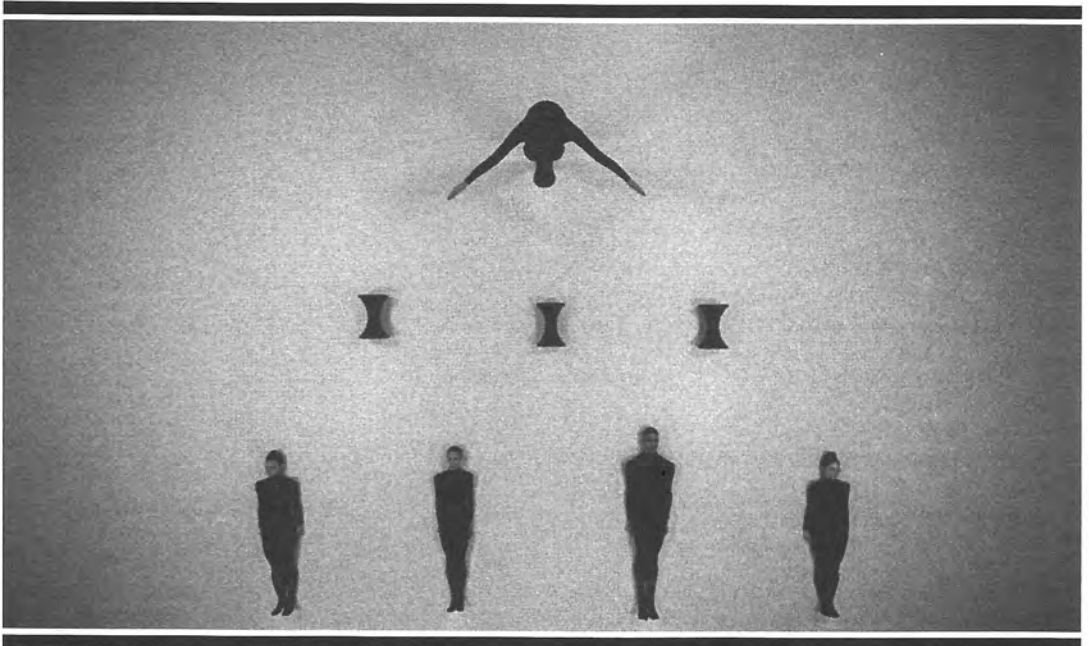




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FUNDAMENTALS

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## 52<sup>ND</sup> ANN ARBOR FILM FESTIVAL



Michigan Theater Marquee, 52nd Ann Arbor Film Festival. All images courtesy Ann Arbor Film Festival.

Self-knowledge and decision-making are tools necessarily sharpened by the challenges of the 52nd Ann Arbor Film Festival. Goals must be set and pathways configured and reconfigured according to the accrual of information and the play of desire. I chose Steve Anker's juror presentation, *Big as Life, 8mm Experimental Film in the U.S.: The Boston Underground, 1976-1992* for my port of entry because of the late Anne Charlotte Robertson (1949-2012). *Apologies* (1990), featuring Robertson fiercely in front of and behind the camera, proved an anchor of Anker's curation. The crystalline sense that *Apologies'* ramifications in experimental film history merited concerted articulation, possible only in an essay devoted expressly to the writing of that film, fascinated me. *Sodom* (1989), Luther Price's polemic clashing of '70s gay porn and "SOME ROMAN .... HOLLYWOOD EPIC FILM" on sex and catastrophe so possessed me that I had to flee the subsequent music video program, given its concern with market forces.

Introduced by Caitlin Horsmon in her "Expanding Frames" presentation *Politics: Aesthetics: Action* before appearing in the program proper, the video *Single Stream* (2014) by Pawel Wojtasik, Toby Lee and Ernst Karel about a Boston recycling center had prior iterations as a sound art project and an installation. Especially considering its topicality in the face of climate change, *Single Stream* sculpts an otherworldly space to reflect profoundly upon the inhabited one. No wonder Wojtasik cites Tarkovsky, particularly *The Sacrifice* (1986), as a touchstone.

Also seen here is the relevance of low-wage manual labor in the scheme of things, such as global capital: workers sort the conveyor belt's current of waste by hand in what seems an especially incongruent reality, given Boston's hyper-concentration of intellectual (and technological) capital. Laborers surfaced as one of the fest's stronger nets. Hope Tucker's juror presentation of her own series, *The Obituary Project*, reached its apex



with the video *Bessie Cohen, Survivor of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire* (2000), inspired by one of the numerous mass-death tragedies of labor history. Despite the sense of choreographed composition and sound of the artist's own minimal music, *The Movement of People Working*, Phill Niblock's video installation based on a catalog of 16mm films shot around the world, illuminated the harsh realities of life at its most basic struggle for subsistence. Shot on a cellphone camera, *From Gulf to Gulf to Gulf* (2013) by CAMP (Shaina Anand and Ashok Sukumaran) showed workers constructing ships, their deceptively low-tech and isolated labor miraculously producing a comprehensive whole.

Portraying a Foley sound studio's fusion of gritty analog noisemaking – think breaking glass and scraping

metal – with state-of-the-art recording technology, Deborah Stratman's *Hacked Circuit* (2014, Leon Speakers Award for Best Sound Design) captures the netherworld of commercial media production. Stratman also appears on camera credits for several films by Thom Andersen, who was featured in an in-person retrospective. The captivating shorts *Get Out of the Car* (2010) and – — (aka *The Rock and Roll Film*, 1967 codirector: Malcolm Brodwick) lured me to the 170-minute collage essay, *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003), dubbed by Andersen "a city symphony in reverse," the sustained experience invoking Benjamin's "aura." Screened next was Brett Kashmere's fascinating treatise on basketball and hip-hop *From Deep* (2013), which together with Andersen's epic presented a compelling argument for the essay film. Bridging film



and music subcultures while igniting critical thought through declarations such as, “All art aspires to the condition of cinema,” Andersen gave credence to the 52nd AAFF as history in the making.

So did the tour-de-force Penelope Spheeris who – speaking with archivist Mark Toscano – invoked her own experience as both cautionary (“the sexism crap”) and inspirational (“don’t look back...just keep going forward”). Her humanity is especially evident when she gains the trust of “gutter punks” in *The Decline of Western Civilization: Part III* (1997) as they share traumatic histories of abuse by adults. *Penelope Spheeris: Films 1968-1998* traces the director’s compassion to her earliest days, from the diva “Warhol superstar” appeal of Jennifer (né Jimmy) in *I Don’t Know* (1970) and *Hats off to Hollywood* (1972) to the

**LEFT PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**

**Luther Price, *Sodom*** (1989), frame enlargements.

**Paweł Wojtasik, Toby Lee, and Ernst Karel, *Single Stream*** (2014), frame enlargement.

**Deborah Stratman, *Hacked Circuit*** (2014), frame enlargement.

**ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**

Thom Andersen, 52<sup>nd</sup> Ann Arbor Film Festival.

Mark Toscano (left) with Penelope Spheeris (right), 52<sup>nd</sup> Ann Arbor Film Festival.

**Penelope Spheeris, *The Decline of Western Civilization: Part III*** (1997), frame enlargement. Photo by John Joleaud.

**Thom Andersen, *Los Angeles Plays Itself*** (2003), frame enlargement.





LEFT

Gerard Holthius, *Hong Kong (HKG)* (1999), frame enlargement.

OPPOSITE FROM TOP

Malena Szlam, *Lunar Almanac* (2013), frame enlargement.

Els van Rie, *Gradual Speed* (2013), frame enlargement.

Sylvia Schedelbauer, *Sea of Vapors* (2014), frame enlargement.

sass and tenacity of her mother in the portrait *No Use Walkin' When You Can Stroll* (1998).

Presence registered especially intensively in such instances as the late Taylor Mead (1924-2013) cavorting in *Los Angeles Plays Itself* or the iconic woman-at-window image of Maya Deren from *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) surfacing in *Joseph Bernard: Super 8 Films*, a program culled from a trove of over 100 silent films. A fest ID featuring the psychedelic train tracks sequence from Czech New Wave classic *Daisies* (1966) honored Vera Chytilova (1929-2014). The anti-colonialist essay film *Les statues meurent aussi* (*Statues Also Die*, 1953) by Chris Marker (1921-2012) and Alain Resnais (1922-2014) screened prior to Duncan Campbell's *It for Others* (2013), a far-ranging essay taking the Marker-Resnais collaboration as a point of departure.

Jeremy Rigsby & Oona Mosna's juror presentation, *Archaic Beasts, God's Asshole and Other Ideas of the Previous Century*, deployed provocation as curatorial tactic, from spectacular destruction in Peter Hutton's *Boston Fire* (1979) to the specter of low-flying planes in Gerard Holthius's *Hong Kong (HKG)* (1999). Rigsby noted how each of the three subjects of Friedl vom Gröller's *Erwin, Toni, Ilse* (1969) later became suicides. When it transpired that the print had parts missing, cinema's valence as absence was palpable.

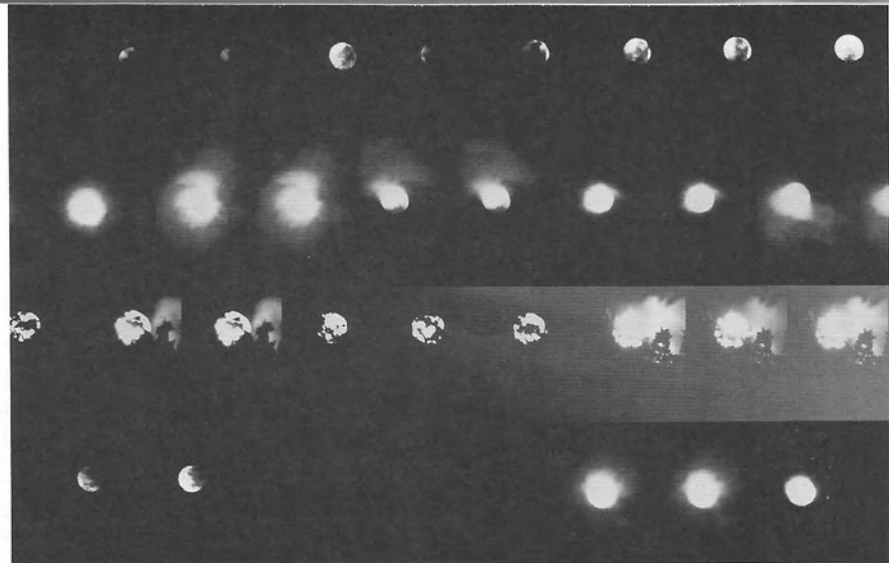
For the panel *Expanding Frames: What the Hell Was That?* (which had panelists – including myself – select their favorite knotty AAFF experimental films to untie), Richard Tuohy generously conceded to showing a single-channel digital approximation of his mesmerizing 16mm dual projection *Dot Matrix* (2013, Kinetta Handcrafted Film Award). From the outset, the performance film's wildness presented containment issues: how can programmers know its true nature

apart from beholding it live? Indeed, Program Director David Dinnell based his curation in part on firsthand knowledge of the artist's earlier *Screen Tone* (2012). *Dot Matrix* as a phenomenon (Benjamin again) maximizes the sense of sharing (both inter-audience and artist-audience) – a reality of the here and now, and absence of infinite repetition, offering recourse to the digitally evolving habitat.

The strobe as hypnotic formal device was also evident in *Sea of Vapors* (2014), Sylvia Schedelbauer's transcendent meditation on the lunar cycle comprised of a torrent of found images. Malena Szlam's *Lunar Almanac* (2013), the film preceding *Dot Matrix*, a cinema marvel marveling (at the moon) and at our modest position in the scope of things, bled over in a most dynamic way. Vivid colors, like those of the rising orange moon, infused the stark black-and-whiteness of Tuohy's work, and Szlam's moons (multiple in the sense that many nights of activity inform her finished film) were glimpsed (in my subjective viewership) amidst the marks repurposed from manga illustration paper of *Dot Matrix*.

Szlam's remarks provided a fascinating meta context for *Lunar Almanac*, especially regarding the filmmaker's solitude and relation to time and place in gazing at the night sky so lovingly. Indeed, such comments echo an earlier Q&A with Els van Riel on her ethereal film *Gradual Speed* (2013, Gus Van Sant Award for Best Experimental Film): to obtain one particularly sublime sequence, the director recounts identifying a coastal scene—stunning in any case—and then watching and waiting (and now I'll segue entirely into my own words) for the course of relations between sea and land to climax.

CAROLINE KOEBEL





# COLOR ILLUSTRATIONS



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Penelope Spheeris, *Hats Off to Hollywood* (1972), frame enlargement. Courtesy Ann Arbor Film Festival.