

Then On From There

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A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

In

Interdisciplinary Master's In Art, Media and Design

OCAD Graduate Gallery, 15/April/14-19/April/14

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, April, 2014

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Then On From There

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Abstract

Then On From There is a practice-based research project situated between the space of the screen and the stage. It interrogates conventional notions of filmmaking, narrativity, and spectatorship in the gallery context, using a combination of collaborative, structural and tactile processes. This thesis revolves around four individual video works that explore what constitutes narrative in expanded media by investigating the role of traditional devices of plot, tension, and character development. These works, in turn, produce a form of experimental narrative that is multi-layered and self-reflexive. My research, then, contextualizes these projects through the lens of early 1970s structural/materialist film theory and participatory theatre, while engaging contemporary discourse surrounding collaborative art practice and the notion of “expanded cinema.”

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my principal adviser Jim Drobnick and my secondary adviser Simone Jones for their commitment and support for my work and research.

Thanks to the IAMD Program Director Barbara Rauch for her ongoing support as well as the Graduate Studies office, Allison Rowe, Julian Higuerey Núñez, Brian Desrosiers Tam, and Alice Brummell for their patience and kind assistance.

I sincerely thank my close collaborators, Ryan Ferko and Faraz Anoushahpour for their consistent enthusiasm, positive attitude and honest feedback, this would not have been possible without you.

Also a big thanks to all our wonderful cohort: to Humboldt Magnussen, Marjan Verstappen, Trent Hunter, Stephen Surlin, Anjuli Rahamn, Brette Gabel, Jason Deary, Rawaa Bakhsh, Takis Zournkos, Mary Tremonte.

And finally I thank my parents for their constant support, understanding and encouragement.

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Introduction

What drew me to film and video from theatre was the performative potential of the filmic situation as a whole, stripped down to its basic components. In my thesis project, I engage with the notion of the cinematic experience, which in itself crosses disciplinary boundaries. I investigate ideas of narrativity and drama within the field of experimental film and video, using a combination of collaborative, structural and tactile processes. Using these techniques I research and produce work in which the content is strongly shaped by the production process. Some of the work expands on established narrative structures within moving-image practices, while others combine narrative and structural elements, creating a tension between readability and unreadability. In some cases the viewer is taken to the edge of psychological immersion, but then pulled out again and made aware of the construction of the film.

I often use collaboration as a way of working. I believe it challenges and empowers the process of production specifically in film and video. Working alongside others raises the level of ambiguity in the production process as it encourages multiple viewpoints at every stage of the work's development. In some of the projects I worked with existing frameworks for collaboration while in others I created my own parameters.¹

Building on some of the questions that emerged through my research on the

¹ One of the projects addressed in this paper took part as part of a summer residency at the Banff Center in 2013; another was formed around a workshop with Berlin based video artist Nina Könnemann, November 2013, Toronto.

theory and practice of the experimental filmmakers and theatre practitioners of the late sixties and early seventies in areas of Structural Film, Expanded Cinema and Participatory Theatre, my Thesis Project explores the following areas:

1. What constitutes narrative in expanded media, where the traditional devices of character, identification and plot are at best underdeveloped or often non-existent?²
2. Will revisiting theories and methods of the structural/materialist filmmakers of the early seventies provide more critical methodologies for dealing with ideas of content, process, image and space in relation to different modes of narrativity in audio-visual work?
3. In what ways can applying collaborative methods, based on techniques of Participatory Theatre, be useful in exploring notions of narrativity and hierarchy within the filmmaking process?

The main body of this paper focuses on four major video works that are included in my thesis exhibition. In the first work, *Still Life (Egg & Glass)* (2013), I focus on collage narrative and more tactile techniques of filming. The second work, *Not Even the Weatherman Can Predict Murder* (2014), reflects on a multi-layered, self-reflexive and collective process, investigating ways of dealing with hierarchical narrative structures. The project is strongly rooted in performance theory and socially engaged art practice. Working through this project, I became aware of the tendency in collaborative work for valuing process over product and therefore largely ignoring formal and aesthetic considerations. As I started seeking alternative ways for collaborating that could extract the potentials of collective creation towards

² This question builds on Jackie Hatfield's initial research question that she proposed but never got to fully execute, due to her untimely death. (Rees, A. L. *Expanded Cinema: Art, Performance, Film*. London: Tate Gallery Pub, 2011. 19.

producing aesthetic work (video) that could exist independent of its process, I found myself strangely drawn to the medium-specific, formal and anti-narrative investigations of the Structural and the Structural/Materialist filmmakers in the early 1970s. *There is a Woman Texting in Front of the Dark Horse* (2014), is a collaborative and structural video piece in which four cameras film a busy intersection, dramatizing the everydayness of the scene by constantly skipping between multiple viewpoints. While *Not Even the Weatherman Can Predict Murder* devised elaborate structures to expose the process of making, my fourth work, *ONroute (Searching for Ken Carter)* (2013), a smaller scaled collaboration, uses the same level of sophistication in developing the process but makes an effort to separate the apparatus from the aesthetic continuity of the finished piece.

The Theoretical Framework section looks at my journey through different discourses on the subject of narrative in audio-visual work and collaborative practices in art. In the Methodology section, I touch on some of the smaller projects that are not included in the exhibition but influenced my thinking and helped form some of the techniques used in my major projects. In the final section, I review the ways in which some of my initial questions have been addressed through my studio practice and research.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for my thesis project is built around ideas of narrative and process across several discourses, including avant-garde film and video in the early seventies, early models of participatory theatre, and contemporary collaborative art practices. Coming from a theatre background, an inherently collaborative profession, I was drawn to the contemporary discourse around collaborative art practices. In addition, a constant search for non-hierarchical structures for artistic production has always guided my investigations within the field of visual arts. Therefore a major part of my research focuses on models for collaboration within the field of participatory theatre and experimental film.

I studied the techniques of Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal, developed in his book *Games for Actors and Non-actors* (1992).³ These performance techniques were primarily developed as tools for challenging authoritative truths, fictional or real. In Boal's methods, when viewing images participants are encouraged to distinguish the difference between what one perceives and what one presumes. As Boal points out: "This is to disrupt the automatic thought processes of inference and to gain a stronger understanding of the way images can be interpreted."⁴ I studied these methods in order to find a way to apply them to my collaborative film projects, looking at ways in which these techniques could affect notions of narrativity and hierarchy within the medium.

³ Boal, Augusto. *Games for Actors and Non-actors*. London: Routledge, 1992.

⁴ Ibid. 86.

Using a similar method, William Greave's *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968)⁵ deconstructs the film process through breaking down the accepted structures of production. Reading about his ideas and methods guided me in thinking about self-reflexive structures for filming. His work specifically helped me to figure out a way to translate Boal's techniques to film. In *What a Long, Strange Trip It's Been: William Greaves' Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*, Maria San Fillipo calls Greave's film an infinitely entertaining experiment in reflexivity, based on the concept of "having the pro-filmic camera eye, which in conventional cinema slyly and surreptitiously equates itself with the vision of the spectator, focus on the spectators themselves."⁶

Claire Bishop's writing on participation, antagonism, democratic structures for art practice and collaboration is also influential in the development of my work, as it constantly raises challenging questions in an otherwise relatively uncontested field. Although acknowledging the creative potentials of collective production, she draws attention to the instances of 'failed collaborations' and argues that it is equally crucial to discuss, analyze, and compare such works critically as art. Bishop emphasizes on the importance of artistic quality and warns against the 'aesthetics judgment' being overtaken by 'ethical criteria' in practices that blindly value process over product as a way to oppose capitalism.⁷

⁵ *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*. Prod. William Greaves. Dir. William Greaves. Perf. William Greaves. 1968.

⁶ San Fillipo, Maria, "What a Long, Strange Trip It's Been: William Greaves' *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*." *Film History*. 2.13 (2001): 216-225. Accessed: 11 Nov 2013. 220.

⁷ Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso. 2012. 11- 40.

As I pursued alternative ways for collaborating that focused equally on joint creation and aesthetic production, I became interested in the medium-specific, formal and anti-narrative investigations of the Structural and the Structural/Materialist filmmakers of the early 1970s, especially in London, UK.⁸ Peter Gidal's writings on experimental film, specifically his anti-narrative/anti-event theories worked as a foundation for some of my earlier material-based investigations. As an influential theorist in the Structural/Materialist movement, he repeatedly states his uncompromising position in relation to procedures of narrative. In *Structural Film Anthology* he writes:

Identification is inseparable from the procedures of narrative, though not totally covered by it. The problematic centers on the question as to whether narrative is inherently authoritarian, manipulatory and mystificatory, or not. The fact that it requires identificatory procedures and a lack of distanciation to function, and the fact that its only possible functioning is at an illusionistic level, indicates that the problematic has a clear resolution. In that sense, it is more of a problem than a problematic.⁹

For Gidal, narrative is inherently authoritarian and repressive, therefore a problem that needs to be eliminated. Throughout his body of work, he meticulously explains how film can rid itself from any illusion and function solely as what he calls *film as film*. He writes that "the Structural/Materialist film must minimize the content in its overpowering, imagistically seductive sense, in an attempt to get through this

⁸ I focus on The London Film-makers' Co-op, or LFMC, a British filmmaking workshop founded in 1966. It ceased to exist in 1999 when it merged with London Video Arts to form LUX. BFI website. <<http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/organisation/8307>>. Accessed 21 June 2013.

⁹ Gidal, Peter. *Structural Film Anthology*. London: British Film Institute. 1976. 4.

miasmic area of ‘experience’ and proceed with film as film.”¹⁰ In response to Gidal’s idea of the anti-narrative, Stephen Heath writes that “*film as film* means repressing the fact of the social existence and heterogeneity of film. Therefore *film is not film*, but always and every time a specific social production.”¹¹ Heath emphasizes that the real process of the film includes the conditions of its construction and presence. In this way film becomes a site of social practice and intervention. Heath reads Gidal’s own films as a “very complex engagement with *representation* but never the less *about* representation.”¹²

Following similar lines, Jackie Hatfield investigates the role of narrativity within the experimental works of the 1970s. With an emphasis on artists who incorporated performance and the qualities of space in their work,¹³ Hatfield argues:

What I’m trying to demonstrate by listing just some of these works is that despite the modernist thrust of the writing with an emphasis on the lineage of purist, anti-imagistic and anti-narrative practice, what actually went on was totally different. Rather than this history being weighted towards anti-narrative, the reality has been that, beginning with the Futurists and the Surrealists through to Fluxus, and to date, artists have played around with narrative rather than being predominantly against it.¹⁴

Hatfield points out that the historical and theoretical premise of the avant-garde artists being anti-narrative can be proved unfounded by simply reviewing their

¹⁰ Ibid. 2.

¹¹ Heath, Stephen. “Afterword.” *Screen* 20.2(1979): 1-7. *Luxonline*. Accessed 23 July 2013. 5.

¹² Ibid. 10.

¹³ In *Expanded Cinema and Narrative*, Hatfield writes: “looking at the work retrospectively the extraordinary and imagistic, textural and sensuous works of Malcolm LeGrice and Annabel Nicolson, seem to bear no relationship to the dry formalist climate around them.” Hatfield, Jackie. “Expanded Cinema and Narrative.” *Millennium Film Journal-online*. 40.39(2003). Accessed 12 Sep 2013. 6.

¹⁴ Ibid.

practice throughout history.¹⁵ In her writing on experimental film and expanded cinema, she points out a need for “a critical review of such practices to examine the significance of experiment with narrative (dramaturgy) within the cinematic event.”¹⁶ She repeatedly mentions that while theory has been preoccupied with an anti-narrative stance, artists have often been both pro *and* anti-narrative. John Smith is an example of one of those artists. Studying under Peter Gidal and involved in the discourse of “*film as film*” at the London Filmmakers’ Co-Op, his work often incorporates both formal and narrative elements, always keeping a tension between narrative and disillusion while never becoming pro-illusion in the conventional sense. When asked about his relationship with the anti-narrative ideologies of the London Filmmakers’ Co-op he responds: “there were manifestos but as you know, some people write manifestos and other people keep quiet, and the people who keep quiet don’t necessarily agree with what’s said in its entirety. In fact, there was a lot of diversity at the time.”¹⁷

Throughout my research on ideas of narrativity in the filmic event, I often read text and looked at work categorized under the heading “expanded cinema,” the definition of which was not always clear and seemed to be constantly shifting. The following sources helped me shape my understanding of widely used terms such as “expanded media” and “expanded cinema.” In his article “Identity Crisis:

¹⁵ Ibid. 9.

¹⁶ Hatfield, Jackie. “The Subject in Expanded Cinema.” *Images*. 24.2 (2004): 14-18. 14

¹⁷ Frye, Brian. “Interview with John Smith.” *Millennium Film Journal-online*. 40.39(2003). Accessed 20 Feb 2014.

Experimental Film and Artistic Expansion,” Jonathan Walley complains that “the increasingly unwieldy mass of forms and materials placed under the heading *expanded cinema* has rendered the term bloated to the point of near meaninglessness.”¹⁸ Chrissie Iles mentioned that the challenge of defining expanded cinema originates from the fact that cinema itself, even pre-expansion, was already so heterogeneous that the label “expanded” seems redundant. She gives a clear distinction between Expanded Cinema (capital E, capital C,) as a specific historical moment growing out of Structural and Structural-Materialist film and what she calls “the ongoing expansion and contraction of cinema” that could be traced back to the pre-cinematic past.¹⁹ For Walley, referring to Gene Youngblood’s landmark book *Expanded Cinema*,²⁰ in the early seventies when the book was published the term was a handy catchall for defining a cluster of nascent art forms that have since become more distinct: video art, media art, performance art, moving-image installation, experimental and alternative television, etc.²¹

Walley reads Iles’s concept of expansion and contraction as the interplay between generality (in which differences between art forms dissolve) and specificity (where each art form’s distinctness and autonomy is explored and sustained, e.g. film, video). For him understanding this interplay leads directly to understanding

¹⁸ Walley, Jonathan. “Identity Crisis: Experimental Film and Artistic Expansion.” *October*. 137(2011). 27.

¹⁹ Iles, Chrissie. “Inside out: Expanded Cinema and its Relationship to the Gallery in 1970s” (Paper presented at “Expanded Cinema: Activating the space of reception,” Tate modern, London, April 17-19, 2009) http://www.rewind.ac.uk/expanded/Narrative/Tate_Doc_Session_2_-CI.html. Accessed 10 Nov 2013.

²⁰ Youngblood, Gene. *Expanded Cinema*. New York: Dutton. 1970.

²¹ Walley, Jonathan. 2011. 28.

expanded cinema.²² Keeping a balance between the specific and the general, or in Iles's words expanding and contracting, was a constant concern and struggle in my practice and research as I constantly moved between large-scale collaborations and my individual inter-disciplinary studio production.

The direction of my research started shifting according to different needs of the collaborative projects I was engaged in. While working on *Onroute (Searching for Ken Carter)* I started researching theories of narrative in fiction film. David Bordwell's book *Narration in the Fiction Film* provides a very different way of looking at narrative in film.²³ Being against the use of grand theories that use film to confirm predetermined theoretical frameworks, his work dissects the viewer's cognitive processes that take place when perceiving the film's aesthetic forms.²⁴ His systematic analysis looks at how filmmakers use different techniques to guide our attention to relevant narrative information. In "Double Trouble: on Film, Fiction and Narrative," Murray Smith sets out to clarify the distinction between fiction and narrative in motion picture media. For Smith, "narrative is a form of cognition arising from our evolved need to track agents through time and space"²⁵ whereas "fictions are part of a larger class of counterfactual representations...a fiction in this later sense is a representation of agents and events that is framed, and thus

²² Ibid. 47.

²³ Bordwell, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2006.

²⁴ Bordwell, David, and Noël Carroll. *Post-theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*. Madison: University of Wisconsin. 2005. 3.

²⁵ Smith, Murray. "Double Trouble: On Film, Fiction, and Narrative." *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 1.1 (2009): 1-23. *University of Nebraska Press*. Accessed 14 Jan 2014. 2.

understood, as imaginary.”²⁶ To further illustrate the distinction between fiction and narrative, Smith investigates four permutations generated by the intersection of the two: 1. Fictional Narratives; 2. Non-Fictional narratives; 3. Non-Fictional Non-narratives; 4. Fictional Non-Narratives.²⁷ In failing to designate films that strictly belong to the last two groups he considers some of the structural films made by experimental filmmakers as existing within the blends and borderlines of the categories. He then continues to analyze how these hybrid narrative structures function in films such as *Wavelength* (1967) and *Girl Chewing Gum* (1976).²⁸

Below is a brief description of films, videos and video installations that have that influenced my process:

- Looking at work produced in collectives such as The London Filmmakers’ Co-op and the Polish Workshop of the Film Form, who were engaging with Gidal’s writing at the time, helped me to understand the discourse further. Specially, looking at ways in which different artists tackled the notion of the ‘artist as film maker’ and beginning to shift film from the cinema to the gallery.²⁹
- In the area of collage narrative, especially films using found footage, Bruce Conner’s *A Movie* (1958), Arthur Lipsett’s *21-87* (1964) and Gary lee Nova’s *Steel Mushrooms* (1967) stand out.
- Among films experimenting with self-reflexive structures or collaborative processes, I found inspiration in William Greaves’s *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968), Phil Hoffman’s *Lessons in Process* (2012), Stephen

²⁶ Ibid. 3.

²⁷ Ibid. 6.

²⁸ Ibid. 13-21.

²⁹ Annabel Nicolson’s article “Artist as Film-maker” and Malcolm LeGrice’s article “REAL TIME/SPACE” expand on this issue further by drawing connections between “film as art” and “film as film.”

Nicolson, Annabel. “Artist as Film-maker.” *Art and Artists* (1972). *Luxonline*. Accessed 10 July 2013.

Le Grice, Malcolm. “REAL TIME/SPACE.” *Art and Artists* (1972). *Luxonline*. Accessed 19 July 2013.

Dwoskin's *Central Bazaar* (1976), Jean-Luc Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962) and *Le Petit Soldat* (1963).

- Hans Schuegl's *Hernals* (1967) and Chris Gallacher's *Seeing In Rain* (1981) are amongst strictly structural films that influenced my thinking and practice.
- But the most interesting group of films for me were the ones that combined formal and narrative elements in different ways such as Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967), John Smith's *Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), *The Black Tower* (1987) and *Worst Case Scenario* (2001-3), and Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez's *Manakamana* (2013).
- Amongst contemporary visual artists I found David Claerbout's *Bordeaux Piece* (2004), Cyprien Gaillard's *Real Remnant of Fictive Wars* (2005), Guy Maddin's ongoing *Séances Project* and Olivia Plender and Patrick Staff's ongoing collaborative video projects interesting and relevant to my own practice.

As illustrated in this section, by exploring a range of relevant theories and looking at the ways in which different artists and filmmakers have responded or added to this discourse through their practice, I sought to keep a balance between my own studio practice and theoretical inquiry.

Methodology

My Thesis Project employs *practice-based-research*³⁰ and *reflexive methodologies*.³¹ In order to discuss my art practice in relation to “reflexive methodology” the dominant figure of the social scientist present in Alvesson and Skoldberg’s text needs to morph into the figure of the artist. As Graeme Sullivan mentions, in the visual arts reflexive practices are used based on Alvesson and Skoldberg’s notion of “Reflexive Interpretation.”³² Naturally, the methods I employ as an artist (studio-based-researcher) are centered on art making and use different disciplines perspectives and practices. In a certain way Sullivan views “research” in a similar light as Alvesson and Skoldberg, as a dynamic and imaginative process of inquiry and creation. He writes “When planning and undertaking research, artists also make informed choices about imaginative and intellectual approaches just as they do when they create and respond to art”³³ he continues by adding “there is no prescribed body of knowledge to be learned and then applied.”³⁴

Throughout my MFA I have developed a series of smaller projects in order to test out and explore different aspects of my Thesis Project. In many occasions works

³⁰ In *practice-based-research*, the studio experience becomes a form of intellectual and imaginative inquiry and creates insight in the process of art making. Sullivan, Graeme. *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Art*. 2010. 70.

³¹ *Reflexive Interpretation* is a methodological strategy proposed by Mats Alvesson and Kaj Skoldberg in the field of Social Science. Alvesson, Mats, and Kaj Skoldberg. 2000. *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*. 2000. 238-293.

³² Sullivan, Graeme. *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Art*. 110.

³³ Ibid. 111.

³⁴ Ibid

were directly prompted by the theory I was reading and in others the challenges and discoveries through my studio process directed me to different reading material.

I have used my education in theatre (participatory theatre) to generate strategies for collaborative, audio-visual work. Collaboration as a method is used in varying capacities in all of the work presented in my exhibition. Using the platform of collaboration, I explored more flexible structures for conducting research within art institutions (e.g. performance workshops, experimental reading groups and performative discussions). In addition, I use collaboration as a tool for challenging the concept of authority, which is another important element in reflexive methodology.³⁵ I have experienced the dangers and frustrations of this method in many occasions both in my theatre practice, while working with *Architectural Association Inter-professional Studio* (a collective of artists and architects), and throughout my MFA at OCADU. Despite the undeniable challenges, I continue to find the collaborative processes rewarding, unpredictable, and endlessly fascinating.

Other more studio-based strategies ranged from incorporating chance structures as a method for filmmaking, breaking up narrative and drama through repetition and duration, re-filming the screen and collage narrative. Here are brief descriptions of a series of projects that helped me develop these techniques and contributed to my final projects but are not included in the thesis exhibition.

³⁵ Alvesson and Skoldberg, *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 240.

The Mirror: Reshaping and Lighting Film Emulsion

Following my research on the Structural/Materialist filmmakers, especially their use of tactility as an instrument and material to internalize process as content, I took part in a workshop lead by Kevin Rice at *Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto*, 2013. Throughout the workshop I explored the anatomy of a filmstrip through a variety of physical and chemical phenomena that reshaped, destroyed and sculpted the film emulsion, experimenting with techniques such as reticulation, bleach etching and mirror toning. The experience brought up issues concerning both the aesthetic and practical application of these techniques in my thesis project and made me think about the theories I was reading in a different light.



Figure 1. Film stills from *The Mirror: Reshaping and Lighting Film Emulsion* workshop. 2013.

1977 Greedy People

This project also, dealt with formal structures and materiality as process. Using existing film as raw material for transformation, in April 2013, I stretched a 8 mm soft porn film reel from 1977 through a communal workshop space. The filmstrip was then re-shot, using an HD camera, through a magnifying glass as the person holding the camera was being moved through the space while seated on an office chair (emphasizing the role of the video-maker as performer). The footage was then

edited into a vertical scroll, using the sounds of the workshop. This project started as an exploration into anti-climactic and process-driven narratives (soft porn was used as one of the most basic and exaggerated narrative structure with clear climactic peaks). In addition, I was experimenting with the materiality of film in relation to video and the physicality of space (the space of viewing directly dictated the extent to which the narrative could unfold. In other words, the amount of footage we see is directly linked to the size of the room in which the film is installed). One of my main intentions was to incorporate performative structures within the process of making the film and not the viewing experience. I tried to resist the common fetishization of film material by using video technology in a hands-on way.



Figure 2. 1977 *Greedy People*, Photograph of Installed filmstrip in space. 2013.

Melancholia

In this project I focused on exploring techniques of double projection and re-filming the projection screen. I began by using the projection light to manually add optical effects to the projected image. With this technique I added another layer of narrative to the project while giving the video a filmic effect. The image produced by moving a

paper tube in front of the projector resembled an explorer investigating a strange fruit washed up on the shore through a telescope. Here the effect worked well with the underlying narrative of the piece, which was about locating a strange melon bought from a street vendor in Chinatown, Toronto.



Figure 3. *Melancholia*, Still image, from video shot in studio while reshooting the projection screen. 2012.

From A to B and Back Again, Again

As part of a workshop with Berlin based artist Candice Breitz, I made a rotating screen with an adaptable speed to act as an editing machine between two previously made video pieces. At every turn the machine blended separate images into each other creating a mesmerizing aesthetic effect while blurring the narrative lines of each piece into the other. This process made me think of transferring moving-images into printed format. I used the same two video pieces to make an elaborate flipbook that could be viewed in both directions, the A side following a different narrative than B.

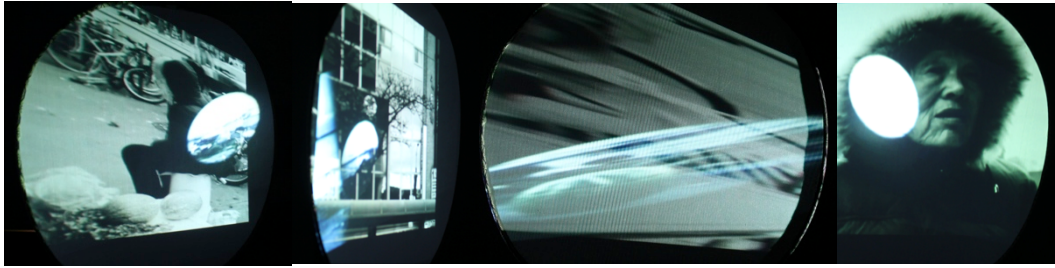


Figure 4. *From A to B and Back Again, Again*, Images from experiment with double projection on a rotating circular screen. 2013.

Knock

In this project I collaborated with Stephen Surlin. We used computer programming to create an interactive audio-visual piece that dealt with ideas of climax in narrative and the active, rather than passive, audience. Talking about dominant cinema Peter Gidal states:

The internal connections between viewer and viewed are based on systems of identification which demand primarily a passive audience, a passive viewer...to be not involved, to get swept along through persuasive emotive devices employed by the film director. This system of cinematic functioning categorically rules out any dialectic.³⁶

In ***Knock***, the viewer is invited to watch a sequence from a well-known television series *True Blood* through a keyhole; the narrative will not progress unless the viewer discovers the correct rhythm of knocking on the door, physically participating in the development of the narrative.



Figure 5. Photograph from *Knock* installation. 2013.

³⁶ Gidal. *Structural Film Anthology*. 3.

The PATH

This project documents Toronto's elaborate underground network PATH³⁷ through a game with three players. Each player was equipped with a video camera, a sound recorder and a notebook and every ten minutes had to document his/her surrounding for one minute using one of the tools. Each player entered the "path" from different locations and could not leave until joined by the other two. This performative process took eight hours. The collected material was then edited into a three channel audio-visual installation. This project was the first collaboration between Ryan Ferko, Faraz Anoushahpour and myself. We have since collaborated on a number of other projects, some of which are included in my thesis exhibition.

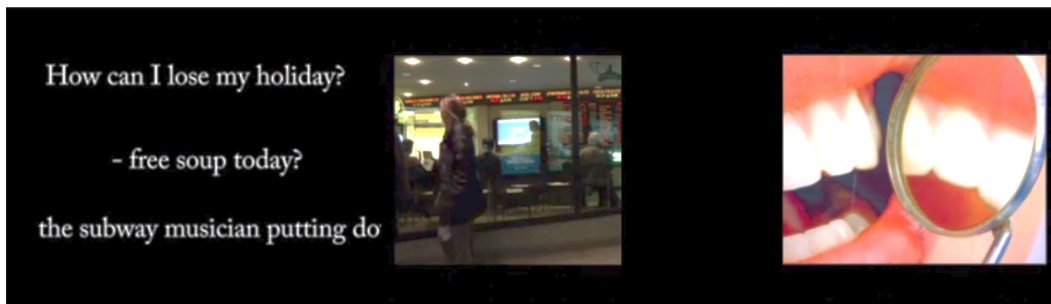


Figure 6. Photograph of three-channel audio-visual installation of PATH. 2013.

³⁷Toronto's PATH system is 29-km underground walking network that links most of the downtown financial district. It is the largest underground shopping complex in the world.

Body of Work

In the next sections, I will discuss the four works in my thesis exhibition: *Still Life (Egg & Glass)*, *Not Even the Weatherman Can Predict Murder*, *There is a Woman Texting in Front of the Dark Horse*, and *ONroute (Searching for Ken Carter)*.

Still Life (Egg & Glass)



Figure 7. Still Life (Egg and glass), Ink on Eggshell, 2013.

Draped in her skin of changing colors, the amorous lady has closed her eyes, draped in her skin, she has closed her eyes, heavy lids of a seductress she has, heavy eyelids . . . unlike fish with the permanent surprise of their always-round eyes, the gaze within is always alert. Better still! She sees far, aims well. Whips lash out, as if flung by the most deft, most dexterous cowboy . . . How can anything escape this repeated embrace? She can crack open the hardest shells, while the mechanics of her breathing continue undisturbed. She will turn red, black, purple, or yellow. She remembers things...recognize things... She is offended by foul-smelling eggs and will throw them back at you violently, turning white with anger.³⁸

³⁸ This paragraph is a collage made up of fragments from Jean Painlevé's text *The Love Life of the Octopus* (1967). The text was cut up and rearranged into a new one to be used as a script.

In February 2011, I was involved in a collaborative video project³⁹ that took Jean Painlevé's text and short documentary film *The Love Life of the Octopus* as a starting point towards making a short experimental video. In February 2013, I revisited this work while developing the idea for *Still Life (Egg & Glass)*. Being my first attempt in exploring the boundaries of narrative form, this work explores a very basic idea of collage as a technique for fragmenting a linear narrative structure. I cut up existing material and re-arranged them into a new sequence, one propelled forward, mostly in my own head, by the idea and the shape of an *egg*. Experimenting with collage narrative is relevant to the concept of narration, as David Bordwell points out: "the viewer still struggles to create a fabula of one sort or another, still treats material as digression, commentary, amplification, or retardation measurable in reference to a more or less determinable story."⁴⁰ During the editing process I was mainly looking for associative and graphic connections between the fragments of audio-visual material that I had gathered. I wanted to explore how far I could push this chain of visual associations and still keep the viewer engaged. The play with narrative in *Still life (Egg & Glass)* operates on a simple level. There are three distinct sets of material weaving in and out of each throughout the film: 1. Fragments of found footage from Jean Painlevé's educational short film *The Forth Dimension*; 2. Sequences from my own collaborative video *The Love Life of the Octopus*; 3. Short sequences of everyday

³⁹ The project was a collaboration between myself, Sophia Jones and Faraz Anoushahpour.

⁴⁰ Bordwell. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. 313.

life in Toronto, gathered over a week.⁴¹ Having established the different sets, I started juxtaposing sequences with similar compositions that were not causally, temporally, or spatially linked in any literal sense. Focusing on Bruce Conner's collage film, *A Movie* (1958), Murray Smith writes:

Conner conjures up surprising and witty connections. Nestling in among these we find a steady yet unpredictable stream of "metaphorical" narrative connections. That is, because we recognize that the shots comprising a sequence not only represent different spaces and times but have been taken from diverse original sources, we realize that there are no literal narrative connections between shots. But we cotton on to Conner's outrageous narrative conjectures.⁴²

In *Still Life (Egg & Glass)*, apart from similar "metaphoric" narrative connections, there is a kind of fleeting drama built using light, darkness and texture without clear narrative peaks or climaxes. Of course there is still a strong sense of continuity driving the work since the sound that glues all the pieces together is highly dramatic, made using a siphon and a space heater in my washroom. *Still Life (Egg & Glass)* is also my first attempt in excluding the conclusion from the narrative structure, one that I will expand further in the following sections. The work is a circle that begins and ends at an arbitrarily chosen point; it is a nightmarish loop perpetuating indefinitely.

⁴¹ With this project in mind, over a week in 2013, I walked around Toronto capturing short sequences of everyday life that I thought could work visually next to the other material.

⁴² Smith, 20.

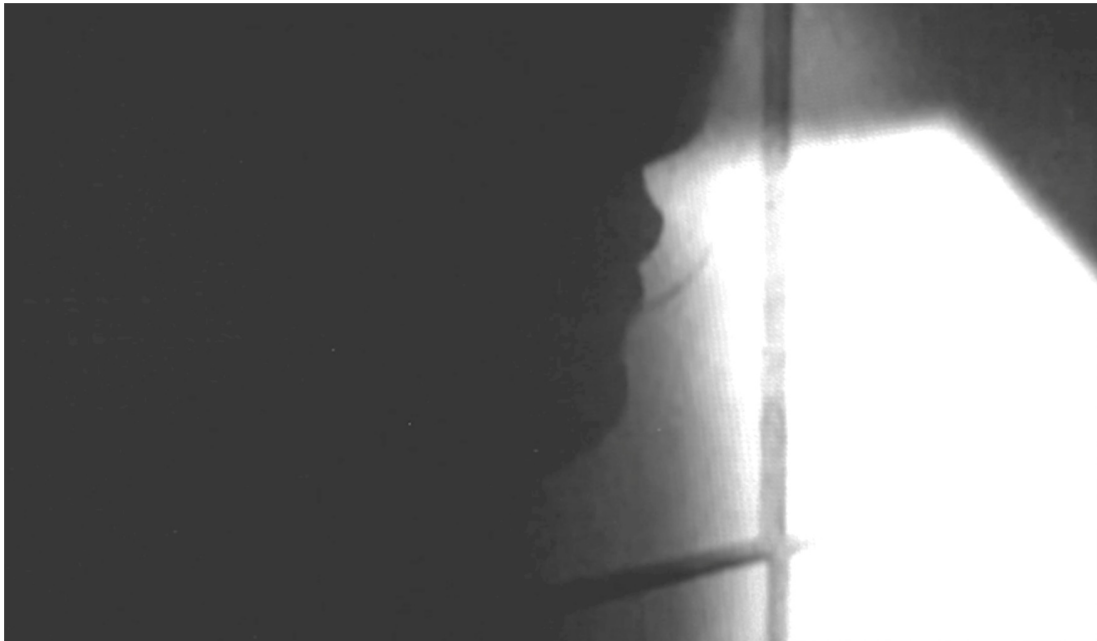


Figure 8. Still Image from *The Love Life of the Octopus*, Freshwater Assassins Collective, 2011.

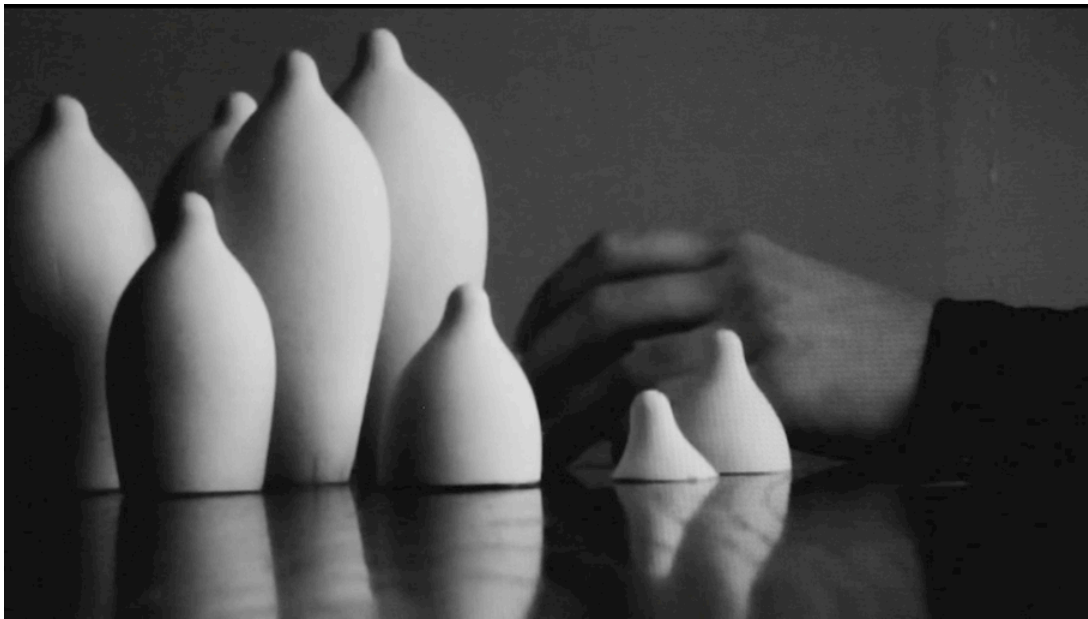


Figure 9. Still Image from footage made while walking around our studio space at OCADU, Sculptures by Anjuli Rahaman. 2013.

Not Even the Weatherman Can Predict Murder

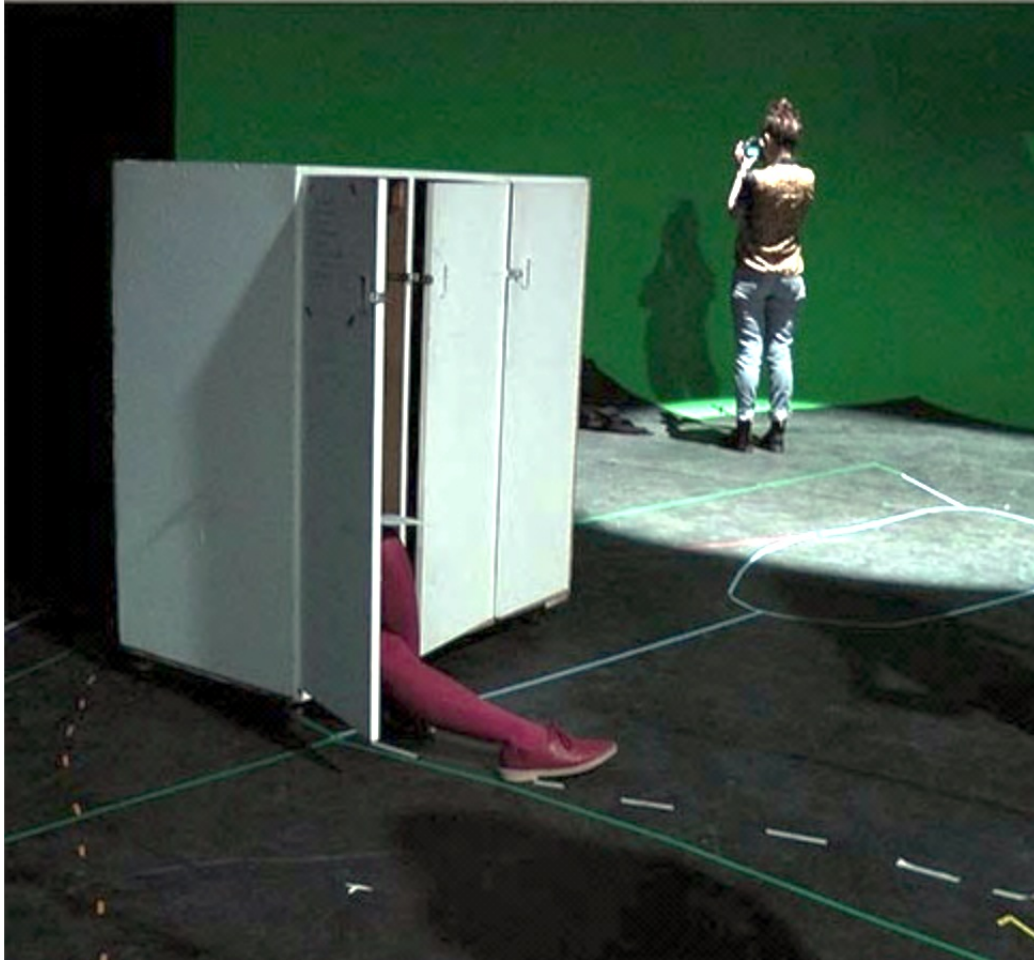


Figure 10. Still image from collaborative film project, Banff Center. 2013.

Forty hours of raw footage, notes and audio recording were produced in a collaborative filmmaking project I participated in titled, “Society is a Workshop,” the project was devised and executed with fifteen other collaborators at the Banff Centre in June 2013.⁴³ We were working towards developing a collaborative method for

⁴³ Summer 2013 Banff Visual Arts Residency Program “Society is a Workshop,” led by Berlin based artist Olivia Plender, focused on collaboration, mutual education and communal living. The program drew from a range of 20th century historical models within the field of visual art, participatory theatre, alternative education, and the commune movement. All examples shared an attempt in critiquing hierarchical institutional structures. Ultimately the aim of the residency was to approach these radical historical models in order to explore whether

filmmaking, one that could upset the hierarchy of production and conflate the roles of actor, director, cinematographer and public into an experimental and open-ended filmmaking process. To achieve this we were primarily focused on participatory performance workshops of the Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal and the experimental films of William Greaves.⁴⁴ In 1968 Greaves challenged the conventions of cinematic production in his film *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*, subverting the hierarchy of film production. As explained by Greaves, the film production was made up of a series of entities that are in “a constant state of disequilibrium.”⁴⁵ While his film seeks to achieve artistic equilibrium within the production, Greaves concedes that, “the final equilibrium *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* is achieved in the editing room, but in achieving it, a new disequilibrium or struggle is pursued between the film and its audiences.”⁴⁶ In the case of ***Not Even the Weatherman can Predict Murder***, after the production phase was over, applying collaborative methods to the editing process proved to be too challenging for the group. The project was therefore terminated with each member of the group owning the rights to the raw material. Following the initial objectives of this project, I continued the search for suitable editing and installation methods that, while remaining true to the experimental, collaborative and open-ended nature of the

these playful collaborative methods still have critical potential today, and to develop new participatory formats that stand in oppositional relationship to the informal and formal institutional structures of the contemporary knowledge economy.

⁴⁴ Boal, Augusto, 1992. Greaves, William. 1968.

⁴⁵ MacDonald, Scott. *Screen Writings: Scripts and Texts by Independent Filmmakers*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1995. 134.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 137.

project, could provide a structure for transforming this vast pool of chaotic material into an engaging account of our process. In dialogue with contemporary discourse surrounding participatory art production, I sought ways to move beyond Greaves' struggle pursued in the editing room, using the material from Banff.

Production Process

During the production phase of *Not Even the Weatherman can Predict Murder*, by treating video as an evolving, dialogic process, we treated the entire production, including its viewing, as a performative act, one that was interested in process and not in a defined product. In addition as a large group, we constantly tackled tricky problems such as shared authorship, collective decision-making and audience participation. The production phase of *Not Even the weatherman can predict murder* can be divided into three stages.

Stage one - a series of performance workshops, familiarizing the group with Augusto Boal's techniques and theories.

Our focus was on Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (1992). The book is a systematization of exercises (which he refers to as physical monologues), games (physical dialogues) and techniques of Image Theatre, designed for both actors and non-actors. He explains: "Theatre of the oppressed is *theater* in its most archaic application of the word. In this usage, all human beings are actors (they act!) and

spectators (they observe!). They are spect-actors.”⁴⁷ We started with Boal’s warm-up exercises, which asked the participants to simultaneously react to each other’s physical presence, the qualities of the space surrounding them, and the objects within the space. Playing with such factors as distance, sound, weight and volume, participants became more aware of their individual agency within the bigger narrative that unfolded. The exercises were then followed by some of Boal’s more composed performance games. These games are designed to highlight one’s ability to observe oneself in action, or what Boal refers to as “seeing oneself in the act of seeing.”⁴⁸ Through playing a series of games the group members are encouraged to understand and use their individual power to challenge any predetermined narrative and alter the course of events. The games were then linked to composed episodes of collective action. These collaboratively staged moments were variations on Boal’s Image Theatre. In Image Theatre, participants use non-verbal expressions and sculpt their own and other peoples’ bodies into static physical images that can depict anything concrete or abstract, such as a feeling, issue, or moment. The group is split into spectators and actors. The Spectators are asked to observe these images and reflect on what they witness. By physically moving the actors around the spectators can also alter or change the image entirely. Boal believed it necessary to practice the separation of objective and subjective analysis: “When viewing images participants are encouraged to be keen to understand the difference between what one sees and

⁴⁷ Boal. 17.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 21.

what one assumes based on how one processes what one sees. This is to disrupt the automatic thought processes of inference and to gain a stronger understanding of the way images can be interpreted.”⁴⁹

Stage two - finalizing a strategy for applying Boal’s techniques of participatory theatre to the filmmaking process.

The circular process of action followed by reflection encouraged by Boal was gradually internalized as a working method within the group. We proposed variations on some of Boal’s theatre methods that could work as a framework for our collaborative film project. During group discussions, different communication devices and conversation techniques were used to ensure that all voices were heard. What I found most valuable and most challenging was the fact that this chain of action and reaction had to resolve itself from within. The absence of an outside authoritative voice resulted in a strenuous investment in what at times felt like an everlasting game of intellectual wrestling. What followed was hours of heated discussion interrupted by a series of outbursts that ultimately resulted in a number of participants leaving the group and abandoning the experiment. The frustration caused by this confusing experience started manifesting itself within the group as different forms of resistance.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 86.

The discussions that followed were more directly related to the ideas of “aesthetic quality” and “shock” found discussed in Clair Bishop’s writing on relational practices and social collaborative work and ultimately very crucial in the development of our project. Bishop argues that “shock, discomfort, or frustration—along with absurdity, eccentricity, doubt or sheer pleasure—are crucial to a work’s aesthetic and political impact.”⁵⁰ She also warns about the dangers of neglecting the aesthetic values of collaborative art:

Without engaging with the ‘aesthetic thing’, the grey areas of slippery meaning are cleaned, contained and kept in place—subordinated to the statistical affirmation of use values and direct effects. Without the possibility of blurring and rupture, there is merely a platonic assignment of bodies to their good ‘communal’ place—an ethical regime of images, rather than an aesthetic regime of art.⁵¹

We finally decided to build the filming approach around Boal’s game of shifting roles. During the game, a participant can either choose to be an Actor (initiating a new movement) or a Copier (copying an existing movement). Participants are free to swap roles in any given moment. Any decision will inevitably change the dynamic of the group and the direction of the action. In Boal’s methods the ability to change roles within the narrative that is being composed provides a possibility for challenging the truth that is being constructed.⁵² We began expanding the two categories of “actor” and “copier” to include a more diverse range of positions,

⁵⁰ Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso. 2012. 26.

⁵¹ Ibid. 34.

⁵² A good example would be Boal’s “Performance game,” explained in detail in his book *Games for Actors and Non-actors*. Boal. 243.

incorporating ones that related more closely to a filmmaking exercise. As an example, during the filming day, members occupying the role of the “observer” had access to a range of cameras and sound equipment and could record the event in any way they chose while still having the option of abandoning their role and adapting other positions.



Figure 8. Part of notes produced during the project, showing the groups effort to come up with more roles for the individual involved in the game. 2013.

What follows is a script based on one of our discussion sessions. The text combines all the sixteen voices into a single “I” and was later used as material during the filming of *Not Even the Weatherman can Predict Murder*. It touches on many of the topics that we grappled with, including questions around our expectation of the collaborative film project as a whole, the role of the Banff Centre’s professional

sound and camera operators as part of the project, concerns about collective editing and post-production procedures, issues of collective authorship, ways for breaking up eight hours of filming into manageable sections in terms of plot and activities, and, finally, thoughts around the use of props, costumes, sound equipment and cameras.

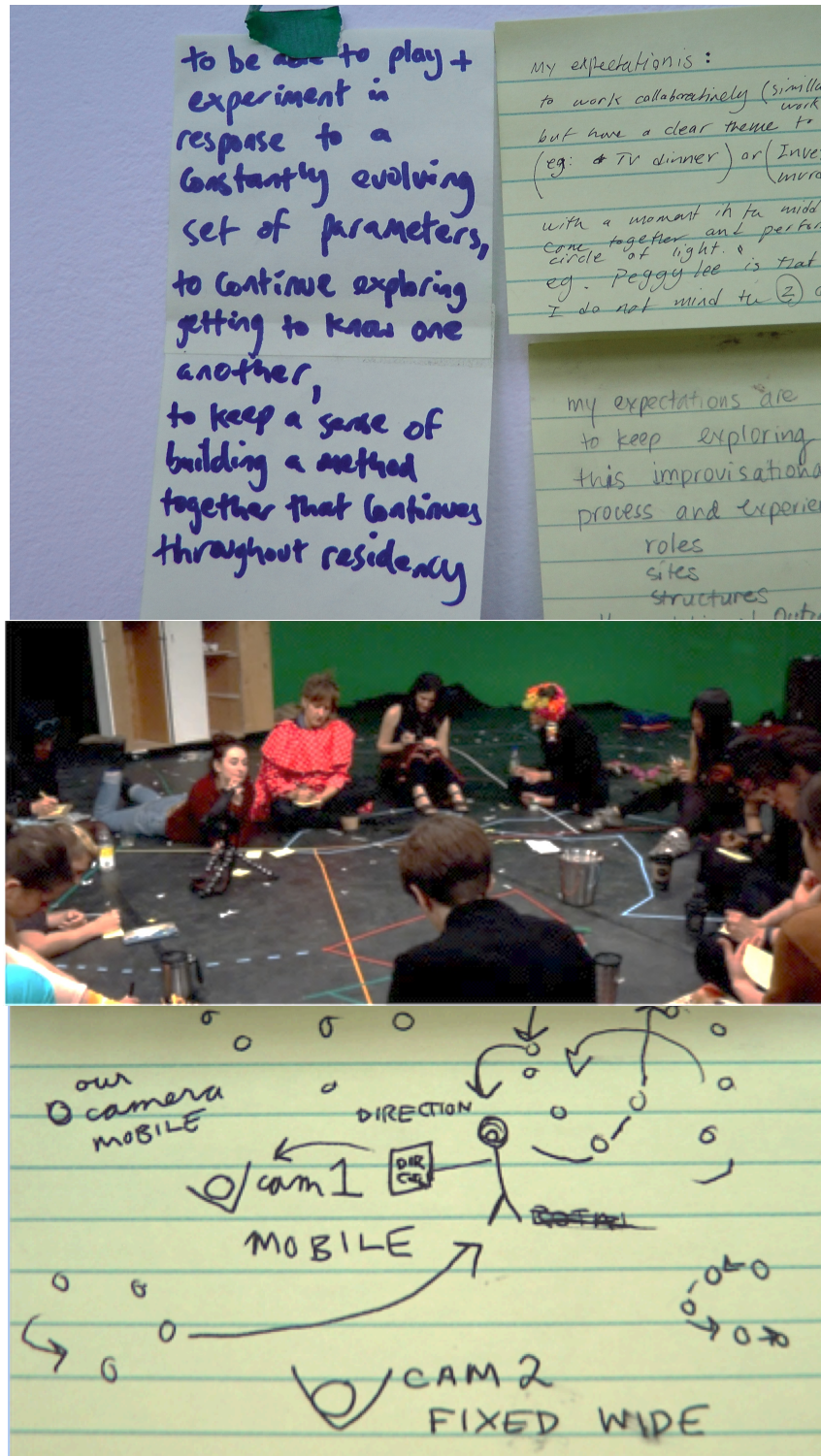


Figure 12. Notes and drawings produced during discussions in the TV studio. 2013.

Script

You say you don't know much about filmmaking and because you value craft, you think the people who have been trained in the craft of filmmaking should be listened to. You're interested in embodying our structure in a physical way. You think the process needs to be included in the actual footage. It's important to you that when the observer comes to the work they can appreciate the process.

What do we expect to get from this?

I have no expectations from the final product *but* I think it would be a shame if reflexivity were not made evident. I expect people to watch the footage, I expect viewers, and I expect a product. I imagine us finding a way to document our collaboration and the complexities of our position in the institution. I really hope we can negotiate the subjective and collaborative needs of the group. Of course there won't be time to edit this week. *but...* actually editing is the antithesis of improvisational and collaborative structures, I mean you're fixing it all aren't you? Mastering it, and the computer screen by nature doesn't really permit more than two people in front of it and it would be crazy for more than one person to have the mouse... *but* maybe we can devise a mode of collective cutting. Ah, and just to add, (squirming a little) maybe I'm being paranoid... *but* knowing that the footage could be manipulated in any way by someone in the future, I think it will affect how I perform in the studio. I'd also have to get hold of all the editing software and I'd have to learn how to use it... *if* I was going to be an editor... *but* I think we should try and make a film. I don't want to be an editor.

How should we break it down?

She doesn't understand what Olivia meant by that TV Dinner thing... But one thing is certain; she's absolutely and wholeheartedly against bringing the committees into this, no way Jose! Nope! She thinks the room is being constructed by its contributions. She feels curious about the reality of

how we use our environments and then she gets excited about the potential held in switching positions...

But *then* he asks her if she's ready to order and so she breaks off for a moment before picking up the notion of switching at increasingly lengthy intervals between the following roles: Set Designer (she's talking about Props, Lighting, Costume), Sound designer (she'd like abstract vocals, invented instruments and live sound from performers would be cool, but she isn't so keen on using words), Camera Operator (she thinks it could be with different cameras and different mounts), Performer and Observer. And how would it work? She wonders. She thinks she'd like it if someone would finger the inside of a grapefruit to accompany the way she moves her hips. She thinks it would open up a space for feedback between disembodied and re-embodied sound. She thinks it might be cool to explore some sort of live lip-syncing too.

Then this leads her to consider the idea that everyone might bring an object to the studio, the object could be used as a prop by performers, set designers and sound designers, the objects would contribute to the production of the space. But then she thinks that one object each might not be enough, she's worried that if she brings a tomato and it gets squished right away then that will be the end of her object for the whole day. She counters that a squished tomato *could* be useful too, but then she ponders that eventually it would become redundant, at the same time she knows it won't disappear but then she feels that it could limit potential exploration of the material if there is only one but she won't quit at musing over whether there could be multiples even while she thinks this seems decadent, because when she was in the conference room didn't she wish for a reduction of the number of objects...? But then she contradicts herself again and it seems like she isn't going to work this out now and there's evidently little point in continuing to go over and over this when she still isn't certain that any of it will actually happen...

She suddenly realizes that in addition to all the other positions mentioned there should also be the

option of leaving the room entirely. And then he asks if she is enjoying her food and she quickly looks up to say, "Yes, thanks."

She is satisfied that the starting point for all this can be the room because it's already so loaded, and then of course there's the contributions, the objects - she'd like to see them as a kind of palette to draw upon, oh! And what about costumes? She wonders if we should dress as stage hands in black but maybe that's a bit arty. Anyway, all that stuff would be the material and over the course of the day construction of the work would occur through an ever expanding structure of contributions.

She thinks that the changing of roles should be quite rapid at first but becoming more drawn out later on. She compares it to a theatre game called Freeze, she compares it to a hockey game, a tag system where you touch the person you will switch with.

Then she goes back to thinking about postproduction and starts to wonder if it might be interesting for everyone to take some of the footage and individually narrate it or somehow add words after the event, maybe do an Adam Curtis on it. She thinks exploring forms of looking and listening are important and that how others perceive her and how she negotiates that perception, that narration, it seems important, she doesn't know how people look at her, she can't... but she knows that she is nothing without that look and without society.

And then she sees him hovering nearby and so she breaks off and turns to him and he asks her if she is "still working at her salad." And she answers, "Yes, she is still working at it." And she ponders on when the film will end and how she will know it's finished?

Cameras

We absolutely don't want the camera people... although we do wonder if it *could* be interesting if they are there because it would reflect the discussion around "labor" so far... but what is the point in performing

that? AND why image? We demand. Why not sound people? Why not professional actors or dancers? Why only the professional camera people, why give this extra power to the camera, of all things! Isn't it already powerful enough?

Then we talk about the cameras themselves and we say we'd like it if different cameras had different positions so one camera might be static, on a tripod for example. Then we counter that it might be more interesting if the user was free to decide if they wanted to move or not move the camera because all the other positions had that freedom and anyway the movement would already be dictated to an extent by the nature of the technology itself, so, take the extreme sports camera, it's very light so it can be worn on the head as a POV shot or attached to a stick to become a birds eye view and this opens up the potential for the camera operator to be a character or a dancer too and to occupy different perspectives within the role. But maybe this was what we meant before anyway... and wouldn't it be cool to have a CCTV camera angle too? What if one camera had a macro lens so it was only doing close-ups?

We feel like we really need to say our thing and then afterwards we feel relief because we said our thing, and we feel a buzzy feeling if we imagine other people supported it. We wonder what would happen if we made more gaps between our broadcasts and listened more instead, we *keep* wondering if it might be interesting to occupy other positions.

Stage three - an eight-hour performance, based on the agreed structure, in The Banff Centre's Professional TV studio.

During the performance, building on previous exercises, we reacted to our new physical surrounding while constantly switching roles, this time also recording the process using cameras. No participant could demand an end to the process; the end had to be achieved organically and as a result of the interplay between the forces developing within the space. In addition, there were several plot lines that we could follow or react to.⁵³ These loose narrative lines provided a preliminary plan for dividing up the eight hours we had in the TV studio. More importantly, it helped us communicate more clearly to the external sound and camera operators that joined our project for that day. In terms of the overall structure, the *breaks* we got during the day were to be the only composed theatrical moments, with the cameras documenting the action from a fixed position. Apart from two professional cameras and two professional sound operators that constantly recorded the process, as a group we had five other cameras to work with. During filming, two DSLR cameras and a POV Extreme Sports camera were being passed around as members swapped roles. We used a webcam to create a diary zone; members could leave the main action and go to this zone to reflect on the action that was unfolding at any moment. There was

⁵³ These plot-lines were finalized previously, during discussions, and included: a murder mystery theme in conversation with Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*. The entire script of *The Shining* was brought to the studio as a prop and was being read from occasionally. A group performance of Peggy Lee's song "Is that all there is" formed another section. A reenactment of a thunderstorm based on a nineteenth century text on how to perform theatrical tricks formed another block of activities. A picnic under a spotlight, warm up exercises and reading from our own script made up the other units. Some of the themes seemed more arbitrary while others reflected directly on our process.

also a fixed CCTV recording of our entire process. After eight hours the production process was finally brought to an end when one of the participants went to the head of Banff Center's media department and asked her to come to the studio and demand an end to our game, this event was documented as well.

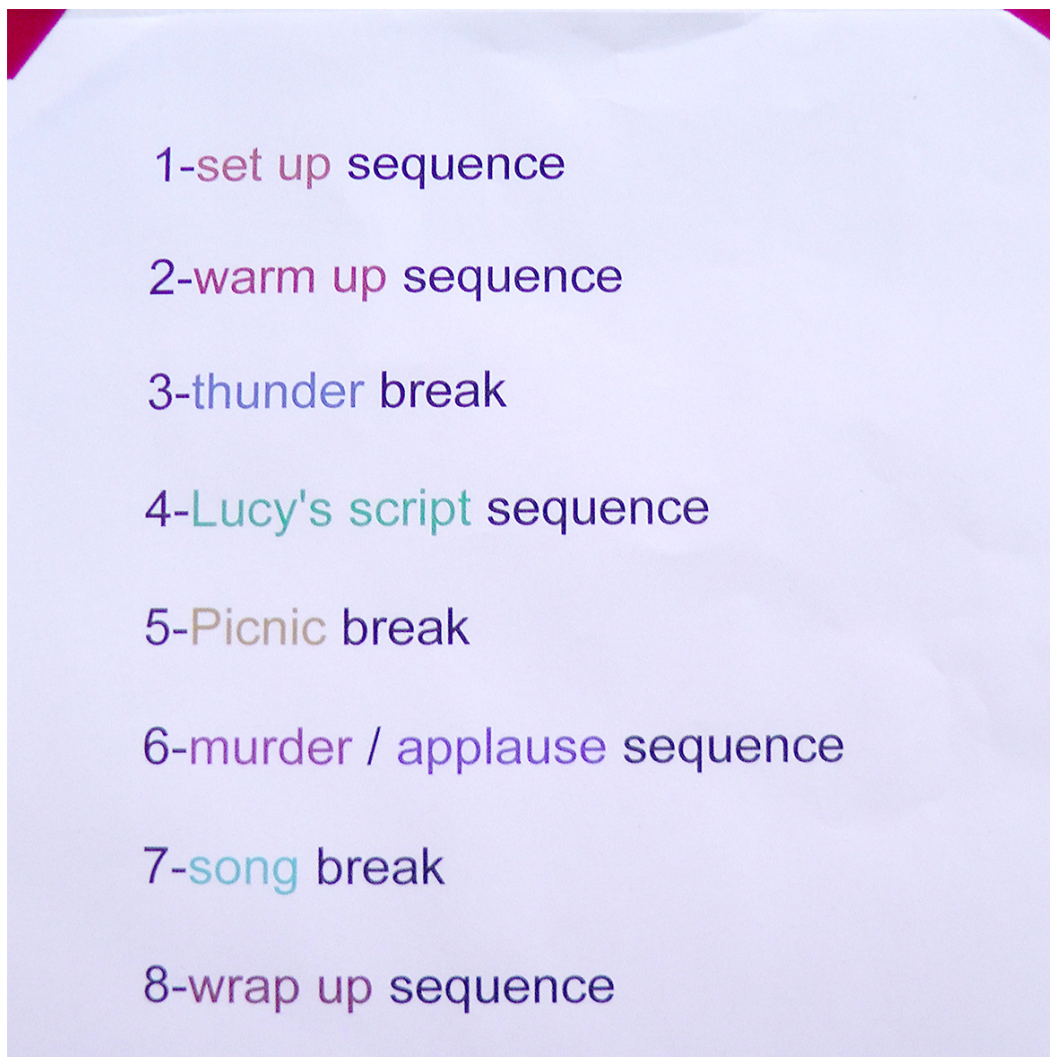


Figure 13. A preliminary plan, devised by the group, for dividing up the eight-hour performance in the TV studio. 2013.

Post-Production Process

Due to the scale of this collaboration and the complexity of the methods involved, editing ***Not Even the Weatherman can Predict Murder*** has been by far the most challenging part of my Thesis Project. Through a number of different iterations I came up with a range of formal structures to arrange the vast pool of chaotic material into a single channel video installation. Because the footage is so laden with content, I was looking for structural methods (symmetry, repetition, inversion, doubling, etc.) to create an aesthetic complexity and avoid becoming overtly didactic. Apart from *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968), I looked at Jean Luc Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962), Stephen Dowskin's *Central Bazaar* (1976) and Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1967) for formal inspiration.

Throughout the video, I use episodes as a tool to break up the narrative and rearrange the material, creating a serial rather than a causal relation between the fragments. Long titles, like chapter headings at the beginning of each episode ; tell the viewer more or less what is going to happen. In ***Not Even the Weatherman Can Predict Murder***, the cameras act as narrators, choosing to show certain aspects of events and characters, and in doing so fragmenting the single unified point of view. In the final version of the video I emphasize this point by editing footage from different cameras together in a single sequence.

Some of the repetition and loops used in the editing also highlights the fact that while the characters are constantly evolved in some kind of action, none of their

activities ever lead to any conclusions, all remains suspended, tense, and sometimes desperate. In addition I occasionally used texts, quotations or excerpts from the group's process of research and design in the video to bring the viewer's attention back to some of the ideas and material that we were engaging with during the production phase of the project.

In his review of Stephen Dwoskin's *Central Bazaar* (1976), a film reduced to 153 minutes from fifteen hours of footage of a group of volunteers improvising and acting out their erotic fantasies over two weeks in the director's apartment, Jonas Mekas writes:

One will ask, perhaps, on walking out, why was this film made, what is it, what is its information, what are its lessons. I don't know, and Dwoskin doesn't tell us either. I only know that what I see is unique, is difficult to make, and I don't think Dwoskin himself knows why he made it. But he had to make it.⁵⁴

Throughout different stages of *Not Even the Weatherman Can Predict Murder* I was often faced with similar questions, why should this work be made, why can't I be content with having experienced the process and not struggle so much to turn it into a watchable piece? I had the luxury of being part of a unique and valuable creative process and I wanted to be able to share that experience with a larger audience in some capacity.

⁵⁴ Mekas, Jonas. "Central Bazaar." *Luxonline*. 1977. < [http://www.luxonline.org.uk/articles/soho_news\(1\).html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/articles/soho_news(1).html)>. Accessed 15 Dec 2013.



Figure 14. Still image from POV Extreme Sports camera footage. 2013.



Figure 15. A member of the group using the *diary zone*. Still image from web-cam footage. 2013.

There is a Woman Texting in Front of the Dark Horse



Figure 16. Room 8309, Super8 Hotel, 222 Spadina Avenue, Toronto. 2013

As interpretive beings we constantly seek meaning and where none can be found we are sure to insert it with paranoid insistence. Each image connects to the next as if moving towards an irrevocable catastrophe. Reality is breaking down.

You mustn't close your eyes.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Curran, Michael. "Insomnia X." *Luxonline*. 2005. < [http://www.luxonline.org.uk/tours/insomnia_x\(5\).html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/tours/insomnia_x(5).html)>. Accessed 22 Feb 2014.

There is a Woman Texting in Front of the Dark Horse is the result of a week-long project that happened through a workshop with the Berlin-based video artist Nina Koennemann in November 2013, jointly organized by University of Toronto, the Goethe Institute and OCADU. Nina's hotel room became the site of the project, although initially starting with a much larger group the project soon became a collaboration between myself, Ryan Ferko, Faraz Anoushahpour and Nina Koennemann. The idea was simple: we were to observe the city's inhabitants move to and fro, using different viewpoints. We decided to use four cameras to follow a singular action. The window of room 8309 at Super 8 Hotel on Spadina Ave perfectly framed an unexceptional view, an intersection with a corner coffee shop. This site became the focus of our investigation. In "Double Trouble: On Film, Fiction and Narrative," Smith points out:

Since the rise of location shooting, in the aftermath of World War II, many fiction films are shot, wholly or partly, in actual locations rather than studio sets, allowing filmmakers to embed their fictional representations within nonfictional, photographic representations of actual locations. The degree to which filmmakers seek to control what happens in these spaces beyond the staged, fictional action varies greatly.⁵⁶

In our project the unpredictable nature of location shooting served as the guiding narrative of the work.

⁵⁶ Smith, 12.



Figure 17. View from Room 8309, Super8 Hotel, 222 Spadina Avenue, Toronto. 2013

Over several days we used the site and executed a number of quick experiments to come up with the most effective way of using multiple viewpoints for following a simple action. The group was usually split in two parts: one observing the site from the hotel room with cameras looking down at the scene, the other filming on street level. The observers had to pick interesting activities and let the other group know, using mobile phones. The members on the street had to locate the action and start filming until they came across another situation that they found interesting and perform the process in reverse. To test out slightly different structures we performed a series of sketches in the same location with all four members on the street level. Using the 510 Streetcar between College and Queen, we used a similar structure for filming. Instead of being split between the hotel and the street, one group was stationed at the streetcar stop, the other in the streetcar.



Figure 18. Still images from the streetcar test, 2013.



Figure 19. Still Images from *There is a Woman Texting in Front of the Dark Horse*, 2013.

Each filming session usually took one to two hours, after which the group reunited in the hotel room and edited the material to see if the footage could be edited into a sequence with enough narrative tension. For the final piece, we returned to the main site and performed the same process again but this time recorded the telephone conversation between the two groups. This thirty-minute conversation was then used as a structure for editing the piece. Whenever there is dialogue, related footage is shown but the gaps between spoken words are filled with disparate ambient sound and footage from the street. While the conversation follows a linear structure, the way the sequences are put together fragments this linear progression, distracting the viewer's attention from what is essentially a simple and coherent narrative structure. A frantic telephone dialogue seems to direct the

camera's gaze as a sense of real-time surveillance is upset by jump cuts and repeated moments, creating a narrative with simultaneously amusing and sinister undertones.

In most of the films that we watched as research for this project, including John Smith's *Girl Chewing Gum* (1976) and Hans Schuegl's *Hernals* (1967), there is always an element within the film, formal or narrative, that creates a sense of constructed reality, or what Smith refers to as "a tension between history and fiction."⁵⁷ In *There is a Woman Texting in Front of the Dark Horse*, this was achieved through the presentation of the work. We showed the video as a site-specific installation. The audience was invited up to room 8309. The curtains were then opened in a theatrical manner revealing the site. As the phone conversation started playing in the background, the audience slowly started approaching the window to locate what the voices were referring to. After a couple of minutes the TV was switched on and the curtains drawn. The video started playing using the same location and the same voiceover. The transition from looking out the window to looking at the same scene on the screen created a momentary loss of reality, the audience started wondering whether they were witnessing an elaborate interactive performance rather than a documentary slice of street life. We treated the screening event as an opportunity to take advantage of having the audience at the site of the video's production and use our role as storytellers to tease the audience about the exact status of our representations.

⁵⁷ Smith, 16.



Figure 20. Audience looking out the window from Room 8309, Super8 Hotel.

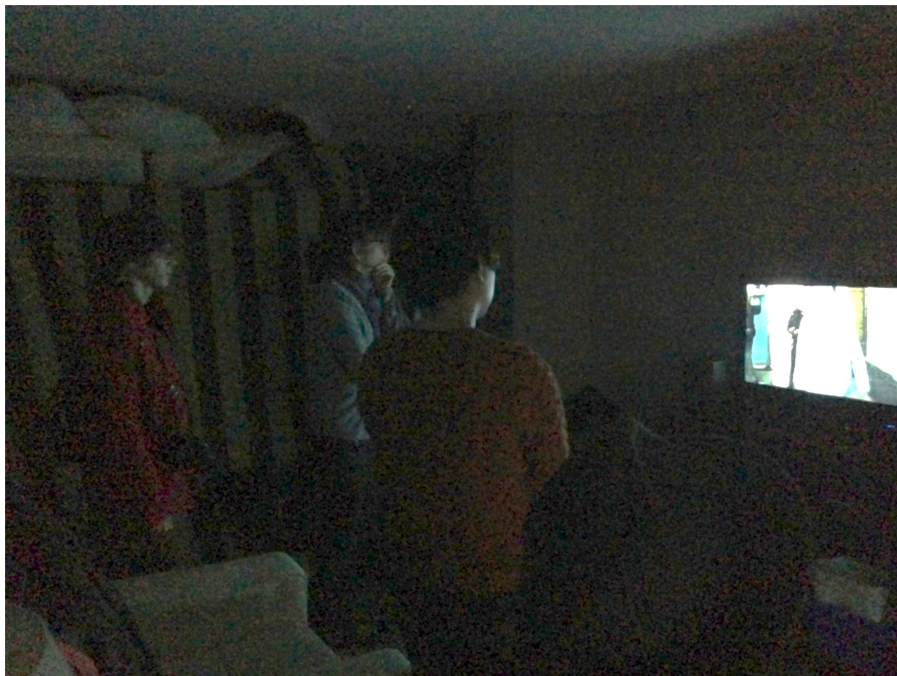


Figure 21. Audience watching the film on the screen in Room 8309, Super8 Hotel.

ONroute (Searching for Ken Carter)

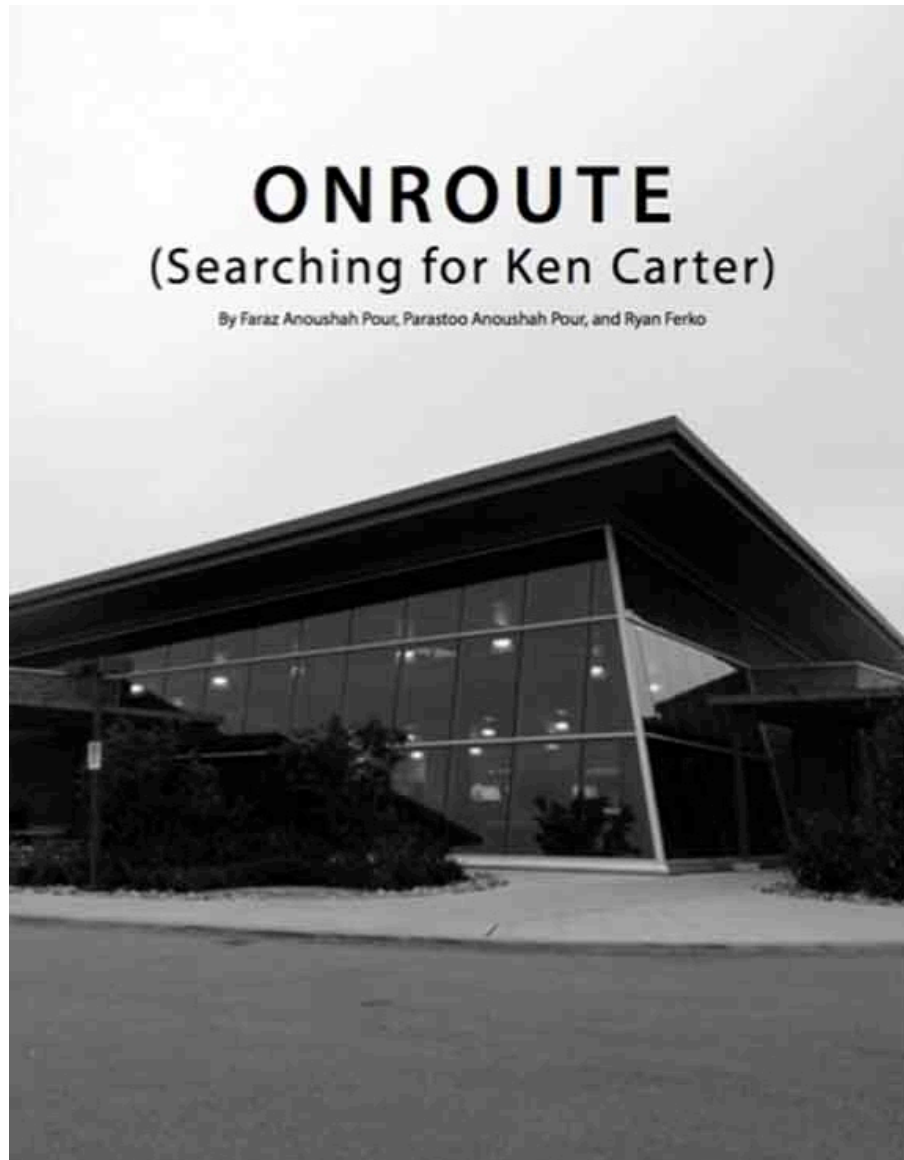


Figure 22. Poster for *ONroute (Searching for Ken Carter)*.

*On the five-and-a-half hour drive between Toronto and Montreal, five nearly identical highway rest stops seem to offer little excitement on a monotonous journey. Shot over a 24-hour period, **ONroute (Searching for Ken Carter)** embarked on that journey, blurring moments of narrative tension with the banal reality of Highway 401 and its ONroute rest stops.*

ONroute(Searching for Ken Carter) deals with ideas and techniques around narrative continuity in audio-visual work while exploring the effects of collaborative filmmaking in the narrational process.⁵⁸ Throughout the project, narrative is considered and analyzed as a process: “the activity of selecting, arranging and rendering story material in order to achieve specific time bound effects on the perceiver.”⁵⁹ The project was devised, filmed and edited by Ryan Ferko, Faraz Anoushahpour and myself. It began as a 24-hour performative audio-visual experiment that used highway 401 as a narrative structure and the rest stops as episodic film locations. The structural elements⁶⁰ of the project were intended as methodological devices to guarantee a visually resolved end-product that we found tended to be missing from similar collaborative projects. The 24-hour time constraint created both a sense of urgency that helped the execution of the project and a parallel reality that added a reflexive element to the film’s narrative.

Pre-Production

Unlike the conventions of my previous discipline, Theatre Design, where one usually begins with the text (a play) in order to move towards materializing a narrative in scenographic space, in *ONroute (Searching for Ken Carter)* we set out to perform

⁵⁸ As a collaborative project this film deals with several other issues (e.g. infrastructures, non-places, cinematic time, etc.). Due to IAMMD Thesis requirements, I have chosen to exclude this material and focus on the narrative structure of the film.

⁵⁹ In *Narration in the Fiction Film*, David Bordwell describes three different ways of considering narrative in film: as representation, as structure and as process. Bordwell, xiii.

⁶⁰ The film was to be shot over 24 hours, edited on the road and screened upon our arrival in Montreal.

this process in reverse. The script was to be the “film transcribed,” the final outcome. Prior to the production phase, a mood-board was composed to help us develop a common language, and use our time and resources most efficiently. We layered this document with several different sets of research material, each forming a potential plot line for the film. Apart from working within the linear structure of Highway 401, the physical space of the car and the familiar trope of the road movie were amongst other established frameworks that we researched. The finished mood-board functioned as a map, offering a number of potential trajectories for executing the project. We began with studying the rest stops in terms of their regional context, architectural design, local history and the amenities they offered, building up the foundation of our mood-board.



Figure 23. Pre-production phase, developing the mood –board.

Intending to use the Road Movie as our framing narrative, for the second phase of the research we moved beyond the functional and spatial qualities of the rest stops and explored their potential as film locations. We treated each stop as a semi-independent narrative block for investigating a set of ideas based on genre-specific filming techniques and structures. These included direct references to scenes from other road movies⁶¹ as well as specific examples of filming and editing used for creating narrative continuity.⁶² The final layer followed the story of Ken Carter and his notorious car stunt in 1979. We discovered that in Morrisburg, Ontario, a ten-minute drive from the last ONroute stop before Montreal, Carter attempted to jump the St. Lawrence River with his car and land in America. We immediately located the site of the jump and added it to our production-map. YouTube clips, interviews and fragments of film about Carter's project were later used as unresolved clues throughout the film. Although Ken Carter's story is not guiding the plot in any straightforward fashion, its inclusion adds another reflexive layer to the film's structure as it emphasizes the conscious and dynamic act of narrative construction that shaped an important part of our process. The tragic tale of Ken Carter became a perfect metaphor for the actual absurdity of our quest to make a fiction film without a plot.

⁶¹ E.g. Lucrecia Martel's *The Headless Woman* (2008), Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger than Paradise* (1984) and *The limits of Control* (2009) and Christopher Petit's *Radio On* (1979).

⁶² We used some of the more established of these cinematic strategies in order to create a sense of narrative continuity, to name a few: Alfred Hitchcock's MacGuffins, Yasujiro Ozu's Pillow Shots, and long tracking shots often used by directors such as Bella Tarr, Michelangelo Antonioni, Andrei Tarkovsky and Jean Luc Godard.

Production

In *ONroute (Searching for Ken Carter)* the shooting of the film is a central part of the film's narrational process since large units of the plot are predominantly formed around conventional cinematic camera movements (e.g. pan, tilt, track, hand-held). In other words, the operation of filming directly drives the fiction. In this section I will focus on three central elements of the narrative—the highway, the car and the ONroute rest stops— in order to talk about their relationship with the camera and the filming process.

The way the highway is represented gradually changes throughout the journey. The camera enters the highway as the sun is rising. Sensational scenes of bridges and buildings combined with Alice Coltrane's *Galaxy in Turiya*, create an overwhelming effect usually associated with a journey's beginning in conventional road movies. Using techniques that could challenge this dramatized sense of departure and arrival, the camera gradually abandons the more traditional ideas of perspective in relation to the road⁶³ and floats between repetitive images of the landscape, captured through windows and mirrors. While the drive along the 401 is linear, starting from Toronto and heading to Montreal, the route in the film slowly drifts free of any such destination-driven order as it employs different visual ways of translating the experience of the road.

⁶³ Mansoor, Jaleh. "Ed Ruscha: 'One Way Street'," *October* 111 (2005): 129.

Throughout *ONroute (Searching for Ken Carter)*, the car functions as a frame for the majority of the scenes, mediating the viewer's perceptual field. The photographic works of Ed Ruscha, such as *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* (1963) and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), got us thinking further about the car's inherent mobilizing power within a narrative and the spatial perspectives it could offer. As Jaleh Mansoor states: "In Ruscha's work, the car becomes the apparatus through which visual presentation is enacted and performed."⁶⁴ During the filming of *ONroute* we treated the car in much the same way to generate other means of framing experience and organizing the banality of the 401 route.

The rest stops epitomize generic, functional and public architecture. Their sole function is to provide a selection of predictable services. They are spaces that one passes through on the way to other places. Stripped of any specific history, in their banality they possess an almost universal quality that renders them "familiar" to the contemporary audience member. We were interested to see how the camera movement could alter the way the viewer experiences these familiar places, drawing attention to the ways in which the captured image splits the audience's attention as they try to figure out what is in front of the camera and how the camera movement changes the view. Often sequences were staged with no fixed idea of how they could come together in editing; therefore each scene had to maintain a degree of independence.

⁶⁴Mansoor, 134.



Figure 24. pre-production sketch devising camera movements based on the locations and buildings.

Post-Production

During post-production, we gradually abandoned the linear process of the film's production and started manipulating the pro-filmic event for the sole purpose of narration. Through editing and sound we began playing with several narrative possibilities, shifting gears between different modes, styles and genres. What created continuity in the film was our approach to narrative organization. In his book *Narration in The Fiction Film*, David Bordwell points to a similar method used in Jean-Luc-Godard's early films and calls the process "Conscious Narration."⁶⁵ Here the director becomes the sole narrator of the film in the way he or she combines a set of seemingly disparate material to create a whole. A similar method was used in *ONroute (Searching for Ken Carter)*, but in this collaborative process the singular image of the narrator multiplied into three individual voices, each interested in specific aspects of the project but making every decision collectively. In order to be able to proceed with this challenging process, we created a second map based on our first mood-board. At this stage, instead of drawing on outside sources, we referenced sequences from our own footage, interweaving them with the different sets of research material⁶⁶ gathered previously to create possible narrative arcs for the film. We used montage techniques as a way to create temporal and spatial connection

⁶⁵ Bordwell. 33.

⁶⁶ Throughout the narration will be scattered images and sounds that belong to the same definitive set of research material (spatial qualities, filmic techniques and Ken Carter's story). Members of each set are distributed across the film sometimes in conventional ways, sometimes acting as punctuation for a sequence, other times purely as disruptions.

between the locations and actions, and to provide a sense of coherence to the rather incoherent segments of performance. The same logic is applied to the use of sound. Musical motifs, ambient sound and genre-specific sound effects are replayed in various parts of the film either to enforce a sense of coherence or to act as disruptions. The act of selection at the sound-mixing stage reinforced the sense of montage as a final arrangement of materials in different degree of rawness.



Figure 25. second map post production for collaborative editing.

Similar to other elements, a character becomes a loose construct, stitched out of cues that can be appropriated to various narrational modes. In *ONroute (Searching for Ken Carter)*, the three characters react to the specific requirements of each sequence rather than act out a plot. They have a reverse function in relation to the plot: rather than reveal details of the storyline through the complexity of their persona/role, they expose the gaps in the plot and therefore open up the structure of the film for active interrogation from the audience.



Figure 26. three diferent characters at different points of the film.

ONroute (Searching for Ken Carter) resists narrative comprehension and remains obscure by constantly creating obstacles at the most fundamental levels of storytelling and spectator engagement. There are sequences oversaturated with clues separated by long scenes that supply none. The audience must make sense of disparate information under the pressure of time. The plot is not organized towards a conclusion but around narrative cause and effect in order to resist creating a clear sense of beginning, middle and end. In resisting the idea of the plot's "progression" towards a final reveal, everything becomes moments of digression. The viewer is asked to accept the film as an ensemble of detours, refusing to answer to demands of a conventional narrative arc. The method of narrative organization is playful; it fragments its material through the use of sound and image, misleading the viewer about the film's overall structure by constantly collapsing pieces together from different film genres, casually insisting on its incompleteness and spontaneity as a preserved sign of process. Despite following a structural strategy at some level, the project is not concerned with searching for the "non-narrative," as was the project of some Structural/Materialist filmmakers.

As a group we searched for unusual narrative strategies that could accommodate a seemingly arbitrary combination of techniques based on different genre conventions and classical norms of narration. This project was an exercise in ways of mixing established narration modes in disorienting ways. Therefore, the result is fundamentally narrative since the viewer still struggles to create a more or

less determinable story. The ultimate goal was to be able to tease the spectator with an eerie totality, provoking a search for a pattern that will never be confirmed.



Figure 27. Photograph of the group while editing the film on the road.

Conclusion

It seems contradictory to conclude, in writing, a thesis project that sets out to challenge linear narrative structures by constantly avoiding clearly defined beginnings or endings. Over the past year and a half I investigated notions of narrativity and drama using a combination of collaborative, structural and tactile processes. When I started merging these techniques I was not concerned with coming out of the process with a clearly defined aesthetic style. I was more interested in defining the specifics of my process. Having produced several video pieces and gone through a number of different collaborations, I feel confident that I have formed a way of working that could be applied to different mediums and projects to follow up and expand upon in future investigations.

In addition, throughout my MFA at OCADU, I have worked closely with Ryan Ferko and Faraz Anoushahpour towards solidifying specific structures and methods for collaboration. Coming from different disciplines (theatre, history, and architecture, respectively) and engaging in individual critical investigations parallel to our group practice, as a collective we have now formed a distinct, interdisciplinary set of skills from which to tackle complex collaborative projects. As an example, our upcoming project titled *Narrating Sites In Transit(ion)*, came out of our collaborative work and is taking place at Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik (ZKU) Berlin, Germany in September 2014.

Working on my thesis project has also taught me the importance of maintaining a balance between my individual practice and the collaborative one as I experienced the ways in which the two can feed into and enrich each other. Therefore, aside from developing proposals for collaborative, site-specific projects, I have been submitting individual work to experimental film and video festivals both locally and internationally. My thesis work *Still Life (Egg & Glass)* will be part of the Images Festival, playing on April 14, 2014.

My experience over the past two years has provided critical insight into both the strong potential, and also the possible shortcomings of creative research that is interdisciplinary, collaborative, and practice-based. Incorporating collaboration has been a compelling strategy as it has exponentially widened the range of issues discussed within the context of each project, creating a complex process of debate and feedback.

I started using collaborative tactics primarily as a tool for disrupting linear narrative structures in my audio-visual work. In doing so, I became aware of the enormous potential held in the improvisational and spontaneous quality of such processes. Building on this inherent potential, through executing a number of interconnected video projects, I worked closely with other artists and devised different techniques to implement structures of chance in the production process in order to generate content and increase ambiguity in the finished product.

Working in an already interdisciplinary framework strengthened these collaborations as it insured that individuals had their distinct angle from which to tackle each project. The multiplicity of approaches and skills encouraged the conversations to get past conventional blockages and find new routes, creating a non-hierarchical process of problem solving. As a result of working with other artists in different constellations, I now understand the importance of having a meticulously structured plan and a rigorous production method before embarking on any collaborative art project. To me, this is one of the most crucial steps towards arriving at an aesthetically resolved outcome that incorporates the potentials of the collaborative process instead of merely illustrating them. It is often during this preparatory phase that tensions arise and the utopian ideal of equal production and shared experience starts to break down. Antagonisms emerge, since the individual forces that shape the process are never equal, highlighting the ethical obligations of partnership and the limits and boundaries of collaboration. Often a singular voice is heard more than others, which threatens the collapse of the democratic structure. To my experience, dealing with the complexities and differences that arise through such processes instead of simplifying them by avoiding conflict, is a risk worth taking as it often produces unpredictable and rewarding outcomes. In my view, to attempt the collaborative method is to consider and workshop different opinions instead of concealing individualistic motivations under the disguise of an ideal whole.

What assisted me in navigating my way through these tricky issues and still be able to maintain a degree of autonomy within the group was sustaining a professional attitude. In my opinion, being aware of the unspoken rules of collaborative art practice is vital but should not stop one from challenging them. Boundaries can and should be crossed as long as members of the group can argue their position and communicate their intention in a clear and transparent manner.

I will continue to use this knowledge and pursue alternative ways for collaborating that focus equally on the potentials of joint creation and the challenges of aesthetic production.

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