

ETC



Alex MacKenzie

The Wooden Lightbox: A Secret Art of Seeing

Sarah Cook and John N. Smith

Number 90, June–July–August 2010

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/64227ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

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Cite this review

Cook, S. & Smith, J. N. (2010). Review of [Alex MacKenzie / The Wooden Lightbox: A Secret Art of Seeing]. *ETC*, (90), 43–43.



ESPACES NÉOMÉDIATIQUES

Montreal

Alex MacKenzie – The Wooden Lightbox: A Secret Art of Seeing

Alex MacKenzie is an artist based in Vancouver, and was the founder and curator of the Edison Electric Gallery of Moving Images, the Blinding Light!! Cinema, and the Vancouver Underground Film Festival.

His practice focuses on various models of expanded cinema and light projection involving the handmade image and performance. In November 2009, he came to the Star and Shadow Cinema, a community-based microcinema that programs films collectively, to present his hand-cranked film performance, *The Wooden Lightbox: A Secret Art of Seeing*. This evening was part of his tour of the British Isles which had Alex running workshops on 16mm handmade emulsion, rayograms, and contact printing, and presenting his work at The Leeds International Film Festival, Cork Film Festival, *no.w.here* in London, and the 7 Inch Cinema in Birmingham, among others. In February and March of 2010, he performed and presented artist talks at Concordia University in Montreal and the Independent Filmmakers Co-operative in Ottawa as part of their Indie filmmaker series, as well as at the Winnipeg Cinematheque.

In a conversation with Zoe Constantinides at Concordia¹, Alex commented that:

“Like any live or moving image experience, the space within which it’s contained can change the shape and quality of the work pretty radically. I have presented work in ancient, relic undercrofts and secret, subterranean basements in France and in the UK, in artists’ loft studios, lovingly constructed or renovated anarchist micro-cinema type spaces, in alternative second-run cinemas, and in official venues at big film festivals[...] Each space brings a particular kind of audience with a particular set of expectations, as well as bringing some indefinable ‘something’ to the piece, and these really play into both the reception of the work and the feeling I have in my presentation of the work. Inspiring spaces are great but inspiring people can make a big difference in a crummy room. [...] A memorable audience for me is an audience that affects, or even infects, the way I’m presenting the work, as well as bringing something to the live process. That doesn’t mean they need to be noisy, reactive, or silent, it just means that there is a quality in the room that is made out of an unspoken collaboration of bodies in space that brings something to the experience for me and hopefully for them. Conversation after the screening might reveal some trace of that collective unconscious, but it really remains, I think, in the experience itself.”

With that thought in mind what follows is a fresh review of the evening at the Star and Shadow Cinema, written by John N. Smith and originally printed in *Kino Bambino*, a small limited edition zine about film in Newcastle upon Tyne (e-mail to: bambinokino@gmail.com).

Alex Mackenzie is a filmmaker in the rawest sense. He takes the basic ingredients of film—gelatin, potassium bromide, silver nitrate, distilled water and acetate strip—to create his own stock which is then shot, dunked by the handful into a processing solution and subsequently shown via a hand-cranked projector at an average speed of about 8 frames per second, all illuminated by a 50-watt bulb.

Whilst this might sound like a recipe for disaster, the production washes, blobs and scratches on the films surface serve to augment the intimacy of its projection, and once acclimatized to this shadowy twilight, the gentle susurros of the projector, together with an echoey ambient soundtrack (played via a mini-disc) subsumes the observer into numinous hinterland of atavistic images.

Within the grey gloaming of his ten or so short chapters, the viewers seem to drift as if in a languid hypnagogic fugue. Fragments of landscape—natural and urban—merge and mesh. A sleeping (?) child turns on a bed; a woman silently articulates a scream—or a song. A magician performs sleight of hand and a horse’s night-mare eye stares unwinkingly at you. We appear to have entered the world in which the spectral shades of Odilon Redon, Francis Bacon, ‘Eraserhead’ and ‘Vampyre’ are abroad.

But Mackenzie is a knowing guide and for those who wish to see them, he has placed some shadowy markers. A bird and a cage sequence casts reference to the zoetrope. The magician opening and closing his hand (done by the beautifully simple expedient of cranking the film backwards and forwards) pays homage to Méliès, while the screaming/singing woman is actually early TV broadcast filmed directly from a laptop screen. Though one does not need to know it, cinemas past, present and potential are subtly conjoined.

You might have ascertained that I liked this performance. You would be wrong. I loved it—this was by far the best thing I witnessed in 2009 and would unhesitatingly recommend all who can to view this extraordinary work.

REVIEW BY JOHN N. SMITH² WITH INTRODUCTION
BY SARAH COOK

Sarah Cook is Canadian and a curator and researcher at the University of Sunderland, UK. Her book, *Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media* (co-authored with Beryl Graham) will be available from MIT Press in 2010.

NOTES

¹ Zoe Constantinides’ full interview with Alex MacKenzie can be found online at: <http://lightbox.mobilemediagallery.org/Interview.pdf>

² John N. Smith, based in Newcastle upon Tyne, is an artists’ technician and occasional publisher of weird fiction in limited editions. <http://www.siderealpress.co.uk/>