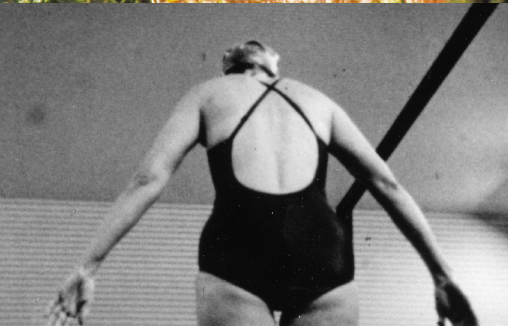


Strategies of the Medium IV:
In 27 Seconds



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 IV: **In 27 Seconds**

7PM, Saturday, November 21st, 2009

Trash Palace, 89B Niagara Street

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

STILLS (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT):

Recámara, Rosario Sotelo; *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan & Encarnacion*, Philip Hoffman; *A & B in Ontario*, Joyce Wieland & Hollis Frampton; *BOUQUETS 21-30*, Rose Lowder; *January 15, 1991: Gulf War Diary*, Susan Oxtoby; *Incantation*, Cara Morton; *Burning*, Barbara Sternberg; *Cloud Fragments*, Chris Welsby; and *Stable*, Robert Todd.

COVER STILL: *Recámara*, Rosario Sotelo



Canada Council
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du Canada

EYE WEEKLY

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Strategies of the Medium IV: In 27 Seconds

This fourth installment of the Strategies of the Medium series will focus on international works that use the limitations and flexibility of the spring-wound Bolex camera as a structural element of composition. The Bolex cameras are perhaps the most accessible and flexible 16MM and Super 16MM production tools. Both locally and internationally there is a strong tradition of filmmakers experimenting with these elements and this screening will seek to demonstrate the variety of results possible. The evening will conclude with a discussion with some of the filmmakers who have integrated the rhythms of the Bolex camera into their working practice. This program will be supplemented by *16MM Filmmaking with the Bolex*, a special production course focused on 16MM films offered as part of LIFT's fall 2009 workshop season.

There will be a panel discussion after the screening featuring Robert Todd and Barbara Sternberg.

Panelist Bios:

Robert Todd has been making short films in the Boston area since 1990. His visually stunning body of work, not easily defined or categorized, comes from a deeply personal place, which is quiet, thoughtful, and curious. The films take a variety of poetic approaches to looking at the personal, political, and social ways in which we choose to live.

Toronto filmmaker **Barbara**

Sternberg has been making films since the mid-seventies. Her films have screened widely across North America and Europe, and her work is in the collections of the Art Gallery of Ontario and the National Gallery of Canada. Sternberg has been active on a number of fronts in Toronto, teaching at York University, working for Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre, serving on Arts Councils' juries and committees, helping to organize the International Experimental Film Congress (May 1989) and to found Pleasure Dome Artists' Film Exhibition Group. She has been visiting artist at a number of Canadian

universities and galleries as well as the Université d'Avignon and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Sternberg has also worked in other media, including performance and installation.

In 27 Seconds

Q: *Just what are the limitations you have to work with?*

A: *Well, they are of two kinds really. One is from working alone in a sense. I mean not just having a group of people around to do the different things such as sort of trying to pick up everything at once. The other is just the actual camera I use is a lightweight clockwork Bolex, so that the end, or course, only runs a certain length, and the [film] roll is only a certain length, but I have a hundred feet to work with before I have to change the film, and about eighteen feet or something that in one wind. So that -- yes -- it does eventually influence the way that I compose the films, even on paper before I start. The fact that I know that I have to work in short takes. And I know that I'm going to have to work in short takes before I ever start.*

—Margaret Tait, Scottish poet and filmmaker, *Subjects and Sequences: A Margaret Tait Reader*, edited by Peter Todd and Benjamin Cook

The Bolex Camera is the workhorse of independent filmmaking. Invented in the early thirties and still manufactured

to this day, Bolex cameras are found in practically every film co-op or film school in the world, and—as Margaret Tait's comments attest—in the hands of practically every independent and experimental filmmaker. Their popularity is due to many factors: their portability, their adaptability, their ease of use and their specific characteristics and limitations—which easily become assets to filmmakers interested in developing creative structures out of limitation.

The Bolex was developed specifically for 16MM filmmaking and represented a break from the equipment-heavy requirements of 35MM filmmaking. Contained in a shell that can be held comfortably in two hands, the Bolex personalizes the craft of filmmaking. Uniquely, it is also spring-wound, which means no electricity is ever required to run it. It can theoretically be taken anywhere with the assurance that it will never run out of power as long as you have the energy to wind it up.

A&B in Ontario by Joyce Wieland and Hollis Frampton is the most

passionate celebration of the Bolex camera. Using pistol grips that make the camera even easier to hold, they cavort through Toronto and onto the island, shooting each other like kids playing cops and robbers in a playful tête-à-tête. They foreground both the mechanical nature of the Bolex—the familiar purr of the camera is the primary soundtrack—as well as its pure ease of use. Part of the joy of this film, besides the pure friendship these two filmmakers express, is that the act of filmmaking is so comfortable (Frampton at one point even swings the camera from hand to hand as would a distracted boy), that the two can easily spend hours shooting each other like there was no care in the world.

Less humorous, but with an equal depth of experience, Barbara Sternberg's *Burning* shows how the Bolex enables a personal vision. This rapidly unfolding film consists of bursts of imagery, often edited directly in-camera in short starts and stops. At its most frenetic, especially the passage devoted to the changing fall leaves, Sternberg's rapid

pace is enhanced by a common artifact of shooting on the Bolex—the shots pulse with a series of flash-frames that occur when the camera is still getting up to speed. This kinetic visual pulse mimics the blinking of an eye (perhaps the one we see at the beginning), suggesting the rapid pace of life that we sometimes find ourselves in the midst of. The film is also optically printed on a JK printer, which uses the precision of the Bolex camera to reshoot footage frame by frame, allowing Sternberg to reinvest the images she has shot over the years with a precisely attuned eye—memory revisited with wisdom.

Cara Morton's *Incantation* is also optically printed, but its source material displays the freedom of movement that the Bolex camera can bring. Also filled with brief shots, Morton creates a more gestural movement with her camera, adeptly connecting the rhythms of the protestors with the movements of the dancer she uses as a centering element in her film. The lightness of the Bolex allows for this type of movement, but

it also retains a certain weight, which provides it with a grounded feel. As a result the pan and tilt of a Bolex feels connected to the similar movements of a human in motion—the pull of gravity is always apparent in its actions.

As Tait points out, filmmakers who want to use the Bolex without a battery source have one distinct limitation. The spring-wind that allows for the camera to run expires in 27 or 28 seconds, which means no single shot can last longer than 27 seconds. For some filmmakers, this limitation becomes an important element to their films. Philip Hoffman's early films often bring this limitation to life. In *?O, Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film)*, he shows a series of shots filmed by a fictional grandfather, each with a 27 second duration. He specifically comments on this to make his grandfather a metaphor for film pioneers—the fixed shot length points to the birth of cinema: before people learned the edit there was a desire to take it all in. In *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan & Encarnacion*, which we will see tonight, this

shot length is a representation of poetic economy. Six of the approximately dozen shots are 27-second takes. Since the film is devoted to seeing how much you can tell with so little (even to the point of preventing us from seeing the central subject of the film—the dying boy), the economy of making a film based on so few shots, and pushing those shots to their physical limits, amplifies the tension of storytelling. The durational pull of expectation and release play out beautifully with the emotive suspension a long take can bring. In a sense, it is that suspension which allows the boy's image and spirit to slip away without us catching hold.

The longest length of shot can be 27 seconds, but the mechanical trigger allows the shortest length of shot to be a single frame. Rosario Sotelo's *Recámara* takes advantage of that function to create a time-lapse film of the camera obscura she makes out of her apartment. She not only shoots a single frame at a time, but each frame is a time-exposure. The obscura is created out of a single

pinprick in her blackened-out windows, so the only way to capture an image onto motion picture film is to hold the shutter open longer than the normal 1/60th of a second (a shutter speed common for cameras that shoot 24 frames per second). With the Bolex, you can do this by holding down the trigger. By triggering the Bolex a frame at a time and allowing enough light to imprint on each frame, Sotelo painstakingly compresses time by condensing months of work into a beautiful, six-minute piece.

Rose Lowder also reduces the elements of her film down to the single frame. Her film *BOUQUETS 21-30* showcases a particular way of shooting that she has developed over the last twenty years. She creates visual rhythms across time and space by shooting a single image every other frame (leaving the intermittent frames black) and then rewinding the Bolex to film in a different location. She fills in the unexposed frames with single images of the second location. The resulting film creates a pulsing image that oscillates quickly

between the two locations, developing a lush and frenetic visual field.

Chris Welsby used the ability to rewind the Bolex to film *Cloud Fragments* to entirely different effect. For this film, he created twelve different mattes that he would shoot through, one at a time. He would then rewind the film and reshoot through each subsequent matte. By repeating this twelve times, he created a grid of twelve different moments of sky. In a sense, Welsby has taken Lowder's temporal technique and suspended it in a single spatial image, where each shot is next to each other rather than oscillating back and forth

Rewinding the Bolex also allows for the filmmakers to double or triple expose the image on top of another, a technique that has incredibly expressive possibilities. Susan Oxtoby's *January 15, 1991: Gulf War Diary*, creates a variety of beautiful superimpositions that personalize her documentation of the final deadline before the First Gulf War. In this case, the low-light levels of the night vigils allow for the darkness itself to become a

type of matte through which each superimposed layer can build upon each other in a visual representation of the many voices of protest on that fateful night.

Robert Todd's sumptuous *Stable* also relies heavily on superimpositions to create a portrait of a New England farm. *Stable* is particularly fascinating because it merges the more mechanically inclined aspect of a film like Welsby's (shots are fixed on a tripod, the grid of windows and shadows are often employed) with the more emotionally charged personality of films like Sternberg's and Oxtoby's. This is done primarily with the use of superimposition, which often places organic forms over rigid ones—giving character to the horses, but still placing them in the context of the farm that both contains them and gives them home. These superimpositions, done entirely in camera, are also reminiscent of the type of visual effects he would create in previous films using an optical printer. Perhaps not incidentally, *Stable* marks a point in Todd's own work where he moves from

working more intently on his footage with an optical printer to allowing his work on the Bolex to exist with out any further re-photography. In later films, Todd masters the Bolex as the extension of his eye, creating film after film that sees through his camera in stunning new ways. It seems that *Stable*, where everything is shot in-camera, is the film in which he recognizes, like many film-makers before him, that there is enough in just the camera itself to provide him plenty of creative stimulus for the many projects to come.

—Chris Kennedy

**Recámara**

(Rosario Sotelo, USA, 2007, 6:00, 16MM, silent, 18FPS)

"Camera obscura: A darkened chamber with a tiny aperture affording a view from an outside space. Through this opening, light enters, bringing with it, observatory-like, an inverted image of the external world. Unique to what one sees in this film are exterior images not projected on blank surfaces as one might expect; rather, seen superimposed on the intimate space of the artist's apartment. Her bedroom is itself transformed into a camera obscura in which outside images and interior space with its artifacts become one. *Recámara* is simultaneously time-lapse documentation of a site-specific installation and unique work of filmic invention."

—Charles Boone, 2008

**Somewhere Between
Jalostotitlan & Encarnacion**

(Philip Hoffman, Canada, 1984,
6:00, 16MM)

“The bus stopped on the Mexican highway, placing us in full view of a young boy, motionless, on the hot pavement. In this film, the incident is revealed through a poetic text, derived from my written journals. The poetry mixes primarily with Mexican streetscapes, which compliment the text in a tonal sense. Most images are 28 seconds long, the ‘breath’ of the 16MM Bolex camera. A lone saxophone (Mike Callich) weaves its way through the narrative, blending to make stronger the tones and accentuations of the images.”

—Philip Hoffman

Music by Mike Callich.



**A & B in Ontario**

(Joyce Wieland & Hollis Frampton,
1984, 16:00, 16MM)

"Hollis and I came back to Toronto on holiday in the summer of '67. We were staying at a friend's house. We worked our way through the city and eventually made it to the island. We followed each other around. We enjoyed ourselves. We said we were going to make a film about each other—and we did."

—Joyce Wieland

A & B in Ontario was completed eighteen years after the original material was shot. After Frampton's death, Wieland assembled the film into a cinematic dialogue in which the collaborators (in the spirit of the sixties) shoot each other with cameras.

BOUQUETS 21-30

(Rose Lowder, France, 2001–2005,
14:00, 16MM, silent)

BOUQUETS 21-30 is a part of the ecological *BOUQUETS* series, consisting of one-minute films composed in the camera by weaving the characteristics of different environments with the activities there at the time. The filming basically entails using the film strip as a canvas with the freedom to film frames on any part of the strip in any order, running the film through the camera as many times as needed. Thus each bouquet of flowers is also a unique bouquet of film frames.



**January 15, 1991: Gulf War Diary**

(Susan Oxtoby, Canada, 1992, 6:00,
16MM, silent)

“A personal register of the passing deadline, fashioned entirely in camera. Toward midnight, a trip to a demonstration at the U.S. consulate in Toronto vies for frame with the swirling super-impositions of clocks and newscasts.”

—Pleasure Dome, *War and Cinema*
program notes, January 15, 1991

Incantation

(Cara Morton, Canada, 1997,
5:00, 16MM)

“Originating in the lens of a discreet hand-crank Bolex camera, *Incantation* is a delirious hand-processed weave of urban protest and contact dance that evokes the powerful spirit of personal and political resistance.”

—Images Festival of Independent Film & Video, Toronto, 1997

“*Incantation* combines images from last autumn’s anti-Harris protest in Toronto with a dancer, creating a brilliant combination that illuminates the spirit and energy evident in the marches.”

—Take One Magazine, Fall 1997



**Burning**

(Barbara Sternberg, Canada, 2002,
7:00, 16MM, silent)

A multiplicity of diverse images—cut
together rhythmically flicker with
energy fire, light, and life.

“Your life is like a candle. Whether you
are aware of it or not, it is burning.”

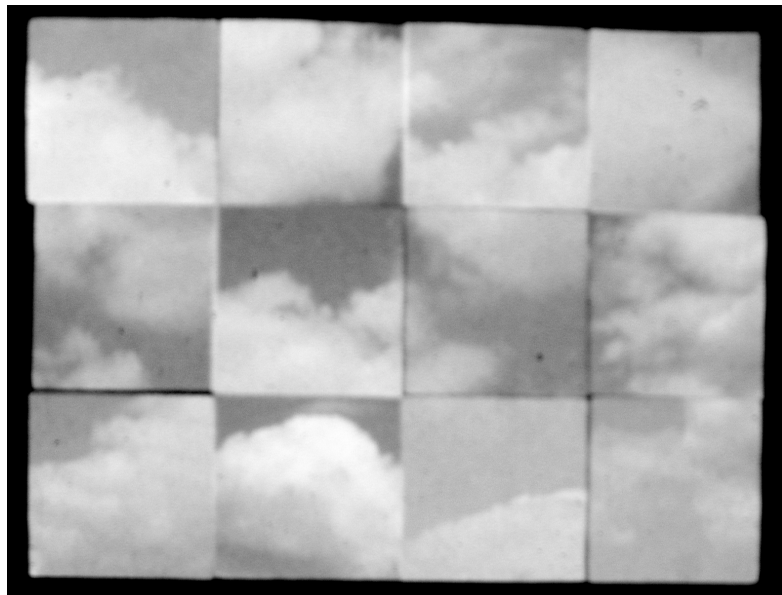
—Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

Cloud Fragments

(Chris Welsby, UK/Canada, 1978,
10:00, 16MM, silent)

The camera position remained the same throughout the shooting. The frame is comprised entirely of sky. Four one hundred foot rolls of colour film were run through the camera twelve times each, one twelfth of the frame was exposed at every run. Each run was divided into four-second takes. Each of these was punctuated by four-second intervals, which are represented by flash frames. The four-second takes are synchronised in each run so that the flash frames at the end of each take occur on the screen at about the same time.

The order in which each separate area of film was exposed was dependent upon the overall distribution of clouds within the frame. The time taken to expose each of the four rolls of film depended on the weather conditions at the time, and varied between one and fourteen days per hundred feet.



**Stable**

(Robert Todd, USA, 2003, 7:00, 16MM)

Portrait of a New England farm: back and there again. The family-run farm is a staple of romantic Americana. Industrialization's reformation of our material and ideological makeup brought with it an idealized notion of the Farm as a point of origin and innocence, and in so doing created a cultural rift between agriculturists and bourgeois. Film's entry onto the cultural stage coincided with the high watermark of industrial hegemony in the Western world, and as a product of Industry, provided a new representational language for bourgeois culture. As such, the character of the lens through which the filmmaker posits the Farm has been either romantic or ethnographic.

—Robert Todd

All layering effects in this film were shot in-camera.

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)

1137 Dupont Street
Toronto, Ontario
M6H 2A3 Canada
www.lift.on.ca

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Design by Martina Hwang (dash-dash.ca)

