

Joseph, Branden W. "Pat O'Neill at Santa Monica Museum of Art," *ArtForum*, January 2005, p. 176 (reproductions)

Recent years have seen a succession of exhibitions devoted to "expanded cinema," a genre-busting category that includes everything from multiscreen projections to happening-like performances to early experiments with video and other electronic technologies. From the Whitney's "Into the Light" to the Vienna Museum of Modern Art's "X-Screen" to the ZKM in Karlsruhe's "Future Cinema," this once-neglected genre had returned to the artistic mainstream. With "Pat O'Neill: Views from the Lookout Mountain," the Santa Monica Museum of Art surveys the forty-five-year career of the eminent Los Angeles-based artist and filmmaker, whose ten-minute film *7362* [1967] Gene Youngblood lauded in *Expanded Cinema* [1970] as paradigmatic of the "kinetic empathy" to be achieved in the "Paleocybernetic Age."

While Youngblood popularized the term "expanded cinema," his perspective was quickly marginalized as typically West Coast. Although James Meyer has recently questioned a similar bicoastal dichotomy in Minimal sculpture, O'Neill's retrospective reinforces rather than dispels such a divide. O'Neill's early sculptures, a few of which appear in the exhibition, display an affinity for molded contours and smooth, lacquered surfaces that relates them to the "finish fetish" of better-known LA sculptors such as Craig Kauffman and John McCracken. More evident is O'Neill's attraction to the collage of West Coast artists like Bruce Conner and Jess, whose seamless, Max Ernst-like montages of printed sources are echoed throughout O'Neill's many composite images. This aesthetic is also characteristic of O'Neill's films, which draw on the synthesizing possibilities of optical printing to layer and combine materials within a single frame. In this he distinguished himself from the important precedent of Conner's 1958 *A Movie* (which O'Neill saw as a graduate student), where the primary formal attribute is the linear editing of diverse, appropriated footage. Nevertheless, like Conner, O'Neill deploys found imagery to trope the metacinematic conventions of documentary, instructional, and/or Hollywood film genre in varying degrees and combinations.

In retrospect, the erotic biomorphism that recurs throughout O'Neill's sculptures, collage-drawings, and (especially, early) films seems to have emerged from his 1961 *Atlantic Auto Wrecking Series* photographs: A pair of mismatched oblong fenders with almond shaped headlights, for example, reappears as dark ovals in the high-contrast ending of his first film, *By the Sea* (made with Robert Abel, 1963), in the twin orbs that open *7362*, and in the oscillating circles of *Two Sweeps* [1979]. That the *Auto Wrecking* photos, according to curator Julie Lazar, have never before been printed or shown only positions them all the more as the generative pictorial unconscious for what would follow.

While comparisons between the many facets of O'Neill's production afford several such connections, the exhibition evinces something of an antiretrospective thrust. Not chronologically organized, most materials date from the last decade and a half, and each of his sculptures was reworked in 2003. And since O'Neill's *Water and Power* [1989] and *Decay of Fiction* [2002] together nearly outlast the entire output of his first twenty-five years, the daily film screenings seem similarly weighted toward the present. Implicitly questioning retrospection, however, surely complements an artist for whom the forces of place and memory must compete with the surface-oriented inauthenticity of an oversaturated, contemporary image realm. As film historian Paul Arthur notes in the catalogue, "In O'Neill's post-narrative (rather than non-narrative) Los Angeles, history has collapsed, time is definitely out of joint, and we can no longer parse substance from illusion. Regardless, human memory persists and so does the urge to shape an otherwise confusing welter of site-specific impressions."

While "Views from Lookout Mountain" represents a deserved celebration of one of Los Angeles's central artistic figures, it was not the only even to feature O'Neill. Shortly after the exhibition's opening, *7362* was screened in "A Psychedelic Picnic," a program of experimental film projected after sundown in the Hollywood Forever Cemetery to benefit the Iota Center's film preservation program. With a lineup that included James Whitney's *Lapis* [1963-66], Scott Bartlett's *Off/On* [1967], Dan Fox's *Omega* [1970], and Adam Becket's *Heavy Light* [1973], the outdoor screening was transformed into an ersatz "be in." Whereas the retrospective presented *7362* primarily in technical terms (Arthur only briefly notes its link "by reputation to the psychedelic 'head trip'"), the cemetery audience freely indulged in the film's "mind-

blowing” pyrotechnics. And while the museum paid particular attention to the scored of O’Neill’s longtime collaborator George Lockwood, David Hollander, the picnic’s programmer, reveled in the fact that Joseph Byrd, who provided the otherworldly, synthetic accompaniment to 7362, would later record as Joe Byrd and the Field Hippies. (Their 1969 album, *The American Metaphysical Circus*, Hollander might have noted, featured guitar by Michael Whitney, whose computer film *Binary Bit Patterns* [1969] Youngblood also praised.) Like Byrd’s more successful venture as keyboardist for the United States of America, the Field Hippies locked his echoey, electronic noises into a production more recognizably of its moment.

Such connections may seem extraneous, if not gratuitous, in a museum context. However, in the larger reconsideration of expanded cinema, such porosity to wider cultural manifestations is precisely the point. For West Coast expanded cinema especially, the museum functions as a double non-site, disconnected from both the cinematic institution and the period’s generative, countercultural expansion. The inadvertent collaborations between museum and cemetery, then, brought an unexpectedly illuminating dialectical focus to O’Neill, whose most recent ventures (like the DVD-ROM *Tracing the Decay of Fiction* [2002]) continue to interrelate the artistic and the social, technical virtuosity and historical relations.