

I cannot remember for what occasion I wrote this piece, or whether it has been published. I emphasize, however, that I still subscribe to the views I had when I wrote this (whenever that was).

### **A Note on the Loop Collective**

I recall vividly how it all began: one of the most talented students I have ever taught came my office. He was enthusiastic about the films he had been seeing in my class, and asked me to show more of the sort he had seen in my class. I told him that I had spent the entire budget I was allotted for film rentals. The student then asked if he could rent films from his own resources—and he added that he might be able to get a number of students to chip in, since there were several other students who wanted to see more experimental films. I suggested that he would be better to do as students at another Toronto university had done several years earlier: to form a student association and ask the Ryerson's Student Administrative Council to allocate its funds to hire films. The students did form a student society, which they called "Loop" and were successful in attracting funding. A new arts organization was launched.

This renewed interest on the part of students in experimental film surprised me. This was in part because of the extreme nature of the request: after all, I am fortunate in teaching only "experimental" film, and in those days, I taught a large number of courses (about 10 three unit courses a year); so I showed quite a lot of experimental films to my classes—far more than any other Canadian instructor did. But that is only a small part of the explanation: a much more important factor was from about the middle of the 1980s to the middle of the 1990s, I had lost interest in what passed as contemporary avant-garde film. Even the very best of it (think of Peter Hutton or Nathaniel Dorsky, filmmakers who started making work in the 1960s, but whose renown is a phenomenon of a later time) struck me as beautiful, but not in a radical way. Consider the difference between the poems of Wallace Stevens and the poems of Ezra Pound, and you'll get an idea of the distinction I mean when I say this was not really avant-garde work. Even the very best of the *oeuvres* whose renown was a phenomenon of the later period struck me as not being as radically contestational—nor as wildly, recklessly imaginative, nor as risk-taking as the works that I drew me to the avant-garde cinema in the early seventies. A chasm separated the works of Hollis Frampton, Michael Snow, Stan Brakhage, Jack Chambers, Lawrence Jordan, and Ernie Gehr from the work that was being done by filmmakers who became prominent later. If this seemed to me to be true of the very best makers of the later period, the matter was so much the worse for the vast majority: they espoused commitments of a whole routine and academic character. One could parse out the meanings of the films of the later group to arrive at an easy, programmatic sort of closure. Susan Sontag, decades ago, in "Against Interpretation," remarked on an absence that still plagues us: "in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art." Sontag's remark suggests how destructive and the creative drives, violent and the tender elements, integrative and disintegrative aspects come to so intimately fused in great art. But we can turn her utterly defensible remark toward the creative process itself: when art making is not fuelled by an erotic enthusiasm, all is lost. Even in the best of work, there was scant evidence on the maker's part of feeling for artworks' libidinal aspect of art, for the violent and destructive potential of material which, when unloosed, can rise up against representation and enfeeble it (and in the process can thwart the craftsperson's urge—a vital component of every strong maker's drive—to create stable closure). In even in the best works of the filmmakers who attained prominence in the 1980s, that conflict between a lust for order and the rage for chaos was enfeebled—and in the discursive works being done by the ordinary makers who, beginning in the 1980s, had arrived in numbers unknown in the 1960s and 70s, this tendency was so marked that the films could provide splendid cast studies for the

art of the erotically crippled.

It seemed to me then (and it still seems to me now) that most of the work done by those who arrived on the scene between the early-to-mid 80s and the mid-90s was largely an academic enterprise that was not driven by any erotic impulse; and so it seemed to me that experimental film was moribund. I didn't foresee great intellectual profit in continuing to pay attention to the "new" experimental film (though I continued to believe that some of the practitioners who had emerged earlier continued to make work of extraordinary merit). More to the point, I didn't expect that another vital experimental film movement would emerge in my lifetime

Having come to this conclusion, I withdrew my attention from contemporary avant-garde films and directed it towards the history of avant-garde cinema in the early decades of the twentieth century, focussing on its relation to other avant-garde practices of the time. I also began studying mathematics and engineering in earnest. So, I was living an odd life, spending my research time writing on, for example, Dada collage and Dada cinema, and using whatever time was left over, in evenings and weekends mostly, to prepare to write exams in mathematics and engineering courses, and when that was done, I endeavoured to apply my newly acquired mathematical skill to developing for signal processing utilities for new media creation. From time to time, I tried to tell students about my interest in the possible merging of film and video, and the new creative possibilities that were being opened by new technological developments. Technology generally represents the will-to-mastery, I warned them (the warnings struck them as novel); but John Cage has shown us other possibilities (openings that lie remarkably close to the theories on art of that trenchant critic of technology, Martin Heidegger). I tried to tell them about my interest in collaboration with machines that moved beyond the will-to-mastery, by using random processes—actually constrained random processes, and the nature of those constraints had already, by this time, become a central topic in my thinking. The general attitude of the students seemed to be, mostly, respectful, amused skepticism; students, including many subsequent Loop members, seemed to feel their instructor possessed useful knowledge on the history of experimental film, but on the topic the potentials of signal processing and machine learning methods he tended to become monomaniacally loopy. They chose instead antipodal (and undisputably great) models: the cinemas of Stan Brakhage and Carolee Schneemann.

Both models were important, but it is Stan Brakhage's that I wish to reflect on here. Particularly important to the founders of Loop was Stan Brakhage's collage films (and those of his hand-painted films that most closely approach the collage mode). By 1961, this strain in Brakhage's work began jelling (there is evidence of antecedents in his *oeuvre*) when he painted on the film's surfaces and scratched it with a newly focussed intensity. The first product of this newly focussed intensity was *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular*, a film of his first wife, Jane, giving birth, a film that includes an extraordinary interaction between diverse elements: images derived in the traditional way, through "straight" photography; images characterized by a photographic anamorphosis; and forms painted onto the film. The culmination of this early stage in his efforts at incorporating diversity influence matured with the *Prelude [to Dog Star Man]* (1962), and *Dog Star Man* as a whole (1962–64), one of his major works—*Dog Star Man* is 78-minute four-part mythopoeic light poem. Some of the visual effects of the multiple photographic superimpositions of the *Prelude* resemble those of collage in Cubist art (and other visual effects that film included resemble effects the Analytic Cubists produced through multiple superimposition). An entelechic process was unleashed, so by Part Two of *Dog Star Man*, amid the superimpositions, Brakhage began exploring film as collage, gluing ("collaging" means "pasting") small pieces of film into individual frames. In 1963, he produced *Mothlight*, a collage made entirely without a camera: to create the film he pressed filaments of moth wings and plants between strips of tape (then

printed the resulting collage). Brakhage has made many cameraless films since *Mothlight* (and later in his life spoke about the aesthetic dangers of camera-derived representations: Brakhage has often created films by painting directly on celluloid, sometimes superimposing this painting on found footage (creating another analogue of what the Cubists produced by combining found objects and painted forms in their canvases) and by scarring the film's emulsion.

By unfolding its cinematic potentials, Brakhage made the collage aesthetic central to experimental film. Collage has been the most common ambition of filmmakers of the Loop group—and here I mean collage in the sense the used in art-historical discourse, the pasting of real materials into the artwork (as Cubist, Dada, Surrealist artists did). Kelly Egan, Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof, and Maria Raponi have all made impressive collage films of this sort.

Maria Raponi's work provides a significant clue as to the importance of this enterprise. As early filmmakers did with montage and cubists did with fragmented imagery and collage, Raponi (like a number of other important artists since) has shattered and combined images to convey how discontinuous, uncertain, and ambiguous our mental and visual life unavoidably is. For her films *Fluid* and *glimmer*, Maria produced photographic/cinematic composites, frames composed of diverse images that often look crumpled and folded. They assemble into a image of a body in crisis—but what crisis? As with recollections of such moments, the information is ambiguous.

The answer, perhaps, can be approached by considering a co-incidence that fascinates me: several painters have recently expressed great bitterness to me over the way that contemporary taste, influenced by the prevalence of reproduction, cannot appreciate the roughness of art. They all complained that contemporary taste demands a polish that has become *de rigueur* with the glut of products from the technologies of image reproducibility—of films, (high-resolution) video, and, above all else, photography (digital or not). Moreover, each artist bewailed the dangers of relying on reproductions in presenting developments in art are serious enough in painting and sculpture (and they all bemoaned the effects of schools' understandable reliance on photographic/printed reproductions in teaching art history); and the effects of this surfeit of reproductions have surely been exacerbated by the sheer abundance of electronic images (that has become, in effect, a second nature for *homo technologicus*). The effects of this can be seen everywhere in the visual arts, but its deleterious consequences are especially evident in connection with collage.

The significance of this shift has hardly been thought. But it is signal: collage became central to the aesthetic of many 20<sup>th</sup> century painting and texture was historically a key to collage. Consequently any attenuation of the sensibility for texture is especially destructive to collage. When one realizes (the recognition can floods one with melancholy) that the deluge of images we are exposed to daily threatens to eliminate all sense of the distinctiveness of each image from all others, we understand that it is this heightened sense of tactility that is at stake. We can think back, for further evidence of this, to moment in the 1960s, a moment located on the cusp between era dominated by working methods that were grounded in the nature of the medium and an era which has spurned those methods (and the conceptions which grounded them) with astonishing vehemence. We think of a body of sculptural work (for example, the soft sculpture of Claes Oldenberg, the rough metal of David Smith, or even the coarse textures of Carl Andre's austere and rigorous work) in which such privilege was accorded the tactile qualities of sculpture that their makes risked overwhelming the formal possibilities that constituted sculpture as an artistic medium. In the earlier era, artists focussed on the artistic medium and the physical processes to which those materials were disposed—such interests co-existed with (and indeed offered support to, just as it was supported by) the era's preoccupation era with the materials and processes of industrial production. That interest turned out to be short lived: in short order, it was succeeded by an era that give expression the impulse to be liberated

from the constraints of mediumistic specificity (for such interests coexist nicely with the levelling illusions of consumer culture).

What the stress on collage, so evident in the work of the Loop filmmakers (and, I subsequently discovered, the work of some of their most significant contemporaries), does is to counter this shift from the tactile to the conceptual. They have reaffirmed the import of the earlier moment, its commitment to a heightened sense of (a sort of) tactility—this reason for this qualification will become clear in due course. Loop filmmakers seem to have realised instinctively that in digital collage, tactility is hardly a factor: we are all too familiar with the fact that the suggestion of roughness or impasto that surfaces they offer is only an illusion. Conversely, collage's emphasis on texture could serve as therapy against for this turn—it could re-affirm the sensuous surface that Sontag's valuable propaedeutic to aesthetics extols. This is why they have rejected my own interest in attempting to transcend the technological gnostic's will-to-mastery through technology itself. It is as though, fearing a loss of bodily, and perhaps of humanity, these artists have undertaken the task (perhaps the impossible task) of constantly pulling us back into the body, into tactility, into the real world where materials are wrought into order by manual processes. In these works tactile modes of knowing, or, especially, carnal ways of seeing (one thinks of Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof's *Her Carnal Longings*, Shana MacDonald's *Self-Seeking Frenzy*, or Kelly Egan's *Finger Petals*) are not subordinated to seemingly disembodied, abstract mental processes. Several of these artists proclaim a feminine/feminist turn in this, for they assert that in the female erotic, multiple aesthetic knowledges, and multiple sensory modalities coexist (and this suggests the many processes through which the embodied female subject is interpellated, and the protean form which results). It may well be that the history of era will come to be written has the progressive transfer of perceptive faculties from an individual's body machines—first to instruments that record images and sound, then, more recently, to sensors (and every sort of detector fashioned on analogy to the their fleshy counterparts) that substitute for the absence of tactility that teleaesthesia entails. This is what the interest in tactility in general (and the particular form that interest has assumed in the work of Loop members) stands against.

But the imagery in collage films—even collage films of the sort here under consideration—are still caught in within an ontology of imagery whose appearance of facture outstrip their being: they appearance of roughness they give is still only an appearance, reproduced through a (non-manual) technical process. (Consider the analogy to design magazines' currently fashionable use of a reproducible—a manufactured—simulacrum of roughness.) The members of the Loop group have understood this: in their work, a sense of process has replaced texture: texture becomes less of a tactile experience and more of a simulated sensation. This attention to process draws attention to the methods employed in making the work—which always involves to the search for the right elements and the combination of parts (aspects of the creative process that traditional methods of montage had highlighted). Digital and film collage conform to these notions of collage (though maybe less evidently than a traditional paper collage): digital and film collage, too, emphasize the search for the right elements and the combination of parts.

But, given that the suggestion of tactility has become through an stress on process, one would be entitled to wonder if this concern with texture and tactility is really important, or whether is it merely an atavistic pining for a lost era. The answer, again, involves understanding how radical a challenge the emphasis of tactility (even a sense of tactility mediated by the evocation of manual operations) offered to the ruling epistemological protocols. The discursive regimes that established the episteme of the age have mostly disregarded lexicon of tactility; the reports of touch were effective a unconscious element that that lie beneath the modern discursive constructions of eroticism, knowledge, and art. It was a primary, but reviled sense:

aligned with bodily pleasure and sensuality, it was suspect; yet, at the same time, it was associated with the authoritative disciplines of science and medicine, and even with higher realms of artistic creativity. Thus, in the interests the members of the group share, one can detect an epistemological concern to understand how tactility has organized knowledge and defined human subjectivity. It is precisely the potential to disrupt established ways of know and reconfigure epistemological foundations of world sundered into subjective and objective realm, that lacks for understanding of erotic processes that pass between the two that makes this work so challenging. Theirs is, precisely, work in articulates (I choose that word deliberately, over the ready-to-mind, but incorrect, term, “represents”) the ebbs and flows between process, body, object and image-flow, an articulation which renders tactility multiple, fluid, always changing, always inconstant—“in process,” as one says. It is concerned with the notion of becoming. This notion of flux, this antagonism to all that, contrary to the accounts for the resistance members of the Loop group have shown to McTheory—not to all theory, but theory that is not genuine, theoretical formulations that have become just another franchise, that replicates itself identically all over the globe, theory for those conceptual commitments are not rooted in corporeal experience, but borrowed. They are skeptical of art that not begin with an existential act of confronting the void that is the self and that does not draw on the experience of the abyss. They are skeptical of art that does that not draw on the body’s immersion in the lived world or that does not draw on life as it is lived. They require that their theories elaborate their life experiences. They will not make work which accords with someone else’s theories. This arises from their commitment to an art of the body.

What would I expect from artists who have associated with Loop? Already their forms have grown toward a common interest in the associative character of memory and an interest (developing out of a central concern with tactility) in experience’s corporeal unpinings. Understanding that the contemporary contemporary socius is endangered because of a schism between lifeworld and system, they have opted for the life world—hence they have made the phenomenology of the body is primary. So I would expect that their interest will become more engaged with psychoanalysis—that, even while their future direction will refuse to thematise psychoanalytic issues, that it will be post-psychoanalytical in the sense that will take psychoanalysis as a given and will work with common signifiers that reference that field. Attention to latent childhood in adulthood, an abundance of references to infantile sexuality and displaced desire, to oral aggression and fear of castration, and a fascination with the symbolism of fairy tales—all these elements can trigger associative processes that seem to suggest the possible revelation of subconscious and psychosexual forces. Thus, I expect that their works will incorporate (as Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof already has in her too rarely seen *my I’s*, *Vibrant Marvels*, and *Echo* and in Ajla Odobašić’s wonderful *Sarajevo Girl*) childhood imagery for its ability to revealing the workings of the adult unconscious and in registering the registering the encrypted force of the unconscious in the way that we feel our bodies.

Still, one sees a connection of strange and wondrous sort in this art, made by hand, with the aesthetics of the era of digital reproducibility. The exemplar of the digital age’s episteme is hypertext (post-modernist artists’ use of appropriation, allegory, pastiche, and self-conscious simulacra reinforce that): hypertext embodies the beliefs that all awareness is discursive, that textuality defines the limits of knowledge, and knowledge has a branching structure. It is, then, based on a metaphor of thinking as association—the same metaphor that gives form to so many of the works produced by members of the Loop group. Hypertext, or, more exactly, hypermedia, proposes an image of though the fits the era of digital reproducibility, just as hyperspace (the space spanned by hypermedia links) reflects how we, in this era, understand the mind to work. In the emphasis on the relation between medium and sensation, and between sensation and knowledge, we detect the precursor of the now regnant totalizing conception of mediatized

perception. Already Ajla Odobašić's collage sound-tracks display these features, and *Morning* is a near hypertextural interweave of text, image and sound (its unifying principles are certainly closer to that than to collage). Ms. Odobašić's film work—both her own poetic films and the sound tracks she has produced for others (including the present writer) show her to be a very accomplished filmmaker whose flexible imagination linked to admirable professional skills have allowed her to produce convincing work in an impressive range of forms. I understand that she is work on a multimedia piece and expect her to lead the way in producing hypertext forms. Though hand-crafted, the art of the Loop collective suggest, more than traditional collage, the world of fragmented knowledge, sundered understanding, and fluid morphing that we associate with new media art—even the liquification of all concepts of identity and the embrace of an ontology of a common factor in the hand-made work of the Loop collective and the work of regnant digital paradigm.

However, on the cybernetic model, thought is understood much in the way it was understood in Peirce's semeiotic, and in particular, in the way that it is represented in Charles Sanders Peirce's diagrammatics—diagrammatics constitute a technique for iconizing complex material, rendering it apprehensible by the intellect: a diagram puts a schema before the mind's eye, to use Peirce's phrase. It is the structure of the diagram that is important: the actual senses employed to bring the relations to the mind's eye, or the matter in which the map of the relations is embodied of no real interest. The emphasis on the medium itself, so evident in the work of Loop group, counters that conception of thought.

And there is this difference, too (and on it much depends): they have not allowed natural space-time to be displaced by an artificial one: space may be ephermeralized by tele-aesthesis, but these artists are insisting on the crucial difference between intimate and personal space and the systematized space articulated by text. Furthermore, to the expansive "real time" of cyber-reality, they counterpose the immediate present of ecstatic life. We can only hope that space time will not give way to threat, offered by the hegemony of simulacra and by the artificially mediatized perception of cyborgian anatomies, that we are merely powerless witnesses to that shift. That is hope that the work made by members of the Loop group conveys.