

Evidence of Visibility

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Akron Civic, Ohio, 1980, Silver Gelatin Print from the “Theaters” series. ©Hiroshi Sugimoto

“People need a screen.”

With those words, author/activist Naomi Klein galvanized the room at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) Glenn Gould Theatre, where a daylong documentary discussion was held in September in conjunction with the Toronto International Film Festival [see “Toronto Turns Forty” in this issue]. Klein was on stage with her husband Avi Lewis to discuss their film, *This Changes Everything*, which he directed based on her book of the same name. The two were there for the film, yes, but also to promote the next day’s event: the unveiling of The Leap Manifesto calling for a new Canada that would turn its back on the tar sands and divest from fossil fuels entirely.¹ Aiming to transform the book into a political movement, Klein had come to this conclusion: sometimes, people seem to need a screen. To inform them? No, books do that just fine, so do newspapers, TED talks, Twitter, and any number of online sites. Rather, Klein said, people need screens to bring them together in community and perhaps even to galvanize them into action.

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Klein and Lewis are firmly entrenched in the activist and documentary communities of Toronto. Both are political/film royalty. She, on the film side, is the daughter of documentarian Bonnie Sherr Klein, who made *Not a Love Story: A Film about Pornography* (1981) while working at Studio D of the National Film Board (NFB) of Canada. He, on the politics side, is the son of Stephen Henry Lewis, past leader of the Ontario New Democratic Party, AIDS policy leader, author, and former UN envoy; and the grandson of David Lewis, a Russian-born Canadian labor lawyer, member of Parliament, and leader of Canada’s National Democratic Party (NDP). Together, they are able to marshal resources beyond the ability of most any other Canadian filmmaker. If anyone can make this documentary-as-politics model work, they can, so it should be fascinating to watch it all roll out.

Their optimistic notion of film viewing as a route to political process is not new: it’s actually the founding tenet of Canadian documentary, enshrined in the National Film Act of 1950 which stipulated the creation of a national cinema that could serve “to interpret Canada to Canadians.”² What is new, however, is the effort to build the political organizing function directly into the production and post-production stages of the film, thus avoiding the gaps that sometimes befall films after their release, when time lags can blunt a message or delays render a documentary less relevant or effective.

Documentary Thinking, Toronto Style

Toronto has a wide-ranging and fearless documentary community of filmmakers and scholars, activists and geeks. The full spectrum was on display over the summer when its three major educational institutions—University of Toronto, York University, and Ryerson University—joined forces to host the twenty-second edition of the venerable global conference Visible Evidence (or VisEv, as it is affectionately known). With panels that ranged from “Documenting Surveillance” to “Reconsidering the Aesthetics of Interactive Documentary,” VisEv provided a constantly stimulating, engaging, and sometimes even infuriating three-day conversation on all things documentary.

Some of the most fascinating sessions were those dealing with cross-platform and interactive works that had a socio-political dimension or practice. A panel with Liz Miller, Katerina Cizek, Deborah Cowen, and Nupur Basu was set up to explore “Parallel Discoveries: Co-Creation Modeling for Socially Engaged Digital Documentaries.” They shared the processes of creating these works in collaboration with communities, not in a mechanistic or opportunistic manner but rather with a sense of purposeful research that could feed into the work but also stand on its own as a model of engagement. Miller’s *The Shore Line* and Cizek/Cowen’s *Highrise* are both complex longitudinal models of transmedia documentary.³ Made outside the realm of the single-work, one-shot model, both involve legions of collaborators, lengthy production cycles, and prolonged research phases. It is significant that the discussion took place in Canada, where subsidy is still available for documentary—though less all the time, under the Harper government—thereby allowing serious time to be dedicated to projects. Further, the NFB’s support for online work that breaks with older narrative structures is also driving documentary experimentation.

The closing keynote address was delivered by prolific British filmmaker John Akomfrah, fresh from his Venice Biennale installation. Joining the documentary crowd in Toronto seemed to send him down memory lane, and in addition to reprising his start in documentary and considering the directions of his hybrid practice since then, Akomfrah shocked the audience. He revealed, even insisted, that it was his practice every year to assemble his team and watch Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985) in its entirety. Some scholars were thrilled, others dismayed; considering *Shoah*’s emergence at the very moment when Akomfrah himself was just beginning (his *Handsworth Songs* was released in 1986), there is an odd kind of sense to this salute across acute filmmaking differences. On the other hand, what would the world be like if Lanzmann had a matching practice of watching *Handsworth Songs* every year?

As I prepared to join a panel with two of the leaders in modern documentary thinking, Brian Winston and Jane Gaines, moderated by the U of T’s Kass Banning, I found myself thinking back through documentary history for clues for my talk. In the 1980s, the invention of camcorders set off an explosion of personal documentary-making and experimentation. As untrained documentarians began to make accomplished first-person works, a term was invented: ECU, or Extreme Close-up. Theirs was a kind of documentary that acknowledged the experience of the person behind the camera and reflected that point of view. It was a visceral kind of documentary, often handheld, often interviewing

family members to recover histories. The ECU documentaries were hailed for transmitting forms of knowledge that likely would have been lost in earlier documentary regimes.

Allowing myself to dream of a retooling of the field for today’s urgently needed documentaries, I realized they demand a wider frame than the ECU was ever designed to construct. So I called for a new school of documentary: the Extreme Wide Angle (EWA). I prize the kind of documentary that takes care to be legible to its subjects, that has an ethics of representation, that opens up the frame, steps back, and takes the context of social history into account. The EWA could contribute so much to national and transnational discourses, with a newly engaged emphasis on context, process, and intention. There, I’ve said it: EWA, y’all.

The Afterlife of Ana Mendieta

Permit me to introduce a film that is not one. That is to say, it is not a film per se but rather a film as an aftereffect, a trace, a documentation, or by now, perhaps, a mirage. I am not speaking about the digital, nor any sort of augmented or virtual reality. Rather, I mean to talk about film as detritus: what is left when a life is gone.

On September 8, 2015, a select group of invitees convened at Galerie Lelong in New York City’s Chelsea district. It was a thirty-year-old event that drew such a posse together to commemorate a life—and a death. The event? On September 8, 1985, the young Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta was murdered, her thriving career cut short at the age of 37, mere months after a Prix de Rome stay at the American Academy had convinced her that the Italian capital offered a perfect solution to her life. For Mendieta, exiled from Cuba as a child in the notorious Peter Pan airlift, raised in Iowa in orphanages and foster homes, then long based in New York where Cold War politics guaranteed constant arguments, Rome was an exit route. It was a place where Mendieta could unify New York City and Havana, connect all her passions and identities to each other, whether in her studio, her favorite restaurants, or in her car joyously battling the unrelenting Roman traffic.

But she didn’t make it back to Rome. Preparing to file for divorce from her husband, the conceptual artist Carl Andre, Mendieta consulted a lawyer with evidence of his infidelity, then went back to her packing. She was excited about her new art practice and deathly afraid of heights. Yet in the early morning of September 8, she plummeted from a thirty-fourth floor window, her body found on the roof of a deli below the apartment she shared with Andre. He was indicted and put on trial for her murder. With the best defense attorney that his art-world buddies could buy, and with

a trial presided over by a judge (after he declined a jury), Carl Andre was ruled to be not guilty due to insufficient evidence. He still lives in the same apartment, with a different woman.

At Galerie Lelong, a wall is filled with books and catalogues dedicated to Mendieta's art. She may be gone these thirty years, but her art has grown in importance with every passing decade. By the end of the evening, there were films, too. One played on a wall of a small gallery where candles had been lit, in memory and emulation of her fireworks performances. In the main gallery, her niece Raquel Cecilia Mendieta screened a section of a work in progress she and Jacqui Frost are making: she had discovered among her mother's things a cassette tape of Ana Mendieta explaining her work, then edited the lecture to filmic excerpts of that work.

Performance art could exist only because of film—yet paradoxically these works were never seen as film. Invisible in plain sight, it was as though the content cancelled out the medium: performance was the thing, not the frame around it.

Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta is the title of a major new exhibition, mounted by the Katherine E. Nash Gallery under the direction of Howard Oransky, at the University of Minnesota, as well as the title of a book of writings on Mendieta, published by the University of California Press.

In This Issue

In this issue, *FQ* marks the passing of three major figures from entirely different worlds of film: Wes Craven, who may well have changed horror forever, is remembered by Caetlin Benson-Allott for his influence on the field; Candida Royalle, who changed pornography in her lifetime, is remembered for her pioneering work by Constance Penley; and Chantal Ackerman, one of the greatest filmmakers of the post-68 generation, is remembered here by Rabbi Delphine Horvilleur with the text of the eulogy she delivered at her funeral.

Patricia White, Richard Dyer, and Leshu Torchin all contribute astute assessments to bring readers up to date on some of the important films of 2015. White, who has long followed the work of Todd Haynes, here considers his work on *Carol* and situates it within traditions of Patricia Highsmith's work as well as a history of lesbian representation. Richard Dyer, widely known for his work on whiteness, pastiche, celebrity, and gay representation, weighs in on *Jurassic World* as a thinly veiled anxiety-dream about procreation and human replicability. And Leshu Torchin applies her expertise on trauma to

a consideration of the style and import of Joshua Oppenheimer's latest film, *The Look of Silence*.

Regular *FQ* columnists Paul Julian Smith and Amelie Hastie provide glimpses into their very different worlds. Smith reports on the runaway success of Mexico's new trend: stage performances based on *telenovela* television shows, as both *Parodiando (Taking Off)* and *Mi corazón* pack in audiences eager to see their favorite stars in the flesh. For Hastie, fresh from a visit with her adolescent nieces, the main event is a screening of *Diary of a Teenage Girl*, which plunges her into a consideration of appropriate representation, with a little help from Bazin.

In Page Views this issue, the advance-viewing feature has been adapted to allow *FQ* to share with its readers the post-humous writing of the late great Mexican novelist and essayist Carlos Fuentes, whose musings on early cinema appear here in English for the first time. Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado introduces Fuentes and his passion for cinema.

J.M. Tyree reports on the latest discoveries from the Mostly Lost workshop, hosted annually by the Library of Congress, where "footage-spotters" watch half-destroyed fragments of long-lost footage in search of a name, a date, a provenance.

In Ukraine, meanwhile, Masha Shpolberg reports on the privately funded Odessa International Film Festival, bravely going forward in this year of cross-border fighting and national insecurity. Ani Maitra, back from the Kashish festival of LGBT films, details the organizing efforts of this festival staffed largely by volunteers. This editor/writer's own Toronto coverage rounds out the *FQ* examination of film festivals for this year.

Finally, this issue has an exceptionally strong batch of book reviews, from Dana Polan's parsing of Technicolor to considerations of new volumes on Arab cinema; the life of Madeline Kahn; Shirley Temple and girlhood; Mexican cinema culture in Los Angeles before World War II; the Billy Wilder/Charles Brackett collaboration; and an innovative theory of *mise en scène*.

Notes

1. See their website: leapmanifesto.org.
2. Zoe Druick, "Framing the Local: Canadian Film Policy and the Problem of Place," in *Canadian Cultural Poesis: Essays on Canadian Culture*, ed. Sheila Petty, Garry Sherbert, and Annie Gérin (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), 91–92, and footnote 41 on 97.
3. It is well worth taking the time to explore their rich environments online. See: <http://theshorelineproject.org> and <http://highrise.nfb.ca>.