

## What the Eye Sees: A Report on the International Experimental Cinema Exposition (14-16 November, 2003)

by Genevieve Yue



*To the Happy Few*

Genevieve Yue is a freelance film critic specializing in avant-garde and independent film. She is based in New York City.

It was the last night of the Festival, and after an impressive program of Gregory Markopoulos films and Jean Genet's rare and masterful *Un Chant d'Amour* (1950), it was hard to imagine what could possibly follow. A young man in drag walked out on stage, hauling power cords and monitors to set up for his band's performance. He was already in full character, adding little kicks and flourishes under his tiny shorts as he checked the levels. A few moments later another band member joined him, duct tape wrapped around his pant legs, going through the same motions. The audience waited, having been told to wait, wondering if this was all part of the show. Finally the credited filmmaker of the group, Jason Wade, walked out wearing a cape and set up two super-8 projectors centre stage to beam out to the sides. After a couple of false starts, they cued the projectionist, the lights went off, and a tremendous, searing noise filled the auditorium. Wade played guitar chords that twisted and bled into each other, channelled through innumerable filters. The sound was blinding. I looked around to see if anyone was actually screaming, as the music suggested, and I couldn't tell. In a festival where many films confronted you with austere silence, this one was like murder with its blanket of sound warping the very space you were in. Wade's film, *Underwater Birth* (2003), was projected in the centre of the stage, rapid cuts between around-town kinds of images run through computer printers, a scene of old people eating dinner, found movie footage looped and played upside down, a negative print of a housecat. A homemade porno was projected on the side screens slightly off-sync but coherent. If sex was meant to distract the eye, it might have been the only thing to offer some relief. As the musical intensity grew, the word "fuck" ran repeatedly over the main film until the whole 15 minute "expanded cinema" piece hit a wall and exhausted itself. We looked around in disbelief, as though by some miracle we had survived it all. As the audience streamed up the aisles, Wade came back out. "Thank you", he said almost sheepishly. "I'm sorry this didn't work out as planned – our keyboardist had to go to the hospital because he cut his finger to the bone during setup". We shuddered. People stopped walking. The keyboardist, the one in the hot pants, had "cut his finger to the bone". The visceral suggestion was stunning, all the more so because we thought nothing more could shock us. Wasn't it supposed to be over? Or was it all part of the show, the final "fuck

you” grabbing at you while you were trying to leave?

*Underwater Birth* was successful in ways it probably didn't consciously intend. With its final transition from imagined to real violence, it made for one of the most potent experiences on the program. In *Underwater Birth*, the sideshow was more interesting than the main event – the 8mm pornos were more engrossing than the scattered images on the centre screen, and, precisely because we weren't expecting it, the events that took place before and after the performance were able to startle the audience beyond what even Wade could have hoped for. There, on the margins of the program, in a liminal space where no one was supposed to be watching but everyone was watching anyway, unfolded the most important moments of the Festival.

Having started in 1999, the International Experimental Cinema Exposition, or TIE, is a young Festival that is concerned with the preservation and continued exhibition of avant-garde film, as well as supporting new and innovative works of the medium. In its four short years it has grown impressively in stature and in scope. Major avant-garde film figures such as the late Stan Brakhage, Standish Lawder, M. M. Serra, and Peter Tscherkassky have sat on its board and, in addition to an annual festival, it hosts screenings, workshops, programs for at-risk youth, and a number of other activities in and around Colorado Springs, where the Festival is currently located.

TIE's program is loosely organised around what the mission describes as the “film language”: works that celebrate or, more appropriately, illuminate film as it has existed as film in the literal sense. Chris May, the curator and director of TIE, explained to me that the mission of the Festival is to keep open a venue for filmmakers working in film, in a world where 16 millimetre projectors are becoming rare and digital mediums are ever present and growing. The program abounded in all idioms of the film language, from hand-processed film strips, found footage compilations, personal storytelling, expanded cinema pieces, and films that, for better or for worse, caught the viewer completely off guard, inspiring some to emphatic applause and sending others to the door.

As part of the mission's imperative to advocate experimental film as a whole, TIE screened many classic films, like Gregory Markopoulos' *Swain* (1950) and rare or new work by



well-known filmmakers, like Brakhage's *Panels for the Wall of Heaven* (2002) or Standish Lawder's *Necrology* (1969-1970). It was breathtaking watching Nathaniel Dorsky watch his hometown quietly celebrate the 4th of July in 1965 with *Summer Wind* (1965), or the bright and simple elegance of Bruce Baillie's panning camera in *All My Life* (1966). Hans Richter's feature-length *Dreams that Money Can Buy* (1947), a surrealist-inspired film that included sections by Marcel Duchamp, Alexander Calder, Max Ernst, Man Ray, and John Cage, was a surprisingly playful glimpse into the inner minds of some of the century's greatest artists.

Many of the newer films, however, sometimes paled

*Dreams that Money Can Buy*

in comparison to the older, more established works. Though Eric These invoked Harry Smith's dictum that “film should be shown with whatever's happening now”, *Hojas de Maiz* (2002), a film laboriously hand-processed by printing cornhusks on celluloid, drew inward, far away from whatever might have been happening in the world outside. The visual rhythm and vibrant colour, though lovely to watch, had more in common with Standish Lawder's *Raindance* (1972) than with anything else on the program. Many filmmakers, when discussing their films in Q & A sessions, offered references to Hollis Frampton, Maya Deren, Harry Smith, Picasso, and Brakhage, but watching their films, it seemed as though many had neglected to take these ideas much further than where they began in the '20s, '40s, or '70s, if at all. These filmmakers were no doubt well-schooled in the history of the avant-garde but it did not appear they had yet learned how to forge their own vision. For whatever reason, the newer films on the program often seemed cautious or derivative of the great films with which they were shown. Robert Schaller, for example, invigorated the audience by explaining his “frameless film” experiments but stopped short when he explained that more narrative framed sequences had been reintegrated as a point of reference. His experimentation ended where his equipment began, for, as he explained, he could not find a frameless projector and simply stopped there (ignoring the logical conclusion of building one on his own). It was as if he was admitting defeat: that great liberating frameless film, oddly enough, imposed its own limits.

In the spirit of the avant-garde, it was those films that broke most radically from accepted norms, films that might have quoted history but twisted and reshaped its syntax, that enlivened the audience. There was nothing so wonderfully unexpected as the second morning's opener, Thomas Draschan and Stella Friedrichs' *To the Happy Few* (2003), a punchy, satirical ride that mixed food, sex, and violence in perverse Kuleshevian suggestions, all with great comedic timing. *To the Happy Few* is a found footage film, a kind of film pioneered by the Austrian avant-garde in the '80s and '90s, and a great example of film giving birth to itself in hybrid, mutated forms. In a different way, Lewis Klahr reconstructed an estranged nostalgia, using '50s textures – wallpaper, radios, hood ornaments – to represent the abstraction of the familiar in *Daylight Moon* (2002).

TIE's dedication to film is admirable, and it serves an important dual purpose to exhibit rare work and provide a supportive outlet for artists working in the medium. Filmmaker Allen D. Glass II, who exhibited *Ojos Que No Ven* (2003), remarked that “a place like TIE is really exciting because it really values the work... You usually don't get any personal contact with a place that shows your film, and TIE really made an effort to contact me and everyone else and encouraged us to become a part of the festival”. As part of its commitment to film and filmmakers, TIE also acquires the best projection equipment, which is often rare and expensive. Early in the program Chris May recounted how, in Telluride, where the Festival began, he had to rescue all the 16mm projectors after the venue decided to no longer keep them. Though there might have been some moments of imbalance between the older and newer films, confusing somewhat the aesthetic vision, TIE as a whole put together a rich and varied program. Like the Temenos, a secluded grove in Greece where Gregory Markopoulos' films are shown as he meant them to be seen, TIE seeks to give experimental film its own reverential atmosphere. Because it takes place in Colorado Springs, a quiet mountain town far from the noise of New York or San

Francisco, the Festival is something of a beacon, drawing together filmmakers and film enthusiasts to revel in the light of the screen.

When the conversation turned to other mediums, however, there was a vague, if not uneasy shift in tone. During the Festival's panel discussion, for example, an audience member asked where he might be able to view experimental films locally. He was young, a student perhaps, genuinely interested in what TIE was showing him and yet perplexed that it could be so difficult to watch these films at any other time. Unknowingly, but perhaps inevitably, his question opened a bigger question, that concerning the relationship between film and other mediums. Since the advent of video, filmmakers, curators, archivists and critics have argued over the transfer process from film to video or digital. One side rejects a degradation in quality, sometimes going so far as to insist that the film, if not presented on film, loses its medium-specific magic; the other points out important problems in distribution, cost, and accessibility. To answer the young man's question, Dominic Angerame and M.M. Serra offered rental options through Canyon Cinema in San Francisco and the Film-Makers' Cooperative in New York, both of which also include limited video and DVD titles. Standish Lawder had a different opinion. Speaking as the oldest and, as he declared, the most representative voice on the panel, he loudly shut the question down by denouncing "glowing phosphorus on furniture" (meaning television). "Long live the sprocket hole", he rallied, but until that point no one had even suggested otherwise. TIE has done its best to cultivate an environment in which film can flourish, but it does itself and its audience a disservice by rejecting other creative mediums outright. Hearing Lawder's vehemence, his implicit insistence that some mediums were legitimate and others weren't, I wondered for a moment if the avant-garde had died and hadn't yet realised it had been reincarnated into the rear-guard.

To be fair, not all comments related to video or digital suggested the kind of antagonism Lawder expressed. At other times, digital works were acknowledged for having their own place, just as film had a home at TIE. As film historian and TIE board member Robert von Dassanowsky, who presented a reconsideration of Leni Riefenstahl's work the first night, affirmed, "Our mission isn't to convert filmmakers or take a stand on celluloid versus digital video. We are saying that cinema has an enormous celluloid heritage and needs its own showcase for the celluloid-based non-commercial art, particularly as this is no longer the only medium for the avant-garde motion picture".

Yet the relationship between mediums remained in large part unaddressed. The awkwardness surrounding the question may reflect a tiredness concerning the question – haven't we heard this all before? – or perhaps a yet unformed stage in a young Festival's development. Whatever the case, and whatever the Festival's intent, the issues surrounding the question of medium were undeniably present. For a Festival that concerns itself specifically with medium, it is precisely the question of medium that emerges: Can an experimental film be made in a different medium? Or does the medium determine the kind of art produced? How does experimental film negotiate the presence of new moving image mediums? In the way that other festivals stake out genres (underground, gay and lesbian, national filmmaking) and enrich themselves through dialogue with other related groups, TIE's steadfast dedication to film affords it one of the best opportunities within the avant-garde community to engage in the question of medium, especially at a time when artists

have new tools and technologies available to them. TIE is unlike most other festivals that feature experimental films, because those like Rotterdam or the New York Underground Film Festival admit all kinds of work. Precisely because TIE stands so firmly, and so exclusively, in favour of film, it is the ideal location for this dialogue to take place. And so it was hard to understand why this conversation *wasn't* happening when the issues were right there, pushing their way in on the margins of the Festival. It was Jason Wade's elaborate set-up ritual, all the things you weren't supposed to see that you were seeing anyway. It was the best part of the show because, like the *Wizard of Oz*, it wasn't the magic of it but the truth, the little man behind the big voice whose feet didn't even reach the floor, it was the truth that grabbed you and stayed with you.

For all the issues that TIE raised about the state of experimental film today, the Festival remained a wonderful opportunity for viewing rare and great films. The story behind Jonas Mekas' smuggling of *Un Chant d'Amour* and his subsequent arrest for showing it was almost as exciting as the film itself. As M.M. Serra explained, Mekas purposefully did not bring the film to the New York licensing board knowing full well that the film would be banned from exhibition. She read an excerpt from a letter Mekas wrote while in jail, her voice quavering, and the force of Mekas' words resonated powerfully: “no legal body can act as an art critic”. Still later she read from Genet's *The Thief's Journal*: “I will dare what must be dared”. This is why avant-garde film is important, I thought, hearing those words. It's not a collection of oddities, a catalogue of diversity, or of things that exist just because they're made on one medium or another. It's the passion, the art, the rawness, the life of it. This is what keeps it going, what has always kept it going.

I could sense some of the vitality in many of the newer films. *Den of Tigers* (2002), by Jonathan Schwartz, lyrically examined the subtle textures of daily life in West Bengal, India. There you could see ankles lifting up and back down into a flooded street, a small ancient woman pushing on the arm of a water pump, and the hypnotic swinging of a young tightrope walkers hips, the image as taut as the narrow rope pressed to her feet. In a similar vein, *Ojos Que No Ven*, a split portrait between Mexico and Los Angeles, was composed in long, meditative shots that delicately observed life on both sides of a border. The title, taken from a Spanish expression “what the eyes do not see, the heart does not feel” used

only the first half of the phrase: “what the eyes do not see”. The truncated phrase suggested that beneath the surface of the film there was much more to be revealed, insights and connections barely hinted. *Ojos Que No Ven*, what the eyes do not see: in there lies one of cinema's paradoxes, that bound in the possibilities of film are its limitations, and that what can be seen is done so at the cost of what cannot be seen.

Thorston Fleisch's *Friendly Fire* (2003) literally burned what you could see, and it was the light of the fire, the projector's beam, that played out in stunning violence onscreen. With so much attention dedicated to the preservation of film, *Friendly Fire* proposed a cathartic alternative: ruined figures of melted celluloid and crackling ash. In death film comes alive,



*Friendly Fire*

more vital, reborn by the very forces that destroy it.

Many of the other films on the program might have been better received had they been organised in a more accessible manner. In one instance, an elderly woman complained to a friend her disappointment with Ben Russell's *Terra Incognita* (2002). She had visited Easter Island years before and had come to see the film for that reason. But watching *Terra Incognita's* impressionistic blurriness, she could hardly see anything at all, and besides, the movie made her eyes hurt.

One example of this was the loose organisation of pinhole films, which did not seem to connect to each other or their technique in any particular way, and were scattered throughout several programs. Some, like Schaller's *My Life as a Bee* (2003), gave meaning to the fluttering of blurred images. The glimpses of colour and sense of rapid motion, a lyrical journey through a garden, made for an unexpected and sophisticated use of the pinhole camera. In others, like Thomas Comerford's *Figures in the Landscape* (2002), the pinhole flatness made the film even blander than it needed to be. Shot on construction sites in Shaumburg, Illinois, a narrator read aloud from the suburb's historical records concerning Native Americans while human models stood stiffly in front of the camera. If meant to assist in an exercise in monotony, the pinhole camera could be considered a successful device, but it seemed otherwise entirely and literally pointless. *Figures in the Landscape's* one saving moment was the narrator's stumble on the audio track, his hesitation, and his decision to start the line over – an instant of sharpness not otherwise found in the film.

A great festival knows its audience, who it is, what it can take, and how far its expectations might be stretched. If TIE can better adjust to viewer expectations – mix longer films with shorter works, vary silence with sound, modulate tone and moods, organise programs according to theme, and give a lot more room between films to simply allow the audience to breathe – it will go a long way in establishing a curatorial rhythm the audience can follow.

As one of the most ambitious and comprehensive experimental film festivals in the world, TIE attracts people who love film and care to see or know where film is headed. Its strength is rooted in its dedication to film, and though I have no desire for TIE to stray from its course, it would benefit everyone involved to talk openly and honestly about the undeniable forces affecting experimental film today. Bringing experimental cinema to people who might otherwise not have the opportunity, or the interest, is already a tremendous achievement. For this, and for all the hard work the Festival planners put into finding rare or forgotten works, TIE is already a great event. To include the discussion of the medium and all the issues it raises – art, technology, the changing face of experimental film – it will succeed in becoming an important one.

---

© Genevieve Yue, December 2003

---

[contents](#) [great directors](#) [cteq annotations](#) [top tens](#) [about us](#) [links](#) [archive](#) [search](#)