

Four Film and Video Makers

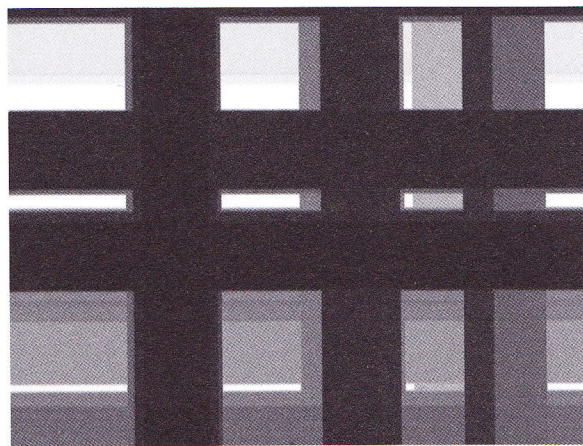
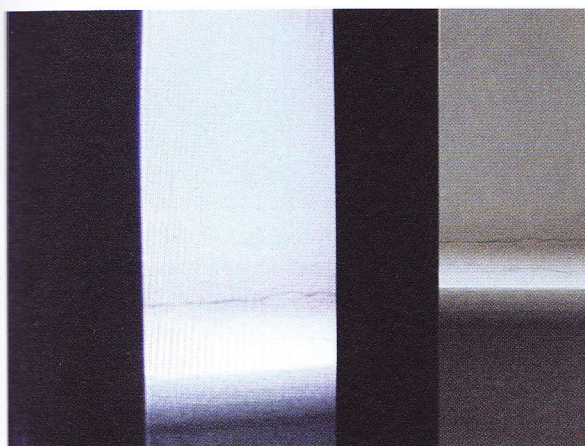
A.L. Rees

The four film and video makers discussed in this essay occasionally show their work together, but they are not a group in any formal sense. Three of them studied at the same colleges, albeit not all together and at different times, and they are all in their early thirties. Taken individually, each artist has a different style and thematic content, and they explore distinct facets of time-based media. Simon Payne is exclusively a digital image artist, while Samantha Rebello and Jennifer Nightingale are primarily 16mm filmmakers, as is Neil Henderson, although he has also made multi-projector performance pieces. Their work ranges from non-objective abstraction to camera-eye documentary, and from colour-field projection to psychodrama. Across this spectrum of differences, however, there is a dialogue and conversation between the makers and their work.

Simon Payne has made a prolific body of work, first of all with the video camera but more recently in a wholly digital computer format. He has also written widely, as in his Luxonline profile essay about Malcolm Le Grice, an essay on 'Full Colour Video' for *Leonardo* journal (v41 n5, 2008) and the programme text for his two-part selection of *Colour Field Films and Videos* (Tate Modern, November 2008). At present, he is researching a book-length series of interviews with UK artist filmmakers. His earlier work explored the mobile surface of the video image, shooting interior spaces to depict the ambiguities of space and depth. In *Black and White* (2001), a flat abstract image is incrementally revealed to comprise fragments of walls, doorways and static computer screen graphics.

These, however, do not resolve into completeness. Each shot depicts a partial view of its space and adjacencies, described by Payne as 'a minimalist investigation of assumptions regarding the aesthetics of virtual reality', which presumably includes mainstream TV illusionism as well as hi-tech VR. In *Monitor* (2002), successive generations of camera feedback to a live monitor are made to interact with focus changes, objects in the camera's line of vision and reflections in the glass screen, to blur the boundaries between off-screen and in-frame space. At the same time, it preserves the differences between the recorded image – never wholly erased – and its representation.

These and other early works are modest in scale, but also elegant and exploratory. In them, a distinct way of seeing emerges. At Maidstone College in the late 1990s, the films of his tutor Nicky Hamlyn (along with a teaching environment that encouraged material investigation of the video image and signal) especially impressed him by showing that a film can be generated in an encounter between the camera and real, i.e. non-dramatic, space. In discussion with Hamlyn some years later, at a no.w.here Light Reading event in 2006, Payne described Hamlyn's films as impressively 'analytic and poetic at the same time'. Hamlyn mainly works with a 16mm Bolex camera, which in his hands is a flexible instrument of vision. Simon Payne himself significantly did not use film as a medium, but carried over into video the insights he took from the structural approach to film, and found equivalents for its processes. He also conveyed the fragility and



subtlety of video's distinctive colour palette. A strong sense of design runs through the monitor pieces, which explore feedback and repetition as well as representational images.

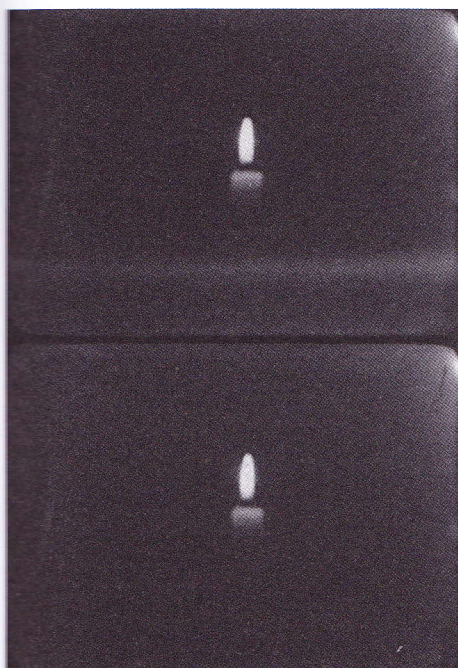
Since 2004, Payne has made a series of abstract digital video projections comprised of colour fields and frames. These are composed directly with the seven colours of the digital computer, and are in the tradition of cameraless films and visual music. The first was the descriptively titled *Colour Bars* (2004), for single screen, which sets into apparent motion the static colour bands of the video test signal. Rapidly phased cycles, and video flicker, combine to create interactive colour mixture, as the fields of stripes appear to dart across the screen. *Thirds* (2006) was similarly silent, but for two projectors that cycle through a series of primary and secondary colours. The projectors partly overlap to create a third central space that optically mixes the combined colours from the two light sources. As the piece progresses, the initial flat fields of colour become narrower, and are subdivided into smaller bands across the screen, inciting faster motion and more rapid and unpredictable colour combinations. The title of *Thirds* alludes to the division of the screens, to the computer maths that underpin the work, and to the construction of an illusory third space where two adjacent fields of colour fuse and join.

Coincidentally, the two projectors in *Thirds* approximated the 16:9 widescreen format that is now the standard scale for film and television. This perhaps

prompted the expanded framework of the digital videos that followed. As its title indicates, *New Ratio* (2007) explores the dimension and scale of projected imagery, jumping rapidly from colour fields in the classic screen rectangle format (4:3) to full widescreen. The speed of the shifting colour values causes momentary colour mixtures and combinations to fuse briefly and rapidly in the eye. At the same time, an electronic tone is pitched to each colour and directly creates visual music. The sound rhythms pulsate as do the colours, with increasing speed over a duration of one-minute and forty-five seconds. *New Ratio* in fact comprises two colour loops, separated by a single black frame to throw them out of sequence and to make up additional sound and flicker fusions.

Payne adopts further 'new ratios' in longer pieces such as *Iris Out* (2008), in which brilliant colour, alternating rectangles, receding circles and parallel ellipses all interact in swift sequences whose overall shape evokes the eye and literalizes the 'iris' as an optical metaphor and a camera device (used in early cinema to shut down the lens and image respectively). The dual themes of his digital abstraction – stripes and planes – are brought together in the synoptic *Six Stripe Spectrum* (2010), in which thin bands of interactive colour assert vertical as well as horizontal flow. The also recent *Point Line Plane* (2010) – the title is adapted from a book by Kandinsky – takes up a different direction. In tones of black, white and grey, it begins with white grids on a black ground, which interact to create an intense flicker effect at mid-point.

Simon Payne
Point Line Plane (for PP)
2010
Simon Payne
Monitor
2002



Neil Henderson
Film Landscape
2002-2010
Neil Henderson
Candle
2006

camera set far back from the scene, it documents the passage of strolling people along the outcrop, singly and in groups, surrounded by beach and water. The scene is simple and elemental, recording moments of leisure and social activity, punctuated by the changing light of the seasons and the weather. Similarly, in *Bathers* (2003/7), shot over a number of years on the north coast of Kent, the camera is placed far back from the sea, which becomes a flat and perpendicular backdrop to the swimmers, paddlers and walkers who are indifferent to a camera they cannot see. Nervous swimmers take hesitant first steps, while old and young brave the water or wander along its shore, and two laughing young women in kerchiefs and long bathing dresses ritually wash a child in the sea.

For the past couple of years, Henderson has been working with Evan Parker, a pioneer of improvised new music. He has made a documentary film of Parker in performance and some shorter independent works that explore the fusion and separation of sound and image. *Portrait of Parker* (2009) is in two parts. The first is black and white, and in extreme close up. The camera focuses on the mouth of Parker's saxophone, which fills the screen. Parker is all but hidden, but for his moving fingers and a patch of beard and shirt. As he plays, the camera captures the bounce of reflected light in the depths of the instrument. This portrait of the musician as performer is severely reductive, to focus on the key elements of breath and fingering that create the sound we hear. The second and similar film, in colour, vividly enhances the chance patterns and textures of reflected light on metal. The film is a record but also a transformation, creating visual music from the rhythms of light, sound and motion.

Henderson graduated from the Slade two years before Jennifer Nightingale studied there, although they (and Simon Payne) had already met while she was a fine

art student at Canterbury College. Nightingale also explores visual and colour rhythm, through direct interaction with the film apparatus. In *Pinhole Film no 1* (2001) a hand-wound Bolex camera, fitted with a pinhole lens, glimpses a window frame and walking figures as fleeting apparitions conjured by mimetic chance. For *Pinhole Film no 2* (2001), Nightingale exposed the film in a Super-8 cartridge by hand-winding it with a hairgrip, turning it into a pinhole camera for motion pictures. This film was 'shot' in Canterbury Cathedral, so that the haze of abstract flashes and bursts of colour occasionally reveals the pattern of window and interior light. To preserve the unedited 8mm print, a 16mm copy was made for projection purposes. Some of the fragility of the colour original is necessarily lost in the new version, but it compensates by enhancing the subtle tonal range of the fugitive reds and blues of a film in which, wrote Simon Payne, 'colour and form are absolutely inseparable.' *Pinhole Film no 2* is a mix of blur and image, specifically when the film stops moving through the camera, revealing its primary intermittent motion and directly conveying the act of its own making.

Her two 'knitting' films also analogically record their making through the shooting process. The idea that a film is woven, or even knitted, from different shots and frames is here made into an image. In the first, *Knitting a Frame* (2006), the filmmaker sits knitting on a couch. A strand from the ball of wool at her feet is looped between her toes to activate the camera's single-frame shutter release and then it arcs back to the knitting needles. Each time she adds a stitch, the camera exposes a single frame. This in-camera film depicts in time-lapse the passage of time and the changing light of the room. The filmmaker occasionally changes position or dress as she knits a white square over the course of several hours, here compressed into a few minutes. At the end of the film,

The piece reverses tonality at the end, by which time the grids have slowly multiplied so that the flat frontal plane gradually supports powerful illusions of receding space made up of overlaid and multiplying inner frames.

These complex but engaging digital video projections yield rich colour/frame combinations for the viewer. That they are based on systems is evident to the spectator, but the rapid passage of colour stripes and circles, and of overlapped and sub-divided grids, create unpredictable bursts of colour and form. The bright and pure seven-colour spectrum is unleashed in a controlled structure, to generate optical effects of shifting colour that defy verbal description. They are experiential works, above all, that create vivid illusions of moving space from sequentially static frames. When streamed and permuted in a series of complex frame-rates (or 'ratios'), a vibrant flicker effect occurs. In a strict sense, the colour and planar events in them exist only at and in the moment of projection: they could not be imagined, for instance, by looking at their separate 'frames', or at the matrix diagrams that map them out. This digital art for the optic nerve also alludes, innately, to its root sources, from impressionist to colour-field painting, to the expanded cinema of Paul Sharits (based on the interaction of frame, shutter and colour) and to the video art of David Hall, Stephen Partridge and Steven Littman, who have also explored grid, surface and structure in electronic media. To these it adds a new dimension, at the interface between digital calculation and powerfully subjective colour and sound, as shaped and determined by primary forms.

Neil Henderson was a contemporary of Simon Payne at Maidstone College, where David Hall in fact had founded the first time-based media course back in the 1970s. Although most of Henderson's work is representational and subject-centred, rather than abstract in Payne's sense, from 1996 to 2000 he made a series of multi-projection films whose titles named the numbers of projectors he used in each piece. In *Thirty Six Working Projectors* (2000), for his Slade MA graduation, the 8mm projectors are banked in tiers and loaded with a short reel of colour leader. The projectors are then all switched on simultaneously. For a short spell, the screen is a panelled grid of dancing hues and intensities, side by side. The work ends when the last 8mm spool unwinds, at which point the filmmaker begins the long process of re-lacing each projector for the next show some hours later. *Black and Light Movie* (2001), shown only once at a Light Reading event at the 291 Gallery, is in a similar configuration for fifty Super 8 projectors which are switched on one by one. Each is loaded with five minutes of black leader, and illuminates its patch of screen only briefly as the reel runs out and its projector is switched off, 'so the film is darkness, and the end of the film light' (Nicky Hamlyn, *Film Art Phenomena*, p51).

Although Henderson has not made another fully abstract multi-projector film since this piece, it contains some of his later concerns. First is an awareness of duration and accident, such as the erratic and irregular running speeds of the ageing 8mm

projectors and their penumbra of light leakage. Second, both maker and spectator participate in a durational experience (briefer for the viewer than the artist, who must remake the work every time it is shown), so that the film is a performative event rather than a contemplative one. The programme note for his Light Reading presentation at no.w.here in July 2008, with musician Evan Parker, expands on these strategies; 'Henderson explores ideas of gradual development and process, exposed and scrutinized through a parallel focus on regular occurrences and changes in nature and the landscape and its effect on human interaction with it.'

The aspect of change as a gradual state is seen in *Candle* (2006), a film in which a Polaroid photograph of a candle is seen developing, but shown in reverse. On the dark screen, the flame provides the sole light source. Film grain animates the still image, and pulsates around the top of the candle, except at the intense white core. Developing backwards in time, and from dark to light, the photograph finally whites out. In his essay *Medium Practices* for the International Experimental Media Congress (Toronto, April 2010), Nicky Hamlyn comments on *Candle* that all change in film is a kind of movement, even if the object is static. Here, the film also 'gives back to its subject the movement it was deprived of in the act of being photographed.' But, he adds, 'this is also movement to its own demise, and so in another move the film reinstates to the lit candle its defining transience.' The white light finally affirms that 'as long as there is film running through a projector, we are looking at an image.'

In contrast to the single-take immediacy of *Candle* is *Film Landscape* (2002, but in several versions since), which documents drainage canals cut through the flat Lincolnshire countryside. The frontal viewpoint is above the waterway, with a camera presumably placed on an unseen bridge. Each shot depicts strips of water receding into the horizon, carefully framed so that the vanishing point is the same from one shot to the next, subtly constructing recessive deep linear space from the accidents of different locations. In addition, the filming was made at different times of day and season, and over many months. 'On reflection', Henderson writes, 'the silvery water's continual disappearance into the vanishing point is not unlike a metaphor for film.' There is one 'reverse' cut in the succession of images, when a van travelling into the far distance from the left is echoed in the next shot by a car moving towards the screen on the right. The deliberately false match provokes the illusion of quasi-temporal and spatial continuity across a reversed axis even though the time and space of both shots are visibly different from each other. This assertively illusionist moment is not repeated. Instead, the film attends to the nuances of light, texture and viewpoint to evoke a landscape which is both natural (water, trees, sky) and yet definitively the historical product of human agency.

The Street (2008-2010) is also a location film, showing a long and wide spur of land that stretches into the sea. Shot over several months with a wide-angle lens on a

she approaches the camera and holds up the completed square of white fabric to fill and cover the frame.

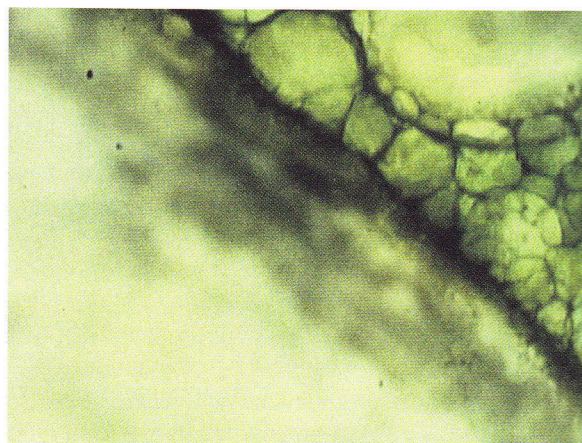
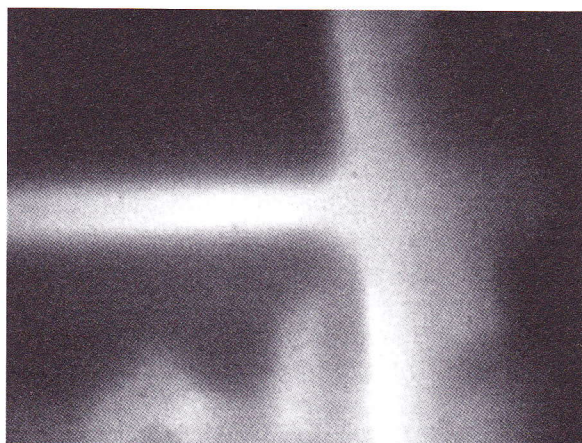
The second film, *Knitting Pattern* (2006), opens with a shot of a squared-up knitting pattern, whose notation incidentally resembles a film laid out on a grid as a series of frames. Differently coloured balls of wool are then shot in single-frame close-up, following the instructions of the diagram, so that each frame represents a predetermined sequence of stitches, e.g. blue, blue, yellow, red, blue. Passing rapidly in succession, the colours are held for variable periods of time, sometimes moving so quickly that for fleeting moments they seem to flicker and fuse in the eye. The delicate textures and hues of the wool are echoed in the flow of the film's sparkingly vivid colour mixture. In the history of the film medium, the design of the intermittent claw that pulls the film through the gate was modelled, in part, on the mechanism of the sewing machine, so there is a distant association between the earliest cinema devices, 'primitive' motion and the single-frame knitting films. But they also allude to other primal elements of the film machine and of colour vision, such as stained glass windows, light-filled rooms or textured and dyed surfaces, all of which can be seen as analogous to the film medium, especially to celluloid. Nonetheless, such associations are contained within a set of time-based procedures that emphasize the active agents of the film process: the camera, the maker (whose physical presence is inscribed in the work) and the viewer.

In *Sunrise Dictated by Stanza* (2003), Nightingale combined her overall visual sense of film process, and the materialization of light, with a literary text – Gertrude Stein's long 1932 poem, *Stanzas in Meditation*. Stein's 'meditations on light are typed out as the room in which the typist and typewriter sits is illuminated by the light of the moving sun'. The filming is not continuous, but in time-lapse. It starts in early morning, in the dark, with the camera at a fixed and constant aperture. Every time the light level goes up by an f-stop, the filmmaker types out a new line from a stanza that itself refers to the weather and the movement of the sun. Nightingale did not know at the time that Stan Brakhage had used the same inspirational poem by Stein for his 1989/90 series, *Visions in Meditation*, but her films share Brakhage's concern for the direct inscription of light, and for the metaphor of 'weaving' a film. Nightingale herself practises a cinema of small gestures that, in each of her works, explores a new conceptual link between form and content. A planned sequence of events leads to chance-based images that evoke an idea through gesture and process. From this strategy, she makes lyric films that are songs as well as visual statements.

The films of Samantha Rebello are also gestural and even lyric, but in a quite different way. Unlike most experimental filmmakers she trained not as a visual artist but as a musician, at Edinburgh University. She was introduced to filmmaking at the LUX and then at no.w.here, where as an intern she made her first exhibited work in 2004. An intuitive filmmaker with a natural gift for the camera and the projected image,

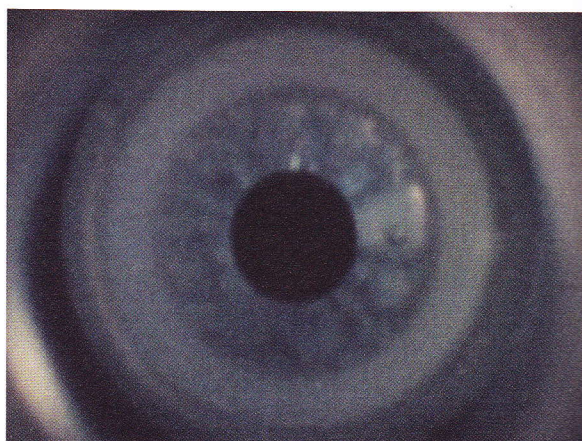
Jennifer Nightingale
Pinhole Film no.1
2001

Samantha Rebello
In Suspension
2008



Jennifer Nightingale
Knitting a Frame
2006

Samantha Rebello
*The Object Which
Thinks Us: Object 1*
2007



she maintains in her practice the hands-on methods of shooting and printing that she learnt in the film workshop. In her films, she writes, 'the otherness of objects is exposed', and formal devices such as focus and depth of field comprise 'a way of exploring a perceptual moment – a particular way of perceiving what is there'. But this way of seeing is not neutral, and instead offers what she calls a 'potential for a visceral cinema' and for 'affective materiality'.

Her first extended film was *The Surface of Residual Matter* (sound by Angharad Davies, 2005/6), in which the handheld camera hovers very close to an unidentified but clearly organic surface, to reveal prolific but fugitive visual data such as ripples and nodes, intensely magnified. The shifting focus indicates that the lens is very close to the object that it depicts, which often blurs at the frame edge and dissolves into film grain. The colours vary from palest white and green and purple to a glowing red, with the light source spreading into the pitted reflections of shell-like matter observed by the lens. Visibly abrupt edits connect the different shots to evoke a material phantasmagoria coaxed by the camera from texture and light. These forms hover at the edge of recognition, so that the viewer is never given a stable point of reference for the saccadic scans that the film induces.

This film, which animates the inanimate, is pre-linguistic and wholly experiential, to present the spectator with phenomena that resist naming and verbal description. *Division of the Tissues* (2006) extends this strategy by including optical diagrams and medical images of brains, bones, wounds and X-Rays, along with close-up shots of limbs and skin in a surgical surveillance of dismembering that slowly drifts into filtered colour and images of light. Some images are evidently taken from books, including historical texts, but in others the source of the pale sculptural body parts is ambiguous. An almost inaudible multi-tracked whispering voice (the word "tissues" can be heard) fades into the mechanical sounds of what might be a film-developing lab, perhaps the one in which the film was made. The film transforms its anxious subject matter – fragile and fragmented bodies – into the light of the toned image held in the print's surface.

In Suspension (2008) opens with a sequence of cell-like corpuscular shapes, fluid but not necessarily in motion, stalked by a hovering camera. They morph into shots that fleetingly reveal natural forms – stones, rocks, leaves – and then dissolve into abstract entities, without name or scale, leaving us uncertain of the space they are in. Rich fields of colour in red and purple, seemingly shot or printed through a filter, introduce extreme close-ups of liquids, followed by superimposed hypnagogic shapes that fill the screen, to end in near-flicker and visible grain induced by the printing process. Asynchronous editing, black spacing and dissolving shapes determine the pace of the film. Its soundtrack is also physically produced, by (I think) blowing lightly into a reed. The film's title describes both its subject matter and the unstable space it constructs for the viewer. Its liquid images are suspended on the verge of anxious recognition.

Despite their perturbing images, and their implied critique of language, Rebello's films are nonetheless semiotic, since they explore and question the production of meaning. *The Object Which Thinks Us: Object 1* (2007) opens with an ideogram of the film's title. A brief shot of graph paper, with a glass placed on it, suggests that the 'object that thinks us' in cinema is the glass lens itself, combined with the measured frame. The film weaves different kinds of flow from water in a sink, to milk from a bottle, gel from a tube, and a wriggling worm. These are interspersed with brief shots of lips, tongue, and an eye-blink, coupled with more disturbing images such as a dead insect, a hypodermic syringe and a streak of red liquid. Some of these are repeated later in the film but shown 'slipping in the gate', so that a juddering flicker analogises the intermittent film mechanism itself. Other signs of materiality include jump-cuts, blank screen and a variety of colours and focal planes. Finally, the graph paper reappears, shot so that it abstracts into whiteness, closing the film almost like a reversed iris. From largely domestic objects, the glass stare of the close-up lens unfolds an oblique drama, mapped by an associative chain of emblematic images that summon a personal vision from everyday objects and gestures transformed by the camera.

The four artists discussed here share a common interest in process and duration, as the fundamental aspects of film and video art. Visual and conceptual links to structural film, especially its British variant, structural-materialism, echo in these new frame-based films and videos. For example, some use an extreme close up lens to displace the shot and its image, while others deploy repetition in the design or editing of continuous sequences. Nonetheless, each artist has found new ideas, procedures, textures and images that extend rather than repeat the structural project, which was never a unified field even in its own time. Rather than insisting on a fixed code of rigid principles, as the legend has it, the structural era opened up strategies in shooting and projection for later film and video makers to engage with – or oppose. In the case of the film and video makers discussed here, the structural film and its broader experimental heritage suggested ways of looking and making that corresponded to their own aesthetic and perceptual concerns.

Process implies performance, and an open attitude to form. Some of the work described here was scored in advance, or at least had its shape outlined. Other work grew directly from the activities of shooting, printing, scanning or mixing the images. In several, the means of production are visibly embodied in the projected work, as surface material, colour and flicker, or montage. In different ways, they are linked to the classic avant-gardes in abstract cinema, video art and structural film. They explore the implications of these waves or movements, but also revise and critique them. Their materiality is centred on the act of perception. Some construct subjective and hypnagogic images at the edge of natural vision and colour awareness, and others paradoxically evoke a haptic sense of touch through optical intensity and flicker fusion. They focus on the emergent rather than the given, and imply the role of chance, flux and change in the acts of making and seeing.

Sequence

Issue 1

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