

COMMON
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GARETH EVANS Given your work across all incarnations of image media – from photography and installation to short- and long-form work in multiple formats – is the priority this serves to create a continuity in your practice, or does each incarnation play to different aspects of your creative personality?

JEM COHEN I guess it's all different shoes for the same road. The installations take on time and space in a different way than the films. For one thing, multi-screen work gets at a panoramic, fractured feeling that can be a bit closer to travel itself, and travel is a big part of my work. *Buried in Light* (in its installation version) and *CHAIN X THREE* take that on, albeit for different reasons. The former uses film as if it was shortwave radio and could possibly be described as Cubist. In the latter, multiple, simultaneous images underscore the disembodied, generic quality of indistinguishable landscapes. Both use three side-by-side images running in sync. In the best-case viewing scenario, they're journeys with a start and finish. An earlier installation, *Black Hole Radio*, was made for one person at a time and meant to be experienced from beginning to end.

In contrast, the installation versions of *The Coral Sea* and *Notebooks* (both Patti Smith collaborations with dual images and no sync) are constantly remaking themselves as juxtapositions randomly recombined. They're somewhat free of beginnings and endings and so express a very different kind of time.

Diverse formats often lead to different kinds of venues, and that makes a big difference. I liked having *Buried in Light* in a museum because the visitors are somewhat arbitrary—you get passing school groups of all ages, long-term reactions from the museum guards and so on. A museum has a more democratic feel than a gallery and they sometimes provide an infrastructure that allows for things you couldn't do on your own. But being able to show in a museum is very rare.

Since distribution of film in the traditional theatrical sense is also close to impossible, I simply have to explore various ways

to get work out. As Elvis Presley said, "If you can't find a partner, use a wooden chair." I've rarely had theatrical runs—just the limited ones for *Benjamin Smoke* and *Chain*, so I never had the luxury of getting used to them. Very early on, I made work thinking mostly of a single person watching on their television with a VCR. That had its drawbacks, but I liked the potential intimacy and the idea of hijacking television sets. One can have some of that intimacy now, perhaps even more readily, via computers, but low-res quick-time movies on tiny screens surrounded by words or ads just don't cut it.

The still photography is something I started with long, long ago but put on a back burner. I kept taking stills quietly, but only picked it up seriously and publicly again in the past four or five years. Between the longer projects it's been such a blessing at least to be able to finish something. But it took a lot of work for me to feel that the stills were good enough to stand on their own.

Anyhow, I like all the formats and all have to do with documentation, navigation, distillation...

GE The relation to music you have developed is striking and clearly committed, both in terms of the musicians themselves but also in terms of the nature and role of the sonic in relation to the image. In both senses, how do the relationships work? Is there a pattern to what leads a project, or even your entire approach?

JC Listening to music has been a necessity for me: it both puts things into place and shifts them around, knocks them into new perspectives. With live music, I've found that my mind can be encouraged to wander more freely and strangely than it normally does. I get some of my best thinking done at good live shows. I've wondered why films don't do that more often—put one in a heightened mindset where the mind is both occupied

and free. So I had hopes in some ways that the films could be a kind of music. I do believe that films can be that, sometimes to best effect without music actually being in them.

When you conjoin music and moving image on a more literal, traditional soundtrack level, it's a whole different story. As much as I love music, I think there's generally way too much of it in films. So often it's an emotional bludgeon—a directive for how the viewer is supposed to feel at a given moment, a crutch. Sound is so much more powerful than people imagine. I have an ambivalent relationship with music in my own work in that I'm not sure that I don't overuse it myself sometimes. It's a constant struggle to get right, to avoid certain kinds of manipulation of the audience but also to let sound and music have their force; to be rigorous and withholding at times, but then to let go on occasion. It's a realm where I'm always learning, making rules for myself and then breaking them.

Part of that process involves working with musicians that bring different things into play. Working with Godspeed You Black Emperor! was a natural because we had a lot in common politically and also shared an interest in a meeting place between punk and classical. With Fugazi, there was the influence of dub, of breaking things apart and recombining, but returning to a certain driving force. That very much affected the editing. Then there are people like Todd Griffin, with whom I've gotten into a long-term exploration of inventing analogues to real world environments in the studio, combining ambient recordings with delicate use of instruments and loops. And then there's the current work with DJ Rupture and Andy Moor, which has brought me more into both the improv and dance music worlds, through things such as Cumbia and Dubstep. Vic Chesnutt is a person I've collaborated with in many ways over the years. He contributed instrumental music to *Buried in Light* and *Lost Book Found*; he kind of stars in *Empires of Tin*; eventually I produced his *North Star Deserter* record and he wrote a song called *Chain*.

As for filming music being made, well, it's still miraculous to me that humans can make music, so of course I want to document something so integral to human experience but still so inexplicable. And it can be very fleeting. I'm very happy to have the little document of Elliott Smith at work. The relentless build of the Ex playing the song *IP Man* stuns me again every time I see it. I just edited a short of Vic Chesnutt recording vocals, and it's fascinating to see the little details, the way he mouths a word that he doesn't actually sing out loud, the times that his eyes close...

As for touring with musicians, I guess I trade my daily grind for theirs. I like looking out of moving windows, and there's a lot of that.

GE The 'city' is often your palette, your performer and your purpose. Is it right to talk about an 'architecture of consciousness' (and certainly a reverse) in your work?

JC I'm not dedicated to studying architecture *per se*; I always saw it as an embodiment, a mould for states of mind and the broader state of society. We make buildings / environments and they in turn make us. And architecture is often literally the vessel into which power pours itself. I was in Chile recently, so I went to film one of the stadiums where the military dragged people to after the coup in '73, and that building still feels very strange. History soaks into buildings, and films can siphon it back out. But on another level I do simply just love certain buildings as forms, and images can bring us back to their shapes, simplifying their physicality in some way so that they become like children's building blocks set in the landscape. As a child, I liked, and made, dioramas a lot.

The writer Luc Sante and I did a short film collaboration in Tangier, a place which can be fantastically chaotic, and we were wondering why, exactly, we liked it so much and agreed that

there is something about the unplanned city that nothing else can match (of course, New York has lost so much of that quality, and we both mourn that loss, so it made sense that we were thrilled to find it somewhere else).

Great cities are based on unpredictability, on what happens when things are not and cannot be planned—juxtaposition, layering, confusion good and bad; what Walter Benjamin referred to as the ‘shock’ of the crowd... Documentary shares a lot of that ground; finding value in what you can’t control. So good cities make for good documentation, even good narrative, because so many unexpected beautiful and terrible things happen. You really just have to stand around.

GE Do you think you primarily ‘sculpt in time’ or ‘stalk space’? That is, if you want to make a distinction...

JC Film editing brings those two together so that they become inseparable. I’ve come to feel that, especially in the city portraits, my role is a bit like that of an improvisational musician, with the camera as a kind of instrument and the world itself a series of forces to react to, but primarily from the gut and on the spur of the moment. This work on the street could be parallel to the way the musician reacts to sounds made by his band, the vibe of the audience, the sonics of the room and so on. The key in both cases is to let go just enough so that reactions are fluid and somewhat fearless, while holding onto some guiding framework, some way of ‘playing’ that your experience has led you to. When editing is going really well, it too brings back that sense of play and musicality. One shot becomes a call and the next, a response, and it’s both time and space that are reacting.

GE In your work, do you think you are a witness or do you intervene? Or both?

JC Witnessing can be, I hope, an intervention. In the early days of making *Lost Book Found*, which were before I took the plunge into the work of Walter Benjamin, I was instinctively groping for a form that would encourage a kind of dream-state in the viewer. I wanted to understand not only my limited experience as a pushcart vendor, but Capitalism itself, which was too abstract and distant as taught in university or vaguely alluded to on the news. I felt there was a dream-state aspect to it and my instinct was to reveal one dream-state by making another. So I was grappling with that on an internal, non-academic level.

Then, when I discovered Benjamin and he was quite explicit about this phenomenon and this way of working, it tore my head off. This was a process that continued, maybe even more explicitly, with *Chain*. I felt we all tended to stop seeing the modern world in its actuality, especially as the world becomes more generic. Its terrors are often very banal and therefore easier to take for granted, to ignore and write off. So I wanted to insist that we focus on what was happening to the landscape; to force myself, and then the viewers, to look hard at all of this nothingness that isn’t nothingness at all because it’s also eradication.

After they put in the big box stores, even if they fail, you don’t get the forest or the field or even the small businesses back. You just get parking lots and shells of what was there. Now, these places can have their strange beauty, but it’s hardly a replacement for what was there before. I wanted that act of filmic seeing to be an intervention. With film you can at least temporarily hold captives. Some do walk out, of course.

Films like *Little Flags* and *Empires of Tin* take on, even more literally, political matters and a critique of historical, nationalist repetition. They’re not my most subtle works, occasionally tipping into anger. I guess they are all mourning films—in *Flags*, for parades as innocent events, and in *Empires* for our seeming inability to break out of the loop of militarism. I don’t like to preach to the converted, so hopefully there’s enough going on that remains ambiguous or unexpected or even (darkly) funny

in this work, but witnessing is still the key.

GE Is there a pattern to the way in which a given work will originate? Is it an idea, a text, a place, a piece of music that seeds the assembly and framing of particular footage from your ever-making archive?

JC No pattern really, except that I often work backwards, out of the image, rather than creating images to fulfill a given story. I like to wander, and what I find leads me someplace and refines what I'll shoot next and maybe what I'll write as a text, and so on. You could describe it as 'echo-location' instead of scripting.

Some of the work could be triggered by something in a poem or even a painting. Painting is a big influence. But usually things originate more in a kind of drifting through the world via which the spiral of work narrows in or opens out. Of course, I am attracted to particular kinds of places more than others. I am especially partial to older museums and less gentrified cities, and to people watching. The New York subway remains an endlessly vivid parade of possible films.

GE You are rightly known for advocacy in your work—of performers and makers, but also of an underlying democracy and justice in production, distribution, exhibition and reception? Given the culture we find ourselves in, the latter increasingly demands more and more of one's attention. Have you resolved this tension between production and defence in your own working life?

JC No, I haven't resolved it at all. Sometimes I think I spend too much time defending, critiquing, being angry or frustrated, when what I really want and need to do most is to make films or pictures. Then again, it does seem that the simplest possibilities

for making and showing work are increasingly endangered, so one has to fight. And the ongoing digital makeover / takeover / whatever means a whole new realm to have to get a grip on; new possibilities and new threats. It's all very hard to comprehend, much less balance. (I've written my 'Double Anchor' essay over and over, and still find it wanting). I find myself wanting; I talk about how we need to get out and support each other's work, but I rarely go out and see new films, much less gallery shows or theatre or dance, so I occasionally find my own advocacy to be a little hollow.

Mostly, it's just hard not to feel swamped these days. E-mail and publicity / distribution and that sort of thing (not to mention making the rent) are incredibly draining. The damned internet is both too interesting and too dull for its own good and that pulls us way too much into the small screen.

Then again, there are times, as with the case of recent repressive street photography regulations in New York, when the defence part became crucial and I had to follow through via literally fighting City Hall. Petitions, meetings, press releases. That kind of activism can be pretty uncomfortable for me, but it was simply necessary. I'm still shocked that we more or less won that battle.

All that said, there are times when basic acts of committed looking or exchange or making become all the more thrilling for their relative scarcity. And if the witnessing and intervention can be conjoined, it follows that production and defence can actually be one and the same, which is really nice.

GE It might be said that you belong to the honourable lineage of diary film-makers, in which the life and the image are not only inseparable but are even perhaps the same single space. If this is so, are you at ease with this state of affairs?

JC Yes and no. There is a seemingly eternal assumption / cri-

tique surrounding the notion that by documenting life one isn't really living it. I don't really believe that, although it is true that sometimes one gathers life in now so that it can be re-distributed later and in that gathering time there can be a level of necessary remove. "Cast a cold eye," said Yeats. I think it's one of the greatest things an artist has ever said, but I doubt it would have won him many friends in his lifetime. It's no accident that it's an epitaph.

I do believe in a 'zen' of recording, wherein the act of making can be very much a fully connected part of life. Jean Rouch spoke about filming in such a way that the camera itself becomes a tool, which pulls the filmmaker into a kind of cine-trance, in which looking and documenting and interacting are all intertwined, instinctive, inseparable. That said, the work is obsessive, with concomitant perils.

I have loved the tradition of certain diaristic filmmakers, Mekas and others, but maybe I loved it best when it was somewhat limited by the material, when precious celluloid forced a certain distillation into the habit. Now that everyone is constantly taking pictures with cell phones and astonishingly countless digital files are piling up everywhere, it becomes harder to find the same kind of value and values in both the act and results. That saddens me a bit, but hey, I can be a little old-fashioned.

GE To a regular viewer of your work, it seems that you occupy perhaps four territories—often simultaneously. New York, music, the zones of the international (both the sympathetic and the imposed) and the space of the moving image itself. Where are you happiest?

JC I don't think I feel happier in any one. Maybe it's really one zone. The happiness is the making, something about the act of seeing coupled with gathering it in some form that can be re-distributed. I like the way that I stop thinking when the shoot-

ing is going well. And I like seeing how things turn out.

Well, maybe there is a special place for the international because then vision automatically has that newness to it, whereas in domestic places that one knows well, one has to struggle a bit to get back to that.

GE Because you have been filming for 25 years, you have as a result created an archive of great resonance and importance, especially in the holding of what is gone, or has been taken, and the deliberately disappeared, whether in the Latin dictatorial sense of human erasure or the systemic globalised toppling of established and experiential spaces. Is this a clear part of your intention for film?

JC I recently did a live one-off screening and presentation called *Film and Filing Cabinet, Curse and Blessing*. The archive makes for freedom and creative possibility in that one grows a forest in which one can wander and re-discover and re-combine for many years. But it simultaneously hangs over one's head as an ever-increasing weight that can't be properly taken care of, much less data-based. Just the relentless turnover in video and digital formats makes things so hard to keep up with, to keep safe and accessible. And sometimes it is probably better just to move on, to go forwards rather than constantly cycling back. So, I have mixed feelings about working in and from an archive. But it's what I've done.

GE At the same time, your work also makes a great argument for the necessity and value of the 'unseen', especially in marginalised human communities and interactions, and in the fugitive values of a warmer, more graceful order. In this way you seem to approach the centre – especially in your critique of political power and its abuses – from the edge, from power's ripple and

fallout, from where it ends, in the rubble. Is this a fair assessment?

JC Yes, it's a fair assessment. I love ephemeral things a lot, and unrecognised things, and seemingly marginal things and the work that has been done around them. Take Helen Levitt's photographs of children's chalk drawings or Hugh Tracey's African recordings or the cheap bags of postage stamps you find in coin shops. And as far as the rubble goes, let's be honest, the rubble is often the most beautiful place—a glimpse of a caryatid here, a bit of grass growing up through a supermarket facade, the old Ozymandias of Egypt bit about the distance to which the mighty fall, revealed in the wreckage. We now know that the details of the seemingly most mundane, the slag heaps in which anthropologists follow the evolution of pottery through shards, the seeds in the mummy's stomach that reveal what people lived off of, those things become much more telling than just following the big stories of the 'important' people.

GE If you had been denied access to the making of the image 25 years ago, what might you have done?

JC I hope I would have found a way into music or writing. No, good writing is too hard.

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GARETH EVANS is an independent curator, editor, writer and critic. He edits the international moving image journal *Vertigo* (www.vertigomagazine.co.uk) and co-edits the new cross arts magazine *Artesian* (www.gotogetherpress.com).

He has curated many film / mixed media seasons, including *John Berger: Here Is Where We Meet* (2005, www.johnberger.org) and *All Power to the Imagination! 1968 and Its Legacies* (2008, www.1968.org.uk).

He has recently been awarded one of five major Break-through Grants by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (www.phf.org.uk) for his new three year project *The Re-Enchantment*, developing artists' responses to place and its meanings across the UK. This will manifest as a national programme of original commissions from July 2010 – June 2011 (www.artevents.info).

JEM COHEN is a New York-based filmmaker whose works are built from his own ongoing archive of street footage, portraits and sound recordings.

Cohen's films have won widespread acclaim, having been selected for festivals across the world and won numerous prizes. His feature film *Chain*, which premiered at the Berlin Film Festival, was also broadcast internationally; and *Instrument*, a feature-length documentary made with the band Fugazi, was chosen for the 2000 Whitney Biennial. *Lost Book Found* won 1st prizes at Locarno, the Bonn Videonale and others. His work has also been the subject of retrospectives worldwide, including at the National Film Theatre and Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen.

Cohen has worked extensively with musicians, from Godspeed You Black Emperor! to Fugazi, Vic Chesnutt, the Ex, Elliott Smith and R.E.M.