

AFTER THE DEATH OF  
FILM:  
WRITING THE NATURAL  
WORLD IN THE DIGITAL  
AGE

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## **Abstract**

**This essay argues that the North American cinematic avant-garde's interest in celluloid film's materiality goes to the heart of our culture's current anxiety about the digital ability to seamlessly transcode, endlessly reproduce and recklessly disseminate images of all stripes. It traces the ways in which celluloid film's capacity for registering the marks made by the artist's hand, natural elements and accidents function as writing in the work of filmmakers Greta Snider, David Gatten, Lynn Kirby among others.**

At first glance, the current cinematic avant-garde's interest in film's specificity might appear to be no more than a last reach for artistic legitimacy in the postmodern digital age. Perhaps nostalgia for a simplistic modernism is to be expected. However, we might be surprised by the cinematic avant-garde's present investment in celluloid film: its indexical, documentary guarantee. This means that what often looks like a return to formalist abstraction actually co-exists with questions about what those light flecks and scratches reveal: the filmstrip's origin, the conditions of its exposure and its travels through the world. Such material mark-making functions as a kind of writing, in which abstract images come to stand for the hands, sun, rivers, ground and weather that made those marks. The current cinematic avant-garde's interest in celluloid's materiality goes to the heart of our culture's current anxiety about the digital ability to seamlessly transcode, endlessly reproduce and recklessly disseminate images of all stripes. Under present conditions, celluloid film's indexical image, unlike digital information, can be touched, cut, held up to the light and observed by the naked eye. Film's comparatively material status also harkens back to earlier assurances, in which a painter's touch produces an impression of artistic presence or a photographer gives witness to an image's capture.

In today's digital world, indexical celluloid film speaks differently from the address offered by paper, video, television and digital documents. The term 'medium' now gestures toward the expanded discursive and political field in which any material document appears. This means that however initially abstract and illegible the image we see may appear, celluloid film's flecks, blurs and scratches can be made to invoke, not only a general sense of how time and history wear upon the image, but the specific material conditions and emotions evoked by the particular context of its production, travels through the world and association with the artist. These larger meanings of the abstract image emerge through extra-textual information, which is offered in the form of program notes, artist's statements, curatorial choices, historical notes, interviews, anecdotes and gossip. Perhaps, such notes often suggest, the shapeless colors and signs of wear we see can tell stories and call up histories. Such information makes otherwise illegible marks function as a form of evidence. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, avant-garde cinema's turn to the expanded discursive field that film inhabits points to the impossibility of representing critical historical, political and cultural events through the iconic image alone.

This essay brings together two contemporary discussions about the status of celluloid in the digital

age, which in recent years have increasingly overlapped. In the first, filmmakers, critics and curators wondered if the digital threatened film with obsolescence, even 'death.' These concerns are encapsulated most clearly in a 2001 *October* roundtable, in which participants worried about the digital's effect on the future of celluloid film in an already shaky postmodern avant-garde. In the same breath, however, they noted the resurgence of avant-garde films tackling the question of film's medium specificity. They also noted the proliferation of avant-garde film festivals in cities like New York, Toronto, Berlin, London, San Francisco, Chicago, Austin and elsewhere. Likewise, experimental film programming has risen visibly in major museums like the Whitney, MoMA, the Tate Modern, Mass MoCA and the Walker. Observing that film's material qualities (its light, its projection, its screen, its grain, its celluloid and its flicker) were once again central to the cinematic avant-garde, the roundtable expressed concern that this interest in filmic specificity felt more old-garde than cutting edge. Rather than concentrate on the status of a cinematic avant-garde revival fuelled by the repetition of formalist, medium-specific gestures, we should ask what historical and cultural shifts such a return reveals—namely whether current interest in film's specificity now raises questions usually associated with documentary film. How does an image come to be? And do the specific character-

istics of the medium impact the image's guarantee?

This brings us to the second conversation, in which documentary theorists, critics and filmmakers have worried about the digital's effect on documentary's long-standing claim to tell the truth through images. Some wonder if the malleable digital image undermines the veracity of photography's indexical claim. Others insist that such a guarantee never existed. Recently, documentary's footing has also been shaken by an influx of animation, abstraction and speculation, in what has been called "new experimental non-fiction." Such work has shown in both documentary venues and avant-garde exhibition sites like Pacific Film Archive, Images Festival and Ann Arbor Film Festival. The art world has also taken note of this turn to experimental documentary, with recent shows at Mass MoCA, the Australian Center for the Moving Image, ZKM and, most famously, Documenta 11. According to *Art in America*, "with over 600 hours of video" Documenta 11 sought "to define the role of art in a post-colonial, globally-connected world." Critic Eleanor Hartley makes the role of moving image work explicit: to define not only the role of art, but also the shifting role of a subject citizen in an uncertain world. If documentary brings a human stake to the art world, disruptive, postmodern experimental techniques raise questions about the image's guarantee. With so much at

issue, how can we trust what we see? Is the image a reliable witness?

The two discussions described above come together in their considerations of film's specificity in a supposedly post-medium, digital age. They mark a struggle over the relevance of celluloid film that intertwines with a larger ongoing cultural conversation, which has spanned the arts and humanities, the academy and the art world. This conversation continues to ask what we make of the modernist avant-garde in the wake of postmodernity. It asks what we do with artistic vision after the death of the author. It questions the place of "truth" after the fall of grand narratives. And, it questions the importance of bodies in an age of subjects, texts and computer code. Conversations about celluloid film's more material status in the age of the digital point to an on-going theoretical instability in contemporary discourse: what is the status of presence in relation to writing? Of speech in relation to the written mark? In response, I argue that we can learn something germane to the larger conversation about how we know the world by focusing on the site where the cinematic avant-garde rubs up against documentary: namely where film confronts the digital.

Current questions about the relation of celluloid film to digital media has roots in the history of the way we understand a photographic process

that repeatedly grounds itself in our experience of the natural world and the representation of that world. In *Burning with Desire*, Geoffrey Batchen writes that at the birth of photography in the 1830s, the first photographers actively questioned the way their images came to be: did nature imprint herself on the filmic plate or did the film capture nature? At the time, such a question pointed to larger epistemological struggles over the relationship of nature to technology, and in turn, to the way knowledge was constructed. Today, the question of how the image is produced is still with us, pointing toward ambivalences about how media negotiate nature and technology, presence and representation and security and contingency. In the context of the proliferation of digital media, North American avant-garde filmmakers actively interrogate the specific nature of film through their representations of the natural world.

Visual amusements like the stereoscope, as Jonathan Crary has suggested, accustomed the observer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to a new kind of vision, one in which subjects negotiated a swiftly changing and vertiginous technological landscape. Writing on pre-photographic and proto-cinematic image making emphasizes the importance of the natural 'view,' the common content of the panorama was a natural vista; viewers of early actualities commonly commented on the movement of waves and leaves; the

stereoscope invited views onto the natural world, far-off lands and their peoples and pornographic scenes. The natural world was never then (nor is it now) simply one of many kinds of content available. Rather, images of trees, waves and flowers have long served as a sign of presence in counterpoint to the quickly changing technologies through which we view them.<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand, these artists' cinematic imaging of the natural world's flowers, trees, streams and skies in conjunction with do-it-yourself filmmaking techniques seems to yearn for an earlier, simpler time. On the other hand, the very same work investigates the technological conditions under which we experience the world today. Is film a medium closer to the natural world than the digital? And if so, does celluloid film allow nature to "speak" more directly? Nature has long operated as a significant theme within the history of North American avant-garde filmmaking, as in the work of Marie Menkin, Stan Brakhage and Peter Hutton, to mention just a few.<sup>2</sup> For the cinematic avant-garde, the digital malleability, mobility, and capacity to mimic film's iconic legibility, has turned film into a distinctly physical medium whose celluloid's capacity to record direct contact with both filmmaker and the natural world of streams, sand, wind and earth has rendered its representations more secure. In the context of the digital's extreme mobility and seamless

malleability, the question of how an image comes to be centers on the always insecure relation between representation and referent: what is the story of the image's capture and how do we read it?<sup>3</sup>

### **The Expansion of Photographic Indexicality: Away from Iconic Resemblance**

According to Charles Sanders Peirce, the indexical nature of the medium of film refers to its ability to point to whatever is put in front of the camera. It implies a guarantee of presence; the object or person captured was indeed "there then," in Roland Barthes' words. Indexicality suggests a direct and tangible link between a worldly referent and the image caught on film through the literal touch of light that bounces off the object and hits the receptive medium. This is the indexical link to the world that is often nostalgically described as lost by the digital. When a digital apparatus captures an image, light is mediated when its levels and intensities are translated into ones and zeros to be recorded for later recall by the digital apparatus. That link may also be lost when an existing photographic image is read by a computer and translated into binary code. For the current cinematic avant-garde, it is less film's ability to produce recognizable iconic images of the natural world indexically that is emphasized, than its ability to physically record the influence of the material world on its celluloid body.

Still, one might ask why film's indexicality would be of any concern to the contemporary filmic avant-garde, a genre in which there is no legal stake in what is imaged, no narrative stake, often no clear emotional stake (as there is in the home movie or family photo's connection to a specific time, place or individual), and in which images are often so abstract as to be unreadable. Within the world of avant-garde film, the abstract image has often been strongly connected to the inner life of the filmmaker. Film's photographic index has been tied more to the guarantee of artistic presence than to that of the object or event depicted. Thus, in conjunction with the loss of the indexical guarantee, the digital can be said to displace, or render insecure, the artist's eye, and by extension the idea of the singularity of artistic vision. If the photographic apparatus can capture an image as an index of presence, then logically it implies the presence of the image's author. The phrase, 'I took that picture,' both centers authorial presence and elides the work done by the machine. The mere existence of easily manipulatable digital technology threatens not only the stability of the photographic index, but the centrality of the guiding, artistic eye.

Rather than emphasize what is seen from behind the camera's viewfinder, an image that resembles the world, contemporary discourse on avant-garde film often emphasizes what

the filmmaker has done to the film's celluloid base: not just its emulsion, but its ability to take color, be glued, cut, scraped, xeroxed and taped. Filmmakers chemically develop raw film stock by hand rather than send it to a lab to be processed. They paint and scratch intricate forms on individual frames rather than use a camera to capture an image. They incorporate found footage and rescued objects from thrift stores and garbage cans rather than download them from computer databases. Many personally carry reels of film to projector performances and put them through a series of intricate ministrations rather than rely on the 'automaticity' of projection. Through reference to processes such as these, filmmakers describe celluloid film's technological specificity as open to the physical manipulation of its mechanisms. Here the definition of the indexical mark is extended to mean other kinds of unique presence, individual vision and personal touch than that captured by light's initial imprint on emulsion. In the digital age, attention to film's material specificity suggests a secure relationship between the hand of the artist and the image. Such marks function like a signature, as symbols of authentication.

In this context, the importance of iconic resemblance to an object or view of the world, falls away. In "Toward a Home-Made Cinema," Robert Schaller suggests that contemporary avant-garde filmmaking

should strive to move away from not only the use of film developing services, but other corporately produced materials like Kodak film and professionally-ground lenses. "In an art so manifestly questioning and irreverent" as avant-garde filmmaking, Schaller writes, "we must not be content to acquire the very material foundation of our work from a company who proclaimed from its outset in 1889, 'You push the button, we do the rest?'" This slogan, he continues, sounds "like a capitulation to a commercial machine that casts a shadow over the integrity of all that passes through it."<sup>4</sup> Schaller suggests that filmmakers use home-made emulsion and eschew materials that promise a reliable surface for capturing iconic, representational images.

Most of the films considered in this essay eliminate iconic photographic resemblance in favor of abstraction in order to emphasize film's more direct capacity for registering marks made by both the artist and the world he or she inhabits. While not true of every work, films such as these imply a distrust of realist resemblance. They suggest that what makes the medium of film specific is not its capacity to make a likeness, to produce movement or to be edited; after all, video and digital technology can make moving images just as well and edit them more seamlessly. What makes film a specific medium at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is its material physical nature: its transparent or opaque celluloid, its

capacity for chemical development, its relationship to the projector and its ability to be cut, often within the frame. What makes film's movement specific is that it is composed of static images presented one at a time at twenty-four frames per second rather than the constant flow of electronic energy in video and the digital media. Today, film's celluloid base signifies as a body that can be touched by the hand and whose image can be observed when held up to the light. As such, an understanding of film's tactility and ability to communicate evidence of artistic intervention operates as a supplement to knowledge accessed by vision. Evidence of the filmmaker's touch is thus not only a mark of authorship but functions as a guarantee of the authenticity of the image viewed.<sup>5</sup> In conjunction with marks produced by the natural world, such marks seek to communicate physical contiguity and presence between the three: world, artist, medium.

### **Nostalgia for a World Less Regulated:**

Many avant-garde filmmakers working today explicitly connect their use of celluloid film and chemical hand-processing techniques with utopian desires for a less-regulated world. Within filmic avant-garde discourse in the past ten years, the medium of film has been associated increasingly with the past as a site of the personal, artisanal, hands-on, material, resistant, individual, local,

small-scale and the collective. In resisting the threat of the digital, many filmmakers associate celluloid film with resistance to a life controlled by the corporate, Hollywood, automatic, industrial, impersonal nature of mainstream media conglomerates and the ideologies they convey. What is striking in much contemporary avant-garde film discourse is the recurrence of themes associated with presence, singularity and naturalness figured in terms of the medium of film's physical reaction to human touch (painting, scratching, contact with bodily fluids), the movement of time (oxidization, decay, the unrecoverable loss of the image and of whole films) and the natural elements (weather, earth and water). The contingencies associated with film's material properties provide 'evidence' for the existence of a less-regulated past and the possibility of a life beyond the confines of contemporary media culture. Within the cinematic avant-garde, the artisanal has come to function as a site of utopian freedom from the automatic, ahistorical, depersonalized, dematerialized processes currently associated with digital technology.

This nostalgia for an imagined closer relationship to the world recalls Walter Benjamin's much-cited essay on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. The qualities currently assigned to digital technology (its loss of secure indexical connection to the objects

it images, its ephemerality, ubiquity, automaticity and capacity for mixture) have imbued the medium of film with qualities associated with unique physical presence, immediacy, singularity and stability — qualities associated with what Benjamin called the "auratic." That we are considering the reinscription of the aura in avant-garde filmmaking practice may seem odd given that Benjamin traced the aura's demise to the impact of film and photography in the famous Artwork Essay of 1935, and even stranger given that Benjamin used the cinema in the age of mechanical reproduction as the exemplar of a medium which had none of the auratic qualities of the unique work-of-art.<sup>6</sup> For Benjamin, film was inherently reproducible as opposed to singular, eminently circulatable as opposed to rooted in a specific place, viewed en masse as opposed to contemplated by a lone viewer, and formally dynamic as opposed to offering a mute, immobile presence. Finally, for Benjamin, film constituted a common entertainment, far afield in pedigree and spectator practices from the "work-of-art."<sup>7</sup>

That people are asking what happens to the aura in the age of the digital should not surprise us, for as Benjamin says, the aura has a way of returning even as it is proclaimed lost, past, dead.<sup>8</sup> Like the photograph in Benjamin's day, the contemporary avant-garde film's aura is propped up on its appeal to authorship.<sup>9</sup>

Although Benjamin might see this as a 'regressive' attempt to hang on to the traditional auratic qualities of the work-of-art, an artist's inclination to reassert avant-garde film's 'cult value' is in fact a complex response to the effects of the digital on film.

These imagined qualities associated with celluloid film's material specificity may seem to reflect a regressive response to rapidly changing technologies of the image—revealing a desire to keep the collapsing binary between film and digital media intact. However, many of the films produced in this artisanal mode engage in thoughtful investigation of the limits of authorship, film's status as art, how images are characterized and the possibility for auratic pleasure. Likewise, most filmmakers are aware that there is no, and possibly never has been, unmediated relationship to the natural world through film.

In *Change Mummified*, Philip Rosen suggests that the metaphor of 'colonization' characterizes the digital's capacity for incorporation in terms of the way it "spreads, infiltrates, overwhelms, and conquers all other media."<sup>10</sup> However, like the colonizing force, the digital depends on the sustained difference of the products of earlier 'regimes' of media in the form of the material photograph, videotape and filmstrip. Indeed, as opposed to being translated and absorbed completely into the digital, it is clear that some films retain their

difference and medium specificity despite, or perhaps because of, film's contemporary figuration as obsolete. The metaphor of imperialism and the resistance of difference in the digital's particular mixture of 'old and new' can be seen in the fervor that animates those filmmakers working in film for its potential as an aesthetic and political practice that resists the digital's ubiquity and uncritical use.

A number of individuals and groups have worked to spread the practice among artists new to film and established avant-garde filmmakers alike. In a manifesto whose tone recalls that of Jonas Mekas for the New American Cinema, the Independent Imaging Retreat declares: "A New Generation of filmmakers have emerged, willing to forego the predictability and standardization of industrial processes in favor of direct control of their materials, motivated by a combination of necessity and curiosity."<sup>11</sup> Also known as the Film Farm, the Independent Imaging Retreat (now in its eleventh year) articulates the belief that knowledge of filmmaking practices will allow artists to take control of the basic means of film production. That knowledge offers freedom from the restriction and high prices of professional film developing labs.

Founded by filmmakers Philip Hoffman and the late Marian McMahon "to encourage a direct, hands-on approach to filmmaking that is far

removed from the costly, hierarchical and inaccessible industrial model," this annual week-long summer retreat in rural Mount Forest, Ontario describes itself as part of a little-recognized international movement of filmmakers. As such, those associated with the retreat see themselves as playing a role in the North American development and dissemination of 'the basic skills and knowledge' of filmmaking process. Similar work can be seen in the Parisian "labos," Richard Reeves and the Ottawa-based Quickdraw Animation Society and Devon Damonte's Crackpot-Crafters, to name just a few. DaMonte (2003) writes, "Suddenly cells of strange obsessive anarchist film scratchers and painters are omnipresent. It's a ding-dang DIY (do-it-yourself) thumpin' revolution in your town and across the globe."

If the cinematic avant-garde once sought to develop a new language of film through montage, it now seeks film's essential qualities and grounds its resistance at the site of film's medium specificity.<sup>12</sup> That resistance is implicated in celluloid's materiality, suggesting that this kind of filmmaking is something anyone can do, takes no special equipment (not even necessarily a camera) and requires no great capacity for artistic vision. It is, in the words of the Independent Imaging Retreat, a 'process-oriented practice.' Rather than emphasize artistic results or the revolutionary potential of spectatorship, present discourse



Figure 1 Philip Hoffman 2001, 'What these ashes wanted'

within the filmic avant-garde focuses on the means of production, the artist as worker and the film itself as a site of transformation. Many contemporary filmmakers direct their political practice toward the making of film (contact between artist and celluloid). An avant-garde filmmakers' shift away from a politics based on spectatorship suggests a focusing inward to the very act of filmmaking and away from the resulting image. The projected image rarely stands alone. It must be read as part of a larger conversation already begun in the production process.

### **Control, Contingency and the Natural World**

Of the range of physical processes applied to film, chemical hand-processing acts as allegory for current societal ambivalence about the filmmaker's relation to the image—and by extension, ambivalence about the effect individuals can have on our world. This can be seen in artists' discourse on chemical hand-processing techniques in the production of abstract images. At times it is nostalgic for a secure relation between referent and image; at other times it actively undoes security.

The chemical hand-processing of film sets up a series of planned and felicitous accidents in the chemical developing process where filmmakers either 'do-it-themselves' or 'do-it-wrong' in order to achieve effects impossible to produce through the supposed reliability of commercial laboratory development process. By changing the temperature or ratios of developing fluid, adding unexpected liquids like Coca-Cola, or fiddling with developing times, a filmmaker can either end up with nothing—a blank reel—or she may uncover a combination of beautiful, solarized, mottled ghosts and hard shapes that can never be produced in exactly that way again. Here the unique and un-repeatable combines with the intricate practice of editing bits of film together by hand that today seems to imbue auratic qualities to many chemically hand-processed films. Presence and singularity are supposedly confirmed through the contingencies associated with the development process.

Film's description as different from the digital because of its capacity to capture the unpredictable contingencies of chemical hand processing thus lends to its perception as beautiful. Much of this work incorporates imperfections like scratches, dust and odd coloration to produce a beauty that relies on contingency rather than studied perfection. Such activities appear to re-inscribe auratic qualities by re-centering authorship and calling

attention to the indexical marks of the filmmaker's presence at the site of the inscription or development. However, even so, both 'authorship' and 'indexicality' are diffused and destabilized. Hand processing film unsettles the camera's actions of capture, the emulsion-covered celluloid's development process and the film's projection as automatic. Hand processing always implies that the marks made by these processes arise out of complex interactions between human being, chemistry and machine.

Filmmakers sometime describe hand-processed films as collaborations between the filmmaker and the specific properties of the celluloid and its emulsion in reaction to changes in chemistry and light. For example, in order to produce *Cinder*, San Francisco-based filmmaker Luis Recoder recalls stuffing a three-minute reel of unexposed black-and-white sound film into a developing canister to see what would come of the accidental points at which the film touched and scratched itself. What it produced is three minutes of unedited jagged, rich blackness and bright light, the patterns of which marked the soundtrack and produced a film that looks and sounds like an homage to Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer*.<sup>13</sup> However, even in its movement between light and dark, *Cinder* is not a flicker film; it does not explore the relationship between light and dark based on a mathematical system of editing,

as does Kubelka's 1960 film. Rather, *Cinder* is more aptly described as the un-manipulated record of the contingencies of the film's interaction with filmmaker, chemistry and 'itself.' Here there is a combination of the idea of film presenting its essence and the intervention of the filmmaker as bringing it forth through the mystery of development. That Recoder projects the original reversal print (rather than a copy made from an internegative) further emphasizes the film's capacity to index a history of contingency, as the scratches that accumulate through multiple passes through a projector add to the film's status as one-of-a-kind.

Likewise, filmmaker Jenny Perlin emphasizes the current importance ascribed to the celluloid image's ability to record contingency. "The final result of hand processing," she writes, often comes "from my own carelessness—the beautiful colors appeared because of my hasty processing. The chemicals continued to do their work long after I called it a day."<sup>14</sup> The quality of contingency assigned to indexes of the filmmaker's presence are very like those associated with the photographic index. However, rather than capturing whatever accidents occur at the moment of the camera's flash, celluloid film captures the duration of chemical development stopped at a point ultimately determined by the filmmaker, regardless of lapses in attention. Perlin asserts that "hand processing allows me to get down

and dirty with the celluloid, shoving ribbons of the stuff into a bucket of chemicals, treating the film as what it is—a bunch of plastic. The miracle then comes when the chemistry reveals what the light recorded on the film's surface."<sup>15</sup> Rather than the single moment of exposure associated with the click of the camera's button, the extended period of time the film spends interacting with chemical developers marks duration, or slow time, as a specific quality of film. In Perlin's description, the film's industrial identity as a "bunch of plastic" to be treated roughly operates in tension with the 'miracle' of chemistry and light that produce layers of 'beautiful colors.' Here, the filmmaker's 'carelessness,' her openness to the possibility and potential of the contingent, characterizes the process of many current avant-garde filmmakers. Celluloid became this artist's medium of choice because of its physicality and ability to capture the contingencies of temporal duration.

Hand processing has come to be seen as a technique that reveals film's specificity as a medium that is both more 'precise' and 'spontaneous' than the digital.<sup>16</sup> Like Perlin, filmmaker and hand-processor Ken Paul Rosenthal expresses reverence for the possibilities and limitations associated with making film by hand—and a nostalgia for a past world. "I'm not a Luddite," Rosenthal insists to one interviewer. "But I am a purist. I may not always like the

limitations of my 'low-to-no-tech' methods, but I certainly appreciate them because the obstacles always create new ways of seeing." Rosenthal also points to the intimacy of the relationship to celluloid engendered by hand processing and editing. "Working with video circumvents a more intimate frame-by-frame relationship to the medium, as well as oneself," he writes. "The nature of one's tools invariably affects the character of one's images—images that are ultimately a reflection of you." While these images do not iconically image the filmmaker, they supposedly 'reflect' his relationship to the world. "So for me," Rosenthal continues, "the issue is not simply image quality, but quality of life."<sup>17</sup> Evident here is an active resistance to the contemporary corporate world of film production and development that ties chemical hand processing to an ethical and aesthetic stance. For Perlin and Rosenthal, whose comments appear on their personal websites, the digital is a channel for communication with other likeminded filmmakers. Digital media operate like a billboard or telephone—a conduit—but not a medium for making art.

If the manner in which images are produced is 'ultimately a reflection of you,' then it makes sense that many artisanal filmmakers use their own bodily fluids to develop film. The rhetoric of 'giving birth' is often employed implicitly, even explicitly, as in Louise Bourque's *Jours en fleurs*

(Canada, 2003), made from iconic images of flowers on celluloid subsequently submerged in menstrual blood.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Rosenthal claims to have knowledge of filmmakers who have used coffee and semen as film developers to quicken exposed film in the 'womb' of the developing tank. In the same vein, he once "stuffed film into a mason jar with cooked wild berries and set it before a southern facing window for an entire year so that it would get sun most of the day,"<sup>19</sup> in a practice that points to the desire for the slow, organic, natural, human and hand-made.<sup>20</sup>

Films developed in these ways can be read as attempting to make the production of film into a natural bodily process, in the tradition of writers and poets of all persuasions who have embraced the metaphor of gestation and childbirth to describe the creative process of writing. In a section of "Antidote to a Virtual World" entitled "A Womb with a View," Rosenthal writes: "Hand processing gives you a womb of your own... And nothing, I mean NOTHING, beats the first view of a newborn image damp with birth bath cradled in a frameline crib. You'll be manically giddy and passing out cigars!!!"<sup>21</sup> Hyperbolic as Rosenthal's exclamations are, they suggest the deep sense of embodied connection described in relation to the material medium of film. That film's embodied materiality is naturalized, feminized and connected to a sense

of home is not surprising, given that film is now being figured as a more primitive, present medium of communication than the digital.

## Collaboration with Nature

In a practice that invokes the contingencies associated with time and space of the natural world, some avant-garde filmmakers call upon the forces of nature to interact with and leave their marks on the material body of film. The quantitative effects of weather on the filmed iconic image often allude to film's ability to mark the passage of historical time rather than simple, natural presence. This can be seen in films such as in Jürgen Reble's *Zillertal* (Germany, 1999) in which an old movie trailer was hung in the trees of the filmmaker's garden for months as he coated it with various chemicals.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, Brian Frye's *Oona's Veil* (US, 2001) reveals images of Charlie Chaplin's wife that had been left sitting out on a fire escape exposed to the weather for weeks. As such, it evokes both the decades of time past since the initial exposure of her image through marks produced by the film's exposure to the elements. Mark Street's film *Guiding Fictions* (US, 2002), uses buried film footage of scenes captured on forest walks begun in his backyard, a practice that attempts to inscribe the presence of that yard. In Louise Bourque's *Self Portrait Post Mortem* (Canada, 2002), she buried footage of herself taken from her early work

in the backyard of her family home.<sup>23</sup> Bourque describes this film as "An unearthed time capsule consisting of footage of the maker's youthful self—an 'exquisite corpse' with nature as collaborator." Here, we see a curious tension between natural presence and historical time, and between artistic intention and the unpredictability of nature, in films whose "imperfections" physically tie them to a specific place and a quantifiable duration of time in which accidents were bound to occur. The natural world, very often the ground itself, serves as a site for the gestation and development of celluloid. The image of burial and resurrection suggests that while film is fast becoming a dead medium, it can rise again in a different, elevated form.

To call on nature as a "collaborator" in making a film suggests that the elements have a will and something to say. The last part of this essay looks at three current examples of avant-garde filmmakers' use of celluloid film as a way of making nature speak: 1) the collectively produced "Quarry Movie," two versions of David Gatten's "What the Water Said" (1997, 2006) and Lynn Kirby's *Golden Gate Bridge Exposure: Poised for Parabolas*.

The collectively produced *Quarry Movie* unrolls as a series of faded, sometimes blurry, scratched shots of an outdoor scene full of red earth and green vegetation, not

necessarily recognizable as a quarry. However, in the artists' collective narrativization of the film's production, one learns that ten filmmakers shot footage that they buried and submerged in various locations in and around the quarry for a period of weeks before chemically hand-processing the reels and editing them together.<sup>24</sup> As producer Greta Snider writes, "This movie began as an attempt to document a place... not only its image as lensed, but its weather, its soil, and its toxins." Like other films in this mode, *Quarry Movie* operates as an attempt to mark the film's image with other elements present in the material space where the footage was taken; "the film documents this place outside of the camera."<sup>25</sup> Snider implies that the photographic representation of the quarry alone does not produce an adequate representation. The quarry must also be referenced through the elements that constitute it: dirt, water, toxins and weather.

On one level, *Quarry Movie* makes an environmental argument that seeks to reference the physical environmental damage the quarry has inflicted on the area, a damage that is difficult to see in the film's iconic image alone. Where this damage can be observed, notes to the film suggest, is in its scratches and faded color, which were produced by the chemical interaction of "leached metals in this exhausted quarry pit's waters" in conjunction with the chemistry used to develop the

film. Snider writes that the surviving natural "organisms in the water and the soil made their marks on" the film and the water's movement resulted in the celluloid's 'physical erosion.' Of course, without this narrative, provided through the film's notes or the personal narration of the filmmakers who participated in its production, these marks on the film are unreadable in this way. It is merely faded film.

The desire to invoke the physical space of the quarry (its iconic image) through the overlay of other indexes of physical proximity operates by way of the simultaneous invocation and dispersion of authorship. They disavow the spectator's process of reading the film in favor of a desire for presence. "The idea," Snider writes, "was not to use techniques to achieve a 'look,' but rather to achieve a *presence*, and then see what it looks like" [my emphasis]. The assumption is that the time the celluloid has spent in contact with the quarry has imbued it with the presence of the place. That contact is more important than the resulting image and 'what it looks like.' Furthermore, there is an attempt to clear space for 'presence' through the film's diffusion of authorship. The use of material generated by ten filmmakers eliminates the assumption of personal artistry or artistic vision behind the camera and attempts to allow the quarry to be encountered as an unmediated 'presence.'<sup>26</sup> However, this presence

is achieved through a disavowal of the marks made by the natural elements of the quarry—water, chemicals, organisms—as writing.

The filmmaking practices described above suggest a connection between film and nature that invokes Benjamin's description of the auratic in its 'original' state, before mechanical reproduction. "If, while resting on a summer afternoon," Benjamin writes, "you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you." It is then that "you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch," whose shadow leaves its cool mark on your body.<sup>27</sup> Like Peirce's example of the index of the wind indicated by the weathervane, which may also be felt (and confirmed) on the observer's cheek, Benjamin suggests a scenario in which one encounters the 'aura' in a context where there is bodily evidence of the wind's direction, warmth and humidity on that 'summer's day' as one reads the indexical mark of its presence in the shadow or through the weather vane. If what constitutes an auratic experience shifts according to historical conditions, the experience of aura appears to be fundamentally dependent on presence and 'singularity.' However, current avant-garde work on film also points to the aura as having a temporality that locates it as an experience past, and therefore no longer accessible except through memory and reading.

Unlike the weather vane, Pierce's second example of indexicality, the trace of human presence left behind by the footprint, is a sign that suggests a gap in time between the person who left the mark and the one who sees it later. Here the reading is not necessarily accompanied by the bodily presence of the one who made the mark, who left the warm spot on the park bench, who produced the dirty dish left on the table of the café, who smudged the glass of the subway window. It is an indexical mark that needs to be *read* because of the gap in time that separates the maker of the mark and the one who interprets it. In this context, these films suggest that what constitutes auratic experience has shifted, that it is determined both by distance and the gap between the time of marking and the time of its subsequent interpretation. "What constitutes aura, actually?" Benjamin asks in "A Small History of Photography." It is "a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be."<sup>28</sup> The conditions that produce the 'imaginary' status of the filmic signifier, film's ability to show what is not actually there, are now, ironically, figured in terms of the distinctively embodied nature of celluloid.

David Gatten's *What the Water Said*, 1-3 (US, 1998) (figure 2) and *What the Water Said*, 4-6 (US, 2006) allegorize the fact that the action

that produced the marks a spectator sees is located in the past.<sup>29</sup> In this work, Gatten submerged various stocks of film in the Atlantic Ocean off the North Carolina coast. Some reels spent time in a lobster trap to be worked by the movement of sand and water. The filmmaker spun others out into the surf, one end tied around a wrist or ankle, so they could be reeled in later like fishing line. In at least one instance, the film broke free and was given up for lost. However, over the next several days the filmmaker's father meticulously collected hundreds of celluloid bits and pieces, which gradually washed up on shore. This allowed the filmmaker to puzzle them back together into a three-minute reel.

The two films, each comprised of three mini-films, vary according to changing weather conditions, underwater obstacles encountered and the length of time spent underwater. Their look also changes according to the film stock used and the celluloid's state at the time of its submergence (developed or undeveloped, new or expired). While Gatten used similar techniques in making the two films, each captures the contingencies of the time and space of their production. In some places, these processes produce a faded, purpled, scratched filmstrip. In others, we see only a series of discontinuous vertical scratches and dense hatchings. Others, using color film, which had been processed before submergence, reveal a kaleidoscope

of turquoise, cyan, magenta, black and white light. In both films, titles function as captions in the form of dates, times and durations of submergence preceding each segment of film, narration that conditions our reading of the 'image.' The two films also include quotations from a number of texts about the ocean that influence spectatorial reception of those images: Edgar Allen Poe's "Descent into the Maelström," Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Fernando Pessoa's *The Sea Monster* and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. All suggest tales of rough water, sea monsters and lost men.

In Gatten's two versions of *What the Water Said*, the indexical marks made on the body of the celluloid strip are figured both as "writing" and as materially present. The image on screen shuttles between telling us 'what it said' and allowing the water's marks on the indexical medium of film to 'speak' for themselves. While the immediacy of Benjamin's original auratic experience with nature is invoked in the idea that the sea can be said to talk to the artist through the medium of film, it is an immediacy that draws attention to the absence of its referent (the ocean is far from the darkened screening room) and thus to the image's status as writing. The water can 'speak' to the viewer because film's indexicality allows the water to write upon it and subsequently communicate the ocean's temperature, light and density (throughout

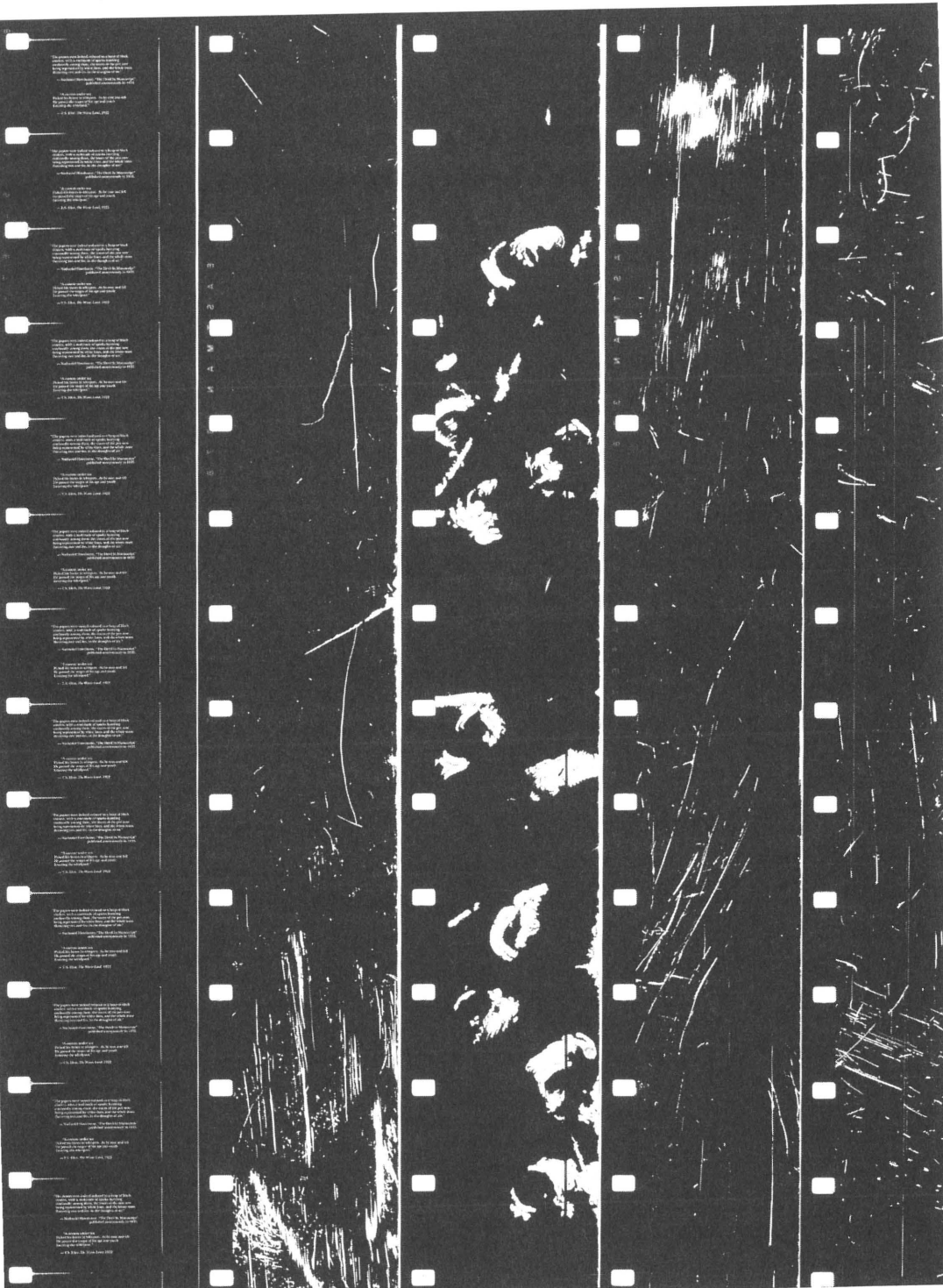


Figure 2 David Gatten 1997-1998, What the water said, 1-3

the duration of its submergence) to the spectator at the time of its projection. Here film's indexicality is marked as a guarantee of presence in the face of the digital's loss of the indexical bond. However, that indexicality is also marked as insufficient, for the film image 'needs' the supplement of narrative—the stories provided by both program notes and the filmmaker himself—to guarantee its meaning. Ultimately, for films like those described here, the multiple and overlapping discursive practices intended to supplement the link between image, referent and artist can actually work to destabilize that guarantee. Too much insistence raises doubt.

The idea that film can be submerged or buried emphasizes its density and materiality in comparison to the supposed body-less-ness of the digital; for a filmmaker to work on celluloid today is always a conscious choice. However, implicit in these practices is anxiety over film's status as an 'imaginary signifier,' what Christian Metz described in the 1970s as film's ability to communicate what is long dead, no longer present or simply located at a spatial remove—and the spectator's negotiation of the image's simultaneous presence and absence.<sup>30</sup> Today, this anxiety about the status of the filmic image accompanies an investment in the material body of the filmic medium as something capable of producing indexical evidence of the site of the image's capture, as some-

how less imaginary and decidedly more concrete than that produced by the digital.

Such films simultaneously invoke the artist's authorship as a guarantee of the film's status as art and diffuse the importance of the artist. While the narrativization of the artist's collaboration with nature invokes the physical presence of the filmmaker in relation to the reel of film as he or she digs, buries, submerges and exposes it (thus affirming the filmmaker as physically necessary to the art-making process), as with chemical hand processing, the artist lacks direct control over the images produced and can only hope for the best. *What the Water Said* further diffuses authorship in the sense that it is made in collaboration *with* the water.<sup>31</sup> Here the filmmaker presents a document, as opposed to a personal expression, in the sense that his primary activity lies in framing and presenting the results of the natural processes that have worked on the body of the film. Thus, the artist is figured ambivalently—both as a guarantee of artistic value and meaning (as his vision provides a way to ascribe intentional meaning to otherwise unreadable marks) and as an uncertain presence, dependent on the workings of chance. Likewise, the film's image is also figured ambivalently, as needing various supplements to confirm its existence. The iconic image is not enough; neither is the index.

## Conclusion

Lynne Kirby complicates this argument about the relationship of celluloid film to digital media in the poetically abstract *Golden Gate Bridge Exposure: Poised for Parabolae* (US, 2004) (figures 3, 4 and 5). Rather than looking to celluloid as a medium that can allow nature to write its own history, Kirby's film invokes the complicated means by which we make and interpret the meaning of images in a complex world. The first movement of *Golden Gate Bridge Exposure* rhythmically presents a range of grays, blues and reds, the idiosyncrasies of hand-processing, scratches and other artifacts, gradually translated into solid blocks of digital color, but no recognizable referential forms of the bridge, sky or water below. However, the work's dedication to the dead, whether suicidal, murdered or accidentally fallen, gives its colored traces of the touch of available light an eerie gravity. The subtitle, *Poised for Parabolae*, evokes the jumper poised at the edge of a suspension bridge for a jump, which in the natural world approximates the shape of a parabola.<sup>32</sup> But just as the contingencies of the real world (air, gravity, weather) change the trajectory of what is otherwise a pure mathematical shape, so the viewer must be poised to adapt to leaps of meaning.

*Golden Gate Bridge Exposure* is one of Kirby's *Latent Light Excavation Series*, 2003 – Present, in which the artist

exposes color celluloid film to the available light of an emotionally or historically resonant physical space without the use of either camera or lens. This practice, rejecting iconic representation, thus aptly captures the impossibility of adequately representing the emotional history of such a space, even as *Golden Gate Bridge Exposure's* title and program notes invoke a connection between the site's light, the exposed celluloid and the digital image the spectator receives. After having the film developed, Kirby transfers its image using a digital transfer machine in collaboration with a technician, in single, improvised sessions.<sup>33</sup> At this time, Kirby chooses the tone of the transfer's colors from her memory of the site's blues, greens and reds, rather than the color captured by her exposure. The blues chosen for *Golden Gate Bridge Exposure* recall the hues of the California sky and the darker, greyer water below. Rather than the kind of direct mark making discussed in *Quarry Movie*, the marks and colors of *Golden Gate Bridge Exposure* raise questions about the gaps between the original celluloid exposure and its final digital organization.

For Kirby, the image and colors chosen become "a jumping off point for thinking about history" and the image's relationship to the history it references. For her, the 70-year history of the bridge is evoked through blacks, whites and sepia, colors that suggest Kirby's interest

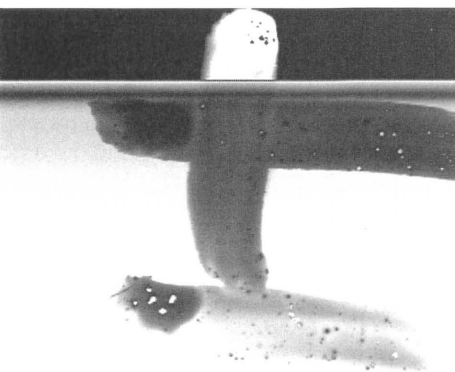


Figure 3 Lynn Marie Kirby 2004, Golden Gate Bridge Exposure: Poised for Parabolas

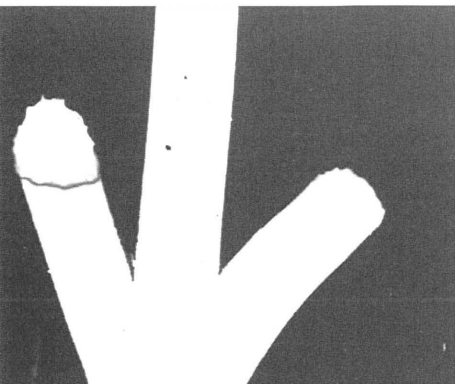


Figure 4 Lynn Marie Kirby 2004, Golden Gate Bridge Exposure: Poised for Parabolas

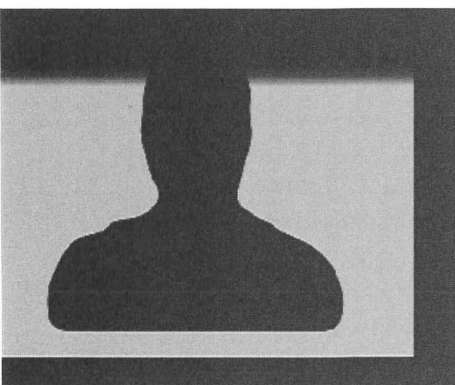


Figure 5 Lynn Marie Kirby 2004, Golden Gate Bridge Exposure: Poised for Parabolas

in early film with its black and white and toned images. The film, she says, meditates on the whole "history of the bridge." The piece also meditates on another current technological crossing—from celluloid film to digital media—as the latest in a history of crossings in which emergent and residual technologies intermingle.

If the jumpers invoked in *Golden Gate Bridge Exposures'* dedication are jumping to their deaths, the piece asks its viewer to make a number of cognitive leaps: from the abstract digital images presented in the film, to the celluloid it references, to the site of its exposure, to the light present in the space of Golden Gate park. The piece also asks the reader to make a number of metaphorical leaps: from blocks of color, scribbled arrows, blurs of movement, rhythms, the phrases that comprise the title, to a bridge's history of uneventful, every day crossings punctuated by mostly unseen plunges into the water below, and, by extension, death. Language gives us functional, everyday crossings as well as poetic leaps. And, like abstraction, language produces barriers that require us to take other paths to meaning or that may derail us completely.

For a piece that contains no images of indexical resemblance to worldly objects or places, *Golden Gate Bridge Exposure* produces its

own form of poetic writing. While transferring her exposed, chemically hand-processed film, Kirby adjusts the speed at which the film is transferred to a digital format. Running the film slowly gives the program time to reproduce individual segments of celluloid in clear detail, capturing images of dust, fiber and scratches. Slow movement isolates and presents individual 'frames' of exposed film in rhythms reminiscent of those produced by an optical printer. Running the film more quickly through the transfer machine allows only hints of visual information to be caught, producing distortions that combine celluloid's look with the digital's abstracted interpretation. Running the transfer quicker still produces a stack of horizontal lines as the image blurs by the digital reader. Kirby describes the transfer machine as allowing her to go 'backwards and forwards in time,' a movement she also asks of her viewer, who must make temporal and metaphorical leaps in order to construct *Golden Gate Bridge Exposure's* meaning.<sup>34</sup>

Here the movement of the film captured by the digital program references many different kinds of time, speed and ways of knowing the world. The horizontal lines and blurs suggest the speed of individual bodies falling. Thirty seconds into the work and then again, close to the end of the film, hand-written letters and symbols inked on clear leader shuffle by. Arrows pointing

up and down from the film's leader reference the materiality of the celluloid on which the light was captured. They also invoke various forms of directional movement suggested by this particular bridge; not just across, but up and down to the water. About two minutes into the film, a figure that suggests a man's head and torso appears in the middle of the frame, and reappears in different color combinations of figure and ground, upside-down and right-side up, intermittently over the course of the next two minutes. Kirby says she discovered this figure inside the digital transfer machine, one of a number of simple symbols editors often use as markers. Kirby immediately recognized her jumper as this figure who exists only inside the machine. An electronic phantom, this iconic figure reads clearly and literally to a first time viewer. It reads as a marker of human presence, offering something for the viewer to latch on to and connect to the place evoked by the work's title.

Towards the end of *Golden Gate Bridge Exposure*, the shifting palette of blues, reds, grays, blacks and whites, are pierced by a surprising orangey-yellow. While one may not be sure about what happened or what this color shift means, something has changed. For Kirby, the Deluezean 'virtual' suggests "another way of seeing" that connects to a different way of thinking. The virtual, she says, can "open up another way of being present to something."

When looking at the *Latent Light Series*, one has to 'go inside and remember history,' the history the image claims to invoke.

In an age when the digital has truncated the automatic belief in any image's connection to a worldly referent, and an account of the ways in which images have been manipulated is only rarely available, the story of a contemporary avant-garde film's making has become important not only to its value as art, but to its value as a truthful representation. The narratives and language circulating around them in the form of the interview, artist statements, program notes, websites and the proliferation of bits of gossip, have become an important extension of the film's text. This discursive apparatus harnesses the filmmaker's presence and interpretive authority to the spectator's interpretative work attempting to read moving images that are often so abstract as to be nearly illegible. That the image implies its origin is important, but the story of how a film was made (while always of interest in the culture of the cinematic avant-garde) has re-emerged as a crucial supplement in judging a film's value not only as a work of art, but as a crucial site in the cultural revaluing of film as an image-making technology.<sup>35</sup> Such practices work to redefine what celluloid film can communicate by examining the relationship between artistic control over the medium of film and film's openness to the contingencies of

production, development, editing and projection.

#### ENDNOTES

1

See Jonathan Crary, Jonathan. 1990. *Techniques of the Observer*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

2

The natural world has been explored by the cinematic avant-garde using a variety of filmic techniques including extended duration (James Benning's *Thirteen Skies*, Larry Gottheim's *Fogline*, Peter Hutton's entire oeuvre), adhesion of natural materials (Brakhage's *Mothlight* and *Garden of Earthly Delights*), photograms (Isabella Pruska-Oldenhoff's *Song of the Firefly*), single-shot editing (Rose Lowder's *Bouquets*), camera movement and editing combined with found footage (Julie Murray's *I began to wish*), etc. See also Scott MacDonald, Scott. 2001. *The Garden in the Machine*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

3

While the answers provided by recent theorists of photography (John Tagg, Alan Sekula, Victor Burgin, Geoffrey Batchen) have turned away from the medium to Foucauldian discourse analysis, the answer offered by the cinematic avant-garde returns to medium specificity.

4

From [www.kenpaulrosenthal.com/writings.htm](http://www.kenpaulrosenthal.com/writings.htm) (accessed January 12, 2004).

5

See Marks, Laura U. 2002. *Touch Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press and 2000. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

6

In the Artwork essay, Benjamin suggested that photography and film as modes of mechanical reproduction were chang-

ing the nature of all art through the proliferation of copies that brought once inaccessible works of art closer to the masses. Such a proliferation worked to destroy aura, which he characterized as a beneficial process akin to "pumping water from a sinking ship" of culture. Benjamin, Walter. *Work of Art*. In Arendt, Hannah, editor. 1969. *Illuminations*. New York, NY: Schocken Books.

**7**

Notably, avant-garde film is a branch of artisanal filmmaking practice that sees itself closer to the world of art than that of the industrial world of entertainment.

**8**

Those who invoke Benjamin's *Artwork* essay include: Hans Magnus Enzenberger's *Constituents of a Theory of the Media* (1970), Bill Nichols' *The Work of Culture in the Age of Cypernetic Systems*, Kevin Robins' *The Virtual Unconscious in Postphotography*, Roy Ascott's *Photography at the Interface*, Raymond Bellour's *The Double Helix*, Erkki Huhtamo's *From Kaleidescomaniac to Cybernerd: Notes Toward an Archaeology of Media*, all in Druckrey, Timothy, editor. 1996. *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*. New York, NY: Aperture and Manovich, Lev. 2001. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

**9**

Benjamin, *Work of Art*, p. 244.

**10**

Rosen, Philip. 2001. *Change Mummified*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, p. 322.

**11**

Unpublished document. Significantly, many of the now well-known filmmakers who currently work using these methods have taken part in the Independent Imaging Retreat, many returning year after year for the sense of community and to trade techniques with other filmmakers.

**12**

This resistance to automaticity does not specifically reference the ideological confines of classical Hollywood narrative film, as it often was in the 1960s and 1970s for groups as disparate as the British Structural/Materialist filmmakers, the New American Cinema Group and iconoclasts like Stan Brakhage (who in the 1960s retreated from New York City to the relative isolation of rural Colorado). Rather, the contemporary avant-garde is more apt to figure resistance to the technology of the digital as opposed to political ideology or to Hollywood specifically.

**13**

*Arnulf Rainer* (Austria, 1960).

**14**

Perlin's *Lost Treasures* (US, 1999) deals with the recent deaths of three women in the filmmaker' life through the imaging of photographs taken from a book devoted to the memorialization of European buildings lost during the bombings of World War II. I quote Perlin at some length because of the way she ties together questions of nostalgia, loss, indexicality, chance and her own interaction with the celluloid's materiality in the

act of chemical hand processing. Perlin, Jenny. "Jenny Perlin," *Animations* <http://www.ps1.org/cut/animations/install/perlin.html> (accessed September 22, 2005).

**15**

Perlin, "Jenny Perlin," *Animations*.

**16**

"Precise spontaneity is the only way of hitting the mark." See James Broughton in Rosenthal, Ken Paul. *Antidote for a Virtual World: Hand Processing Motion Picture Film*. Ken Paul Rosenthal. [www.kenpaulrosenthal.com/writings.htm](http://www.kenpaulrosenthal.com/writings.htm) (accessed September 22, 2005).

**17**

The quotation continues, "There's room for video and traditional film technologies to exist side by side." See interview between Melanie Ansley and Ken Paul Rosenthal. *The Organic Film*. Ken Paul Rosenthal. [www.kenpaulrosenthal.com/writings.htm](http://www.kenpaulrosenthal.com/writings.htm) (accessed September 22, 2005).

**18**

"A symphony of nature told in a shower of golden colors that reveal a microcosm of cellular structures. Film emulsion transfigured by incubation in menstrual blood." Note by Marc Webber, 2003 London Film Festival. [http://www.lff.riff.com/films\\_details.php?FilmID=135](http://www.lff.riff.com/films_details.php?FilmID=135) (accessed October 5, 2005).

**19**

The quotation continues, "I've left film to rot in a compost pile of seaweed to the point where white maggots were crawling in and out of the sprocket holes. To the dismay of my new roommates, I had a jar of film and urine on the porch for several months that made the emulsion bubble up." These writings, along with essays by filmmakers Brian Frye, Robert Schaller and Scott Stark, are available on Rosenthal's website, cited above. As such, they comprise an important assemblage of articulate theoretical writings by artists on the medium of film in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**20**

The titles of Rosenthal's essays articulate his desires and values, but also raise questions about the place he assigns the medium of film: *Antidote for a Virtual World: Hand Processing Motion Picture Film*, *Shot of Solitude: Hand (and Heart) Processing on the Film Farm* and *The Organic Film*.

**21**

Ken Paul Rosenthal, "Shot of Solitude: Hand (and Heart) Processing on the Film Farm." <http://www.kenpaulrosenthal.com/writings.htm#hand> (accessed September 22, 2005)

**22**

"An old trailer had been in the trees of a garden for months. Now and then it was coated with various chemicals. Through chemical disintegration and weathering the old plot of the film resolved to a great extent. Colors emerged from black and white. Black areas transformed into mountainous regions." Views from the Avant-Garde Program Notes, 1999. <http://www.filmlinc.com/archive/nyff/avantgarde99.htm> (accessed October 5, 2005).

23

"Upon examining the footage five years later she found that the material contained images of herself captured during the making of her first film. That discovery seemed handed over like a gift and prompted the making of this film, a metaphysical pas-de-deux in which decay undermines the image and in the process engenders a transmutation." See Big Balagan II 50<sup>th</sup> Show! *Balagan Experimental Film & Video Series* [http://www.coolidge.org/balagan/big\\_fall2002.html](http://www.coolidge.org/balagan/big_fall2002.html) (accessed September 22, 2005).

24

The collaborating filmmakers are: Nathan Corbin, Michael Ginsburg, Gretchen Hogue, Shin Homma, Shannon Insana, Lisa Krist, Mary Molina, Max Rubinstein, Greta Snider and Tony Stone. The producer is Greta Snider and the editor is Shannon Insana.

25

Views from the Avant-Garde. [www.filmlinc.com/archive/nyff/avantgarde99.htm](http://www.filmlinc.com/archive/nyff/avantgarde99.htm) (accessed May 10, 2005).

26

Views from the Avant-Garde. At the same time, the interaction of the bodies of those ten filmmakers with the film in the space of the quarry serves to anchor the image.

27

Benjamin, *The Work of Art*, pp. 222-3.

28

Benjamin, *A Small History of Photography*, p. 250.

29

For an excellent formal breakdown of Gatten's *What the Water Said*, see MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine*.

30

Metz, Christian. 1975. *The Imaginary Signifier*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

31

Or, as in the case of *Quarry Movie*, with both the quarry and ten other filmmakers. Or, as with *Oona's Veil*, with both the natural element of wind and rain and the filmmaker who shot the original black and white footage of Charlie Chaplin's wife.

32

The cables of a suspension bridge also approximate the shape of parabolas. "Parabola," Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parabola> (accessed August 31, 2007).

33

For an overview of Kirby's work, see Michael Sicinski, Michael. 2006. Incremental: The Paragon Example of Lynn Marie Kirby. *Cinema Scope*, Spring issue 26, pp. 38-42.

34

Phone conversation with the artist, Tuesday August 28, 2007. All subsequent quotations are from this conversation.

35

What is thus desired is the guarantee of the presence of the work of art "in time and space, its unique existence at the place it happens to be" through its history. Benjamin, *Work of Art*, p. 220.