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Avid Eyes

Masterworks from American Avant-garde Experimental Film (1920–1970)

November 12 - December 18, 2015 - 7:00 p.m.

Film and Video

Avid Eyes is an anthology of experimental American cinema curated by researcher Bruce Posner, who also oversaw the landmark film series *Unseen Cinema*, held in the Museo Reina Sofía in 2006. *Avid Eyes* features a selection of 37 recently remastered films that introduce the multiple pathways traced by American avant-garde cinema between 1920 and 1970.

According to Walter Benjamin, the viewer accesses their “optical unconscious” through the functions of the eye and the camera’s ability to capture and pinpoint something transparent, invisible or elusive in everyday life. For Benjamin, this is



the basic experience of cinema, based on the fascination it produces, and one of the driving forces behind avant-garde cinema across the 20th century. At the core of experimental film a search for responses to these agitations of the eye are discerned, a desire to transcend reality – this eye, conceived as the visual organ belonging to a hungry and non-conformist viewer, determines the films that make up this series.

The selection centres on the productions of different generations of film-makers working out of the United States, where the early reception of the avant-garde and its transformation into *outsider* film converges with classical cinema, albeit whilst moving in the opposite direction. The 1920s mark the start of the programme, and the 1960s its end point and the advent of video practices and the subsequent reframing of specific roles in the medium of film. The productions in this series express concepts, feelings, moods and productions of intellect in absolute visual terms, and all have diverse principles in common: a recurrence to poetry as a model, the use of visual tools, the rejection of a narrative thread, the challenge to temporal logic and, above all, the mode of production and personal distribution.

Just as poetry feeds prose without disappearing altogether, these films reflect the resistance of a series of film-makers who were aware they were clutching an instrument of thought. In hindsight, Maya Deren would write: “I thought about how interesting it would be to use film differently. Until then, it had been used as if it were a novel telling a story, or as a documentary. Between those two poles there was nothing, and I wanted to use film as a poetic medium [...]”. Thus, the murmurings from César Vallejo’s poetry becomes apparent, and runs through the whole series: “Avid eyes, but from poetry!”.

└ Maya Deren. *Meshes of the Afternoon*. Film, 1943. Courtesy of Filmmakers Showcase



Itinerary

CGAI-Filmoteca de Galicia (February 4 - February 25, 2016).

TABAKALERA (San Sebastian) (January 15 - February 19, 2016)

Curatorship

Bruce Posner

Programa

Actividad pasada November 12 and December 5, 2015 - 7:00 p.m.

The 1920s

Presentation of the film series by Bruce Posner (video conference)

Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand. *Manhatta*. 11'41". 1920-21. 1^a version with the Donald Sosin orchestra

Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy. *Ballet mecánico*. 15'53". 1923-24

Rose Sélavy a.k.a. Marcel Duchamp. *Anémic Cinéma*. 6'40". 1924-25

Robert Florey and Slavko Vorkapich. *The Life and Death of 9413-A Hollywood Extra*. 13'20". 1927

Robert Florey. *Skyscraper Symphony*. 8'53". 1929

Duración: 55 minutes

Early avant-garde cinema was torn between fetishistic enthusiasm and scepticism towards the industrial and technological progress in the aftermath of World War One. This cinema finds one of its central objects in the modern city, conceived as an organism of precise operation – resulting in the birth of the urban symphony. Manhattan juts out as the prototype of this utopian metropolis, for instance in *Manhatta* and *Skyscraper Symphony*. The combination of fascination and perplexity is also unveiled in the arrival of European avant-garde aesthetics: the sense of mechanistic comicality in *Ballet mécanique*, the tragic parody of the urban landscape and the anti-hero in *The Life and Death of 9413*, or, more

conceptually, the inquiries into language and the vision set out by Marcel Duchamp in *Anémic Cinéma*.

Film and Video

 Sabatini Building, Auditorium

Actividad pasada November 13 and December 6, 2015 - 7:00 p.m.

The 1930s

Ralph Steiner. *Mechanical Principles*. 10'18". 1930

Jay Leyda. *A Bronx Morning*. 14'05". 1931

J.S. Watson, Jr., Melville Webber, Alec Wilder, Remsen Wood and Bernard O'Brien. *Lot in Sodom*. 25'53". 1930-32

Emlen Etting. *Poem 8*. 19'40". 1932-33

Oskar Fischinger. *An Optical Poem*. 7'02". 1937

Joseph Cornell. *Thimble Theatre*. 6'07". 1938-1968

Duration: 83 minutes

A greater expansion of avant-garde ideas defined the experimental cinema of the thirties as it refined and expanded what had been passed on from the previous decade. The legacy of the urban symphony took on a more poetic and intimate side in films like *A Bronx Morning*. The predominance of rhythms and song from the machine age were once again present in Ralph Steiner's *Mechanical Principles*, whereas films like *Poem 8* and *Lot in Sodom* augmented

choreographies of sensual or openly sexual bodies. With the aim of giving shape to mental images, Oskar Fischinger explored the expressive capacities of the medium through exclusively abstract references, while an interest in decontextualising quintessential collage images led Joseph Cornell to deploy a combination of found footage cinema and surrealist strategies alloyed with alien materials, between a fascination in performance and child-like nostalgia.

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 Sabatini Building, Auditorium

Actividad pasada November 19 and December 9, 2015 - 7:00 p.m.

The 1940s

Mary Ellen Bute and Ted Nemeth. *Tarantella*. 4'24". 1940

Rudy Burckhardt. *The Pursuit of Happiness*. 8'09". 1940

Francis Lee. *1941*. 4'. 1941

Maya Deren and Alexander Hackenschmied. *Meshes of the Afternoon*. 13'46". 1943

Maya Deren. *Meditation on Violence*. 12'27". 1948

Helen Levitt, Janice Loeb and James Agee. *In the Street*. 16'50". 1945-1952

Duration: 59 minutes

Over the course of the 1940s, some films fell back into the autonomy of the image and into worlds created inside it. Musical orchestration and abstract forms built the cornerstone of

Tarantella, while *Meshes of the Afternoon* demonstrates the endurance of automatism in film. *The Pursuit of Happiness* sees the metropolis reflected as a space of chance encounters and the search for meaning in each apparently free individual through consumption and the alienation that confined urban symphonies in the preceding years. The USA's emergence in the Second World War shrouded a large part of avant-garde cinema productions, loading them with violence: *1941* recreates the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, for instance. The directors of *In the Street* unequivocally place the New York neighbourhood Harlem between the battlefield and the theatre, imbuing it with the aesthetics of street photography. More explicit violence is displayed in the camera-director-performance choreography that unfurls in *Meditation on Violence*.

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 Sabatini Building, Auditorium

Actividad pasada November 20 and December 11, 2015 - 7:00 p.m.

The 1950s

James Broughton. *Four in the Afternoon*. 14'. 1950-51

Mary Ellen Bute and Ted Nemeth. *Abstronic*. 5'45". 1952

Kenneth Anger. *Eaux d'Artifice*. 12'57". 1953

Ian Hugo. *Bells of Atlantis*. 9'27". 1952-53

Jim Davis. *Evolution*. 8'01". 1954

Hy Hirsh. *Gyromorphosis*. 6'40". 1954

Marie Menken. *Hurry, Hurry.* 4'27". 1957

Francis Thompson. *N.Y., N.Y.* 15'10". 1949-1958

Duration: 75 minutes

The fifties ebbed and flowed between two poles: on one extreme, the persistence and enrichment of abstract experiments that spanned *Abstronic*, *Evolution*, *Gyromorphosis* and *N.Y, N.Y.*, and on the other, the playfulness and ritual of erotic desire present in *Four in the Afternoon* and *Eaux d'Artifice*, where water takes on an abstract and oneiric role. In *Bells of Atlantis* the mythopoeic references, akin to an exercise in automatic confessional writing, operate as an exploration into subconscious and intrauterine recollections. The interplay between organicism and abstraction reappear, once again with an undercurrent of desire in *Hurry, Hurry!* as microscopic images of sperms are juxtaposed with others from men anxiously seeking a sexual partner.

Film and Video

 Sabatini Building, Auditorium

Actividad pasada November 26 and December 17, 2015 - 7:00 p.m.

The 1960s

Hilary Harris. *9 Variations on a Dance Theme.* 12'39". 1966-67

Bruce Baillie. *Castro Street (The Coming of Consciousness).* 9'59". 1966

Owen Land [George Landow]. *Film That Rises to the Surface of Clarified Butter.* 8'26".
1968

Jonas Mekas. *Walden: Diaries, Notes and Sketches.* [Extracto] 13'05". 1969

Lawrence Jordan. *Our Lady of the Sphere.* 9'14". 1969

PeUnnamed Film

Duration: 53 minutes

The sixties shared a common reduced narration and an awareness that turned towards actions giving rise to explorations into elements from the film medium. *9 Variations on a Dance Theme* underscores the camera movements that set a specific artistic language in motion, in this case dance. *Film That Rises to the Surface of Clarified Butter* reiterates the animator's gesture to return to the metaphor surrounding the misleading relationship between the two-dimensional reality of film and the real world. The multiple superimpositions in *Castro Street (The Coming of Consciousness)* and the continual tracking shot reveal a walker in a paralysed industrial landscape. The fragment from *Walden: Diaries, Notes and Sketches* focuses on simple and immediate experiences from the snapshots of Jonas Mekas's lived moments. The recovery of an aesthetic of surrealist appropriation turns *Our Lady of the Sphere* into a deliberately illegible tale between sci-fi, the world of children's fantasy and dreams. The session concludes with an unexpected and surprising film alluding to how experimental film has previously been exhibited.

Film and Video

 Sabatini Building, Auditorium

Actividad pasada November 27 and December 18, 2015 - 7:00 p.m.

The 1970s

Tom Palazzolo. *Love it / Leave it.* 14'07". 1970

Lawrence Janiak. *DL2 (Disintegration Line #2).* 11'46". 1970

Amy Greenfield. *Transport.* 5'43". 1970

Bruce Posner. *Sappho and Jerry, Pts. 1-3.* 5'35". 1977-78

Francis Lee. *Ch'an.* 6'08". 1983

Phil Solomon and Stan Brakhage. *Seasons...* 16'00". 2002

Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand. *Manhatta.* 11'41". 1920-21, 2^a version with soundtrack by Wolfe and Carluzzo

Duration: 70 minutes

The development of video and its popularisation in the seventies pushed experimental film to look at its own nature. Similarly, the new socio-political climate in the USA in the era of protests surfaced in films such as *Love it / Leave it*, an essay on patriotism and consumption. The focus shifts towards the film medium located at the heart of *DL2 (Disintegration Line #2)*, based on abstract animations, while *Transport* returns to the idea of human choreography. In *Sappho and Jerry*, Bruce Posner reverts to the strategy of alteration in found footage, contrasting his own film-making practice with his work restoring the landmark *Manhatta*. The session ends with three films from outside the chronological timeframe that enter into dialogue between the past and present in experimental cinema: Francis Lee's *Cha'an*, in which a film treatment intensifies the aquatic quality of ink paintings by the film-maker and implies the reappearance of cinema-poetry; Phil Solomon's film *Seasons...*, which recovers and reactivates the film painted and torn by Stan Brakhage; and the aforementioned *Manhatta*.

Film and Video

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