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Uncovering in-betweens: On photochemical practices and handmade cinema

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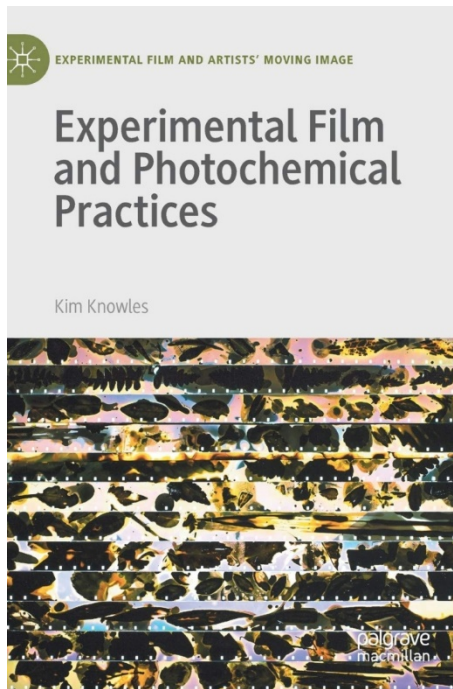
Uncovering in-betweens: On photochemical practices and handmade cinema

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In the early years of the digital turn and the post-medium age, Edward S. Small developed his direct-theory argument and his presentation of experimental film/video as a separate major genre in his 1995 book. He defined the function of experimental film/video as 'neither to entertain nor persuade but rather to examine the quite omnipresent yet little understood pictos [semi-otic symbols] that mark and measure our postmodern milieu'. What then seemed to be a narrow path at the margins of cinema, that required a different set of theoretical terms than narrative film, has become a field of creative practice that can now be addressed from the variety of theoretical viewpoints that appeared as a reaction to the challenges of the digital age. Digital media have not only called for a reevaluation of the relationship of the 'old' and the 'new' but has challenged our perception of media differences and prompted scholarly reflections. Expanded cinema has expanded the theoretical field. Thus, rather than asking 'what experimental cinema is', the field of research is defined by a meticulous evaluation of the medial context and a conscious choice of terms. Instead of experimental cinema as such, there are collections of works which are uncovered as a coherent phenomenon of visual culture – an adherence made visible from the viewpoints chosen by each researcher. The constitution of a field of research started to resemble curatorial work as much as never before. Thus, there is some imprecision in using the term experimental cinema as the common ground of two books published in 2020: *Experimental Film and Photochemical Practices* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) by Kim Knowles and Gregory Zinman's *Making Images Move. Handmade Cinema and the Other Arts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020).



Photochemical practice/ process cinema is the key concept in the former, while a cameraless, abstract, and intermedial cinema is the basis of the latter. The authors share some core ideas and films, yet they have idiosyncratic definitions regarding the mediality of experimental cinema. Kim Knowles writes essentially about film, both as a medium and as a material object, while Gregory Zinman prefers the term moving image or kinetic art instead of film or cinema. Both books address the reinvention of a medium, but they carve out different spaces and imagine different futures for it. *Experimental Film and Photochemical Practices* was the second volume published in the Experimental Film and Artists' Moving Image series by Palgrave Macmillan. These types of films do not just expose alternative visions of the world, they seem to become catalysts for contemporary film scholarship's hot topics such as medium specificity, the future of cinema, and changes in cinematic exhibition. Such is the book by Kim Knowles, which 'argues for a wider understanding of photochemical film practice in relation to discourses of technological transition and material culture' (p. 7) and rediscovers celluloid filmmaking as an artistic practice with creative potential in an era when this has been declared obsolete and marginal. After an effective overview of analogue-to-digital discourses, what follows is a media archeology-based approach to obsolescence. This

criticism is needed to redraw the contemporary media landscape as something that still contains photochemical film rather than considering it as a thing of the past.

Looking beyond forms of commodified nostalgia, such as retro-fetishism and restorative nostalgia, the author suggests that the future of film, both as an 'old' media and as a past culture of objects and materials (meaning cinematic equipment and also films formats) lies in the freedom to reinvent itself as a medium in opposition with and outside mainstream cinema. 'Digital is not better than analogue, but different', the author cites Tacita Dean. Artisanal and materialist film practices are very much 'things of our times' but in a marginal position which can open up aesthetic and political perspectives 'to wider questions of matter and materiality that dominate contemporary intellectual discourse' (p. 8). Photochemical film re-emerges not just as 'art', but, according to Knowles, even as a (film) cultural 'gesture of resistance to modern society's emphasis on speed and efficiency, rejecting the imperative to update and upgrade in favour of an ecology of recuperation and restoration' (p. 14). A very complex weaving together of theoretical strands begins: ideas related to the post-human, the post-medium age, Anthropocene, obsolescence, new materialism, phenomenology, and cinema of sensations all work together to a new theory of contemporary materialist film. This is the main topic in chapter 2, titled 'Materials, Materiality and New Materialism', which builds a theoretical basis for describing a film practice consisting of 'works that draw attention to the material of the filmstrip through tactile intervention and obscure vision by creating multiple layers, tangible surfaces, proximal views and haptic images' (p. 25). Resonances with historical examples of working with the matter of the medium are presented, such as structuralist films or Man Ray's *Return to Reason* (1923). The subchapter 'Material Bodies' shows entanglements between concepts of vision and embodiment both in films about bodies and the filmic body. Through the analysis of Paul Sharits' *3rd Degree* (1982), containing images of burnt film strip, the ideas of vulnerability and mortality are introduced as notions that are heavily used in relation to ruin films such as *Decasia* or *Lyrical Nitrate*, or in film preservation designating the instability of the material artefacts. However, the author smoothly turns our attention to other possible conceptions of the body metaphor, for example Jeanne Liotta's *Loretta* (2003) and *Wake* (2015) by Eric Stewart, which demonstrates how questions of materiality, death, and mourning can be translated to the senses of the spectator through the tactility of the celluloid surface.

The next subchapter, 'Materiality and the Ecological Thought', reflects on the differences between the larger context of the 1960s and 1970s materialist films and contemporary practices, defined by 'the shifting technological landscape and the related questions of environmental instability in an increasingly computerised and networked society' (p. 35). Waste is one of the key concepts here, as something that involves human and non-human, animate and inanimate, but noticing that waste can also become a reflexive stance which can provide a critique of the order of things and open up alternative views on the world. The contemporary status of film is one of liminality, it is a kind of waste: 'an abject object in the sense of the living undead' (p. 38), Knowles concludes. Jane Bennett's notion of 'vibrant matter' is quoted here to demonstrate that matter has expressive potential and agency too, in a non-hierarchical ecological sensibility. Timothy Morton's 'ecological thought' is also a key reference, as a kind of being with ecology instead of thinking about it – an idea that infuses the way this book thinks about the matter of film and defines film practice as an ecological encounter. Thinking of interconnectedness is being ecological – this is what Knowles fruitfully transposes onto questions of representation and into an ethics of re-visioning. The Anthropocene, as something that exceeds vision and comprehension (Knowles quotes Mirzoeff), calls for a something beyond the established visual language and even questions visions as a way of understanding the world. 'We need to see differently with a deeper physical awareness' (p. 42). This is where experimental cinema with its alternatives to standard vision comes into play in the context of this fresh 'ecological thought.'

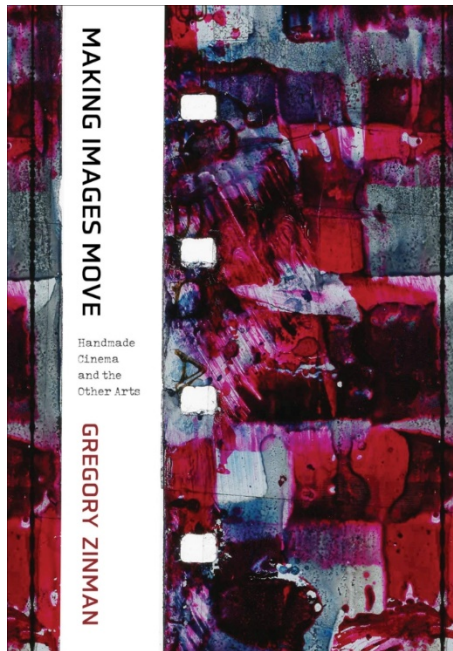
Kim Knowles proposes the term aesthetic of contact to name this kind of re-visioning, as a kind of expressivity stemming from the encounter of film with another surface. Inspired by Raymond Bellour's concept of *l'entre-images* (between the images), she even introduces the notion of *l'entre-objets* (between the objects) 'to describe an in-betweenness that manifests both as the self-reflexive staging of materiality through the presence of the film strip and the transformation of perception through proximal relations' (p. 44). Thus contemporary celluloid practice brings out an aesthetic that privileges material gestures and the unseen through an emphasis on sensation; concordantly, the book theorizes this practice at the intersection of new materialism, posthumanism, and sensuous film theory. The following chapters constitute the analytical and practice-oriented presentation of the field of recent photochemical films.

Chapter 3 titled 'Process and Perception' takes the discussion of affect, experience, and matter a step further, as it presents artisanal filmmaking from the past 20 years grouped in four main categories: radical landscapes, ecologies of small things, colour and chemistry, and materialist action films. The digital turn is a backdrop for the analysed examples, but in the meantime it acknowledges the historical roots of these preoccupations – Man Ray and Stan Brakhage films are often referenced here. Technical and chemical processes such as scratching, drawing, painting, cross-processing, optical printing, contact printing, burying, and weathering are presented as explorations of vision and of interconnections among different elements. 'How does nature see?' Or at least how does nature look from a non-human POV? Such questions imply a new understanding of authorship as well, as the filmmaker is not fully in control in these films, he/she is rather a catalyst of material processes which he/she harnesses (see p. 78).

The subchapter 'Earthly Engagements and Radical Landscapes' is an intriguing presentation of the 'retraining of perception' coined by Scott MacDonald. Kim Knowles brings forth examples of and explorations beyond this thesis, such as the montage-based film *Bouquets 9* (1995) by Rose Lowder, built from individual frames to achieve radical revisioning. Examples such as Greta Snider's *Quarry Movie* (1999), Nishikawa's *sound of a million insects, light of a thousand stars* (2014), Emmanuel Lefrant's *Underground* (2001), David Gatten's *What the Water Said* (1997-2007), or Christopher Becks' *I Don't Think I Can See an Island* (2016) disclose dialogues between film and other materials and rework landscapes. In contrast, 'Ecologies of (Small) Things' is an account of films where techniques of close-up or enlargements, richly textured haptic images, are used as tools for rendering things unfamiliar. Magnified fluids, glued-on insects, punched holes, and surface scratches in Vicky Smith's and Charlotte Pryce's camera-less practices are discussed together with Hans Richter's and Stan Brakhage's works. 'Colour and Chemistry' concentrates on the celluloid surface as a site for experimentation. Esther Urlus' handmade colouring experiments and Francesca Duran's phytogram imagery are key examples here. Materialist Action Films, for example the work of Bea Haut and Jenny Baines, are characterised by 'performance that comes to play a pivotal role in teasing out parallels between the material constraints of the Bolex camera and the limitations of the physical body' (p. 117). After this tour de force of categorisation of practices two main chapters follow as a recognition that photochemical film culture encompasses much more than films: the fourth chapter presents the world of alternative cinematic institutions

such as film communities and film labs, while the fifth chapter deals with practices of film exhibition.

While Kim Knowles thinks about film as an in-betweenness of objects and materials, Gregory Zinman's book is about a different kind of in-betweenness, that of different media and of cinema and the other arts. *Making Images Move: Handmade Cinema and the Other Arts* is a monographic look at the camera-less, non-photographic filmmaking that encompasses pre-cinematic media practices, experimental cinema, psychedelic light shows, and video art.



The book provides a conceptual and historical framework to illuminate a set of converging practices resulting from the confluence of art forms. The author identifies it as a tendency towards time-based abstraction in media practices beyond film, across media. Zinman's book also has a broader scope, to orientate cinema studies towards the understanding of moving images instead of film. Zinman talks about the cinematic as an idea or sensation perceived in different kinds of works, regardless of their medium or art form. The introductory chapter of the book emphasises three key notions: cameralessness, abstraction, and intermedia, although the concept of the handmade is also important here. Handmade cinema is defined as a method that 'fuses

theory and practice, artistic imagination and technical nous into an integrated whole' realised by a single practitioner (p. 6); it can be considered a kind of gestural, tactile art (and in contrast with Knowles' approach, it is considered as evidence of human creativity). According to Zinman, handmade cinema could make us reconsider the moving image apparatus beyond standard expectations about how moving images are made and how they are understood (p. 7).

The notion of cameralessness excludes the photographic image from this category of films, in order to open up a space where 'cinema can connect to other artistic practices' (p. 6), but in the meantime 'cameraless handmade films offer a direct realism beyond the photographic' (p. 9), for example a carrier of the artist's physicality. Cameraless filmmaking is also a concept that provides Zinman the link between analog avant-garde practices and today's computer-generated imagery, much of which is constructed without photography. Thus, a variety of artisanal practices are gathered through this prism: handpainted films rooted in abstract painting, kinetic sculptures, light shows, and handcrafted video synthesizers. Connected to the idea of the handmade and from the non-photographic, abstraction here is discussed not just in the context of art, but surprisingly Zinman brings to the fore spiritualism, various forms of mysticism, and Eastern philosophy that informed abstraction and synaesthesia in plastic arts and film. Abstraction means much more than formal experimentation – it is anti-mimetic cinema. How can abstraction be understood, how can we mine its meanings? In order to understand the polyvalence of abstract form we need 'a more theoretical understanding of abstract moving images', Zinman argues (p. 14). 'The use value of meaning-cancelling abstraction may reside in the viewer's increasing awareness of his own perceptual apparatus – that is to say his additional cognizance of participating in the act of looking' (p. 15). Abstract moving images are ambiguous, overwhelming their cognitive processes, 'producing new forms of sensual confusion, delight, terror or knowledge' (p. 15). Thus, an analysis of abstract moving images might consist of questioning vision and representation, and also of the states and visions it can produce. Zinman proposes a complex approach: 'from the vantage point of the maker, taking into account any paratextual information regarding the artist's intent (such as statement, interview, or essay), or from the perspective of the viewer, acknowledging the information and expectations that an individual brings to the viewing experience' (p. 16). This section of the introductory chapter seems quite useful as a method for future research projects, as it directly confronts the debate around the artists'

role in their work; it is a convincing argumentation for using artists' statements as 'entry points' or 'openings' to understand abstract films.

Intermedia is the last analytical term presented in the introduction. Cinema has been defined by many contemporary scholars as something inherently heterogeneous, as being in the in-between of other arts. David Rodowick's idea of cinema being an uncertain object is quoted here, also Rosalind Krauss' post-medium condition. Yet Zinman chooses Noël Carroll's argument for a dismissal of the concept of the medium: 'forget the medium; watch the movement – the movement of history and the movement of the image' (Carroll qtd. by Zinman p. 19). In order to account for cinema as a hybrid form, Zinman builds on Dick Higgins' intermedia chart of overlapping artistic practices, which seems an adequate choice, as it is not a cinema or film-centred chart but is rather a synthesis of possible media relations. In this book the term intermedia is used as a conceptual notion, although the discussion of the artworks would have benefitted from the vaguely mentioned research field marked by the term 'intermediality' – designating not an artistic practice, rather a theoretical approach to the 'cinematic' in contemporary visual culture.[1]

Making Images Move structures its findings in two major chapters. The first one, titled 'Handmade Films', presents works resulting from artists' interventions on the surface of celluloid film. 'Between Canvas and Celluloid' consists of examples ranging from early examples of visual music (like color organs), the European abstract painting preoccupied with rhythm and motion (Surrage, Kandinsky), the advent of abstract film (Ruttman, Richter, Eggeling, Fischinger), and the invention of photograms by Man Ray and László Moholy-Nagy. The subchapter 'Abstractions in Time' focuses on postwar artists painting and scratching on film (Lye, McLaren, Smith, Lettrists, and Brakhage). 'By Chemical, by Body, By Mechanism' is about handmade films made with a variety of methods like cooking, using chemicals or ecological processes, building machines. 'Beyond the Frame' presents artists who use their craft to articulate questions related to feminism and identity politics (Schneemann, Nicolson, Uman, Tambellini, Gallagher, among others). Part two, titled 'Handmade Moving Images', maps experimental moving image technologies designed to make paintings in time without using photography. 'Light in Motion Making Space' describes Thomas Wilfred's Lumia compositions and Moholy-Nagy's kinetic sculptures as moving images between plastic arts and cinema. 'Making Space, Making Time' is about the ki-

netic light art of the 1950s and 1960s shifting between sculpture and cinema. 'Forms of Radiance' presents the practice and significance of the psychedelic light show, a fugitive art form of artists working together with technicians to design performances of light and colour, where Zinman extends the two previous chapters into interesting new directions. Chapter 8 is about video art, the art of electronic signals extending the possibilities of abstract painting. The concluding chapter links analog and digital media and proposes the concept of the handmade as something valid even in a digital context, a conclusion that Kim Knowles also reaches in the context of photo-chemical film.

These two books stand on common ground. Not surprisingly both authors have contributed to MacKenzie and Marchessault's edited collection of essays titled *Process Cinema, Handmade Film in the Digital Age* (2019), which explores new and experimental practices with celluloid in the digital age. Kim Knowles has written a monograph on Man Ray in 2009, while Gregory Zinman has edited a book on Nam June Paik's writings in 2019, and somehow these research experiences are channelled into their new books. They also share a methodological decision: research and analysis concerns much more than the close reading or formalist analysis of films, as they often refer to interviews and data provided by the artists. The limited non-fully author-driven aesthetic of contact in the former, and the cameraless moving images in the latter not only create alternative viewing positions but they also call for a different kind of critical approach which is more practice-based and (auto)ethnographic. With their 'thick description' of cinematic works and practices, Knowles' and Zinman's books both trace paths in the history of moving images and reflect on the current state of film and cinema in contemporary culture and art. As they paradoxically demonstrate how obsolete technology and artisanal filmmaking represent our contemporary visual culture, both books deserve to become required readings for students and scholars of contemporary art and media.

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Notes

- [1] Beyond the philosophical approaches to intermediality of David Rodowick, James Bellour, or Alain Badiou various works dealing with painting, sculpture, and cinema (by Brigitte Peucker, Steven Jacobs, Susan Felleman) come to mind. A wide spectrum of approaches to intermediality is discussed in Ágnes Pethő's recently enlarged and republished book *Cinema and Intermediality: The Passion for the In-Between*.