Strategies of the Medium II:
Printed Light

LIAISON OF
INDEPENDENT FILMMAKERS
OF TORONTO

Strategies of the Medium

Presented by 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 27 Seconds**
Part IV: **In the Dark**
Part V: **Pieces of Eight**
Part VI: **Go Big or Go Home**

Part II: **Printed Light**
8pm, Saturday, July 11th, 2009
Cinecycle, 129 Spadina Avenue (down the alley)
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

STILLS (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT):
Archaeology of Memory , Gary Popovich; *Self Portrait Post Mortem*, Louise Bourque; *We Are Experiencing Technical Difficulties. Regular Programming Will Resume Momentarily.*, John Kneller; *3 Part Harmony: Composition in RGB #1*, Amanda Dawn Christie; *Passage à l'acte*, Martin Arnold; *930*, Alexandre Larose; *The Evil Surprise*, François Miron; *buffalo lifts*, Christina Battle; *Once*, Barbara Sternberg.
COVER STILL: *3 Part Harmony: Composition in RGB #1*, Amanda Dawn Christie

Strategies of the Medium II: Printed Light

This screening represents a diversity of contemporary practices that use the optical printer and contact printer as primary production tools. Staples of analogue special effects and film manipulation, optical printers and contact printers are among the most versatile tools in the filmmaker's toolbox. LIFT currently has two purpose-built optical printers and one contact printer in use, as well as an animation stand modified to serve as an additional printer for special uses. Included among these instruments is an Oxberry 1700 (for 35mm or 16mm), one of the most versatile and precise printers available anywhere. This program introduces a season of workshops devoted to optical printing.

The screening will be followed by a panel discussion with filmmakers Christina Battle, John Kneller, and François Miron.

Panelist Bios:

With a B.Sc. in Environmental Biology from the University of Alberta and an MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute, **Christina Battle** currently lives and works in Toronto, Canada. An active member of the city's arts community, she has worked within Toronto's vibrant artist-run culture as jury member, arts administrator, technical coordinator, board member, educator and curator for various organizations including The Images Festival, the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto and the Ontario College of Art and Design. Her artworks have screened internationally in festivals and galleries including: The London Film Festival (London, England); The Images Festival (Toronto); The Toronto International Film Festival (Toronto); The International Film Festival Rotterdam (The Netherlands); YYZ Artists' Outlet (Toronto); White Box (New York); Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery (Halifax, Canada); The Foreman Art Gallery at Bishops University (Sherbrooke, QB); Nuit Blanche 2006 (Toronto) and in the 2006 Whitney Biennial "Day for Night" (New York). The CFMDC recently released a DVD compiling Christina's film works as a part of their 2007 Artist Spotlight series.

Born in Geneva, Switzerland, **John Kneller** grew up in Hudson, Quebec and moved to Toronto in 1985. He attended the University of Toronto, where he earned a BA in Cinema Studies, and recently received a Master of Fine Arts in Film Production from York University. His work with optical printing, multilayering and matting techniques has gained critical attention both locally and abroad. John is currently a full-time Professor in the Media Arts Film program at Sheridan College, Oakville, Ontario.

François Miron began makings films in 1982 and received an MFA in filmmaking from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His main body of work consists of several short experimental films, all created using the powerful film image manipulation technique of optical printing. His films have been screened in festivals and

venues throughout the world and have received countless awards. Aside from this, François produces music videos, feature title sequences, photography and short narrative films. Since 1993 he has been teaching optical printing and filmmaking at the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema, Concordia University in Montreal.

The Transformative Potential of Optical Printing

Almost all of the films we see projected are prints, and the printing process is as important in film as it is in photography or printmaking. In printing, colour and contrast are carefully balanced, and for decades the optical printer was the means by which mainstream films achieved the most elaborate special effects, as well as title sequences and simple effects such as dissolves. The use of printing processes in the commercial cinema, when well executed, tends to go unnoticed by the viewer—they are among many elements that go into the creation of the illusory world of the dramatic film. Many independent filmmakers, on the other hand, have taken up the contact printer and optical printer as essential creative tools that can emphasize the plastic qualities of film in terms of temporal structure, image layering, colour, contrast and texture. These devices allow the filmmaker to work with film as a concrete object rather than a set of abstract representations, and

through them the printing process tends to become a generative process that opens up new ideas and techniques.

In the contact printer, a processed strip of film with images is in direct contact with a strip of unexposed film, so that, in most cases, a positive print is made from a negative. The optical printer, which was first introduced in the 1920s, consists of one or more projectors whose light beam is focused into a camera—it is essentially a device for "rephotographing" an existing strip of film frame by frame. Both devices have potentials for creative manipulation that go far beyond their everyday use in the industry. They appeal to independent filmmakers because they make accessible a range of techniques and methods that have enormous potential that remains untapped by conventional uses.

Gary Popovich's *Archaeology of Memory* and John Kneller's *We Are Experiencing Technical Difficulties. Regular Programming Will Resume Momentarily.* both use images taken from everyday life and employ the optical printer to

dramatically transform and intensify the experience of these images. Though rooted in their filmmakers' own lives and everyday experience, these films are nevertheless radically constructed works in which montage, colour, texture and sound are marshaled to draw out deeper resonances within the source material. *Archaeology of Memory* begins with the most basic of possible cinematic expressions, scratched emulsion, and connects these gestures to the surviving pictograms of ancient peoples; it is a film about origins—cultural, sexual, and technological. *We Are Experiencing Technical Difficulties.*, by contrast, insists on the everyday quality of its images despite its incredibly elaborate techniques. But it locates their relation to larger cycles of life in their recurring rhythms and variations. Like all of Kneller's films, it is a work of both painstaking, meticulous craftsmanship and generous observation.

Alexandre Larose's *930* and Barbara Sternberg's *Once*, in very different ways, move towards the abstraction

of straightforwardly shot material. To make *Once*, Sternberg placed between four and eight layers of positive film over a strip of raw stock and exposed it by running a flashlight along the film a few feet at a time. The new film was then processed by hand and an internegative made from that. The effect is subtle and haunting, the original images combining to create a new composite stream of images in which the source material is partially dissolved, but still hovering at the edge of perception. In *930*, Larose reworks high-contrast black-and-white footage shot in a train tunnel. The contrast is extreme, so that the film consists mainly of large black or white areas, highly abstracted, and this abstraction is increased by the creation of symmetrical compositions that could bring to mind pulsing, shifting Rorschach blots.

In *Self Portrait Post Mortem*, Louise Bourque uses the optical printer to slow down and heighten the textural and chromatic effect of biological decay on strips of film that had been buried underground for several years. This resurrected film, with its clusters of brightly coloured mould colonies partly obscuring the image of the filmmaker's face in younger days, works a fine balance between representation and abstraction, memory and presence. Similarly, *buffalo lifts*, by Christina Battle, works with lush and intense colour and textural effects. It is at once a film of a buffalo herd in motion, and a struggle between the alluring surface of the film and the viewer's desire for pictorial representation, just as the buffalo seem to struggle across the space.

One of the applications of the printer is the use of found footage, at times in a critique of the dominant cinema, in other cases simply to create a collage in which fragments from existing films are recombined in a completely new context. A remarkable example of the former is the Austrian filmmaker Martin Arnold's *Passage à l'acte*, which drastically reworks a short scene from a classical Hollywood film, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Arnold was originally trained as a psychiatrist, and the film clearly shows his strong interest in symptomatic gestures such as stutters and nervous tics, as well as in a critique of conventional representations of the family. François Miron's incredibly elaborate *The Evil Surprise*, similarly, uses conventional commercial film images—often from low-budget educational films and features—to create a paranoid portrait of the movies as a demonic, hypnotic medium of brainwashing and deception. Where Arnold deeply excavates the latent implications of one section from a single black-and-white source film, Miron brings a host of divergent fragments together in an explosive montage of eye-popping colour and unstable visual spaces.

In *3 Part Harmony: Composition in RGB #1*, Amanda Dawn Christie adapts the three-strip colour process developed by Technicolor in the 1930s as the key tool to the demands of her experimental dance film. The film was shot entirely in black-and-white, through three different colour filters, and the three black-and-white films were then recombined on the optical printer to create the final

colour image. What is remarkable here is the way in which the three images of a single dancer stand out in pure single colours against the more or less realistic reconstituted colour of the background. Christie uses the three-strip process against the intentions of its inventors, as a way to explore a symbolic psychological and social space rather than creating a bright, post-card "realistic" colour image. — Chris Gehman

Archaeology of Memory
(Gary Popovich, Canada, 1992, 14:00, 16mm, colour, sound)

Beginning in scratches of light, Popovich's *tour-de-force* of optical printing evolves through colour, rhythm and multiple images, tracing a history of cinema from mythical beginnings to the thread of personal memory, peering into the everyday pathology of family, sex and death. "A kind of double history that intertwines autobiography with the development of cinema, it's a stunning, enormously seductive array of images" (Cameron Bailey, *Now Magazine*).

Self Portrait Post Mortem
(Louise Bourque, Canada/USA, 2002, 2:30, 35mm, colour, sound)

An unearthed time capsule consisting of footage of the maker's youthful self—an "exquisite corpse" with nature as collaborator. Bourque buried outtakes from her first three films (all staged productions dealing with her family) in the back yard of her ancestral home (adjoining the grounds of a former cemetery) with the contradictory intentions of both safe-keeping and unloading them. Upon exhuming the footage five years later, the images seemed handed over like a gift and prompted the making of this film, a metaphysical *pas de deux* in which decay undermines the image and in the process engenders a transmutation.
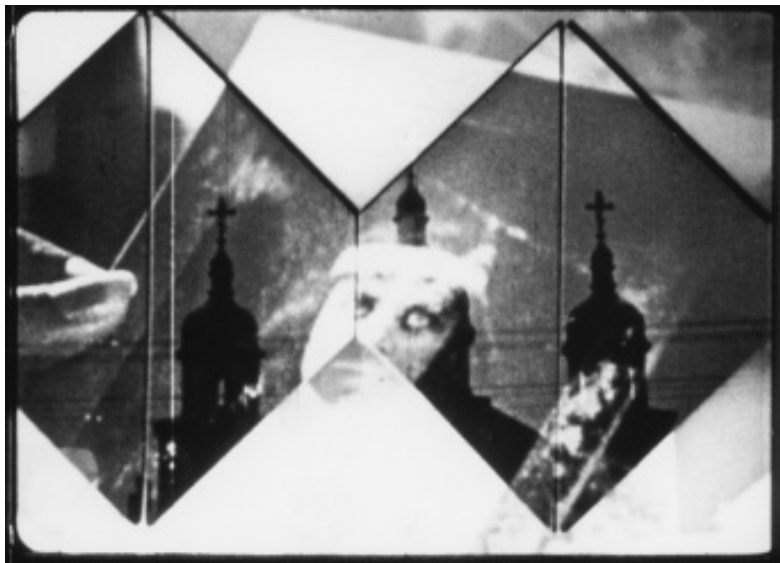
We Are Experiencing Technical Difficulties. Regular Programming Will Resume Momentarily.
(John Kneller, Canada, 1988, 12:00, 16mm, colour, sound)

John Kneller is Toronto's acknowledged master of the optical printer, and his films often employ elaborate multiple exposures, traveling mattes and glorious colour. "*We Are Experiencing Technical Difficulties* is a visual treat that manipulates, combines and recombines to dazzling effect. In this digital age, this optically printed film runs countercurrent to the trends. The film uses repeating imagery such as five autumns' worth of leaves… and the effect is mesmerizing" (Liz Czach, Toronto International Film Festival).

3 Part Harmony: Composition in RGB #1
(Amanda Dawn Christie, Canada, 6:00, 16mm, colour, sound)

This experimental dance film employs a bastardized version of the 1930s three-strip Technicolor process. Shot entirely on black-and-white film through colour filters, the images were recombined into full colour through optical printing techniques, one frame at a time. The gestures in this dance work explore psychological fracturing and reunification in representations of the female body.
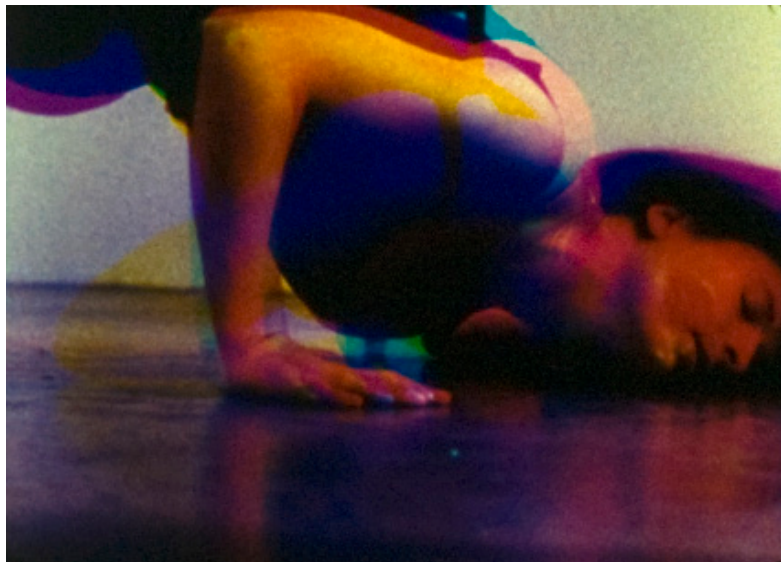
Passage à l'acte
(Martin Arnold, Austria, 1993, 16:00, 16mm, b&w, sound)

Arnold rigourously works through a brief scene from *To Kill A Mockingbird* in units of a few frames each, effectively opening this fragment of Hollywood film up to a host of readings. A family breakfast with husband, wife, son and daughter shows, in its original state, a classic, deceptive harmony. *Passage à l'acte* deconstructs this scenario of normality by destroying its original continuity. It catches on the tinny sounds and bizarre body movements of the subjects, which, in reaction, become snagged on the continuity. The message, which lies deep under the surface of the family idyll, suppressed or lost, is exposed—that message is war.

930
(Alexandre Larose, Canada, 2006, 10:00, 16mm, b&w, sound)

Larose captured sequences of images in and around a short train tunnel in Québec City—in the tunnel, both ends can be seen at once. By manipulating his original footage on the optical printer, Larose transforms his material into an abstract visual landscape and an emotional experience that reflects the intensity of the filmmaking process.

The Evil Surprise
(François Miron, Canada, 1994, 16:00, 16mm, colour, sound)

An incredible kinetic collage preoccupied with social conditioning and absurdity, a mind-bending psychedelic optical printing film, a brain probe and a short journey out of your mind, *The Evil Surprise* is inside your head. You won't believe your eyes in this psychedelic classic!
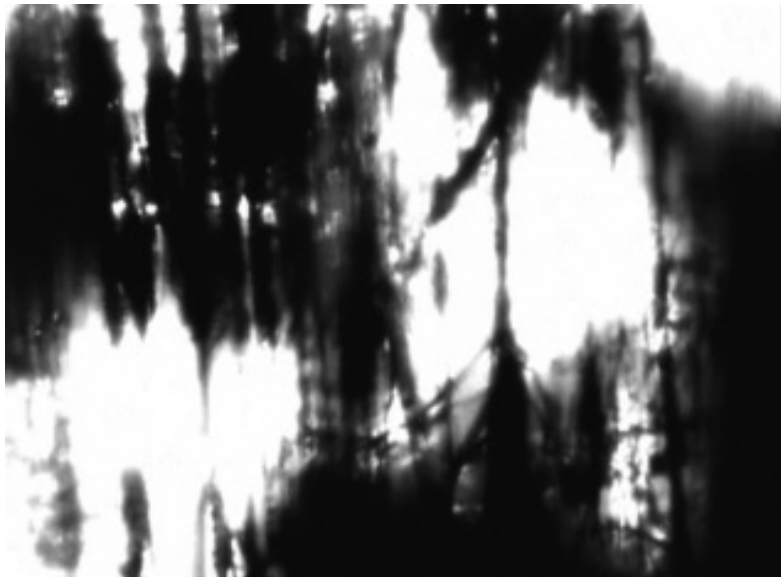
buffalo lifts
(Christina Battle, Canada, 2004, 3:00,
16mm, colour, silent)

Awash in sumptuous colour, a herd of
buffalo desperately try to hold on as
they struggle to cross the film frame.
Christina Battle's mastery of the film
surface and printing processes alike are
made clear in this ravishing cascade of
colour and motion.
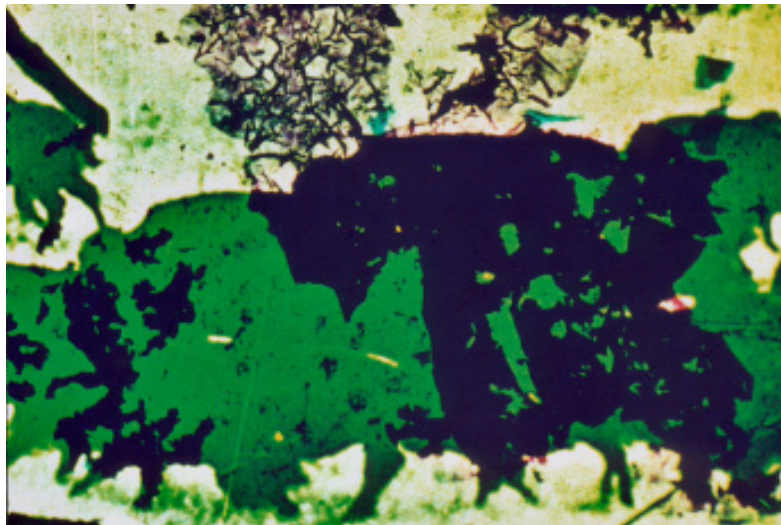
Once
(Barbara Sternberg, Canada, 2007, 5:00, 16mm, b&w, silent w/ sound prologue)

Poetry. Film. Light. Life. An excerpt read from Rilke's "Ninth Elegy" introduces this silent film which evokes the beauty and brevity of life. Images shimmer in an uncanny light. We catch glimpses only. Silent with sound preface.