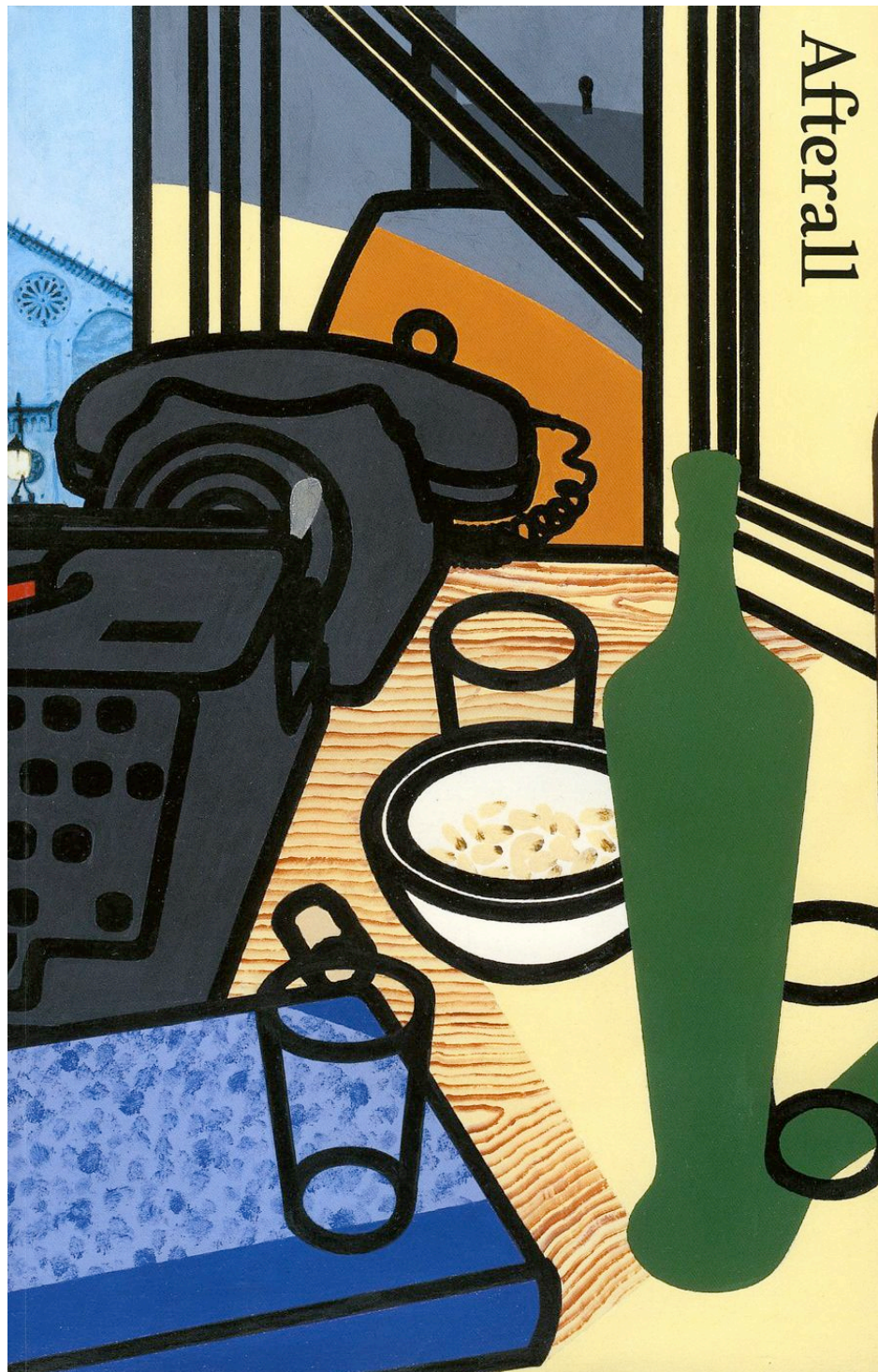
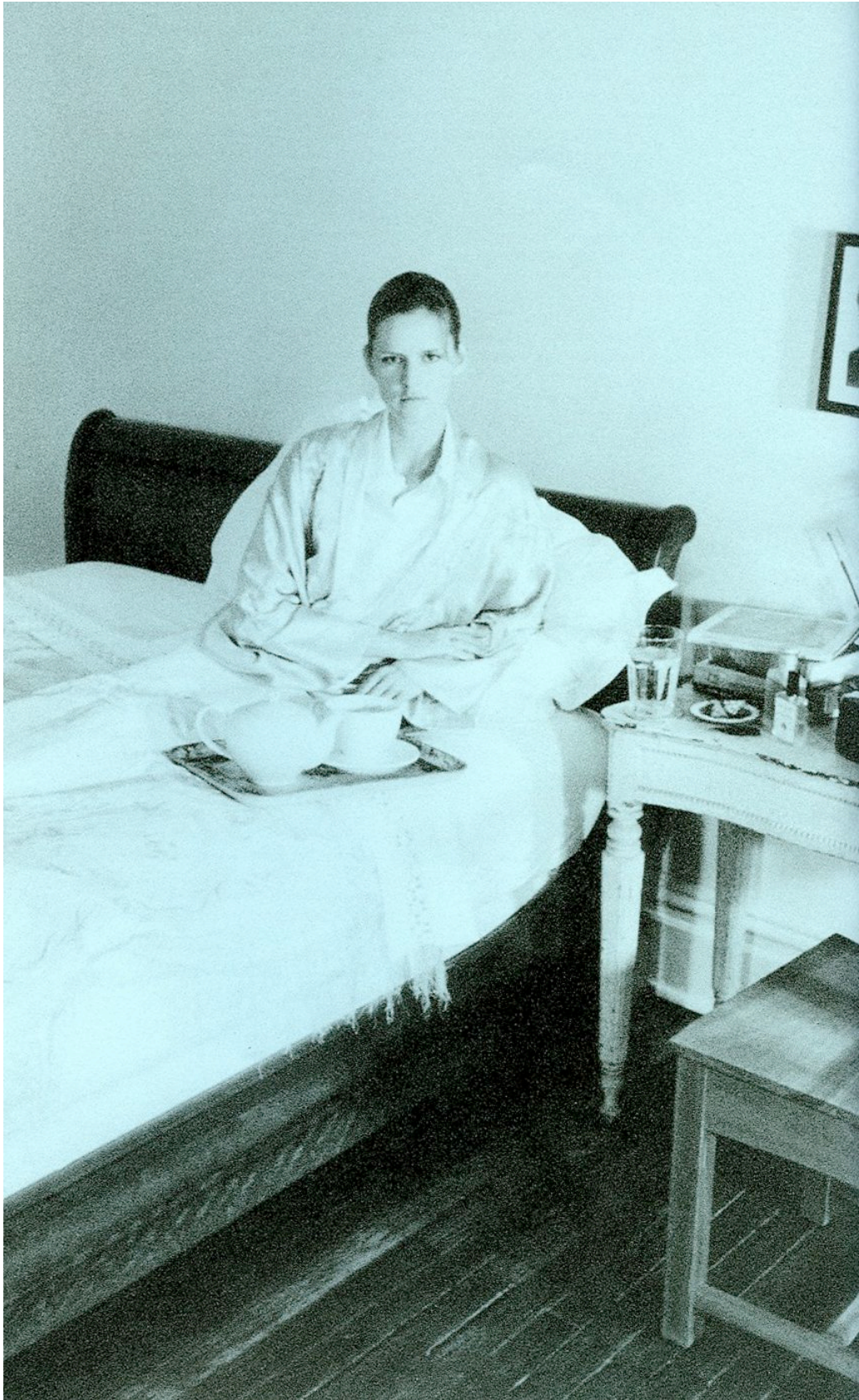


Kirsty Bell, "T.J. Wilcox," **Afterall**, London & Los Angeles, October 2005, Issue 12, pp. 35-52.





Photograph of the
film 'Stephen Tennant
Homage', c-print,
40.6cm x 50.8cm, 1998

T.J. Wilcox
— Kirsty Bell

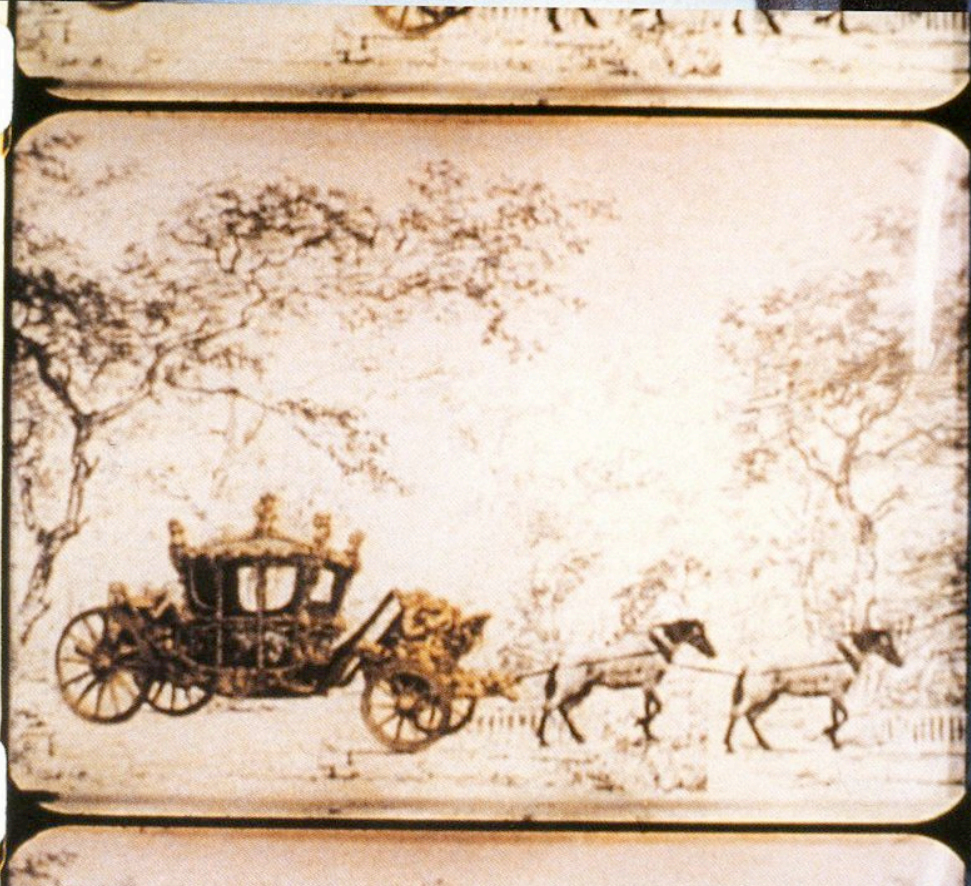
Here, ladies and gentlemen, is the truth ... the whole truth of the extraordinary life...

With this bold announcement T.J. Wilcox's first film, *The Escape (of Marie-Antoinette)* (1996), begins. It subtitles an ambiguous opening shot of a military ceremony, replete with foot soldiers, guards on horseback, an elaborate procession and horse-drawn carriage. The exact nature of the ceremony is hard to determine. It moves in jagged slow motion, the images have a ghostly bluish cast and are blurred by slight reflections and distortion. The footage was shot in close-up on Super-8 directly from a television monitor, so these images are secondhand, at least. But they set the scene in more ways than one, presenting an atmosphere of pomp and ceremony fit to describe this 'extraordinary life', while displaying the artist's crude, though evocative, means of production. The contrast between the grand proclamations of the narrator and the paucity of their illustration immediately draws attention to the images' 'borrowed' status, casting doubt on their ability to demonstrate 'the truth'. This approach is fundamental to Wilcox's technique as a storyteller. Fact and fiction, not to mention fantasy, are bound up in an elaborate role-play where the character of each is distorted and exchanged, knitting a fine but dense web in which the audience is invited to suspend its disbelief. The very title of the film encapsulates this willed contradiction, as Marie-Antoinette did not, of course, escape; she was captured and her extraordinary life brought to a violent and untimely end.

The Escape (of Marie Antoinette) presents a composite portrait, both in terms of source material and in the literal terms of the image itself, composed of layered and overlapping footage. It is an almost physical manifestation of the quality Walter Benjamin describes in his 1936 essay 'The Storyteller' as: 'that slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers that constitute the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings.'¹

The physical identity of the Queen fluctuates throughout the film, as a succession of surrogates are brought in to portray aspects of her character. A distant ceremonial figure; an angelic-faced girl crowned with a halo of curls; a fashion model bedecked in Galliano couture darting along the catwalk as the subtitles instruct us to 'notice the Queen's sumptuous attire'; a stoic, mob-capped woman led to the guillotine in the final scene. A more knowledgeable film buff no doubt could spot the original films from which these images are borrowed, but this is beside the point. Whatever their original roles may have been are now irrelevant as each of the actresses are hijacked into the portrayal of Wilcox's Queen. The film is rife with such slippage and discrepancy. Images reduced to slow motion create a disjointed action; subtitles and pictures often fail to synchronise; the point of view changes as we slide from being distant onlookers to having an intimate audience with the 'Great Harlot'. The escape itself is dramatised in an animation sequence in which a pair of horses pull a baroquely encrusted golden coach before a Watteau-like sketch of trees, while a mannered harpsichord provides the soundtrack. But the scene goes

Walter Benjamin,
'The Storyteller.'
Reflections
on the Works of
Nicolai Leskov',
Illuminations,
New York: Schocken
Books, 1968, p.93.



Photograph of the film
'The Escape (of Marie
Antoinette)', c-print,
40.6cm x 50.8cm, 1996

Photograph of the film
'The Escape (of Marie
Antoinette)', r-print,
40.6cm x 50.8cm, 1996

2

Ibid., p.87.

on slightly too long in its simple repetitive movement, and the tension and anticipation of escape dissolve into a circular baroque daydream. It is just these technical cracks and inexactitudes that create the film's resonance. The suspension of reality that allowed Marie Antoinette to envisage her glamorous escape in a golden horse-drawn carriage in such vivid detail is echoed in the artist's fantastical filmed realisation. The moving pictures Wilcox selects and creates are proposals to illustrate a story that exists, above all, in his imagination, as it did in the Queen's, and as, in turn, it must in ours.

'The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale,' wrote Benjamin in 'The Storyteller'.² His role is the delivery of a tale that is common property, to reanimate it and disseminate it, transmitting the experience across cultures or generations. Unlike the novelist, the storyteller's role is not subject to a singular psychological viewpoint but has a neutrality that leaves his story psychologically uninflected. Wilcox, in his distillation of experience (occasionally his own but more often than not gleaned from other sources), is a practiced storyteller. The subjects chosen for his first films, all of which are more-or-less biographical, are without exception defined by a remoteness (through history, celebrity or aristocracy) coupled with a fantasy life so elaborately developed that it fuelled their lived reality. The fantastical is another aspect that Benjamin describes as crucial to the storyteller, seeing 'information' with its need to 'sound plausible' as a threat to its form:

Extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks.³

Ibid., p.88.

Wilcox's second film, *The Death and Burial of the First Emperor of China* (1997), tackles the subtle difference between vivid description and plausible information head on. He assembles a raft of Orientalist images, augments them with a detailed narrative set out in *National Geographic* documentary-style subtitles (in English and Chinese for added authenticity), and adds an exotically twanging eastern soundtrack to present a rich and persuasive vision of the legendarily luxurious tomb the Emperor designed to house his own dead body. The details we hear are without exception extraordinary: the thousands of terracotta warriors guarding the tomb; the rivers of mercury flowing through it; the servants who allowed themselves to be sealed inside together with the dead Emperor. The 'information' Wilcox presents us with has all the trappings of legitimacy, but the pictures he gives us have been shot from whatever home-grown versions of Orientalism that happened to be close at hand (self-shot footage of Chinatown in Los Angeles; the Chinese tearoom of Sans Souci, Potsdam; the astrological mural on the ceiling of Grand Central Station; or footage borrowed from Hollywood blockbusters such as Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*). The soundtrack is by the esoteric 80s English band Japan, and the question of plausibility hangs tantalisingly as it is revealed that the tomb will probably never be excavated, as the dangers of booby-traps and mercury contamination are thought to be true. The descriptive substance of the text and images we have so attentively been following is thus pure hypothesis, legend and fantasy. As with Marie-Antoinette's imaginary escape, here the tomb's interior, so graphically and persuasively described, exists only in the realm of imagination, but is translated into rich and allusive storytelling.

On a material level, the very images Wilcox presents us with appear abstracted from reality. Their coherence is denied by the strange physical distance within them, resulting from the elaborate process of transference they are subjected to. Movies played on home video are filmed directly from the monitor with a Super-8 camera. This footage, together with animated sequences, is then transferred to be digitally edited and finally transferred again to 16mm film for the final exhibition. Wilcox came to film through

painting and sculpture, and his ongoing interest in collage is palpable in the layering techniques he employs. His films are obviously handcrafted, there is no crew of sound, camera and lighting technicians. He determinedly turns these technical limitations into advantages in order to create an intimate communication of what he calls 'fantasy spaces', and to stir the imagination of his audience. Karen Kilimnik once described painting as being 'like magic' in its ability to transport herself (and her audience) into a fantasy realm populated by teen idols, stage coaches and forests hanging with chandeliers.⁴ Film, for Wilcox, seems to have the same magical property of giving form to an imaginary space.

*For me, interesting art objects are like a residue of the attempt to ... substantiate ~ or to give a body to ~ the drive to articulate or pin down ~ however fleetingly or unsuccessfully ~ a personal interiority or the space of fantasy. I came to film as a ... highly malleable medium that could convey a great deal of layered meaning systems ... and be 'believed' because of our shared fluency in the language of film.*⁵

4
Karen Kilimnik,
Paintings, Zurich:
Patrick Frey, 2001.

5
T.J. Wilcox in an
email to the author,
July 2005.



Wilcox rarely allows the images to speak for themselves, however. Although they amplify the written or spoken narrative, it is the language – the script – that carries the story. Wilcox's texts are well-crafted and carefully paced, their slightly antiquated or formal language fitting their subjects. Whether the excited declarations of *The Escape...* ('And now a great episode!'), the pseudo-documentary tone of *The Emperor* or the plummy English reminiscences spoken by the narrator in *Stephen Tennant Homage* (1998), the audience is addressed directly and implicated personally. The success of the stories depends on their belief, their willingness to fully engage the imagination, and this itself depends on the persuasiveness of the script. The story of Stephen Tennant, an artist, writer and dandy who famously retired to bed for the last decade of

all images
Photograph from the
film 'The Death and
Burial of the First
Emperor of China',
r-print, 40cm x 50cm,
1997

his life to work on an elaborate, much anticipated and never completed novel, is presented as a kind of memoir by a relative of his (the model Stella Tennant, who plays a cameo role as her uncle, dressed in a pale green silk dressing gown and sipping tea in bed). The biography progresses elliptically through her snatched remembrances, colourful anecdotes, descriptions of his house and excerpts from his novel while we see images of starfish and seashells scattered on a wooden staircase, flowers floating in a bathtub, stills of Tennant's elegant and humorous drawings, or a scene borrowed from Fassbinder's *Querelle* of sailors dancing on deck. An atmosphere of intense aestheticisation prevails to draw a picture of a man (whose actual face we see only twice in old black-and-white photographs) that lives up to his legendary irresistible charm and eccentricity. Unlike the previous films, however, Wilcox's presence is palpable. We can faintly hear him posing questions to the narrator, and a clapperboard shuts silently to introduce the scene of Stella Tennant in bed, bringing us back with a jolt to the here and now and, most probably, to Wilcox's own bedroom. The distance between subject and author opens up momentarily as the veil is lifted and we see the film's mechanism, and the artist's hand, at work.

6

Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', *Against Interpretation*, London: Vintage, 2001, p.286



all images

Photograph of the film 'Stephen Tennant Homage', c-print, 40.6cm x 50.8cm, 1998

7

Ibid., p.286.

Although Wilcox's style is too refined and nuanced to fall into the category of 'camp', several of the individuals he chooses to portray, not least Marlene Dietrich, the protagonist of Wilcox's *The Funeral of Marlene Dietrich* (1999) seem to fulfil Susan Sontag's description whereby 'character is understood as a state of continual incandescence – a person being one, very intense thing'.⁶ Dietrich was notorious for her extreme vanity and self-obsession; the 'theatricalisation of experience', as Sontag calls it, was her *modus operandi*.⁷ Wilcox's film is both a demonstration of the grand delusion which led Dietrich, and an homage to the intricate melodrama she created of her life or, in this case, the end of her life, the scene here being her funeral. A German voice, as gravelly and seductive as Dietrich's own, describes the occasion – 'the whole of Paris

is weeping' – and distinguished guests rush to the church, jealously eyeing each other, while queers the world over dress in costumes from her films to honour her memory. Of course, in actual fact, Dietrich outlived most of her celebrated contemporaries, dying old and alone in a decrepit apartment in Paris, having hidden for years from the world to allow the legend of her beauty to live on, unspoiled by the unfortunate ravages of age.

Death has a lingering presence in Wilcox's films, though its effect is not of tragedy. Like Dietrich herself, he screens the awkward, messy details of death behind a façade of ceremony. In his hands death is, as Benjamin called it, paraphrasing Baudelaire, 'the last journey of the flaneur'.⁸ Its trappings are so intricately orchestrated that the grim reality is overstepped, or it is escaped entirely, through fantasy. It is at once denied and overwhelmingly present. In *The Little Elephant* (2001) the death of his mother is the turning point in this coming-of-age story of a Babaresque elephant. In *Hadrian and Antinous* (2001) Hadrian's death is prevented only by the self-sacrificial drowning of his beautiful lover, Antinous, who we see drifting beneath sun-dappled water. On a material level, the accelerated degradation of film quality that Wilcox encourages through his laborious process of transferal could be seen as a journey towards the death of film itself. However, in the very making of the films, Wilcox is defying death, or at least perpetuating the story of a life. Death, perhaps, is essential for the story itself to live; as Benjamin said, 'not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life – and this is the stuff that stories are made of – first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death... Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell.'⁹

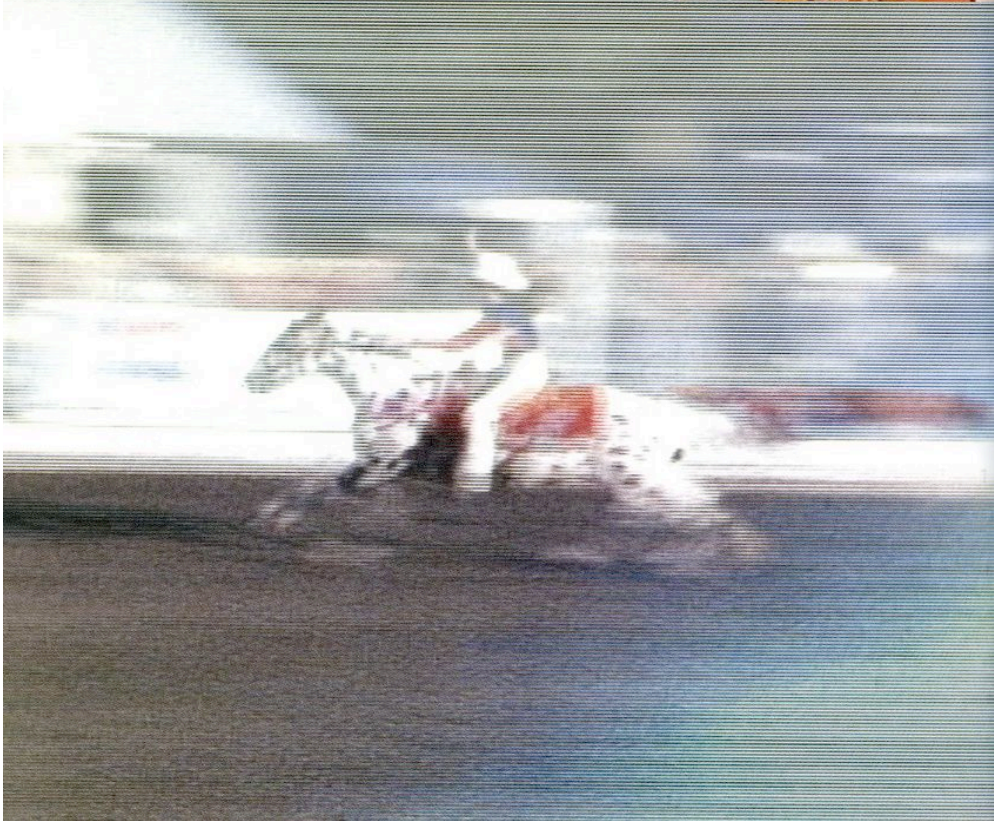
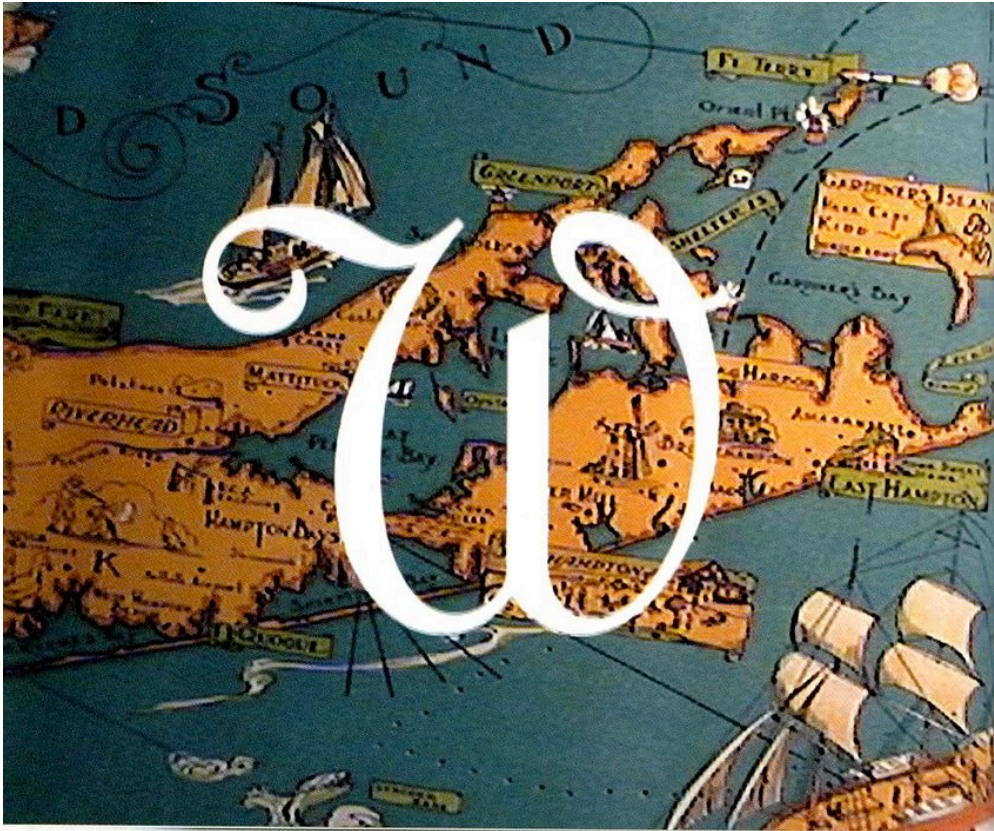
Wilcox's recent films, a series of vignettes in groups of three or four he calls *Garlands*, also touch on death as a persuasive subject matter, but have done away with the ceremonial pomp of earlier films in favour of an incidental, anecdotal and quite often personal flavour entirely fitting with their concentrated format. Short, silent collages of imagery, they have a more informal quality than their longer predecessors and are strung together like beads, despite the lack of a direct or single narrative thread joining them. In the first *Garland*, for instance, a moving elegy to the artist's late stepmother ('the first innately cool person I had met') consisting of snapshots and shaky hand-held camera shots of twilight landscapes is followed by the rather more dramatic story of the massacre of the last Tsar of Russia and his family, though Wilcox dwells on the endearing fact that the family's bulldog was with them to the last, and buried alongside them. Finally comes *Fraise des Bois*, a clunky animation of little wooden flowerpot figurines who appear to be standing guard on a strawberry plant which gradually grows and turns to reveal a glimpse of the wonderful, fuzzy red fruits hidden beneath its leaves. As the *Garlands* series progresses, the personal, historical and whimsical accumulate to form a rich and singular vision of life as a compendium of incidents, a succession of inspiring characters, a source of hand-me-down wisdom and idiosyncrasy. The personal and the universal readily exchange places and the story becomes a metaphor for life itself. As with all of his work, the films are projected onto free-standing screens, adding both sculptural and audio aspects that are vital to the works' final composite texture. The clack-clack of the projector fills the otherwise cold silence while the screen, as well as providing a frame, embodies a nostalgic sense of home-movies, reinforced by many of the films' muted palates, a 70s-tinged softening of sharp contemporary colours. This softens the imagery, somewhat blurs the subtitles and distances the works from their contemporary surroundings. They seem lost in time, salvaged even, as are the stories themselves. Just as the images appear at a physical remove, their origins hard to detect and their collaged texture obscuring context, so the stories are presented as tarnished, handed-on, the temporary property of this storyteller until the next one takes them on.

Photograph from
the film 'The Funeral
of Marlene Dietrich',
r-print, 40.6cm x
50.8cm, 1999

8
W. Benjamin,
'Paris, Capital of the
Nineteenth Century',
in *Reflections*,
New York: Schocken
Books, 1986, p.157.

9
W. Benjamin,
'The Storyteller',
op. cit., p.94.





Garland 3, 16mm,
colour, 9min 5sec, 2003

T.J. Wilcox: From Dusk till Dawn
— Bettina Funcke

Garland 4, 16mm,
colour, 8min 33sec,
2005

The world must be made romantic. Then once more we shall discover its original meaning. To make something romantic is nothing else but a qualitative potentialisation. In such an operation, the lower self becomes identified with the higher self. We ourselves are this series of qualitative potentials... Insofar as I render a higher meaning to what is ordinary, a mysterious appearance to what is customary, an infinite look to the finite, I am romanticising.

— Novalis¹

1

Novalis, *Fragments* (1798), in Howard E. Hugo (ed.), *The Portable Romantic Reader*, New York: Viking Press, 1957, p.51.

2

Charles Baudelaire, 'The Setting of the Romantic Sun', *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p.297.

3

See Friedrich Kittler, 'Memories Are Made for You', in Rebecca Comay (ed.), *Lost in the Archives*, Toronto: Alfabet City, 2002, p.406.

4

Johanna Burton, 'T.J. Wilcox', *Artforum*, April 2005, p.188.

The birth of film in the late 19th Century happens to have occurred at the same time as a moment of literary and artistic decadence. The moment is summed up in 'The Setting of the Romantic Sun', a poem by Charles Baudelaire from the 1868 edition of his collection *The Flowers of Evil*. The poem reflects on a 'dying god' and the swimming 'odours of the tomb' that appear during the 'remorseless night [that] establishes her reign'. The poem strives to capture the atmosphere of a certain light growing dim, a slow transition from warmth to coldness, an ideal swallowed up in base matter. With the setting of the Romantic sun, the precious light that allowed one to differentiate, the hope for a harmonious synthesis of opposites, was replaced by the twilight, gray-on-gray of a decadent age, in a fluid transition from good to evil, necessity to luxury, origin to artifice, life to death. Baudelaire's attempt 'to trap one ray, at least one fading thing', serves as a useful image for understanding T.J. Wilcox's film and video works.² One might say they take place at another moment of loss and passage, in an area between the dusk of the history of celluloid film, a translucent medium tied to projected light, and the dawn of a new era of digital film, the material existence of which is based on binary code, and a computer architecture built for storage, transferal and processing.³

There is an eerie melancholy to Wilcox's *Garlands* (2003—), an ongoing series of films whose number now stands at 21. None longer than three minutes, a disparate group 'strung together like celluloid jewels', the films are presented simultaneously in the nocturnal space of the darkened gallery, an intermingled accumulation of historical and personal, fact and myth, in which a love for historical minutiae figures as a trace of the truth while evoking the sentimental techniques of the Black Romantics.⁴ A partial list of these footnotes to history would include the 1918 execution of the Romanovs, which apparently claimed the life of an innocent dog called Ortino, various tragic residents of the Place Vendôme in Paris, such as Frédéric Chopin, the burial wishes of the artist's stepmother Ann, possible traditions underlying the Japanese wooden dolls known as Kokeshi, Sarah Jessica Parker's televised dash to a Manhattan subway entrance, a collection of sunsets, a tour of the globe as seen through vintage postcards, and the revelation that a recently deceased neighbour of the artist overheard a conversation between swans that identified the end of the world as 16 December 2012.

Garlands are often composed of dead or dying flowers, and are put to use in rites of passage like death, marriage or homecoming. The word, however,

also has the less-familiar definition of an anthology of poems or ballads. Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* happens to share both senses of the word with Wilcox's film series. This renowned book of poetry is steeped in the classic figures of decadence: twilight, artifice, nature, beauty, decay, death, loss; a refined aesthetic sentiment borne of deep transition and the sense of decline. T.J. Wilcox's work marks the passage of the golden age of film; a nostalgic relationship to the romantic sentiment – arguably embodied by that golden age itself – characterises most of the artist's films. They muse on a technique in which the becoming sensual of each thought and the becoming thought of all sensual material was the true goal of thinking itself.

THE MAKING OF: TECHNIQUE DURING THE DUSK OF FILM

Releasing 'images' from stories thus means increasing their power of infinite interconnection within a space whose aesthetic name is mystery and whose political name is History.
 — Jacques Rancière ⁵

5
 Jacques Rancière, 'Godard, Hitchcock, and the Cinematographic Image', in Michael Temple, James S. Williams and Michael Witt (eds.), *Forever Godard*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004, p.226.

6
 T.J. Wilcox, quoted in Reena Jana, 'The Recovery of Memory', *tema celeste*, no.105,



Though he trained as a painter, Wilcox explains that he was drawn to film for its 'ability to contain layered, complicated information without heaviness.'⁶ He begins a piece by filming the basic footage on Super-8 film. This might mean turning the camera on his dog, Louis, for the Romanov tale, filming from still images such as postcards, capturing articles from newspapers and magazines, or taking movie fragments off the television screen. After this footage is gathered, it is transferred to digital video, not simply for editing, but also for any necessary manipulations. Artifice, after all, is important. Wilcox, for instance, altered an image of the black royal dog Ortino to match his footage of Louis, a white French bulldog. Once complete, Wilcox transfers the material to 16mm-film for

Sept/Oct 2004, p.56.
 Garland 1, 16mm, colour, 8min 6sec, 2003

projection. The resulting films are grainy, with high contrast and saturated colors, shimmering with an odd light bestowed by their multiple, layered generations. The artist's comment about his own procedure has been quoted several times, and is worth repeating: 'This process of transferring from film to video to film gives the works a very specific look or an uncommon palate because the image shifts with each transfer. At the labs they think I'm losing image but I always feel like I'm gaining something new with each step in the process.'⁷

Wilcox's work is a mixed breed of sorts, not simply with regard to these material techniques, but also with respect to different narrative traditions. To make the ground, so to speak, of his work, he might rely on the conventions and elements of commercial cinema – script, characters, camera work and lighting – but it is in the post-production that his own peculiar techniques intervene and point us elsewhere. With each cut, each medium transfer and every layer, Wilcox somehow increases the density; with each step he arranges and rearranges units of meaning, and one suddenly sees his hand everywhere. In the impacted essay-film tradition of Jean-Luc Godard or Chris Marker, material is presented in both personal and discursive styles to muddle subjective history with newsreel history.



Garland 2, 16mm,
colour, 5min 47sec,
2003

overleaf
Garlands, installation
view, Metro Pictures,
2005

What happens, exactly, when one divorces bits of film from their original narrative continuums and binds them anew? Wilcox refashions these pieces as he wants us to see them, as icons of pure presence, the results of a quest for new sensation. His emphasis on heroic figures does not stand in contradiction to his practice of connecting anything with everything. Rancière's observation about Godard could just as well refer to Wilcox:

Connecting one shot to another, a shot to a phrase, fresco, song, political speech, newsreel image or advertisement, etc., still means both staging a clash and framing a continuum. The time-space of the clash and the time-space of the



*continuum have, in fact, the same name: History. Disconnecting images from stories, Godard assumes, is connecting them so as to make History. But history precisely means two different things. For some decades history has been plotted out as an open field of division and conflict. The historical connection of a cinematographic shot with a newsreel or an advertising image thus meant the demonstration of a contradiction and the appeal to the spectator as an agent in the process of historical conflict.*⁸

8
J. Rancière, op. cit.,
p.225.

Yet even as video or film artists claim allegiance to the 1960s' critical tradition personified by Godard, 'they now tend, rather than to disclose the relations of power hidden between things and images, to present us with sets of images and items that bear witness to the mystery of co-presence or to frame symbolic representations of the human condition'.⁹ The practice of critical montage has been overturned: no longer a means of prying open ideological secrets, it has become a way of establishing playful mystifications.

9
Ibid., p.231.

In Wilcox's case, mystery is often rendered through fetishistic, heroising reconstructions of implausible anecdotes about personalities such as Marie-Antoinette, the Romanovs, Marlene Dietrich, La Comtesse de Castiglione and the Roman Emperor Hadrian. Simply told yet somehow lacking a summarising clarity, they are reminiscent of fairy-tales, particularly those of the Brothers Grimm, who, like Wilcox, crystallised stories that until then had only existed in oral tradition.

One heroic figure appearing in all of the artist's works is film itself: for example, the materiality of celluloid film versus the immateriality of its successor, digital video, is a recognition that the logic of the moving image has shifted from a mechanical, chemical and optical science to one of programming, engineering and mathematics. Film has reached the end of its golden age and we enter a sense environment composed of numbers. Wilcox situates his hand-made and admittedly computer-assisted montages (sometimes frame-by-frame, in the manner of both old-school animation and contemporary digital-effects work) at the point of this transition, which is not simply a transformation but also a kind of revolution, and he carefully plays both ends against the middle. Giving space to the beauty of a film expiring in a flash of leader is a celebration of the medium in the tradition of the structuralist filmmakers of the 1960s; opening each film with elegantly presented titles in the graphic styles of past decades and capping it with a title card announcing 'end' are gestures that celebrate the conventions of cinema and work against the ubiquitous seamless loop of the video installation.

THE SCREENING OF: ON SHOWING FILMS IN THE SPACE OF ART

It is in this way that I would understand what Barthes calls 'emanation'. This flow of light which captures or possesses me, invests me, invades me or envelopes me is not a ray of light, but the source of a possible view: from the point of view of the other.

— Jacques Derrida¹⁰

10
Jacques Derrida,
'Spectographies', in
Rebecca Comay (ed.),
Lost in the Archives,
Toronto: Alphabet
City, 2002, p.421.

In 1971 Robert Smithson wrote: 'Going to the cinema results in immobilisation of the body. Not much gets in the way of one's perception. All one can do is look and listen. One forgets where one is sitting.'¹¹ Wilcox's viewer is situated quite differently, in confrontation with a complex, almost theatrical assemblage. In the same essay Smithson pointed to film's 'wilderness of elsewhere', and this bewildering territory, which for him unfolded primarily in one's memory of a movie, is given experiential status in Wilcox's installations as the audience is assigned neither a fixed seating location nor a singular image. At any moment, six of the *Garlands* films screen simultaneously on six collapsible screens, projected from noisy Eiki Slim Lines, a once-typical home-movie accessory. The gallery is overwhelmed with the rattling of the reels and the whirr of serial mechanics, lit only by the mixture of screen-reflected light. To watch six films at once is impossible, but in this setting it is equally challenging to patiently

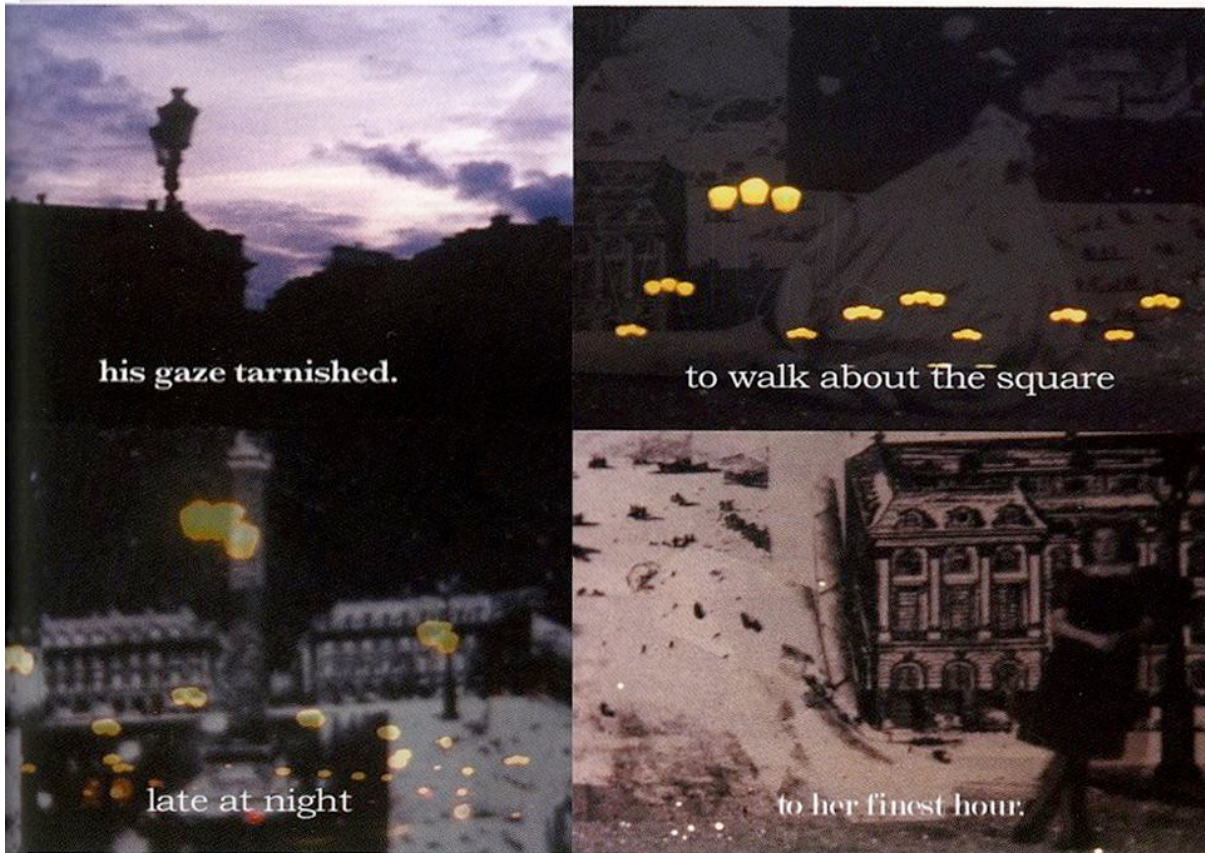
11
Robert Smithson,
'A Cinematic Atopia',
Artforum, September
1971, p.53.

12

Heidi Zuckerman
Jacobson in
conversation with
the artist, 18 March
2002, in T.J. Wilcox:
Smorgasbord,
exhibition brochure,
University of
California, Berkley
Art Museum, 2002.

take in one singular reel after another. At the same time, the frequent subtitles ensure that one is reluctant to drift among the images too much, lest one miss a clue crucial to any one tale, or even to the overall project itself.

This experience of languorous struggle evoked by Wilcox's installation could be seen as a response to a new era of images and how they are experienced. Clearly the physical means of projection has always been a part of cinema's magical appeal. For a long time, film was what was shown in a cinema. This period, however, now becomes a kind of prehistory, the base not simply for digital and digital-assisted media, but for a set of entirely new viewing circumstances: home television, of course; the computer; the video-installation; the waiting areas of airports and train stations; bars; and the view-finding screens of still cameras, which are also now video devices. Wilcox touches on this transition, explaining: 'My work is informed by the different ways we experience film, from movies in the Cineplex or National Geographic newsreels in the classroom, to the mini-epics we construct, surfing through the TV channels, remote control in hand. Though I understand the tricks of movie making, I still believe in its magic and I use it to pay homage to people or ideas I wish to preserve.'¹²



Garland 5, 16mm,
colour, 6min 49sec,
2005

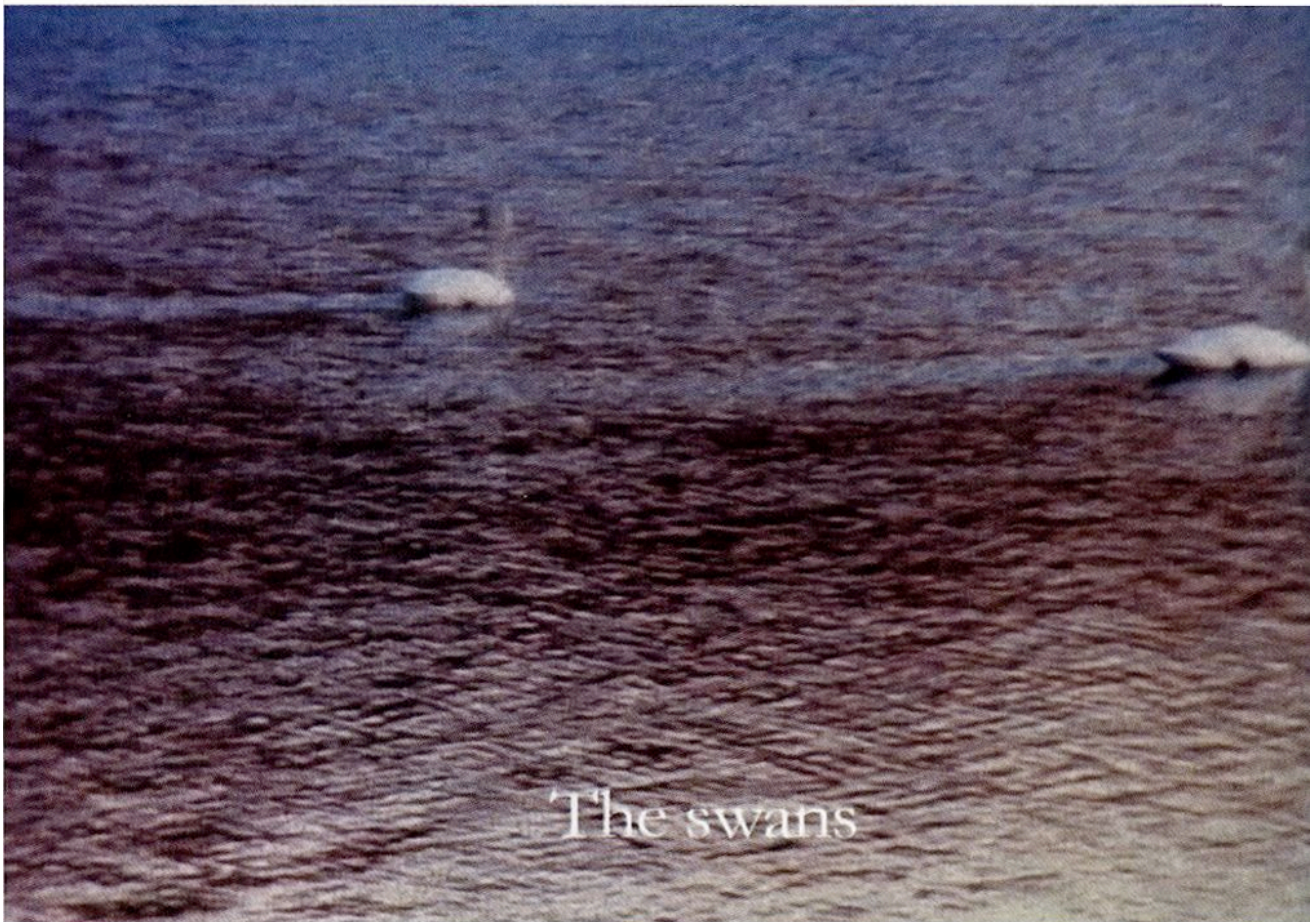
DAWN: THE DIGITAL AGE

You're supposed to come in and float out on a cloud.
— Son of Bobbie Zorn, proprietor of The Shady Lady Inn

If, as suggested above in relation to Wilcox's films, Romanticism sees the true goal of the process of thought as the becoming sensual of each thought and the becoming thought of all sensual material, the term acquires a sinister ring when one considers his latest video, which documents a contemporary desire

for artifice in which the guiding ambition is that everything one sees must be beautiful.

The Shady Lady (2004), a video presented on a large flat-screen monitor in a space adjacent to *Garlands*, asserts the new, bright aesthetic of the digital image in crass opposition to the antique magic next door. The opening shot, an artificial deer posed in a garden bordered by a faux-historical lamppost, prefaces a conversation in which three relatives of the recently deceased Bobbie Zorn honour her and The Shady Lady Inn, her life's work. The inn, a B&B made over as a menagerie of today's entirely unhistorical notions of beauty, embodies Zorn's commitment to the flamboyant life well lived. Her son observes: 'They lived the life that most people watch on TV,' presumably referring to all the dolls, gift beer steins, collectible teapots, crystalware. Television, among the most ahistorical of media, produces a new form of post-Romantic nostalgia out of biting light, without film's nocturnal suggestion of things long past. Wilcox exaggerates the tendencies of both of his chosen mediums. He might here be pointing to a future beauty, one beyond tradition and filled with all the presentness of popular culture, one which ignores any historical context or cultural traces left by the many generations that came before.



Garland 6, 16mm,
colour, 9min 13sec,
2005

