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Dissolving Boundaries: Pat O'Neill Experiments in Hollywood
Words and images by Steve Anderson

A new film by Pat O'Neill is to the experimental film world what a planetary alignment is to astrophysicists, a rare and momentous event, promising a glimpse into the workings of laws of light and movement – perhaps even a new way of seeing the world. For O'Neill to complete two projects at once, however, is more like a supernova colliding with a black hole – the convergence of two extraordinary phenomena in a single moment – a nearly inconceivable occurrence from a man who thinks nothing of waiting an entire year to photograph a ray of sunlight shining through a window at a particular angle. Yet this is exactly what has happened.

In a single grand gesture, O'Neill recently completed both his first film project in six years – *The Decay of Fiction,* shot entirely in L.A.'s historic Ambassador Hotel – and the first digital hybrid work of his career, a DVD ROM called *Traces of the Decay of Fiction*, that incorporates visual elements of the film into an interactive, immersive environment. But O'Neill's DVD is no conventional digital supplement, resting on self-indulgent director's commentaries or tedious, behind-the-scenes "making of" sequences. Indeed, *Traces of the Decay of Fiction* is itself a fully articulated, stand-alone artwork, produced in collaboration with Marsha Kinder, Kristy Kang and Rosemary Comella at USC's Annenberg Center for Communication's Labyrinth Project. Both projects debut at Germany's ZKM "Future Cinema" show in November 2002.

Background
Although he is best known for his 1989 Sundance-winning feature, *Water and Power*, O'Neill has been an icon of American experimental film for nearly four decades. After studying photography and design at UCLA, O'Neill created a series of short, lyrical 16mm films made on the optical printer, among them *Runs Good* (1971), *Saugus Series* (1974), and *Sidewinder's Delta* (1976). O'Neill also helped found the legendary, but short-lived L.A. film collective, Oasis Cinema, which sought to create an outlet for experimental cinema in the shadow of Hollywood.

Through the early 1970s, O'Neill also served as the founding Assistant Dean of Film and Video at CalArts. Established by Walt Disney as a trade school for animators, the school quickly (and predictably) ran amok, developing a reputation for experimental and anarchic work that was difficult to assimilate into Disney's whitewashed, non-procreative universe. Having left his stamp on a key generation of artists experimenting with the visual possibilities of the optical printer, O'Neill left after six years to form his own visual effects company, Lookout Mountain Films, which his business card now aptly situates "at the very periphery of industrial entertainment."
After his departure from academia, O'Neill developed a reputation for effects work that was polished and precise. In addition to creating innumerable title sequences and commercials, O'Neill was called in to render critical effects on such high-profile studio efforts as *Return of the Jedi, Superman IV* and *The Game*. As opposed to his stint in academia, the industry allowed O'Neill to work without interruption on his own films for extended periods, returning to commercial work as needed to support his own filmmaking habit.
Eventually, O'Neill longed to achieve the precision and resolution of his

commercial work in his own films. He says, "I came from underground and independent 16mm, and there were a whole set of assumptions that went with that, but I was working in 35mm commercially to make a living. And I began to realize that I would rather make my own films that way."

On the Periphery

Since turning to 35mm with *Water and Power,* O'Neill has slowed his output noticeably, completing only one or two films per decade. But his images have also become grander and more complex; his stories more haunting, eloquent and subtle. Now working exclusively in 35mm on films that have little hope of receiving mainstream distribution, O'Neill uniquely limns the boundaries between art and commercial film practice. This ongoing tension between high-end industrial effects and personal experimentation has defined O'Neill's work for the past two decades.

Today, O'Neill lives with his wife Beverly, CalArts' longtime Provost and Oasis co-founder, on a rambling lot in the Hollywood hills. Set against the Laurel Canyon hillside, the property includes several converted workspaces that casually blend old technologies and new. In one studio, O'Neill is working on a few final audio loops for the soundtrack of *The Decay of Fiction* on his sound designer, George Lockwood's PC. Behind him, a 35mm animation stand used for shooting mattes is wedged floor-to-ceiling, accompanied by a WWII era black-and-white film processor. An adjacent room houses a Mac G-4 workstation where O'Neill creates his large-scale digital artworks and tests new additions to the DVD ROM as they are created by the Labyrinth design team. A few yards away is O'Neill's optical printing studio, where the sweet smell of film cleaner hangs nostalgically in the air around two immaculately maintained 35mm printers. It was here that O'Neill once rendered Obi-Wan Kenobi translucent and a few months later mapped the psychic geography of Los Angeles onto the desiccated landscape of Owens Valley in *Water and Power*.

At the end of a long stone stairway, the garage has been converted into a makeshift shooting stage, littered with C-stands and carefully packed travel cases for O'Neill's portable motion control apparatus. The shooting stage doubles as a screening room for 35mm dailies, complete with an Army surplus projector and two walls hung with thick black velvet.

This room also houses some of O'Neill's ceramic sculptures from the 1960s when he was a design student at UCLA – glossy, abstract shapes characteristic of the "finish fetish" movement in L.A. sculpture that included artists like Craig Kauffman, John McCracken and James Turrell. The motorcycle helmet sized objects are beginning to show their age, with tiny fractures appearing in the shiny black veneers, but they remain enigmatically pleasing to look at and inviting to touch. Indeed these shapes seem to fill in the sensorial gap in O'Neill's film work, which revels in textures and surfaces, but can never provide direct, haptic experience.

Tall and soft-spoken, the 63 year-old O'Neill comes across as the person you would want at the controls of an airplane that had suddenly lost both engines. His manner is thoughtful and deliberate, yet laced with moments of wry humor – not unlike his films. "I suppose that I have paid the dues of living in this town and dealing with this arrogant industry," O'Neill admits, "but being here allows me to buy short ends cheap and make deals with labs and get a kind of freedom within the medium that you don't have if you live anywhere else."

Process

O'Neill's lyrical short films have long defied categorization. Part abstraction, part essay, and part experiment with light, movement and scale, his work is known for its visual elegance and surrealistic tendencies. However, it is the

optical printer that most clearly binds his work together and defines it stylistically within the history of cinema.

Optical printing is a technology that is almost as old as cinema itself. At its most basic level, the optical printer is simply a device that allows you to transfer images from one strip of film to another, while altering the speed, size and placement of the image within the frame at will. It is a laborious process, and one that demands patience as well as precision. O'Neill's 35mm printer – a 1972 Producers Service aerial printer, one of only four in the world – has been modified for computer-control, easing some of the more labor-intensive processes of superimposition and multiple image layering, arguably O'Neill's specialty within an amazingly diverse palette of visual effects.

The other technology that has driven O'Neill's unique visual style is a computerized motion control device that allows a 35mm camera to precisely replicate camera moves across multiple exposures. This custom-designed apparatus allows for effects that defy conventional laws of cinematic representation. Motion control, which is used in Hollywood mainly for shooting miniatures to simulate full-scale, live action motion, is used by O'Neill toward the opposite end – transforming real spaces into ethereal fields of spatial possibility.

Somewhat surprisingly, O'Neill appears to harbor little sentimentality toward the waning technologies with which he is most often associated. Indeed his attitude toward the digital future seems almost hopeful. "I've done a lot of stuff with film – manipulating emulsion with a processor and so forth – and some things would be pretty hard to achieve digitally, but most things, if you keep at it long enough, you can find an analogy that's pretty close. People say there are things you can only do on film, but I'm not so sure. There are certain characteristic things that one *tends* to get on film and in digital media, but I think they're more interchangeable than most people imagine." After so many years of intimate work with these devices, O'Neill has developed an improvisational and intuitive style that seems to contradict the precise demands of the technology. He explains, "Sometimes I make a series of images without knowing what the combination is going to add up to. Or I just improvise on the printer without looking at the image. You begin to realize that things make sense in your head even when you're not conscious of it."

In an era of digital effects, the optical printer would surely be at the top of any film technology's endangered species list. With the completion of *The Decay of Fiction,* even O'Neill says he is looking forward to spending some time working with image processing software such as Adobe After Effects. "It's a scary feeling," he says, "They've made it so easy, all the things that you were doing that are so labor intensive and part of a whole linear methodology. If a ten-year-old who knows how to use a computer can get a similar effect, I mean who needs it?"

The Decay of Fiction

Nine years in the making, *The Decay of Fiction* is undoubtedly one of O'Neill's most ambitious projects to date. Funded in part by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, the film's budget ultimately ran over $250,000 – impossibly cheap for a conventional 35mm feature but a staggering sum in the world of experimental cinema.

Among the many challenges O'Neill faced was the slow the decay of the very medium he is working in. "Film is really starting to disappear," O'Neill says matter-of-factly, "two of the film stocks that were essential to making the film are no longer manufactured, so I had to buy all I could before Kodak

stopped selling it."

Another obstacle was the uncertain future of the hotel itself. When O'Neill began shooting in the Ambassador in 1994, the building was owned by Donald Trump, who planned to build a 128-story skyscraper on the site. Assuming he would only have a few months before the demolition began, O'Neill captured as much of the building as he could, using motion control and time lapse to create suggestive movement's through the empty building's cavernous interior that would be matched later with images of people, photographed to look like ghosts moving around the spaces. Before long, however, O'Neill ran out of money and a recession scuttled Trump's plan's to build L.A.'s tallest building. Now owned by the Los Angeles School Board, the hotel's fate remains uncertain. At present, the building's short-term salvation rests precariously on the monastic pace of the city bureaucracy.

For O'Neill, the film brings together personal memories with elements of L.A. cultural history. A Los Angeles native, O'Neill grew up in Inglewood, just ten miles from the Ambassador. "My family visited the Ambassador a few times when I was a child and I remember being very stressed out in that place. It was very strange and full of exotic people, exotic odors, people moving fast, it was like a foreign land. Everything was more intense." In spite of these connections to childhood memories, O'Neill insists that the film does not dwell on nostalgia or sentimentality.

The film even downplays the hotel's entanglement with Los Angeles history, (though these elements play a crucial role in the DVD ROM). Every president from Hoover to Nixon stayed at the Ambassador and the hotel was allegedly the place where JFK first met Marilyn Monroe. Most famously of all, Bobby Kennedy was gunned down in the kitchen of the Ambassador following his acceptance speech for the Democratic nomination for President in 1968. But all of these histories are not dealt with explicitly in the film, which focuses instead on Los Angeles' *other* history – the one populated by hard-boiled detectives and dangerously seductive femmes fatale.

The film's primary tension occurs through transplanting the language of film noir – complete with stock characters, suggestions of plot and narrative intrigue – into an experimental tradition. For O'Neill, the Ambassador functions as a kind of architectural and historical time capsule – a vessel for his Hollywood-inflected stories that is at once historically specific and fluidly immaterial, with permeable walls and shape-shifting spaces designed to disorient the viewer. "It's about making time into an abstraction," O'Neill says, "Contrasting slow time—animation time—with live action creates a disruption that's interesting because everything in film is conventionalized. It's edited in a way that's familiar to anyone who looks at features. And that makes the contrast of times even more noticeable. You become aware of the fact that everything is not what it seems to be."

The film reaches its crescendo in an increasingly abstract 15-minute costume ball sequence that O'Neill populated by shooting a few characters many times over so that they appear to occupy multiple fantasy spaces at once. As the scene progresses, the ghostly figures increasingly begin to defy the laws not only of cinema, but of physics, passing through walls and changing radically in size, while the frame splinters into multiple fragments. At this point, O'Neill says, "Everything becomes less and less comforting. The hotel background becomes something that's completely permeable. It's just a layer through which the actors can work."

But the real final chapter of the film has yet to be written, as the end of the film is bound inextricably to the hotel's ultimate fate. "When the building gets torn down, if I'm around and can get access to a roof nearby, that will be the actual ending." O'Neill pauses momentarily and then notes wryly, "Maybe I'll send it out as a sequel."

Tracing the Decay of Fiction

What makes O'Neill's film truly unique is its relation to the DVD ROM project that was created in parallel with it. *Traces of the Decay of Fiction* marks the third "electronic fiction" to emerge from the Labyrinth Project, a research initiative directed by USC professor Marsha Kinder. Over the past three years, Labyrinth has also published CD ROMs based on works by novelist John Rechy (*Memories and Desire: Searching the Worlds of John Rechy)* and experimental filmmaker Nina Menkes (*The Crazy Bloody Female Center*). O'Neill's project, which also began as a CD ROM, gradually evolved into its present form, with the added resolution and interactivity of the DVD ROM format lending itself to the creation of a truly immersive interactive narrative experience.

Ironically, the highlight of the project for O'Neill is a feature of the DVD that momentarily strips all control away from the user. He explains, "I wanted to be able to scramble the parts some of the time, so that the backgrounds and the actors and the soundtrack are in some kind of a random relation to each other." The solution, which posed the greatest technical challenge of the project, turned out to be something called a "randomizer." O'Neill continues, "In some unpredictable time frame, the screen begins to shake and you realize that you're experiencing an earthquake. About every four to seven minutes, the whole project goes into a random combination generator. It's really my favorite part of the piece."

Freed from the linear constraints of cinema, O'Neill and the Labyrinth production team of art director Kristy Kang and programmer Rosemary Comella, were free to develop an interactive structure that requires the user to be adventurous in exploring the labyrinthine spaces of the abandoned building, uncovering story elements and revealing glimpses into the hotel's illustrious past.

What's interesting is the extent to which the film and DVD ROM complement each other, rather than merely recapitulating the same visual and narrative elements. For O'Neill, the distinction between the two projects rests on the DVD's greater investment in the history both of the Ambassador, and the community surrounding it. He says, "I didn't see the film as a historical project or a documentary about the building particularly. But in the DVD we really had an opportunity to get into some of the storytelling and some of the history of the hotel. We still thought the building was probably going to be torn down – so we talked to as many people as we could and it became a real sort of intersection of fiction and history."

Traces of the Decay of Fiction will be available in November from Amazon.com and Facets Video.

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