



FILM AFTER CINEMA: SANDRA GIBSON AND LUIS RECORDER'S LIGHT SPILL AND MUSEAL MATERIALISM

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This essay explores the moving image installation work of artists Sandra Gibson and Luis Recoder. Gibson and Recoder's work operates at the interstice of structural/materialist film and expanded cinema, addressing the museological fate of film in the expanded arena of the art gallery, as well as challenging notions of a macro-view of the film archive. Gibson and Recoder's 16mm projection installation *Light Spill* (2006) conceptually and materially combines traditions of avant-garde film and newer practices of moving image exhibition in the museum and art space. *Light Spill* employs a modified 16mm projector without a take-up reel or intermittency mechanism, and utilizes discarded, de-accessioned film reels acquired by the exhibition space, which unspool on the floor of the gallery in a snaking, tangling pile that massively accumulates over the course of the exhibition. If a film reel runs out, a gallery attendant spools another reel. If no film is being shown, depending on the

This article is an expansion and revision of a short essay that originally appeared in the exhibition booklet *Light Spill*, UW-Milwaukee Art History Gallery, January 2011; republished in LOLA 1 (August 2011), http://www.lolajournal.com/1/end_of_cinema.html.



amount of film supplied, the projector's light must remain on. The installation, (mounted many times in a variety of art galleries and film venues) operates as a set of instructions, which has both fixed aspects – the projector, the conditions and terms of projection – and contingent components – the variability of the exhibition space, the quantity and nature of film acquired, the duration of the exhibition.

I curated this installation, collaborating with the artists at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Art History Gallery for two weeks in early-2011, during which time I confronted firsthand some of the challenges of exhibiting film projection and the maintenance and stewardship of this work's durational aspects. My subheading "museal materialism" is a bit of a provocation, as in some sense, *Light Spill* moves most overtly against a conception of film as something that can be contained or collected within a museological mode or by a set of preservation practices. Rather, their work elaborates film, as a material and as an object that holds within it both a pedagogical historicity and a perverse futurity, one that challenges permanence. Further, this work's complex iteration of preservative and destructive impulses aligns with an insight of Jacques Derrida's regarding the fundamentally paradoxical nature of the archival drive, which structurally depends on both conservation and annihilation.¹ Materialism is employed here in its multivalent meanings to suggest a number of different strands of aesthetic innovation and philosophical tradition – of materialist filmmaking which aimed to strip cinema to its fundamental base to pose questions of an ontological nature, and of materialism in a philosophical sense, in an attention to the "thingness" of film as recalcitrant object, which both perishes and exceeds its expiration.

Gibson and Recoder come from a tradition of experimental filmmaking – a tradition that prizes the personal, the artisanal, the handmade, the durational and labor intensive,



but also a certain probing examination of what constitutes the film medium, and what defines its limits. As a kind of post-cinematic practice – and by cinema is meant an idea, an ideal, as well as an institutionalized mode in its historicity – Gibson and Recoder, in *Light Spill* and in much of their other work in projection performance and subsequent installation work, explore the basic components and the materiality of film as medium – projector, screen, light, celluloid, and their recombinant capacities. Their work also draws on the legacies of expanded cinema, in which film is folded into a tapestry of other components – performance, sound, light, audience participation. In their live projection performances, Gibson and Recoder utilize a variety of devices to both heighten and mystify the performative act and optical effects of projection – using double projection, along with sprays, gels, crystal and other glass surfaces as mediating materials, exploiting the variability of lens focus, the obtrusive capacity of their hands. Gibson and Recoder use the mechanical and temporal rhythms of the apparatus through and against itself, creating an ethereal and ephemeral post-cinematic experience.

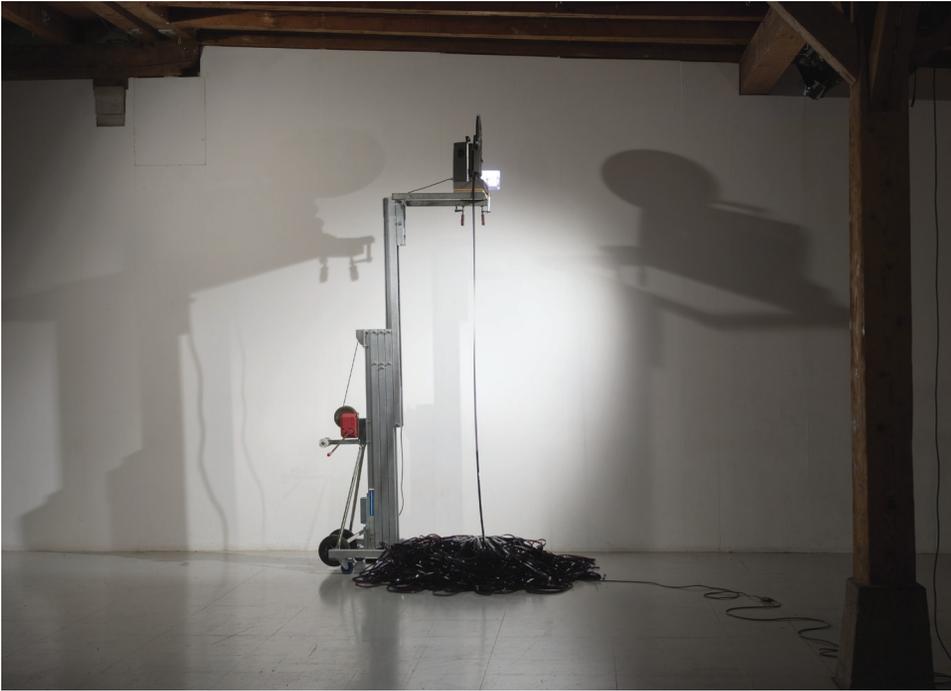
The trace of these performances is left in their installation practice, of which *Light Spill* is its most prominent forebear, and their most exhibited installation. Installation serves to archive an aspect of their performances that remains invisible to them as they perform live, especially when in the projection booth. Installation thus acts as a supplement to the primacy of projection and the screening setting in Gibson and Recoder's work, but also itself confronts the live, performative capacities of projection both exposed and divested of the human actants and labor that shepherd its processual unfolding. As the artists note regarding *Light Spill* in an interview with Ed Halter,



It's like the projectionist left the theater – forgot to reel up the film, and left. It's like our freedom, a version of our freedom. This precious film, that we worked so hard on, that we learned about in school and projected for years— now we just let it go on the floor, like who cares, and just walk away. It's our filmmakers' freedom to walk away... It's a whole letting go.²

Indeed, Gibson and Recoder's installation work asks us to consider the ways in which cinema's history can be refigured itself as a mode of installation. Raymond Bellour, elaborating on moving image installations by a variety of artists suggests something of the sort, stating that installations,

thus also make cinema into a history that exceeds it. The history of installation begins with the invention of the camera obscura and projection, and unfolds through its many different devices (from phantasmagoria to the diorama) throughout the nineteenth century. Cinema can thus be viewed (retrospectively and probably too simply) as an installation that succeeded in capturing for itself alone the energy appropriate to the animated image, dominating it for half a century until the competition of what television has been for so long, namely a 'projection-without-projection.'³



This sense of installation as belatedly reminding us of cinema's spatial, temporal and situational historicity is very actively mobilized by *Light Spill's* scene of what Gibson and Recoder call "performing projection." The interactive components of *Light Spill* are born out each time this work is mounted in a different venue. Like film itself – which in each screening, subtly shifts meaning – the work takes on an iterative, performative, aleatory quality that is dependent on the variables of the location and space chosen, the films acquired and donated for the exhibition, and the specifics of the projection situation. Gibson and Recoder think of this work as an "ongoing open archive." Conceived in 2005, *Light Spill* continues to be installed in various venues internationally (it has shown in TENT in Rotterdam, Pittsburgh Filmmakers Gallery, at the Images Festival in Toronto, the Robischon Gallery in Denver, among many others). So as a traveling work, of instructions as well as collated materials, *Light Spill* accumulates a persistent life of its own, through its transit and ephemeral reconstitution from site to site.

Light Spill's contemporaneity, its currency, is one that insists on the surplus value of the medium's mechanical and materialist base, made all the more poignant in the wake of cinema's evanescence. For the past 15 years, if not longer, the "death of cinema" has been announced, debated and contended with in the film industry, film culture, and film criticism and theory. Pragmatically as well as rhetorically, this declension is dependent on changes in the economics of theatrical exhibition and distribution, on the onerous fate of film preservation, and perhaps, most visibly, in the eclipse of an analog medium with the arrival of digital formats. Film's indexicality, we are told, gives way to the moving image's new status as information and data. Counterfactually, Gibson and Recoder posit cinema's much-mourned decay as coincident with the resolute, stubborn recalcitrance of the film



object's materiality. Their work reminds us that film, even as it draws ever closer to the vagaries of the art gallery and its attendant market, bears both a museological gravity and a radically contemporary weight, in what the artists call "the becoming cinema of art."⁴

Distinguishing between cinema (as institutional practice, ideological frame, immaterial idea) and film (the material object which gives cinema its life, provides its substrate), Gibson and Recoder confront the moving image's historicity through a reassembly of its physical components. With the surgical clarity of vivisection, film's organs – screen, projector, celluloid – are broken down into ever more discreet mechanisms and processes. A series of displacements and relays unfold. A take-up reel is replaced by the floor, converting the film strip into a contingently wending, looping, tangled sculptural form. The institutional location and necessary darkness of the cinema theater is exchanged for the light of the gallery space, a light that overlaps with an image tendered through an unfocused lens, through which the projection of dispossessed films, image fragments, produces a painterly, unfixed, aleatory frame. In place of theater seats, we have a bare space, in which the viewer is free to wander in the round, to pause on whichever detail most compels them amidst the mechanical dramaturgy of the act of projection. The film screen, historically the object of an indubitably immersive spectatorial attention, is both diminished and expanded, substituted with the gallery wall. Thus, the representational contents of the projected image, and, as a consequence, a history of encounter with and a way of relating to that image, is subordinated to the refurbished processes and technical strategies that summon it forth. The de-realized screen pulls us backwards, anachronistically, against teleology, towards another swelling tide. Gibson and Recoder's modified apparatus and installation-performance unveils the "back end" of projection, made suddenly organic, corporeal – another material



substrate exposed. The film strip itself is stripped, slipping, spilling from its previously seamless embrace of the technology which housed it, provided its conventions of exhibition and reception, and once gave it a coherent shape, a distinct place. The spectacle's motility is reallocated, slithering in reverse towards film's disposal and disposability. Film: now a pile of snaking, swirling, luminescent entrails, so much waste matter spit out from the corpus of cinema's invisible archive. Nevertheless, a vibrant refuse that refuses to remain dead.

The conceptual incisiveness and incision, one could say, of this work, emerges in part from its temporal and durational qualities. The multivalent destruction of cinema manifests itself on the abstract and the pragmatic scale, as well as on the felt and experienced scale – in *this* gallery, in *this* specific place, *these particular films* see their last moments of projected, if blurred out, bliss, before expiring. The durational experience of this piece continually operates through a sense of belatedness, modeling different temporalities – archival, mechanical, organic, and photographic, at the level of the extruded frame or visible photogram. In expiring, spilling out, snaking and tangling before us, these films become something else, stubbornly sculptural objects, made for a different kind of lively and vibrant contemplation. The film object's slow slithering extrusion from the back end of the projector contrasts with the inexorably mechanical time of the apparatus, and the sense of frenzied speed of the abstracted projected image. We are suddenly made aware of all that we may have missed in the *temps perdu* of films unfathomably lost, unrecoverable. On the one hand we have the lost time of films unwatched, unseen, unknown, and the shifted temporality of arriving too late. The disaster happened long ago, and we realize we slept through it. On the other hand, we have a gesture towards a time of infinite spilling out, and a historical machine that demands a requisite and singular procession of endless images, moving ever



forward, as it processes and masticates them, unperturbed. Thus, *belatedness*: a certain motion backwards, paradoxically to another (perhaps sideways) understanding of the technical and material properties of film's projection, the film strip's materiality, its channeling of time, its management of duration.

Light, an essential element of motion picture production *and* projection, is multiplied and refracted, illuminating film as the vital remains of a vanishing cinematic ideal. Light cannot contain film, but *spills out*, through film and beyond it. If film spilling entails loss – the nightmare of film preservationists' Sisyphean struggle against the ravages of time on an unfathomable body of unknown films – light spilling invokes an expanded arena of diffusion and admixture, an elasticity regarding what this *thing* called film, after cinema's end, might become. Light, in this sense, can give film new contours, another shape, an alternate flesh. Beyond cinema: an other space opens up, of seeing, feeling, approaching film as ineffable object _ organic and inorganic, obsolete and obdurate.

Gibson and Recoder point to the possible futures of film's incorporation and re-situation in the sphere of the museological, even as their work problematizes questions of storage, preservation, and the archive. In one of their more recent installations, with which I would like to close, the conditions of possibility elaborated by *Light Spill* – of the fundamental autonomous materialism of film as object and projection performance – are pushed further towards another situation of reassembly. In *Loop*, a 35mm strip of celluloid is hung offset from a gallery wall, as an empty 16mm projector casts a white rectangular frame on the wall, and an electric fan provides buoyant motion through mechanized gusts of air. The light of the projector creates both a shadow play and an aleatory surplus of ludic refraction, as the strip's capacity to mirror light creates whipping motions of threaded illumination on



the wall. In this piece, the reanimation of the film strip through an additional immaterial but forceful element, that of air, externalizes the technological motion of the projector towards a more formless but no less aesthetic experience, that of the film strip's escape from the durational and processual function of the projector's time. The operative activity of the projector is reduced to light, and its capacities for motion are extruded, translated by the spinning, spiraling motion of air by the fan, suggesting a pro-filmic scene both before and after cinema – resonant with “the wind in the trees.”⁵ Extending the sculptural capacities and capaciousness of *Light Spill, Loop* doubly re-performs the contingency at the heart of a conception of cinema – rather than the organic metaphor of a spill, the sealed up shape of the loop enacts the precepts of continuous motion, repetition, but produces effects of refraction which appear completely unfixed. This dialectic created between objectness and organicism, between the muteness of a technology and its expressive capacities, here takes the expired waste matter of *Light Spill* and deracinates it further, in a gesture of reduction that attends to both cinema's pastness and its material, film's, eternal return as lively thing, reanimated form.

NOTES

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, translated by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 12.

² Ed Halter, “Interview with Sandra Gibson and Luis Recoder,” in *Live Cinema: A Contemporary Reader*, edited by Thomas Beard (San Francisco: San Francisco Cinematheque, forthcoming), 149.

³ Raymond Bellour, “Of an Other Cinema,” in *Art and the Moving Image*, edited by Tanya Leighton (London: Tate, 2008), 406.

⁴ Sandra Gibson and Luis Recoder, “Artists' Statement,” *Light Spill*, exhibition booklet, UW-Milwaukee Art History Gallery, January 2011, n.p.

⁵ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 60.