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On Capturing the Ineffable: A Moment from Experimental Film "59.10"

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Abstract

This artwork is a still from "59," an experimental film installation I created with the following restrictions: I had to direct eleven 59-second films in eleven months with eleven collaborating artists, none of whom could be cis men. In the resulting project, we used film and those eleven short moments to capture our unique, fragile experiences. We explored everything from the way in which facets of personality drift in and out of the subconscious to the beautiful, mercurial nature of gender.

Keywords

experimental film, gallery installation, relational aesthetics, avant garde cinema, Maya Deren, Waking Life, Richard Linklater

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Cover Page Footnote

My many thanks to Britta Kaye and my collaborators, Angelina Prendergast, Madeline Merritt, KC Slack, DeiSelah Thompson, Maranatha & Jackie Hay, Sheridan Irwin, Tatiana El-Khoury, Jacqueline Suskin, Jade Phoenix Martinez, Sarah London, and Rae Threat.



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In the resulting project, we used film and those eleven short moments to capture our unique, fragile experiences. We explored everything from the way in which facets of personality drift in and out of the subconscious to the beautiful, mercurial nature of gender. The restrictions were chosen specifically to mimic and subvert the pithy structure of the television commercial as well as the cis-male dominant power structure of the entertainment industry.

The beauty of film as the chosen medium is the marriage of the cold and mechanical—thin celluloid pulled past a half-moon shutter by a mechanism based on a sewing machine needle or light ingested through a chip then rendered into data—and the ineffable. By its nature it is illusive: images interspersed with a darkness that is erased through persistence of vision. Each flicker denies the viewer solid ground. One can wrestle against the liminality or embrace the fluidity of the ever-changing image.

It is appropriate that experimental artists should use this medium in an attempt to preserve ephemeral human experiences. Maya Deren, known as the mother of avant-garde cinema, stated, “Inasmuch as other art forms are not constituted of reality itself, they create metaphors for reality. But photography, being itself the reality or the equivalent thereof, can use its own reality as a metaphor for ideas and abstractions” (Deren, 1960 p. 221).

There is a beauty in using what is perceived as reality to subvert a viewer's understanding of visual fact. This is often disconcerting and even frustrating to audience members, but allows for the exploration of difficult ideas. In that liminal space where the tangible is more evanescent than first assumed, marginalized artists, especially members of the LGBTQ+ community and people of color, find space in which to explore and communicate their experiences. The feelings of discomfort can be used to create empathy and greater understanding of experiences that are hard to internalize through other media.

In Richard Linklater's film, 'Waking Life' Caveh Zahedi speaks of the power of film to capture a "holy moment." (Walker-McBay et al, 2002). I believe Zahedi is, in part, discussing the moment where the chemistry of light bathing emulsion to create image after image meets the expression of an evanescent idea, and where a viewer, if even for a moment, becomes aware of that profound intersection and is transported. The additive property of those elements is the genius of filmmaking, and those moments, more available when artists push past linear storytelling, are what those of us who are experimental filmmakers hope to achieve.

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