

T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G The Architectures of Perception: Cinematic Enchainment and Sentient Machines*

ESPERANZA COLLADO

This month's show looks at plastic, quasi-sculptural aspects of cinema as present in a series of correlated explorations of light, space and repetition. The starting point in curating this show was *Making a Home* (2007), a video work by Cork-based artist Maximilian Le Cain, who also contributed to the curation of this show by proposing one of the works: Etienne O'Leary's. The rest of the films were selected for the various ways in which they resonate with and expand certain features present in *Making a Home*. In general terms, the films we are presenting (dis)articulate the structures of architecture, in the broadest and most perceptual sense of the word-space as it is objectively constructed (or dismantled), but also as it is experienced by the camera eye, by fictional characters and by the audience. Whilst each of the four films puts a different emphasis on one or more of these three centres of attention, they have in common that their drama is an individual subject's direct perceptual experience of light, time and space, occurring at the extreme limits of his or her senses.

The unbridgeable gap between internal and external perception explored in *Making a Home* is proven by the filmer/protagonist's inability to discover or construct an equitable inhabitable space in accordance with the desires of his subjective being. The torture of the endlessly repeated shots and the fragmentation of the audio-visual discourse (and spoken text) could be interpreted as symptoms of this failure which acquires the form of a cinema that makes space, in its architectonical edifice, stutter. More precisely, this cinema makes the architectures of perception stutter. This is true not only of Le Cain's film but of the entire programme.

This 'stuttering' is a vehicle or catalyst for externalizing pulses, anxieties, desires, for making cinema a sentient contraption that works as a sort of fail- safe device that kicks in when a system created between the filmmaker and his single-handed practice

* Notes for the film programme curated by Esperanza Collado and presented on January 25th 2009 at Ha'penny Bridge Inn in Dublin (Ireland) with invited artist Maximilian Le Cain.

(as each film is shot ‘single-handed’) inevitably fails in attempting a sensual encounter with subjectified architectonical space. There is an overtone of horror and violence in all four films, a kind of sensualized or sexualized horror, depending on the film. In Etienne O’Leary’s *Chromo Sud* (1968), for instance, there is a queasily disturbing threat of sexual violence that creates an atmosphere of decadent sleaziness.

Ivan Zulueta’s *Leo es Pardo* (1976) displays a range of sensualism on a visual, aural and tactile level that even encompasses taste. Its result, when embodied and animated by the elements of cinema, is a state of extreme fear and distress in the protagonist. Light further emphasizes anxiety. Whilst in *Leo es Pardo* the constitution of space is circumscribed by the cinematic fluctuations of harsh, bright light as an externalized form of the main character’s anxiety, the murky light of *Chromo Sud* blurs reality, aiding its disintegration into an orgiastic ritual of sorts. *Making a Home* even utilizes what could be seen as traditional horror film lighting. It abounds in shadows and creepy corridors, which, nevertheless, lead not to a lurking monster but to a sensual field of flickering red frames, shortcutting any possibility for representation and opening a crack in the filmer/protagonist’s reality through which the spectator can insert his or her own subjectivity.

As in Paul Sharits’ *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* (1968), this injection of intervallic space or cracks in the flux of representational images offers a manifest assault on the sphere of representation, positing images and language as subjects of entropy and atrophy. The stuttering sound in both *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* and *Making a Home* (the word “destroy” in *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* and the opening declaration “I thought” in *Making a Home* are subjected to repetition and enchainment until their meaning distorts) is harmonically accompanied on the visual track by an intoxicating vibration of intermittent light.

There is also a sensualized form of terror present in the violent enchainment of frames in *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G*, a film that inaugurates corporeal cinema, sculpting light and generating a gaseous type of perception characterized by the dancing corpuscles of its relentlessly flickering images. If *Making a Home*, *Leo es Pardo* and *Chromo Sud* attest a radical internalization of space, the obscene luminosity of *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* reaches a quasi-three-dimensional state of cinema, rushing at the viewer rather than inviting exploration. We could plausibly describe this phenomenon as a sort of chromatic ejaculation of light over the audience, since *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* sprays us with cinematic light, accentuating the viewers’ physical awareness of their bodies and the space surrounding them. Irrational cuts and a zero degree form of representation posit this film at the doors of cinema’s dematerialization (or what has been addressed as expanded cinema). Whilst generating a concatenation of

neurophysiological vibrations beyond movement, it explores the physical exultation the rotation of images communicates directly to the brain.

Vibration is indeed one of the main threads linking all four films. They all 'vibrate' markedly but differently. *Chromo Sud* and *Making a Home* both modulate the perception of reality from the perspective of the filming subject, the act of shooting opening a space of negotiation between objective and subjective reality. *Leo es Pardo*, on the other hand, puts the protagonist in front of the camera and at the mercy of an overwhelmingly active transformative cinematic reality. And *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* essentially places the audience itself in her position, as the film's victims. But to varying degrees the viewers of all four films constantly find themselves sharing in a subjectified experience of the world and falling vulnerable to the threats experienced by different nervous systems without the traditional narrative mediation of a series of causal events.

WORKS:

MAXIMILIAN LE CAIN'S "MAKING A HOME"

(Video, 2007, color, sound, 10mins, Ireland) Courtesy of the artist

Making a Home is 'thinking space', as is plainly expressed in the opening sequences of the film; an undefined, disintegrated building, a large space full of possible discoveries. In Le Cain's words, *Making a Home* "is an attempt to create a dwelling for and from internal desires using the mystery implied by the given architectural space, which fails". The impossibility of a reconciliation of internal and external insights is illustrated in *Making a Home* through ways of destabilizing impressions of this space captured on video. Cracks are caused to appear in representation (cracks which return the audience's gaze from an exploration of a space back on to themselves), through the torture of repetition and the regular presence of black intervals. A sublime sound treatment accompanies this process, adding a series of subtle frequencies to the vulnerability of the subject in his attempt to construct something coherent out of a stuttering space. *Making a Home* shares the exploration of a ruined architectonical space with some of Le Cain's other works such as *John Puts a Chair Away* (2008) and *(...from a dying hotel)* (2007), as well as the 'thinking space' of buildings made 'weightless' in *Available Light* (2008).

IVÁN ZULUETA'S "LEO ES PARDO"

(1976, 12mins, 16mm on DVD, Spain) Courtesy of Augusto Torres (producer and filmmaker)

Iván Zulueta is one of the most prolific Spanish filmmakers. He began experimenting intensely with the medium in the 1960s and 1970s, influenced by the avant-garde cinema he discovered in New York. His distinctive style is reflected in his first feature fiction film *Arrebato* (1979), where his central preoccupations with formal aspects of cinema are intertwined with his passion for horror films and an exquisite obsession with cinematic stases and cadence. As in many of his films, the title 'Leo es Pardo' is a wordplay: 'leopardo' means 'leopard'; splitting the word results in 'Leo (a common female/male name) is brown/dark green'. The film, which premieres in Ireland, is reminiscent of Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* and Kenneth Anger's *Puce Moment*. The enclosed space of *Leo es Pardo* embodies, cinematically and in the disparate erotized fluctuations of light and motion, an anxious emotional state which the subject can only externalize through this sentient machine: the cinematic architectures of perception.

ETIENNE O'LEARY'S CHROMO SUD

(1968, 21 mins, 16mm on DVD, France) Courtesy of Denis O'Leary.

One of the very few films made by Etienne O'Leary, all of which emerged from the French underground circa 1968 and can be very loosely designated 'diary films'. Like the contemporaneous films by O'Leary's more famous friend Pierre Clementi, they trippily document the drug-drenched hedonism of that era's dandies. In contrast to the back-to-origins minimalism of the Zanzibar Group (Garrel, Deval, Reynal, Bard, etc), O'Leary worked with an intoxicating style that foregrounded rapid and even subliminal cutting, dense layering of superimposed images and a spontaneous notebook type shooting style. The touchstone would seem to be Mekas and the New York underground rather than Godard. Yet even if much of O'Leary's material was initially 'diaristic', depicting the friends, lovers, and places that he encountered in his private life, the metamorphoses it underwent during editing transformed it into a series of ambiguously fictionalized, sometimes darkly sexual fantasias. *Chromo sud*, his most sinister work by far, owes as much to Kenneth Anger as to Mekas, presenting the libertarian impulses of the time in as orgiastically morbid and sadistic

a vein as Anger's Scorpio Rising biker culture. In common with O'Leary's other films, *Chromo sud* is a testament to the transformative powers of editing and the control it gives the filmmaker in shaping his own reality from the world around him.

PAUL SHARITS' "T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G"

(1968, 12 mins, 16mm, USA). Lux Artists Moving-Image London

Paul Sharits, an American plastic artist before becoming an experimental filmmaker, was a notorious member of Fluxus influenced by the teachings of John Cage. Pip Chodorov and Vincent Deville have stated that Paul Sharits' films are legendary for triggering what harsher critics have regarded as masturbatory nonsense: the inaccessible, elitist and uncompromising nature of avant-garde film. Nonetheless, Sharits' films are not solely, as Chodorov and Deville affirm, visual experiences. These are films to be experienced beyond the boundaries of the visual since their fluctuating light floods the exhibition space, influencing the whole environment. In fact, Paul Sharits was one of the first artists to introduce experimental cinema to art gallery spaces with his film installations, which he called 'locational films'. "The film's title (letters separated by commas) shows the physical conception of Sharits' cinema: starting from discrete units (still frames) a fluid movement is created (the cinematic illusion). [...] In this film there are three types of images which show physical contact: the hands performing various destructive actions around the face; a surgical operation on an eye; a photo of sexual penetration. [...] As demonstrated by his project on epileptic seizures (...), Sharits' goal is to penetrate us as deeply as possible through the eyes, to make us vibrate in resonance with his film". (Chodorov and Deville, *Understanding Paul Sharits. Madala Films, Re:Voir, Paris, 2003*).