

Hanhardt, John G. "A Conversation with Pat O'Neill." Pat O'Neill: Views From the Lookout Mountain. Ed. Stephanie Emerson. Germany: Steidl, 2004. 193 - 211

In early December 2003, I spent two days in conversation with Pat O'Neill at his new home in Pasadena, California, which he shares with his wife Beverly. Pat and Beverly are key figures in the Southern California art world. For over forty years, Pat has been a leading independent filmmaker and has contributed to the film culture of Los Angeles, both as an artist and as an organizer of experimental film screenings. With a group of artists and filmmakers, Pat and Beverly founded the Los Angeles film cooperative Oasis in 1976, fostering local support for and knowledge of alternative films. For many years Beverly also served as Provost at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), an institution with a major film school and animation program.

I have always been fascinated by Southern California, and Pat's films embody its many contradictions. Although I included *Water and Power* in the 1991 Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial and had followed Pat's filmmaking for many years, I did not know him like I did other Southern California film and video artists, such as Morgan Fisher and Bill Viola. So I welcomed the opportunity to interview Pat for the catalogue of this timely and important exhibition. In preparation for our meeting, I immersed myself in Pat's films, seeing many of them again, and I spent time looking at his digital photographs and reading through the notebooks he provided me. While Pat's films have been honored nationally and internationally, they are long overdue for focused critical attention. Through our conversation I came to know Pat better and gained a greater understanding of his work. And I was continually impressed by the modesty of his observations as he candidly reflected on his creative life. I believe Pat is one of the foremost artists of our time, and my conversation with him reinforced that opinion.

Many of Pat's films are uncanny meditations on place and history. He has approached filmmaking as a bricoleur, shaping seamless moving-images that echo the narratives, myths, and stories embedded in the everyday culture of Los Angeles and its suburban and rural surroundings. Oscillating between past and present, mythic and mundane, his art conveys a sense of melancholy that captures the chimerical seductions of Southern California and the Western landscape. Although Pat has always worked with complete independence, his films possess a sophisticated understanding of Hollywood. While retaining a solid distance between his art and the all-consuming power of popular culture, he has fashioned an artistic identity and creative life that includes collecting film footage fragments from such sources as cartoons, newsreels, and Hollywood movies.

In recent years museums have steadily integrated the moving-image artwork into exhibition programs and collections, just as galleries have increasingly realized the commercial potential of moving-image installations and projections. The various forms of the moving image have impacted all of the arts. Museums and galleries must now address the urgent need of preserving this body of work. In tandem with preservation, art historians and curators face the challenge of rethinking twentieth-century art history so as to place film, video, and new media alongside the other arts. Pat O'Neill's films occupy an important but as yet largely unanalyzed place in this history. He expanded the vocabulary of filmmaking and instituted an editing style that is not unlike that of a jazz musician who creates improvised music in time with the contemporary tempo. And like a jazz composer, Pat has forged an urban art form. He is an individual voice alternately speaking for a community or listening into the ever-changing migratory rhythms of the highways and railroads. As complex documents of the cultural fabric, Pat's films articulate abstract and representational images, and explore the light, color, and texture of movements in time.

Q: John Hanhardt

A: Pat O'Neill

Q: I thought we might begin with your most recent film, *The Decay of Fiction* [2002]. For me, it is about memory and place. With those themes in mind, I would like to ask you about how you first came to film. What was it that drew you to it? When did your interest in it emerge? And what informed that beginning?

A: I began thinking about film around 1961, when I was a graduate student in Fine Arts at UCLA. I was coming from an undergraduate design program, also at UCLA, during which I had increasingly concentrated on photography. I began making serial projections of transparencies, followed by loop projections in 16mm film, and finally short films. It was an extension of studio practice, using the film

camera and projector in conventional and unconventional ways to make and present images over time. Everything was open to consideration—projection on objects, on performers, on materials of varying opacity, and inside sculptural containers.

Q: Where did you grow up?

A: In south Los Angeles, right on the border of Inglewood, in a working-class and middle-class neighborhood that is essentially a flat grid. I went to UCLA and moved into a trailer near the Venice canals.

Q: What were your interests growing up?

A: Automobiles fascinated me early on. I was always an avid model builder, and, between the age of fourteen and seventeen, I constructed entries for the Fisher Body Craftsmen's Guild, a national contest for teenage boys sponsored by General Motors. Contestants built scale-model prototype cars. Each model required months of shaping clay, carving balsa wood, turning metal parts, and spray-painting lacquer surfaces. I never knew another person who entered.

Q: What brought you to UCLA and what was your experience there?

A: By the end of high school I was intent on a career as a designer of cars. I was accepted at UCLA, which was virtually tuition free. The design program at UCLA, part of the art department, was in an ascendant period. The program's founder, Henry Dreyfuss, had framed industrial design as a socially conscious discipline bridging engineering, ergonomics, and esthetics. Studying design yielded a foundation in problem solving and communication with far-reaching benefits for me. Those years exposed me to art for the first time, not only in art history classes but also through contact with practicing painters and sculptors. The autonomy of the artist, or at least the fantasy of autonomy, struck me as different from the life of a designer.

By my fourth year at UCLA I had decided to do my graduate studies in the fine arts. Not that I had any affinity with the esthetics of my art teachers. Quite the contrary, I was aware of the first manifestations of Pop Art and Fluxus and had spent hours in the library learning all I could about Surrealism, a history rarely touched upon in the curriculum and pejoratively dismissed by studio instructors. They applauded genteel figurative and abstract work. I hungered to be a part of what I perceived as a revolution in the concept of artistic practice.

One of my instructors in graphic design was Robert Heinecken, whose trajectory was similar to my own. He was a designer who came to embrace photography. He undertook the radical project of liberating photography from mechanical technique and sought to establish it as an art form in its own right. This was a battle that had been going on for at least a century but had not yet touched the fine arts department at UCLA. His success in this struggle originated a new course of study.

I found the discussions in Heinecken's classes to be particularly relevant to real-life questions. I was captivated by the idea of the photographic image as a mirror of the maker's mind and a revelation of belief, instinct, and heritage. I became Heinecken's second graduate student. He was a maverick in that he welcomed transgressions of the purity of the medium. We were encouraged to distort the technology, cook the negative, cut up the print, and even use its surface to paint upon.

About this time I became aware of the Coronet, a theater on La Cienega Boulevard that showed a repertory of unusual films: works by the 1920s European avant-garde, Kenneth Anger, Maya Deren, Buñuel and Dalí's *Andalusian Dog*, and Bruce Conner's *A Movie*. Raymond Rohauer operated the theater and Stan Brakhage worked there for a while as a projectionist.

Q: So during your undergraduate years you gradually moved away from design to focus on photography. And your interest in photography led you to film. Aside from Heinecken, were there other teachers who mentored you or were important to you?

A: Bob Heinecken was my principal advisor, but there were at least two others who were important to me. One was Donald Chipperfield. He had been Heinecken's teacher as well. Chipperfield had a reputation as a taskmaster, but those who stayed with his teaching were often grateful for the level of concentration they learned to tap into. His photo critiques tended to uncover life-changing levels of awareness. Another person

was John Neuhart, a design instructor who was also a graphic and exhibition designer in the office of Charles and Ray Eames. Neuhart's approach reflected the practice of the Eameses; he maintained openness to and engagement with every aspect of world culture and its visual manifestations. He possessed an encyclopedic knowledge of image-making and image-reproduction techniques. By comparison, the fine arts faculty seemed antiquated and phobic about popular culture and non-traditional media. As Neuhart's assistant I taught the use of the letterpress and ran the silkscreen lab.

Q: Let's talk about your photographic work, which began around 1960 at UCLA. You mentioned your renewed interest in working with the still image. Could you expand on what distinguishes your still work from your film work? I would say from the outset that the still images contain distinctive features that also define your work as a film artist.

A: I started by making stills on the optical printer. I would select a frame that seemed to stand for the work and send it out to be printed. In the early 1980s, I got interested in making unique frames that were not part of films. These compositions were more compressed and more interesting as a single image. It is a somewhat cumbersome way to work because you never get to see all the parts in interaction until the final stages.

I got to thinking about the viewer's experience of the static image. It is not just experienced as a whole. You also explore it. Usually there's an instinctive place to enter the composition and then move through it, experiencing the space. You begin to know the imagery and figure out what the tensions are in it.

Some of the same imagery appears in both the films and the static images. For instance, I have often used the form of the coil. It appears in the still image *Seated Coil* and in the film *Trouble in the Image*. It contains energy and functions as a locus of attention. In the still image I superimposed the coil on a background that's made up of part of a ruin and a landscape of burning chaparral. When the negative came back I decided to put a couple of humanlike legs on the coil. I scratched the legs into the emulsion with a point, and then printed from that.

Q: What changed when you began to work digitally?

A: Once digital inkjet printing became available in the 1990s I was able to make really good quality prints. By the mid-1990s I was working with a couple of commercial printers, making images of some size. In 1997, I bought a computer and things really began to expand. Now I can access my whole library of images, commercial graphics, and found materials. I can arrange them in digital files and put them to work on one another. With this great facility, the visual problems get to be really interesting. At first I was bothered by the fact that I was doing this all on a platform that was beyond my understanding—that it was somebody else's game. I worried it would invade my work process and disrupt it. But then I realized I could work with complete freedom with the photographs and materials I was familiar with. It was revolutionary. Some people have said, "well, anybody can do that." Well anybody can, but on the other hand, the English language is the same way, anybody can write it, but only a few people can write it well.

Q: Do you see a relationship between your use of the optical printer and the still images you are making?

A: Yes, the principles are the same but the digital experience is far more fluid. With the optical printer you can never see the whole thing until you have brought all the pieces together and put them into film format, made an exposure test for each one, and then tried them. It's a long process. Working digitally everything is up for grabs all the time.

Q: Was film part of your classroom experience or was your primary exposure at the Coronet?

A: In the film school, Hugh Gray's classes in Russian revolutionary cinema and the European avant-garde were extremely popular. Through Gray I encountered Dziga Vertov, Eisenstein, Ruttman, Rene Clair, and Slavko Vorkapich. He invited Josef Von Sternberg to class. I also met Beverly Morris there, and we've been married for forty years.

Among my classmates, Peter Mays, a painter who was just getting into filmmaking, established a film society at UCLA, inviting filmmakers to screenings.

Two of the first to come were Jack Smith and Gregory Markopolous. Markopolous had a paper bag full of camera rolls, which he screened. They became part of *Twice a Man*. Stan Brakhage screened *Dog Star Man*, part one, and spoke at length. That film did not engage me at the time, but I found him fascinating.

Soon I began attending “Movies Around Midnight,” a screening series of “underground” films presented by John Fles on Saturday nights at the Cinema Theater on Western Avenue in Hollywood. It was at these late-night screenings that I encountered the first of the Warhol films. I also saw works by the Kuchar Brothers, Ron Rice, Carolee Schneeman, the Newsreel group from Berkeley, Jordan Belson, Brakhage, and the touring program of the Ann Arbor Film Festival. The screenings began as small events. Within a few months, the Cinema Theater, which had about 400 seats, was full to overflowing, initiating another screening on Friday nights. But it only lasted a few years and was definitely over by 1965.

Q: And in 1963 you made your first film, *By the Sea*. What led to that first film?

A: Well, I had been gravitating toward Venice since high school. Venice was a beach town stuck in time. Abbott Kinney began developing it in 1903 as a residential and resort community. It had a system of canals, crossed by elegant concrete bridges. There was an amusement pier with a ballroom and a hotel. But Venice failed as a residential development, and the 1920 oil boom radically changed the face of the waterfront. Vacant lots became well sites. By the late 1950s, most of the wells were played out, but their wooden and steel derricks still stood. The region was melancholy, particularly in winter, with the scent of the ocean mixing with crude oil and dead things floating in the canal—a slum by the sea. Rents were cheap and one could still find storefront studio space. San Francisco’s Beat culture put in a brief Southern California appearance there. My apprenticeship in photography took place in Venice, in the no-man’s land of derricks, tanks, empty houses, and oil-slicked canals. It was unfamiliar, largely vacant, and fraught with expressive possibility.

Just a few miles north was the Santa Monica Pier, with its ancient carousel, carnival games, and corn-dog stands. Nearby was Muscle Beach, a hangout for bodybuilders, circus performers, and precocious teenage gymnasts. There was always some action to watch and an enthusiastic audience. No one seemed to object to the presence of a camera, even the whirring Bolex, which I had borrowed from my friend Bob Abel. As footage accumulated we started to think about how it could be put together. Bob got access to a film school editing room with an upright Moviola editor, and we began to cut. At around the same time, I was printing photos on a graphic arts sheet film that produced very interesting results—a long tonal range with very dense blacks. I enlarged sequences shot at the beach with the Bolex, controlling the exposure so that the ground completely disappeared, leaving figures to float in a void. Bob and I experimented with making this happen in motion. It seemed like a way to transform flexing, stretching, and flying bodies into creatures that had never before been seen on the screen. This material was the basis of *By the Sea*. It was my only collaboration with Bob, who later became well known as an innovative producer of visual graphics for television commercials.

Q: What about the transition from *By the Sea* to *7362*, which is from 1967? In the history of video, this is the moment that Paik developed the image processor. At the same time, you, using an optical printer, were making *7362*, which is exceptionally rich visually. Can you talk about the transition from *By the Sea* to *7362* in terms of abstraction, color, and the processing of the image?

A: In 1966 I was teaching photography at UCLA, standing in for Heinecken during a sabbatical year. As a state employee I had access to an institution that sold surplus materials from various government agencies. They had contact printers that had been used by the Navy for combat film work. I bought a contact printer and put it in one of the UCLA darkrooms. It was a Bell & Howell, Model J, a beautiful machine that was out of production. It allowed me to print one-to-one from any negative to any stock. I also obtained processing tanks so I could hand-develop black-and-white stock. This led to the possibility of doing various photographic processes, like the sabatier (check spelling) effect, or solarization. I was interested in making something that was neither a negative nor a positive, but an amalgam of both. The technique emphasizes outlines of shapes and the boundaries between them but largely obscures their surfaces. The contact printer gave me the possibility of taking a piece of film and reproducing it many times. I could take a single figure and make a chorus line.

At this point I had completely left design except as an occasional source of income. In addition to photography and film, I was tentatively beginning to realize some ideas in sculpture. The early pieces were constructions of appliance parts, military gear, and industrial scrap metal. I started lighting and filming some of these same materials, often on turntables or pendulums. This led to constructing a stage apparatus, in which to record live models performing machinelike movements. This footage could be combined on the contact printer to yield hybrids of the living and inanimate. One day I tried printing the same piece of negative twice on the same raw stock, turning it over between exposures. This produced a bilateral symmetry in which every movement was fused with its opposite. This technique became the primary structural motive of *7362*.

Q: So something important synthesized around *7362*. Bilateral splitting is an image-processing technique. But you were also interested in the philosophic and materialist notion of the object, which is complicated by this process of doubling. I am fascinated by the connections you have suggested between image processing, sculpture, and film. Through processing you seem to have imbued film with tactility.

A: *7362* had to do with hand-making, with being able to take something, do an operation on it, look at it, do another operation, and so on. It was a mechanical model, predating the electronic. My interaction was with film and light. *7362* is the Kodak stock number of a high contrast black-and-white film that is used in the making of film titles and mattes. That stock was the basic material for many of the intermediate steps in the film's making. It was the missing link Abel and I didn't know about when we made *By the Sea*.

Q: The film *Screen*, from 1969, explores the celluloid grain. Can you talk about this technique and how it developed?

A: Initially I used spray paint on clear film. I would spray a section of film and then make several different versions on high-contrast black-and-white film. These were printed on color-reversal film using theater lighting gels to produce color. *Screen* was the first film I made on an optical printer. I made it for a group show, in January 1969, called "Electric Art" that was curated by the sculptor Oliver Andrews.

Q: Did you think of *Screen* as sculpture?

A: No, I thought of it as a non-photographic image that was projected continuously as a loop. The projector was concealed in a booth. One of the walls of the booth had a perfectly square opening—I think it was four feet by four feet—fitted with a back projection screen. Being square helped to remove the work from the definition of a movie. The film appeared to be built into the wall's surface.

Q: Your film *Runs Good*, from 1970, is a brilliant mix of found footage—from science education, newsreel, and stag films, to blocks of monochromatic color. And the sound quality is also distinctive. Compared to the films we've discussed so far, *Runs Good* captures and remixes a whole other set of source images.

A: Before *Runs Good* I did another film, called *Bump City* [1964]. It's the first work in which I deal with a vision of urbanity, a vision of an environment driven by commerce. That film used neon signs, animated billboards, and print-ads for cigarettes to construct a whimsically hellish vision of a mediated society. That film led me to begin collecting castoff films. Although I didn't actually use any stock footage in *Bump City*, when I got to *Runs Good*, I had amassed several hours of film sequences that I had copied on the contact printer. I also consulted the Los Angeles Central Public Library, which had a 16mm collection that could be borrowed by teachers. And there was a wonderful little business in the San Fernando Valley called Gaines Films that dealt in 16mm prints. I bought newsreel stuff, Castle Films releases, television shows—such as "You Asked For It," "Beverly Hillbillies," Alfred Hitchcock, and "Twilight Zone"—and industrial sales and training films there. The Gaineses also sold footage by the pound. You might get lucky, or you might get a whole lot of leader. Another good source of discarded film was sound fill, which was sold for use as leader. These sources were a reward for staying in Hollywood.

Q: Isn't "runs good," a term used for a car? As in, "used car, runs good?"

A: Yes. It's a very minimal claim and you still see it on windshields. *Runs Good* is deeply ironic. This was 1970. You can see a reaction to a society that seemed to be on the edge of self-destruction. It has many parallels with Conner's *A Movie*, made twelve years earlier.

Q: Tell me about your use of monochromatic color in this film. For me, it raises the issue of postmodernism. You take narrative material but move past it by acknowledging modernist frames of reference.

A: When I was working on *Runs Good* I visited the Berkeley Art Museum and looked at the Hans Hofmann canvasses in its collection. I was familiar with Clement Greenberg's writings and Hofmann's writings on color. I was thinking about the idea of optical recession and advance, how colors occupy space depending on hue, saturation, and contrast with the field. So in *Runs Good* I made two windows—just like holes through the screen—which allowed for two colors to interact and gradually change independent from the black-and-white background. The images I chose as background were all news shots that had central characters in them, so that they would be situated in the middle of the screen between the two windows. I found a roll of film of someone being booked into jail and covering his face. When I hid part of the image, the conflict was very immediate. There are two realities going on, and you can attend to both of them at the same time but only by using different parts of your mind. One part is engaged with absorbing a reportorial image of a personality, a straightforward recording of something that undoubtedly was shown with a voiceover. The other part is experiencing the interactions of color.

Q: I was really taken by *Easyout*, from 1971. You collaborated with Stan Levine on the sound, which I thought was very interesting. Also your use of loops struck me as something that a new generation of artists would benefit from seeing.

A: The looped section is taken from Max Fleischer's Betty Boop cartoons from the 1930s and early 1940s. They were just old enough that my generation hadn't experienced them as kids. And they had a very bold, very strong line that I could reproduce over and over again. By this time, I had done a lot of work with Marty Muller, an extraordinary painter and brilliant cartoonist who was my creative collaborator, along with his lady-friend and later wife, Chick Strand. As a painter he went by the name Leon Park. In some ways his humor reminds me of the German artist Michael Sowa. We worked for several years with vintage cartoons, cycling motions over and over, and sometimes redirecting the stories into peculiar conclusions. I tried to make a field of motions so completely assimilated that you were not aware of the individual parts. We took things—like rolling rocks going down a hill, splashing water, or elephants dancing—and printed them over and over until they moved like primordial rubble. Yet it still had the eight-frame rhythmical beat of Fleischer's animation.

Q: At this point you began bringing found footage into your filmmaking. This calls to mind the work of Wallace Berman and his interest in assemblage and collage. Were you aware of Berman's work at this time?

A: Wally Berman did posters for *Movies Around Midnight*. He lived in Beverly Glen, where I lived during my graduate school days. Wally had a studio near the market. He would often hang out at the market, chatting with neighbors and digging through the trash. I did not know who he was at the time, although I had seen his famously shutdown show through the window at the Ferus Gallery. I did not know Berman at the time, although I had seen his famously shutdown show through the window at the Ferus Gallery.

For me, existing images were a natural place to begin. I was always trying to make an image that could not be preconceived. At the same time I wanted to have a starting point that was somehow socially defined. It always had to do with creating interconnections, ending up with something that went beyond its parts.

Q: There is a rich iconography of found and generated footage in *Last of the Persimmons* [1972]. Can you speak about how the imagery in this work came about?

A: It started out very simply. It was a celebration of a place where there were three persimmon trees. Every fall we'd be up to our navels in sweet sticky fruit. Most people did not know that you are supposed to wait to eat them until they are really ripe. They are very bitter when they are still hard. So I made this little training film. It starts in the aftermath of a Pasadena Rose Parade. A man is blowing up balloons and people are looking at the flower-covered floats. Crowds of strolling citizens are examining elaborate temporal art pieces. Everyone seems contented, because the art is clearly labeled and thematically determined. Then a green plate appears with a red fruit on it. You see hands preparing the fruit. In the background is a pattern of repeated linear animations, like wallpaper. The animations replace the tabletop, making the dish appear to float.

Q: *Down Wind* [1973] has time-lapses. Had you used them before?

A: No, I started shooting time-lapses in 1972. *Down Wind* began as a diary of a year that included some travel in Europe. The organizing principle of *Down Wind* is the diagonally moving plane that cuts through the shots. This plane is different from the rest of the imagery and draws a distinction between the screen's surface and the illusions projected on it. Of course, it is an illusion as well. The shots document the consumption of the unfamiliar as a summertime diversion—a cat show, geysers, a dance of two gloved hands, a clock made out of flowers in Switzerland. But the film is really about the experience of looking at a screen, it gives the screen itself a character independent from the movie.

Q: So on a micro level the animation frame anticipates some of the compositional ideas behind *Saugus Series* [1974]?

A: At the time I was still editing in a cinematic way, searching for ways to cut on action, to propel the experience as smoothly as possible, and to use sound as an agent in transitions. *Saugus Series* is segmented. Around 1973 I became frustrated with my editing assumptions. In *Saugus* I wanted to make shots with a fixed number of elements that would be present from beginning to end. Each shot would stand as a separate entity. They are somewhat like blackouts in Vaudeville. One segment has no image at all but is instead an edited art lecture in which a narrator describes ways to make an image "more interesting." By this time I had seen Peter Hutton's films. I think the first one I saw was *Images of Asian Music*. Bob Nelson introduced me to his work. Hutton uses no cuts, and the way this procedure sharpens attention to the individual parts was a revelation. Regarding Nelson, I had known Bob's work for a while, again, from *Movies Around Midnight*. We saw films like *Half Open and Lumpy* and *Oiley Pelosa and the Pumph Man*. Later I saw *The Great Blondino*, the long piece he did in collaboration with William Wiley. Then Bob taught at CalArts for a couple of years, 1972 and 1973 maybe. He made *Bleu Shut* around then.

Q: Can you talk a bit more about your motivations for the segmentation of *Saugus Series*?

A: *Saugus Series*, *Sidewinder's Delta* [1976], and *Foregrounds* [1978] are all segmented pieces. In fact, the idea was that the filmic segments could be shown individually as loops. They are open structures and do not necessarily have to be connected together, but they have always been shown from beginning to end.

With *Saugus Series* I began with studio setups. I shot into a water tank in time-lapses to reveal the reflection of the sun moving across the water's surface. Another section is timed by a man sawing a tree branch. There are objects that are painted repeatedly with a spray gun—images appear and are painted over and replaced by others. A pair of shoes changes color. I also made a shot by pouring black roofer's asphalt over a glass surface mounted in front of a blue-screen backing. The result was repeated three times laterally to make a three-colored ripple that moves like a waterfall down a geological formation that seems at first like roasting meat. The mountain is actually a geyser in Yellowstone. This segment is accompanied by a tune from a Chinese recording that imparts an upbeat ceremonial quality to the whole undertaking.

As the film goes on, it becomes flatter and less representational. A handheld shot of Joshua trees interrupts a continuous field of stripes. Toward the end of the film there is a field of moving dots and lines, many, many superimpositions. At the very end there is a floating object—a man's hat floating on water—that crosses the screen. This was during the Watergate Era, and the hat with a stringy brim was George Mitchell's.

Q: Is the abstraction in *Saugus Series* always maintained in tension with the real, the photographic?

A: Yes, that pairing of opposites is very important. I need one to mark the other.

Q: You have described *Saugus Series* as a complex and sensual visual text. You create a fluid surface out of diverse visual sources. You utilize recurring strategies of appropriation, collage, and assemblage. As you were making this work and as you encounter it today, what are the various meanings of these visual elements and techniques?

A: Well, the falls sequence is about glamour and sensuality. The asphalt moves slowly and constantly reshapes itself. And there are three stripes, like a well-rehearsed trio of backup singers. Undercutting that is the background, which is steamy in another sense entirely, like watching ducks cooking in a Chinese restaurant's window.

Q: Is there irony in this?

A: Yes. Think of the mountain as the logo for Paramount Pictures and think about the glamorous women that appear at the Academy Awards. I try to restate an impression using very different materials. I suppose everything in *Saugus Series* is sort of place and process bound. The primary colors are about the laboratory control process. The source of the image is dyes on film.

Q: Is the composition of the film's sequences done quickly? Do you put elements together intuitively or do you sketch them out in advance?

A. I find that previsualization usually yields only a rough approximation of what a finished piece will become. I begin with the assumption that what ever I am working on will change, sometimes drastically, before it is completed. In fact, the sense of its completeness is often subject to revision. The way one works—the preparation, the way elements are laid out, conditions in the studio, and most importantly, conditions in the mind—will have a bearing on how I work. It seems, on a good night at least, that the pieces make themselves. Each one will present its own set of rules, and each act alters all that went before. Solutions often cannot be coaxed but appear spontaneously.

Perhaps what I am doing is making objects that act as training exercises for an audience, in a particular way of seeing, of relating to the world. The "world" is, after all, far more absurd, and vastly more unjust than one can begin to represent. It is necessary to acknowledge these perilous circumstances while taking pleasure in small gifts of the day-to-day, that this is what I try to do.

It is also worth mentioning that all of this goes on under the long shadow of Art History—calling for the recognition that, today, nothing is new, there is no new unbroken ground, that one is simply rearranging, cheerfully, the common legacy of image-making.

QQ: I don't remember seeing much use of language in your films. Am I right?

A: Well, in *Saugus Series* there is a section that is spoken. But I didn't use text as a visual element until *Water and Power* [1989].

Q: Before we leave the 1970s, let's talk about *Sidewinder's Delta*. It has color strips and disorientating upside down shots of Monument Valley. Aspects of the film reminded me of Brakhage's *Text of Light*, and I was also intrigued by your use of the Western landscape. Can you describe the shift that took place in this work in your approach to abstraction?

A: In *Sidewinder's Delta* I was starting to work with direct emulsion processes: painting and scratching on film, making complex combinations of simple, handmade elements. And it was during the making of *Sidewinder's Delta*—two weeks after I had resigned from CalArts—that I was hospitalized with an aneurysm, a blood clot on the brain. It was 1975, Christmastime. I went into a coma that lasted for ten days. When I regained consciousness, I learned that I had survived brain surgery. All the parts seemed to work, except that I found myself looking at a *New Yorker* cartoon, and it had something under it, and I looked at it

and said, “What’s that?” I realized it was text, but I had no idea what it meant. Gradually my perceptions began to settle in, but for a while it was similar to some of the film work I had done—the surface was interrupted. People have drawn a connection between my illness and this tendency in my filmmaking, but I was working that way before it happened and continued doing so after.

Gradually I could read a bit. I worked for a year and a half with a tutor to relearn reading, but I never got beyond about fifty words a minute. I couldn’t read fast enough to keep up with film subtitles. When I go to a foreign-language film I only look at the visuals, or rely on someone to whisper in my ear. I can read an article if I sit down for hours. In the scale of things, I was incredibly lucky to survive. You deal with it. When there is time, Bev reads to me and rents foreign films to provide me with the voiceover.

Q: Your work is definitely in dialogue with what’s being written and made today. Structural and poststructural theory is grounded in language. Your work is grounded in the visual, the treatment and re-treatment of the visual, from the found image to generated abstraction. So your work both invites and resists the language model. How do you write about and describe the moving image, which is constantly changing? Embodied in your work is a whole set of very interesting visual challenges to language-based interpretation.

A: I guess I’ve chosen to attempt things that might fail, to bring things together that raise problems. I am fascinated by things that seem a little foolish, a little ugly. I remember seeing my first Bruce Nauman sculpture at the Wilder Gallery in the early sixties. He was making fiberglass representations of the spaces between the furniture in his house. He wall-mounted these awkward, rough triangles and parallelograms. I thought they were the dumbest objects I’d ever seen. But they raised the question of why one makes any object. They presented a problem that insisted on an answer.

Q: You are pointing to a still from *Sidewinder’s Delta*. How does it exemplify the potent awkwardness you are describing?

A: In *Sidewinder’s Delta* I took rolls of 16mm leader and attacked them with a sharp object. Making a lot of clumsy marks. The printing master that followed had all of these marks built into it, and each time it was exposed it revealed another increment of the background image, which is a shot of dissolving and flowing paint on a vertical surface. I keep going back to printing technology to see how it can be used to create complex surfaces.

Q: *Sidewinder’s Delta* shows the hand in and on the landscape. This is a subjective assessment on my part, but do you think this moment, or others in the film, express a state of melancholy?

A: That’s one strain, one part of it, for sure. The landscape is Monument Valley, which references the West and Western film—John Ford, Stagecoach, and, of course, the people who live there, the Navajo. I traveled there in awe, and for many years did no shooting at all. It seemed almost disrespectful to photograph there: I was drawn to be there, but felt I had nothing to add to its representation. Finally, in the early seventies, I spent a period of time there, recorded a few observations, and executed a piece which involved placing sheets of colored paper into the predominantly red environment. Later, the colors of those sheets could be replaced, presenting a bogus demonstration of a “Chameleonic” substance. This was followed by a Saguaro cactus which would, when shown colored light, spontaneously change its color to the opposite side of the spectrum, making it stand out from its surroundings.

I shot the mitten butte in its upright position and then briefly inverted it. I was interested in the way an image reassembles itself when you look at it upside down. More recently I have paid attention to this in a series of small, agitated drawings made with a constantly shifting orientation. We always search for clues to orient ourselves in the space of a drawing. Each time we rotate a drawing ninety degrees new clues emerge to make totally different. Space entirely depends on what story we tell ourselves.

Q. Did video attract you at all?

A. I thought it was a useful way to document something but never found the image quality to be satisfactory. I also crave the scale and the darkness of the theater. For the last ten years I have been

shooting on Hi-8 and then mini DV, but I have never finished a work in that format. I blew up a few minutes shot on a train in Germany and included it in *Trouble in the Image*.

Q: This description of your process is very interesting. In the 1970s people were reading Morse Peckham's book *Man's Rage for Chaos*. He wrote about the issue of human expectation. I think that resides in your work and in your process.

A: Chaos is particularly the operating principle in *Let's Make a Sandwich* [1978]. It is a projection installation. Whenever it's shown, I say, "if you can stay with this for one minute out of twenty, that's all you need to do. I am interested in the images you make in your mind." I was trying to take found footage to an extreme of disintegration. After I had superimposed as many as twenty layers through several generations, I wanted to find out what was left of the original images. I tried to make a film that used every conceivable kind of material—stuff shot off television, New York City in a snowstorm, an aquarium, zoo animals, cartoons, training films. I put it together without regard to content or even right side up or down. I repeatedly superimposed rolls over one another until I had a continually moving field. At times you see perspectival illusions, caricatures, figures in motion, grids, bits of lettering. The original content has been boiled down until it almost disappears, but not quite—that's the trick.

Let's Make a Sandwich was a kind of summation. I initially showed it in a very large room at LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions).

Q: How was it projected?

A: It was a loop projector with a rear projection screen hanging free out in the room. It was the only piece I showed, and the room was a good eighty feet square. You could walk around and see it from a distance or up close. It was shown continuously, day and night, for five days. The experience can be likened to Stan Vander Beek's *Theater of Dreams*. Exhaustion, boredom, and distraction can actually help you to reach a film.

Q: What about your film *Foregrounds*, also from 1978?

A: *Foregrounds* is a segmented piece continuing on from *Sidewinder's Delta*. Perhaps its most memorable section is the last one. A short loop of film is seen hanging on a tree branch. It is in motion; action is visible in the individual frames of the film. Moving closer, the action is revealed to be a tracking shot of palm trees moving from left to right. It is about the projector, the intermittent movement, and the filmstrip, all displayed in the unfamiliar confines of an overgrown garden.

Q: How did Lookout Mountain Films come about and what is its relationship to your films?

A: After making *7362*, I was approached to do photographic effects work for commercials. I worked for a number of production houses beginning in 1969, making various arrangements to use optical printers. I began to teach at Cal Arts in 1970, when it was founded, and for a time I did my own film work on the school's equipment. In 1974, I was able to obtain a vintage single-head printer of my own. It took ten years and a lot of jobs to pay it off. I converted our garage into a studio and named the company after the street we lived on—Lookout Mountain Avenue—because I liked the sound of it. We did work on feature films by Haile Gerima, Donna Deitch, Will Vinton, Larry Clark, and Melvin Van Peebles. We did commercial projects of all kinds—titles, archival stuff, and effects shots. I could colorize shots and do some background replacement. We got a rotoscoping stand so we could project material and do wire removal from acrobatic stunts. In 1980, we got hooked up with Lucasfilm and did a lot of work on the second and third movies in the Star Wars trilogy.

Q: You were active in the film collective Oasis. Can you discuss what this group meant to the independent film culture in Los Angeles?

A: Oasis was started in 1976 by Grahame Weinbren and Roberta Freidman, who were a filmmaking couple at the time. Beverly and I joined in the effort, as did Amy Halpren, who had just come from the Collective for Living Cinema in New York, Morgan Fisher, David and Diana Wilson, Paul Arthur, and Tom Leeser. We wanted to present touring filmmakers and exhibit work that otherwise would not appear in Southern California. We did the first screenings at an old lefty theatre called the Haymarket. Our very first event was a presentation of Jonas Mekas's *Lithuanian Diaries*. After a year we moved to LAICA, the Los Angeles Institute for Contemporary Art, an alternative gallery on Robertson Boulevard that later moved downtown. Every Sunday night we would arrive with the projector, screen, chairs, and programs, do a screening, and then pack up. We operated as a collective. Everybody who contributed their time could bring in screening proposals. When we showed Warhol's *Chelsea Girls*, which is a two-screen piece, nearly 250 people packed into the gallery. I am sure it was totally illegal. Oasis remained active until 1982 when worker fatigue took its toll and the group disbanded.

Q: What was your perception of structural film on the West Coast?

A: I first encountered Michael Snow's *Wavelength* in Gene Youngblood's screenings at CalArts, along with Ken Jacobs's *Tom Tom the Piper's Son*, and Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity*. At first these works seemed totally puzzling. Why does one make such an object? Are we to look at, or just read about it? And how have these ideas come to have such authority in other academic settings? These works threw out all of the baggage of past cinemas, and wasn't it time that happened? In fact, our own ideas began to look quaint, indulgent, and inadequate. I was struggling to relate. Over time I came to terms with the ideas of Materialist filmmaking, even to feel an affinity for the way these long, dry projects explained their assumptions, given patience and repeated screenings. Was it time to acknowledge that one's practice had simply been made obsolete? Not only was I surrounded by the indifferent milieu of Hollywood, but also the sense of possibility I had felt in the underground seemed to have evaporated.

Q: What happened then?

A: I cultivated the garden, painted our VW. I had begun to assimilate some new notions of temporality, as could be seen in the real-time duration of *Two Sweeps* [1979] and even as far back as *Down Wind's* interruptive geometry. And I realized that the structuralist model supported only so many iterations and had perhaps already shown signs of exhaustion. It was an interesting period in retrospect, perhaps the last time that a critical imperative carried such weight and generated such discussion. It addressed film as form rather than as a vehicle for content, and that discussion has been very muted ever since.

Q: What did you think of Snow's work?

A: The first time I saw *La Region Centrale*, I didn't watch it through to the end. The second time I did, and I was profoundly affected. The view to the empty landscape is completely about the way the camera moves. By the end of three and a half hours looking at the screen you become identified with the camera, at least I did. I felt like the whole theatre was moving. It seemed like the most effective dance film I'd ever seen. It's choreography for the camera. That was an influence that led me to make *Water and Power*, which moves in a more limited way but also uses scores that define the motion of the camera. Motion control allowed me to take a multiplicity of shots which all had the identical motion. I photographed widely different subjects and combined them in the optical printer.

Q: Let's focus on the body of work that constitutes your production in the last two decades, beginning with *Water and Power*, which was the first time you made a film in 35mm.

A: I began *Water and Power* in 1982. I teamed up with Mark Madel an artist and programmer, who wrote software for me that could motion-control a camera. It was an ingenious invention that used one of the first portable computers. It made it possible to drive four axes: pan, tilt, zoom, and exposure. I wanted to make the moves in the shots repeatable—that was the heart of the whole thing. I wanted to shoot something on location and then go back and recreate the movement in the studio, shooting miniatures, an interior, or actors. It is something I have been fascinated with for years because I was shooting a lot of time-lapses, making an exposure every five seconds or every twenty seconds to record the movement of sunlight. In

order to do that the camera was always stationary. I knew about motion-control from the industry and from working on commercials but had never actually shot this way or even used a computer.

I spent a lot of time in Owens Valley, northeast of Los Angeles. It once was an agricultural zone beginning in the 1880s. It was bought by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and was the site of the major water importation that allowed the city to expand after 1915. As the Owens Valley water table was ,some farmers tried to hold out and keep their land. In the 1920s, the aqueduct was blown up a couple of times, but gradually the farmers gave up. I was drawn to the area, not because of politics, but because of its remarkable geography. Alongside this valley runs the highest mountains in the country. When you are in the Owens Valley, the Eastern Sierra is a wall of 12,000 to 14,000-foot peaks. The valley goes down to a 3,000-foot elevation and then to the east there is another range of mountains. So basically it's this long rift.

Q: It mirrors the horizontal lines you love in your films.

A: Right. And at the bottom of the valley there is a lakebed that is primarily dry, a bed made of soda ash and salt crystals. There is some cattle ranching and the remains of a mining culture that began in the 1870s. There was a lot of silver, lead, and zinc taken out of the mines up in the mountains at Cerro Gordo, and a lot of waste products spread out and contaminated the valley. Because of these high mountains and this deep valley, there is a shadow that moves across like a sundial. It writes the exposure change on the valley's floor. I got interested in using this moving shadow as a thematic divider, almost like a wipe. I shot the valley from different perspectives—long pans on the floor and from the vantage point on a road that goes up into the Sierras. I supplemented this material with shots from *Twin Peaks* in San Francisco, to get residential neighborhoods. I shot a lot in Bolinas, up in Marin County. And in downtown Los Angeles. I rented a studio at 6th and Main and shot off the roof to get panoramic views of the city. And inside I set up a blacked-out environment in which to record performers.

Q: A theme in this conversation has been the complexity of your image—its diversity, movement, and change. *Water and Power* exemplifies how you function as a bricoleur who combines and unites fragments to a smooth finish. Yet this degree of complexity resists interpretation. What are the key terms that define *Water and Power* for you?

A: I wanted to make naturalistic landscapes that were filled with contradictions. One shot that I particularly like is near the middle of the film. It moves over a neighborhood. Gradually the pan discovers a person who is seen from the shoulders up. He is eating a meal and talking. You move across his profile. You can still see the neighborhood, you can see him, and you come to a tabletop cluttered with debris. Among the debris is a plaster sculpture, a little dog with its head missing. You move past the tabletop and into a window in the room. The window is reflecting the light. The light goes off and you begin to see through it. You move back out of the room and see the city at night. So you have found this person in this room with these artifacts. Among them is a neon sign that spells out the word “nuts” in red letters. But it is reflected in a mirror so that the word “nuts” appears as “stun.” The pan captures a place where a person exists. I am always trying to balance content so that it does not become solely about a specific person, job, or neighborhood. I am trying to make it both general and specific at the same time. Q: Did you use found footage in *Water and Power*?

A: I shot almost everything in *Water and Power*, but there is some found footage with references to early Hollywood. There is footage from Cecil B. De Mille's 1926 *Ten Commandments*. The scene is of a vast crowd of people and Moses stands before them and directs them to go to where the Red Sea had parted.

Q: In my notes, I describe the performers as looking like George Segal sculptures. There is a similarity, I think, in that the figures you film are frozen, or nearly frozen, in time. You mold a representation of time out of these people as they repeat an action.

A: Segal was a reference, particularly on my last film, *The Decay of Fiction*. I showed the actors some images of Segal's work to help them realize that it wasn't about total naturalism, that their work would be seen in a different way.

Q: Describe some other scenes that illustrate particular techniques and goals that you had in *Water and Power*.

A: Towards the end there is a sequence that focuses on an urban neighborhood. It happens to be San Francisco, seen from the top of Twin Peaks. I made a very repetitive camera move—a rectangle that always returns to the same point. I wanted to tell a story with inter-titles. It is a description of a woman in a room. She emerges from the shower and a bullet comes through the window. She drops to the floor and crawls to look out the window. There does not seem to be anyone out there. While this is going on, the camera is moving right to left, top to bottom, left to right, bottom to top. It repeatedly makes a square while looking at a hillside with houses and busy streets. And it is fast enough so that the image is strobing a bit. Basically I made the shot repetitively all afternoon, changing the zoom lens' focal length from time to time, so that sometimes it is covering a small area and seems to be moving fast, and sometimes it is covering a wide area and seems to be moving slower.

Q: What drew you to that scene, to that story, to that action?

A: I was trying to recreate some of the tension of film noir. I wrote the material, but it is so generic it could have come from anything of the period. I wanted to evoke an incident entirely through written words, while the camera's searching movement reinforces it in a non-descriptive way. This is a technique I have used as far back as *Runs Good*. I try to give the part of the mind that uses language something to do. I strip the film of conventional grammar and replace it with something else. To deprive the audience entirely of narrative in a long film is a real risk.

Q: It seems to me that the hermeneutic challenge of your work lies in an absorbingly rich and seamless use of source material. You have forged a juncture between visual fecundity and stylistic fluidity. This allows your work to maintain mystery and ambiguity.

A: All I can say is that, to me, it resembles life. Every interaction is full of unspoken knowledge. Every moment is full of memories of the past and expectations of the future. There is always your mind's eye *and* what you are actually seeing. All experience is a composite: someone could tell you something and while you are being told that, maybe you are hearing music on the radio, and looking outside and seeing a girl bend over to pick up her glasses. You track all those things at once. But in narrative, the story takes control, the rest is background. Storytelling is inevitably linear.

Q: Your work represents the world as multi-textual, multilayered. You tangibly depict the complexities of cognition, or epistemology, how we understand the world. We have talked some about duration, and I'm curious if you feel your work shares a rapport with someone like Bill Viola who also deals with temporal issues—narrative time, perceptual time, historical time.

A: In *Room for St. John of the Cross*, he slows actions down so you see a range of movement and expression that you would never catch in real time. I have done similar things with landscape, revealing an experience that you normally can't perceive. I was particularly affected by this installation in which drastically different modes of representation seem to stand for inner and outer life.

Q: What about your film *Trouble in the Image*, from 1996? It seems to have earlier footage. Can you explain how it came about?

A: Some of it was shot for *Water and Power* and even before. It is really a series of separate studies, a studio practice film. I call it "works on film from 1975 to 1996."

Q: What do you mean by that?

A: I sometimes like to realize an idea quite quickly, to respond to found material, or to go into the studio and film myself doing an action. I might make live-action shots to add to existing backgrounds, or freely animated line drawings. Over time these materials accumulate. I wanted a structure that could contain some of them and began to conceive of it as clusters of threeshotseach; triads, with each of the three shots very

different from one another. Within each group is diversity, but between the clusters are similarities. I wound up with about thirty such groupings, which I arranged blindly, using a random number table. Then George Lockwood and I started in on the soundtrack. The track was made primarily of re-used dialogue fragments and music. It also includes readings of my own written fragments. George would digitize the material and edit in a digital studio. His musician's ear led to many surprising refinements in the editing process. The track was entirely spatial, which is revealed in the rare projections with an optimized stereo system.

Q: Do you think of yourself as an abstract artist or a conceptual artist, or neither?

A: I would say I work abstractly, in that meaning for me has more to do with the relationship between parts than the individual parts themselves. But I retain an oblique connection to narrative and storytelling.

Q: Your images are loaded with semantic meaning. They all have associations.

A: I enjoy regarding recognizable images as formal entities and perceiving them abstractly. The problem is finding a balance between what one knows about the subject matter and what one sees.

Q: Right, you are someone who gathers materials and images and who comments upon them by combining and refining them. Your work embraces two seemingly opposed aesthetics, what we could call a Bay Area Funk approach to assemblage and your own kind of finish fetish.

Q: How did you come to the title for your film *Coreopsis* [1998]?

A: *Coreopsis* is named after a little yellow daisy. I was working with something that was mostly yellow, and it reminded me of those blossoms. In my mother's personal things there was an old envelope of seeds, which she had labeled "Coreopsis-Helen, 1935." That's her sister. I knew my folks had been in Nebraska in 1935, and I found it interesting that viable seeds could be saved for so many years, so I named the film after the flower.

Coreopsis is one of the scratch films I made in the mid- to late-1990s. They were quick exercises and used a frame-reordering procedure I call a progressive loop. This was something that David LeBrun employed in a film called *Tanka* [1970], which is an amazing piece. He made a printing scheme for the optical printer where he would duplicate seven frames forward and then back up the original six frames and repeat this throughout a shot. This makes a repetition, but it's an ever-changing one. You can come up with any pattern—say twelve forward and five back. The more you repeat, the more rhythmic it is, and the more you advance, the more freeform it is. I improvised on the printer, changing the patterns randomly.

Coreopsis is basically thirty feet of scribed leader. If you scratch into black leader made on color-print film with a scribe, it removes the black and leaves behind some yellow and green. The point will pick up everything but the cyan. If you take that off you have yellow. If you take everything off you have clear. When you put scratched film in the printer and put light through it, the clear portions are brighter and produce an expanded line. You get a size gradation from bright to dark. I would take a strip of film with me and draw on it from time to time.

Q: The colors in *Coreopsis* are extraordinary, and the forms you scratched in are linear but also almost biomorphic. Do you relate this type of work to Brakhage's hand-painted films?

A: Yes, certainly. I have been thinking about the way Stan evolved into this working process. For me the limitation of direct drawing is its complexity and speed. There is more visual information coming at you than you can take in. I wanted to be able to fix on and consider certain forms, and that's why I decided to establish repetitive cycles.

Q: We have talked about different kinds of associations that have narrative meaning but resist an overall narrative structure. Your most recent work *The Decay of Fiction*, is structured by a building in which people circulate, and by an extraordinary soundtrack. While it is clearly related to your past work, it is also very distinctive. Could you talk about how it came into being?

A: It definitely came out of *Water and Power*. In the early 1990s I was looking around for another location. I was interested in finally undertaking the direction of actors. Since I hadn't done it for so many years, it was sort of like the elephant sitting in the corner.

Q: But you had directed gestures....

A: Yes, but never dialogue. I was worried about taking on sync sound. I was concerned narrative would pre-empt other formal concerns that I wanted to retain. The first thing I did was to have a new motion-control system made that was capable of running the camera at twenty-four frames-per-second, which meant that it had a much larger memory and could move the camera around much more quickly. The Ambassador Hotel came to me out of the blue, like most things do. I knew it was vacant. Donald Trump and some other investors owned the building and planned to tear it down to build a very tall office building. This was in 1988. At the same time, the Board of Education attempted to seize the property under eminent domain. So the two parties got involved in litigation that lasted ten years. I went to visit in 1993. At first I saw the building like a natural formation, like a sandstone ridge reflecting the sunlight. And the place was also historically significant. There were stories around every corner.

There is an aura to a spot with a strong collective memory attached to it. The Ambassador was built in 1920 as a luxury hotel and was very much part of the movie industry. The first Academy Awards were held there. The reporter Walter Winchell lived there when he was in Los Angeles. J. Edgar Hoover lived there part-time when he was director of the FBI. John Kennedy stayed there a number of times. Robert Kennedy was assassinated at the Ambassador in June 1968.

Q: What was the production process? Did you begin with a script and storyboards? Where did the stories come from?

A: Initially I studied the spaces to determine how they were revealed by sunlight at specific times of day. I gradually built a list of locations whose light I wanted to capture and places, such as the ballroom, that needed to be lit. I used a stopwatch to time shots so that they could contain scenes. At this point, the scenes themselves had not been written, but I knew, for example, that I wanted to pan across a patio as the shadow of the adjacent building crept across its tiled floor. I knew how long it would take someone to walk the length of a hallway, so we could design a camera move that would follow her. George Lockwood and I filmed at the hotel for a year and a half, off and on. Eventually we had about four hours of footage. I began preparing a rough cut and planning the action. My research consisted of looking at noir films on tape. In my imagination the hotel had become firmly located in that historic zone. My job was to adapt or re-imagine scenes from dozens of sources to fit the shots we had made.

In 1999 we started casting. I put an ad in *Drama-Logue* asking for a man of a certain age, a woman of a certain age, thinking I might get a handful of people. I got 3,800 headshots in the mail. We needed a large dark space to shoot the action so we used the hotel's convention hall. We took the dimensions of the shots and put markers on the floor for actors to follow. The shoot lasted six weeks. *The Decay of Fiction* is the most thematically contained piece I've ever done. We did a document of a site, showing it exactly the way we found it and then transplanting a fictive population into it.

Q: Can you talk about the segments with small figures and other details in relation to the ending?

A: Yes, there are seven short sequences which prefigures the film's last movement. They often occur in small-scale models with drastically scaled-down humans. I began making these shots late in the editing process, when I had nearly finished the core of the optical composites. I began with primitive animations, building with fragments and scraps of leftover trinkets such as might have been found in the empty building—light bulbs, dolls, parts, broken things. These sections inserted another voice or consciousness into the film, commenting upon or paralleling the larger action I wanted to step backward—or forward—to childhood. Characters on their way to a big costume gala come down the hallway from all directions and defy the architecture, emerging through the walls. The space opens up to reveal a stage of indeterminate depth. People cross through one another and other images penetrate them. This section succumbs gradually to the lure of uncertainty. The fiction of the preceding sequences disappears just as the particulars of the individuals in these shots become more pungent. Characters reappear, frequently wearing different

disguises. I have always felt that hotels were places for changing identities, or for revealing identities peculiarly our own.

The end that I originally anticipated for the film involved the actual demolition of the building. The demolition was pending, but it became apparent that it wouldn't happen. We ultimately used recordings of a building demolition over the credits.

Q: It's also a film about illusion, isn't it? About Hollywood?

A: Yes, and it is also about the institution that thrives on creating illusions for other people. It's my way of describing Hollywood to someone who has no idea what it is. I didn't go there to eulogize it. I went there because it's an empty building that captures the light in interesting ways.

Q: But did you feel you had to resist being nostalgic?

A: No, I think I just dived into it, and into all of its implications. It's the artificiality of the culture that interests me—the immersion of the characters in their roles, contrasted with the inexorable rotation of the planet.

Q: With this film completed, has it caused you to think again about the trajectory of your work? What are you thinking about these days?

A: The expense of the last film made me think about doing very inexpensive projects, like drawing on film. I'm also thinking about doing more shooting with performers. There are ideas involving the human body in defined space that I think I haven't really finished with yet. We're at a point now where making composite moving images digitally is becoming affordable. Some days I think that the filmmaking part of my work is over and I'm just going to make images for a while—to let the viewer make the movement, make the journey using the imagination.

Q: You made a DVD called *Tracing The Decay of Fiction: Encounters with a Film by Pat O'Neill*. How did it come about? Do you consider it a complete work separate from the film?

A: In 1999, about the time we were about to shoot the action, I showed Marsha Kinder—some of the footage. She asked if I would be interested in working on an interactive project related to the film as part of the Annenberg Foundation's Labyrinth Project, where she is director. I realized I'd created a project ideally suited for a data based structure. The parts are not connected in a linear way, and I liked the notion of a participant unfolding the material in an unpredictable way. It's a horizontal structure as opposed to a vertical one. The Labyrinth Project's mission is to provide digital opportunities for artists and authors who are not primarily working with computers. I brought in materials and ideas and collaborated with a computer programmer, Rosemary Comella, and a graphic designer, Kristi Kang.

I began thinking about what shape the project should take. I soon realized it should extend beyond the film and bring together lots of elements and evidence—history, anecdote, geography, and artifacts. So I took the dramatic or the semi-narrative material that we'd shot and put it side-by-side with archival material. We did research in archives for early photographs of the building's construction and records of notable events that took place there. We met Carolyn Benjamin, a wonderful storyteller, whose father was hotel manager from 1920 to 1938. We found people who had witnessed the Kennedy assassination. We synthesized their stories with written material about the aftermath of the assassination and the investigations that followed. There were a number of sources, including state historian Kevin Starr who had a lot to say about the significance of the Wilshire corridor and why the hotel was put there.

The DVD ended up incorporating a quarter of the film combined with a couple hours of other material. It's an introduction to the idea of the film, but you could certainly experience it without seeing the film. It's a hybrid.

Q: A new generation of moving-image makers is working in film and video installation, interactive work, and performance. Are you aware of this work and do you feel a connection to it? The independent film culture, which has been central to our entire conversation, has evaporated as we knew it—the supports,

funding, and distribution. Increasingly you see people projecting something on a wall in a gallery and trying to put their work into that economy of support.

A: It's gratifying for that to become a possibility. I've experienced installations by artists like Grahame Weinbren, Douglas Gordon, Pipilotti Rist, Sharon Lockhart, Christian Marclay, Jennifer Steinkamp, Erika Suderberg, and George Stone, to name a few. I've found much there to like. The success of these artists indicates that this new genre has taken root.

Q: Do you have any interest in returning to the installation format?

A:

We are soon going to begin putting up a building here that will allow me, for the first time, to plan room-size, three-dimensional projects in which actions can be both filmed and projected. It is something I have been trying to get underway for years, and I am excited about what may follow.