



# THE TRANSFORMABLE MOMENT

**The Films of Stephen Broomer**

“Having devoted his life to the art of cinema in his various capacities as a filmmaker, scholar, preservationist, and poet, Stephen Broomer is on his way to establishing himself among the most aesthetically and historically engaged experimental filmmakers in Canada. His practice is indeed “experimental” in the best sense of that term: his films are imbued with a clear awareness of the great strengths and weaknesses of what was, the limitations and possibilities of what is, and the mystery and wonder of what could be.”

Scott Birdwise  
YORK UNIVERSITY/CANADIAN FILM INSTITUTE

“Stephen Broomer’s poetic, prismatic work launches Northrop Fyre’s famous question ‘Where is here?’ into a luminous flow of landscape, memory, and audio-visual palimpsests of perception. Broomer’s impressive celluloid and digital works recalibrate Canada’s contemporary moving image cartography.”

Tom McSorley  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
CANADIAN FILM INSTITUTE

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Edited by Scott Birdwise  
and Tom McSorley





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Edited by Scott Birdwise and Tom McSorley



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## The Transformable Moment

The moment is an indefinite measure of time into which almost all experience falls. It is the conclusive present and it permeates all written past. It forms in our vision and consciousness. History enters as the moment fleeting, but the moment, in and out of time, the present moment, is our epiphany, when eternity reaches into our time and into us. Eternity carves its expression into us. It comes to us to build.

Film has allowed the artist to tame the moment, to record and possess it, to suspend it in a representation that pretends to permanence. The moment, as inscribed on film, becomes an elastic interval. In this raw form, it opens onto the many possibilities for further creation, be they achieved by distortion and obscurity, by the heightened clarity that comes in the movement study, by the divergent gestures of alternating patterns, and by other operations played on the visual field. Our mastery over the moment and its contents invites us deeper inside the instant and eternity. That moment of insight, formed in the improvisatory gesture or tempered and realized by later contemplation, might be transformed to damn out old motions, to make them new; to give polyrhythmic integrity to both moment and memory itself; to reach for the essential energy of experience. Transformations reveal a composition as a field of individual and endlessly renewed meanings and energies. But the epiphany is rare and ultimate.

Every moment possesses the power to transform itself. In its stagnant chronology, its fixed coordinate, it changes. By memory and by history, time transforms itself. We use film to alter the moment, to cradle the moment, to annihilate the moment, or at least its impression, and by these operations, the image bears out the mystical associations of consciousness. The transformable moment is the moment turning into both its opposite and its other, and meaning arises in the gap between opposition and otherness. By this transformation, the moment departs from the assurances of memory and becomes a breathing passage.

Stephen Broomer, November 2014



## **Some considerations on the artistic process (of Stephen Broomer)**

By Dan Browne

*“Just as the creative artist is not allowed to choose, neither is he permitted to turn his back on anything: a single refusal, and he is cast out of the state of grace and becomes sinful all the way through.”*

– Rilke, letter to his wife, Oct 23, 1907

At a younger age I read a quote, whose source has since eluded me, which stated that while it is acceptable to be a poet, it is not acceptable to become one. Artists rarely fit comfortably into their eras, and there is often a discomfort between the living artist and their surroundings, especially those who continually produce new works. Perhaps they are obscene due to their fecundity, which makes them unpredictable and difficult to categorize—it is easier to deal with them once they have passed and can be converted into idols or forgotten (and sometimes, when the time is right, rediscovered).

In the dialogue *Ion*, Plato distinguishes between the practice of ‘art’ and ‘inspiration’ as fundamentally distinct categories. For Plato, art is a subset of *techne*, a mode of craft-making achieved through knowledge, while he likens

inspiration to an act of possession by divine force, using as an example the attraction of iron rings to a powerful magnet. The poet's role, in this context, is to serve as a link in delivering inspiration from Muse to audience:

[T]he muse first of all inspires men herself; and from these inspired persons a chain of other persons is suspended, who take the inspiration. For all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art [*techné*], but because they are inspired and possessed... For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him... They are simply inspired to utter that to which the Muse impels them.

What Plato's metaphor suggests is that poetic inspiration is not a form of knowledge that can be obtained via reason; the creative act originates without an ability to submit to prior calculation. (Yet another reason for why living artists are obscure: they do not behave as expected. Historical trajectories can be envisioned with much greater ease in retrospect.) This is perhaps why artists cannot seem to fully explain what they do, no matter how hard they may be pressured: they are only ever a conduit for their work, a medium in a similar sense to the tools used, through which inspiration is channeled as a prism refracts light. In this sense, an artist is never the sole producer or owner of their artwork—they have simply been given the privileged position of assisting the work into being.

Once a work of art is complete, it begins to take on an independent existence in the world, like a child. This means that, in order to succeed, artworks (and perhaps even artists themselves) must be born into the world like horses: on their feet, running. They must be functional machines, able to deliver their intended purpose. It is a great challenge for their initial fragility to be nurtured into fully-fledged existence—exceptions are found only in such rare conditions where a close-knit community of like-minded individuals has somehow miraculously been given a chance to flourish. Their situation is further hindered by the approach of most contemporary audiences, whose approach to new work is not rooted in a willingness to

receive, but is instead based in the notion that the work owes them a debt (obtained by purchasing admission) that ought to be repaid as quickly and efficiently as possible (usually to facilitate the continued consumption of such disposable forms of exchanges). Sadly, this attitude is a sure-fire means for breaking the magnetic force of inspiration, and regrettably ensures that the lifespan of most new and interesting works is relegated to the length of their circuit within a given festival scene.

Another notion that I would like to briefly touch upon relating to the practice of art is one found in numerous traditional folk cultures: that artworks are a means for encoding and transmitting forms of wisdom, to be later received by future generations. Such transmissions are encountered routinely through the codes within ancient myths, fables, dances, songs and crafts. (For instance: it was only recently discovered that some fifteenth century Islamic carpets contain quasi-crystalline mathematical patterns, encoded long before the discovery of such forms by the modern Western mathematical tradition.) This concept of art, for which the Russian-Armenian mystic G.I. Gurdjieff proposed the term 'legominism', is subversive to contemporary ideas of artistic legitimation, as it not only redefines the significance of aesthetics, but also effaces the boundary between artisanal crafts and 'high' art. However, such motivations seem apposite for practitioners of the cinematic arts, as the camera's functioning as "nature's pencil" makes it well equipped for capturing present moments for future revisiting, and, extended through time, offers a form of *techné* with vast potential. In his "Statement of Plans" for the unfinished film cycle *Magellan*, Hollis Frampton called for a "totally inclusive work of film art as a model for human consciousness... of an art of cinema that might encode thought as compactly as the human genetic substance encodes our entire physical body."

I raise these ideas as a preface to discussing the films of Stephen Broomer as an entry point to the dynamic tension within his body of work, a tension also characterized by Broomer's dual status as film historian and preservationist in addition to film-maker—these roles necessitate distinct approaches, yet can nonetheless mutually illuminate each other. He has



found a Muse with a strong magnetic force as of late: producing over twenty films in a mere four years' time is a remarkable (if hardly rational) feat, and the sense of personal urgency Broomer brings to each project appears to have no immediate signs of dispersal. Despite this prolific output, the films cover an astonishingly wide range of subjects and techniques, and while never resorting to any particular formula, certain overarching tendencies can be observed among them. Many take their point of departure from a specific location, often embodied in their title. Yet space in Broomer's films is never understood *a priori*, an assumption to be taken for granted, but is always instead connected to a dynamic and embodied sense of temporality—such a proposition being the only reasonable approach for an artist working in a four-dimensional medium—maintaining a historicizing (fact-based) context while simultaneously generating an embodied, subjective (value-based) encounter, through representing both the artist's internal vision and the ways in which that vision interacts with (and resists against) the medium of the cinema itself.

While the subjects of Broomer's films fall within the realm of the visible, an aspect of the invisible is always sought in the process: from the distortions of the childhood spaces in *Manor Road* (2010) and *Memory Worked by Mirrors* (2011), to the superimpositions of *Christ Church Saint James* (2011), *Conservatory* (2013), *Brébeuf* (2012), and *Spirits in Season* (2013), and the gestural camerawork of *Queen's Quay* (2012), *Blue Guitar* (2013), *Balinese Rebar* (2011), *The Order of Ideas at the Leslie Street Spit* (2012), and *Dominion* (2014). The elements encountered at the sites of these films are inevitably transformed by the filmmaker's experience; these recorded moments form the kernel of a particular work. ("first thought, best thought"). The compression of space, the elimination of distance, and the re-presentation of the frame as a flat, two-dimensional object are formative strategies employed in juxtaposition against the illusion of depth and substance that is an inescapable feature of the camera. Images and sounds struggle to exert their force as closed systems while simultaneously maintaining their link to the external world, forming two poles between which the films oscillate. These dual forces are to some extent always at war over the place of meaning in Broomer's films: as they struggle to reclaim the specificity of a place lost in time, their representations come

into friction with an understanding of media as a substance that can only ever exist in the present, inscriptions for which any semblance to another reality is ultimately phantasmagorical.

While many of the films are portraits, all of them are also self-portraits. Place is revealed as the means to finding a sense of self, through the act of mediation (just as presence can only be truly understood through absence). Broomer's films are nostalgic in the sense Frampton chose to define the word, as "the wounds of returning": they seek to achieve the re-presentation of something lost, but, in doing so, are forced themselves to admit the loss inherent to any representation, that any such form can in a sense only ultimately limit and obscure whatever is recalled. Yet, infinity can nonetheless be encountered within a finite space. There is an obsession with decay and echo—an image recorded, bearing only a trace left for the re-visitation of something that has since passed, as evinced by the spectral graffiti of the church which fell to arson in *Christ Church Saint James*, the lost footsteps of the missionary in *Brébeuf*, the archival turn of *Championship*, the faces of *Jenny Haniver* (2014), obliterated by interface. In all these works there lies a tension between the desire to record, to preserve, to cherish, while at the same also an uncertainty of the possibility that such a miracle can even exist. They have a spiritual dimension, in the same sense that Heidegger calls questioning "the piety of thought."

In this sense, *Pepper's Ghost* (2013) might be Broomer's most successful work to date, in that it summarizes many of these aforementioned issues while also transcending them. The loss confronted is a spectre that has haunted all of his previous 16mm output, whose spaces effaced by historical change can be viewed as metaphors for the fate of the medium in which they have been etched. As a film historian, it is clear that Broomer views this loss as nothing short of catastrophic—a fall to which his attention for the specificity of the medium struggles against, his works acting as a rallying cry for film to be carried forward into the new millennium—however, crisis and opportunity are always linked. *Pepper's Ghost* is arguably his first work set entirely in the present moment, though its correlation with 2013 being known as the year of the 'selfie' is mostly

anachronistic—the film is more concerned with Renaissance optics and Victorian stage magic than contemporary vanities. *Pepper's Ghost* can be seen as both a return to the cinema of attractions—honest and sincere in its appraisal of the wonders to be had through the veils of illusory media—while at the same time a more detached and formal comment on this state of novelty, achieved through a greater degree of structuralism than in any of Broomer's previous work. Yet, even through the camera is anchored to a static tripod throughout the duration, embodied gesture still finds its way to the forefront of the image in the form of the liberated bodies free to play the room itself as a camera: the two-way mirror, blinds and fluorescent lights serving as viewfinder, exposure and shutter. The synopsis is an excerpt from *Magia Naturalis* (1584), by Giambattista della Porta, a Neapolitan scientist credited with the invention of the *camera obscura*, a device attributed not only to the development of linear perspective in painting and the rise of photography, but, as Lee W. Bailey observes, “a classic yet largely unacknowledged root metaphor for psyche itself, as if psyche were nothing but a dark room.” While film artists of the previous century could maintain their hermetic individualism, networks saturate contemporary media environments. The character of video insists that it cannot be used entirely in accordance with the codes of the previous episteme—thus, the darkroom psyche here is shared in collaboration, amongst not only the three performers but the audience as well, who are invited through the reflected gaze(s) of the lens and the figures to share in the exploration of the textures of light—an increasingly immaterial form in the digital realm, yet rendered tactile through constant handheld manipulations, such as the raising and lowering of blinds, flicking on and off of light switches, tape attaching transparent gels to mirrored glass. Like Broomer's other films, *Pepper's Ghost* depicts the accumulation of self through representation, but simultaneously fragments the individual I/eye through the collaboration between many and machine. As the performers' reflections dematerialize and rematerialize in the play of instantaneous feedback through the mirrored surface and magic box of the camera, the magician says: “See, it's easy. You just pull the rabbit out of the hat.”





## **A Radical Sense of Form: Against organic unity, or Notes for discussion of Broomer's films**

By R. Bruce Elder

This all-too-brief theoretical note concerns a mode of construction that, despite its current importance, has hardly been considered in critical discourse. Its contemporary relevance is largely the result of its close relationship to permutational or algorithmic methods and to forms that make use of the unvarying repetition of a modulus or group of moduli. Beyond this reason for its importance, this mode of construction should have commanded widespread interest for the sweeping challenge it offers to received ideas about art and art-making. Alas, that has not been the case.

Among the filmmakers who have used this form of construction is Stephen Broomer. This essay is also propaedeutic to an examination of his work. Were this mode of construction better understood, I would call on that awareness to analyze his body of work. However, that understanding is not commonly available, so all I can do is offer preliminaries to analysis, in the form of a few superficial theoretical observations about a mode of construction he favours. My hope is that this essay, exploring the implications of a sort of construction that is common in his work, might inspire other film analysts to undertake the close analysis that Broomer's films deserve. Or, better still, perhaps that analysis can be left as an exercise for the reader.

Basic to this form of construction is the belief that the integration of an artwork need not result in an organic unity. Artists proposed, almost militantly, that the relations among the juxtaposed units in this new art would be entirely external; the elements would remain what they are—they would not be transformed internally—when they enter into relations with other units. Several works in the 1920s anticipated this development, but by the mid-1960s, serial art, serial painting, systems art and systematic painters were aggressively bodying forth a new sort of artistic unity, based on simple geometric configurations repeated with little or no variation. This work relied on readily apprehensible arrangements of basic elements (stark lines and simple geometric shapes, often mechanically produced) and voids (binary structures, opposing presence and absence were common); such readily apprehensible configurations of the basic elements were often generated algorithmically (as algebraic permutations of a set, for example). Lawrence Alloway's 1966 show for the Guggenheim Museum, *Systematic Painting*, announced this development to the world at large.<sup>1</sup> These approaches would influence the work—and polemical advocacy—of new media and cybernetic artists (such as Jer Thorp) who plump for “rule-based art.”

By 1970, the sculptor Carl Andre had identified the fundamental tension in his own art-making as that between plastic and clastic tendencies, which he characterized as follows: “plastic is flowing of form, and clastic means broken or preexisting parts which can be put together or taken apart without joining or cementing.”<sup>2</sup> The term Andre has adopted here, “clastic,” comes from the Greek *κλαστικός* (*klastikos*), meaning broken; the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that in geology it means “consisting of broken pieces or of older rocks” and in anatomy “composed of a number of separable pieces.”

Let's take 1966, the year of the Primary Structures exhibition at New York's Jewish Museum, as the moment that marks the institutional recognition of clastic art.<sup>3</sup> The art of the preceding two decades had been overwhelmingly plastic in character, reflecting an enthusiasm for *compenetrazione* that suggested a higher realm of organic unity that subsumes all particulars. Nonetheless, as I have noted, in the 1910s and 1920s a sizeable number

of artists brought into question the belief that the unity suitable to a work of art is necessarily organic, with each element or quality being changed inwardly through forming relations with other elements or qualities of the work. In the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, artists in considerable numbers began to advocate for a new form of unity, appropriate to the mechanical technology seen by many at the time to represent the most advanced stage of economic and cultural development. The technological unity they advocated for—truly revolutionary to the arts—involved the assembly of standardized units. In a mechanical artwork (an artwork whose unity has a mechanical character, rather than organic), the elements assembled are not changed inwardly by being formed into a whole, just as the nuts and bolts of a machine are not transformed when being integrated into a machine.

Various factors (including the rise of the electrologic paradigm and the rise to prominence of esoteric traditions) contrived to usher this conception from centre stage. By the mid-1960s, it returned with a vengeance. Among those who asserted the importance of this form of unity was the aforementioned sculptor, Carl Andre (who likes to remind us that he grew up in the industrial town of Quincy, Massachusetts). Andre did not start out as a sculptor, but rather as a poet; the poet he most admired, and elected to apprentice himself to, was Ezra Pound.

Let's consider Pound's example, and consider what Andre may have learnt from it. I will choose a passage from Canto 83 for my example.

the sage  
delighteth in water  
the humane man has amity with the hills  
as the grass grows by the weirs  
thought Uncle William *consiros*  
as the grass on the roof of St. What's his name  
near “Cane e Gatto”  
soll deine Liebe sein  
it would be about a-level the windows  
the grass would, or I dare say above that

when they bless the wax for the Palio  
Olim de Malatestis  
with Maria's face there on the fresco

This clearly is an assemblage of a new sort. As Andre notes, “no poet before Pound wrote in the form he created.”<sup>4</sup> We could almost say of any canto after the first fifteen, that “any arbitrary element can follow any other.” Certainly nothing in the novel syntax he worked out prevents any element from following another; though, of course, the unique semantics (capturing thought processes) entails that some juxtapositions will be more resonant than others. To show this, I will comment on the passage from Canto 83, but I want to make it clear that my commentary on that work draws extensively on Carroll F. Terrell's glosses on the poem (in *A Companion to The Cantos of Ezra Pound*). First, “the sage/ delighteth in water/ the humane man has amity with the hills”: the cross-references among the three lines suggest Pound's commitment to Confucian ethics—sitting in a cage near Pisa (under arrest for treason), Pound attempts to renounce striving and to accept the world he was given. He is helped in this by a passage from the *Analects* (IV, 21). “He [Kung] said: “This wise delight in water, the human delight in the hills. The knowing are active; the humane, tranquil; the knowing get pleasure, and the human get long life.” Then, “as the grass grows by the weirs/ thought Uncle William”: the “William” here is William Butler Yeats, who, in “Down by the Sally Gardens” wrote: “She bid me take my life easy.” What justifies making a connection between the Yeats's work and the passage from the *Analects* is that both advise tranquility: “as the grass grows on the weirs;/ But I was young and foolish [I didn't take the lesson of tranquility—no doubt the caged Pound was feeling just that], and now am full of tears.” That last phrase provides the semantic ground for the next juxtaposed term, *consiros* or ‘with grief’. The term appears in a Provençal passage incorporated into Dante's *Commedia* (*Purgatorio*, XXVI, 144): “Ieu sui Arnautz, che plor e vai cantan;/ Consiros, vei la passada follor,/ E vei jauzen lo joi qu'esper denan;/ Aras vos prec, per aquella valor/ Que us guida al som sens freich e sens calina,/ Sovegna vos atenprar ma dolor.” The lines mean, “I am Arnaut [one of Pound's favorite poets, and with whom, at this juncture,

he doubtless identified], who weep and go singing. Grieved I see the past folly [here is the semantic ground for the connection with the passage from Yeats' “Down by the Sally Gardens”], and I see with pleasure the joy which I hope for in the future [the Confucian rewards for a life of tranquility and generosity]. Now I entreat you by that virtue which guides you to the summit without cold and without heat, that you will remember to assuage my grief.” The reference to grass in the line from Yeats prompts Pound to think of grass in a different context: “As the grass on the roof of St. What's his name/ near ‘Cane e Gatto.’” Cane e Gatto (The Cat and the Dog) is the intersection of two streets (each named after one of those animals), near San Giorgio, a cathedral in Pantaneto, Siena, explaining the link to “St. What's his name.” (“Soll deine Liebe sein” [is to be your love], by Carl Bohm, was a popular art song in the early twentieth century”; it proclaims that one's love should be as deep as the sea and as strong as steel.) But what explains “the grass on the roof”? The phrase relates to “about a-level to the windows” (though the close relation among them is obscured by the apparent distant relations among the moduli internal to the poem). Twice a year there is a horse-race in Siena—on July 2, for the Festival of Our Lady's Visitation and on August 15, for the Festival of Our Lady's Assumption”; the horse-race is called the Palio, and Pound refers to it two lines after he references the grass on the roof being “a-level to the windows.” Before the horse-races there is a procession, issuing from San Giorgio, where “they bless the wax [candles] for Palio”; Pound is alluding to having watched the procession from the Palazzio Capuquadri Salimbene, whose first floor windows look over the church roof. “Olim de Malestestis [formerly of the Malestestas]—the Palazzio Capuquadri Salimbene was once owned by the Maletesta family (Pound declared himself a pagan, and he believed that Sigismondo Maletesta was at the centre of a pagan erotic cult). “With Maria's face there in the fresco” alludes to a face in a painting over one of the doors in the palazzio's halls, reminding Pound of his daughter Maria's face (no doubt he regretted being relatively estranged from her).

The loosening of the bonds among the *Canto*'s lexical units accounts for the fact that these units are not changed internally—at least not radically changed—as they enter into relations with other moduli in the artwork

(in an organic artwork, the relations between the elements are so integral and complex that they transform whatever they incorporate). Pound understood those implications more deeply than any of his predecessors and contemporaries; indeed more deeply than most of his followers. The loosening of the bonds between elements permits any element to follow another. This idea was made explicit by Carl Andre's friend, Hollis Frampton, in what he humorously labelled 'Brakhage's theorem': "*For any finite series of shots [“film”] whatsoever, there exists in real time a rational narrative, such that every term in the series, together with its position, duration, partition, and reference shall be perfectly and entirely accounted for.*"<sup>5</sup> Another way of saying this is to say that, given any sequence of shots, an arbitrary shot can be adjoined to it, and one can give a perfect and complete account of the new sequence (the sequence as it was before the shot was added, along with the new shot). As a way of attempting to spell out that idea, we can say that in any film (or, for that matter, any piece of serial art) any element can be adjoined to another (though, of course, not with the same richness of implication). That new form of unity is a result of eliminating internal relations from the nexus of elements that compose a work of art, and converting all relations to one whose character is entirely external.

One form of construction that highlights the possibilities resulting from the free juxtaposition of elements are those that result from repeating a single unit without variation (though of course the different units' places—relations—within the resulting configuration necessarily changes); another are those that result from permuting a set of basic moduli. Thus, Carl Andre often borrowed his material from external sources (for example, accounts of wars against the First Nations of America, the *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, and biographies of Charles Lindbergh) which were then organized according to arbitrary systems (for example, an alphabetic system, in which words starting with a particular letter drop out, then words starting with another. Looking at a series of pages, we see repeated clusters of units changing position or being reorganized (and we sometimes also see the constitution of these clusters being changed, as a unit will be dropped from or added to the grouping).<sup>6</sup> The units themselves are not original, but the organizing system is.

Artists' use of such variational processes motivated Hugh Kenner to propose in "Art in a Closed Field" that poets and novelists of the modern era redefine the boundaries of their respective practices by selecting specific elements from the medium with which they work (or, alternatively, from their environment) and order them according to laws or rules of their own devising.<sup>7</sup> Kenner describes this method as involving the arrangement of a finite set of elements within a closed field.<sup>8</sup> For Kenner, the modernist aesthetic is based on the linguistic paradigm of a combinatorial process within a closed field, where what is important is the generation of novel syntactic relations. He connects this sense of composition to machine translation, about which he states, "to program a translating machine . . . you must treat each of the two languages as (1) a set of elements and (2) a set of rules for dealing with those elements." (Consider Carl Andre's works: many of his sculptures consist of a quantity of identical units—bricks, concrete blocks, metal plates—that are arranged in forms that can be notated using simple and elegant mathematical patterns.) "These rules, correctly stated, will generate all possible sentences of the language to which they apply, and of this concept the sentences in a given book may be regarded as special cases." One of the works that Kenner uses to elucidate his ideas is Gustav Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. Of it, he writes that it "does but repeat the same small cyclic motion, study, enthusiasm, practice, disaster, over and over until it has used up all the things that the curriculum affords us to study: a closed field of plot consuming a closed field of material."<sup>9</sup> This is what a composition by the unit and the interval make possible, and film is the art of the unit and the interval.

This conception of the nature of composition ("putting together") is the primary theoretical basis for working with algorithmic processes, which has won the allegiance of recent artists—and behind that theory is the artistically revolutionary conception of the unit and the interval. Kenner notes Gustave Flaubert's interest in lexicographic structures (an interest Flaubert shared with Hollis Frampton and Carl Andre)—an interest I see developing a sense of composition as reliant on the unit and the interval.

The dictionary takes discourse apart into separate words, and arranges them in alphabetical order. It implies that the number of words at our disposal is finite; it also implies that the process by which new words are made has been terminated. Hence, the persistent lexicographical concern, from Johnson's day to nearly our own, with fixing the language. That Shakespeare had no dictionary and that he was less occupied with words than with a continuous curve of utterance are corollary phenomena . . . Flaubert, the connoisseur of the *mot juste*, comes to terms with the fact that, whatever printed discourse may be modeled on, it is assembled out of the constituents of the written language; and the written language has been analysed, by a long process which took its inception with the invention of printing, into . . . two desiderata: a closed field, and discrete counters to be arranged according to rules.<sup>10</sup>

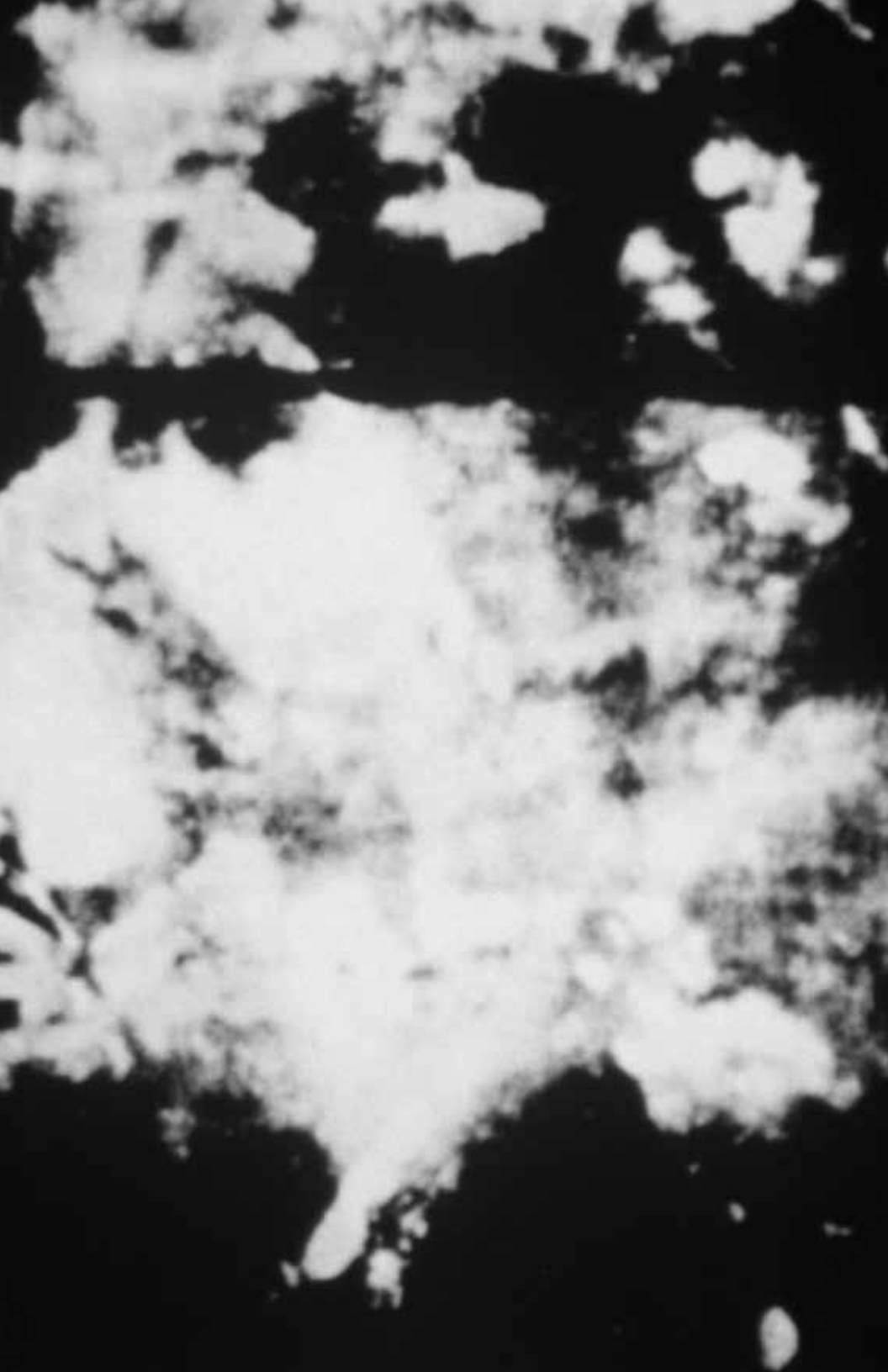
Regarding such lexicographic enthusiasms, he notes, of James Joyce's masterwork, *Ulysses*:

The closed set of words which we call the book's vocabulary was most deliberately arrived at. It was not simply Joyce's own vocabulary, but one that he compiled. And the rules by which the words are selected and combined are not the usual rules that used to be said to govern the novelist. The traditional novelist is governed by some canon of verisimilitude regarding the words people actually use and by a more or less linear correspondence between the sequence of his statements and the chronology of a set of events. In "Ulysses" the events are very simple, and are apt to disappear beneath the surface of the prose; the style, as the book goes on, complicates itself according to laws which have nothing to do with the reporting of the visible and audible; and again and again we find Joyce inserting a word, or a combination of words, precisely so that he can allow it to carry a motif, as in music, by simply repeating it on a future page. System, in fact, sometimes took precedence

over lexicography.<sup>11</sup>

Such combinatorial processes are fundamental to Stephen Broomer's work as well. He, too, works by the unit and the interval. Other papers in this collection will highlight the importance of these processes in his work.

1. Lawrence Alloway, "Systemic Painting," in: *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, by Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 37–60 and Jack Burnham, "Systems Esthetics" *Artforum* 7.1 (September, 1968): 30–35.
2. Phyllis Tuchman "An Interview with Carl Andre" *Artforum* 8 no. 10 (June 1970): 55; reprinted in Carl Andre, *Cuts: Texts 1959–2004*/Carl Andre ed. James Meher (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 142.
3. This, of course, was not the only significance of that renowned exhibition.
4. Carl Andre, letter to Rene Odlin, 12 June 1963; reprinted in *Cuts*, 75.
5. Hollis Frampton, "A Pentagram for Conjuring the Narrative" *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 144. The italics are found in the original, as are the crotchets and the matter they enclose. One easily discerns the influence of system approaches on Frampton's humorous formulation. Among the likely reasons for Frampton identifying this as Brakhage's theorem is that he (and Andre) had come to conceive an art in which anything could follow anything else through Pound's poetry, and no film artist has more completely assimilated the lessons of Pound's *Cantos* than Stan Brakhage.
6. A key concept in Andre's theory of art was that of the cut. For many years, as he waited for the art world to recognize the importance of his work, Andre worked as a brakeman and conductor in the New Jersey yard of the Pennsylvania Railroad. This is the provenance of his word "cut": a cut is series of cars separated from a train. Hollis Frampton describes Andre's work for the railroad as "assembling freight trains." Frampton goes on to say, "The baldest guesswork would suggest that [Andre's] earlier intimations of modular and isometric structures found abundant examples among the boxcars and crossties of New Jersey" ("Letter to Enno Develing" *On the Camera Arts . . .*, 282). The analogy with film is clear: a film is one frame and interval and then another frame—like one box-car followed by a coupler followed by another box-car. A cut is grouping of box-cars, as a shot is a grouping of frames.
7. Hugh Kenner, "Art in a Closed Field" *Virginia Quarterly Review* 38 (4) 1962: 597–613. Much of the material in this piece was reprinted in Kenner's magisterial, *Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962). Both are essential sources for understanding the real intellectual and aesthetic source of algorithmic art. I might note that I disagree with Kenner and his teacher Marshall McLuhan when they claim that typewriter played the crucial role in the development of this mode of composition. I believe that the cinema had that role—McLuhan and Kenner tended to undervalue the cinema due to a binarism they formed, between the film and the electric arts. I believe there is plenty of evidence that in the early twentieth-century, the cinema (along with X-rays) was understood as the paradigmatic electric art. Yet, its material basis, which alternates light-shows and darkness (the frame and the interval between frames) also makes it the paradigmatic art of the interval.
8. Kenner, it seems, was able to foresee the development of systematic and algorithmic art that would take place shortly after this article appeared by getting a very clear understanding of the historical developments the led up to it.
9. *Ibid.*, 602
10. Hugh Kenner, "Art in a Closed Field": 600–1.
11. *ibid.*, 598–99,



## **Permutations and Other Schema: A Few Notes on the Films of Stephen Broomer**

By Clint Enns

### **Introduction**

One of the concerns of this essay is to make some relatively basic mathematical knowledge about permutational structures and algorithmic editing accessible to a general audience, without compromising mathematical integrity. Moreover, I will attempt to explain how these structures and processes can be applied to filmmaking by exploring various applications and examples. In particular, it is possible to find some of these structures and procedures within some of the films of Stephen Broomer. Although it may be fruitful to analyze these structures and processes within Broomer's films, it is worth observing that within his work there are many other strategies at play including historical/spiritual/psychogeographical investigations, chance operations and a variety of aesthetic pursuits specific to individual films. Finally, I do not intend to further comment on why the decision to make use of these structures and processes is radical, since R. Bruce Elder's article "A Radical Sense of Form: Against organic unity, or Notes for discussion of Broomer's films," included in this volume, provides a persuasive theoretical explanation that argues against the organic unity of these forms, and demonstrates the historical importance of these constructions.



## Permutational Structures

In mathematics, there are several ways to define a *permutation*. The most general way to define a permutation is as follows:

A permutation of an arbitrary set  $X$ , is a *bijection* from  $X$  to itself.<sup>2</sup>

With this in mind, it is possible to define a permutation in a way that is more relevant to cinema, namely, as follows:

A permutation is a linear ordering of all the elements in a set.

In other words, it is possible to think of a permutation as a list of all of the elements in the set with each element listed exactly once. For example, the permutations of the set  $\{1, 2, 3\}$  are 123, 132, 213, 231, 312, 321. In general, the number of permutations of the set  $X$  can be shown to be  $|X|!$ , where  $|X|$  is the size of the set. For instance, the number of permutations on the set  $\{1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6\}$  is  $6! = 6*5*4*3*2*1 = 720$ . In order to prove this simple result, it is easy to see that there are initially  $|X|$  choices for the first position,  $|X|-1$  choices for the second position, until there is only one position for the last element of the set.

Even with this elementary mathematical knowledge, it is possible to see the role permutations can play in filmmaking given that films are, in essence, a linear ordering of shots. For instance, consider James Benning's *13 Lakes* (2004), a film consisting of 13 shots of the lakes with each shot lasting ten minutes. From these 13 shots, Benning would be able to construct  $13!$  films, that is, approximately six billion different films simply by changing the shot order. In fact, given that 100ft of 16mm is 4000 frames, it would be possible to make  $4000! = 4000*3999*3998*...*2*1^3$  films simply by rearranging the frames. Taking this idea to its logical conclusion, Stan Douglas used a variation of this permutational structure to create *Journey into Fear* (2001), an installation that exhausts each of 625 possible combinations of sound and images, creating a work that lasts six and a half days. Douglas explains:

*Journey into Fear* is a film installation in which a picture tracks loops while

its dialogue tracks are constantly changing. The timeline is broken in four positions (1-4) to permit branching. At these junctures, a computer randomly chooses which one of the five dialogue variations (A-E) will be performed. Each time the picture track repeats, a different combination of dialogue segments is heard until all permutations have been presented.<sup>4</sup>

Given the exhaustive nature of this approach (and this discussion), it seems worthwhile to explore alternative, and more subtle, uses of this permutational structure.

Anagrams, a permutational structure that involves re-ordering letters of a phrase to produce a new phrase by using all the original letters exactly once, is one way of rejecting the number of results produced by generating all permutations of a set. Given that language is fairly limiting,<sup>5</sup> by only considering permutations that form phrases, the number of permutations that can be used is greatly reduced. Broome's film *Hang Twelve* (2014) is an anagram of the word wavelength, making reference to the seminal 1967 Michael Snow film of the same name. In addition, *Hang Twelve* contains a poem, read by the filmmaker:

*Nice Eyes Revolt*

Encores live yet  
Slice every note, each notice sincere in secret  
Lovers covet eyeliner to recite in vein or vesicle  
Clever noise, silence or else

Again, this poem seems to consist of anagrams. Below is a further anagram of the poem. (I encourage readers to create their own.)

*Serene Velocity*

Serene Velocity  
Serene Velocity – Insert a conscience cite here  
Vision lover in revolt  
I revere eyes eclectic tone  
Sincere love, I enclose reels

The title *Nice Eyes Revolt* is an anagram of the phrase serene velocity, referencing the seminal 1970 Ernie Gehr film of the same name. More than being a simple homage though, these anagrams provide the key to decoding the structure of this work, namely, they allude to the underlying algorithms that Broomer used to construct his film.

### Algorithmic Structures

Algorithmic art is art produced by following a finite list of well-defined instructions or by following a procedure/schema. Usually computers are associated with the production of algorithmic art; however, computers are not an essential part of the process. As previously alluded to, *Hang Twelve* (2014) would be considered a work of algorithmic art and the anagrams introduced provide the audience with a way of unravelling the underlying algorithm used to generate the work. Both *Wavelength* and *Serene Velocity* are works that experiment with cinematic space through structuring their work around the focal length of a zoom lens. Similarly, *Hang Twelve* is a work that is structured around focal length, however, Broomer expands on this previously explored theme by connecting it to the RYB colour wheel, a circle consisting of twelve equidistant colour sections arranged as follows: red; orange-red; orange; yellow-orange; yellow; yellow-green; green; blue-green; blue; blue-violet; violet; red-violet. At first glance these two concepts may seem disconnected, however, light (and more specifically, the refraction of light through a lens) and colour are both products of the same physical phenomenon; namely, electromagnetic radiation.

*Hang Twelve* is divided into twelve parts not including the prologue and epilogue. For the twelve sections, the focal length of the zoom lens was divided into twelve equal intervals. The first section begins with the focal length set at 12mm, for the second section the focal length is set at 24mm, continuing until the focal length for the twelfth final section is 144mm. In other words, the film is structured around the zoom. In the final section of the film, Broomer reads the poem *Nice Eyes Revolt* on screen before committing one final random act, the throwing of a pitcher of water at

the camera, with the tossed water blocked by a window. In addition, each section is framed by one of the primary colours, continuously cycling through red, blue and yellow in that order. Between each section is a six-second cycle of twelve static frames representing the colour wheel – that is, the solid colours begin with red and end with red-violet. Finally, the prologue consists of twelve seconds of solid red and the film ends with twelve seconds of solid red-violet. One of the more interesting aspects of the film occurs in the epilogue, where the entire space is revealed in negative and the colour wheel is also shown one final time, also in negative. Through inverting the colours, Broomer estranges the space and seems to allude to the limitations of this predetermined system and of the RYB colour system itself – that is, Broomer may be alluding to colours that exist outside of those generated by the RYB colour wheel.<sup>6</sup> Taking this idea to its logical conclusion, the film may be hinting at ideas beyond visual representation.

Despite this rigorous structure, many of the sections of *Hang Twelve* create tension between predesigned plans and improvisations. In each of the sections, a spontaneous action occurs within the constructed frame. The events improvised by the performers – the filmmaker and his friends Blake Williams, Cameron Moneo, Emmalyne Laurin, and Eva Kolcze – include looking at themselves in the camera, playing with a mirror, sweeping, etc. In fact, the tension between these oppositional modes of production – rigid schemata and chance operations – can be found in many of Broomer's other films.

In *Christ Church - Saint James, Brébeuf* and *Conservatory*, Broomer uses a geometric schema to edit his film, once again playing with the tension between systematic and chance operations. By observing the geometric motifs in the works' essentially lyrical nature, it is possible to see fundamental tensions between an internal organic unity and an artistic unity based on external geometric configurations, as further discussed in Elder's "A Radical Sense of Form." For instance, consider the circular motif in *Brébeuf*, the hexadecagon motif in *Conservatory*, and the rectangular and semi-circle motif in *Christ Church - Saint James*.

Finally, consider *Championship*, one of Broomer's most challenging works. Kate Russell explains the origins of the film:

Stephen Broomer's *Championship* was born from a chance purchase and also deliberately uses chance methods. It was created from 8mm film reels that Broomer purchased unseen at auction. It transpired that the material was a series of amateur wrestling matches fought between high school boys in various gymnasiums. This fortuitous acquisition tendered the raw material from which *Championship* was created. Broomer speculates that the footage had remained unclaimed in a lab, making him its first viewer. Found by chance, reclaimed and repurposed, it has been transformed through chance procedures such as superimposition into a poetic and comic meditation on the human body.<sup>7</sup>

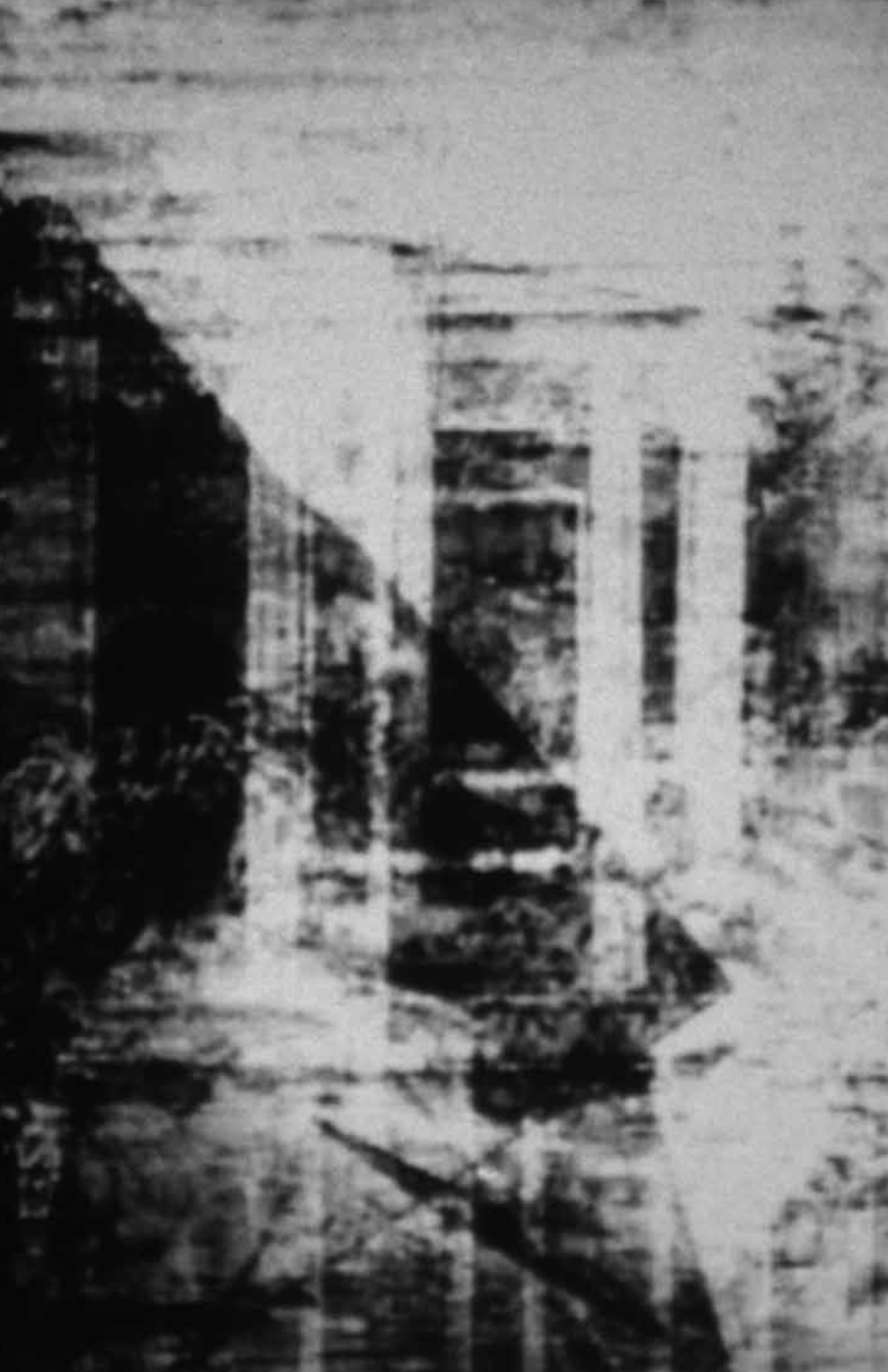
The film uses chance operations within a precise structure influenced by Owen Land's 1974 film *A Film of Their 1973 Spring Tour Commissioned by Christian World Liberation Front of Berkeley, California*, namely, three-frame alternations.<sup>8</sup> Similar to the use of lexical units in the *Canto* as described in detail by Elder in "A Radical Sense of Form," the use of rapid three-frame units, chance operations and superimpositions wrestles the found footage free from its previously linear structure. Elder further observes,

Artists' use of such variational processes motivated Hugh Kenner to propose in "Art in a Closed Field" that poets and novelists of the modern era redefine the boundaries of their respective practices by selecting specific elements from the medium with which they work (or, alternatively, from their environment) and ordering them according to laws or rules of their own devising. [...] For Kenner, the modernist aesthetic is based on the linguistic paradigm of a combinatorial process within a closed field, where what is important is the generation of novel syntactic relations.<sup>9</sup>

From this observation, it is possible to read *Championship* as a cinematic realization of the modernist aesthetic through the generation of novel *visual* relations, redefining cinematic boundaries by selecting the three-frame unit and ordering them according to a schema which incorporates

chance operations. In fact, this seems to highlight one of the central strategies in Broomer's systematic work, namely, the creation of tension through problematizing a formal system's expected predictability by systematic incorporation of chance operations.

1. Special thanks to Cameron Moneo and Scott Birdwise for their editorial advice, R. Bruce Elder for his inspiring article and, of course, Stephen Broomer for his films.
2. A bijection, in mathematics, is a function that is *one-to-one* and *onto*. That is, a function is *one-to-one* if every element of the codomain is mapped to by at most one element of the domain and a function is *onto* if every element of the codomain is mapped to by at least one element of the domain. In other words, a function is a bijection if every element of the codomain is mapped to by exactly one element of the domain.
3. Needless to say this number is astronomically large.
4. Stan Douglas, *Journey into Fear*, (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2002), 26.
5. For instance, most of the books in the Library of Babel would be meaningless.
6. There are certain colours which cannot be expressed within a particular color model, often referred to as colours out of gamut. One of the standard examples is pure red which can be expressed in the RGB color space and cannot be expressed in the CMYK color space.
7. Kate Russell, "Championship [filmmaker Stephen Broomer]," HA&L, Hamilton Arts & Letters, Issue 6.2 (Fall/Winter 2013/2014): 2.
8. As discussed in personal correspondences with Stephen Broomer.
9. R. Bruce Elder, "A Radical Sense of Form: Against organic unity, or Notes for discussion of Broomer's films"



## Unruly Fragments about *Christ Church*

Zoë Heyn-Jones

ABSTRACT: not a summary this time, but a declaration of intent. To think about what is abstract here. To foreground that which is drawn away from. What does it mean to abstract the ruins of a particular site on and through film? Or, rather, what does this abstraction do? Hito Steyerl talks about the “uncertainty principle” of contemporary documentarism<sup>1</sup> - the inverse proportionality between immediacy and intelligibility in, say, the blurred and nearly indiscernible broadcast of a journalist embedded on a military operation for instance. Can we think through this lens-based ambiguity in the context of artists’ moving images? Always, our terms are so slippery! ‘Documentary.’ ‘Art.’ ‘Film.’ ETCETERA. And the spaces, discursive and otherwise, in which these terms circulate. Perhaps we can revel in this perpetual-perceptual doubt. Perhaps we must, because it is all we have.<sup>2</sup>

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Stephen Broomer’s *Christ Church – Saint James* (16mm, 2011) rejoices in the ambiguity I’ve invoked. A film of and about layers, *Christ Church – Saint James* is an acutely indefinite document: a work of intense aesthetic beauty depicting, manipulating, and transforming the remains of an historic black church on Toronto’s Shaw Street that was destroyed by arson in the spring of 1998. The ruins remained, a mere pit and a few walls, and over the ensuing years, the site was overtaken with graffiti. Broomer’s *Christ Church* masterfully re-produces the layered form of the site itself, the

surfaces shifting, trembling, changing state, becoming other, imbued with the effervescence of grainy 16mm and rephotography. The inevitability of decay, the melancholy of entropy, and the life-force coursing under all surfaces priming them for change are simultaneous and strikingly conflicting. This document is a sited and cited space, made otherworldly. The concurrence of the base and the sublime moves about the frames and pricks our ears through the electric feedback of the caesural, hypnotic tones<sup>3</sup>; an uncanny interplay between sound and image, and implying a deeper narrative underlying these shimmering surfaces.

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OF RUINS: so clearly does the ruin express and collapse both time and space. What better co-conspirator than the moving image? A film about ruins enacts the presenceabsence of memory and history in its very ontology. A film about place shows us time. A film about ruin shows us transformation. Ricky Varghese talks about the ubiquity of ruins, asking, “do they constitute figure or ground?”<sup>4</sup> Proposing this aesthetic binary obscures simultaneity – and perceptual variation. *Christ Church – Saint James* is, for me, about the negotiation between figure and ground, between place and space, between the fact and its ephemerality.

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SITE VISIT – 11:04am, Tuesday October 28th, 2014: visiting Shaw Street, west side, north of College Street, Toronto - the site where Christ Church - St. James once stood - on an unseasonable warm and diaphanous fall day.

Approaching the site, I hear the rhythmic, grating percussion of machinery; the noisy, vibrating hum emanates from behind the chain-link fence and wooden barriers, pervading the entire neighbourhood. High school students in uniform walk by, their animated chatter suggesting obliviousness. I wonder: are they ignorant or cognizant of the layers – between the banal and the scandalous – of the site?

The air smells of autumn, the drying leaves, decay, and woodsmoke mingling

with the mineral smell of fresh, wet piles of earth newly excavated. Hoping for any remaining ecclesiastical ruins, one is sorely disappointed by the signs announcing the “ULTRA. URBANE. UNIQUE.” condominium development in progress. Goldenrod gone to seed pokes through wire mesh fence amid pile of gravely-clay mud and pile of old lumber, assorted garbage, and fallen leaves. It’s a warm, hazily blue-skied fall day, and the minimal, uniform, dark gray rectangles of the next development in the background look not unpleasant (it’s a good day, we’re feeling generous of spirit). Then the tinge of despair battles with this acceptance, recoiling at the cookie-cutter-concrete dwellings, forever as inaccessible to most of us as they are now, in their non-existence and fenced-in cloistering.

Construction workers look at me with suspicion and skepticism as I assess and document the site from the sidewalk. I ignore them and pace back and forth, taking in the site as best as one can without being actually able to walk on/in it. I take stills, informational ones to record the evidentiary aspects. Then close-ups of the painted wood grain of the barriers, a series of abstractions to document this further transformation of the location. I make silly, surreal panoramas. I take a short video of the cement mixer spewing its load in order to remember its ridiculous, terrifying sound.

The closer I get to the REAL - the very, factual, exact spot! – the more difficult it is to imagine this place as anything but this provisional, banal, unremarkable construction site with its apocalyptic pleasant palatability. Like Steyerl’s inverse relationship between immediacy and the evidentiary status of low-res abstract documentarism, the closer one gets to a spatial location, the harder it is to apprehend any sense of other temporalities. Is this hallowed ground? Not by virtue of being a former church site, but by virtue of having been something to someone in the past? Whose traditional land are we on? How can we think of reverence and ruin without feeling our own colonial history weigh heavily under our feet?

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This, I suppose, is an invitation to think about HAUNTOLOGY – not to exceed ontology, but to reimagine it. Hauntology, Powell & Shaffer argue,

“functions as a critique of ontology,”<sup>5</sup> shifting perspectives and opening up new spaces for theory and praxis. Following Derrida,<sup>6</sup> we can think of truth not as found in the identity of the thing, but rather how we interact with it.<sup>7</sup> The truth of a film, then, is not an essence but rather resides in the reading or experiencing of it. The truth of a site, then, is multiple, temporal as well as spatial, haunted, political, unmoored, mostly invisible, forensic.

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City of Toronto Archives – Fonds 70, Series 330, File 81: a postcard collection, “Views of various Toronto churches”

The only postcard not explicitly labeled. Is this the one? A micro-mystery: the conviviality of archival research is epitomized; the staff are on the case, helping me. To discern what? Is this the one; the Christ Church? So many churches look so much the same, and going to the archive can give me that old existential-epistemological shiver – so much stuff, but so little is known about it, and sometimes the question of relevance gives me the blues. What could possibly be the use of sifting through these dry vestiges? But curiosity always compels, eventually. I notice three men nearly obscured in the image, on top of the building, peering down at the photographer. This has a strange resonance with my experience of being warily surveilled at the site.

City of Toronto Archives – Fonds 1266, Item 2059: A single image of the church, a glass slide replicated on microfiche in a Globe & Mail collection.

City of Toronto Archives – Fonds 2, Series 1099, Item 548: A booklet titled “The March of Progress,” published to commemorate the accomplishments of the Hynes plastering company. Contains views of many churches, monuments, and municipal buildings that they worked on, including the Prince’s Gate at the Canadian National Exhibition Grounds and the Pantages and Runnymede theatres. One is struck by the similarities between the decoration/embellishment of churches and theatres.

DEEMED “PUBLICLY VIEWABLE”:

Type: building – demolished

Status: demolished

Accessibility: Easy – demolished

Recommendation: not very exciting (anymore <sup>8</sup>)

Urban explorers were drawn to the site not only for its dilapidated stateliness, but also for its mystery and intrigue. Not only was the arson of the sacred site a salacious draw, but the suspected arsonist was also embroiled in a case that involved a murder in a university cadaver lab, a stint on the lam, and the later recovery of remains on the Scarborough Bluffs, apparently a suicide.<sup>9</sup> The strata of narratives that haunt the site, and their complicity with both memory and forgetting, are made manifest on celluloid and emulsion. Like spirit photography, wonder and doubt are simultaneously conjured; death and layers the only certainties. In *Christ Church – Saint James* we see windows and graffiti conflate and confound, a transcendent ghastly stained glass. Diaphanous billowing curtains invoke ghostly breezes and light refracted through fabric, glass, and lens, onto screens. The simultaneity of so many contradictory impulses and impressions – changes of state, alchemical manipulation of surfaces, permanence and impermanence. The ruin in its becoming.

1. Steyerl, Hito. “Documentary Uncertainty.” *Documents of Contemporary Art: Abstraction*. London & Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery & The MIT Press, 2013. 160-167
2. “The only thing we can say for sure about the documentary mode in our times is that we always already doubt if it is true” (Steyerl, 163)
3. John Butcher, “A Short Time to Sing.” *The Geometry of Sentiment* (Emanem, 2007)
4. <http://drainmag.com/ruin/> Accessed 28 October 2014
5. Powell, Benjamin D. & Tracy Stephenson Shaffer, “On the Haunting of Performance Studies,” *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* Vol. 5, No. 1, April 2009. 1-19.
6. Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994.
7. Cf. Sobchack, Vivian. “Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience.” *Collecting Visible Evidence*. Jane Gaines and Michael Renov, eds. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999: 241-254.
8. Information about the site from UER (Urban Exploration Resource), created 2004, last modified 2009; <http://www.uer.ca/>
9. Stephen Broomer describes the mysterious narrative – and its permutations – in his statement prepared to introduce the film on the sixteenth anniversary of the fire: <http://stephenbroomer.tumblr.com/post/82928527255/the-chance-of-resurrection> Accessed October 23 2014.



## **Layers of Being: Stephen Broomer's *Brébeuf***

By Michael Sicinski

Canadian experimentalist Stephen Broomer is a film artist who works in recognizable idioms. Many of his most recent efforts reflect a keen interest in place and in particular the natural landscape, and in this respect his work nestles quite cozily within a noble and often ecstatic avant-garde tradition, one with roots that go back to at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century. However, in terms of painting, the examination of nature as both an optical and a haptic space, an experience as well as a geometry, we can situate Broomer within a modernist cinematic tradition that stakes certain claims with Cézanne and, particularly within Canadian filmmaking, the Group of Seven and their fellow traveler Emily Carr.

The tradition of landscape film within the avant-garde moves in many directions, but one constant seems to be the tension between the camera as a tool of detachment or one of tremulous engagement, as either an extension of a distanced eye or a body in the throes of what Heidegger called “enworldment.” Merleau-Ponty had an even more precise reading on this problem when he wrote of the *chiasm*, the intertwining between body and world. Since we are enrobed, enveloped by the sensory universe, which moves around us, and we around in it, like water in a swimming pool, how can we ever hope to attain a picture of the world from a position outside? Nevertheless, phenomenological thinking tells us we can assume that distanced position, “bracket” that sensory engulfment, and gain something like a total picture, even if only momentarily, and only provisionally.

We can consider certain key films in the history of landscape cinema as marking out positions within this tension. Artists such as James Benning (from *One Way Boogie Woogie* [1977] onward) and Peter Hutton (in films such as *Landscape (for Manon)* [1987] and *In Titan's Goblet* [1991]) favor fixity, allowing people and objects to move through their own stationary frame. By contrast, Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale* (1971) exemplifies the opposite position, allowing spatial indeterminacy to overwhelm any attempt at optical mastery. Snow's film doesn't bypass the eyes, exactly. But it short-circuits their sense of distance from overall embodiment; it reintegrates them into the entire physical apparatus.

*La Région centrale* is a film we watch with our eyes and with the rest of our bodies, as we lock onto the screen and feel our receptors being turned every which way. A number of other filmmakers have engaged with landscape in a similar vein: Joyce Wieland (*Reason Over Passion* [1969]); Ernie Gehr (*Signal: Germany on the Air* [1985], *Side/Walk/Shuttle* [1991]); R. Bruce Elder (*Consolations (Love is an Art of Time)* [1988]); and Chris Welsby (*Fforest Bay* [1973]; *Seven Days* [1974]), to name just a few. For the most part, we can best understand Broomer's filmmaking within this framework.

But not entirely. One of the things that has made Broomer's recent films so interesting is that, rather than giving over to one pole or the other – distanced or embodied, shall we say – he has organized his work as a kind of perceptual struggle between the two. This can be seen in the deeply tactile manner in which Broomer approaches the landscape, his way of describing natural spaces with his handheld 16mm camera. One frequently gets the sense that Broomer is holding the camera still, trying to produce a fixed-frame view or sequence of views within a particular locale, but the slight tremble of his grip emphasizes his bodily presence behind what we are seeing.

This is not the gestural cinematography of Stan Brakhage, at least not immediately. It tends to scan more like an emulation of the static summation of the landscape as a set of parts (the Benning / Hutton approach) with a suppressed energy, a will to become something else. For

example, in *Brébeuf* (2012), Broomer is examining St. Ignace II, a mission site in present-day Tay, Ontario that was the historic site of the Huron-Wendat peoples prior to their forcible removal in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. In the earliest shots of the film, we see Sturgeon River and the tree line, a train trellis, and various snow-dusted shots of the surrounding woods. They are discrete, semi-static shots, connected by straight cuts.

However, at around the 1-½ minute mark, Broomer turns the camera loose from its moorings on his body. The woods, the snowy ground, the flares of the sun, all become a whirling, jagged form of writing. Trees go horizontal, a wooden railing flies skyward. Then, after another anchored shot (or branches entwined around a utility pole), Broomer layers a static shot of the river with one in which we are moving slightly forward through a circular portal. This maneuver launches the dominant action of *Brébeuf*, wherein Broomer superimposes two views of the St. Ignace II landscape, pitting them against each other as tussling forms. Sometimes one, then the other visual track will adhere to Broomer's tremulous but predominantly stationary gaze, at the hills in the distance or the forest from within. The other image will usually engage in some sweeping gesture, instigating an abstraction that makes this contested Canadian space something less than the picture of clarity. Instead, *Brébeuf* generates a poetic agitation, one that not only refers to the particular historical valence of the site but to the competing tendencies within experimental landscape cinema as well.

Although the particular history considered in *Brébeuf* makes Broomer's technique particularly apposite, his landscape work can generally be understood as an intervention into the ways we have addressed the natural world through cinema. This has philosophical ramifications, of course. A line of Western thinking from Kant and Hegel, and particularly pernicious in Western Marxism until the Frankfurt School, understood nature and the environment to be the empty, inert "stuff" on which human activity occurs. Where such thinking got us, I need not point out.

But the idea that cinema can be a tool for negotiating our comprehension of nature's active existence, and our interconnectivity with it, is a vital one. Broomer's film work doesn't just look at nature, or flash and cut



and move it around, like a kind of ersatz animation. His films are about the tension we experience between the apparent placidity of the natural environment and the way that environment reaches out to us, serving as a phenomenological envelope for our bodies' greater potentials. The fact that dirt, trees and sky all enjoy a far greater permanence than we do only adds a historical dimension to this haptic co-presence. In *Brébeuf*, Broomer asks us to give our vision not just to any restless energy, but that discovered and provoked by contested land, comprised of the same physical substance then as now. When Broomer layers double visions of the haptic -- melding them, colliding them, and pulling them apart -- the struggle to navigate between them is a kind of act of social self-definition. That is, we can neither observe the landscape, nor luxuriate in it. Instead, we must negotiate the chiasmus between observation and experience, two inadequate poles of knowing. The films of Stephen Broomer maintain that suspension space; his method produces the activated field that allows landscape to come forth to meet us while retaining its identity.





## **Magic: The Gathering, or *Spirits in Season***

By Brett Kashmere

*\*Note: This essay was originally written for the forthcoming Angular Vol. 1 DVD compilation, which will feature Stephen Broomer's Spirits in Season (16 mm, 12 min., 2013, Canada).*

The marriage of landscape and a priori structure has been a major theme in Canadian experimental film since its foundation. The locked frame and static text of Joyce Wieland's *Sailboat* (1967), year-long backyard indexing at the heart of Jack Chamber's *Circle* (1969), programmatic 360-degree camera of Michael Snow's *La Région centrale* (1971), and predetermined lap dissolves that constitute David Rimmer's *Canadian Pacific* (1974) are cases in point; all can be interpreted as attempts to contain and control the outside world. As both a scholar and a practitioner of this cinematic mode, Toronto's Stephen Broomer is well aware of its traditions, tendencies and clichés. In *Spirits in Season* (2013) Broomer opts for a different approach, channeling the more impulsive, bodily work of American predecessors like Stan Brakhage and Charlemagne Palestine (the inclusion of a U.S. flag midway through hints at this distinction). Through its foregrounding of subjective camerawork, Broomer's film calls back to an earlier era of first person cinema, but one less burdened by personal psychology and mythopoeic ambitions.

*Spirits in Season* is an autumnal, audiovisual tone poem. Its fall palette is comprised of rusty reds, muted golds, and speckles of brilliant green. Shot handheld on low-speed, 16mm daylight stock at the Lily Dale Assembly in New York State, and utilizing optically printed superimpositions and digital layering (which offer more intense color casts), *Spirits in Season* translates the intuitive experience of an unfamiliar yet spiritually rich location into an expressionistic, spectral cinema. It is a consciously Romantic maneuver but the results are modest, pensive and unpretentious rather than grand, overreaching and self-concerned. The overall shape of the film, implied by the title, is circular and the resulting impression, enchantment. There is a fluent, almost inconspicuous alternation between single- and multi-layer imagery, which sometimes repeats in contrapuntal, fugue-like patterns. The soundtrack, by American trumpeter Nate Wooley, features amplified vocalizations that produce a meditative, semi-wraithlike, semi-corporeal effect while complementing and modulating the film's visual rhythms and recurrent motifs, punctuated by stretches of silence. Structurally the film cycles through four sites that highlight man's interaction with nature: the entrance to the Leolyn Woods, a pet cemetery, an "Inspiration Stump" (the retreat's "energy vortex"), and a "Fairy Trail." Human traces abound, providing detail and orienting the viewer: a row of 19th century two-story cottages that lead to the forest, rows of rustic wooden benches, homemade grave markings and monuments to deceased animal companions, coin offerings, mirrored talismans that dangle from tree branches, and so on.

In its mixture of improvisational cinematography, assured in-camera edit clusters and dense, polyrhythmic passages of superimposed layers, *Spirits in Season* evokes Brakhage's lyrical films of the late 1950s and early 1960s, *Sirius Remembered* (1959) in particular. A poetic meditation on the death and decomposition of the family's dog, *Sirius Remembered* joins horizontal panning shots of the animal's decaying corpse as it lays in a field (with the camera literally swung over and across the body, as if to propel it back into motion), and vertical pans of the trees and sky of different lengths and velocities of movement, shot during the four seasons. In *Spirits in Season*,

a similar sense of conjuring the past, bringing it forward into the present is fashioned through formal means. The more saturated overlay sequences, meanwhile, bring to mind Kirlian photography – an electro-chemical process that purports to reveal supernatural auras, further alluding to the history of the location. Known as the "World's Largest Center for the Science, Philosophy and Religion of Spiritualism," Lily Dale Assembly is home to the American spiritualist movement. Incidentally, its founding in the late 1800s closely follows the apex of the American Romantic period. The idea of nature as a source of spirituality, a defining characteristic of the movement, is echoed in Broome's two-phase investigation of the place (his initial, interpretive photography, and its subsequent re-photography and compositing).

In *Spirits in Season* an openness to the mystery of the environment is balanced and amplified by strong craftsmanship. Neither the seams, nor the hybrid digital-film workflow, announce themselves. Through a careful cinematic sleight of hand we are transported to the moment of original encounter. Although fragmented by editing and superimposition, the film's time-sense unfolds in a continuous present. For 12 minutes, we are one with the work and with nature, absorbed in the spell of a skilful cinematic magician.



## **Rites of Passage amid ‘flooding radiance’**

By Andréa Picard

“Strong. The strong light  
has already penetrated everywhere  
                                  into the thickest foliage.  
There was neither wind nor vainglory.  
  The unison shattered  
  It splintered  
  into crumbs  
of minute bits of glass  
  first the lowest  
then the highest  
crystal note of song  
Dismay.  
  Then the day sang by itself  
in its flooding radiance.  
It sang in the lowest mind  
in the blood and the vertebrae  
of the men at work  
since dawn. It sang  
itself and in itself all of history  
without parts, without memory.”

Excerpt from *Earthly and Heavenly Journey of Simone Martini*, Mario Luzi

Ecstatic fervour hardly seems *de rigueur* during these tumultuous times. And when expressed or represented, it is most often met with deep, unbridled suspicion, perhaps even fear for it counters the orthodoxy of our present-day rhythms: ones that are frenetic and uncontrolled to be sure, but whose resulting delirium tends –unwittingly or not – toward darkness. In a mere number of years, experimental filmmaker, preservationist and scholar Stephen Broomer has prolifically amassed an impressive body of work, one that is a result of delving rather intensely into the light. Seeped in fascination and infectious urgency, his enthralment has led him to revisit the lyrical, mythopoetic and trance tendencies of the New American Cinema of the 60s and 70s, as well as the classics of Structural film especially within the Canadian avant-garde, forging a dialogue with wide-ranging works from the likes of David Rimmer, Joyce Wieland, Michael Snow, R. Bruce Elder, Jack Chambers and Carl Brown, and a group of younger generation peers, many of whom are members of the Toronto-based Loop collective (Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof, Dan Browne, Kelly Egan, et al.).

While an in-depth account of Broomer's work-to-date may seem premature, especially given his rate of productivity, which suggests an active and fulsome filmmaking future, he has consciously positioned himself amidst an august lineage, a paradigmatic one within the history and evolution of experimental film. Broomer is also keenly aware that the still fertile terrain of avant-garde cinema has inevitably –naturally, and quite unequivocally – changed since its heyday in the aforementioned decades, not least of which in its semantics. Steering clear of the politics of discourse in favour of poetry, and steadfast in his pursuit of beauty and of perceptual and chromatic chance discoveries, Broomer works in compulsive haste with seemingly boundless energy, sometimes in miniature with sketch-like gestures and open, aleatory rhythms. Indebted to, yet also untethered to the films he loves, Broomer explores a curious variation of what Nathaniel Dorsky identifies as “devotional cinema” (though too idea-heavy and not precise enough to truly fit the bill); in this case, transcendental is reconfigured in a way that is more reminiscent of Jackson Pollock than it is Ozu, Bresson or Dreyer - to take up Paul

Schrader's famous examples. Broomer's is a cinema of action (not with splattering paint but with constant motion either inside or outside of the compositional frame), of quick and constant activity, of breathing (his of course, but also that of some of his images), of experimenting with colour, texture, phantasmal traces, even custom-made aspect ratios. Notably, his bold, deeply evocative and somewhat idiosyncratic music choices (or do they feel more strangely anachronistic, or simply out of time due to their paradoxical thematic yet structural application) heighten the sense of summoning, of accumulation, ascension and temporary crescendo most often found in his films, and, in some cases, resuscitate a buried, imagined or extemporized history. Above all, Broomer is compelled by the essence of layers: Photo-chemical layers, ghostly, digital strata, thick impasto-like ones, albeit of an opaque and luminescent nature, mythical, concealed and reflective ones, in addition to the aestheticizing, translucent materials like the filters and fabrics deployed in *Pepper's Ghost* (2013), one of his most accomplished films.

Somewhat ironically given its self-assured vigour, *Pepper's Ghost* constitutes a turning point in Broomer's style and filmmaking practice. Before it, he had been making work on Super 8 and 16mm employing his signature technique of superimposing images atop one another in a quasi-cubist collage approach that lent a rich density to his compositions. Alchemically electrified and sometimes appearing paint-stained or inky (though really hand-processed, with instances of digital editing), his images are composites of fragmentation, multiples which significantly posit, to quote the great Cubist painters Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, “a new way to imagine light.” Broomer's films concretize their oft-quoted dictum “to illuminate is to reveal, to colour is to specify the mode of revelation.” In films like *Christ Church – Saint James* (2012), *Brébeuf* (2012), and *Spirits in Season* (2013), each a portrait of a sacred site (a Toronto church destroyed by arson; a spiritualist community in New York State replete with pet cemetery; and St. Ignace II in Huronia where Jesuit missionary Jean de Brébeuf was killed in the 17th century), the uneven articulations of images and their constant accrual hover on the verge of abstraction, never quite relinquishing their indexical sources. In fact, *Christ Church –*

*Saint James*, with its striking geometric reconfigurations of the eponymous church, fashioned out of ruins and detritus, but also growth and graffiti, bears a rather striking resemblance at times to Kurt Schwitters' "Picture with Light Center", a multi-media cubist collage from 1919.

This Schwitters' masterpiece, especially when seen in the flesh, emanates movement through light, a spectrum of blonde hues, and demonstrates a structural, rather than a decorative swirl of green, as has been noted by many art historians. Invoking the

German-born Dadaist may seem like an oblique reference here, but it is that very geometric obliqueness that forms an intriguing link. With emphasis on the brick and rebar of the Church's dilapidated structure, set to the rhythm of pulsing animated scratches, which replicate the effect of the (now destroyed) stained glass windows (impossible not to think of Brakhage here), and a dominating circular shape later echoed in Brébeuf, the film's formal geometries reveal a materialist take on the natural world, which occasion fissures, metaphoric as much as metaphysical. Those gaps – the antinomic result of layers – create a space beyond physical reality and one that leads to a renewed, vibrant perception of the world. This vibratory spirit anxiously emanates from many of Broomer's films like an archeologist's stirring of the spirits in an engulfing, activated landscape. Or like restless awakenings amid a sudden "flooding of radiance" to borrow from Mario Luzi's epic poem, *Earthly and Heavenly Journey of Simone Martini*, in which a fresco artist embarks on a 'quest for light, and a form of silence and synthesis.'

So where does that leave *Pepper's Ghost*, *Championship*, *Hang Twelve* and *Jenny Haniver* (2014), which follow and feel so different from many of Broomer's other films? Keeping with the Schwitters analogy for a moment, *Pepper's Ghost* can be seen as a Merzbau using elements from the material world to conjure an abstract aesthetic; far from refuse however, but nevertheless incorporating a performative and additive drive toward filling, shifting, colouring and refracting space by means of vernacular materials applied ceremoniously and bolstered by a soundtrack of chanting monks in Bhutan recorded in the late 1960s. The intense, meditative

bass throat singing and frisson-inducing handheld cymbals augment the ritualistic nature of the performance. As Broomer and his collaborators Eva Kolcze and Cameron Moneo, two emerging filmmakers in their own right, transform a Ryerson University office formerly used for observation into a tunnel of transfixing illusionism, creating a series of surprising images (including their own self-portraits) using filters, fabric and a combination of sunlight and fluorescents, Michael Snow's *Slidlength* (1969-71) comes quickly to mind. The latter is a carousel of 35mm slides depicting plastic gels and hand gestures (Snow's), as well as still images from *Wavelength* (its pendant work in a different medium -16mm - and famous the world over, from 1967), and which includes an intimate and mysterious amber-soaked portrait of Joyce Wieland at night sitting at a desk. As a prolonged expression of demystified mystification, *Pepper's Ghost* conjures a narrative, just as *Slidlength* does, of a portrait of the artist at work and, most assuredly, at play. (Merzbau, notably, was Schwitters' life's work as work of art.) Sure, there's an enacted meditative and concentrated force in *Pepper's Ghost* but there's also a playful, improvised routine that defies the repetitive rigour of the ritual. In other words, there's palpable joy intervening in this light play, and it's extending an invitation outward as much as it is inward. It harbours an incantatory might but revels in the interruption provided by chance discovery and in the simple pleasures of creating beautiful compositions through colour blocking, light filtration and mirror reflections, which Broomer has used before as an alternative or surrogate to the camera's lens.

*Hang Twelve* (2014), its title a fitting anagram of *Wavelength*, follows up on the premise set by *Pepper's Ghost* with its isolated room and performing characters, yet reframes the rules of the game. Using a primary colour palette (and pattern) in its mise-en-scène (Mondrian, as much as *Pierrot le fou!*), *Hang Twelve* reaches, through perspectival play and constant activity, for a vanishing point. Complicating *Wavelength's* mythic zoom (which we know to be discontinuous despite the illusion of unbroken linearity), the film lingers in thresholds and continuously reframes its distance through varying focal lengths. The grids may be quaint markers of Modernism (coloured tape on mirrors, echoed in Broomer's plaid shirt,

etc.), but they also allude to the boundary lines of the performance, in which obstructions (like the textured plastic acrylic sheets) are used to the players' advantage as they wrestle with uncertainty to create form. The accompanying atmospheric soundtrack, with low whirring bass, creates tension in the image, upping the stakes, interrupting the evolving, serene velocity. An intermittent and repetitive cycling through of the colour spectrum provides a flicker (and a flooding) of coloured light that upends the perception of depth and flatness, while inducing the notion of randomness during this traversal of time and space.

While *Championship* (2013) may at first seem like an outlier, its (endearing) focus on the relationship between performer and spectator, as well as on the margins and limits of control align it with Broomer's more recent emphasis on human bodies in the frame, initiated by *Pepper's Ghost*. A kinetic assemblage of found black and white amateur films of a wrestling tournament, to which Broomer added a wistful, spectral piano score, which imparts an early silent cinema magic to it, *Championship* was first and foremost born of a chance discovery. A ready-made made infinitely more surreal, the film emits both a ludic and mesmerizing quality, and forms a printed choreography somewhere between the burlesque and cinéma vérité. Does the filmmaker find affinity with the wrestler (performing, exerting himself, being on display and taking a risk, wanting to please others and himself, attempting a glorious apotheosis) or the audience, enthralled by not only the gestures and the dance as a whole, but the suspense and excitement of it all? Each match constitutes a rite of passage, a show, a test. The compulsion to continue forth – to evolve and to go deeper – resounds far beyond the arena. *Jenny Haniver* is proof of that.





## The Answering Act

By Cameron Moneo

*And we can get back to that raw state  
Of feeling, so long deemed  
Inconsequential and therefore appropriate to our later musings  
About religion, migrations. What is restored  
Becomes stronger than the loss as it is remembered;  
Is a new, separate life of its own. A new color. Seriously blue.*

from "A Wave" (1984) by John Ashbery

In my years of friendship with Stephen Broomer I've come to remark in him a fearsome capacity to remember. Company spent with Stephen is a chance to hear from his vast psychic inventory of jokes, anecdotes, artifacts, lines of song and poetry, etc., – some of which he recorded yesterday, many more of which were set down in the time before I knew him. I suspect his memory speeds the way he associates mental imagery, and thus partly accounts for his marvelous sense of humour, as well as informs the visual construction of his films. It is no secret, on the other hand, that in the deeper parts of his memory Stephen stays with sore spots and injuries of the heart, as the more sensitive of us will. While it is not my intention to psychoanalyze Stephen's work at length, I could argue here that *cathexis* seems a plausible metaphor for his creative/affective process. To hear him tell it, Stephen often invests years of himself into a single image.



I can't say if having a good memory makes one especially qualified for the vocation of art. But I know for Stephen that recollection is indispensable to whatever sense of identity he claims as an artist. One could mention Stephen's numberless art-enthusiasms, which are a constant, called-upon resource for thinking through and giving emotional shape to his own work.<sup>1</sup> Thematically his films are often about coming back to some prior person, spirit, self; there are historical-programmatic and autobiographical elements to go with an interest in revitalizing aesthetic traditions.

What I think underlies these gestures and preoccupations is a bearing of spirit in Stephen, passing through individual recollection, toward the form-giving pre-condition or Other to which reverential art-acts feel some obscure duty to respond. Stephen often refers to a hoped-for "sincerity" in his approach to making art; I take him to mean he persists with roots and mystery, and has no designs on gaming the system of art. I believe this sincerity or bearing in Stephen's work can be understood as religious in nature.

George Steiner writes of a *moto spirituale* in art that seeks with "gravity and constancy" to explore the mystery of forms – all that is given us but that is not ours to own.<sup>2</sup> Within the "unhousedness of human experience" (Wallace Stevens: "And hard it is in spite of blazoned days"), the creative impulse of art nominates us to become "at least alertly, answerably peregrine" to our condition.<sup>3</sup> To propose that certain art-acts are religious in character is not (necessarily) to order them by denomination, nor is it to restate age-old claims for the divinisation of the artist – the type of art mysticism that makes theophobes "smell incense," as R. G. Collingwood put it.<sup>4</sup> Rather the religious disposition in art, following Steiner, is moved to listen for the alien meaning of things, and to communicate its presence among – or transcendent of – the familiar. Consider in this light the unreason of the artist who is said to create "out of his/her senses," in a trance that quiets the practical faculties.<sup>5</sup>

Stephen is fond of using an online alter ego: Strange Witness. It's the title of a pulp novel about a ventriloquist sent to prison on false charges, years later seeking revenge on those who framed him. In many ways I assume

unfinished business drives Stephen to make art, to make it with urgency and prolificacy. The variations on return in his films, some of which this essay will discuss presently, indicate Stephen's restive, innocent attraction to forms that resist closure. A person becomes an artist, thought Iris Murdoch, when the nagging how of selfhood can no longer go ignored.<sup>6</sup> Stan Brakhage sought the "roots of aestheticism" in a childhood proximity to the origin and order of being—intuition of eternity in the healing of a scraped knee.<sup>7</sup> Art is liable (making no guarantees) to call back to, and renew, the lasting unanswered-fors. Stephen's films orient in this direction. I turn to them now.

*Manor Road* (2010) is Stephen's first experimental film, and his most serenely contemplative. He took the image eight years prior: a fixed-camera Super8mm movie of trains slowly passing under the bridge at Yonge Street and Manor Road in northeastern Toronto. A patch of sky is visible above the trains, between some trees; the soundtrack is silent. In 2010, through processes of digital abstraction, the train footage is converted to soft-edged shapes of gently vibrating colour, shifting on a field of black. There are time-skips and overlaps in the picture, and the impression of a flattened, compressed plane, but for the perspective subtly afforded by the trains. The bridge from which the raw footage was taken has immediate life associations for Stephen, the naming of which makes him emotional. Abstract though he surely wishes *Manor Road* to be, I find it hard not to figure the signal lights sculpted into the blackness as a pair of googly-eyes watching the ceaseless back/forth motion of the trains: strange witness to an image of time.

Years-old footage is also transformed in *Balinese Rebar* (2011) and *Queen's Quay* (2012). In both films a spirit leaps up among the textures of the city. Balinese Rebar whips together a set of urban visual motifs: brick buildings, chain-link fence, industrial rebar, puddles and pigeons. Chance superimpositions of these motifs multiply under a colour cast of rusty golden brown and pale sky blue. Some part of this collage is always hastening, swirling, searching, in juxtaposition with templates of static brick. The camera's tracing of stiff, snaking rebar rhymes with a movement

scanning the flight path of birds. I find in this film, one of my favourites, a restless meeting of forms rigid and unbound.

In *Queen's Quay*, a spectrum of saturated colour floods the hard geometries of downtown Toronto. The film's combination of colour and architecture brings to mind Shirley Clarke's *Bridges Go Round* (1958); there is also a suggestion of cathedral stained glass. (I think Stephen once indicated to me a desire to work in stained glass. I could swear there are remnants of a droll joke in *Queen's Quay's* conferral of holy radiance onto the windows of Toronto's condominium towers.) Stephen uses colour boldly and intuitively in his films; he doesn't make psychological symbols of hue choices. Purples, greens and yellows have a lovely, hand-tinted lightness in *The Order of Ideas at the Leslie Street Spit* (2012), Stephen's joyful tribute to the playground of nature, and to Shooby Taylor, the "Human Horn." The films of Stephen's "Spirits Trilogy," *Christ Church – Saint James* (2011), *Brébeuf* (2012), and *Spirits in Season* (2013), re-envision their programmatic religious events and places with colour-fired illuminations of the material world. *Queen's Quay*, in its rather brief stay on the screen (one minute and twelve seconds), quite simply announces colour's own effulgent beauty and significance. Contrary to the nature of edifice, we can't think the limits of colour.

*Championship* (2013) seems at first glance one of Stephen's least characteristic works. It borrows extensively from footage Stephen didn't take himself: that is, black and white 8mm high school wrestling films from 1972, found in an estate sale. Stephen commits himself – allowing for chance operations and improvisations<sup>8</sup> – to a recurrent three-frame-alternation editing procedure. The film is constructed around, by my count, approximately forty sequences, each of which performs a different set of abstractions on a wrestling match. On the soundtrack we hear varieties of psychic channeling: old recordings of glossolalia, hyperventilating breath exercises at a séance,<sup>9</sup> piano compositions purportedly transmitted to the players by the ghost of Frédéric Chopin.<sup>10</sup> The effect is bittersweet: as with many of Stephen's films, the past is called up, its presence perhaps thicker than it's ever been in his work, but not without exasperation, difficulty,

even a measure of skepticism around the notion of reliving the past as a present moment.

An unsettling repetition compulsion obtains in this film. I have already mentioned the three-frame-alternation; analogous to this schema is the soundtrack of psychic hyperventilation. As paired with the wrestling imagery, the frantic, machine-like cycles of these breaths (they also sound like dog panting) seem to communicate what I want to call a respiratory symptom of the myth of progress. It is indeed tempting to allegorize *Championship*, with its protracted struggles over manhood, stuttering victory/defeat loops, fragmentations of time, as a wide Western comment.<sup>11</sup> Such a reading is complicated, however, by the remarkable intervention partway through the film of a baby cradled in the arms of her/his grandmother (the only image not taken at the wrestling gym). Suddenly the film speaks the poignancy of the life-cycle: the baby and the telepathic Chopin intimate the deep-rooted wish to live again in another.

I might add that *Championship* is Stephen's funniest film. You get the idea that Stephen repeats little bits of cheerleading, of wriggling combatants, of referee body language, because they amuse him. In this way the film reminds of Ken Jacobs' *Tom Tom the Piper's Son* (1969-1971), only with a latent parody of the instant-replay/highlight-reel obsession of sports media. And yet, for me, *Championship* is also the saddest of Stephen's visits with the spirits of the past. It tells of how the annals of victory (Pindar's champions win again in the immortal poem) quietly commemorate the vanquished. Stephen ends his film with a heartbreaking, accidental composition: at match's end, a spectator stands with his back to us, bifurcating the image so that, to his right, the winner of the match is embraced by a crowd of jubilant teammates, while to the spectator's left, the loser goes to be consoled. (I recall Stephen with some chagrin confessing that the initials on the wrestling mat here coincided with those of his own high school.) Pathos resounds in the hammered chords of psychic Chopin, distorted by a broken soundboard, playing this image and this film to a close. It occurs to me that the lonely spectator in this finale is another of Stephen's devout time-witnesses, kin to the looming signal light eyes of *Manor Road*.

## Postscript: *Pepper's Ghost* and *Hang Twelve*

I'd like to end with some personal accounts of collaborating with Stephen. It is my fortune to have been part of the creative process on two of Stephen's recent performance-based digital-video pieces: *Pepper's Ghost* (2013) and *Hang Twelve* (2014). For the first video, Stephen, myself, and our friend Eva Kolcze set up shop in Stephen's Ryerson University office, equipped with a DSLR, some coloured gel filters, and the vague outlines of a procedure for the afternoon. Stephen was excited about the enigmatic perspectives offered by a two-way mirror in the wall between his and the adjacent office (once the site of a psychiatric observation room). The idea was to fix the camera on a tripod facing the mirror in one office, while in the other some of us worked the blinds, taped gels to the mirror, and played around with props (I brought a copy of Northrop Frye's *Words With Power* to the shoot, just in case it meant something). Performing in *Pepper's Ghost* was a diverting and easy-going experience, perhaps because the camera was doing the concentrating for us. Stephen later amplified this suggestion, humorously I think, with his choice of a soundtrack of Buddhist monk chants. I like to imagine one hears only the meditative inner-state of the camera, tuning out our visible laughter and idle chatter. Our mandate was to trick and disturb the single-minded vision of the DSLR, to break its focus. I truthfully remember this day as a collaboration among four presences.

Those familiar with Stephen's body of work will recognize how remarkably well *Pepper's Ghost's* layered compositions, improvised in-camera, correspond to the aesthetic of his other films. The miracle of this piece is that Stephen discovered a way to introduce his post process into the live space and moment of recording itself. *Hang Twelve* continues along this line. This time five of us – the *Pepper's* cast, plus Emmalyne Laurin and Blake Williams – gathered in Stephen's apartment with the DSLR and a plan to shoot at twelve different lens lengths, for each marking off the frameline in real space with red, blue or yellow tape, afterwards improvising activities within these frames. One can see our perspiration from the heat of an offscreen floodlight, not to mention from the bodily contortions

required to navigate the hanging grid of framelines, which became by the sixth lens length or so a kind of Mondrian jungle gym in three dimensions. The net effect of this process was to make the performance space increasingly difficult to inhabit (a wry joke on Stephen's desired occupancy in modernism?).

*Hang Twelve* explicitly comes out of Stephen's admiration for, among other filmmakers, Michael Snow and Ernie Gehr, as well as for the little-seen work of David Haxton. I asked Stephen to clarify the debt to Haxton in *Hang Twelve*: "It's in the act of improvising around geometry, geometry's relation to the camera eye, but also the way in which our process manages to illustrate simple optics and to make that illustration a creative act while maintaining its wonder." Always Stephen inclines to art with bewilderment. Such is his faith.

1. When once I asked Stephen to explain to me the impact of jazz on his films, his wide-ranging response – citing the rhythmic influence of Sonny Rollins' precisely staggered beats; the circular breathing of Evan Parker; the structured improvisations of Varyan Weston's Tesselations; the music of Anthony Braxton (about whom Stephen's father Stuart wrote an excellent book for Mercury Press, called *Time and Anthony Braxton* [2009]); the "pan-religious spirituality" of Trane, Pharoah Sanders, Albert Ayler; particular recordings by Paul Bley, Derek Bailey, Cecil Taylor, Charles Gayle, etc. – had to be cut short by an apology.
2. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 225. The title of the present essay, "The Answering Act," is taken from Steiner's brief, parenthetical definition of "vocation" in *Real Presences*, 126
3. *Ibid.*, 140.
4. R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 128.
5. For more on the notion of the irrationality of art, and its source in Plato's thought, see Dan Browne's essay in the present volume.
6. Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide To Morals* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 147.
7. Stan Brakhage, "An Exercise in Ineffability," in *Telling Time: Essays of a Visionary Filmmaker* (Kingston, NY: Documentext, 2003), 77.
8. For an illuminating discussion of chance operations and their use in *Championship*, see Kate Russell, "Championship [*filmmaker Stephen Broomer*]," *Hamilton Arts & Letters* 6, no.2 (Fall/Winter 2013/2014).
9. The breathing you hear in *Championship* is by one Rudi Schneider, an Austrian medium who was said to induce trance through hyperventilation; the specific recording is called "Trance Breathing" (1933). See also the chapter on Schneider in Harry Price, *Fifty Years of Psychical Research* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1939).
10. The Chopin transmissions were received and performed by the twentieth-century spiritualist Rosemary Brown and by someone named "Wynford."
11. My thinking around frame-alternations and their relation to Western temporality is admittedly influenced by filmmaker Ken Jacobs' method of "eternalism," particularly its application in such "Nervous System" pieces as *Capitalism: Slavery* (2006) and *Capitalism: Child Labor* (2006). Stephen's film has (unintentional) formal similarities with these pieces.



## **Interview**

Film becomes our gold leaf, video our ‘pencil and paper’ – an interview with Stephen Broomer

By Scott Miller Berry

### **Where did you grow up? Did you grow up in an artistic-friendly environment? Any early influences?**

I grew up in Toronto. My father is involved in improvised music – when he was a teenager he led a group called the Stu Broomer Kinetic Ensemble, which did the live musical accompaniment for Joyce Wieland’s *Bill’s Hat*. My mother works in cultural administration and is very interested in painting. I benefited from their interests in art and culture, and I spent a lot of my childhood in art galleries and museums and theatres. In terms of early influences, my father took me to a lot of concerts, and my mother took me to a lot of movies. I was exposed to many different things when I was young that informed my interests later on, but, even though I’m talking here about music and movies and painting, a big part of my understanding of what creative action is came through literature. My formative experiences, in that sense, were with novels and poetry and plays. The house I grew up in was made out of mountains of vinyl and paper, so just wandering through the stacks was an education.

### **What's your earliest formative "experimental film" experience?**

It's hard to say what I saw first. By the time I was in my early teens I was very interested in film. The programming on Off Beat Cinema, a Buffalo public access B-movie late night horror show, was what I grew up on for the most part, Roger Corman and Ed Wood films, the collective unconscious of the drive-in. Around the same time that started, when I was about ten, Chas Lawther started doing his late night movie program on Showcase, the Showcase Revue, and that introduced me to a lot of 'art house' narrative filmmaking. For me that side of filmmaking, often independent and with explicitly artistic aspirations, arrived along with experimental film. Through a movie like *Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, I would also discover *L'Âge d'Or*. One of the reasons I find it hard to trace where I began watching experimental films is because so much of it, for me, came in the same way that it probably came to general attention in the fluid orbit of the 60s, through Sheldon Renan's *An Introduction to American Underground Film*. I read my father's copy of that. It's a book that served in the 60s as a proxy to the rarified experience of actually seeing those films. So even as I was reading about these films, or hearing about them from my parents, I wouldn't see most of them for years. Some work wasn't impossible to find: I remember watching a VHS tape of Maya Deren's films that Mystic Fire issued, when I was about nine or ten, and seeing *Un Chien Andalou* around the same time. Those were the first avant-garde films that were on my periphery, because of my parents, because of the contents of the house I grew up in. I was fortunate, in that sense, to be able to piece together, early on, an idea of the avant-garde film from descriptions, still photos, and what was recalled to me.

### **How did you first get into filmmaking – what elements were in your orbits that motivated you to pick up cameras?**

I began making videos in my last years of high school on a consumer video camera. I was interested in making things that were deliberately obscure, discontinuous, and maybe a bit menacing. They were also terrible. When

I came to university to study film, I began working with Super8mm film cameras, making environment studies. Toward the end of my degree, I became interested in documentary film, which resulted in a long essay film about the City of Toronto's 2006 attempt to count their homeless population. Film school was good for me and was a great privilege, in that it allowed me to work in a variety of styles and affirm what my values were. But it was also a bad scene in that there was some cynicism, commonplace in art schools, in the form of pressure for job training, to gain a 'useful' education, and that pressure led me to set my own interests aside for a while. I was fortunate, by this, to have had so much time to think about the implications of having an artistic practice, and to be inspired to it later on by the examples set by friends such as R. Bruce Elder and Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof. My earliest film that I acknowledge, *Manor Road*, was finished eight years after I first picked up a film camera, and out of the first footage that I had shot, no less. That incubation of source footage was important for a number of pieces, and would be difficult for me now to approximate or replicate.

### **Is there one single influence that sticks out above the others?**

In the past the couple of years, I've found it increasingly difficult to identify a singular influence or ideal. John Berryman once said, "I didn't want to be like Yeats; I wanted to be Yeats!" But I don't know when I ever felt that kind of direct line of influence to a predecessor, only because I feel that way, always, about so many predecessors. I do think that feeling is shared among a great swath of artists who want to, in that sense, *be* Stan Brakhage, and I think that's a noble aspiration. To me, the question of influence is one of picking up voices, by adoption or impression, and living in them for long enough to understand some of the roots of those voices. There's a terror there: if an artist can vanish into their work, they can also vanish into the shadow and persona and individualism of another artist. But this is, for me, the essential act of maturing intuition. I could give you the names of those I've borrowed from, and some influences are more apparent than others, and I'm not shy about acknowledging the tremendous debt I have

to the past. But those are the pieces that I've gathered up naturally and that have informed my intuition. The immediate influences bearing on my work are much more intimate.

**Experimental or Avant-Garde or Underground or Fringe  
or \_\_\_\_\_?**

For my own part, I make non-linear sequential art. Underground is the term I like best as a social frame, for its inclusivity and its conspiratorial suggestion. Experimental film is an old term, one that I find agreeable, but which doesn't inspire any strong feeling from me – today it's a good neutral term for festivals. For the intimacy of my intentions, I also like the terms 'film poems' or personal films, but I wouldn't seek out occasions to use those words. I would never say that terminology isn't important, but I find it tedious how much emphasis gets placed on arguing terminology. I don't believe its end is really to figure out the most accurate label for the work itself, but to champion one ideology over another. I've also seen these debates pitched as an excuse to cast aspersions of elitism on those with the dearest and most unpopular convictions. A label will rarely tell you much about the content of an experience. I think our audiences and artists get the short shrift in semantic debates over labeling, which always pits our cinema as other to something else. For what it's worth, when I write about history, I use the terms experimental, avant-garde, and underground fluidly.

**You're incredibly prolific – one of the most active filmmakers I'm  
aware of – how (creatively and practically) do you maintain such an  
active filmmaking practice?**

In my experience, the process of making a film arises from necessity. I make films concurrently, and so if I lose the energy to pursue one, I switch to another. I hear people talk about creative renewal and the importance of taking time away from work, but that doesn't suit me. I won't pretend it's not taxing to make a lot of work, but my output is really pretty minor.

I keep notebooks with plans and outlines and proposals for projects, and I'm always thinking about what will come next. In practical terms, there are always barriers. But if the work needs to be made, then there are compromises that are worth taking. Sometimes those compromises involve finishing work in unconventional ways, or allowing projects to achieve a more modest scale than intended; sometimes those compromises involve neglecting other debts and responsibilities in order to see the work through.

**You're also an archivist, archaeologist, restorer, researcher,  
programmer, writer, etc. How do these worlds and your filmmaking  
overlap (or not) in ways that resonate?**

For a long time I wanted to distinguish my research and writing from my filmmaking. But the exchange between the two has become increasingly clear in recent years. I've been writing a dissertation on the work of Jack Chambers, Michael Snow, and Joyce Wieland, and I've borrowed extensively from all three of them in my filmmaking. There are other, less explicit dialogues between my work as a writer and film preservationist and my filmmaking. A lot of this began for me with my restoration of John Hofsess's *Palace of Pleasure* in 2008, a film of such leveling, healing ambitions that it left a deep mark on me. I believe that some of Hofsess's aesthetic gestures are embedded in my own films. I think the relation can be distilled to this, that all of my writing and research activities address the films that are of greatest value to me, and that those same films compose the tradition that's on my mind when I make films.

**What does celluloid mean to you? Are the properties of film (on  
film) making, projecting and watching different than video/digital  
for you? Anything you'd like to add to the formal/aesthetic/meta-  
physical differences? Are these questions tedious? Important? Both?**

For me, film used to mean a working process and a final stage. Of course the properties are different, and now the stakes are becoming higher,

but I am unwavering in my faith in media inclusivity, and I often use digital intermediates and have finished a number of works digitally. All that I would add is to say that, in the modern project, which seems to be the affiliation that a lot of film purists hold dear, artists often aspire toward totality, and the total work of art is not the restricted province of one media or another. And Robert Motherwell painted on cardboard, and some of Charlie Parker's best recordings were on a plastic Grafton saxophone. Compare those who now say cinema can only exist on film to those who might say a painting can only be done on canvas. I think both of those positions are naïve or delusional, and completely compatible with one another. We're plagued by these dated ideas because our art evolved, and is evolving, but its philosophy became more entrenched and stubborn and dated to twenty years ago. I still make work that passes only through film processes, just as I make work that begins on digital media and ends on digital media, and I am a filmmaker. There's a statement that's been attributed to Jean Cocteau: "Film will only become an art when its materials are as inexpensive as pencil and paper." At times this has almost been true of film, when small formats were more inexpensive than they are now, when you could buy and process through drugstores. That is no longer our reality. Film becomes our gold leaf, video our 'pencil and paper'.

**Your recent piece *Hang Twelve* (2014, digital) is really lovely, I've taken to calling it A+B+C+D+E in Ontario. I like the use of coloured tapes to frame the space and the film frame; it feels both like an homage to *Wavelength* (the title is an anagram after all!) and at the same time something else entirely...where did this film come from?**

Ha! Thank you. I agree that it's something else entirely, or at least, its homage extends beyond *Wavelength*. For instance, the poem that I read at the end of the film is made out of anagrams of *Serene Velocity*, and our use of a textured acrylic sheet as an obstruction draws back to Michael Snow's *Right Reader* and *Short Shave*. Our debts run deep, though the preoccupation with the RYB colour wheel is my own. As to where the

piece came from, I needed to make a film. I had spent that spring writing in relative isolation, and I wanted to make something new with my friends Eva Kolcze and Cameron Moneo, who had also collaborated with me on *Pepper's Ghost*. My idea of the environmental portrait, in *Pepper's Ghost*, had been structured around a kind of odd space – there's a debt there to Lynne Cohen – but in this case I wanted to make a film of a less exceptional, nonetheless beautiful and intimate space, my apartment of the last seven years, and to expand the participants to include Blake Williams and my partner Emmalyne Laurin. Blake and Emmalyne are both artists as well, and these works tend to rely on the creative intuition of the participants. We set ourselves to tasks and construct the image and embrace the unexpected and our mistakes, and time moves in the way that it would in performing any communal task. But there's something else going on in the film that has nothing to do with it as a group self-portrait, and that is the magnification of focal length. As the film persists, the focal length narrows along a twelve times table, scaled along twelve points – it begins at 12mm, and ends at 144mm. We build a new frame suspended in air at each changing focal length, out of alternating red, yellow, and blue electrical tape. This is an attempt to illustrate the frustum formed by that multiplication, and the resulting distortions of the composition plane, as the lens aims to a vanishing point.

**I love learning that your father is an improviser and it leads right into a question about the use of music in your films. I'm thinking particularly of the haunting choral music in *Brébeuf* (2012, 16mm) the gamelan in *Balinese Rebar* (2011, 16mm) and the improv-based scores of *Spirits in Season* (2013, 16mm) and *Christ Church - Saint James* (2011, 16mm). Tell us when the music enters the production and how you approach sound with your filmmaking.**

In the case of *Christ Church - Saint James* and *Spirits in Season*, I was working with John Butcher and Nate Wooley respectively, musicians whose integration of acoustic and electronic expressions strongly influenced my process in integrating analogue and digital images. Both of

those films were finished, for the most part, before I approached John or Nate; I felt I needed to have the work ready to show them prior to asking them to participate, but the films originated partly out of their influence, from listening to their music. Otherwise, my approach to music is a bit unstructured – what happens in *Brébeuf*, for example, is that the Huron Carol, written by Jean de Brébeuf, sung in Wendat, is played over itself in a repeating round, in another act that mirrors the way in which I work with images. That is to say, the images in many of these films, and particularly in *Brébeuf*, are structured in rounds. To get back to your question, music or sound tends to enter my process early on, but I don't shy away from silence.

**Many of your films, I'm thinking here about the aforementioned *Christ Church, Brébeuf* and *Spirits in Season*, are documents of spaces/places - there's a strong connection to the past shot through a distinctly personal lens grounded in the present. Can you say more about your connections (or not) to documentary form as well as photography? Your use of single frame and superimposition in particular resonate strongly.**

I used to make documentary films, and I've had an interest in the historical and documental dimension of photography, but my overarching interests in 'non-fiction' and the documental also come out of literature, what I came to realize over time was the shared impulse in modern poetry and avant-garde film to capture the immediacy of the present moment, enclosed in history and memory. In terms of the relation to these specific techniques, I took on the idea that pixilation was a literal illustration of loss, not symbolic but the act of losing time. This is also the central gesture, I believe, in Jonas Mekas's diaries, of particular importance to *He Stands in a Desert Counting the Seconds of His Life*, in which, by short bursts of exposures, the seconds rapidly drop away. Superimposition, on the other hand, is about transformation. With it we gain the ability to transform time in the same way that both memory and history do – or, to be clear, the way that writing and reading history do – to influence one instant, or composition, by the impression of another, to create out of that intercourse something that resembles both but that is neither one nor the other.

**Mirrors are a recurring presence in your films -- tell us about your use of mirrors and what they represent for you.**

In my films mirrors are often used as an object in the composition, as in *Hang Twelve* and *Blue Guitar*, or more significantly as the governor and giver of vision, as in *Memory Worked By Mirrors* or *Pepper's Ghost*. I try not to think of mirrors, or reflections in general, in romantic or symbolic terms, but as tools for visual composition. A mirror is much like a film frame, in that it casts back at us something that we can claim as objective representation, but our perception, and the restrictions and boundaries of our vision, do not allow us to realize it as such. The most truthful thing that a mirror can give is its ability to refract and distort light. For me, a mirror is another lens.

**Yes! And for me that connects to your earlier thoughts on superimposition, your interest in transforming time, space and the frame. Yet within your frames it often feels like an infinite expansion and contraction. Does the frame ever feel limiting?**

I take the frame as a restriction, a border, but it's also a liberating tool. In the frame we focus on and record a kind of muted, narrow slit of vision and liberate it from periphery and spatial experience. In distorting time and space, through editing and superimposition, I'm trying to find other means by which to be liberated from, and by, the frame.

**Lets talk about *Championship* (2013, 16mm), a film I hadn't seen until quite recently. It's such a kinetic montage film of historic B&W wrestling footage; I love the layers of frenetic movement with the referees, wrestlers and audience all overlapping in this maelstrom of both intimacy and struggle; it's like Owen Land meets Martin Arnold. Where did this film come from?**

I'm flattered that you would think of Owen Land! The use of tri-frame alternations is something I gained from *Film of Their 1973 Spring Tour*,



my favourite of his. The wrestling footage came from a box purchased at an estate sale – a few hours worth of home movies in 8mm and Super8. It seemed to be a box of unclaimed reels from a lab in Chicago. As I went through the footage, I found that a lot of it was from a collegiate wrestling competition, static shots taken from the audience. I would guess it was taken by the family of the one wrestler who is consistently in all of the footage. There's a heartbreaking moment in there, midway through the film, when he's declared the winner and his hand is lifted by the referee and he looks straight into the camera with this proud grin. I found it hard to shake the footage after watching it, and started to imagine how those images could be turned into an instrument, like a spirit board, by juxtapositions, inversions, faint layering, stymying and damming up of action and all other forms of ritualized gestures that I take as inventions to reveal the psychic interior. I wanted the film to be a séance, and that extends to the soundtrack, which is made up of a mix of EVP recordings, glossolalia, and the music, purported to be posthumous compositions dictated by the ghost of Frédéric Chopin to the pianist-medium Rosemary Brown. It revisits that proud grin. It's a lonely work, and I felt at the time when I was making it that it was less about the competitors, their struggles and triumph, and more about time itself, and the elasticity of forms, and the experience of the onlooker. When I try to place perspective in this work, I think of the boy stepping down from the bleachers at the end, seen from behind when the last match is letting out, fixed with his back to us.

***Jenny Haniver* (2014, 16mm/HD) is an intensely handmade portrait film. I'm struck by its 'menacing' energy, by the qualities of the degradation, and its absolutely haunting imagery flickering through each frame. Tell us about the title and the process of its making.**

A 'jenny haniver' is a totem that was sold for centuries in the port of Antwerp, its name forming from the French 'jeune d'anvers,' a young girl of Antwerp, turned by tongue into this beautiful name. It's a ray or a skate carcass that has been carved up so that it resembles an angel or a devil or a dragon. It's a terrifying object, in a way, but it's also ambiguous,

caught between the divine and the infernal. I think the film is likewise caught between angels and devils, and I'll not shy away from the menace you see in it. But it's also about transformation, and the resilience of forms and representation through abstraction and destruction. The film resulted from the convergence of several experiences. First was a lesson that Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof gave me in photogram techniques; second was a workshop I took with the Australian filmmakers Richard Tuohy and Dianna Barrie, that dealt with using obstructions, primarily tape, to block various lab processes, allowing for the coexistence of negative and positive sites within a single image; third was my participation in Phil Hoffman's Independent Imaging Retreat, or Film Farm, which was an immersion in hand-processing, and where I spent a lot of time just shooting and processing by rote; and finally, my collaboration with Eva Kolcze, who made her film *All That is Solid* alongside me in the darkroom, and she guided me in chemical processes that she had developed through her own work. Those were the experiences that informed the physical properties of the film. But I think it's worth saying that the film also had a digital intermediate, and so all of the handmade properties of the film, which were arrived at through chance operations, were also given a digital accent. The image has been destroyed by chemistry, sandpaper, etching tools, but it has also been augmented by digital processes, for example, glass filters. These pursuits allowed me to further flatten the composition, another gesture toward abstraction.

**I'm also curious to hear your thoughts now that we've spoken about sound in your works, about its silence and your feelings about silent film.**

Silence is always purposeful. For some, I'm sure, the silence of *Jenny Haniver* will prolong their ordeal of it. It's not meant as an ordeal, no more than any other film I've made. My sense of this work is that sound would serve as a relief or distraction from the transformations that are taking place. And in this work, silence is so much closer to my experience of such events, of planning out acts of creation, as in the first sequence, or

of waking from a nightmare, as in the last, or of meditating on beauty and change, as in what lies between. Silence colours the imagination of the audience.

**A very recent film, *Dominion* (2014, digital), was made in response to Northrop Frye's idea of Canada as bearing an uncreated identity, for Hamilton Arts & Letters' upcoming themed issue on Frye's *The Modern Century*. I also read that it was influenced by Joyce Wieland's *Reason Over Passion* which you wrote about in your dissertation. Tell us about this film, its connections to Canadiana, modernism, movement studies and abstracting Canadian landscape.**

For Frye, Canadian modernism involved an act of tearing away physical reality, to see what lies beyond or through it. He said that with an eye to mid-century art – he speaks of Les Automatistes in that lecture – but he was also saying this only half a decade after the Canadian Neo-Dada had emerged, and that notion, of searching beyond and through reality, is especially true of that group, in which Wieland was a central figure. *Dominion* is not so much a tearing away as it is an obscuring of reality – its record of reality is obscured by motion blurs, by superimpositions, by fracturing edits, and so on. The main influence bearing on the work is Joyce Wieland's *Reason Over Passion*, and her nationalism in general. My scale isn't epic, as hers was, but both are intimate. I thought of the overarching conceit of *Reason Over Passion*: she uses our motto, "A Mari Usque Ad Mare," from sea to sea, as an organizing principle. I wanted to give *Dominion* a journeying conceit like that of Wieland's film, so it has this prelude, in the tannery and longhouses at Ste-Marie among the Hurons, in Midland, Ontario, near Emmalyne's hometown of Penetanguishene, in the same region where we shot *Brébeuf*. And it's as if the stoked fire and smoky air in the longhouse has induced this dream of the wilderness, of something vanishing. I wanted this work to reflect my impression of Canada, informed by Frye, as a nation contemplating its ideal, contemplating the identity that it has failed to achieve. I had patriotic anthems on the brain when I started planning *Dominion*, in particular,

our failed anthem, "The Maple Leaf Forever". As in Wieland's film, there's an embrace of bodily movements, of breathing, in my photography, and *Dominion* also continues my work in motion blur, the creation of abstract patterns through physical exertion, by treating the camera as an extension of the body and locking the body into mechanical, ritualized motions. The combination of superimpositions and motion blur become a new means of working through physical reality, to render visible, out of the exploratory process, a metaphysical experience.

**What's the most exciting part/s of experimental film practices in 2014? What thing/s would you change?**

I'm excited by the diversity of forms in 2014. It can feel isolating, at times, and I've seen people walk away because, even in that whirl of diversity, they can't make a connection and they experience a kind of heartbreak. We're coming to a time where it will be important to revisit our past without the cynicism, prejudices, arrogance, and little provinces that are cast over the present, and to think hard on what values we want to resurrect and carry on or build anew. For me, those values would be close to the utopian ideals that Jonas Mekas spoke about at the Philadelphia College of Art in the summer of 1966. I believe in the possibility of a cinema that can reach into and heal the fractures, by the earnestness of love, by singing in a new age, by film taken as an art of light, a monastic order. I would like to see that utopian ambition gain traction. This is what some of us are trying to change.

**What's next? What are you working on at this moment? I'm curious not just about films/videos/moving image things but also research, writing, programming, etc.**

In terms of my writing, I recently finished two book-length historical manuscripts dealing with the early years of the Canadian avant-garde film. My research involves difficult modern aesthetics and their relation to avant-garde cinema, and my writings will continue along that line. With

my filmmaking, I've been trying to develop a pair of projects on a fairly intimate scale. First is a series of collaborations that I call 'latent collisions'. They involve chance superimpositions, formed by exposing and then swapping rolls of 16mm film with friends. The other is a long-term project, a modular diary film in Super8mm, which will be re-edited periodically to a fixed running time in order to integrate new material, and which is shot entirely in slow motion. There are other, larger projects that are always on my mind, but as my work is self-financed, I deal with what my resources will afford. For the time being, my interest is in the present moment.

## **FILMOGRAPHY**

Established by Stephen Broomer. Assistance provided by Sarah Piccini.

### **MANOR ROAD**

2010 | 3.5 MINUTES

Trains travel to and from a fixed point in space beneath a variable coloured horizon.

### **CHRIST CHURCH – SAINT JAMES**

2011 | 7 MINUTES

The remains of Christ Church – St. James are overtaken with graffiti. On its layered form, the space and surfaces become tangled and multiple, the grid of a stone-filled window giving geometric form to simultaneously occurring images of concrete, nature, waste, paint and sky.

### **BALINESE REBAR**

2011 | 3.5 MINUTES

Birds in flight break through rusted clouds and translucent buildings. Rebar at a construction site seems to snake through sunlit puddles.

### **MEMORY WORKED BY MIRRORS**

2011 | 2.5 MINUTES

A mirror in the filmmaker's backyard reflects his childhood home. The black frame of the watermarked mirror becomes a mysterious portal, distorting brick, branch, and flesh into an amorphous hodgepodge.

### **FOOLISH FIRE**

2012 | 1 MINUTE

The friar's lantern, ignis fatuus, or Will-o'-the-wisp, a phosphorescence caused by decomposing organic matter, is an atmospheric phenomenon long overshadowed by its mystic and macabre significance; here rendered as a skipping, ghostly flame that holds the power to seduce and mislead travelers.

## **BRÉBEUF**

2012 | 10.5 MINUTES

A study of St. Ignace II, in Huronia, where the ethnographers and Jesuit missionaries, later saints, Jean de Brébeuf and Gabriel Lalemant, were killed in 1649. The images in this film arise from a reading of that story - the joining of the sumac and the cross, the blessing gestures, struggles in the field, elliptical scans of stones, and the shimmering of water to summon a glimpse of the flesh boiled from the skin, in fables of the killing.

## **THE ORDER OF IDEAS AT THE LESLIE STREET SPIT**

2012 | 3.5 MINUTES

On the paths that cut through Toronto's Tommy Thompson Park, at the foot of Leslie Street, an assortment of terrains collide: thicket, pebbled shorelines, muddy vistas, and fertile earth with beds of wildflowers. A giant duck crosses the horizon.

## **SNAKEGRASS**

2012 | 1 MINUTE.

Snake grass lines a forest path. The camera passes toward the entrance to the woods. It staggers and repeats as the scene is saturated in colour.

## **QUEEN'S QUAY**

2012 | 1.5 MINUTES

Red, green, blue, and yellow grids track the horizon, left and right. The colours collide and mix.

## **SPIRITS IN SEASON**

2013 | 12.5 MINUTES

Lily Dale is a spiritualist community in Chautauqua County, New York. In the fall, Lily Dale becomes an intimate setting for spectral communions. This film explores the town's Leolyn Woods, pet cemetery, Inspiration Stump, and Fairy Trail.

## **APIS IN MEMPHIS**

2013 | 1 MINUTE

Apis the bull of Memphis, earthly representation of the god Ptah. His sacrifice signals the rebirth of a king as a god.

## **BLUE GUITAR**

2013 | 5.5 MINUTES

Things as they are, are changed upon the blue guitar.

## **RAVINE**

2013 | 4.5 MINUTES

In Toronto's Nordheimer Ravine, an environment of thick brush and dead wood flattens into fields of colour. Its paths lead to Winston Churchill Park, where the entrance to a city reservoir overlooks a green vale.

## **PEPPER'S GHOST**

2013 | 18.5 MINUTES

How we may see in a Chamber things that are not! Mutations of light, through fabric, glass, and colored gel, make bodies and objects transparent. For what is without will seem to be within.

## **CHAMPIONSHIP**

2013 | 21.5 MINUTES

At a wrestling tournament, a young competitor faces match upon match. Sounds drift in: a psychic piano enters over fast and short breaths. This is a contest of past and future. It will be decided in the ring.

## **CONSERVATORY**

2013 | 3.5 MINUTES

Stamens and pistils are lit in rapid succession behind the dome of the Palm House at Allan Gardens. The plants trade colour, making alien scenes in the conservatory. Solid forms, too near to the eye, become muddied and indistinct, in constant passage, but the dome and the grid are fixed.

## **THE SHAPES BOOK**

2013 | 4 MINUTES

Shapes in a dollhouse betray the fatal competition of earthly things.

## **ZERAH'S GIFT**

2013 | 12 MINUTES

On Zerah Colburn, the early-nineteenth-century human calculator, made into a sideshow attraction by his father. A record of the countryside that he grew up in and to which he later returned and died. The world as the work of a Great Calculator.

## **WASTEWATER**

2014 | 1.5 MINUTES

The North Toronto Wastewater Treatment Plant lies in thick brush downhill from a hydroelectric corridor. The eye bounces, guided by the vertical forms coming up out of the valley, and a low flame bridges these movements.

## **SERENA GUNDY**

2014 | 3.5 MINUTES

Serena Gundy Park, in Toronto, so named for the late wife of Toronto businessman James Henry Gundy. In early spring, the trees remain bare from winter, on cusp of renewal. The film takes her name for its homophonic relation to the nursery rhyme Solomon Grundy (born on a Monday, christened on Tuesday, married on Wednesday...), which cycles through the days of the week that chart Grundy's life from birth to death, inevitably repeating, birth and death enclosed in a loop.

## **JENNY HANIVER**

2014 | 15.5 MINUTES

Jenny Haniver or jeune d'anvers (young girl of Antwerp) is a cryptid totem sold for centuries at the docks of Antwerp; a disfigured ray or skate carcass, carved to resemble an angel, a devil, a dragon. To mirror its namesake, the film's plastic properties have been carved, lacerated, bleached, otherwise stressed, reshaped to transform reality into the fantastic and unknowable.

## **HANG TWELVE**

2014 | 24 MINUTES

Encores live yet / Slice every note, each notice sincere in secret / Lovers covet eyeliner to recite in vein or vesicle / Clever noise, silence or else.

## **DOMINION**

2014 | 8 MINUTES

The thistle, shamrock, rose entwined, a vision in the longhouse, a dream in the wilderness.

## Contributors

**Scott Miller Berry** is a Toronto-based cultural worker and filmmaker. By day he works at Toronto's Images Festival where he has been Director since 2005 and on staff since 2001. He serves on the Boards of *the 8 fest small gauge film festival* and *MANO/RAMO* (Media Arts Network of Ontario) and is co-instigator and co-programmer of the film series Early Monthly Segments. Scott's film *'ars memorativa'* recently screened in competition at the 2014 Oberhausen Film Festival.

**Scott Birdwise** is a programming consultant with the Canadian Film Institute and a PhD student in Cinema and Media Studies at York University. He has recently published essays on Michel Brault, Amanda Dawn Christie, and the question of horror in the films of Jack Chambers and R. Bruce Elder.

**Dan Browne** is a Toronto-based filmmaker, photographer and multimedia artist whose films and videos have been presented at over fifty festivals and venues around the world. He is currently a doctoral candidate in the York/Ryerson Joint Graduate Program in Communication and Culture.

**R. Bruce Elder** is a filmmaker, critic, and teacher (and former Program Director) in the Graduate Program in Communication and Culture at Ryerson University.

**Clint Enns** is a video artist and filmmaker living in Toronto, Ontario. His work primarily deals with moving images created with broken and/or outdated technologies. His work has shown both nationally and internationally at festivals, alternative spaces and mircocinemas. He has a Master's degree in mathematics from the University of Manitoba, and has recently received a Master's degree in cinema and media from York University where he is currently pursuing a PhD. His writings and interviews have appeared in *Millennium Film Journal*, *INCITE Journal of Experimental Media* and *Spectacular Optical*.

**Zoë Heyn-Jones** is a Toronto-based researcher and visual artist whose handmade Super 8 and 16mm films have screened locally and internationally. Zoë is a member of the programming collective at Pleasure Dome and serves on the board of directors at LIFT (the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto). Zoë is a PhD student in Visual Arts at York University, focusing on experimental ethnography, performance, expanded cinema, and Latin American studies. She studied cinema and anthropology at the University of Toronto, and holds an MA in Film Studies from Concordia University and an MFA in Documentary Media from Ryerson University.

**Brett Kashmere** is a filmmaker, curator and writer living in Pittsburgh, USA. He is also the founding editor and publisher of *INCITE Journal of Experimental Media* and is currently co-editing a book on Arthur Lipsett, forthcoming from University of Calgary Press.

**Tom McSorley** is Executive Director of the Canadian Film Institute, Adjunct Research Professor of Film Studies at Carleton University (Ottawa), and film critic at CBC Radio One's "Ottawa Morning."

**Cameron Moneo** is a doctoral candidate in the York University Graduate Program in Film, specializing in humour in experimental film and video.

**Andréa Picard** is an independent curator and writer based in Toronto and Paris. She has worked for The Toronto International Film Festival since 1999, and was a member of the TIFF Cinematheque programming team for twelve years. Since 2006, she is the chief curator of Wavelengths, the Festival's critically acclaimed avant-garde programme –named in honour of Michael Snow –and a regular contributor to the Future Projections exhibition programme. She has collaborated with international institutions such as Art Metropole, le Centre Pompidou, the Museum of Modern Art, Vienna's Belvedere and MAK museums, and the Secession.

**Michael Sicinski** is a writer and teacher based in Houston, Texas, U.S. He is a frequent contributor to *Cinema Scope*, *Cineaste*, and *Cargo*.

