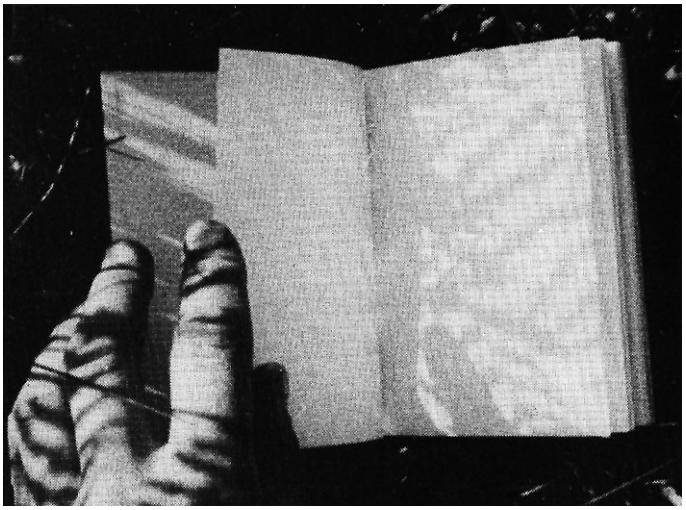
FILM POEMS 4: MESSAGES



ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

Film Poems 4: Messages - Programme Notes. Copyright remains authors or as stated.

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Details of the earlier programmes Film Poems, Film Poems 2 Moments Histories Feelings and Film Poems 3 can be found at http://www.lux.org.uk/filmpoems

Programme notes design - Jeanette Sutton.

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Introduction

Working on An Office Worker Thinks of Their Love, and Home, and earlier on For You, reflected an interest in text and image. As a version for screening began to emerge, I started to think if this new work might fit in to one of the Film Poems programmes. Talking of text and image with Guy Sherwin resulted in an evening at his house with him projecting two 8mm letters from a friend now living in New Zealand. One of these works, printed by Guy from 8mm to 16mm appears in this programme. Two of the works appeared in earlier Film Poems programmes. Anemic Cinema had been mentioned by William C Wees in his article (available on LUX website) for the first Film Poems programme.

Seeing the programme, preparing it for touring, and reading the essay and notes which later came in, thoughts came to the fore, of how films could be letters, essays, records and poems or a combination of these and more. Writing on work of this kind is hard to come by, and part of the process on putting the programmes together has been producing programme notes. I hope for those interested (the programmes can stand alone) these notes open up ways of thinking, and also ways of writing, that might be appropriate for the work.

I've started on a new work so maybe there will be a further programme, but it will have to find its own place. The works are on 16mm which can be a delicate format, sometimes needing a slight adjustment between films. The works themselves have often been shown in cinemas but also galleries, halls, clubs, studios, homes and where groups have come together to watch them. Perhaps sometimes glimpsed first as stills. Not always cinema on the big screen, but a kind of chamber cinema, sometimes with discussion. I hope wherever you see them you find the works, and Film Poems 4: Messages of interest.

Peter Todd

PLEASE NOTE. Eriskay - A Poem of Remote Lives, Colour Poems, Kokoro is for Heart all have sound. Otherwise, the works are mute.

Infinite Eyes: Thoughts on 'Film Poems 4: Messages' by Gareth Evans.

"There has never been a great film unless it was created in the spirit of the experimental film maker".
Len Lye

Message n. 1. a communication, usually brief, from one person or group to another; 2. an implicit meaning or moral, as in a work of art; 3. a formal communiqué; 4. an inspired communication of a prophet or religious leader; 5. a mission, errand; 6. 'get the message': *informal*, to understand what is meant; 7. vb. to send as a message, to signal (a plan) etc. (C13: from Old French, from Vulgar Latin, *something sent*).

It is said that once, upon a time even (as if the moment was a hill from where one looked out across unfolding landscapes of event), among the olive groves, as the light failed, they killed the messenger for the news they carried.

These notes are being written as the after-effects of a car bomb, which destroyed a significant part of the UN compound in Baghdad, killing more than a dozen people and trapping the UN special co-ordinator (who subsequently also passed away), are being reported around the world. First, there was the radio broadcast of a press conference on landmine clearance; the star-beamed picture in regular transmission.

Then, switch-sudden…

Eye's food snatched, image gone, sound wrenched into a rictus of collapse.

'What endures will pass'. Róbert Gál

There is the silence that comes in contrast to such acts, rubble settling onto lungs trying to fill a voice with enough air. Swelling breath into clenched shouts, gasps for aid.

Later, there are messages, communiqués: 'we swear by the milk of our mothers that we shall make the days of the occupiers as black as their faces'.

Pictures and language, the dark lyricism of a certain form of opposition. There is an image in the words, and words fail alongside such images. And more, what does 'kill' mean; what does 'injure' signify? How do we describe a life seeping over broken walls into boiling sand?

And what does 'film poem' mean? How does one write about the fragile aesthetic of certain clusters of light, the wrought delicacy of artisans working to convey truths about our passage through the trees and streets and countries, when such actions fill the stomach with acid, choke the chest like rising drown-water?

We might lose language like sometimes we lose keys. Do we then learn it again, newly wise to its vulnerability? Or do we leave it where it fell and revert to other gestures of communication, to beacon fires, simple hand gestures, the marking of bark or path-sides? What if such a rupture happens before we feel the merits of the tongue? What if we are children growing steadily into being and the speaking time, only to find ourselves severed from articulation by something that is the opposite of creative order, of speech?

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The first message was long-held and fundamental. It built things. It was local and international and beyond all maps. It named the visible and the not seen.

Maya: a people of outstanding achievements. Their language also. They are called their language, or is it the reverse? We all are, surely. English. Inuit. Swedish. People and phrase. Arabic. Maya: Hindu goddess of illusion. The personification of the power of Maya, a regarding of the material world of the senses as illusory. Celluloid incarnate.

Sherwin and his daughter are in the world. That could be message enough. Should be, even. Witnesses to phenomena, they voyage together through everyday wonder. She, a fresh, unique configuration of cells and mind, is new to it all but her coded, secret axis, the coral of her instinction, shimmering in marine light, knows to turn on this motion into language. Into speaking the world out loud. But she is not quite there, the rise of that hill lies still ahead, and so the film is silent.

'Silence is quiet. Listening'. Róbert Gál

Language is inscribed but not uttered. The hand is a tongue. Both are agents of purpose. When does naming reduce the possibility of things and when does it enlarge them? Maya is on the cusp of becoming. Literally on the threshold. Sweeping through the rich harvest of the seen world, her eyes, like benign scythes, search the crops for understanding, for nourishment. Might we still see like her, as she brings her body into its relation to landscapes and evidence, as she

articulates self through knowing what is not-self? Sherwin paces calmly in her shadow as she totters, then stands into first wisdoms. What do they see?

The white book, pages blank as a beginning? Leaf-dapple literacies, shadow ink of high, bright mornings… a leaf this way up becomes its tree when turned. Perspective is all, the geometry of seeing is an early lesson. Draw it. The tree blurs to a smudge. Why can't you see the wind? You can see it in the leaves. You can see through it, to the other side of the wind, to the silence there. Light in trees, like words in books, like water on its shoal-glistening course. Leaf boat linkages. The logic here is one of associative enquiry - felt, perceptual, experiental bridges to the next territory. We are in the shared Zen of unfettered senses here. Primary faiths renewing themselves with each falling season. Our hand, like our tongue, in the flow of the day. Making the lasting shapes from which all else breeds. Pebbles are round because the water makes them swell. And so it goes… from sand circle to playground roundabout, time in tree rings to celluloid spooling.

Relaxed negotiations between surface and essence, camera and light. A manifesto of light, like a desert hermit dizzy with visions of pure gleam. 'Look, the sun's coming with us'… Repeat to fade and then intercut with the life-forming new.

'What has no shadow has no strength to live'. César Vallejo

'Why is the shadow of the stick longer than the stick?'

We see, we name, we draw to confirm the thing. Trees etched, in glass the lace lines are. This is daily, local seeing. It is all around us, the streaming coat things wear. Their varnish. What to do with 'all this useless beauty'?

Spell the name to be sure of it. M-a-y-a. In our language this means 'she is'. I am… Write it with insect, in window's sweat, on stone. She is learning otherness and tracing the edge of herself through immersion. 'A child can't wake up when it's in a picture'. Dream, then… The child is growing, testing things and their present tense while learning, at the same time, time. Watching the clock secreted inside a flower or the sky as it reveals the pulsing absolute of being. Finding the signs and legends of it in all the daily business.

Sherwin like some time-gone missionaire, some explorer then, bringing it all back home from just around the corner of the eye. He sees it, she sees it, we see it. 'Why don't our looks mix when they meet?'

Sending it down the telegraph wires in mist. A Noah for the future, saving all the creatures, the ancient birds, the window cat. But it's all alive, even the things that do not stumble, trundle, run.

Anim -al, -ation, -ism.

Sherwin like some peacetime cryptographer, decoding the found visible. Presenting the mystery in a way that does not defuse it. This is the centre of it all. Consciousness and its kaleidoscopic tread.

Writing fingers, typing fingers, handling fingers, hand.

It is as always, about paying attention. Brilliance of the wall-top broken glass. 'Are there toys in prison for children?' If this world, this life is a cell, then at least its playthings are numerous, are immanent. And, as we know from all the tales, take it all away and still, the prisoner has their cloud-tipped view.

'Aeroplanes take the blueness out of the sky, don't they?'

Are we near the end then? Is it all done with (incinerator) smoke and mirrors? Is it all empty volumes, a TV's screen dissolving? No. The message is old as fossil. We are not creatures sealed alone in lost rock, sedimented by time. We are the shadow in the sun, the unfixed figures seen against the hill. A man and his child in the (still) springtime of the planet, hand to hand and simply are. 'It's the people in the dream who make the dream happen.'

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Who are these messages to? Who from? Were they left by chance? In hope or in despair? Messages not in bottles, but canisters and cartridges (bottles in *spirit*) or neatly archived transcripts to the future. Are they flags or warnings, aide-memoires or manifesto scripts? And value, who says which might be important, which faint human trace demands we look?

Werner Kissling looked. Took a boat to the islands. To the far rim, to the outer places. Where the light was both older and fresher. The people stand up to watch it come (their arms shade the sun from their eyes)... Their shadows lie like blankets gently on the sand and grass, stirring slightly in the breeze. They straighten from their bending, their backs shaped like marks of question. And the question, why this life, what is it? These remote lives… He found them dwelling close to things, within their shadows and not split from them. Close to fish and heath, wool and weave. In time both gone and yet to come,

in some slow aftermath of complex collapse. Lives *on* earth. From it. They live in its brick, stir in its heat, are coloured by it. They draw its lichen to dye wool. Lives of matter but not prosaic; lives threaded with poetry. They sing their making into being. 10 songs of making…They chant together while drifting, nomadic Kissling, on the run and yearning, there with youthful postcard longing, watches.

And it takes this 'alien', this border-crosser, to give to Film its first, fine Gaelic reels. To bring the old tongue to the new system. To climb the hill, to climb it in a morning in the '30s (still here, archive-dusted off) and flash a mirror-message into sea's full sun, 'these people and this place, they happened. They survived. They made it through'.

Those who are gone are not gone are they gone no their light is in the morning, mid and evening air and in cinema's shared, quite reeling mind…

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There is a different mind for islands. Margaret Tait had such a mind. Clearly in the ocean, she values local detailing. The etched trajectory, the fecund spill. Things verdantly over-lapping. She was the light-teller of daily tales. The peace makar who did not ignore the conflicts (born 11.11.18, how could she be anything but doubly aware?) There's another daughter here too, keeping Sherwin's from lonely, her own, as well as she herself, offspring of colour (not just a spectrum but a borderless philosophy of being) and forever returning to its arbours and walks. Reading all the scripts, from signage grabs to nature's text, from boats, leaves, soil, rock, war. Incensed she might be, but loud and over-stated no. Working on the interstitial, intertitled, overlooked, what other response can there be than the wonderful 'Aha!'

Her eye's magpie retrieval, keeping all, in time.

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'They told me that the truth of the universe was inscribed into our very bones. That the human skeleton was itself a hieroglyph. That everything we had ever known on earth was shown to us in the first days after death. That our experience of the world was desired by the cosmos and needed by it for its own renewal'.
Saul Bellow, from 'Something to Remember Me By' (Collected Stories).

A man sits by the night window. Darkness buckles the pane. Old light arrives at his eyes from the constellated stars, the original messages coded as pictures to be read from all corners, in all times, by all cultures and minds. The interpretation of the message might change, chinese-whispered through the centuries, millennia, but the picture itself pours ceaselessly through the unending corridors of night, in the auditoria of the head. Old light of films seen long after the star/scene has passed. And Stan, late Brakhage (it is said that the pigments, based on coal tar dyes, he used for much of his career, caused his cancer) who only wanted to leave a 'snail's trail in the moonlight', what of him? What message from him now of this film made behind closed lids (light passed through skin), in the fine flesh pools? Only fair to give him back his words…

'This is a hand-painted film whose emotionally referential shapes and colors are interwoven with words (in English) from the 'First Hymn to the Night' by the late 18th Century mystic poet Friedrich Philippe von Hardenberg, whose pen name was Novalis. The pieces of text I've used are as follows: 'the universally gladdening light ... As inmost soul ... it is breathed by stars ... by stone ... by suckling plant ... multiform beast ... and by (you). I turn aside to Holy Night ... I seek to blend with ashes. Night opens in us ... infinite eyes ... blessed love.'

Hand-painting. Painting his hand, his passage, onto film. Like stained glass. Like polished rock. It flows and tells.

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Finally, it is all desire. Desire transcribed into light. Light as desire itself, without words or language needed. The films are desire paths, the chosen routes, the maker's beaten tracks. They turn cinema in on itself (anemic they are not) to find the other way that it can be. The way it can tell the older, deeper stories. Of growing. Of being a child (the main motif, the newly-minted seeing once again) in other islands, on the planet's flip-side, but sailing in the same (and different) sea. 'This is New Zealand'; 'I like sheep'; 'The woolshed'; 'The sheep runs'… This is what happens. The looking, the naming, while the sea writes its own elegy again and again on the shore.

The message is translated. It is (the word root, 'brought across') carried by light. It is the body's sound, and place's sound, and the sound of things ordered into shadows on the wall. It is guttural and dug out of the heart's pit. 'Kokoro' is for Heart'… It is beyond ink language and mind language. It is what is spoken in fire-circles, in staving off dark *and* welcoming it in. We hear it in 'the throat singing of the first peoples' and we will hear it again at the last instance. It is the language of the delta, of merger and yield, of the moment of passing into larger orders; the moment of gifting. Of offering.

The message is human and a wing. A leaf and a shelter. It is generous and calm. It is *necessary*. It heals wounds and repairs the damaged world. We read it and can go on. We read it and can go on.

Gareth Evans is a writer and independent film programmer. He also edits the film journal 'Vertigo' (www.vertigomagazine.co.uk).

Eriskay - A Poem of Remote Lives.
Dir. Werner Kissling. GBS. 1935. 18 mins. Sound.

"As an essay, or adjunct, or illustration for Kissling's studies it would act as a powerful aide-memoire, as well as informing and entertaining those who know virtually nothing about the Western Isles and her people. and the lack of artifice, its placing of so little between lens and the viewer, give it, almost by accident, a tremendous power - with the odd flicker of amazement each time it is seen: a flicker caused by the sharp profile of a face, or the clear and direct look of a person probably long-dead, straight into the camera and our lives today. But they were not seeing us, or their future audiences. They were seeing an unknown, elegant, wealthy enquirer, from a far away country of whom they knew virtually nothing."

Michael W. Russell. from A Viewing of the Film in A Poem of Remote Lives The Enigma of Werner Kissling 1895 - 1988.

Messages.
Dir. Guy Sherwin. 16mm film. 1981-3. 35mins. b/w. Silent.

On Messages.
It is twenty years since my film Messages was completed and first shown. The child who was the inspiration for the film, my daughter Maya, is now 24 and about to return to England from a village in southern Japan where she has been teaching English. One of the central themes of Messages is language and its acquisition, and in fact Maya grew up to be very interested in language. An early indication of this can be seen in the film, in the concentration and intensity she gives to writing her name she draws the letter Y as if it were the extended branch of a tree. Once we were walking along a country lane and came to a point where the lane divided. 'Is that a Y?' Maya asked. I explained as best I could that yes it looked like one but wasn't, because lanes aren't letters. It seems that through such a process we find out which things go into which compartments in our developing understanding of the world.

Messages was made in part at the London Film-Makers Co-operative using laboratory equipment which I'd become familiar with, having worked there in the mid seventies. The dominant theory to come out of the LFMC at the time was 'structural materialism', a movement which asserted film's physical and material properties over the tendency for film to make illusions. In giving Maya her name we hadn't realised that 'maya' actually means 'illusion' in Hindi and is an important concept which refers to the illusion that is the material world. Maya wrote her name again and again on odds scraps of paper. I collected them and they became part of the film. Maya's very first word was 'la' , by which she meant 'light' - she would say it while pointing at the lights in the kitchen. I kept a book and wrote down her first words and the questions that she asked. They were captivating, and almost impossible to answer: 'why can't you see the wind?' or 'how can people live in a wire?' (on answering the telephone). My film is silent, and doesn't attempt to answer her questions, but at least is an acknowledgement of her sense of discovery of the world.

A question that one might ask (as an adult) of any film is: why do images hold such fascination? It didn't occur to

me then, but making the film Messages was perhaps my response to Maya's fascination with the world through my own fascination with the image; for images can hold something of the wonder of seeing the world as if for the first time.

The way that the images work in Messages is through oblique connection and association. There is no arrow of time in the film (and no message), rather a set of thoughts and reflections around a cluster of themes. The advantage of such uncertainty is that it opens an expanse of time, within the overall span of the film, for one's own thoughts and associations.

Last year I was invited to show Messages at a festival screening in Fukuoka City Public Library, not far from the village where Maya teaches. For this unique screening Maya stood beside the screen and spoke the English subtitles in Japanese - thereby translating into her newly acquired language the very same questions she had asked as a young child. Afterwards, the organisers of the screening told us that it had had once been common practice in Japan, during the period of silent cinema, for a 'benshi' to stand beside the screen and help communicate the meaning of the film to the audience, as Maya had done.

Guy Sherwin. August. 2003.

Anemic Cinema.

Dir. Marcel Duchamp. FR. 1926. 7 mins. Silent.

"The title, an anagram, immediately reveals the basic principle of the film: to make an object "turn" on itself, an object that might be a figure or a phrase, turning in space which was no longer the naturalist space of the disc's revolutions. but the purely mental space of both optical illusion and wordplay. On the screen we see figures of apertures - snail-like spirals, helices, Fibonacci curves - and there too are extensions of the corkscrew whose shadow is cast on the surface of Tu m' and of the bicycle wheel "screwed" into space. These figures alternate with Spoonerisms whose typographic arrangement, outwardly duplicating their own structure, is circular. Anagrams and metagrams are to discourse what the spiral is to the figure; glyphs and graphs alike coil and unwind about themselves within a space that has no reality.

A new stage of abstraction has now been reached. the domain of that immaterial, though still sensory, space of the stereoscopic or anaglyphic photograph is abolished, replaced by the purely conceptual space, without thickness or depth, of optical and linguistic games. It is, rather, the space which makes these games possible. This is the space so well described by Michel Foucault, in his discussion of Raymond Roussel's as "tropological"; a flat space in which words and figures rotate indefinitely, with neither end nor beginning, a space wholly subject to the infinitely glittering effect of meaning, in the definite absence of all meaning."

Jean Clair, from Opticeries - in October no 5, Summer 1978.

Colour Poems.

Dir. Margaret Tait. GBS. 1974. 12 mins.

"Well, yes, I do remember the young men going off to fight in Spain".

The first words of Colour Poems give the impression of joining a conversation in mid flow. Throwing the tragedies of war into an intensely personal perspective, this beginning sets the tone for Colour Poems, Margaret Tait's elegy in nine parts to her homeland of Orkney. She conceived the film as 'nine short linked films', each signalled with her trademark titles. The structure of the whole is created from a chain of associations through word and image that relates the wider political world to one closer to home. Tait's first words are about the suffering of war, a sharp contrast to the accompanying lyricism in an image of leaves on a tree shifting in the wind. The marching boots of war veterans become the 'Old Boots', a still-life image of wellingtons worn for gardening. The association has shifted from war to allusions of the land; of farming, growing crops, home. 'Terra Firma'.

Tait's voice is felt as an insistent presence throughout the film. In the marks of drawings scratched directly into the film emulsion or words chalked into the picture, she speaks with a quiet urgency which underscores the

shifts of mood and image. The allusions to war and particularly to North Sea oil and Scottish independence are strongly placed but Tait does not make her message polemic. Her point is a much subtler one. Her images reflect the political as she finds it in the personal realm of her surroundings, over the radio, in the boots of marching war veterans, ploughed earth, quarries, litter. When this is placed against the pattern of the natural world she represents by images of waves, changing seasons, meadows, it strikes a note of disquiet at how these natural resources are being mined, depleted, for their commercial value. A warning perhaps.

Lucy Reynolds. September. 2003.

An Office Worker Thinks of Their Love, and Home.

Dir. Peter Todd. GB. 2003. 3 mins. Silent.
Camera Susi Arnott. Editor. Anthea Kennedy.

In 1999 I curated and made a piece for a group exhibition featuring contributions from 15 artists of their response to the experience or idea of 'Lunch Hour' (which had also been a theme of some earlier writings). This had taken place for one day at home. The piece I'd made was a short silent 16mm film. It had been filmed in my lunch hour with Susi Arnott on camera who I had worked with on the earlier film To Red. Essentially it was shots of places I around where I work in the west end of London. After 'Lunch Hour' I continued to look at the film every now and then. Even earlier that time in the day had been the subject of several short stories I had written. As an artist who is also an office worker it had been, and remains, an important period of the day. Sometimes for shopping or errands, other times for working (my own), day dreaming, doing nothing, reading or a combination of these. I came to decide to shoot some new footage so that the unique work for 'Lunch Hour' would become a new work. 100' lengths on a clockwork Bolex camera. Perhaps three of four were shot in total. Then editing with Anthea Kennedy over a period of months, often in the evenings, when we were both free, and the film emerged at the beginning of 2003.

Peter Todd. August. 2003.

First Hymn to the Night - Novalis.

Dir. Stan Brakhage. USA. 1994. 4 mins. Silent.

Film Letter from New Zealand: Boy. Travels with Stick.

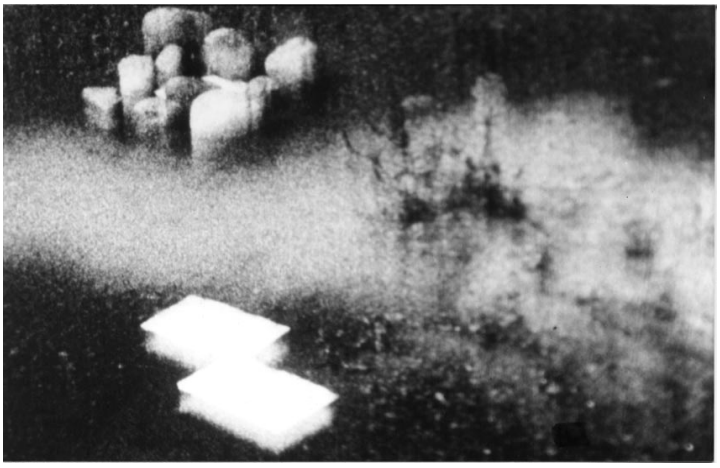
Dir. Gordon Brounker. NZ. 1988. 3 mins. Silent.

My tour guide for the day was admittedly rather young but as I followed him with my camera I caught sight of a rich backwater; the charming, rural NZ environment in which he seemed to flourish. He knew the same nursery rhymes as I'd learnt in England but had neither shoes nor socks; the landscape was kind. Much further down the track and for me a long way from home, he tossed me a glimpse of a lovely, simple childhood in a land of milk

and honey. He spoke very little and the tours' highlights were humble but I was sold and I seemed to recognise something of the flavour.

Gordon Brouncker. August. 2003.

Kokoro is For Heart.
Dir. Philip Hoffman. CA. 1999. 7 mins. Sound.



Screen-play by Philip Hoffman and Gerry Shikatani. Camera and Editing: Philip Hoffman. Sound Composition and Performance: Gerry Shikatani. Spoken text in English, Japanese and French.

KOKORO IS FOR HEART is a collaboration with Canadian-Japanese sound poet Gerry Shikatani. Gerry works with sound the way a sculptor models clay, quickly and carefully, feeling each phrase with the body and the breath. It calls to mind the breath of the Bolex, the rhythm created through shooting rather than through editing. We walked over to the gravel pit one day, down the road, and filmed KOKORO IS FOR HEART. Gerry's gestures sometimes coinciding with the lens, sometimes out of the picture... a stone... a feather, his script\poems floating like big ships in a puddle. The irregular yet rhythmical sound of the camera's inner workings, echoes Gerry's phrasing and re-phrasing.

When I got the footage back from the lab I was disappointed because of the periodic flipping of the image. After screening the footage several times I realised that the malfunctioning camera echoed Gerry Shikatani's rhythmic sound and body gestures. The flipping images of the gravel pit and its surround rendered the filmed-nature, unnatural ....questions surface: what is nature? what is natural??

BACKGROUND: Kokoro is for Heart grew out of a film/performance called Opening Series. In this on-going project EACH FILM CONSISTS OF 12 SEGMENTS, EACH SEGMENT IN ITS OWN HAND- PAINTED FILM CANISTER. THROUGH THE VISUAL REFERENCES ON THE CANISTERS, THE AUDIENCE, PRIOR TO THE SCREENING, ORDERS THE FLOW OF THE FILM.

OPENING SERIES: "I wanted to find a way of working with images that would allow them the possibility to move more freely, to change position with each and every screening so that over time, through their range of juxtapositions, and ensuing meanings, I might come to know them as a sibling, a friend, or a lover."

All the footage that Gerry Shikatani and I shot at the gravel pit was step printed on an optical printer 2:1 & 3:1. The films were screened many times and in many different orders, by way of the OPENING SERIES performance process. Eventually, the film found a fixed order & became KOKORO IS FOR HEART.

Philip Hoffman. August. 2003

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