

Behind These Walls: Contemporary Canadian Experimental Short Films

The short film program *Behind These Walls* gathers recent work by a new generation of Canadian experimental filmmakers. Featuring seven films made on 35mm between 2005 and 2009, the program demonstrates an engagement with a diversity of strategies, namely hand-processing, collage, animation and optical sound. Together, the films draw a picture of a filmmaking movement characterized by a personal vision and a DIY approach that persists – with surprising creativity – amidst a rapidly diminishing support structure for analog technologies.

Behind These Walls is conceptually inspired by a video by Michael Snow – a central figure in the history of Canadian experimental cinema. Shot in 2002, *Solar Breath (Northern Caryatids)* is described plainly as a 62-minute video of a curtain slapping against a window of Snow's Newfoundland log cabin. The video plays on the idea of hitting against a "wall", which in this instance can be seen also be seen as hitting against the lens of the camera. This has the effect of drawing attention to the cinematic apparatus, reminding us of the structural architecture that makes images possible. Meditative and strangely satisfying in its predictability, the film in a sense "exposes" the attention span of the viewer. Snow's formalist cinema also foregrounds the medium itself: the frame, the projection, and most importantly, the element of time. By breaking cinema down into bare components, Snow "exposes" an anti-illusionist cinema.

Experimental Cinema in a Context of Exhibition Cinema

The 1990s saw a strong presence of cinema in galleries and museums worldwide, with Douglas Gordon's 1993 remake of *Psycho* as the iconic moment. Installation works featured large-scale projections characterized by a naturalist quality of the image, an image that addressed politics, spectacle and subjectivity through direct sampling, imitation and reframing of conventional texts of Hollywood narrative scripts. In employing these strategies, artists like Stan Douglas, Tacita Dean, Rodney Graham, Mark Lewis and Jeremy Deller posed compelling questions about cinema and narrativity in the contemporary era. At the very same moment, independent filmmaking was being threatened, as small-gauge film stocks disappeared at an exponential rate, affecting the working tools of several generations of experimental filmmakers. Ironically, as the 8mm and 16mm formats vanished, visual artists (mostly represented by large mainstream galleries) began using the 35mm format, producing spectacular images that were later transferred to digital formats and projected in white cube galleries.

In the last decade, cinema in its largest definition became the central object of several important survey exhibitions in Canada. Among those were curator Barbara Fischer's *Projections*, a 40-year survey held at the University of Toronto Art Galleries in 2006, and curator Michèle Thériault's *Timelength* held at Concordia University's Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery in 2005. Both exhibitions examined the influence of the material, spatial and temporal dimensions of cinema in a context that framed the medium as a dominant mode within contemporary visual art practice. In *Timelength*, Thériault juxtaposed works marked by the slowness of their movement – or the quasi-fixity of the image – thus, in a way, examining the state of duration in relation to the supporting technology of each work. In doing so, Thériault succeeded in generating a context that shed light on the missing histories linking experimental cinema to the recent practices of exhibition cinema.

Short of a few exceptions, mainstream galleries and museums have long ignored experimental filmmakers' work. Thériault's exhibition, organized around a constellation of Canadian filmmakers including Pascal Grandmaison, Gwen MacGregor, Jocelyn Robert, counterpointed recent work to emblematic films by Andy Warhol and Michael Snow, thus creating a context that mapped today's obsession with duration (think of Douglas Gordon's 24-hour long remake of *Psycho*) with the structural films of the 1970s. Likewise, today's common display strategy of exhibiting the cinematic projector as an inherent component of the artwork (arguably, the "auratic dimension" of the medium) is mirrored by Thériault's choice to display Warhol's films in their original 16mm format, which draws the viewer's attention to the conditions of production of cinema – a fact that most exhibition cinema denies.

The Micro Politics of Experimental Cinema

The dominance of today's "cinematographic" language in contemporary visual art practice blurs the boundaries between what is considered traditional film, documentary film and visual art. Experimental cinema is no stranger to this blurring, with filmmakers working in a variety of hybrid and increasingly performative ways. In the culture of experimental film, however, a central thrust emphasizes the artisanal over the professional and process over product. Filmmakers continue to broaden the traditional form of cinema by exploring a variety of means (photography, typography, radio, for example), and new concepts and intermedial crossings (performance, visual music, graphic and sonorous poetry, ambiances). Together, these tendencies resist the instrumental culture of Hollywood by denying the strictly narrative function of film.

Indeed, experimental cinema answers to and resists the mainstream film industry by exploring alternative means of production and by reclaiming other uses for film technology that articulates a distinct anti-illusionistic quality. Strategies include remixing found footage; exploring the legacy of structural cinema through duration; using handcrafted film techniques; and exploiting the physicality of film through collage, scratching, and performative forms like expanded cinema. These continue to place the viewer in an active relationship to the medium of film.

Since the 1990s, state arts funding has been severely curtailed as well as politicized, generally to the disadvantage of avant-garde filmmakers. Yet, a period of resurging activity has occurred within experimental film all the same. Microcinemas and small film collectives have emerged, and films have been projected in industrial spaces and artist-run centres in Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa, Halifax and Winnipeg, drawing faithful crowds. Furthermore, a solid network of film festivals (Oberhausen, Rotterdam, Toronto, New York) and a new generation of film curators have contributed to setting the stage for major new talents, such as David Gatten, Matthias Müller, Peter Tscherkassky, Martin Arnold and Christina Battle, now known internationally. New opportunities through commissioning programs have given filmmakers the occasion to pursue new works on 35mm and to take part in touring programs organized in Canada, for example, through the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre.

The history(ies) of experimental cinema, however, did not fare as well. Experimental filmmakers, though well documented in their immediate circles, have consistently failed to enter into mainstream visual art culture; this is arguably in an even more fragile state today as experimental filmmakers face the demise of the technology required to make and exhibit their work. Other key issues, such as the lack of critical attention afforded to the new generation – as recently discussed by film curator Brett Kashmere in the online

film journal *Incite!* – poses an ongoing threat to the present and future generations of experimental filmmakers who will suffer without new instruments of publicity and analysis like online journals.

Behind These Walls: A New Generation of Filmmakers

It is in this charged context that the film program *Behind These Walls* was presented in Sherbrooke in fall 2009. At the invitation of Sebastien Pésot, curator and founder of the media arts biennial *Espace [l]m]média*, a festival largely devoted to video and performance by emerging and mid-career Quebec-based artists, *Behind These Walls* was created to offer a “filmic” point of view on the moving image: call it the literal display of the “auratic” presence of analog technologies within the festival. In a regional context where a heterogeneous culture of the media arts is only in the process of articulating itself, the goal was to sample recent work by Canadian experimental filmmakers that could speak to the production practices of today. The conditions for projection were adequate: a local art-house cinema with room to sit some sixty people in front of a screen close enough to overwhelm the spectator’s view.

Behind These Walls was bookended with two works by filmmaker Christina Battle, creating a framework calling to mind the supporting structure of the black box cinema, within whose architectural framework the spectator sits. The works in the program were divided into three themes: the design/space of the image (Battle, Piller), personal narratives (Bourque, Grimanis) and visual music (Saïto, Egan). These represented well, in my mind, the spectrum of methods and themes used by experimental film practitioners active on the Canadian scene.

Christina Battle works like a printmaker, inscribing images onto film using a collage or photogram technique. Her work addresses psychological and social “disasters,” whether through narrative tropes or the interplay of image and text. In the cameraless film *Behind the Walls and Under the Stairs* (2005), Battle has used the photogram technique, laying figures on the film stock and shining a light onto them to inscribe their shadow into the material. With unexposed film’s multi-layering of colours, this produces a shock of vibrancy against a wall of pure blacks, shaping the frame of the objects placed onto the film stock. Playing on the horror genre, Battle has used the image of the spider coupled to her trademark evocative titles to call attention to the possibility of danger lurking nearby.

In the commissioned work *Three Hours, Fifteen Minutes Before the Hurricane* (2006), Battle again explores psychological spaces, this time locating her story in a contemporary real-world disaster: the storm that hit New Orleans in 2005, commonly known as Hurricane Katrina. Battle’s narrative explores the advent of the storm from the point of view of the plant and animal worlds. Finely outlined Victorianesque drawings collaged onto the surface of the black film stock seemingly float on the darkened space, intercut with titles that narrate the storm’s impending approach.

In *L’Étranger-The Stranger* (2006), Madi Piller creates a portrait of fear using colour and close-ups. The work represents well the DIY approach: the film is hand-printed on black-and-white film stock, hand-painted and optically reprinted on 35mm. Piller keeps the tension high, pulling the viewer along with slow pans across a graphic black-and-white landscape of lines onto which she inserts strokes of blood-red paint. Piller writes that she

sought to describe a condition evoked by absurd crimes committed in the name of humanity.

With Louise Bourque's *Éclat du Mal/The Bleeding Heart of It* (2005), the viewer is placed in an oneiric memoryscape where the filmmaker tries to remember, through cinematic images, the painful scenery of a dream punctuated by complicated family dynamics and dysfunction. The film triggers poetic confusion between memory, fact and fiction, leaving the dream unresolved. Bourque's work evokes the heritage of second-wave feminism with its handcrafted quality and political explorations of the personal.

Lucky Girl (2009) by Alexandra Grimanis constructs a narrative around a real event drawn from the filmmaker's past. Using an intimate voiceover, Grimanis tells the story of how, as a young girl, she met a man who invited her to meet with him at a local park later that day. She explains her attraction to this person, who, ultimately, she was unable to meet as planned. By way of a few select images showing a park and a man rendered through grainy overexposed colour film, the filmmaker conveys the fascination and repulsion held in this childhood memory.

Kelly Egan's work explores visual music, a mode of working with film that exploits rhythm through intricate, almost mathematical montage work. In *Firefly* (2007), Egan "translates" the shape of the words of a poem by printing these on the sound portion of the film stock; the effect is a visual soundtrack that interprets Souvankham Thammavongsa's "Firefly." Egan thus confounds the visual and auditory realms, creating a topographic wordscape that uses the medium of film to "speak."

Daïchi Saïto's *Trees of Syntax, Leaves of Axis* (2009) is a lush, hand-processed film that explores the rhythmic structure inherent to film editing: cutting and splicing. Made in collaboration with violinist and composer Malcolm Goldstein, the ten-minute film interprets Goldstein's sonic world via a portrait of a single tree coupled with the kinesthetic movements of rapid-fire edits and shifting colours. The syntactical rhythmic structure is expressed through an intense image and sound interplay, making for a rollercoaster ride for the senses that transforms the viewer's sensorial perception of space through pattern, variation and repetition.

The films that make up the program *Behind These Walls* speak to the multifaceted forms of filmmaking being practiced in the experimental cinema community in Canada today. Alongside the rise of large-scale installation works, or "exhibition cinema," these small-scale, largely handmade films contribute to the heterogeneity of today's moving image works and add to the multiplicity of experiences that can be had in galleries, museums and movie houses both here and abroad.

Vicky Chainey Gagnon

Biographies

Christina Battle lives and teaches cinema at the University of Colorado. She holds an MFA from the San Francisco School of the Arts (2005). Her work has been shown internationally at such as events as the 2006 Whitney Biennial: *Day for Night* (New York), the VideoEx Experimental Film & Video Festival (Zurich), the London Film Festival (London) and the White Box (New York).

Louise Bourque lives and works in the Boston area where she teaches cinema. She holds an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (1992). Her films have been presented in venues and festivals in over twenty-five countries, including the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York), the San Francisco International Film Festival, the Toronto International Film Festival, and the International Film Festival Rotterdam. A retrospective of her work was held at the 2005 Images Film Festival (Toronto).

Vicky Chainey Gagnon lives and works in Sherbrooke, Quebec, where she is curator of the Foreman Art Gallery of Bishop's University. She is interested in a variety of art practices, particularly those that resist institutional structures, and is currently working towards a PhD at Concordia University on the subject of new Canadian curatorial practices.

Kelly Egan lives and works in Toronto, where she is working towards a PhD in Culture and Communication at York University. She holds an MFA in Film/Video from Bard College (2005). Her films have been screened at major festivals across North America, including the Toronto International Film Festival, the New York Film Festival, and the Diagonal Film Archive (Seoul).

Alexandra Grimanis lives in Montreal, where she works at Main Film, an artist-run centre for independent filmmakers. She completed her studies in film production at Concordia University in 1997. Screenings include: the International Film Festival Rotterdam, the Toronto International Film Festival, the Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery (Halifax) and Groupe Intervention Vidéo's *Vidéos de femmes dans le parc* (Montreal). She was recently awarded the Prix à la création artistique du Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec for the best art/experimental work at the 2009 edition of the Rendez-vous du cinéma québécois.

Madi Piller is a Toronto-based filmmaker who was born in Lima, Peru. A graduate from the University of Lima in Communication Sciences, she works as an experimental filmmaker, educator and mentor. Her films have been shown at the Royal Ontario Museum (Toronto), Anthology Film Archives (New York), the Ottawa International Animation Festival, the Centre for Art Tapes (Halifax) and the Museum of Modern Art (Bogota, Columbia).

Originally from Japan, Daïchi Saïto studied philosophy in the United States, and Hindi and Sanskrit in India before settling in Montreal, where he co-founded the Double Negative Collective. He holds an MFA in filmmaking from Concordia University (2008). Screenings include: the Sonic Acts Festival (Amsterdam), the International Film Festival Rotterdam, the Hong Kong International Film Festival and Anthology Film Archives (New York).