

Strategies of the Medium III:
In the Dark

Alex MacKenzie's
the wooden lightbox: a secret art of seeing

Strategies of the Medium

Presented by the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto (LIFT), this six-part screening series reflects on current and historical practices in the use of specific material and technical strategies in artist-based film production. The screenings and accompanying panel discussions complement LIFT's series of advanced workshops and production courses on the topics of animation, optical printing, the Bolex camera, photochemical processes, and 35MM artist film.

Part I: **Animating Analogue**

Part II: **Printed Light**

Part III: **In the Dark**

Part IV: **In 27 Seconds**

Part V: **Pieces of Eight**

Part VI: **Go Big or Go Home**

Part III: **In the Dark**

8PM, Saturday, October 10th, 2009

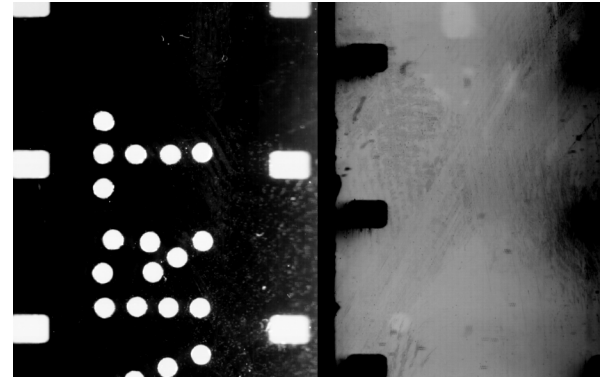
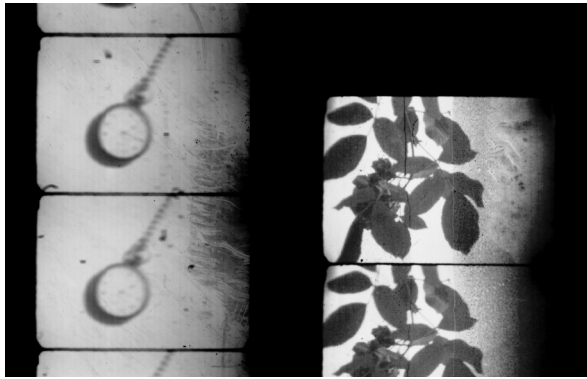
Cinecycle, 129 Spadina Avenue
(down the alley)

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Suggested donation:

Members \$5, Non-Members \$8

www.lift.on.ca



Strategies of the Medium Part III: In the Dark

In this screening LIFT continues with its medium-specific programming series to explore work produced through chemical manipulation in the lab. The darkroom is an inherent part of all photographic processes and offers a host of options for alchemically inclined filmmakers. Working with chemicals can become more than a vehicle to produce a standard photographic image. The new darkroom facilities at LIFT provide space and access for filmmakers interested in taking the processing and printing of their work into their own hands. This program features a performance and discussion by Alex MacKenzie, who will also be teaching a workshop on handmade film emulsions. This program complements LIFT's current season of creative and technical workshops devoted to darkroom practices and camera techniques.

Biography

Alex MacKenzie has been working as a media artist for over 15 years with a focus on various models of expanded cinema and light projection involving the handmade image. He was the founder and curator of the Edison Electric Gallery of Moving Images, the Blinding Light!! Cinema and the Vancouver Underground Film Festival. His live media works have been presented at festivals and underground screening spaces throughout Europe and North America—most recently at the Rotterdam International Film Festival, Lightcone in Paris, the WNDX festival in Winnipeg and the Halifax Independent Film Festival. He received a Bachelor of Arts Degree with Honours in the School for Studies in Art and Culture (Film Studies) from Carleton University, and has worked with a variety of independent film organizations over the past 15 years including Main Film, Pacific Cinémathèque, Cineworks, and DOXA. He recently completed residencies at Atelier MTK in Grenoble, France and at Struts Gallery/Faucet Media Arts Centre in New Brunswick. Alex is the co-editor of *DAMP: Contemporary Vancouver Media Art* (Anvil Press 2008), interviewed David Rimmer for *Loop, Print, Fade + Flicker: David Rimmer's Moving Images* (Anvil Press 2009) and is currently designing handmade film emulsions and manually-powered projection devices for gallery installation and live performance.

the wooden lightbox: a secret art of seeing
(Alex MacKenzie, Canada, 2007–ongoing, 40–50 minutes, 16MM live performance)

the wooden lightbox: a secret art of seeing is Alex MacKenzie's latest exploration and reconfiguration of cinematic apparatus and emulsion. Presented here is the first of an extended cycle of films that use the early development of cinema as a marker for cultural, technological and economic change. These film cycles draw from turn of the century cinematic prototypes and long forgotten ideas surrounding the moving image and its early promise. At the core of this approach is the use of a home-built hand-cranked projector in an expanded cinema format to present a striking array of handmade and processed emulsion. The vast potential of the film frame is drawn out through imagery both archaic and contemporary in shape and form. Hypnosis, panorama, motion studies, expectation, magic, the dreamworld and sleight of eye conspire in this intimate and immersive framework.

the wooden lightbox: a secret art of seeing is performed live with a hand-cranked 16MM projector built and assembled from various relic 16MM projector and rewind parts and framed in a wooden box. Ten “chapters” are presented over the course of four reels. Film speed is varied manually by cranking more quickly or more slowly, while direction of the action is controlled by winding forward and backward. An average of eight frames of 16MM can be cranked for every second of time elapsed. Colour gels are used to tone the black and white images while lens and hand interference are used to distort and/or partially obscure the image. Sound consists of a series of tracks shaped for the specific chapters and acting as guides to the progression of the images. TWL is an ongoing work in progress, an assembly of images entirely handprocessed and contact printed, transforming and developing as new materials are added and deleted.

A Laboratory of Images

In theory, the manufacturing, developing and printing of film stock is the final stumbling block to truly independent filmmaking. You can conceivably get away with single-handedly writing, directing, shooting, editing and distributing your film—dragging in assistance only when schlepping equipment is needed—but the most likely point where you would call in professional support is at the stage where you need the film developed and printed.

Unlike the historical trajectory of photography, where developing and printing one's own photographs was key to the artistic practice, the majority of filmmakers have never attempted to develop their own film. But those who have learned how have often found it a key part of their creative practice. The art of hand-processing, tinting, toning and contact printing is not only a way to potentially reduce costs, but for many it becomes an important extension of the filmmaking practice itself.

At the most practical level, hand-processing is a way to quickly and cheaply create an image. Filmmakers working in a fixed setting, shooting animation sequences or optically printing complex passages, can easily run into the nearby darkroom (often the bathroom) and process what they have shot to check whether it is appropriate for their project. Using processing tanks and minding the proper chemistry and temperatures can create a negative or reversal image almost as good as a professional lab.

Other filmmakers like to use hand-processing to introduce non-standard “errors” into their films and work hard to learn to manipulate the film in ways that add unique aesthetic or emotional dimensions to their work. They use methods like spaghetti-processing (agitating film loosely in a bucket while processing to encourage uneven development and create scrapes and scratches in the image), solarization (exposing the film to light at the “wrong” time, which blends negative and positive imagery together), reticulation (“cooking” the film so that the emulsion that holds the image cracks), tinting or toning (coloring the film with extra chemicals) or developing film in completely non-standard chemistry (coffee, Coca Cola, and bleaches, etc.). These filmmakers often speak fondly of the “danger” of losing an image completely and the excitement that comes when their experimentation transforms an image in an entirely unexpected way. Because this approach to hand-processing allows so much room for chance transformations, this method of filmmaking can create unique and unrepeatable images that are unobtainable through any other medium.

Vancouver's Alex MacKenzie has teased out the unique and unrepeatable elements of his filmmaking until they have become an important part of the final presentation of his material. For the last ten years, he has worked primarily in film performance, where he allows the live presentation of his work to organically take shape in the theatre. He prepares the constituent elements in advance—the film loops, the sound design, the general flow of the piece—but the live experience is dependent on the decisions made on the spot and by the technical possibilities of the various types of projectors that he uses.

The live presentation mirrors the entire process by which MacKenzie creates his film work. Every step of the process is guided in part by his decisions and in part by the chance possibilities that he introduces. Beyond the performance aspect, this is most notable in the fact that he hand-processes his films and, more uniquely, that he often creates his own film emulsion onto which his images adhere.

Obviously, MacKenzie's ability to hand-process his films is an extremely efficient way to create the multiple prints needed for a live performance. The introduction of handmade film emulsions, however, creates a realm of additional possibilities. Since the emulsions MacKenzie creates using simple chemistry—primarily gelatin, potassium bromide and silver nitrate painted onto an acetate base—are not produced using the standardized manufacturing techniques one expects from Kodak or Fujifilm, there is again much room for “error”, or happy accidents. Even if each strip of film were developed the exact same way, the emulsion would consistently have variant exposure indexes (how much light is required to get an image) and an uneven application to the surface of the film. As a result, his work often has an otherworldly quality, as if we were seeing images for the first time.

MacKenzie's performances are a vivid example of the possibilities of self-sufficient and extremely economical filmmaking. His particular methodology means that, apart from chemistry and the acetate base on which he paints the emulsion (which can itself be recycled by removing previous film emulsions using bleach), he has all the tools and skills necessary to create his work. More importantly, as anyone who has seen any of his performances can attest, his process allows for the re-entry of a sense of wonder, what theorist Walter Benjamin once referred to as the *promesse de bonheur*, or the utopian promise of technology that can only be reproduced through an artistic reinvestment in the hidden possibilities of a medium. Through his rediscoveries, MacKenzie takes us back to the birth of the moving image—the moment when the image could finally be chemically and permanently fixed on the material support that we now commonly call film.

— Chris Kennedy

Since 1981, LIFT has been Canada's foremost artist-run centre for independent filmmakers, providing affordable access to film equipment, pre- and post-production services and education, in a creative and supportive environment.

Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto (LIFT)

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