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An Interview with Pat O'Neill

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David E. James: I thought about starting with Oskar Fischinger. In the recent show of his paintings, I saw the one you own, "Happy Birthday." I think it's one of his best. How well did you know him?

Pat O'Neill: I never met him. I first heard of his work through Bill Moritz; we moved here to Laurel Canyon, the neighborhood in which he lived, in 1969 and he died here in 1968. I'd never seen any of his films. I guess Bill contacted Elfrieda [Fischinger's wife] because he'd seen a print or two in Europe and that was the start of their collaboration.

DJ: But you did some work with Fischinger's films as part of Bill Moritz's archeology project?

PO: Yes, archival work, copying, helping him to restore some negatives in the 70s.

DJ: So your contact with Fischinger came well after you had established your own areas of concern?

PO: Yes. I finished my first film in 1962. Then I started doing abstract or composite films. I began to use the camera as a sort of gathering device to provide elements for manipulation through re-photography. This led to 7362 which was finished in 1967. I didn't have much knowledge about the history of the medium at that time. I'd had maybe three film classes at UCLA and beyond that the midnight screenings at the Coronet and the Cinema Theater were my education. That series at the Cinema Theater was going on from the early sixties.

DJ: What kind of effect did those films have for you?

PO: I remember seeing programs at the Coronet as early as 1959. They showed all the European avant garde of the 1920s, and experimental work from New York. I had no idea what any of these films were but I was curious. I was never particularly interested in mainstream cinema, and here was an alternative. I saw Andalusian Dog, which they ran over and over again. And I saw Bruce Conner's A Movie about the time it appeared. And Brakhage's Dog Star Man and Maya Deren's Meshes of the Afternoon and Kenneth Anger's Fireworks. The Cinema Theater became a social phenomenon. "Movies Around Midnight" would pack the house every Saturday. In fact, it ran both Friday and Saturday for a few years. There was a festival two years running where they invited people to submit new films and there was a \$500 prize. Bruce Baillie won one year for Mass for the Dakota Sioux. Jack Hirschman would read poetry and Ruth Hirschman was beautiful and wore big hats. It was a very demonstrative audience, at times rowdy. They always started with an hour of serials; you got a dose of old Batman and Chandu the Magician and some old newsreels. So there was this sort of audience response thing for the bad guys in the serials and then we would get down to the serious part of the evening. It was kind of a family, though I don't remember thinking of it that way at the time. It only lasted about three or four years, and then I don't quite remember how it was that it happened but the Cinema became a porn house and that was that.

DJ: That social group didn't shift to a different theater or recreate itself any place else?

PO: There were quite valuable screenings at the Theatre Vanguard in the 1970s, but by then the moment had passed.

DJ: You mentioned Jack Hirschman; this would have been the Beat era in Los Angeles, the era of the Gas House. Were there any connections between the avant-garde film world in LA and the poetry world?

PO: Of course. I was fascinated with the poetry and I remember going to the Gas House in Venice when I was still riding a bicycle, from Inglewood, where I lived. I don't think I actually went to an event there, but in the daytime you could go in and wander around and sit in the bathtub and partake in the flavor of the whole thing. I liked to watch women who wore black. It was a big relief after Washington High School.

DJ: So, despite these screenings at the Coronet, there was no sense of independent films being made in Los Angeles?

PO: Not that I was aware of, though since I didn't know the film makers, I wasn't aware of where they were.

DJ: But if they were showing Brakhage films and films from San Francisco at the Cinema Theater, why weren't they showing films from Los Angeles, Gregory Markopolous, Kenneth Anger, or Curtis Harrington?

PO: Well, they may have been, I didn't see everything. Markopolous didn't work in LA did he?

DJ: Yes, he was in film school at USC. *Psyche* was made there. There was an area of underground film activity there in the late 40s. This was also the period when the Whitneys were living in Barnsdale Park, which Bill Moritz says was the center of a film community. But the way you remember it, the LA film of the 40s and 50s was not current in this Beat era sensibility?

PO: I didn't know about it. I was just a kid from Inglewood with no connection to anything. Then I went to UCLA, where I was sort of all over the place and finally wound up in the art school doing design. It really wasn't until I had been there about three years that I began working in photography and encountered a couple of teachers that were very helpful. But it was still photography that got me interested in moving images. It was John Neuhart at UCLA who showed me the Whitneys' films for the first time. I was Neuhart's TA in the summer of 1962. John Whitney came and set up his pendulum-actuated device and also showed some of his early work. And soon after that John Whitney was working on his piece for the US pavilion at the New York World's Fair and he showed *Catalog*. That one in particular was quite a revelation, the first time I had seen anything completely original in abstract film.

DJ: When you think of your work--*Water and Power* or the shorter films of the early 1970s--do you feel yourself to be part of any tradition? I ask because your films are not like any other films in the avant garde. Except for the people you influenced at CalArts, you're really a school of one. Do you perceive yourself that way or do you perceive yourself in an ongoing tradition?

[MFJ ordering] [MFJ Special Ordering] PO: There are certain characteristics that my work shares with the work of other artists, not all of them in film. One is a concern with perceptual ambiguity, with subjects whose presence has more than one explanation. Finding the point at which content is both unstable and balanced led me to the use of multiple images laid over one another. This was not new, of course, even at the time, but it is not an area many filmmakers have chosen to pursue, perhaps because doing so tends to hamper the flow of montage. My interest in relationships between elements in static shots has led me to make films that either have no cuts, or that have pauses between shots. It comes from my background with the still image. I am satisfied with a static camera and minimal movement. Combining imagery is also something that

is difficult to do without re-photographing the original elements. The means of doing this have been largely unavailable to filmmakers, and that has tended to make it seem needlessly technical. Nowadays, combined imagery is all over the place: music videos, network promotional graphics, commercials, God knows what. Some of it very well done, beautiful even, but, of course, all of it sponsored by some corporate entity or other. Did I have anything to do with that? Perhaps, indirectly. What can you do that won't eventually be redigested in that way? At this stage I just look at what I'm doing and try to forget everything else. All you can do is keep on.

DJ: When you talk about painting, it's usually New York painting seen in Los Angeles: Rauschenberg, Duchamp, and Johns. Were there any L.A. artists that were significant for you?

PO: Wally Berman, of course, the assemblagist. Wally lived in Beverly Glen for a time, as I did, so I used to meet him at the market; he always had some interesting involvement with something he found in the street or something somebody said to him. Later I began to see his work; he did the posters for "Movies Around Midnight," which were quite wonderful. I managed to save a few of those. As a teenager I encountered the car painter and striper, Von Dutch. I was very involved with automotive culture and built several cars, one of them from scratch, and did a lot of car illustrations.

I had a curious experience while I was a freshman at UCLA. I used to go to the library occasionally between classes, just go up to a random floor, and begin reading random books. One day I was looking at a 1943 bound volume of Life magazine, and I came across this article on a Salvador Dali exhibit. I had this amazing flash where I realized I was familiar with that particular issue of Life. I would have been four when I saw it, so I had sat and looked at Dali's "Persistence of Memory" and several other works, as a kid. I later became very interested in Dali but I had no idea how that image first got in there. There was no art in my parents' house, there was nobody interested in art or talking about it.

When I was taking painting classes in college, I tended to be involved with Surrealism and my instructors were appalled; William Brice said, "Destroy that. At least take it away!" Everyone was into figurative abstraction and painted like Matisse. So I didn't get along in the art school at all. My mind was split between art and design. I still wanted to design automobiles: that romance didn't die easily. I was in a very idealistic program in industrial design originated by Henry Dreyfuss in the 1950s. I was really wrapped up in that for four years and then I began to realize that I didn't want to do the corporate thing. I knew I didn't really want to do products. Basically I was moving shapes around. I wanted to do sculpture; I was having ideas in several media at the same time and spent all my time in the studio. I was very involved in making things, in learning about materials and processes. I took a similar approach to making movies. I was as interested in the projection situation as I was in the content of film, and learned about all of it from the point of view of making projected light phenomena.

My third film, 7362, was perhaps the most technical, most physical phase of my work. It was made right alongside of sculptures and assemblages and photo-combines.

DJ: And so you really found your voice as a filmmaker around the time that the late 60's California hard-edge, plastic light people came together, Turrell, Kauffman, and so on.

PO: Parts of 7362 looked to me like several of Craig Kauffman's reliefs, and I knew it at the time I was doing it. You're moved by a work and suddenly you realize that you've absorbed it and it's hanging out of your own work. Billy Al Bengston was another influence. "The Dentos," remember "The Dentos"? Around 1965. Sergeant-stripes motifs, lacquer painted on aluminum that had been distressed with a hammer. These paintings were sort of hieratic and iconic, but at the same time Pop influenced. The subject reduced to a kind of logo. In the years that followed were two very

influential moments: James Turrell's darkened-room installations, in which a mysterious light-shape materializes and becomes a volume--a movie made entirely in one's own perception; and Michael Snow's La Region Centrale, in which camera movement becomes subject matter, and the screening room turns into a camera.

It was a very good period. I was sharing a studio in Santa Monica with Carl Cheng; I was productive and getting in some shows and so on. I came to a corner where I had to get serious about making films. That's when we moved to Laurel Canyon and I had to give up the studio because I couldn't afford both places and the drive across town.

DJ: I've heard you say before that your shift in filmmaking was influenced by the Beatles' Yellow Submarine, and by a sense of a cultural optimism of that time.

PO: I don't remember saying that but maybe I did. When Yellow Submarine came along, it seemed to indicate a change was taking place. Here, suddenly was a mass audience, high budget film that was very experimental and that dealt with perception and consciousness, albeit in a very light-hearted way. The mid-60s were extraordinarily optimistic years; it seemed things were getting better. It actually seemed that the larger culture might expand to permit, even embrace the experiences that that film hinted at. Although I was more convinced by art that actually induced experiential changes like Turrell, Cage, and Snow rather than referring to it, Submarine was a phenomenon that happened in the mainstream. It is quite strange to recall the curious things that were going on at that time, the possibilities that seemed to be opening up. It seemed too good to be true, and, well, it was.

Although I was listening to rock and roll, I was never really heavily involved with music, the energy came more from the image. I was reading John Cage's Silence, and thinking about simplification and how you dealt with intention and how you deal with your own personality and get beyond it. I was also beginning to learn from my experiences with marijuana.

DJ: But you did work with the Single Wing Turquoise Bird .

PO: Well, I never really worked with them in performance. I used to provide film material, I knew Dave Lebrun and John Green and Peter Mays. I knew Peter from way back. We were both in the art school at UCLA in '59 or '60. Peter started a little film society and managed to get some money to invite artists. He invited Brakhage and Jack Smith and Gregory Markopolous. Smith and Markopolous came together and showed single rolls of the original of Twice a Man. Peter Mays was making his first couple of films, like Sanctus, on black and white super-8. For his master's degree he presented a film. I remember it was quite an electric screening. In the following years, Peter did a string of films. He was an influence, his enthusiasm was infectious. When Cinema Theater did a Brakhage retrospective in about 1963, I remember Peter Mays went to every show. Peter Mays and Bruce Lane used to be good friends. Bruce made a UCLA student film called Unc., three minutes long, a masterpiece. And then he spent ten years working on a film based on Kenneth Patchen's Journal of Albion Moonlight; he shot extensively and edited for years and its completion was always one of those anticipated events. Unfortunately it was never completed.

DJ: Now you are indicating that there was some underground filmmaking in L. A. . .

PO: Well, I knew a few people and I heard about others. Besides those I mentioned there were Chick Strand and Marty Muller, who moved to L.A. in 1966. Chick was at UCLA and doing wonderfully eccentric work right from the beginning. We collaborated on various projects--even made a commercial for Sears in which we did irreverent things with their back-to-school fashions. Reg Childs, who was just out of UCLA, put together a short film distribution company, Genesis, which lasted for four years and provided exposure for a number of filmmakers. Marty, Burt

Gershfield, and I worked for Genesis doing, among other things, trailers and posters. And then there was the Ann Arbor Festival, the first of its kind and a place where you could go (and still can) and see a whole week of new films of every possible kind.

DJ: But despite this, there just wasn't the momentum to create a L.A. version of Canyon Cinema or Anthology?

PO: No, there never were the cultural roots. I sent my films to the Ann Arbor film festival because I remember getting the hand bill in the mail. I think *By The Sea* was the first one and I think they rejected it. Then I sent 7362 and that got in. But when I sent them *Runs Good*, they gave me first prize. Then there came the coveted invitation to go to New York and do a screening at Millennium. I had some trepidation about how the film would be received. I was reading *Film Culture* by then, and figured I might get fried. But I had a screening and it was very warm and accepting; well attended, no attacks, no problem. Then there was a Cineprobe at the Museum of Modern Art. It always seemed that the community was there and in San Francisco, and you just sort of accepted the fact that filmmakers disregarded L.A., though audiences liked to hear stories about the excesses of the industry. I thought a lot about moving, but I didn't.

DJ: The next attempt to create an community would have been Oasis, which was started in 1976. You were one of the founders of Oasis?

PO: Roberta Friedman and Grahame Weinbren who were at CalArts were really the instigators. And Morgan Fisher, David and Diana Wilson and Amy Halpern, who had just come from New York. It seemed like there was a mass of about 8 or 9 people who came and went.

DJ: Did Oasis have any effect on your own work or was it more of a social environment?

PO: It was more of an attempt to make a community that one hoped would grow and would correspond with Millennium and the Cinematheque. The circuit of traveling filmmakers was a vital ongoing thing through the late 1970s and early 1980s. There was a lot of new work, there was writing about the work, and there were grants to support non-profit venues. It was an opportunity to present (and often to see for the first time) new work, particularly challenging pieces that would not be shown anywhere else. Keeping the screenings going was a great deal of work for a number of people, all of whom had other involvements, and finally the energy began to flag. Oasis never had a permanent home, and eventually the prospect of setting up another room full of folding chairs was just more than anyone wanted to bear. I don't know if it had any effect on my work. A few friendships from those days have endured. By 1981 everyone was tired. Amy Halpern and Paul Arthur tried to revive it in '82, but couldn't get a place to do the screenings.

I remember I was going to do a show of my own stuff when Oasis was housed at LAICA. I showed up the day before and I noticed that someone had built a wall across the theater; between the screen and where the seats were supposed to go an exhibit had gone up. They just forgot that there was a screening and we had to cancel.

DJ: You mentioned earlier that when you were a student you were split between art and design. It's that kind of bridge between mutually incommensurate spheres that's really produced the uniqueness of your work, your connections with the industry and industrial kinds of production on the one hand and the aesthetic sensibility that's associated with the avant garde on the other.

PO: I think there are several questions at work here. One has to do with the materials and, to an extent, the subjects of my work, and another with the necessity of making a living and paying the costs of an art process that has turned out not to be entirely self-sustaining. About the second. Most independent filmmakers support themselves and their work by teaching, usually in an art

school or a university film department. I did this for a time, and it was a more or less satisfactory experience, although I soon realized that it would prevent me from becoming immersed in a working process that would require concentrated attention over a period of time. Teaching is a start-stop start-stop kind of life, where one must always be thinking about next week's classes, and so on. I decided to opt out, and instead try to work sporadically in the free-lance model, hopefully making as much in a few months that I could in a year at school, and to have actual free time, and the equipment to work with. It actually did work out that way, for a while, and that may help to explain why someone such as me might live in Los Angeles. Starting in 1976, I worked on commercial projects, bought two optical printers, and set up a modest studio. The early 80s was a time of expansion in special-effects work, and even a small shop, such as mine, could, occasionally, have an involvement in a large project. During those jobs, as many as six people, most of them filmmakers on their own, would have jobs. (Some of them: Beth Block, Tom Leeser, Tim Shepard, Diana Krumins, Sandra Matthews, David Tucker, Diana Wilson, George Lockwood, Lisa Mann.) Of course, the reality of business is risk--not every job is profitable, and there are periods of extraordinary anxiety. Often the hiatus between jobs came to be occupied with looking for work, not concentrating, as I had hoped, on the process of filmmaking.

And then, of course, there is the question of what this is doing to you while you are doing it. I mean, it encourages habits of cleanliness, sobriety, and reliability, which are all good, to a point. It also tends to make one a bit indifferent to the implications of work at hand. This is the industrial model, after all, in the entertainment business. Most, if not all of what one does may be completely trivial and besides, nobody asked for your opinion. You learn to be satisfied if your client is satisfied. You build partitions in your mind to keep from worrying about thing over which you have no control. And then, one day, you try to remember what it was you were thinking about when all this started. . .

Anyway, David, the other part of your comment I think brought to mind the question of the aesthetics of the process--the by-products of the processes of special-effects work. I mean the support materials, the offscreen stuff, never meant to be seen, that which undermines the illusion. That seems to be a very powerful thing--the illusion and the denial of the illusion, both present at the same time. For example, opaque black mattes, film used to hide part of an image so as to replace it with another, have a fascination that comes from their incomplete descriptiveness. The edges of shapes are hauntingly photographic, yet their center is vacant and flat. Characters are both knowable and invisible. This is a technology particular to a very specialized craft, which I am re-using, if you will, in the spirit of collage.

DJ: But the kinds of skills you developed in doing industrial work, especially in the precision of the images, passed over into your own work and distinguishes it from any one else--there's nothing in it of the home-spun folksiness of Brakhage or Mekas.

PO: Well, I guess it's because I've always had a fondness for the particulars of the image and I was trying to bring them through to the screen. I'm really interested in making an image with complexity that you could really spend some time with. I've always loved large format photography, large negatives and contact prints, and I've always wanted to bring that quality to the screen. I really do love the big screen, bright projection and the image that really lets you see your way into depth and a complex understanding of what you are seeing. I don't think it's ever been fully explored; imagine being able to work in a format like IMAX!

Maybe this is the kind of thing you just have to attribute to differences in individuals' nervous systems. Perhaps we can't really know why we develop an affinity for a particular kind of rendition, a particular tonal range, pairing of colors, or quality of focus. I know I used to be very much more careless about the qualities of the image than I am now. Which is not to say that I find myself beholden to some measurable standard of image quality. It is nice to be able to define

something very clearly when you want to, and it also helps to be able to make it big--especially when the concerns of the image are perhaps not obvious, are perhaps subliminal, then scale and brightness render an experience available that might otherwise be lost in the transmission. Those things have led me in the direction of larger negative size.

DJ: Are there any feature filmmakers whom you find especially memorable?

PO: Oh many, many. Of course, Bunuel, Tarkovsky, Antonioni, Kurosawa's Rashomon. Godard, of course.

DJ: But not any Hollywood films?

[MFJ ordering] [MFJ Special Ordering] PO: I think when you frame the question as an opposition between Hollywood, specifically, and everything else, I would have to say that I find the genre somewhat impenetrable. I mean I respect, sometimes enjoy, occasionally even get involved with the narrative form, but I can't relate to it in the sense of being a part of it, or for that matter even understand why it should exist as it does. I mean the power, the pervasiveness, the incredible perfection of the form all stem from the aggressive competitiveness of an industry that defines the needs of its audience. And that in turn defines our attitude as a national culture. Uhh. . . blah blah blah . . . my antennae showing?

In the last few years I have particularly enjoyed Robert Altman's Short Cuts, Wayne Wang's Smoke, and in revival, Kubrick's Full Metal Jacket and Francis Ford Coppola's Apocalypse Now. There's a lot of interesting new material out there, I mean how can you even get a grasp on six hundred plus features a year? Let alone revisiting films you saw twenty years ago, and probably only once at that. How do you even find a place in your memory for all those stories, all those characters?

DJ: I want to come to the Ambassador Project, but first I wonder how you relate to the west. I feel that relationship initially in the role that landscape plays in your film, and you spoke about your sense of being an outsider in New York. Do you feel yourself to be a westerner?

PO: I feel an affinity for open, empty places, wherever they are. Since I live in a city, I feel the absence of that kind of space, and seek it out. Over the past twenty years I have spent whatever time I can doing time-lapse filming of skies: weather, light, storms, lightning. It has become an enjoyable ritual, involving sitting in one place, sometimes for days at a time while a shot is in progress, and then moving around over the landscape in search of interesting conditions. It's like getting paid to go fishing. The shots form a library, which sells occasionally as stock footage. I suppose that you make use of whatever you can in the environment, and as a result become part of it. I don't have any particular fondness for Western American culture, as opposed to Eastern, Southern, whatever. I'd rather make distinctions between mass culture and individual reality.

DJ: I perceive you as very much at home in American culture; you have this house full of American furniture, and whenever I've been here, there's always been contemporary music, and you have good connections with the Los Angeles art world.

PO: Hmmmm. Well I suppose so. I mean that's sort of a given, isn't it? We're in America, in California. That is both good and bad, depending on how you look at it and how things have been going. Today is OK. But I don't know about the Art World. I know a few artists.

DJ: Your concern with western landscape seems to me to run from Sidewinder's Delta through Saugus Series and right up to the present.

PO: Yeah, this is true, I do love the open land, the Great Basin. *Water and Power* was a landscape film that gradually became animated by the beginnings of human stories. That was how I solved in my own head the question of the way we could look at some of these places--by putting action in them. I didn't want to just shoot a western. Actually, for a time in the mid 70s I was in a western movie town in Utah and I was thinking that I would shoot some absurd kind of western. I could never think of what it was going to be, though. I could think about what it would look like, but I couldn't think of the action, or when I did, I realized I wasn't that interested in it. So yeah, I guess the connection I have with the west is the ground, the earth, and with this sort of human interface between human industry and what was here before we came, which really is about ecological disaster. On the other hand, there's the urge to become an activist and to do something politically, but that seems so overwhelmingly difficult and impossible, and it would take you away from ever doing anything in the way of art. I admire the people in *Earth First!* who say, "Look, these species are as important as you are." But I've never done an activist film, I've never figured where it would be possible to do it. It seems like what I do happens to have some subject matter, but is more like music really, not about real politics.

The question seems to be one of finding a satisfactory container for one's observations. Those early films were groups of ideas, events, strung together by thematic threads of place and condition. The individual parts were all made separately, so the film is not cohesive unless you can see it as a kind of journal, a collection of entries all by the same person but at different times and places. If you see it as a record of an individual who wanders the land and from time to time stops to comment on it, that is about right. The films move from one into the next, almost without interruption. All the time I was doing them, I was thinking about the form, thinking about a way to present film that was completely non-theatrical and non-sequential, that did not rely on any connection between its parts. This led to the endless-loop films, *Two Sweeps* and *Let's Make a Sandwich*, which were projected in rooms where the audience was free to come and go. I felt the need to get completely away from the theater situation as we know it.

DJ: What I was going to say about your films in general, especially *Water and Power* takes off from that; the films seem to me to be simultaneously overwhelmingly specific and powerful in terms of iconography, but at the same time seem very resistant to translation or interpretation. So commentary on them often consists of enumerating the techniques you use. Are people noticing what you want them to notice, or do the people who write about your films miss what is important to you?

PO: Well I'm trying to think of specific examples . . .

DJ: Paul Arthur seems to me to have written best about your films.

PO: I think he's understood certain things, he taught me certain things about what I was doing. C. Noll Brinckmann and Grahame Weinbren also did some interesting pieces in the late 70s, and Fred Camper reviewed *Water and Power* very favorably in 1991. That film was reviewed a good deal, because it was shown in a number of festivals. Often journalists accustomed to purely narrative work really draw a blank, the more tolerant saying something like "Someone tried to do something here--it's very technical but who can guess what it's about." One problem is that art journalists don't write about films, because the medium isn't in their department. And people who are at work on theory in film these days seem to be interested only in the narrative. I have chosen to use the language of one tradition while working in another, at my own peril. What I do has not really been on the plate of the people who write about avant-garde film. The New York writers went on to concentrate on features, because there really hasn't been much experimental work to write about. Do you see it as the end of the medium, or are we at a time when the medium is going to turn to something else like cybernetics? It has seemed like the dark ages for quite some time really.

DJ: That perception presumably affected your decision to shift to feature length or quasi-feature length works. A feeling that short films are not going anywhere. . .

PO: I began work on a larger-scale piece in 1983. The nature of this one was that it would take more time to unfold than anything I had attempted before. It would be about landscape, about camera movement, and about a kind of performance in which characters interact with settings in a very particular way. I decided right from the beginning that it would be a feature. A feature? All I knew about features was that they were over seventy minutes long, and that they were programmed by themselves, rather than in groups. That is just the duration of experience our culture has settled on. If I couldn't at least have a chance of getting a film into some viable theatrical distribution, why do it at all? The film took five years to finish, what with this and that, and it was shown in a good many festivals, sometimes to quite receptive audiences. It didn't get theatrical distribution, but it made it possible to secure funding to start another project.

I also realized that showing my work as an installation in a museum is not satisfactory either because it just isn't the right work for that. I always felt that Let's Make a Sandwich was probably the most satisfying thing I ever did in that direction, the most demanding and the most satisfying. But it only showed twice, once at the old LACE and once for about four days in San Francisco.

DJ: You've never had a Whitney show?

PO: When David Bienstock ran the Whitney, he used to show all of my stuff. He died in 1973, and nothing of mine was seen again until Water and Power.

DJ: Why have you never reduced Water and Power to 16mm?

PO: I just didn't have the money. I'd like to, I'd like to have it at Canyon. I was astonished when I found out how much it would cost; an interpositive, a reduction negative and a 16mm soundtrack was about \$22,000. I haven't deliberately kept it out of distribution. It's just that I'll never get the cost of it back. I could live to be 120 and I wouldn't get back \$22,000 in 16mm distribution. 16mm distribution has never done anything more than pay the cost of maintaining the prints. [In 1995, a reduction negative was made, and now 16mm prints are available. --D.J.]

DJ: So right now you're going to go in two directions; you're going to continue making museum installation pieces and you're going to go on with the Ambassador Project?

PO: That's essentially it. I'm finishing two films: the Ambassador one and then there's Lazy Susan III [since retitled, Trouble in the Image --DJ] which is a compilation of short bits I've been working on since before Water and Power. It will be about 40 minutes long.

DJ: When will the Ambassador film be finished?

PO: That's probably going to take a while, depending on funding. I applied for a Rockefeller Fellowship this year and that would take us through the next phase of shooting. The whole project will cost about \$250,000; I've used up about \$60,000 in funding and the Rockefeller is for \$35,000 and if I get that I can probably finish it. I think this one just might reach a larger audience. That's the nuts and bolts.

DJ: Can you describe the Ambassador project briefly?

PO: Basically, on one level it's a documentary of an existing site. The Ambassador Hotel is a curious place. It was called L.A.'s Garden Hotel. It was built in 1920, before any other buildings in

the neighborhood, before Hancock Park, as a society hotel, a big deal place for the elite to come for vacations. It's an interesting piece of architecture in that the way it's shaped--an "H" in the plan view--it looks back on itself. It has a massive Spanish tile roof, but in a lot of ways it's a crummy stucco building that's fallen apart and been redecorated time and again. It has the Coconut Grove nightclub that looks what Las Vegas looked like in 1970. So it has all of these contradictions.

When you're in it, you look out to buildings from the 60s and 70s on Wilshire Boulevard, and beyond that just a sea of low apartment houses and a startling view of the high-rise banks downtown. The sun rises behind the banks, symbolically, and sets over the ocean. Up in the tower, you find a clear perspective on the cultural politics of this part of the city. On the eastern horizon, you have Bunker Hill, the center of corporate LA, and down in the streets you have a poor and immigrant community of overcrowded apartment houses. You are in this place like an island. There is a fence around it and no-one inside. The city swirls around it. When I went there, I assumed there would be squatters and gang activity, but that's pretty much absent.

The ball will hit it within five years, but in the meantime it will take at least two more years of legal battles before they know what they are going to do with the site. The neighborhood is changing so much that development on Wilshire may no longer be seen as a viable alternative. Originally, Donald Trump and his partners were going to put up a 128 story tower of residential units and offices, the biggest building in L. A. He bought it in 1988, then the recession hit and then the earthquake and the value of the property dropped by half. Nobody seriously thought the Ambassador could be saved as a historic architectural site although I know there were efforts early on, but they backed off because the building was pretty badly damaged by the earthquake.

The Ambassador is the Robert Kennedy assassination site. It's perhaps best known for that--the shooting and all the controversy surrounding the investigation of it. It was where Marilyn Monroe stayed and apparently met Jack Kennedy and where J. Edgar Hoover lived and Walter Winchell lived when he was in L. A.--a lot of history that I'm just gradually becoming aware of. So it comes with all this cultural baggage; in the film business, everybody who ever passed through L. A. went there and has memories of the place. The first eight years of the Academy Awards were held there in the Coconut Grove. My uncle played trombone in the Jan Garber band, who were regulars there for years. I tried to get him to tell stories about those days, but he's forgotten them all.

But anyway, it's like an architectural container in which dramatic episodes can be set and so far I've just occupied myself with filming the container, finding ways to move through it, finding ways to approximate the way people might have existed in the space.

I'm going to composite it so that even the walls are going to be transparent, with sometimes people occupying not only the room that you are in but maybe the next one and maybe even upstairs, and other times it will be completely vacant, just the birds and the cats and the wind blowing. But it's completely unarticulated at this point. All I've been able to do is to make the shots, edit the shots, and think about the transition between the shots and try to deal with all the things that the light does. In about a month I know the sunset will shoot a shaft of light right up the entry hall and all the way up the main corridor to the main lobby. I didn't get it on film because I only saw it for one day, and when I came back, it was cloudy for a week and then it was gone. So I treat it sort of like exploring a valley in New Mexico that has a big rocky thing that looks a certain way in the summer. I wish it would snow or something to really change it. The problem is that it's really monotonous. I go down there sometimes and I think, Oh God, it's just this dreary old stucco building. But every so often, it will show me something that will just send a shiver up my spine. All of a sudden, I'll look in a room and there will be this reflection from a building across the street of the sun coming through a rippled window making this astonishing picture that's just there for

maybe five minutes. I've managed to get a couple of those events down, but the equipment is heavy and it takes a couple of us, and by the time you get set up its gone.

A lot of the footage is designed with the idea that its spaces would be occupied by a cast of characters who would move through it. All of our camera moves are under the control of a computer, so that they can be recreated exactly later on. The camera is mounted on a dolly, which rolls on a track: this, together with pan, tilt, and zoom make up its vocabulary of movement. Filming with actors can be done later in any large room, and then combined with the hotel footage in post-production.

So using this two-stage procedure, I am able to capture the architecture and then later invent the activity that is to go on within it. This is where I am now: writing a script for a film that already exists. We will use performers to tell stories in a naturalistic way and then be able to locate these stories within the constraints of the space. And, of course, the way a character is constructed and revealed is totally variable, as is the overlap of stories.

Curiously, the problem now is writing--conceiving characters, dialog, action. The complexity of this unfamiliar craft (unfamiliar to me: completely familiar to narrative filmmakers) has become a total involvement. I began by seeing the characters in about as much detail as George Segal's mute white plaster mannequins: soon I realized that their actions would become the heart of the film. So I seem to have backed into storytelling. It's all very speculative because I'm not sure what the story is going to be. And then there's the whole thing about the service side and the guest side. There's this whole world that is kitchens and corridors and service elevators and store rooms and huge laundry rooms in the sub-basement, and the tunnels that go out from the kitchen to some of the bungalows. The workers have their stories to tell and the guests have theirs, and you don't know much about what the workers' stories might be; you just have to sort of make them up from what you know about life.

DJ: Speaking of workers, both you and Beverly come from working-class backgrounds, and through education you've achieved a degree of class mobility. Do you feel that class is an issue in your work?

PO: No, I don't think so. Economically, I am middle-class, as were my parents. It's not an identity that I treasure, but there is no point in denying it.

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