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Pat O'Neill and the Western Precipice¹ :

An Elemental Table of Objects and the Events That Enfold Them

SOME INTERPRETIVE LANDSCAPES

According to Hopi legend, an ancient race of "Lizard People" dug thirteen underground cities, with a capital located beneath downtown L.A. On January 29, 1934, W. Warren Shufelt, a mining engineer, drilled a 350-foot shaft on North Hill Street looking for the Lizard People. He never found them.²

Not yet perhaps. But I suggest that Pat O'Neill is on the case and it is only a matter of time before the Lizard people join the O'Neill pantheon of objects, surfaces, luminescences, and topographies in search of celluloid strata. Of course they won't exactly *look* like lizards once they are assimilated. Mr. Shufelt's mistake was depending on a straight line.

This quest for stray items and planes of idiosyncratic but identifiable purpose is a partial key to unlocking O'Neill's filmic production. It is a production best characterized as a steady lava stream of encrusted geologies, interiors and urban grids -- dense and seductive, immersed in western pathos, myth, confusion and lust. No affixing, pinpointing or sweeping annotation of O'Neill's strata is possible. The artist remains prolific, enigmatic, and passionately engaged in the fabrication and choreography of an eccentric, devastatingly acute visual grammar that defies easy assimilation and seduces the viewer into new perceptual universes.

I'd like to offer the first few pages of a topographical primer to O'Neill's work, an essay slanted geographically and geologically down a Californian desert slope that terminates in either an outlet mall or on a beach. Dorothy Parker said that Los Angeles was 72 suburbs in search of a city but this is too flat East an orientation suggesting only clichéd *vastness* and *lack of weather*, a disorientation caused by her being too far a-field from the Algonquin. O'Neill's Los Angeles works in 72 simultaneous time-space continuums in search of each other. These time-warps often sidle into adjacent parking spaces, tease color

¹ This essay owes its title to Paul Arthur's indispensable essay: "The Western Edge: Oil of L.A. and the Machined Image," *Millennium Film Journal*. No.12 (1982-3): 8-28. Hopefully Mr. Arthur will abide my riffing on his most excellent title and view it as the homage that it is meant to be.

² *The L.A. Weekly*, January (1996) 17.

transparencies, move at sub-or supra-perceptual speeds. His films are rocket-in-time-lapse projectiles that defy linguistic codification and agitate all sensual inputs.

Basically I'd like to make a good sandwich, one that Mr. Schufelt could live off of for a few days down in the mineshaft before Mr. O'Neill unearths him and diverts his linear trajectory.

BEDROCK

To begin, I think I killed O'Neill's goldfish on Lookout Mountain. It should be noted in my defense that this fish swam in dangerous proximity to the optical printer, a contraption of alchemical import and mysterious control switches situated in the middle reaches of mythical Laurel Canyon. Granted, the goldfish was old and not terribly attractive. But I fear I let it languish because I was too immersed in a stack of O'Neill's extra sexy Robert Crumb comics, (while dining on his late season persimmons), to fully attend to my house sitting rounds. It is upon this fish and the admonishment of a Midwestern film teacher to "go West and *find* Pat O'Neill" that I construct an origin.

I mix this origin in liberally with forbearer smatterings of the roots of graphic cinema, René Clair and Francis Picabia's *Entr'acte* (1924), George Méliès "effects", Viking Eggeling and Hans Richter's collaborations in the 1920's, Walter Ruttmann's early *Opus* films (1924-25) and later "documentary" derived "symphonies" of speed and urban mechanics.³ Folded into this mix would be later-day experimental iconoclasts ranging from Harry Smith's recycling epics to Brakhage's late hand painted optical epiphanies and Gene Youngblood's *synaesthetic cinema*.⁴ O'Neill represents the friendly collision, (possible only in Los Angeles) between myriad elements including: abstraction, assemblage, hallucinogens,

³ Standish Lawder's discussion of Eggeling's quest echos concerns primary to Pat O'Neill's work as well. "Eggeling intended to develop a vocabulary of abstract forms and then to explore its grammar and syntax by combining these forms into 'contrapuntal pairs of opposites', within an all-embracing system based on mutual attraction and repulsion of paired forms." Standish Lawder, *Cubist Cinema* (New York: New York University Press, 1975) 43. Another side in this investigation of abstraction within film language is the rich interface between early cinema and the avant-garde. O'Neill's undisturbed, though accelerated landscapes and their interplay with photographically derived representational objects *and* fabricated multiple graphic interventions is part of this cross-talk between origin cinema and the 21st century. For an excellent dissection of early cinema and its influence on the "avant-garde" see Bart Testa, *Back and Forth: Early Cinema and the Avant-Garde*, (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario 1992).

⁴ For an unpacking of graphic cinema and its relationship to European Modernism read Standish Lawder's distressingly out of print *Cubist Cinema*, (New York, New York University Press, 1975). Incidentally, as a filmmaker Lawder also resides in the hybridity and optical invention that fuels much of O'Neill's work. In addition Gene Youngblood's classic, *Expanded Cinema* (New York, Dutton 1970) presages many of the contemporary media arts theoretical parameters and obsessions.

the sex-education film, Raymond Chandler, Michael Snow remixed by Oskar Fischinger and a really good 1971 garage band rediscovered and reissued by Rhino Records.

Laurel Canyon and Lookout Mountain Films are the operative fantasy loci -- a set of topoi that decidedly inflects all subsequent contributions to this text.

From this vantage point, in your peripheral vision a Quaalude-diminished Joan Didion careens down Lookout Mountain Avenue in a waxy Lincoln Town Car in search of “senseless killing neighborhoods”. The soundtrack is a bootleg jam session between Black Flag and the Art Ensemble of Chicago remixed by Captain Beefheart. It is a Los Angeles of light shows, the experimental film collective, Oasis, secret porno Snow White animation, mosh pits and a populace that reinvent themselves after ecological disasters. O’Neill is packing up the van with the time-lapse machine and rolling down Lookout Mountain in search of the West and its discontents.⁵ He misses sideswiping Joan by a coyote’s whisker.

TERMITE, NANOBOT AND RHIZOMES

Manny Farber writes that “a peculiar fact about termite-tapeworm-fungus-moss art is that it goes always forward eating its own boundaries, and, likely as not, leaves nothing in its path other than signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity.”⁶ As a contrast to what he terms white elephant art-the dead European masterpiece frame as constricting model, termite art “feels its way through the walls of particularization.” Termite art is subversive and molecular.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, place what amounts to strategic land-mines within Western thought when they posit the existence of the rhizome as the acentered anti-structure: tubers, tunnels, and tangents not necessary emanating from any single origin:

“Unlike a structure, which is defined by a set of points and positions, with binary relations between the points and biunivocal relationships between the positions, the rhizome is made only of line: lines of segmentarity and stratification as its dimensions, and the lines of flight or deterritorialization as the maximum dimension after which the multiplicity undergoes metamorphosis, changes in nature. Unlike the tree, the rhizome is not the object of reproduction:

⁵ In “Distinction of Idioms: Non-Industrial Film in Los Angeles”, David James puts to rest the cherished binary antagonism theory of experimental production in Los Angeles, the industrial film (Hollywood) grazing in arrogant cannibalism on the “avant garde” margins (and vice-versa). O’Neill’s production supports James’ theory of the multi-vocal, the “other dialects of film” present in Los Angeles that complicate the convenient binary. Holly Willis, ed. *Scratching the Belly of the Beast: Cutting Edge Media in Los Angeles, 1922-94*. (Los Angeles, Filmforum, 1994) 36-37. This catalog also contains Terry Cannon’s overview of the Oasis film collective of which Beverly and Pat O’Neill were co-founding members.

⁶ Manny Farber, “White Elephant Art Vs. Termite Art”(1962) *Movies*, (New York: Hillstone Press, 1971), 135.

nether external reproduction as image-tree not internal reproduction as tree structure. The rhizome is antigeneology. It is short term-memory or anti-memory. The rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, and offshoots. Unlike the graphic arts, drawing, or photography, unlike tracings, the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connected, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight.”⁷

O’Neill’s films operate by constructing such rhizomes, burrowing into and populating mile-deep stratas with shape-shifting nanobots that labor symbiotically with the termite; traveling, occupying, unearthing and generating.

Section # 4 of *EasyOut* (1971), laminates multi layers of opaque and transparent color shards and swimming flickering jagged cells that trigger other planes into synapse color shifts. An overlay grid of growing, hand-drawn corners hovers, attempting to impose order over the flashes of pink, vermillion, green, and yellow cells. The corner edges chew themselves out into transparent complete squares. This gnawed corner grid flicks off when it cannot organize the color flake plane. A slow motion yellow silhouette woman saunters across the screen on her independent plane, the grid pops back, morphing into mushroom-like caps that extrude lewd tongues, lapping in her direction. These seismic frictions between the graphic and the *real* (photographically derived) planes of action, are propelled by movement, transparency, color, and screen direction. These tangents fold into and under each other, seeping, slathering and infiltrating to create serial permutations. These are repetitive but unpredictable composites formulated by a nanobot that has jettisoned its original programming and is now drilling new tunnels with a crooked bit. Pathways permeate every image; responses are triggered at synapse speed and project a continual multi-dimensional morphology that observes no boundaries (except the size of your screen).

GRAIN

The projection loop *Two Sweeps* (1977) deploys similar *EasyOut* strategies but on a minimal, filmic molecular level. Two outlined circles occupy a plane. One outlined flat circle swings above another that is stationary. As one slows the other catches the rocking beat and begins its own swing as the top circle winds down. Movement is a virus channeled between forms. The outline of each circle is filled with pointillist fields of shifting white, blue or blue gray emanating from the background that isn’t really a background, just a porous field that bleeds multi-speed cellular grain. The grain plane is contrasted to, enfolded by, or blended into the swinging circles. The circles appear to either fade into the granular camouflage or refuse assimilation altogether. As they try on these skins inside and on top of their flat

⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 21.

bodies, their indecision causes a flicker and flash of activity, which chaotically provide “background” - a semblance of solidity based on molecular uncertainty.

The film frame now includes: hypnotic sway, permutations of grain, the action of one circle in relation to another and the lack of a fixed foreground or background. Viewers must perform a suturing together while burrowing into the seemingly rigid “simple” geometric players of this frame. The uncovering of what constitutes the circle-object itself destroys the hypnotic pull. The fissures are on view; the seepage between circle and background are both subject and object. The surface suggests structures, but the substrata dematerializes that illusion. As grain fills circle, circles rejects and assimilates grain and mimics the movement of organizing circle. *Two Sweeps* and the aforementioned section #4 of *EasyOut* (when digested), reveal that this creature-machine can morph infinitely into existing scenery, organic or man made. Grain, form and movement are nanobots existing dust-mite-like in microscopic symbiosis with images, invisible but ever present: digging, eating, revealing, reconstituting and rechanneling.

WESTERN

But there is the rhizomatic West... its ever –receding limit, its shifting and displaced frontiers. There is the whole American “map” in the West, where even the trees form rhizomes. America reversed the directions: it put its Orient in the West, as if it were precisely in America that the earth came full circle; its West is the edge of the East. (India is not the intermediary between the Occident and the Orient, as Haudricourt believed: America is the pivot point and mechanism of reversal.) The American singer Patti Smith sings the bible of the American dentist: Don’t go for the root, follow the canal...⁸

Paul Arthur writes, (in what remains one of the most astute encapsulations of what experimental film ‘means’ within the Los Angeles topography), that “the L.A. area prioritizes a responsiveness to the images and functions of technology and its reflection in past styles of art and mass-cultural production-where ‘technology’ (in Francis Bacon’s original use of the word) means the impulse to culturize the natural, to exert man-made control over materials, processes and their expressive contents”.⁹ This sense of culturalization is palpable in O’Neill’ films and O’Neill himself pinpoints this by saying, “I guess the connection I have with the West is the ground, the earth, and with this sort of human interface between

⁸ Ibid, 19.

⁹ Paul Arthur, “The Western Edge: Oil of L.A. and the Machined Image,” *Millennium Film Journal* 12 (1982-3): 19.

human industry and what was here before we came, which really is about ecological disaster.”¹⁰ The western “ground” in O’Neill’s frame is open for dissection, breeds new life, and can be dangerous.

A section within *Trouble in The Image* (1978-1995) segments and maps a pine-studded mountain landscape with an ominous automaton surveillance camera passing over in oiled machine grids. *Water and Power* (1988) is traversed by water pipelines that glint UFOs and dead lakes with underwater urban grids. The re-telling of settler-Indian wars is recounted solely in subtitles over black. An accelerated day and night washes over downtown Los Angeles enclosing a tide of surging and ebbing traffic, glinting and snaking through city corridors accompanied by bugle calls. A sepia Hollywood Moses parts the red sea and then cross fades into a sheer face of white quartz. In *Sidewinder’s Delta* (1976) a fore grounded giant cactus and light bulb watch over a solitary stone house with an illuminated blowing curtain window. The bulb and the cactus challenge each other, taking on multiple contrary and then aligned supersaturated colors and then fading out as a generator cut outs on the soundtrack. Simultaneously the lights in the house are extinguished. Cactus and bulb congruently flick into black silhouette as mournful coyotes call. The West as exploitable frontier and promise and the collapse of that promise coexist awkwardly. O’Neill accesses the landscape through a complex web of objects, textures and sound. The earth, rock, water and air respond, taking on characters and revealing fields of inquiry and decay. Entropy and shape shifting are the operative movements O’Neill posits as devices to organize, visualize and assimilate the sublime become ordinary and the ordinary become sublime.

ALCHEMY

Water and Power provides multiple tracking shots that incorporate objects, drawn landscapes and the animation of activity incised onto those landscapes. Line-drawn mountain peaks erupt in drawn red flames in the upper background as the foreground tracks, old Western-style store fronts, mammoth wooden dressers with drawers of effluvia, neon signs blinking, stacks of tools, and a geologic strata crossed by speedy time-lapse sunset shadows. Radioactive dot flame sperm creatures slither out of the hills as time-lapse night engulfs the landscape. Transformation comes through multiple scales, creatures (human or otherwise who activate the space) and entropic slippage. The side of a mountain can be smaller than an overflowing wooden dresser. Tools can be the size of architecture. All objects can potentially transform any other object or site. Alchemy can be inferred and its transformative possibilities manufacture these images. Red can become stone, an incised line can become an ant colony; a glimmer can overtake a lake. Accumulations, manipulation of scale, the breaking down of expectations of the orderly or explainable are the axes of operation. These transmogrifications seem a reasonable response to the Southern California environment.

¹⁰ David James, “An Interview With Pat O’Neill,” *Millennium Film Journal* 30/31 (1997) :126.

Decay of Fiction (2002) modifies this alchemical promise by drifting characters into the decayed shell of the Ambassador Hotel. Although O'Neill constructs a skeleton narrative for *The Decay of Fiction*, his alchemical predilections are intact. A lost woman in a blue dress leads us down a peeling hallway to a door that reveals the bedrock the hotel stands on. Re-occurring interstices -- in contradistinction to the flow of ghost figures acting out scenarios within the Ambassador -- alternate with characterless shots of architectural landscapes: falling wall paper like eucalyptus bark, a palm tree shadow climbing the side of a building, blue skies streaking a ballroom wall -- in a mind-boggling array of transmutations. The interstices, afloat in a soundstage black void, are bare of any Ambassador architectural referent. These insertions into the "larger" narrative, shrink the characters and place them on a tabletop where they mill aimlessly about, while being overseen by a life-sized frenetic time-lapse blurred man, who pages through a book. The pages accelerate until they are on the verge of combustion. It is no accident that floating in these intermediate spaces are objects that smolder and often burst into flame.

FLOW

O'Neill found an envelope labeled "Helen's Coreopsis" with seeds from a 1935 visit his mother had made to her sister in Nebraska. His film *Coreopsis* (1998) was made by scratching into developed and discarded pieces of film stock revealing pink, yellow and clear layers. This remnant of his memory of her is performed and inscribed in these excised layers. Yellow and pink patterned inscriptions suggest the flower's colors but also recall active photochemical synapses. Scratching notates a kind of hidden liquidity, a harsh inscription, which liberates the constitutive colors hidden in spent stock.

Squirt Gun Step Print (1998) also consists of base materials, raw stock "attacked" with a squirt gun loaded with developer, fixed and then loop printed. Like *Coreopsis*, *Squirt Gun Step Print* bypasses any camera-recording device. O'Neill's production of these films alongside a work like *Decay of Fiction* underscores the basic transformative impetus. While Bedrock, film stock, entropic captures, fires, transparent people, and mutating film layers provide an alchemical arsenal of perpetual transformative promise in *Coreopsis*, *Squirt Gun Step Print* literally *fixes* a transformative stream in order to wash the viewer in its macrocosmic projection. Aggregate, translucent, sandwiched, multi-temporal modes of composition require this flow and this definition, and return us to what makes film form, what causes film to capture form. Light, color sandwiches, chemical interventions and fixative become the film subject, a subject evocative of memory and a commitment of that memory to non-representational film. Sometimes alchemy is only a squirt gun brandished out the window of a speeding car.

SWARMS

In *Trouble In the Image* (1996) a 24sec second segment begins with a full frame image of the shadows of people waiting for a train in late afternoon sun. The shadows travel from right to left. But a solitary shadow rocks back and forth in the center of the platform. Suddenly temporal space explodes, as the left half of the

screen becomes an orange, high-pitched Western U.S. army battle. The soldiers appear to be shooting off screen left and running off screen right directly into the abutted right-hand blue half of the screen. This blue half teems with birds that approximate agitated film grain, moving in swarms according to their own program. The birds engulf a glowing orb that reveals itself (as it is drawn into focus) to be a light bulb on a wire. Overlaying these competing halves is a rotoscoped white line drawing of students writing. A teacher enters and leans in over the student. The teacher straightens up and leans further into the orange frame and appears to witness the original army being overrun by another. The teacher's exit coincides with the blue swarm, which is also exiting the frame in the upper right hand corner. An authoritative male announcer describes a light wave experiment involving complementary colors, "yes it's just the spot of red light above, a spot of green light below." The blue and orange complementary halves (already a complex composited realm) fragment into a quadrant of see-through figures drafted from narrative film engaged in dramatic gestures. Slaps are exchanged and guns pointed. All this has transpired in 24 seconds and has involved multiple planes of filmic reality and the suggestions of hundreds more. Perceptually we combine these images and rearrange them depending on which part of the stream we enter. We ascertain and store away for recall as the film continues to accumulate.¹¹

Associative memory can lead us to multiple sites: the authority of the education film voice teaching us about light wave travel and color, the pedagogical performance of rotoscoped teacher and learner, the Western movie war providing friction but no climax. The perversity of *writing* these films destroys the nature of their operation. It is imperative to be in the swarm itself. A viewer returns in warped recall, re-accessing, reinventing and reconfiguring the film. You cannot *relate* the film using description because O'Neill's films are designed to be inside of them. This interior position, (touching down with the swarm), positions the spectator to synaptically link and arrange layers for herself/himself. An O'Neill film will not be perceived nor recalled the same way twice. The impossibility of any visual unity or of a single authorial-based interpretation is clearly present within meticulously constructed composite frames. The hegemony of the maker, the omnipresence of his/her apparatus and the radical dissections deployed by O'Neill to control but also open associative meaning make entering his work at once tantalizing and multi-sensory. Art historical, filmological descriptions can not illuminate the density of O'Neill's project for such accounts necessarily suggest organizational linearity, but the fecund tubers of a rhizome (of which this essay is one tentative subterranean tendril) -- breaking off and sprouting new linkages in a 24 second crackle begin perhaps to articulate why dwelling in O'Neill's substrata is so deeply pleasurable.

CRUST

¹¹ For a close analysis of O'Neill's practice see the meticulous articles of Christine Noll Brinckmann and Grahame Weinbren, "The O'Neill Landscape: Four Scenes From Foregrounds," *Millennium Film Journal* 4/5 (1979): 101-116 and "Selective Transparencies: Pat O'Neill's Recent Films," *Millennium Film Journal* 6 (1980): 51-72.

*It rested on a crust of earth at the edge of a sea that ended a world.*¹²

*What I mean by this allegorical tension is precisely that there is this space of reading, of losing, of delaying, of thinking, that is folded right into a gap and stop-gap of recent history. That isn't a place of metaphorical or metaphysical comforts, of big histories, of ancient histories, but instead Los Angeles opens onto recent history in a catastrophic and primal way. Adorno said that it is always recent history that flashes back as primal. It's only recent history under mega-history that comes up for allegorical reflection over and over again in L.A., in ways finely suited to its being in the center field of all kinds of mediatic representations. Here the gap, the psychologized, mobilized preparedness is slightly differently skewed and framed but finally also caught up in a recent history of forgetting, of sudden remembering, of lapses and flashbacks, of all those discontinuities that I first ran into when I thought I would walk around L.A. for the first time.*¹³

O'Neill's primal scene includes tar pits, freeway flow, the educational film and the grain of technologically aided human paranoid construction. In the later third of *Sidewinders Delta* (1976) a brick brandished by an off screen mechanism creakily careens from one side of the screen to the other like a wrecking ball. Its scale dwarfs the translucent building on the side of a desert highway. It is circling and slowly builds up speed. The building is one of those quickie slab structures of indeterminate use. The wall facing forward translucently leaks the landscape of a ribbon highway backed by mountains. This wall is transparent but maintains structural integrity. The brick creaks heavily and circles closer. Gunshots are heard, and the screen goes black before the moment of immanent destruction. Closure is denied, but inference continues to reverberate. We don't see the *correct* images paired to the aural landscape. Our expectations are disrupted, and O'Neill happily lays plastic explosives in the gaps of narrative illusion.

You have to have a sense of humor about the end of the world, particularly because the world is always ending here in California. We are an edge cult, a clichéd and sometimes very real designation. Scrapping around that crusty edge and forming new mud shapes staves off the end for a bit. The West that O'Neill traverses is alternately fated and closed but nonetheless resonant with strange promises and perpetually reinvented finalities. Today clear cutting and organic farming co-exist in a California governed by an robotoid action figure. It is this schizophrenic identity that O'Neill uncovers and explores. He deploys co-existing stratas of obsolescence, repose, revolution, consumption, and anarchic agitation. Ultimately he

¹² Frank Fenton from his novel *A Place in the Sun* quoted in Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land*, (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1946, 1973): 269. There is no understanding of Southern California without Carey McWilliams.

¹³ Authors video interview with Laurence A. Rickels, author of *The Case of California*, (Baltimore & London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

engages us in seeing. As he puts it “we are shoppers in the second-hand store of technology adapting illusion machines to remind one another of the simplicity of experience itself.”¹⁴

Now, that’s a sandwich I’d send my nanobot out for.

¹⁴ *The Journal of Film and Video*, Vol. 54, No. 1 Spring 2002. California State University-Los Angeles, Department of Communications Studies.