

Manual (R)evolutions and Itinerant Projections: An Interview with Alex MacKenzie

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ZC Hello, I'm Zoë Constantinides from the Communications Studies Department at Concordia University in Montreal. I'm talking over the phone with Vancouver-based artist and filmmaker Alex Mackenzie. We're discussing his work and in particular his piece *The Wooden Lightbox: A Secret Art of Seeing*. Hi Alex.

AM Hello.

ZC So tell me about the projector you use in *The Wooden Lightbox*.

AM The projector I built for this piece is, as you may have guessed, framed in wood. It's built out of relic bits and pieces of several old projectors, as well as a rewind arm. The primary projector was gutted and altered, with a few bits and pieces added from other projectors, and the rewind was attached to the axle of the main projector body. The projector is hand cranked, so there's no motor in it, and the lamp housing has also been altered to accommodate a lower-wattage bulb, which I jerry-rigged inside. The projector, for me, is a hearkening-back to a period in time when the tools of cinema were in their infancy, and there were still many possibilities with regards to how and what cinema would finally come to be. So the hand-cranked aspect speaks to that time, and the labour aspects of the film presentation. The performance itself very much revolves around the hand-cranked elements, my presence in the room as

both maker and presenter - a sort of amalgamation of these two processes - and an extending of the creative process.

ZC Tell me about the footage you use in *The Wooden Lightbox*. Where did that come from?

AM The bulk of the footage I use in the piece is original footage that I filmed or created in a variety of ways. There are elements of drawing, illustration, text, live action, and found footage. The materials are for the most part pre-determined elements that I sought out in the creation of the piece, meaning that the imagined shape and look of the piece was loosely defined ahead of time, and then I went about creating or finding material that would reflect that initial inspiration. Sources for the found footage in this piece include online archives, actual hard archives, and materials that I own. I have kind of a big [stack] - a mess - of 16-millimetre archive stuff in my basement that - I don't even know what I have, actually. It's a real mishmash. But I sort through that when I'm working on pieces, as well. I should mention, too, that I hand process and contact print all of it, so there are no labs involved in the making of the work.

ZC Where did you collect the footage that you own?

AM It came out of a lot of deleted collections. There was a period in time - probably about ten years ago now - when all sorts of different schools were getting rid of their 16 millimetre collections because they were just not using them anymore. People were just getting rid of projectors and prints and were moving to video, so a lot of these places would contact the local film co-op, or myself, when I was running a cinema, and say, "Hey, we're going to throw these out, do you want them?" And, to be honest, I didn't really

want them [laughs], but I didn't want them thrown out either...

ZC [laughs] Right...

AM So I said, "Okay, yeah, I'll take them." And so I have this archive that is both a burden and a curse sometimes, but also something that I can dig around in to find things. I have to say, though, that as romantic as that may sound [laughs], a lot of the materials they were throwing out were really just not [very] interesting [films]. So it's only [somewhere around] ten percent of the total collection that ends up being kind of worthwhile. But you never know what you're going to want in the future, and what could become interesting depending on how you contextualize it.

ZC Right. And tell me about the sound in *The Wooden Lightbox*. What is the role of sound in the piece and how does thinking about sound become a part of your process?

AM For this particular piece, I created the sound after the picture was "locked", as they say. I was thinking about the sound throughout the creation of the piece and had a pretty good idea of what I wanted each segment to contain with regards to audio - I mean, in a very in-my-mind kind of way. Each segment has a distinct track, which I composed using pre-existing materials that I altered, inverted, slowed-down, as well as original pieces created with recorded ambient environmental sounds, and actual instruments. In the end the tracks actually go a long way to guiding my presentation of the piece, as I crank the projector with their shape and timing in mind. As for thinking about sound as part of the process, I'd say it's pretty central to process, as is silence. Each collaborates

with the image in a number of ways, both in the presentation of the piece and its creation. Depending on the work, sound will play a number of roles, but always in the service of the piece as a whole. I'm always imagining or trying sounds out when I'm in the process of creating work, and sometimes sound will inspire images. With *Lightbox*, the sound of the projector itself - separate from the actual soundtrack - rising and falling in volume and speed as I crank it, [stop it, or reverse it,] is a very central element to the work, as well.

ZC And I imagine that, because it's hand cranked, it's much quieter than a regular, motorized 16 mm projector?

AM Well, it's interesting, because I'm in the audience with the projector, whereas normally when you are showing a movie the projector is behind glass. You don't actually hear the projector in a normal screening, whereas with this you actually *do* hear it. So depending on the room, and depending on the number of people and the ambient space, that volume will rise and fall. So it actually can be quite noisy, and people sort of turn and go "Oh, that's what's going on right now. He's actually turning- making this thing happen." So it becomes an accent to the whole piece.

ZC And you've been touring the work for a few years now. Where have you encountered your most memorable audiences, and what made them memorable?

AM It would be hard to name a specific place, because I think each place brings so many different elements to the piece. But I think a memorable audience for me is an audience that affects, or even *infects*, the way I'm presenting the work, as well as bringing something to the live process. That doesn't mean they need to be noisy,

reactive, or silent, it just means that there is a quality in the room that is made out of an unspoken collaboration of bodies in space that brings something to the experience for me and hopefully for them. Conversation after the screening might reveal some trace of that collective unconscious, but it really remains, I think, in the experience itself. I think the room, too, can have a really huge impact on the experience. And, for me, depending on where I am in the world and what [connections] I have with that place - history, memory, associations - and what the audience might have, I think those kind of things bring a lot to that space being memorable.

ZC I'm sure you've encountered a wide variety of venues. What do you hope to find when you arrive at a venue? And what spaces have you performed in that brought a special quality to your work?

AM Well, at the very least, I hope to find a dark room and a nice solid table to put my projector on [*laughs*]. But even those can be at a premium sometimes, oddly enough. For the most part though, and given that I send out a specification sheet of the needs for any given piece, I usually find the venue has basically what I need. Otherwise, friendly, helpful people are pretty central, as well as enough time to get things set up. Like any live or moving image experience, the space within which it's contained can change the shape and quality of the work pretty radically. I have presented work in ancient, relic undercrofts and secret, subterranean basements in France and in the UK, artists' loft studios, lovingly constructed or renovated anarchist micro-cinema type spaces, alternative second-run cinemas, official venues at big film festivals... Each space brings a particular kind of audience with a particular set of expectations, as well as bringing some indefinable "something" to the piece, and these really play into both the reception of the work and

the feeling I have in my presentation of the work. Inspiring spaces are great but inspiring people can make a big difference in a crummy room.

ZC I have this vision of you travelling with your projector across the country and to different continents, and I'm reminded of the long history of itinerant 16 mm exhibition in Canada. I guess that's also sort of a romantic vision. How do you see your practice in relation to that history?

AM My move from single-channel works - meaning films that are presented in a conventional way on a projector in the back of the room where I have no involvement because someone else is running the projector - into a more performance-based and expanded cinema type shape of presentation had a lot to do, for me, with a desire to maintain a creative process and involvement in the piece, for my own sake, really, and interest. Once a conventional single-channel work was completed, I was finding that I often had very little invested in it anymore, and the whole screening-exhibition stage was a bit disconnected. You know, you send a film off to a festival, and a lot of time you have no idea how it's received, if people had any kind of reaction - that sort of thing. So the possibility of maintaining the energy and aliveness in the creative process by creating work that required my presence and active participation in its unfolding was more exciting, and to be able to see and participate in the reception of the work was worthwhile. Having said that, it can also be extremely exhausting and demanding and stressful, so there's kind of a balance to be struck. But I've always loved the idea of a travelling show and recognized - particularly in Canada, which is so big and spaced out - that the old-fashioned itinerant projectionist with fold-up screen and a bundle of films under their arm was pretty central to a [certain] type

of film presentation in this country, usually in places where regular cinemas simply didn't exist. You know, setting up in halls or even people's homes. And now, the kind of films that I'm showing often require a specialized venue or don't fit into the conventional multiplex that we think of first when we think of the movies. So that specialized space and presentation continues in a lot of different shapes and forms.

ZC How does *The Wooden Lightbox* relate to your other works? In other words, what in your practice led you to *The Wooden Lightbox*?

AM I guess there was a gradual move for me from conventional filmmaking - for lack of a better word - toward the hand-made and singular human manufacture in my work. That led me to research around the early days of cinema before it had fully taken on what we know it now to be, and when the possibilities were really wide open. It was a period when nobody really knew what to make of this thing. And the huge number of apparatus devised and created around this potential at that time is really a testament to that. If you look back in history, it's incredible to see just the number, the volume, of devices being created and manufactured - at first on a pretty small scale, but then on a much larger scale - to figure out what to do with this new tool and device. I wanted to investigate this phenomenon, or at least ask a few questions: *What* could have been, or *where* could it have gone? If the economic imperative wasn't so central - as it always is [laughs] - just think of the range and shape that could have been possible in this infancy. And think as well of the myriad tests and experiments and possible versions of the moving image that did actually exist and have since been lost in the drive forward for better, faster, shinier, more sellable [products]. One that does remain is the thin slice we call

the "avant-garde" or "experimental" or "underground" or whatever you want to call it. And so my work, I think, inevitably, lives somewhere in that neighbourhood.

ZC Alex, you frequently, though not always, as you mentioned, work with archaic moving image equipment and found footage, and this genre - insofar as it is a genre - is often framed in terms of nostalgia and a certain romanticization of the technological past. How do you see the relationship between your work and nostalgia?

AM That's always a really interesting question to me, and it comes up for me personally all the time when I'm actually in process. I don't know that I've come to a complete conclusion, but I guess - for better or for worse - there's no question that we, as a culture, romanticize and sentimentalize the past. That may have something to do with an innate desire for simpler things, but you'd have to go pretty far back to find that simplicity. I think the whole period just before and around the industrial revolution speaks in large part to a refinement of human suffering, and the transformation of attitudes towards work, and the definition of work, and, well, the colonizing of huge numbers of people, to say nothing of minds. What I'm hoping to do in this piece, in particular, is to invoke something that at first glance looks like our idea or idealization of the past, but is actually something other and in some way maybe questions that imagining. I think without our preconceived ideas of these familiar tropes to begin from, this would probably be an impossible sort of task. So in some ways I depend on that nostalgia as a point of departure, and from there the reconfiguration of both apparatus and material follows.

ZC As archival practices evolve, and as the art-world moves in different directions, what do you think the future of found footage practice will look like?

AM You know, it's already changed so radically with the advent of the Internet and the ease with which we can pluck a given subject and film from online archives or order it from Ebay. A lot of so-called found footage film practices are now created with footage we want and seek out as opposed to footage we find and are inspired by. I do believe, though, that this access can, and has, really resulted in some incredible work and speaks to the idea that there's already so much material floating around that it almost seems indulgent or unnecessary to make more of it. But the desire to unearth and discover lost gems or hidden oddities, and accidentally stumbling upon strange or confounding material - I don't think that'll ever go away. And the formats will change, of course. I know [many] people are out at thrift stores picking up [dusty old] VHS copies of [mail order videos] on how to operate home businesses [or improve your memory] that seem completely banal and void of any interest, but you can start manipulating that [material] and come up with some pretty amazing things. I think that will go on in one form or another. As for archives, I'd say they've got their work cut out for them these days. I suspect Google or some other mega corporation will shortly be making footage available as they have already done for books. It may be that the future archive will transform from a largely hidden and precious institutional model to an entirely commercial and monopolized corporate model. I think that's already happening, actually. When I imagine the future of most anything institutional it seems to be moving towards some kind of large corporate model. Unfortunately.

ZC Speaking of the future, what's next for you in terms both of *The Wooden Lightbox* and your other work?

AM Right now I'm working on a couple of different projects involving original materials - largely landscape based - as well as devising new, very stripped-down apparatus both for filming and projection. I'm also continuing to develop and experiment with hand-made emulsions and exploring moving image photogram techniques [for application in larger projects] - a couple of things I've been focused on for the last little while. As for *The Wooden Lightbox*, it's always evolving. It's a piece that I pull bits out of, and add bits to, and change over time - subtly, for the most part. It is an evolving piece, but I suspect it will probably sit idle off and on while these new projects develop and take precedence.

ZC You mentioned that you're going to South Korea later this year...

AM Yeah, for a festival in September, the EXiS Festival*. I think they're featuring a broad selection of Canadian works, so it will be part of **that** retrospective. Touring around and festivals are a big part of what I'm doing at any given time. It's sort of like those interrupt the work on projects, and the projects interrupt the touring - back and forth all the time. Also, completely outside of the realm of film stuff, I'm building a house on a remote island here on the West Coast, which is another big project of mine. So it's all handmade [in the end] [*laughs*]!

*Experimental Film and Video **Festival** in Seoul.