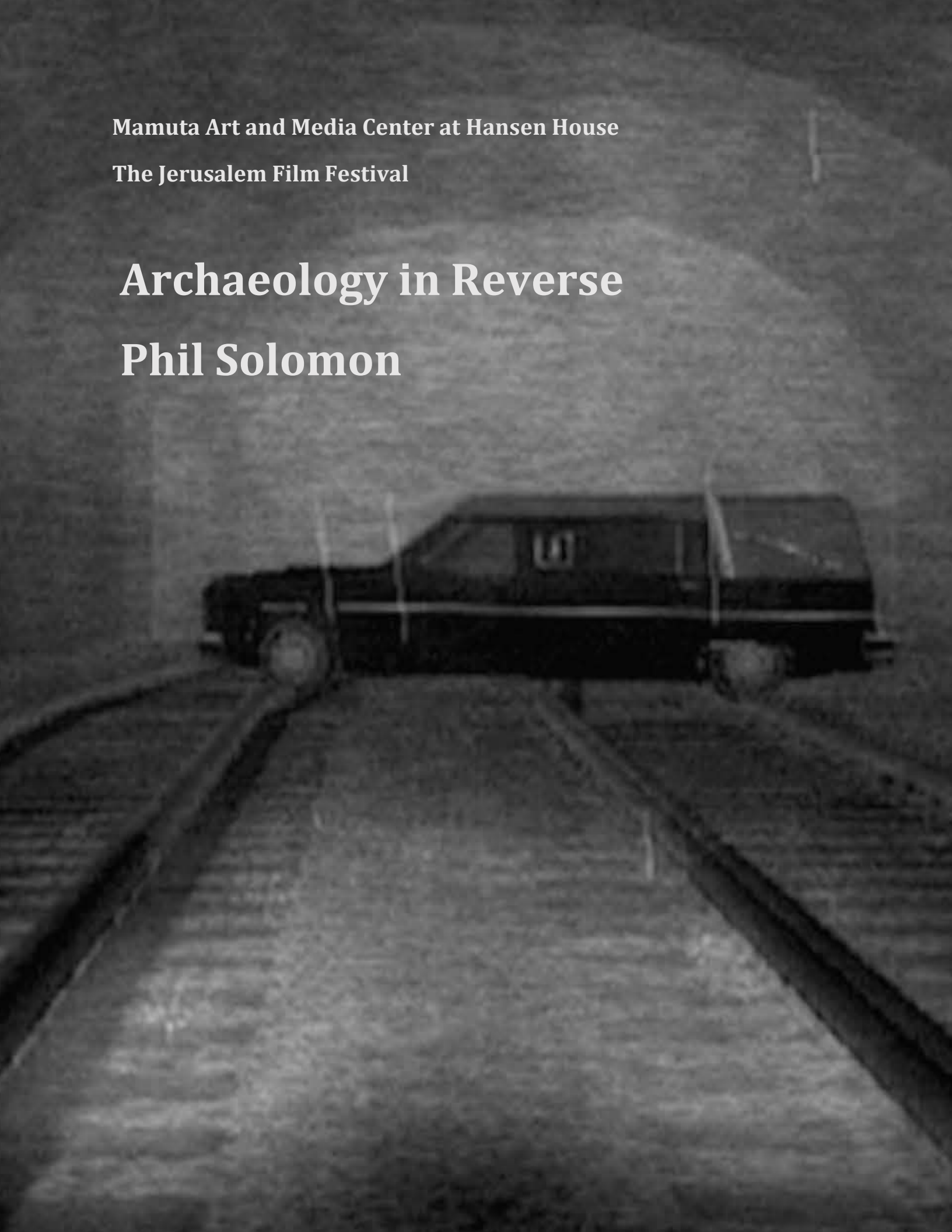


Mamuta Art and Media Center at Hansen House

The Jerusalem Film Festival

Archaeology in Reverse

Phil Solomon



Mamuta Art and Media Center

**Intersections Program, Jerusalem Film
Festival**

**Hansen House for Art, Technology and
Design**

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Archaeology in Reverse, Phil Solomon

Mamuta at Hansen House

July-August, 2015

Guest Curator: Hava Aldouby

Artistic Directors: Sala-manca Group

Production & Design: Sala-manca

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Sala-Manca (Lea Mauas, Diego Rotman)

PREFACE

A year ago, as part of the 2014 Jerusalem International Film Festival, Mamuta opened up its exhibition spaces to the beautiful exhibit of the iconic Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman, who created a site-specific installation and presented a work-in-progress screening of her film *De la mère au désert*. Akerman's installation dealt with the desert and created an infinite journey into the tunnels of Mamuta's exhibition spaces. For this year's film festival, we invited Hava Aldouby to curate an exhibit of works by the leading American avant-garde artist, Phil Solomon, including a screening of his experimental films.

It is not coincidental that Phil Solomon's new exhibition finds its place in what were once the patients' rooms of Jerusalem's leper's hospital. The staff of the Leprosarium Jesus Hilfe, or the Hansen Government Hospital, treated patients whose skin and subsequently their limbs were affected by the disease. During their treatment, the hospital shielded the lepers from public exposure. Solomon, a key artist working in the treatment of film as material, has dealt for years with celluloid as "skin"; he views the filmic material as a means for processing or altering meaning and creating new aesthetic and visual interpretations. Much like the nurses at the leper's hospital, Solomon deals with the sensitive and fragile film surface, or "skin" —striving, much like the nurses, to create a new reality. Solomon intervenes in the body of the image decontextualizing it in order to create a new poetic truth; the nurses and doctors at Hansen did this in an attempt to treat,

to alleviate, and to cure; in both cases there exists the constant tension between the darkness of the chamber and paradise.

Among the works exhibited is a series of films in which Solomon departs from his treatment of the physical filmic material (celluloid) to explore a different sort of spatial reality, namely, the virtual reality of gaming. Here, too, we can find a possible analogy between the history of the hospital and Solomon's work: the building, which originally functioned as a hospital, is transformed into a place of artistic creation and exhibition.

The hospital, much like the urban geography of the popular video game *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA), are no longer protected spaces; they undergo a process of liberation or change of designation. In a way, Solomon "cures" the game's virtual space from the rules of gaming itself. He creates poetic paths that defy the paths fixed in advance by the programmers, and transforms the consumer experience into a subversive creative one.

Hava Aldouby

A FILMMAKER IN THE WORLD OF GAMING: PLACE AND NON-PLACE IN PHIL SOLOMON'S CINEMA

Phil Solomon was born in New York in 1954, a third-generation Jewish-American of Russian origin. His father served in the US army and fought in Europe in WWII. Solomon's extended family was part of the move from the city to the suburbs, and he spent his childhood in Monsey, New York. Solomon describes the socio-cultural experience of growing up in a neighborhood comprised almost entirely of the children and grandchildren of immigrants, as a basically comfortable one. In public school a sometimes tense but mutually inquisitive coexistence prevailed, between the majority of Jewish children who were born in NYC and moved to the suburbs, and a diversity of Italian, African-American and Latino middle-class suburban kids.¹

In 1971 Solomon applied to college at SUNY Binghamton. With no prior training apart from his amateur interest in film and television, he began studying in the university's recently founded film department, headed by leading figures in the American avant-garde movement of

the period, including Ken Jacobs, Saul Levine, and Peter Kubelka. After his formative encounter with the practice and aesthetics of experimental cinema, and with what was known at the time as "art film," Solomon went on to earn a master's degree from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston. The periods during and immediately following his studies were marked by a feverish intellectual searching, nourished by the spirit of the times and fueled among other things by light drugs, which was also characteristic of the time. "I was late to the Sixties, so I had my Sixties in the Seventies... I caught just the tail end of it," he says.

From 1991 and to this day, Phil Solomon has been a professor of film at the University of Colorado Boulder, where he became a colleague and close friend of Stan Brakhage (1933-2003), one of the pillars of the American poetic avant-garde. Solomon's works are presented regularly at leading festivals and museums in and outside of the United States, including the New York Film Festival, the Ann Arbor Film Festival, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Biennial of American Art, the Tate Modern, the London Film Festival, the Rotterdam International Film Festival, the Hong Kong International Film Festival, and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all of the biographical information and citations from the artist that appear in this article are taken from an interview conducted by the author during a research stay with the artist August 13-24, 2015. A research stay in Boulder was made possible thanks to the support of *Da'at Ha-Makom* (ICORE) - Center for the Study of Cultures of Place in Jewish Modernity.

“Archaeology in Reverse,” 1985-2005

“I’m something of an archaeologist in reverse: I try to discover truths in these artifacts by throwing the dirt back on them. I bury things rather than excavate them.”²

From the late 1980s to the early 2000s, during which time Solomon evolved as an independent experimental artist, he developed the style that would become the hallmark of his filmic oeuvre. He made extensive use of optical printing (i.e. re-

photography of existing films using an optical printer), enhanced by optical manipulations that alter the original, sometimes beyond recognition. The footage he uses ranges from home movies to well-known commercial films. Manipulating the light projected through the film in the optical printer, Solomon achieves, at times, an almost complete abstraction of the image, as in figure 1, taken from his film *The Secret Garden* (1988).

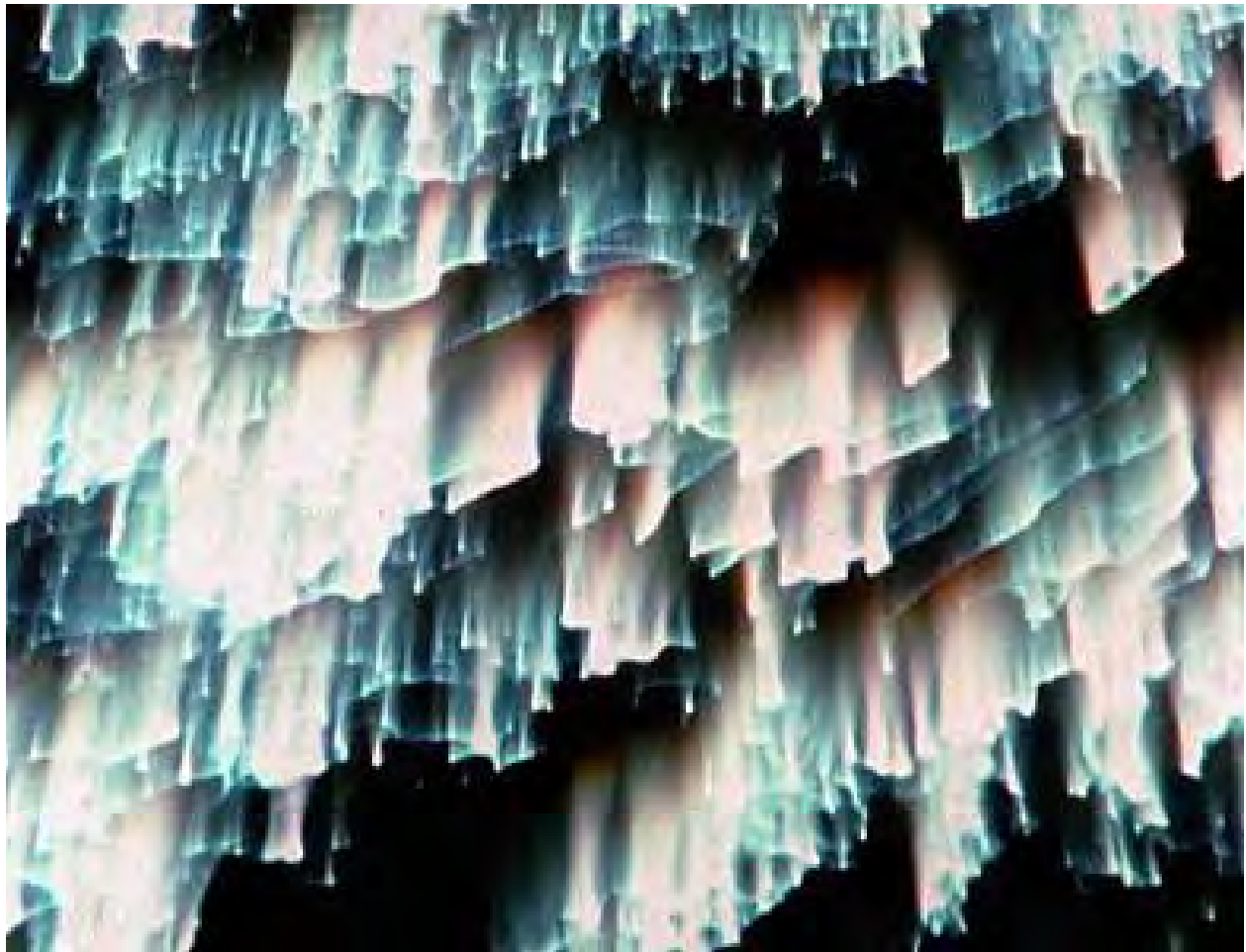


Figure 1: *The Secret Garden*, 1988. 16 mm, silent, 17:30 min.

² Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 219-220.

In the mid-90s, Solomon discovered a method of treating film using a chemical formula that dissolves the emulsion and thus radically affects the photographed image. His virtuosity in controlling the optical and chemical manipulation is evident in the work *American Falls* (2002-2010) (figure 2). This enables Solomon to treat the photographed image as a painting, controlling the texture and shading. Images appear and disappear on the screen in a matter of seconds, swallowed into what looks like volcanic

magma. Solomon emphasizes that *American Falls*, an epic work in terms of the quantity of embedded cinematic materials and sound layers, does not constitute a nostalgic look upon American history, nor upon its reflection in the cinema. His treatment of these materials is suffused with irony, and even anxiety, at what he sees as the corruption of the American ethos of social justice and democracy. (This theme is expanded upon in the interview with the artist published in this catalogue.)

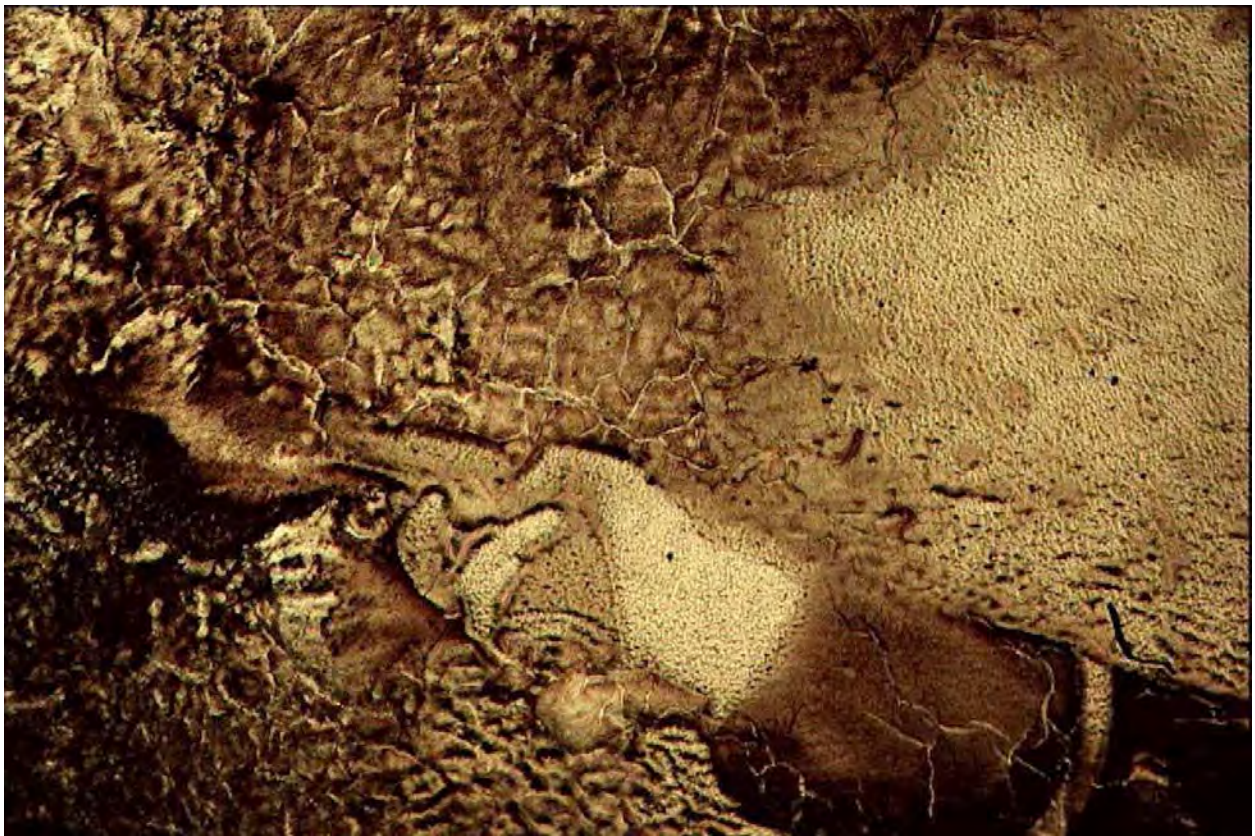


Figure 2: *American Falls*, 2010. Three-channel video installation, color, sound, 56 min.

"I'm something of an archaeologist in reverse," says Solomon in reference to his decomposition of images. "I bury things rather than excavate them." In the work, *The Snowman* (1995), he re-photographs mold-affected home movies. Using only lighting, with no chemical treatment in this case, he enhances the breakdown of the damaged film. A child of about three years old plays in the snow using a small shovel. The boy appears eleven times throughout the film, each time flickering on the screen for a few seconds and then being swallowed into a field of what looks like "erased" film (figure 3). As the figure escapes our grasp, the film itself seems to grab the viewer through a powerful suggestion of tactility, elicited by the strange texture of moldy emulsion on the film's surface. Thus, while the image is no longer legible, its suggestive quality is enhanced. It primarily arouses and challenges the tactile sensibility, through the thick prickly texture of the surface.



Figure 3: *The Snowman*, 1995. 16 mm, sound, 8:30 min.

Solomon conceives of *The Snowman* as a "Kaddish" (the Hebrew prayer of mourning) for his father, inlaying into the soundtrack a muffled and distant echo of a sound recording from a memorial service held in the father's honor. The

pain of loss and the elusiveness of memory are evident in his treatment of the cinematic materials. And yet, the attempt to bury the figure in matter, in the crumbling emulsion, may be associated with a desire to re-grasp the presence that has slipped away and disappeared. Paradoxically, through the burial it becomes charged with a sense of material existence, albeit at the expense of a certain loss of semiotic power. While it is no longer possible to identify the image, the feeling of material presence strikes the senses with all its force.

Archaeology is anchored in time and place. Solomon, the self-described "archaeologist in reverse," treats the celluloid films to create an uncanny sense of time and place, embedded with an unfamiliar set of rules. The viewer can no longer find his or her orientation within the space; the experience of place becomes dynamic and fluid; fragments into a single scene are looped to create a circular movement of cinematic time. The layers of images and the melted emulsion pile up, inviting the viewer on an archaeological quest the depths of memory. Except that Solomon's "reverse" archaeology heightens the presence of memory precisely at the moment in which the images disappear from view. It is precisely at that moment that the presence becomes more perceived and palpable, through the appeal to the viewer's senses.

Filmmaking in Non-Places

Only very rarely does Solomon set out to film directly in the outside world. Rather, he privileges the distancing achieved by looking through the lens of the optical printer at found materials. "In my cinematic work I can risk being more vulnerable than I could in the outside

world,” Solomon says, noting that he is reluctant to place his camera in public spaces or facing real people. “I don’t like to be seen,” he says in the interview published in this catalogue, further noting that *place* for him is fundamentally a mental concept.

In his filmic works, Solomon rarely represents any concrete or identifiable place. *The Secret Garden* (1988) is an ethereal place in which fragments from a home movie documenting the artist’s sister in their childhood flicker alongside treated excerpts from a subtitled French version of *The Secret Garden* (Fred Wilcox, 1949), and from Dorothy’s journey across time and place in *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939). The layers upon layers of treated images hint at an Eden of childhood, a topos of longing for an elusive and eternally unattainable state of rest (Figure 4). Towards the end of the film, the flicker intensifies. The viewer’s gaze is at once drawn into the flickering world on the screen, and powerfully repelled from it, to the point of physical discomfort. “Just like the Burning Bush, Solomon says, “God would be so beautiful that you couldn’t look at [it], you could go blind... I wanted that, like you were forbidden from looking at this... An expulsion, a literal expulsion, a visual expulsion.” The biblical scene of the Burning Bush, where one would be powerfully drawn to look but banned from approaching, is thus associated with the Expulsion from the Garden. Solomon invokes two biblical scenes that seem to occur in a virtual place, where God is present alongside Man.



Figure 4: *The Secret Garden*, 1988. 16 mm, silent, 17:30 min.

In *American Falls*, Solomon appropriates a scene from Buster Keaton’s film, *One Week* (1920), where Keaton struggles with a do-it-yourself construction kit, attempting to erect a house for his bride and himself. The makeshift house, conspicuously lacking stable foundations, sways and spins in the wind, while the people inside are violently tossed around. Solomon transforms Keaton’s scene through optical and chemical manipulation, turning it into a 2:30 minute drama, multiplied across the work’s triple projection scheme. Embedding a sound recording of Kate Smith singing *God Bless America* (ca. 1938), Solomon has the phrase “My home, sweet home” signal the beginning of this bitterly ironical treatment of Keaton’s comic tribulations. A shadow of instability, uncertainty, and anxiety, is cast upon *home* and *homeland*. By privileging optical printing and chemical distortion, Solomon places a mediating, protective veil through which he negotiates a sense of foreignness and vulnerability, expressed as a longing for The Garden.

In Memoriam (Mark LaPore, 1952-2005), 2007-2009

In 2005, Solomon set out almost for the first time to search for film locations in an urban environment. However, this turn did not mark a foray into the outside world, as might be expected, but rather an entrance into a domain that is simultaneously mental and actual—the virtual world of the popular computer game *Grand Theft Auto* (henceforth GTA). “[...] without resorting to my usual bag of photochemical, cine-texture magic—I was on my own again, nowhere to hide,” says the artist about the shift following his entrance into the world of gaming.³

What, then, is the nature of these non-places, where one can no longer hide safely, but whose attraction seems doubly powerful?

The literature on the perception of place in GTA emphasizes the game’s unsettling, multivalent representation of its major locations, Liberty City, Los Santos, and San Andreas, easily recognizable as referencing New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.⁴ GTA allows the user to navigate in the streets of these cities within a compelling simulation of the space, and also with the help of a graphic presentation of street maps. The game offers a rather convincing illusion of entrance into the space, and the possibility of spending time and acting in these places. On the other hand, as Bogost

and Klainbaum point out,⁵ the streets and landmarks that look familiar to the user are not based on a concrete geographical reality but rather on popular media representations of these iconic cities. Cruising through the streets of Liberty City, the game version of New York City, where *Still Raining, Still Dreaming* (2009) is “filmed,” or San Andreas, where the other two films in the trilogy take place, necessarily involves a sense of cognitive dissonance. The user oscillates between the pleasure of extended spaces for presence and action, and the disturbing sense of the uncanny in these spaces, which are simultaneously familiar and strange.

Not surprisingly, Solomon directs our attention to game sites that recall cinematic scenes set in these locations. The film *Last Days in a Lonely Place* opens with the GTA version of the Griffith Park Observatory in Los Angeles (figure 5). This is an overt reference to Nicholas Ray’s film, *Rebel Without a Cause* (1953), which has a scene that was filmed in precisely the same location. Solomon’s observatory scene in *Last Days* is superimposed with found sound footage, appropriated from the scene filmed at the same spot in *Rebel Without a Cause*, sounding an apocalyptic description of the end of the planet.

³ See the artist’s statements published in this catalogue.

⁴ Ian Bogost and Dan Klainbaum, “Experiencing Place in Los Santos and Vice City,” in Nate Garrelts, ed., *The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto* (Kindle Locations 3075- 3337). (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company. Kindle Edition, 2006).

⁵ See also: Zach Walen, “Cruising in San Andreas: Ludic Space and Urban Aesthetics in Grand Theft Auto,” in Garrelts, *The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto* (Kindle Locations 2684-2685).



Figure 5: *Last Days in a Lonely Place*, 2007. Digital video, B&W, sound, 22 min.

In order to understand the phenomenology of Solomon's process, the artist's own description is crucial. The first stage in the work, he recounts, was aimless cruising in the spaces of the game, with the goal of spending time and getting to know the place, revisiting the same locations over and over until they became familiar and easily accessible. In the interview appearing in this catalogue, Solomon describes a surprising feeling of presence, which he compares to getting around in his own neighborhood.

Solomon inhabits the spaces of the game, and makes them habitable. Notably, he does not play by the rules. The crux of the action in GTA is a violent gang war

unfolding in the crime-ridden streets and neighborhoods of the big city. Solomon, for his part, chooses to wander on the city's outskirts, noting the level of detail in these settings, where the gamer is not even expected to visit. The excess of visual information taps the senses of motion and touch, creating a convincing experience of presence, which enables Solomon to find a place for himself precisely in those non-places beyond the standard borders of the game world. Solomon's meandering, totally disregarding the prescribed scenarios of the game, may be conceived in the terms of Michel de Certeau as "articulating a

second, poetic geography”⁶ on top of the game’s pre-programmed experience of its locations.

Solomon’s wanderings along the outskirts of the city are accompanied by a search for the game’s operational “glitches,” places that have not been completely ironed out by the programmers. In addition, Solomon masters the game’s “cheats,” making all kinds of strange occurrences possible. Gravity is defied, solid walls become penetrable, and motion does not defer to the laws of physics. In *Rehearsals for Retirement*, for example, we feel like we are moving forward in a train tunnel, due to the visual effect of a mist coming at us. But a look at the train tracks, which remain still throughout, elicits precisely the opposite sensation (figure 6). A disturbing cognitive dissonance arises from the perception of these irreconcilable indicators. Here, too, it is the challenging assault on the senses, rather than perceptual realism, that intensifies the experience of presence, contrary to the original intent in the use of the devices.



Figure 6: *Rehearsals for Retirement*, 2007. Digital video, color, sound, 12 min.

⁶ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p. 105.

When wandering the streets of San Andreas and Liberty City, Solomon makes sure to clear them of human presence. While the game’s spaces are usually populated by a diversity of people and vehicles, Solomon develops an ability to block traffic in order to create the still, abandoned environments we encounter in the *In Memoriam* trilogy (figure 7). While interaction with other characters is considered requisite for a convincing entrance into the game’s reality,⁷ Solomon consciously avoids this. Paradoxically, through the avoidance of all those ostensibly convincing components of the illusion, he succeeds in inhabiting the virtual reality of GTA.



Figure 7: *Still Raining, Still Dreaming*, 2009. Digital video, color, sound, 12 min.

In *Still Raining, Still Dreaming*, we stand still and watch a line of closed stores on an empty street. Some of the stores appear to be abandoned. A shadow creeps over the houses and the street, creating an accelerated, unnatural, and disturbing transition from full sunlight to dusk (figure 8). Throughout this time cycle the filmmaker/gamer’s viewpoint is completely still. In the absence of motion,

⁷ W.A. Ijsselsteijn, H. Ridder, J. Freeman, and S. E. Avons, “Presence: Concept, Determinants and Measurement,” *Proceedings of SPIE, Human Vision and Electronic Imaging* (San Jose, CA, 2000), <http://proceedings.spiedigitallibrary.org/proceeding.aspx?articleid=920235> (accessed June 2014)

the experience focuses on being *in* the place, and witnessing the passage of time. The tension conjured up between the familiar and the strange, the natural and the unnatural, constitutes these game locations as uncanny places to dwell in. Like an eternal stranger, Solomon wanders on the margins of the game,

cruising along invisible seam lines. He plays GTA against the grain, creating his own version of the world, and of his place within it. Yearning for “The Garden,” his quest takes him into the world of gaming, at once habitable and uncanny, alluring and unsafe.



Figure 8: *Still Raining Still Dreaming*, 2009. Digital video, color, sound, 12 min.

ABOUT THE WORKS

American Falls

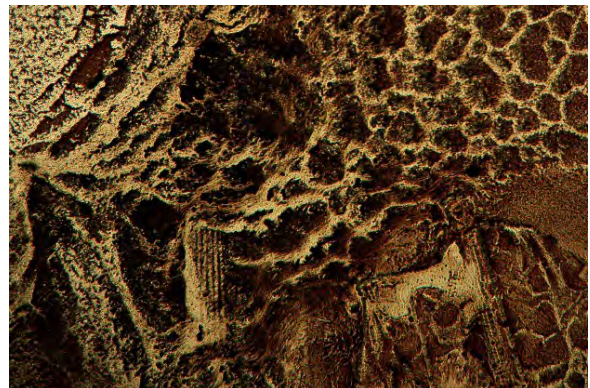
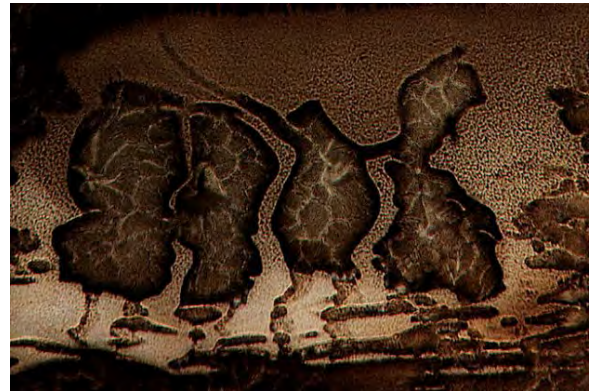
2000-2012, HD video, color, sound, 56 minutes

American Falls is a single-channel stereo sound reduced triptych adaptation of a 56-minute, six-channel, 5.1-surround sound installation commissioned by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. It was inspired by a trip that I took to the capital in the year 2000, at the invitation of the Corcoran in 1999, where I first encountered Frederick Church's great painting *Niagara*; took note of a multichannel video installation by Jennifer Steinkamp, projected onto the walls of the Corcoran rotunda; and went on walking tours of various monuments to the fallen throughout the DC area.

The architecture of the rotunda in the vicinity of Niagara invited me to muse on creating an all-enveloping, manmade "falls"; I imagined my commission as something akin to a widescreen version of a WPA/Diego Rivera project at century's end, where mediated images of the American Dream that I had been absorbing since childhood would flow together into the river with the roaring turbulence of America's failures to sustain the myths and ideals so deeply embedded in the received iconography. Emerging historical currents continuously break down and revert to their molten, primal forms and amber waves of pageantry, all eventually converging over the falls (in every sense of the term) as the great Unanswered Question posed by Charles Ives at the dawn of the last century echoes: Whither America? *American Falls* was supported in part by

funding from the University of Oklahoma/Thatcher Hoffman-Smith Award. *American Falls* is dedicated to Annie Edson Taylor and Jean Francois Gravelet ("The Great Blondin"). The first went over, the second walked across...

Phil Solomon



In Memoriam (Mark LaPore, 1952-2005)

Sometime during the new century, I began to suspect that videogames (which I had literally not seen since PONG in the 70's) were having a major impact on the aesthetic and philosophical renderings of time, space and gravity in the commercial cinema that I was seeing. The simulacrum and its attendant theories had finally caught up with me, and so I promptly went into Best Buy and bought a Playstation 2 and asked about interesting games that I could explore, without actually having to play. The Geek Squad recommended the infamous Grand Theft Auto series to me. Needless to say, I was shocked, appalled, disgusted...and absolutely fascinated. Mostly I became intrigued by the (narratively unnecessary) level of detail assigned to the renderings of landscape (particularly in the small rural areas – this is a game of primarily urban warfare, after all). I spent a great deal of time in a Warholian trance, just watching the light change, noting the grass gently swaying in the wind.

In the late summer of 2005, the filmmaker Mark LaPore, my best friend since college days, when we discovered the art of film together, visited me in Colorado and insisted on making a short piece together – something we had never done before. We stayed up all night and created a short, rather uncanny piece (of what I later learned would be described as “machinima,” a genre I was thankfully unfamiliar with) which was first referred to as *Untitled (for David Gatten)* and would eventually be re-titled as *Crossroad*.

About 3 weeks later, sometime in the early hours of 9/11/2005 (a date no doubt chosen intentionally), Mark LaPore ended his life by his own hand. I realized

the film that we had made together was his parting gift. In response to this utterly shocking and profoundly tragic event, I created the trilogy *In Memoriam (Mark LaPore, 1952-2005)*, with all visual materials culled from *Grand Theft Auto* gameplay. The great challenge here was to treat the crude, sometimes cartoon-like simulacrum with profound tenderness, rather than easy irony (which is already built-in and which pervades much of this kind of work). *In Memoriam* afforded me a new opportunity to stretch what I was creatively capable of achieving (particularly by now being able to traverse the z-axis, to “track,” as it were...) without resorting to my usual bag of photochemical, cine-texture magic – I was on my own again, nowhere to hide. And so, in speaking plainly, I searched, once again, for the uncanny sublime...

All images for *In Memoriam* were captured from the videogame series *Grand Theft Auto*, where Mark and I, boys of summer, were allowed to roam and wander without mission without murder “cheating” our way through the streets of polygonal horrors, finding (to our continuing astonishment) amusement, poetry, and darkness, just over there at the edge of town...
—P.S.

Rehearsals for Retirement

2007, digital video, color, sound, 12 minutes

*The days grow longer for smaller prizes
I feel a stranger to all surprises
You can have them I don't want them
I wear a different kind of garment
In my rehearsals for retirement
The lights are cold again they dance
below me*

*I turn to old friends they do not know me
All but the beggar he remembers
I put a penny down for payment
In my rehearsals for retirement
Had I known the end would end in laughter
I tell my daughter it doesn't matter...*

—Phil Ochs, *Rehearsals for Retirement*



Last Days in a Lonely Place

2007, digital video, b&w, sound, 22 minutes

*Farewell my friends
Farewell my dear ones
If I was rud
Forgive my weakness*

*Goodbye my friends
Goodbye to evening parties
Remember me
In the spring
To work for your bread
Soon you must leave
Remember your families
And work for your children*

*I don't need much
and the older I become
I realize
My friendships
Will carry me over
any course of distance
any cause of sorrow
My friends that last
Will dance one more time
with me.
I don't need words
This, I need.*

—Polly Jean Harvey, *Before Departure*





Still Raining, Still Dreaming

2009, digital video, color, sound, 12 min

*Like Rain it sounded till it curved
And then I knew 'twas Wind—
It walked as wet as any Wave
But swept as dry as sand—
When it had pushed itself away
To some remotest Plain
A coming as of Hosts was heard
That was indeed the Rain—
It filled the Wells, it pleased the Pools
It warbled in the Road—
It pulled the spigot from the Hills
And let the Floods abroad—
It loosened acres, lifted seas
The sites of Centres stirred
Then like Elijah rode away
Upon a Wheel of Cloud.*

— Emily Dickinson, *Like Rain it sounded till it curved*

*Rainy day, rain all day
Ain't no use in gettin uptight
Just let it groove its own way
Let it drain your worries away yeah
Lay back and groove on a rainy day hey
Lay back and dream on a rainy day
Lay back and groove on a rainy day
Lay back
Oh yeah !*

— Jimi Hendrix, *Still Raining, Still Dreaming*

BETWEEN JERUSALEM AND LIBERTY CITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH PHIL SOLOMON

27.4.2015

Hava Aldouby: *Your first show in Jerusalem takes place in the 19th century building of the Leprosarium Jesus Hilfe, founded by the German-Protestant Moravian community and operated by European nuns serving a Moslem population. Strictly secluded by high stone walls, forbidden even to the gaze, the place still bears an uncanny sense of virtual reality, of a non-place.*

Could you relate to the meaning of place in your work, between this uncanny venue in Jerusalem and the iconic American cities of LA and NYC — reconstructed in the video game Grand Theft Auto and serving as 'filming' locations for your In Memoriam trilogy?

Phil Solomon: Let me begin with a personal anecdote. Interestingly enough, as soon as you invoked the word "leprosy," what sprang to mind immediately is a very vivid memory from my childhood of witnessing a cinematic miracle on a huge screen in a scene from the movie *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959). Those religious epics in wide-screen formats in the 50's and 60's like *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben-Hur* were very powerful experiences for me as a child. Near the end of the film, after the famous chariot race, the fictional Jewish hero, Judah Ben-Hur, learns from his defeated foe that his mother and sister are still alive, banished to a leper colony after they

contracted the disease in a Roman prison. Judah is told by the family housekeeper that his sister and his mother "don't want you to ever see them again." I had no idea at the time what a leper colony was, but the vision of it in the film was unforgettable, as they were all huddled in a cave, shrouded in hoods and wearing gloves to protect their skin sores and abrasions. At the very end of the film, during the moment of the Crucifixion, the sky opens up and it starts to storm, and it is during a series of lighting flashes — like the intermittent cinematic shuttling between light and dark — that the mother and the sister are miraculously cured of their disease. At the film's end, they all come home and embrace... I can bring back tears just telling you about it, it's so moving. I've never forgotten it.

So all this is to say that my early understanding of leprosy is of a people who have been shunned and physically separated by society. And, of course, one can't help but be reminded of our own time and all the people who suffered from the AIDS virus in the early days of ignorance and fear. But the fact that the Hansen House was a place where there was also this incredible generosity of spirit exhibited by the nuns, whose life's mission was to save and heal — well, I like to think of art as a kind of spiritual communion, offering a possible healing of the self with the self. Art can be a kind of mirror back to the self.

I like your idea of Hansen as a former non-place, a virtual reality, a once forbidden zone that was forbidden from sight and therefore had to be imagined. I have spoken in interviews before about how the spaces I found in *Grand Theft Auto* interested me so much because of the incredible detail tendered to landscapes and environments that didn't really further the player's narrative

progress. They were there for the beauty. The art direction was so unexpectedly rich and created spaces that could be recognized, remembered and re-visited, so that you would know this was a field, and it's across from this abandoned factory or near this alleyway, and you would get to know a generalized but roughly accurate street map of downtown Los Angeles or the boroughs of New York City including landmarks and topography. And that's really the true thrill ride for people who are playing these so-called "sandbox games" in such a hyper-real environment: its remarkable fidelity to the act of moving through real spaces, even with the simplest somatic cues like a vibrating controller. The mind somehow synthesizes all of it into an imagined reality, and I found, quite to my surprise, that my recall of the geography and signposts of the virtual places was exactly the same as my memory of real space. That is to say, if I picture myself leaving my house now, I know I go down the end of the block, I take a left, then a right, then another left — and I can "picture" it in my head, on what my colleague Bruce Kawin calls our "mind-screen."

For me, that is the very much the same kind of experience as when I travel to these places in *Grand Theft Auto* again and again, because I would inevitably be caught or killed in action, failing miserably at even the game's simplest missions. So I'd have to get in the car again, and take the same routes over and over again, and I'd remember the roads and rely on repeatable visual cues and almost a sense of muscle memory (I never utilized the game's GPS map during gameplay as I needed to have a clean composition with no graphics on the screen). And of course the more you do it, the more the geography is inscribed in memory. It was really stunning to me,

how the virtual spaces remained with me in memory when I left the actual physical game-playing — they were reliably *there* all the time when I re-started playing the game and brought them back to virtual life. Inside the box, as it were.

H.A.: *The notion of carrying the space with you is interesting.*

P.S.: Yes — it became a mental space that I could re-visit in my mind. One makes mental pictures after having a physiological experience of space. How does it get stored and then recalled in the mind?

H.A.: *So what you are actually saying is that your mental experience of place cannot be divided into categories of "real" and "virtual."*

P.S.: Well, of course, in the virtual world, you don't have any sense of smell — that's truly missing. For example, there is a rather infamous place in Denver just off the highway called Commerce City, where each time you drive through it, you anticipate that it's going to smell like processed sewage at a very particular part of the road. So whenever I bring that place into recall, I retain that imaginative olfactory memory as well the visual one — let's call it a "nose screen." The virtual world is arid, airless. And the haptic recall, the sense memory of touch, is limited to what can be inferred by the vibrating hand controller, but again I've been surprised by how the mind can experience a wide variety of imaginative sensations from the smallest cues, whether it's audio for the ears, visuals for the eyes or a minimal physical vibration on your thumbs. But I was also drawn to the game imagery, particularly in the relatively crude earlier versions of GTA,

precisely because it's *not* the real space. And it so "wants" to be, and the poetry lies in that poignancy of its *failure* to do so. In fact, the greatly improved graphics in each succeeding generation of the GTA games (and we are now up to 4K resolution or better on GTA V PC), have made it more difficult for me to wring out my own artistic handprint from the already built-in aesthetic beauty by the game's graphics designer and art director, if you know what I mean. I had to be a bit clever to get something visually compelling out of the earlier games, and now the challenge is to find something that is not contingent on the gorgeous graphics alone. But one might say the same about shooting nature out in the real world with the automatic photographic beauty of the latest 4K HD cameras and digital post processing effects. Cinematography has become a specious concept, at best, in the real and the virtual worlds.

H.A.: *In 2005 you shifted from photochemical filmmaking to the gaming platform of GTA. Before the turn to filmmaking in virtual reality your practice drew primarily on optical printing, which basically means re-photography of already-filmed materials, rather than filming "out in the world." In both iterations you avoid facing the world directly. You always resort to a mediating apparatus. What are the aesthetic concerns that underlie your insistence on mediation and distancing?*

P.S.: For me, the aesthetic experience, common to all the arts, is essentially a meditation on form. But the entire technological development of the cinematic apparatus since its inception and the syntax that has evolved around narrative film language all seem to work

toward a semi-hypnotic illusory belief in the frame as a window and the grammar is based on strong identification cues with characters' points of view — which in my mind almost precludes any aesthetic meditation on form. Think about it. There really is no equivalent in the other arts to those feelings of identification with characters that we all experience from the movies, save perhaps the pulp novel, where one might get "lost," say, in a Stephen King book without having any sense of the actual words on the page whatsoever. I came to the art of film from the modernist tradition, where there has always been a tension between form and content, or where form and content are one and the same. So while much of my work actually plays with the syntax of classical narrative film language or with poetic forms, it ultimately resists psychological identification with any particular "character" as such. The constant attention back to the surface of the screen, particularly in the photo-chemically based work, is very much there to create a tension between the projection of the filmstrip and what the emulsion is depicting. In the GTA films, there is a tension between the rather solemn, elegiac narratives that seem to be going on with these lonely, expressionless, almost cartoon-like figures standing still or running or driving in these purgatorial empty spaces and the obvious artifice of pixels and polygons that make up that world. I find that there is a sad and beautiful pathos in the game's very lack of verisimilitude, where the trees and grass and wind will always remain, at best, just a pixelled approximation, a mathematical simulacrum. Nevertheless the room is there for the imaginative mind to emotionally fill in the digital void, and that is where those films happen for me,

and why they work. There are contradictory forces at work, and that's where the art happens.

Going back to the films, I knew from the start that I wanted to work from the personal, the quotidian, the everyday, and make films that sprung directly from specific autobiographical moments of my life — or, rather, the emotional memories of those moments — which indeed is often when I am most moved to express myself. But rather than attempt to photograph the people, places and things that are directly in front of my life and my camera — as Stan Brakhage did with his first person sense of “my eye/camera eye” or as Jonas Mekas and many others have done with the personal diary form — I wanted the embedded meanings and the latent dream content of my films to emerge from metaphorically resonant images (often culled from “treated” found footage) that serve more as allegorical or symbolic figures, rather than being limited to any one specific person, place or time. Even though I may be working on some level from very personal source material that may not be accessible on innermost tree ring level to others, I do believe that the *essential emotional truths* of the work will get through if it's there in the form itself — so my films, as Walter Pater (1839-1834) observed about all the arts, “aspire to the condition of music.” (“The School of Giorgione,” *Fortnightly Review*, 1877)

My entire body of work is dependent on the belief in metaphorical and extra-filmic significance of what I call these “uncanny” images that are expressive of the ineffable, the unknowable, and the inexpressible by containing the feeling within what Susanne K. Langer (1895-1985) has referred to as the “significant form.” (*Feeling and Form*, 1977)

H.A.: *Would you say that you look for archetypal places, which are not concrete?*

P.S.: Yes, and this is often achieved by abstracting the specifically denotative — the given standards of “photo-realist” deep focus, three-point perspective photography set forth by both Kodak and Rockstar Games (GTA) — into the more generalized connotative, the symbolic, and metaphorical. *The Snowman*, for example, is a duet between summer and winter, where space becomes a signifier of time, time in the sense of the changing seasons in the backgrounds of the figures. And one is really given only the most minimal spatial cues to be able to “read” any recognizable imagery at all — so in many ways, you can *feel* it even before you decode it as an image. A patina of fine scratches created by enhanced chemical decay and my optical printing illumination often masks both the figures and the landscapes in *The Snowman* (in fact, the original title of *The Snowman* was actually *Figure/Ground*). We see, for example, a repeated motivic image of just a boy holding a shovel. We presume he might be in snow, but the space is mostly just a white field of fine, luminous, shifting horizontal lines (and later this same boy is actually shoveling on the beach in summer). So the picture field of the film becomes more about *a mental space of winter*. As Stevens himself says in the opening line of the poem that inspired the film, ‘One must have a *mind* of winter’ (Wallace Stevens, *The Snow Man*, 1921). That is what I’m trying to get at, *winterness*, not just winter, or not just last winter, or my winter, or your winter, or the winter of 1963, etc. And hence you also hear all the winds that “blow through the same, bare place” (*The Snow Man*). Late in the film, we see the boy on the very end of the diving board, in summer,

facing his father. Then he suddenly leaps off the board into the void and there's a continuity cut with an ellipsis of space/time, so that he ends up landing and rolling on the snow-covered ground in winter in what sounds like a blizzard. So he is transported from summer into winter by virtue of a simple match-cut hidden by the constant motion of the texture, a classical narrative trope of creating a false continuity of motion that is compounded by the image decay. What I love about this kind of moment is that you still can glean the narrative essence of that graphic "rhyme," while the actual picture plane remains impenetrable as a window to the world — analogous, in a way, to your intriguing idea of the Leprosarium as a prohibitive space. That is for me the essence of what I think of as the aesthetic experience. The film resiliently remains only itself and you remain only yourself — which is the opposite of the identification hypnosis that we all experience with classical narrative syntax-based films. This tension between the desire to have the romantic illusion of a point of entry into another world — and the recalcitrant, flattened and framed resistance that reminds you of your own limitations — is the heart of the modernist aesthetic, as I understand it.

So Modernism itself may also be considered a kind of prohibited space in general. Renaissance paintings, by virtue of what Stan Brakhage refers to as "the man-made laws of perspective," (*Metaphors on Vision*), offer us a vista of endless space, which you are invited to enter from the very edges of the frame all the way through to the vanishing point — or perhaps to the kingdom of heaven itself. Now, as we move toward the 20th century, this leap of faith (which is both

spatial *and* religious) is gradually replaced with a scientific skepticism and a concurrent loss of faith, moving us through all the "isms" (mannerism, expressionism, impressionism, cubism, abstract expressionism, minimalism, etc.) finally back to the picture plane itself (this is paint on canvas, this is emulsion on film) and beyond (with post-modernism being concerned with primarily with everything *outside the frame*). So modernism forces you back on yourself: you can't enter the picture anymore, you can't go home again. What we have, then, is mediation — art is media, as we say. The experience is located somewhere between you and the work you are beholding. Aesthetic contemplation of "significant form" is what gives the work of art its ultimate truth. But this is a very old fashioned idea here in the 21st century, I'll admit.

H.A.: *But then when you go out into the world of Grand Theft Auto it is as if the space opens up again, for you and for your viewers.*

P.S.: That's right. And in fact it allows me much more access than before, because I can have movement along the z-axis, tracking shots that are even physically impossible. I can penetrate space as in the real world, which is one of the things actually that Hollywood does so well right now with small, mobile cameras and digital technology. Moving through space in cinema is really the current thrill ride. Look at *Birdman* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2014). It essentially treats the real world like a video game, where you are attached to following avatars throughout the "game" of the film, almost like playing the film in first person mode. With my thumbs on the controller of my gaming console, I can now glide my

camera effortlessly through space, which really feels like a floating, out of body experience. You can see this in *Rehearsals for Retirement*, when I move the camera slowly through the fields or in the aerial shots when I'm flying through the clouds. This was a very liberating experience for me as a filmmaker, especially for one who has been weighed down by the increased gravity of age and illness in the present, and rather cumbersome camera equipment in the past. With *Rehearsals for Retirement*, there is a sense that you are moving slowly but inexorably, very much like a dream narrative, compelled by the editing and the oneiric movement through space. And yet I don't think that you can really see my hand in it too much, as I try to hide my edits with graphic matches or slow dissolves. And that is something of a reaction to Brakhage's body-driven first person relationship to camera and editing. I wanted a more neutral, meditative space, one without physicality, out of the body.

My films are very influenced by the narrative film language I grew up on, but I also wanted the formal awareness and distancing effects that we get from poetry. We must acknowledge that reading Emily Dickinson or John Ashbery or Wallace Stevens is very different from reading a book by Stephen King. With poetics, you are always aware of how it looks on the page, the font, the spacing, the punctuation, the line-breaks, the rhyme or lack thereof, the cadences and meters, the very breath of words, etc. There is an aesthetic resistance to the imaginary identification pulls of a pulp novel, which, in my view, often precludes what I think of as the aesthetic experience. And this is especially true for those of us who are intent on exploring alternative narrative forms that are perhaps closer to the other arts than the novel or theater.

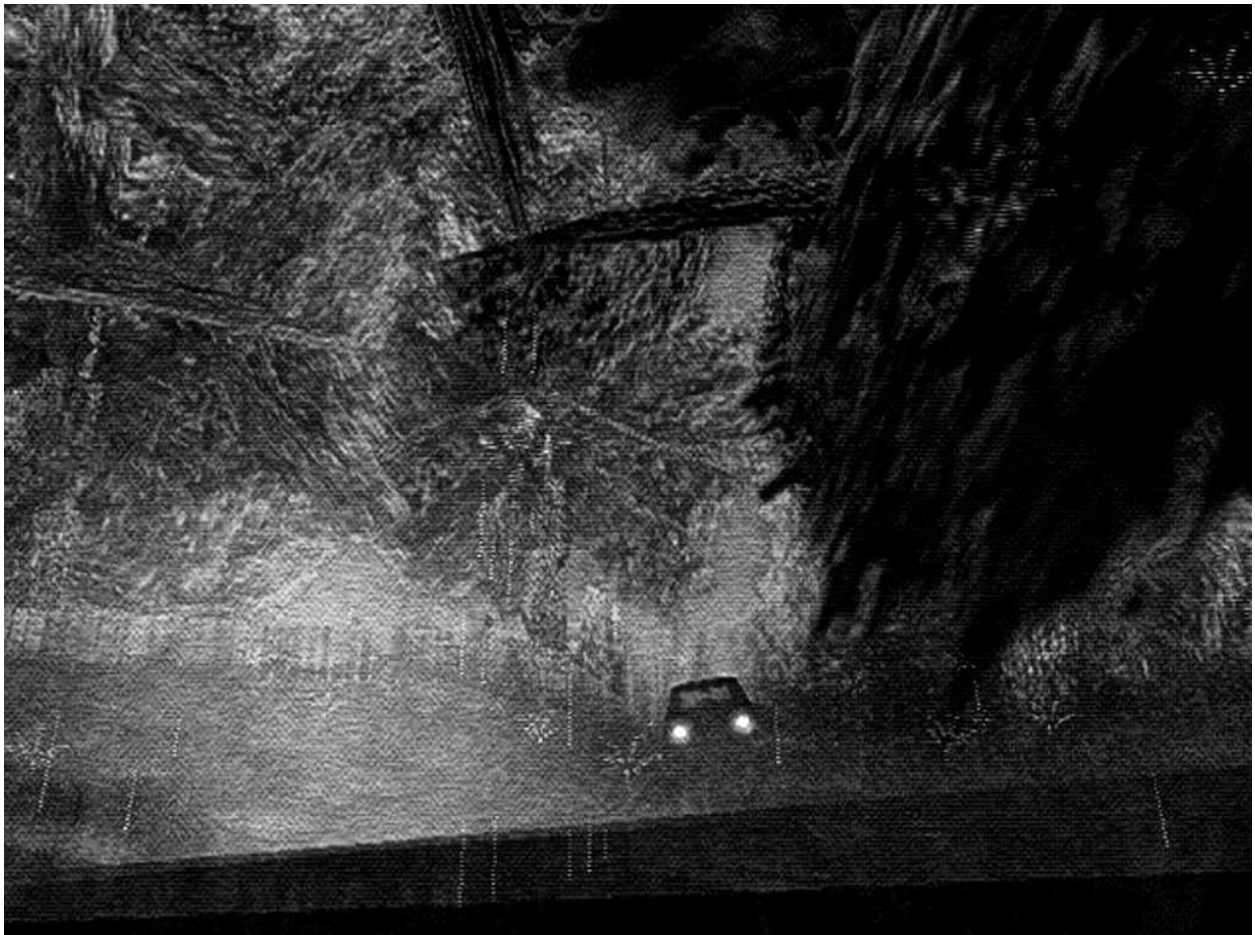
H.A.: *Would you consider this formal emphasis yet another distancing apparatus?*

P.S.: This issue of distancing can mean many things when it comes to making personal films. When I first began making a film about my mother's death (*Remains to be Seen*), I was using very classically composed, unadorned black and white footage of her that I photographed over the course of the five years of her illness. There was no curtain, no effects, no veiling — she was very present and very visible. And the return of her living gaze was very strong. But each time I began to work with that material, I was so overcome with emotion from what Roland Barthes has called the *punctum*, a kind of "puncture" or "wound" of the image referent (*Camera Lucida*, 1979), that I knew that I simply could not watch that footage over and over again every time the film was screened. I had no distance on the material at all — and you need to have that in order to see the forest from the trees and be able to construct a form that works aesthetically over time — color, rhythm, textures, composition, sound. That was my mother and that was me photographing her. But the film could not be solely dependent on the emotional investment I already had with the imagery before I even began to edit. So I ended up using none of that material, and I used found footage of swimming and surgery, home movies (both from my dad and others) combined with my own camera footage from several years of shooting (Walden Pond, trees, skies, Yosemite Falls, etc.). The viewer does not need to know the who, what, where, when or why, but one can still get a sense of a life lived and a sense of grieving from watching the film. The film is not dependent on the viewer knowing

the biographical details and their contexts to glean the essential *feeling from the forms*: the imagery, sounds, and the juxtapositions, the “light moving in time” (William Wees, 1992) toward a final cadence.

H.A. *Grand Theft Auto is a considerably violent game, yet your GTA-based films are suffused with a lyrical note, which is very far from the general atmosphere of the*

game. While technically the films may be subsumed under the title of machinima, they radically differ from typical machinima pieces, which preserve the violence of the game world, mainly for ends of cultural criticism. Could you let us in on some game tactics through which you achieve the idiosyncratic lyrical-poetic note that characterizes the In Memoriam trilogy?



P.S.: I began working with video games quite by accident (from researching a class that I taught on post-modern cinema), and from a place of complete naïveté, which was wonderful to me. I had never really seen any modern video games, let alone any machinima art up to that point. I was intrigued by the free-for-all violence at first, but then that child-like pleasure quickly wore off for me. The adult, the artist in me quickly took over and I reveled in just looking around at the incredible detail of the virtual world where I could roam freely. I was stunned at how much attention was being paid to creating an entire environment, where the pleasures were much more about aesthetic beauty than violent horror for me. The details were completely unnecessary to the game's murderous missions, and served no other purpose than to entice the viewer to feel like they have wandered into a realm to explore. So when I entered into the *Grand Theft Auto* world, which immediately demands that you *do* something, that you go to work, that you have agency of some kind — I did just the opposite. I walked in as quietly and as invisibly as possible, and did nothing but look. And I noticed all these things opening up, as I just watched. The world certainly wasn't static, even with my "Grand Zen Auto" approach, as I most clearly demonstrated with my 48-minute single shot video, *Empire* (2013). I think that a lot of the sense that you are having of melancholic loss and sadness mostly comes from what I do to the image after the recording, in terms of adjusting the speeds, and working with the sound. I am carefully *constructing* it so that it appears to be lonely and sad, whereas if you played the game, it would be full of anarchic bedlam and wacky humor. I had to work very hard to *induce* that existential sense of purgatory, so part of

what I'm doing is going through all kinds of machinations before I even begin recording the gameplay in order to set up the shot, not unlike a Hollywood production with set dressers, grips, assistant directors, etc. For example, in *Last Days in a Lonely Place* (2007) there is a scene where the camera gradually begins to track into a movie theater doorway from across the street. The camera is in motion when the shot begins, the movie theater marquee suddenly lights up (and, the marquee was blank) and then the camera slowly but inevitably tracks into the darkness of the cinema. Now, that street is Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles, and it's ordinarily very busy with pedestrians and a lot of traffic. So I had to type in a cheat code, *spawn* (which means then magically drop from the sky and just appear from the code, not from stealing) two huge army tanks and then use them to block off traffic on both sides of the shot, again just like a film production crew might do. Now in that game, you can't get a first-person point of view of any kind without being in a vehicle. So I took a baseball bat, which is ordinarily part of your regular arsenal for murder and mayhem, and I smashed out the headlights of my car because I didn't want any ambient light in front of the camera. But if you do it too hard, you end up blowing up the car and getting killed, as I have done many, many times, of course. Something they don't teach you in film school! I died for my art! So then I get into the car and I have to wait until I know when the movie theatre is scheduled to open according to the game clock because I want to catch the marquee lights suddenly going on as the shot is in motion. So I drive the car very slowly moving my thumbs ever so gingerly, and the roads are temporarily clear from the army tanks blocking the

traffic, and as I move the marquee comes on and I have to stop myself from getting too excited that I caught it just right, because my thumb will twitch and the motion will jerk. And then I finally get all the way across the street to the shadow area under the marquee and I have to continually steer the car/camera so it appears graceful and purposeful, which took many, many takes. On some takes, everything would be just perfect, but then a taxi, which is programmed to be more aggressive in traffic, would muscle its way past my roadblock and then explode right in front of me, essentially committing suicide in order to ruin my shot! That's when I knew that my late friend, Mark LaPore, to whom the whole series is dedicated, was haunting me and having a laugh.

In *Still Raining, Still Dreaming* (2009), for the final shot, I held an another long take static shot and just stayed in one spot all day while recording different take after take of the same landscape where people were walking in the rain in the distance. Later I superimposed one shot on top of the other, and with superimposition, the objects that don't move at all will appear solid, but anything that moves will appear transparent in the overlay, and this gave me my "walking dead" shot at the very end of the film. It's one of my favorite shots in all my work. All the walkers are carrying umbrellas and hunkering down, as I made it rain through a cheat code each time. It looks very Japanese to me, like *A Page of Madness* or *Kawidan*. They often have a space where the dead walk, and that's how I see the final shot, I see it as a forbidden space. Would people get that reference? I don't know. But to answer your question, I work very hard at creating that elegiac tone that you are perceiving from these kind of hidden gestures.

H.A.: *American Falls* is your magnum opus to date, in terms of the overwhelming quantity and richness of treated materials, and the multilayered soundtrack. Your treatment of American history as it is reflected in the cinema — the ultimate medium of the American cultural endeavor — is ironic and at the same time anxious. The soundtrack reverberates with several layers of music, and historical sound recordings. Can you point out the major aesthetic guidelines organizing the vast array of sound fragments embedded in this work?

P.S.: Charles Ives, the great American composer, was really my aesthetic guide for the choices of music for the film. *The Unanswered Question* (1930-1935; originally 1908) begins and ends *American Falls*. It's a very transcendental piece of music, for me that is what *American Falls* is, the unanswered question, particularly post 9/11. Leonard Bernstein proposed in his Harvard Norton Lectures that Ives is essentially asking, at the beginning of the 20th century, "wither America now?" And I ask the very same question a century or so later, wither America now? I feel like that question has not been answered and "remains to be seen." Something radically changed to the American character in the after shock of that event. In current American popular cinema, it feels like the trauma of 9/11 is being rerun over and over again in the post-apocalyptic destruction of city after city. The world ends, in 3-D... until the sequel.

Of course the other aspect of Ives' music that inspired *American Falls* is that he collaged and layered "found footage," appropriating hymns, popular tunes, patriotic anthems into a multi-layered American musical landscape, and I essentially did the same with the imagery

and the triptych form. So Wrick Wolff (the primary sound designer) and I primarily drew on sources from classic movies, like “Over There” for WWI (*Yankees Doodle Dandy*, 1942) and “We’re in the Money,” from Busby Berkeley (*Gold Diggers of 1933*). The music is always electronically treated to match the rhythm and textures of the chemical treatments, but you can hear it embedded during the Depression section, which ends with Kate Smith’s “God Bless America.” It’s a bitter take this on a very old idea of American entitlement, the “City upon the Hill,” blessed by God, according to puritan John Winthrop’s sermon (1630). As we hear the end of the song and the words “Home Sweet Home,” we see Buster Keaton unable to enter his house, now spinning out of control. The most beautiful music of all was saved for the emotional peak of *American Falls*, during what we called the Civil Rights section. Wrick Wolff added Dinah Washington’s version of *Deep River*, an old Negro spiritual sung by the great Marian Anderson, just as we see the Lincoln Memorial where she famously sang in a key moment in civil rights history in 1939. When we saw how the music worked perfectly with my already edited sequence, everything just suddenly fell into place and I knew I couldn’t go on anymore, even though I had shot and treated historical material right up to 9/11. We all cried when we saw it together — and so we end the film with a nocturnal postlude, a lullaby, as we hear *The Unanswered Question* posed one more time.

I had used appropriated voices in my work before in *Remains to Be Seen*, *The Exquisite Hour*, and particularly in *Last Days In a Lonely Place*. In the case of *American Falls*, we are almost halfway through the film before I introduce the voices on the soundtrack, and that makes

perfect sense because of the film’s historical timeline and the technological advent of talking pictures and radio, the American “voices on the air.” And so the first voice you hear is Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who, for me, is the central figure of *American Falls*. And the very first words you hear on the track are from his incredible Second Inaugural address, where he lays out the need for a “Second Bill of Rights”: the right to a good education, the right to a good job, the right to health care and social security, the right to the social safety-net as laid out by FDR. This is simply an incredible speech, particularly in light of the conservative backlash in our time by the 1% against any remaining Roosevelt-style progressivism. They see these rights as these “privileges.” That is what *American Falls* is about at its heart: the contradictory impulses of the unremitting self-interest necessary for advanced capitalism and the need for the common good in an ideal democracy.

I think *American Falls* really changes when the voices come in, it becomes much more political and elegiac. The film comes to its quiet moment, almost a moment of silence, when J. Robert Oppenheimer, the man responsible for the atomic bomb, sheds a tear of regret over what he has let loose upon the world. He quotes from the Hindu scripture the Bhagavad Gita: “Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.” You hear General MacArthur’s address to West Point, “The shadows are lengthening for me.” And finally you have the description of Roosevelt’s funeral, beautifully narrated over the radio by Arthur Godfrey — all these moments in the aftermath of World War II lead us into the latter half of the 20th century and the road to 1968, where we finally go over the Falls.

H.A.: *Finally, do you find any specific salience in the exhibited works for an Israeli audience making its first acquaintance with your films?*

P.S.: First of all I would like to thank you as a representative of your country for inviting me to do this and for attending to my work with such intelligence, due diligence, curiosity and genuine passion. And I thank all the good people at the Hansen House who care so very much for the arts for fighting for that space for so long, and for inviting me in. It means a lot to me. As you know, I have never been to Israel. As they say, maybe next year in Jerusalem.

You and I were speculating when we first began to chat almost jokingly about the part that American Jews have played in the avant-garde. I think there might be something to that in my work, which in some respects can be thought of as Jewish identified. I remember when I would go to synagogue as a child, there was something very moving for me in the chanting and the singing. And in saying “Amen” — we agree — as a group, in ensemble, as I think an audience in a cinema often does silently in the aftermath of a great film. When you hear a great cantor sing, there is a kind of plaintive cry in his voice, “blue notes” and minor keys that imply an ancient melancholia, a people’s cry of pain and suffering. There is an implied anxiety in the melodies themselves

And if nothing else, there is a spiritual quality to my work. So I think it is something special for me, to be showing in a land where I once “planted a tree” as a Hebrew School student. We were all asked to collect money specifically in order to get funding and receive an official certificate of verification that there was a tree planted somewhere in my

family’s name. So I shall think of this exhibit and screening as planting another tree in Israel and re-establishing roots in Israel. As a liberal American Jew, I admit to a complicated relationship filled with contradictory feelings about Israeli politics and the impossible Palestinian problem. But I am truly honored to be showing my work in Jerusalem and at the Hansen House in particular, to add my voice to the conversation, and I will be most curious to see if there are particular spiritual or cultural aspects of my work that are perhaps more accessible by showing my work in this context.

H.A.: *That will be interesting to find out. The question of feeling more comfortable “inside your head”, or alienated from real spaces, as you put it in earlier conversations, is a question I hesitate to bring up in the Jewish context, without going into identity politics.*

P.S.: Well, the word “homeland” comes to mind when one thinks of the history of Israel, a word that is obviously very complicated and fraught with ambiguity. But I do think artists are often familiar with never quite feeling at home in the world or even in your own skin, and hence we create new worlds and new skins in the privacy of the creative act. It’s our job to be “in our heads.” But then, when the work process is over, you try to desperately to re-assimilate back into the culture. And then people will look at the work and ask you “What did you mean by that?” But quite often you’ve created something in a kind of trance state and then you only reinterpret it later, much like the way we give our dreams a scripted sense of narrative.

My own third-generation Jewish legacy in America is very similar to others of the Baby Boom generation, especially from

the NYC area. Our dads came home from the war and went to work and began to raise their families, and their goal was to eventually take their families out of the city into the newly developing suburbs — our version of the so-called American Dream, which was still possible to achieve at the height of our post-war economic boom. Virtually all the families on my block had a similar story. We were all Jewish, we were all middle class, and we were all the first generation of the television era. And truth be told, that is where I truly discovered my own Jewish cultural legacy, mostly from the great parade of mostly geniuses whom I adored on TV, our great Jewish relatives who came from the vaudeville, radio, and the Catskills resorts in upstate NY which was a big part of Sunday on the Ed Sullivan Show from the “Borscht Belt”: Jack Benny, George Burns, Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, Mort Sahl, Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, Jerry Lewis, Joey Bishop, on and on—these men were like our great Jewish uncles. There was also the great songwriting tradition from Tin Pan Alley and Broadway, including my own cousin, Carolyn Leigh, who wrote songs for Broadway shows (*Peter Pan*, *Wildcat*) and for Frank Sinatra (*Young at Heart*). Later on in college, I would also discover my Jewish roots in the history of cinema and 20th century art. So I never truly felt that sense of Jewish cultural or religious alienation that you are referring to, because, as far as I was concerned, my whole world was Jewish — the county, the neighborhood, most of my classmates in high school, and the people I saw on television. All of the boomer kids on my block were bar-mitzvah’d around the same time, and all of us stopped attending synagogue on the day after. It was only later, when I attended high school and participated in sports, did I encounter the outside world

of anti-Semitism, and even though that was comparatively lightweight, it came as a shock to me nevertheless. I feel very, very lucky that I grew up in a family and a culture that placed a premium on education, which radically changed my life when I left home and went to college. I became a film artist because of the academy, and, as I discussed with you, it turns out many of my classmates and most of my teachers were also Jewish (Ken Jacobs, Larry Gottheim, Saul Levine, Dan Barnett, Ernie Gehr), and that made for a kind of cultural shorthand and instant rapport. There was already a “tradition,” as the song goes.

Finally, let me finish with this thought. I would say to any audience that is new to my work just this: Assume that I know what I’m doing after all these years (laughs) and just relax and let the images and sounds wash over you without constantly calling them into question with your inner critical voice. I always loved what scholar Tom Gunning wrote about my work in his famous essay, *Towards a Minor Cinema*: “One must surrender to the trance-like authority of a Solomon film.” Don’t try to stop the film while the river is running to constantly struggle with meaning and subtext at every moment. It’s more about letting yourself float downstream, and dream along with me, letting the films take you somewhere ineffable and hopefully—transcendental. Let the emotional tones of the films and videos have their say, open your heart to them, and just look and listen. I am not using language all that much in the films, so exult in the audio-visual rhythms and textures of the work without letting words interfere too much while its on screen. I think my work is accessible and transparent if you can see and hear,

because I try to make images that are uncanny and recognizable, at least in my imagination. There is everything to gain, and nothing to lose by “letting the eyes have it,” as Stan used to say.



SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

PSALM IV: VALLEY OF THE SHADOW, HD digital video, color, stereo sound, 2013
THE EMBLAZONED APPARITIONS, 720p, color, stereo sound, 2013
THE ETERNAL COURTSHIP, I-Pad movie, 1 minute, color, stereo sound, 2013
AMERICAN FALLS – 6-channel high definition digital video installation, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., spring 2010
STILL RAINING, STILL DREAMING – high definition digital video, sound 2009
EMPIRE – high definition digital video, sound, 2008 (also installation)
LAST DAYS IN A LONELY PLACE, digital video, sound, 2007
REHEARSALS FOR RETIREMENT, digital video, sound, 2007
CROSSROAD (with Mark LaPore), digital video, sound, 2005
TWILIGHT PSALM III: "Night of the Meek", 16mm, sound, 2002
SEASONS... (with Stan Brakhage), 16mm, silent, 2002
TWILIGHT PSALM I: "The Lateness of the Hour", 16mm, sound, 1999
TWILIGHT PSALM II: "Walking Distance", 16mm, sound, 1999
YES, I SAID YES, I WILL, YES, 16mm, sound, 1999
CONSCRESCENCE (with Stan Brakhage), 16mm, silent, 1996
THE SNOWMAN, 16mm, sound, 1995
BI-TEMPORAL VISION: THE SEA (original footage for Ken Jacobs' Nervous System), 1995 *THE EXQUISITE HOUR* - (16mm revision), sound, 1994
REMAINS TO BE SEEN - (16mm revision) - sound, 1994
ELEMENTARY PHRASES, (with Stan Brakhage) - 16mm, silent, 1994
CLEPSYDRA, 16mm, silent, 1992
THE SECRET GARDEN, 16mm, silent, 1988
AS IF WE, 16mm, silent, 1980
NOCTURNE, 16mm, silent, 1980
THE PASSAGE OF THE BRIDE, 16mm, silent, 1978

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS OF FILMS

CAI-Contemporary Art Institute, Sapporo, 2014
Musée national d'art moderne, Paris, 2014
National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 2014
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA, 2013
Redcat Cinema, LA, CA, 2013
"Video Jam", Manchester, UK, 2013
Arts of the Moving Image, Duke, University 2013
Young Projects Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, 2013
Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, NY, 2013
Everson Museum, Syracuse, NY, 2013
Museum of the Moving Image, NY, 2012
Ann Arbor International Film Festival, 2012
London Film Festival, 2011
Tate Modern, UK (2 show retrospective) 2011
New York Film Festival, 2010
National Gallery of Art, 2010
American Falls installation at Corcoran Gallery of Art, D.C., 2010

Harvard Film Archive, 2009
Massachusetts College of Art, 2009
Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, 2008
Anthology Film Archives Leeds Film Festival, UK, 2007
California Institute of the Arts, 2005
Cinema Project, Portland, Oregon, Retrospective, 2004
Tama Arts University, Tokyo, 2003
Stan Brakhage/Phil Solomon Retrospective, Yokohama, 2003
Third Text: City University of Hong Kong Festival, 2003
Museum of Modern Art NY, 1999 (1994, 1990)
The Art Gallery of Ontario, 1998
Harvard Film Archive, Cambridge, Ma., 1994
Stadkino Cinema, Vienna, 1994
Arsenal Cinema, Berlin, 1994
Filmmuseum Royale, Brussels, 1994
Stuc Cinema, Leuven, 1994
Het Cinema Festival, Antwerp, 1993

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Bordwell, David. "Solomonic Judgments," from *Observations on Film Art*.
<http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2012/05/07/solomonic-judgments/>
Marks, Laura U. "Loving a Disappearing Image", from *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, University of Minnesota Press, pp. 95-96
Powers, John. "Darkness on the Edge of Town: Film Meets Digital in Phil Solomon's *In Memoriam (Mark LaPore)*," *October* #137, M.I.T PRESS, Summer 2011, pp. 84-106
Sicinski, Michael. "Phil Solomon Enters San Andreas and Emerges, Not Unscathed: Notes on Two Recent Works," *Cinemascope*, Issue 30, 2007, (<http://academichack.net/solomon.htm>)
Sitney, P. Adams, "The End of the Twentieth Century," from *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000*, Third Edition, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 431
Young, Paul. "Celluoid Canvas: Film as an Artistic Medium," *Art Cinema*, Taschen Books, 2009, pp 64-65
Yue, Genevieve. "View From the Falls: Collective memory and experience in the work of Phil Solomon," *Moving Image Source*, July 2010
(<http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/view-from-the-falls-20100713>)

