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6 | The Western Edge: Oil of LA and the Machined Image

> I had to admit to myself that I lived for nights like these, moving across the city's great broken body, making connections among its millions of cells. I had a cray wish that some day before I died, if I made all the right neural connections, the city would come all the way alive, like the Bride of Frankenstein.
>
> —*Ross Macdonald,* The Instant Enemy

In the Belly of the Basin

Dreiser called it "the city of the folded hands." H. L. Mencken said it was "the true and original arse-hole of creation." Malcolm Lowry called it a "barren deathscape," exactly the sort of hell to which a suicidal spirit would gravitate. Faulkner concluded that "they don't worship money [here], they worship death." Brecht had a slightly different eschatological vision:

> In these parts
> They have come to the conclusion that God
> Requiring a heaven and a hell, didn't need to
> Plan two establishments but
> Just the one: heaven. It
> Serves the unprosperous, unsuccessful
> As hell.[1]

The object of such warm sentiment is, of course, Los Angeles, or at least that piece of the city inseparable from its stand-in in popular imagination, Hollywood. Long after a sour cohort of literary lions moved on to other habitats, the denigration of LA remains a favorite sport of artists housed in this nexus of urban postmodernity. A closely related activity offers invidious comparisons between the perceived styles and underlying philosophies of creative work produced here and in New York City, as if these two locations

were the sole arbiters of national taste.[2] Indeed, when the topic of discussion is cinema, the bicoastal cliché—like many other Angelenocentric truisms—contains more than a smidgeon of truth.

The notion that LA is a cultural wasteland would seem to mute the announcement of an alter-ego relationship with NY. Yet frequently subtending jeremiads of self-proclaimed inferiority are nods to the inarguable power wielded by popular culture industries, especially TV and music recording, based in and around the city, cheek-by-jowl with manifestations of elite culture. As cliché has it, nowhere in America are the demands of High and Low as blurred or as reciprocal. Hence a visual artist in LA whose work is defined as peripheral to codes or social attitudes associated with mass media consumption must contend with a kind of double-edged estrangement: perceived by opposing camps as either "in denial" or suspiciously nostalgic for an ethos of bohemian detachment. It is hardly surprising, then, that beneath the veneer of much "LA Cool" painting and sculpture of the past two decades is a choked anxiety symptomatic of a cultural setting only ostensibly immune to residual dogmas of modernism but a setting that registers simultaneously as omnipresent and amnesiac.

If only because institutional networks of publicity and financial reward are so meager, the situation for avant-garde filmmakers—as opposed to painters or even photographers—is rather different. Further, the discrepancies mirror but also diverge significantly from the plight of avant-garde filmmaking elsewhere. For instance, LA's experimental film scene has tended to be excluded from discussions by, predominantly, Eastern critics and scholars and when it *has* gained recognition there is a tendency to identify it with the terms of a specific "look" or technical facility borrowed from art-critical discourse on LA. As is the case with other avant-garde centers, a number of filmmakers began their careers making gallery art, and local painters and sculptors have occasionally ventured into alternative cinema; nonetheless, genuine collaborations between these creative arenas are erratic at best. On the other hand, instead of pragmatic or stylistic affinities, an attribute arguably shared by both groups is an iconographic fascination with Southern California's unique mixture of natural and manmade environments. Although the same claim might be made for the output of various cities, alternative filmmaking here seems unusually galvanized by indigenous, physical conditions of possibility. Which raises the issue of regionalism, a nexus of idiosyncratic responses to reigning aesthetic ideas—say, the ongoing impact of structural film's reductionism and reflexivity—couched in a cluster of local idioms. The outlines of such a position are already evident in David Curtis's early designation of a "West Coast optical/kinetic movement.[3]

Although this offers a tempting line of inquiry, several caveats are in order. Among the factors inhibiting a cohesive definition of regionalism is a tenuous relationship to the idea of a "national" or dominant avant-garde paradigm; in this sense, it could be held that all alternative filmmaking has a regional cast. Additionally, local participation has not only been relatively limited in scope but bears the consistent imprint of several makers who have worked and taught in the area since the sixties; for instance, Pat O'Neill's name appears as informal or technical advisor in the end credits of a sizable

number of films. If there is a case to be made for regionalism, it must take into account two unavoidable, and interrelated, predicaments: the proximity of the commercial film industry; and the role played by high technology in the region's postwar economic development and its contemporary social mythology. That is, my admittedly provisional use of regionalism as critical framework focuses on tensions between industry, or technology, and environment. Before surveying some recent versions of this tension as inscribed in representative films, a brief historical detour is instructive.

These days it is easy to overlook the fact that the origins of experimental film in America and in LA coincide exactly. What we know of the making of Slavko Vorkapich's, Robert Florey's, and Gregg Toland's *The Life and Death of 9413—A Hollywood Extra* (1928) indicates the terms of a recurrent ambivalence. All three directors—and one could also include the less blatant experimentalists Paul Fejos and Charles Vidor—adapted production methods, iconography, and syntax from nonmainstream European sources. They subsequently applied visual approaches discovered in the relative freedom of independent production to their industry careers. Vorkapich's condensatory montage sequences of the thirties and some of Toland's scale-obliterating work in *Citizen Kane* constitute well-known instances of this conjunction.[4] To be sure, individual and collective debts to German Expressionism and Surrealism were increasingly diluted by homogenizing pressures of the studio regime. It is clear, however, that the presence of a loosely knit film community and heightened access to professional equipment facilitated, and in turn deflected, the noncommercial impulses of aesthetically adventurous movie novices.

A second strand of the Hollywood interaction appears in the 1930s in abstract films by Oscar Fischinger and James and John Whitney,[5] a starting point for the later propensity to harness color and movement studies to the capabilities of animation and optical printing. This fusion of formalist invention and artistic application of sophisticated and costly imaging systems—engineered and controlled by large corporate interests—is shadowed by an often frustrating cycle of courtship and rejection, technical alliance and outright theft, that remains a singular feature of the West Coast avant-garde. While the Whitneys kept their distance from the lures of Hollywood production—except for ill-paid excursions like the credit sequence for *Vertigo* (1958)—John's projects required close cooperation with emerging technologies of data processing and data communications, realized through association with Bell Laboratories and IBM. Sponsorship in the form of direct and indirect grants, technology time-shares, or more nebulous exchanges of access and publicity continues to affect a wide swath of local art, for which precedents in avant-garde film served as partial models, if not cautionary tales. Although hardly confined to LA, the desire of a generation of visual artists to enlist resources of advanced industry blossomed in the late sixties with the acclaimed "Art and Technology" exhibit at the LA County Museum. Fittingly, one characteristic of this show was a profusion of cinema-aided and protocinematic installations. A less sanguine, yet telling feature was an implicit disavowal of the political meaning of high-tech borrowings.[6]

LA also played an underacknowledged role in the evolution of avant-garde psycho-

dramas in the forties. Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* was shot in the kind of lush hillside neighborhood that figures prominently in the stories of Raymond Chandler and proved a staple of forties film noir iconography. Even discounting Deren's interest in Wellesian flashbacks, the LA-based trance films of the period have a distinct kinship with the existential themes and strident lighting patterns of Hollywood noir. Several years after Deren moved east, Kenneth Anger, Gregory Markopoulos, and Curtis Harrington all completed their first important films in and through the sites and mythic subtexts of LA/Hollywood. They were close acquaintances, exchanged equipment and advice, and nurtured disparate attitudes toward the movie industry; perhaps most telling is Harrington's transition to feature film directing in the early sixties. The subsequent trajectories of these filmmakers are typical of the early avant-garde: a short-lived burst of activity followed by migration or a change in creative commitments. Without stretching the point, transience has often served as a multivalent trope in the description of both indigenous social arrangements and the exigencies of avant-garde production in LA.

A resurgence in the mid-sixties of nonlinear animation, and looped or optically printed treatments of found footage, revived an experimental niche in the promotion of technically polished image surfaces, a trait known in the artworld as "finish fetish." In retrospect, it was a halcyon moment for American experimental cinema in general, in which the vision of a broader, receptive youth audience jolted avant-garde enthusiasts into fresh alliances with adjacent art forms. In this heady climate, alternative films acquired immediate leverage from their imbrication with the counterculture: rock concert light shows (in LA, the collective Single Wing Turquoise Bird included filmmakers Pat O'Neill, Peter Mays, and Peter LeBrun); hallucinogenic street festivals; electronic music; and, to a lesser extent, local antiwar activism. Films that epitomize the youthful energies of the time—such as Burton Gershfield's stroboscopic lament for the genocide of Native Americans, *Now That the Buffalo's Gone* (1967)—hang together via an inflamed thematics of "dehumanization" and, paradoxically, a passion for rhythmic repetition.

By the mid-seventies, rapidly evolving institutional ties and fledgling artist-run organizations resulted in enhanced opportunities for screening and distribution,[7] increases in funding, and the gradual incursion of filmmakers into academia. Although the prime resources of the area's two giant film programs, USC and UCLA, continued to be staunchly dedicated to narrative and documentary discourses, nodes of experimental activity coalesced around strong personalities: O'Neill, Ed Emshwiller, Chick Strand, and Jules Engel at CalArts; Shirley Clarke at UCLA. On the other hand, local geography, the vagaries of educational employment and film exhibition, and the growing popularity of video tempered prospects for the type of bohemian urban community that helped sustain avant-garde momentum in New York or San Francisco. As production costs mounted and funding leveled off in the early eighties, artists such as Gary Beydler abandoned film altogether. The LA Independent Film Oasis, a loose screening and discussion collective that attracted some of the area's best-known makers, went dormant, leaving just two isolated venues in which to present new work.

Infrastructural cycles of boom and bust are of course the lingua franca of marginalized film production. In LA, however, such issues are inflected by broader creative and economic trends in Hollywood and its attendant or tangential industries. For instance, just as the utilization of fiberglass and polymer resins in airplane manufacture—also in surfboards and custom cars—has had an impact on LA sculptors such as Larry Bell and John McCracken,[8] Hollywood's accelerating reliance on intensive special effects is reflected in stylistic shifts in avant-garde visuals. It is, of course, significant that a host of local artists support themselves financially through commercial film production. Moreover, their labor, for the most part, is not limited to semiskilled laboratory or projection jobs but involves specialized editing, optical printing, titling, and sound recording. Hence it is curious to discover in the waning technical credits of, say, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) a full roster of avant-garde talent. But the significance of commercial involvement is discernible only alongside a near-total dismissal of influence of, or even fascination with, popular genres. Rather than trying to lump together a bunch of recent avant-garde films under the rubric of "nativist" allegory, it pays to look more closely at particular relationships between physical environment and techno-culture as they surface in a few exemplary films, including the summary achievements of Pat O'Neill.

Manifest Destiny

Tom Leeser's *Gratuitous Facts* (1981) and Betzy Bromberg's and Laura Ewig's *Marasmus* (1982) evoke, in rather different ways, confrontations with an enveloping social milieu based on pervasive media images and an aura of mechanized human contact. They share a basic strategy of unleashing skeins of referentiality inside formal structures whose purpose is to short-circuit or upend coded significations of popular culture. All three have made films elsewhere, but Leeser's work has a clear, if ultimately superficial, resemblance to the West Coast avant-garde stereotype: beautifully crafted; awash in dazzling color and varied textures; conceived around optically denatured bits of TV or movie found footage. *Facts*, along with Leeser's previous LA films, *Renee Walking/TV Talking* and *Opposing Views* (both 1980), negotiates between iconographic context (or how it structures meaning) and descriptive or denotative elements contained by a given image; as Leeser puts it, "how we perceive an image as object, and as cultural and political information."[9] In *Renee*, the mediating climate is the multichannel flow of daytime TV, shown as a concatenation of seamless yet alien languages of identification, from detective dramas to advertising, soap opera to news reportage. The core of this seductive assault is its inevitable seepage into the dynamics of intimate, personal relationships, a transference that imbues the banal events with a hyped, disfiguring dramatic logic. Conversely, we see how TV solicits, perhaps requires, individualized readings of its mass-produced contents.[10]

The pretext in *Opposing Views* is the polarized design of Cold War rhetoric and the formal pun on ideological conflict drawn through the narrative convention of shot-countershot. This initial insight is amplified by a variety of tacky spectator and sports-

action shots arranged in the same editing figure, creating a syntactical as well as an iconographic framework for competition. This is close to the analytical territory honed by English structural filmmakers Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice, but in contrast to their didactic rigor, Leeser's focus on history and cinematic language is constantly buoyed by playful, associative linkages predicated on shape or movement.

In the same way that a well-known clip of the 1959 Nixon-Krushchev "kitchen debate" functions as generating source for *Opposing Views*, fragments of a poorly made industrial advertisement for a Styrofoam decanter spawn the structural shape of *Gratuitous Facts*. The film begins with titles in stenciled lettering, as if on a crate or commercial package, superimposed over a field of video dots. Color-saturated, diagonal video patterns, mimicking the common malfunction by which color images dissolve into black-and-white, recur as visual static. These abstractive patterns are compared to walls and cyclone fences enclosing industrial sites; both are spatial interruptions that also carry their own intrinsic meanings separate from the objects they surround. The flow of the film suggests a sharply condensed daily TV schedule with the camera position alternating between commercial transparency and pointed subjectivity. A salient perspective is that of reporter, or perhaps archeologist, digging through and recontextualizing a group of strange artifacts in the form of kitsch footage: a tooth held by pliers, a desert-bleached skull, a fossilized rock—all held up to the camera for close scrutiny by unseen sleuths.

Similarly, found footage from a variety of sources is sewn together and tested for coherence through criteria of shape, color, or narrative activity. A dominant, all-purpose shape or gestalt is given at the outset: a light bulb glows lurid red then gets even brighter. This image is roughly continuous in graphic outline and symbolic association with a parade of objects: the Styrofoam decanter, an underwater diving suit, an astronaut's space suit, John Glenn's domelike head at an American Legion banquet, a dolphin leaping for fish, smokestacks at a refining plant, and, last, the cartooned word "idea." Leeser's method here is to cue visual symmetries or odd displacements by rapidly juxtaposing materials already altered by filters, optical matting, and related procedures. In one chain of reference, a petroleum plant—involved perhaps in the manufacture of the decanter—appears next to shots from a B-movie space epic; it's a plausible sequence of "airtime" that ties Hollywood product to the depredations of oil conglomerates.

Marshall McLuhan's outmoded thesis of "warm" and "cool" mediums is recalled in alternating images of heat or water, expressed at times by red or blue overlays. An ingenious trope finds television itself vouchsafed as an ocean, with the iron-suited diver as immersed spectator, or alternatively, a surrogate for the struggling artist. Voices on the soundtrack create an additional layer in the decoding of media artifacts, especially an officious documentary narrator who extols the virtues of Pompeii "before the long silence fell." Other spoken conduits of information—announcements of time, weather, topical headlines—are filtered by a haze of white noise. Leeser creates an implicit contrast between Pompeii artists "representing the ordinary life of the people" and the social alienation felt by contemporary avant-gardists. When did the rupture occur? Attempting to evoke the late stages of a "great silence," *Facts* sketches a society

that has learned to love the (media) Bomb, spending its days stockpiling images of its own slow-motion destruction. The last shot at first seems like an anomaly, a young girl posed self-consciously in a crude home-movie remembrance. The isolation and reflective authority of the image derive from its raw, unadorned recording of "ordinary life." Appearing as something left over, a remnant, it calls into doubt the mercurial completeness of what has gone before; as if a piece from an avant-garde autobiography had wandered into the visually scrambled array. The ending benefits from a strange poignancy, which acts to seal Leeser's distance from prerogatives of both poetic and structural styles (the latter is given a playful nudge through a dialogue of "conceptual" intertitles).

Leeser has insisted that in his work the "tyranny of the surface" is not the issue. Yet what remains problematic for the viewer is the delicate balance between exposing origins and cultural meanings of distinct shards of image and welding them into a dense, kinetically pleasing container. Although the syntactical flow of Leeser's films could never be mistaken for that of TV, looming disparities and contradictions are at times subsumed by fascination with a composite image's technical brilliance. Rather than a capitulation to forces of mass manipulation, however, ambivalence toward the machined image reveals something useful about the reciprocity of fabrication and packaging, an insight that extends from heavy industry to the more illusionistic realm of movies. In its condensatory power, *Facts* approaches, as it simultaneously refuses, the condition of smoothly rendered commodity (the decanter, which, as the ad shows us, is appropriate for both "hot" and "cold" substances). Like its plastic analogue, *Facts* situates itself as a newfangled object retrieved from the detritus of a "multistaged energy conversion," whose facile surfaces are neither tyrannical nor totally divorced from their original productive contexts.

It should be stressed that *Gratuitous Facts* does not satirize or deconstruct specific film or television genres; nor do its techniques obviously mirror those employed by Hollywood in the creation of fictional worlds. Nonetheless, there are tantalizing connections between the LA avant-garde's interest in denaturing processes and commercial genres that rely on integrating partial images from discrete sources (say, live action and animated models) into compelling dramatic scenes. Science-fiction and horror films are not only Hollywood's special-effects sentinels, they are currently the two most financially successful genres in international as well as domestic markets. In science fiction, displays of futuristic technology inherently celebrate the "alien" sovereignty of immense capital outlays directed at ever-more dehumanized film processes; in horror films, the technological imprint is usually masked by themes of human resistance to supernatural forces. Avant-garde work manifests a version of the sci-fi ethos in no-budget hi-tech quests aimed at transcending parameters of space and time, and also through the iconic fusion of natural-mechanical beings (think R2D2) or landscapes. Needless to say, since experimental cinema disregards conventions of linear narrative, the effect of reordering—i.e., mechanizing—photographic recordings is validated in rather different terms. Recent films specializing in optical printing techniques evidence

a submerged stake in issues raised in standard sci-fi fare: for example, Diana Krumins's *Babobilicons* (1981), Diana Wilson's *Rose for Red* (1980) and *Eclipse Predictions* (1981), and Lyn Gerry's and Estelle Kirsh's *Abacus* (1979) deal in slippages between things we usually identify as organic versus those we designate as mechanical. Not all contain conspicuous sci-fi imagery, like *Gratuitous Facts* and a group of late-sixties West Coast films,[11] yet their tentative acceptance of technological transformation as both inevitable and capable of triggering redemptive knowledge limns a major conceit in commercial sci-fi.

Although frequently grounded in present-tense, recognizable settings, horror films address consequences of technological domination, also common in sci-fi, but they do so in less thematized, more ambivalent idioms. As films such as *Alien* (1979) and *Altered States* (1980) attest, generic boundaries between horror and sci-fi are highly permeable. At the risk of overstating the distinction, technology in horror is brought to bear not on landscape or objects but on "unnatural" bodies, either by destroying them in ever more gruesome ways or by reconfiguring their exterior or internal structures—a familiar motif is that of scientifically altering some subhuman/superhuman species.[12] Instead of the natural world as machined, horror replaces body parts with complex filmic effects. The manifest project in horror is, however, clearly the inverse of "bionic" corporeality: upholding an unfathomable uniqueness of human form *as* consciousness. In contrast to humanoid figures in sci-fi, monstrous creatures are almost always outcasts from society and their trajectories of dehumanization serve as displaced reactions to universal feelings of powerlessness and isolation. Hence sci-fi and horror films pose complementary versions of our relationship to emerging technologies, with the instrumentality of E.T. and Yoda—ushering in a desired fulfillment of human consciousness—answered by the return of atavistic impulses in the technobeasts of *The Howling* (1980) or *An American Werewolf in London* (1981).

From this angle, Bromberg's and Ewig's *Marasmus* can be seen as a kind of feminist avant-garde horror film, the Bride of Frankenstein set loose in a postindustrial wasteland, the choking maw of monster LA. Bromberg's earlier films, *Ciao Bella* (1979) and *Soothing the Bruise* (1981), segue tiny bursts of narrative action with seemingly random bits of domestic life. Neither personal documentaries nor poetic diaries, they shift gears with razor-edged velocity, tossing together disparate materials—color and monochrone, positive and negative stock, straight photography and optically distorted images—in aggressive combinations of emotional tonality. Visualizing what *Bruise* refers to as "speaking in tongues," they hover on the edge of control, caught in a circuit of female victimization and female resistance.

All three films offer scenes of women in agitated movement against some unseen male violence: go-go dancing, tumbling down a barren hillside, lurching in circles around a mountain parapet. The central, deracinated figure in *Marasmus* moves through a series of brightly hallucinatory spaces, alternating between offices in a sterile skyscraper, bleak industrial sites, and even bleaker canyon terrain. There are multiple references to and metaphors for birth, death, and abortion. The protagonist's body, covered by a clear plastic shroud, lies near an oil pipeline, the stillborn product of this

environmental blight, or perhaps its deceased victim. The relation between industry, female reproduction, and disease is signaled by the film's title, a childhood ailment found in the urban slums and rural poverty areas of underdeveloped countries, caused by gross malnutrition. It is a disease where infants acquire the blank inanition, painful motion, and wrinkled skin of the elderly, with bloated bellies that grotesquely recall pregnancy. The plastic shroud, a dry bush held in front of the woman's face, and skin seen through water all suggest an attempt to empathize with the condition of starvation through psychophysical metaphors of self-abnegation.

A chorus of Third World women is conjured from a succession of ethnic costumes, topographic allusions such as desert landscapes, dancelike performances, and phrases of non-Western music. It is an intentionally vague evocation—part Middle Eastern, part Asian, part African—a vision culled from dreams or, differently, cognizant of the dangers of privileged identification with depressed cultures. The dire plight of women, the film seems to imply, is a transnational reality. *Marasmus*'s heroine is often gaudily dressed and made up; she delivers eye-rolling expressionistic grimaces and exaggerated hand gestures indicative of madness or bodily "possession." She is a minatory incarnation of the voice heard at the beginning of the film: "What am I supposed to do? Feed the starving children, starve my own country?" But she is also the angry voice of former congresswoman Bella Abzug: "We have nothing to apologize for. We don't make policy," a line heard over a shot of the protagonist raging in front of the walking-beam of an oil pump. It's a crucial moment: the female outcast, disenfranchised and metaphorically starved, confronts a mechanical and, we sense, patriarchal edifice that has sired her condition.

Technology, or rather the social ecology it has engendered, is inscribed as Other—and as unavoidable. Suspended between glittering corporate spaces and barren (but somehow feminized) wilderness, the outcast finds solace in neither. Through iconography and enacted events, a venerable avant-garde theme of dehumanized corporate technology is subjected to feminist rereading. For an older generation, romanticized visions of battles with technology helped validate tenets of independence, personal freedom, and creativity.[13] Here the problematic of technology as creative antipode is less idealized. The formal language of Bromberg's previous films is exceedingly rough, providing much of their vital energy. An immediate shift in *Marasmus* is the degree of formal control, including the removal of fictive events from contact with a spontaneous, documentary milieu. Editing rhythms are more regular and there is greater reliance on filters and optical printing. One could account for this change by citing the important collaboration with Ewig or simply remarking that it is a *later* work. Another possibility involves rooting the tensions between surface execution and anarchic structure in a specific cultural context. That is, contemporary LA art can be said to prioritize responsiveness to the look and functions of technology as a means of "cultivation" or control of natural elements. In *Marasmus*, the symbolic compass of control, including technical mastery, is understood as inherently gendered, and is actively challenged by tactics of (female?) disruption.

Bromberg's and Ewig's film also needs to be recognized as contributing to recent revisions in the avant-garde psychodrama, a form originated by Deren and Anger among others. Like Deren's early productions, *Marasmus* is anchored by a changeling figure making her way through a threatening environment. Other revisionist psychodramas include Michael Guccione's *Legions* (1981), Vivienne Dick's *Beauty Becomes the Beast* (1978), and Ericka Beckman's *Out of Hand* (1980). What is significant is that the form is being appropriated largely by women filmmakers and repositioned within broader cultural discourses, in which the dilemma of image production (a marker of cultural power and sexual difference) is no longer peripheral. If the new versions are less subjectively tortured, they are just as angry and erotically charged.

The Shadow and Its Shadow

It is possible to reformulate the technocentric "alien agenda" operating beneath both Hollywood's megalith and the fringe cadre of the LA avant-garde film. During the last decade or so, the dominant industry has strayed from a visual paradigm of straight photography of recognizable backdrops—a cinematic benchmark of realism, tweaked by appropriation of cinéma vérité techniques—toward a ruling ethos of artificial, phantasmic worlds with a concomitant disengagement from overt social themes. Put another way, the prime locus of industry creativity has begun to shift from mise-en-scène, the stage of photography and acting, to a moment of production which privileges *rephotography,* opticals, and postproduction generally.[14] In cruder terms, this development represents a return to the studio environment and its aura of Taylorized oversight, but it also underlines an increasing creative practice of subcontracting in which directors (George Lucas, for one) assume roles closer to those of engineer or project manager than auteur.

On the other hand, an implication of special-effects practices is that commercial directors have, in certain respects, moved closer to the creative stances of local avant-gardists. In fact, several ballyhooed technical achievements were pioneered by experimental makers for the depiction of otherworldly states. To take one example, *The Demon Seed* (1976), an otherwise dismal sci-fi/horror concoction, contains abstract sequences crafted by Jordan Belson, who has done effects for other films and from whom, it is rumored, the penultimate slit-scan sequence in *2001* (1968)—the progenitor of recent space epics—was purloined. Belson's contributions are deployed in the visualization of an omniscient supercomputer bent on ruling the world. Stripping away the film's admittedly silly narrative trappings, it features the sort of fusion of "higher consciousness," advanced technology, and graphic abstraction that corresponds to one popular profile of avant-garde cinema.

Studios have as well employed experimental filmmakers as consultants. Among other notable projects, Scott Bartlett managed to leave his stylistic stamp on the Warner Brothers flop *Altered States*. A lexicon of devices familiar to avant-garde enthusiasts—flicker, solarization, multiple superimpositions—are discernible in, for instance, *The Black Hole* (1980), *Wolfen* (1981), and *One from the Heart* (1982). In a similar vein, effects gurus John Dykstra and Douglas Trumbull have parlayed rudimentary

knowledge of the avant-garde canon for kinetic light shows etched into *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (both 1977).[15] The point here is although Hollywood has a long history of inserting visually hyped passages into otherwise straitlaced narratives—starting with dance numbers in thirties musicals—today's interludes are not only semiautonomous in their stylistic ruptures but feature a level of abstraction unusual for Hollywood in any era.[16]

It might be tempting to conclude from these observations that a portion of the most successful commercial genres is now devoted to aesthetic principles consonant with those of the LA avant-garde. Such a position is grossly misleading. A more grounded explanation for the seeming convergence would address the myth of (Hollywood) technology in an era of broad economic instability and the challenges to longstanding bastions of American industry—such as automobiles and aerospace—from countries such as Japan. That is, there are ideological ramifications to effects-driven genres that exceed any speculative alliance with experimental methods or objectives. For starters, the visual elegance and fantastic themes of recent sci-fi and horror films serve a typical goal of deflecting attention from pressing social ills. On another, perhaps more salient, level, displays of technical mastery—regardless of the apocalyptic stories they illuminate—help to embed a set of beleaguered national values as *formal* cinematic properties: Innovation, Efficiency, Expansiveness, Power.[17] No comparable jingoistic markers can be dredged from the sleek surfaces of Lesser, Bromberg, and their colleagues.

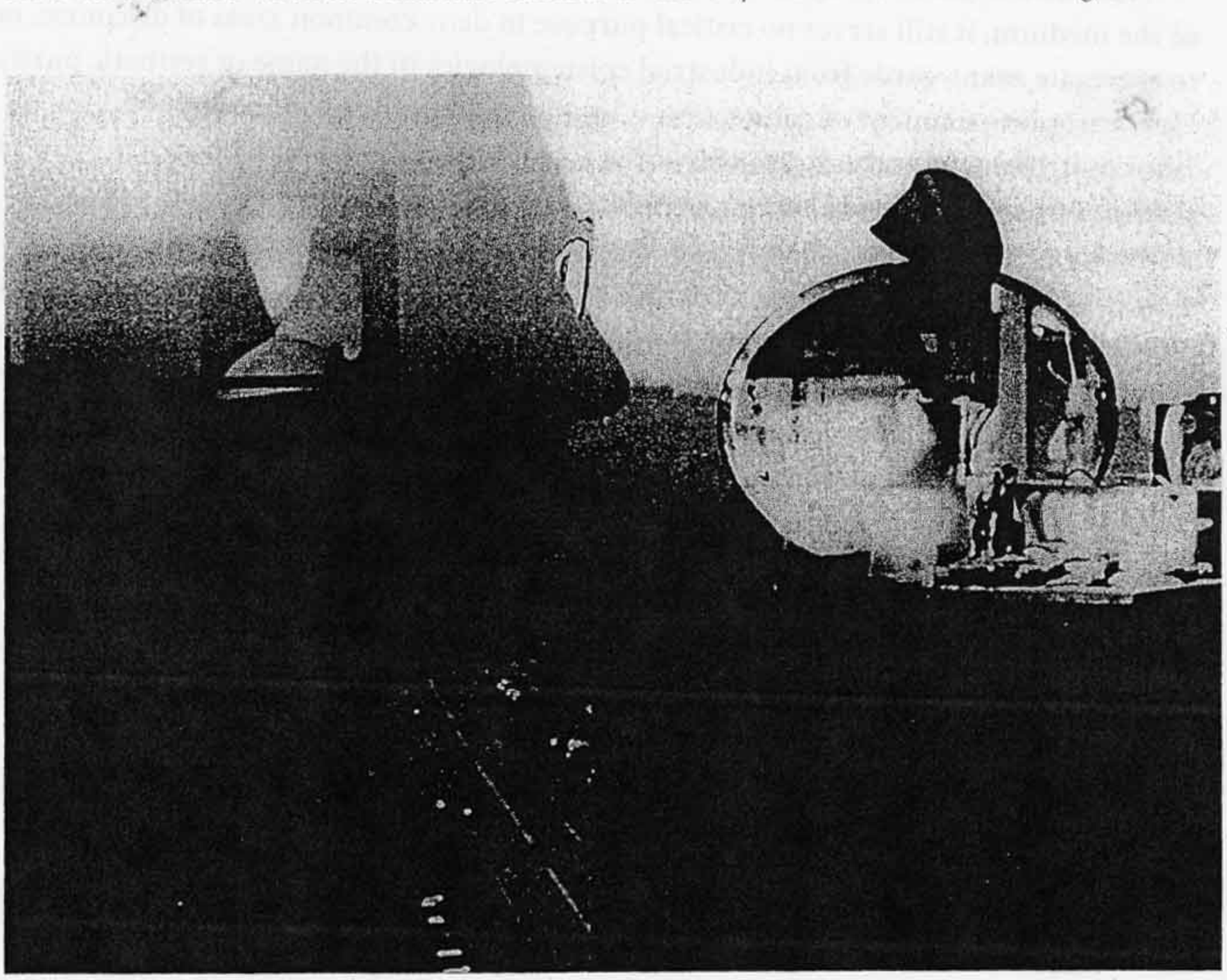
Nonetheless, in granting essential and unalterable polarities between the two uses of the medium, it still serves no critical purpose to deny common areas of discourse, or to segregate avant-garde from industrial epistemologies in the name of aesthetic purity. One intriguing filament of connection is that images produced, separately and in collaboration, contain implicit defenses of the authority of those tools by which movies are defined in the public imagination. There are, to be sure, various reasons why the local avant-garde has resisted competing claims of personal-poetic filmmaking and the analytical, reflexive practices of the structural style. LA might be said to constitute a "third stream" of development, were it not for the existence of additional regional streams and tributaries. At the risk of oversimplifying a local spectrum of formal approaches, a notable preoccupation involves coupling densely packed referents with coolly distanced—i.e., nonsubjectivized—frameworks of enunciation. The tendency to maintain a neutral organizing presence is, in many instances, accompanied by the absence of didactic gestures of demystification. Image construction is couched as neither spontaneous recording nor the execution of a blueprint. And image succession is rarely a matter of exclusively logical, or psychological, coordinates. Finally, there is a certain—or rather, *uncertain*—optimism regarding the place of the machine in an artificial fabric that indulges as well as transforms the immediate physical environment.

Surface Tensions

Last year, an evening hosted by David James to honor Pat O'Neill was held in an ornate theater at USC, a venue more accustomed to the intricacies of Alfred Hitchcock or Herbert Ross than those of a scion of the avant-garde. In this case, the location enabled

O'Neill to screen two recent 35mm projects, *Let's Make a Sandwich* (1982) and sketches from an as yet untitled film [*Water and Power,* 1989]. The former takes a piece of commercial kitsch—a domestic primer in how to prepare a weird sandwich, produced to plug the virtues of natural-gas cooking—as a jumping-off point for layering a deck of diverse images (animals, a seascape, an animated digestion diagram). The untitled film has extensive time-lapse photography of light phases and human movements set against urban, coastal, and desert backdrops. If aspects of both films signal a departure for O'Neill, they also extend the condensatory, defamiliarizing tactics that galvanize his previous work. His decision to switch gauges was predicated on a desire for greater scale and more exacting control of the image surface, qualities clearly enhanced by the size, brightness, density, and clarity of 35mm images. Exploring O'Neill's films, it is important to consider the notion of "surface" as a site of intense transactions, a realm where themes of regulation and disruption, the everyday and the fantastic, are intertwined in comic and menacing articulations.[18]

After studying industrial and graphic design at UCLA, O'Neill started making films in the early sixties, having abandoned an interest in sculpture. Within a few years he had become a hub of local energies by dint of his films and teaching, but also through his exceptionally generous technical counsel and production assistance. At the core of his reputation is the recruitment of the optical printer as primary tool in the hermeneutics of image construction and reception. The shadow of the printer hovers over O'Neill's work in a manner similar to the way camera movement invigorates



Water and Power by Pat O'Neill. Photograph courtesy of the filmmaker.

Michael Snow's oeuvre or the splice acquires sweeping metaphoric significance in Stan Brakhage's filmography. The point is not that these films are *about* their instruments of production, but that a specific technique, fixing and privileging one stage of production over other stages or operations, authorizes a powerful union of imagination, creative exigency, and formal execution.

A few (untutored) observations are necessary on the nature of optical printing—which I am using to cover an assortment of procedures including stationary and traveling mattes, image enlargement and reduction, even subtitling. As practiced by O'Neill, composing with a printer fundamentally means making images of images, working at a minimum of one remove from the photographic recording of reality. It adopts the individual frame as principal unit of filmic utterance. But unlike, say, Peter Kubelka, for whom the frame is an absolute unit of syntax, O'Neill's fascination with optical printing posits the single frame as divisible, as a field capable of sustaining internal juxtapositions among noticeably discrete parts. Changes within a given sector and changes in relations between areas develop in the course of what are perceived as single takes, deflecting the usual place of editing in the generation of meaning. Though it is often thought of as a somehow streamlined or automated process, O'Neill's version of optical printing is as painstakingly "hands-on" as almost any technique known to film; indeed, its closest relatives are cell animation and hand-painting.

A typical O'Neill image consists of three or four iconic components occupying separate planes—sometimes just a corner, sometimes the majority of the frame. These fragments frequently diverge in scale, in material (animated shape, found footage, straight recording), coloration, iconographic category (indoor/outdoor, organic/cultural), and so on. There has been a loose progression over the years in the look and formal range of O'Neill's planar compositions. In earlier films such as *Runs Good* (1970), either a foundational image is "decorated" with one or more rectangular, screenlike cutouts, or several levels are melded through superimposition. In a more recent film like *Foregrounds* (1978), the device of miniframes inside the larger frame gives way to a closer integration of planes in which designations of "primary" and "secondary" are rendered moot. Despite this compositional shift there has been a persistent theme of "projection," in which human or mechanical shapes, whether moving or stationary, take on the function of screens on which new image permutations appear. Sometimes the master trope of objects as reflective screens is literalized in footage displaying the mechanics of film projection. In *Sidewinder's Delta* (1976), regular pieces of paper placed on barren desert ground begin to glow with eerie, metallic color transformations and are then gently rolled and turned as if by the wind. The image suggests both a mini–movie screen filled by desert light and an organic formation, some rare geometric desert flower that breathes new colors at the touch of scorched air.

Projection screens, a shape that *is* but also *contains* something else, can be read as an allusion to the mechanical relationship between projection and recording, or re-recording, of parallel filmstrips inside the printer. In successive print generations the composite image gets farther away from conventional camera illusion, more constructed and hermetic. The irony is that O'Neill's films are also strongly evoca-

tive, even cannily descriptive of a real Southern California environment itself often discussed as an illusionistic amalgam of disparate features.[19] As if in imitation of the method of their fabrication, compositions often begin slowly then build to moments of visual intensification, then begin to fade. Entire sequences in the later films pile up in a similar fashion: a fluid configuration is added to another without discernible narrative or formal trajectory. Rhythms may accelerate or slow down, referential fragments may become more abstract; there is often a brief wry coda. The critical difficulty in describing O'Neill's work stems in part from the complexity of individual images, but it is also a consequence of their laconic, transient organization, re-presenting familiar objects as prone to mysterious incursions.

It is possible to regard the optical printer as a kind of alchemical device acting on original photographic materials to bend, recolor, dissolve, replace, even reverse their coordinates. Indeed, a prevalent image category is the turning of apparent solids into liquids or gaslike transparencies, giving visual shape to otherwise ephemeral phenomena. The title *Sidewinder's Delta* is instructive: it suggests a riverbed of snakes, but delta is also the symbol for change, and the sidewinder is a rattler that thrusts its body forward in a series of loops. Hence it poetically invokes the movement of film through printer or projector (the filmstrip as snake is parsed most spectacularly in a late sequence of *Foregrounds*). Sometimes the agency of change is explicitly cued as the banuasic Artist: hands encased in editing gloves snap their fingers at the start of *Easyout* (1972); a godlike fist assumes the shape and scale of a mountain in *Sidewinder*; the toe of a work boot meddles with the bottom of an image in *Saugus Series* (1976), where boots later serve as an abstract expressionist canvas for sprays of intense color.

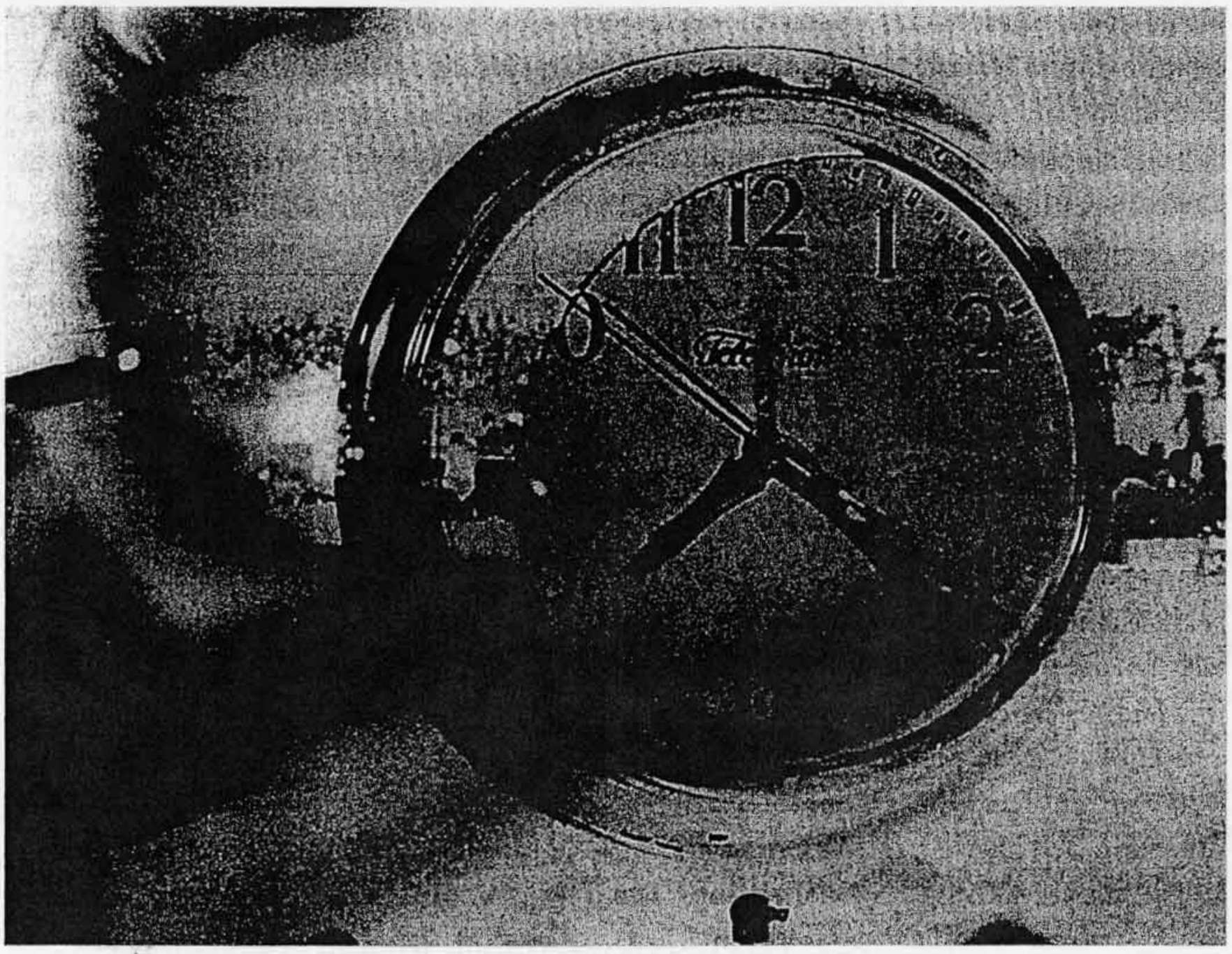
More often, however, the mediator of change is associated with something mechanical. Electronic music or machine noises on O'Neill's soundtracks frequently provide an initial linkage. A sputtering generator in *Sidewinder* seems to fuel an extraordinary exchange of colors between an electric lamp and a cactus; when the generator shuts down, so do the tonal variations. Machine sounds are also used to mock their ostensible synchrony with an image, as when an annoying saw in *Saugus* eventually defies its own rhythmic command. Natural elements such as clouds move with the cadences of wind-up toys; a stream is redone in the tones of an industrial paint job; a potted cactus soars like an airplane. The theme of nature and/as/versus machine can be split into a cluster of antinomies: animal instinct versus learned behavior; the prerogatives of animal versus human; conformity and its opposite as benchmarks of contemporary society; the cycle of growth and decay.

An early indication of how O'Neill treats these tensions is evident in *7362* (1967), named after a high-contrast print stock and featuring split-screen laterally symmetrical images of, primarily, an oil pump and a nude dancer. At one point the movements of these two figures, flattened and abstracted, seem to merge, but eventually the human form asserts its distinctive prerogatives of nongeometric shape. The film is a redaction of Férnand Leger's *Ballet Mecanique* (1924) fitted to the specifications of LA's nightclubs and oil facilities. If the body-as-machine conceit is open to social critique, the affect of *7362* is nonetheless staunchly abstractive.

Runs Good (1970) is O'Neill's most concerted effort at picturing a malignant mass society. It relies heavily on found footage and recalls the films of Bruce Conner in its sour millenarian mood. It opens with a drive through a tunnel into a blinding light (perhaps that of LBJ's gift to the lexicon of the Vietnam War), and what follows is a "newsreel" from a postholocaust future. People and animals have been reprogrammed in their behaviors: women act like dogs in a piece of soft-core pornography and, for good measure, their stunts are looped to blunt the erotic effect; animals at a pet show pretend to be human; a lonely bison humps the ground as a voice on the soundtrack singles him out as a nonconformist. A gigantic snail clicks across the screen, dwarfing an airplane and a crowd of sun-worshipers. Entertainment is reduced to strict utilitarian limits, with a football game compared to military formations and the lockstep of a digital clock repeating a countdown from ten. Even an orange grove is depicted as part of a horrifying manmade order. A counterweight to the film's overabundance of control is signaled by intermittent breakdowns in the image. In fact, a recurrent tactic has an image or sequence reaching a level of mechanical refinement—subtended by the domination of natural elements—that precipitates a disruption by nonrepresentational blobs or lines gone haywire.

Sequences that resist, as they simultaneously affirm, a mechanical or rational order occur in *Runs Good, Easyout, Saugus Series,* and *Sidewinder's Delta*. Over the course of O'Neill's career, the unraveling of old footage thematically redolent of domestication or institutional constraint—in *Runs Good,* this includes shots of a lion-tamer, cops, and a wedding ceremony—seems less agreeable than doctoring culturally unhinged images such as cartoon characters. In later films, O'Neill adopts objects or elements that would appear to be completely immune from visual reconstruction: twigs, rocks, plants, clouds, streaming liquids—things whose irregular or transient shapes, random arrangements, or immeasurable durations make mechanical intervention all the more surprising. In *Saugus,* for example, a three-pronged stream of viscous fluid is at first mistaken for a waterfall in front of foggy rocks. The original photographic source for this deluge is perceived as nonmanufactured, while the sinuous shapes described by the separate prongs are inferred as neither animated nor looped. Yet as the colors inside the stream start to change in harmonious patterns, like a color organ, the unavoidable conclusion is that rational agents have caused the permutations. Further, the artificially saturated colors suggest an industrialized homogeneity. The composite image is a typical O'Neill "oasis," a refreshing hybrid composed of natural elements altered to resemble mechanical objects, or ostensibly artificial parts that acquire amorphous properties of a natural regime. The ultimate fiction of loss of control, the purposive confusion between manmade—meaning regimented, at the service of culture—and natural is amplified by the filmmaker's amazing technical mastery. *Techne* is elevated to the status of a theme because it is clearly in excess of the quotidian image-contents and because it emblematizes a friction attributed to the geographic context to which those images refer.

Finally, it is worth noting that ambivalent transactions with technology have been a potent idea in LA artmaking at least since the sixties. Two characteristics are especially



Water and Power by Pat O'Neill. Photograph courtesy of the filmmaker.

relevant to O'Neill's films. The first is the adoption of materials and processes expressing contradictory relationships to the natural world. Among prominent examples from the sixties are Kenneth Price's ceramic eggs, Craig Kaufman's swelling plastic reliefs (which recall animal carapace or rock formations), and Ron Davis's "marbleized" paintings. Of more recent vintage are Eric Orr's environmental sculptures that employ water, fire, and precious metals.

A second characteristic relates to avant-garde film's vaunted project of perceptual retraining. Specifically, vacuum-formed or other advanced industrial materials are wielded to emphasize the role of light in fluctuations of shape and color. Though they differ vastly in aesthetic goals and applications, James Turrell, Doug Wheeler, Ron Cooper, Jerrold Ballaine, and Robert Irwin have all constructed work highlighted by conflicts between real and implied projection, translucency, and reflection, and underwritten by the shifting apprehension of form as alternatively intrinsic to the object or produced by a viewer's contact with a contingent environment. Thus a parallel exists between the aspiration to "paint with light" and the avant-garde's rigorous interrogation of the depth illusion.

Larry Bell is perhaps the artist whose aesthetic vocabulary, commitment to perceptual process, and complex handling of technology most closely resemble O'Neill's accomplishments in film. And although he has never been concerned with explicit social imagery—unlike, say, Ed Ruscha, who shares with O'Neill an affinity for surrealist

visual condensations drawn from local scenery—Bell's sculpture poses a convoluted relationship to his increasing sophistication of means. His private annexation of the production machinery of commercial plating, his well-documented establishment of a factorylike studio, and the increasingly *organic* connotations exuded by that technology have interesting correspondences in O'Neill's career; for starters, a self-described turning point was his purchase of an optical printer.

Bell's large glass constructions made since the early seventies—including *Homage to Griffin, Dilemma of Griffin's Cat* (both 1980), and the *Cat Variations* (1981–82)—actively engage the spectator in a play of perceptual contradictions whereby reflected and directly transmitted shapes appear to materialize and dematerialize as our gaze shifts or we move around a given piece. Spontaneous, chance occurrences in the experience of this work stand in blatant contrast to the precise control exerted (and felt by the viewer) during the design and building stages. To be sure, if the tone of Bell's sculpture is antithetical to that of several of O'Neill's films—highly theatrical, metaphysical, utterly devoid of wit or self-mockery—his suspension between natural and manufactured formal properties is strikingly similar. The poet Robert Creeley, in an introduction to a recent catalogue, compares the experience of Bell's art to a "changing sky or river." The plying of metaphors from the natural world is indeed a common critical response to his art. Bell himself, in the same introduction, says that a series of vapor drawings "represent very strong personal feelings. Not anguish, pain or joy but daily mundane drama . . . most of all they contain my efforts to overcome strict technical discipline, to become spontaneous, intuitive, improvisational in my approach."[20]

A central problem, then, for both Bell and O'Neill is the balancing of advanced technological processes with overtones of a natural disorder or anomaly. If the look of Bell's sculptures suggests a liquid recontextualization of the smooth architectural skins of skyscrapers, O'Neill carves a similar niche between city and country in his transformative welding of machine life and elemental vitality, although unlike Bell's, his iconography of the manmade is funky, unpredictable, antiutilitarian. Moreover, their shared concerns echo a traditional ambivalence in American culture toward the position of nature in historical trajectories of progress, simultaneously threat and providence, that is famously, and convulsively, manifest in the nineteenth-century writings of Thoreau, Emerson, and Melville.[21] O'Neill clearly recognizes the personal as well as the collective status of his opposing forces; they are not idealized or made redemptive by his approach but situated on a continuum that reflects, as it constantly reinvents, its origins in an indigenous milieu.

Postscript: O'Neill's City Symphony

Water and Power begins with a high-wire act, a defiance of natural law by human—or rather, technology-aided—resolve. Then immediately there is a fall. A time-lapse low-angle shot shows a soaring bridge at dusk beneath which scuttle tiny beachgoers; a lone figure walks across the trestle, pauses, climbs the railing, then leaps into the evening sky like a shooting star. How the shot was made, its degree of verisimilitude or artifice,

remain opaque. We realize only later that this sumptuous opening is practically the least complicated image in O'Neill's remarkable 35mm short feature, a lambent rush of quasi-narrative, documentary, and formalist prerogatives. The first image is a bridge, as it were, initiating cyclical rounds of accretion and dissolution, ebb and flow in its widest sense, permeating every quadrant of the LA basin, the extended body of a city rife with anxious illusion.

A city symphony in the great 1920s tradition of Dziga Vertov, Joris Ivens, and Walter Ruttman, O'Neill's film is a flagrant hybrid: a "big-budget" (approximately $60,000) avant-garde epic produced over nearly a decade and sporting optical effects every bit as polished, as innovative, as those of Hollywood blockbusters—in particular, a personally designed computer-driven time-lapse camera program capable of minute increments of motion between frames. Moreover, there are specific references as well as identifiable moods that connect O'Neill's portrait of LA to commercial movie genres of the past. Hollywood—in the form of quotations from film noir, De Mille, two early von Sternberg dramas, allusions to westerns and to irradiated sci-fi monsters from the fifties—floats over the proceedings like a ghost in a dream factory, creating a zone that encompasses not only streets and city skyline but adjacent desert landscapes and ocean tidepools. They are all part of an omni-production line. Once again there is the trope of an oasis, inhabited this time by human wanderers whose impossibly sped-up movements are answered by glacial topographic shifts in seashore and desert floor. Ultimately, the film both is, and is about, the clockwork mechanisms of human/natural interdependence.

O'Neill accumulated footage slowly, often through trial and error, by taking long solitary treks into remote areas. In some sequences, durations of up to six hours are compressed into minutes. With the basic photographic materials in hand, he then subjected them to varied processes of matting, superimposition, and so on. The painterly studies that emerged from this arduous gestation were then stitched together into a loose narrative fabric secured by informational titles, a vague historical progression, and an ominous mélange of movie voices and obscure verbal anecdotes.[22] In a manner analogous to his construction of images, the history of LA is sedimented in overlapping layers, from references to Native American and pioneer outposts to the laying of the infamous 1910 pipeline from Owens Lake that spurred the growth of a modern urban matrix. Allusions to different eras drift through scenes of contemporary ethnic diversity in LA's bedraggled downtown district and the cookie-cutter sprawl of middle-class suburbs.

Predictably, O'Neill's film has been compared with Godfrey Reggio's ecological attack on urban blight, *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), yet the disparities between the two are more illuminating than any superficial congruences. While Reggio's film flaunts, even fetishizes its time-lapse vision of technological society run amok—in essence, denying any complicity between his fancy camera apparatus and corporate domination of society—O'Neill is typically sensitive to, and skeptical of, his own inscribed mastery. Indeed, at times *Water and Power* seems to comically taunt the puny resources of cinema as wan metaphors for the heat and light and ceaseless animation of natural

elements. A *bricoleur* almost without peer, O'Neill is ever mindful of the material limits of his art.

Unlike the distanced, if also enraged, narrational presence in Reggio's work, *Water and Power* is imbued with a tantalizing nimbus of subjectivity. On one level, it is possible that the film's framework of knowledge derives from one or more of its dramatic "characters," intermittent figures that perform small tasks within scenes of extreme temporal compression or that narrate individual sections. Another reading is that the source of enunciation is O'Neill himself. A bunch of signature images (a running dog; a porkpie hat) recall earlier films, the filmmaker takes a fleeting turn before the camera, and several characters share a rough physical resemblance to O'Neill. Behind the trappings of a city symphony, then, may lurk the shadows of avant-garde psychodrama. To be sure, *Water and Power* is a synoptic project that touches upon and reformulates a number of persistent themes, including O'Neill's participation in commercial fiction films and TV ad campaigns.

There is even an enigmatic central location, a locus from which the film's hallucinatory journeys might radiate: a loft in downtown LA with a view of surrounding streets and looming mountains. Depending on how it is filmed, or the type of images that infiltrate its drab interior spaces, it looks like an abandoned industrial building, an artist's studio (in one sequence, a nude model poses in blurry fast motion), a large camera obscura, and a barebones movie studio in which memory, projection, and photographic observation are conjoined in a labor-intensive drama of image production. To put it another way, *Water and Power* operates in a no-mans-land, a cinematic ground zero. In its scale and ambition, its flirtation with narrative, and its profound reckoning of technology, O'Neill's tour de force is at once a boldly original initiative and a film that raises unsettled questions for the future of the avant-garde movement in general.

(1982–83)