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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 Rancière⁵

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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.

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

7
T.J. Wilcox, quoted in Lawrence A. Rickels, 'The Loss Generation', *Art/Text*, no.64, 1999.

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.



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

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

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.

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

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

8
J. Rancière, *op. cit.*,
p.225.

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Ibid., p.231.

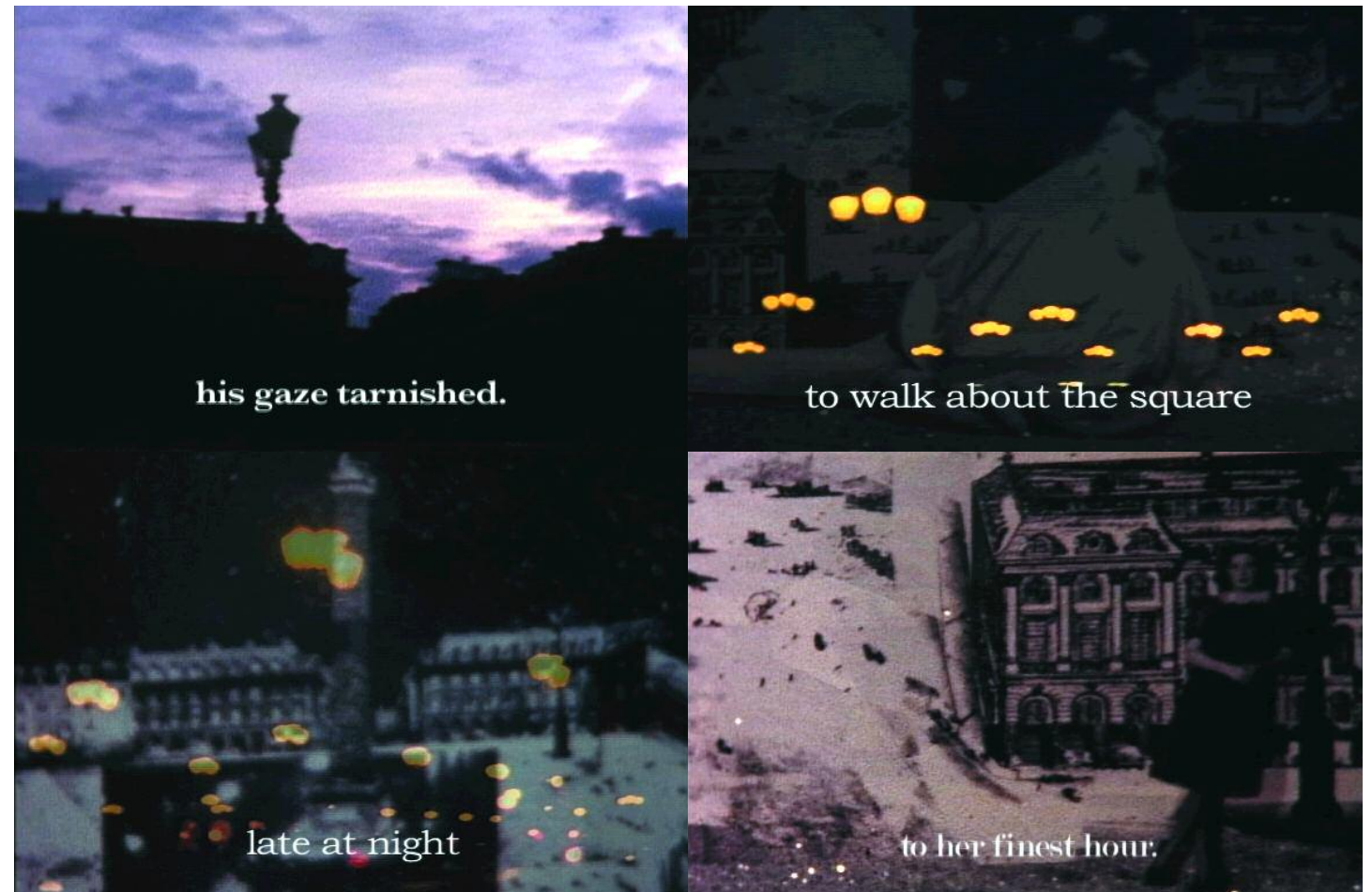
12
Heidi Zuckerman
Jacobson in
conversation with
the artist, 18 March
2002, in *T.J. Wilcox:
Smorgasbord*,
exhibition brochure,
University of
California, Berkley
Art Museum, 2002.

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

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

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

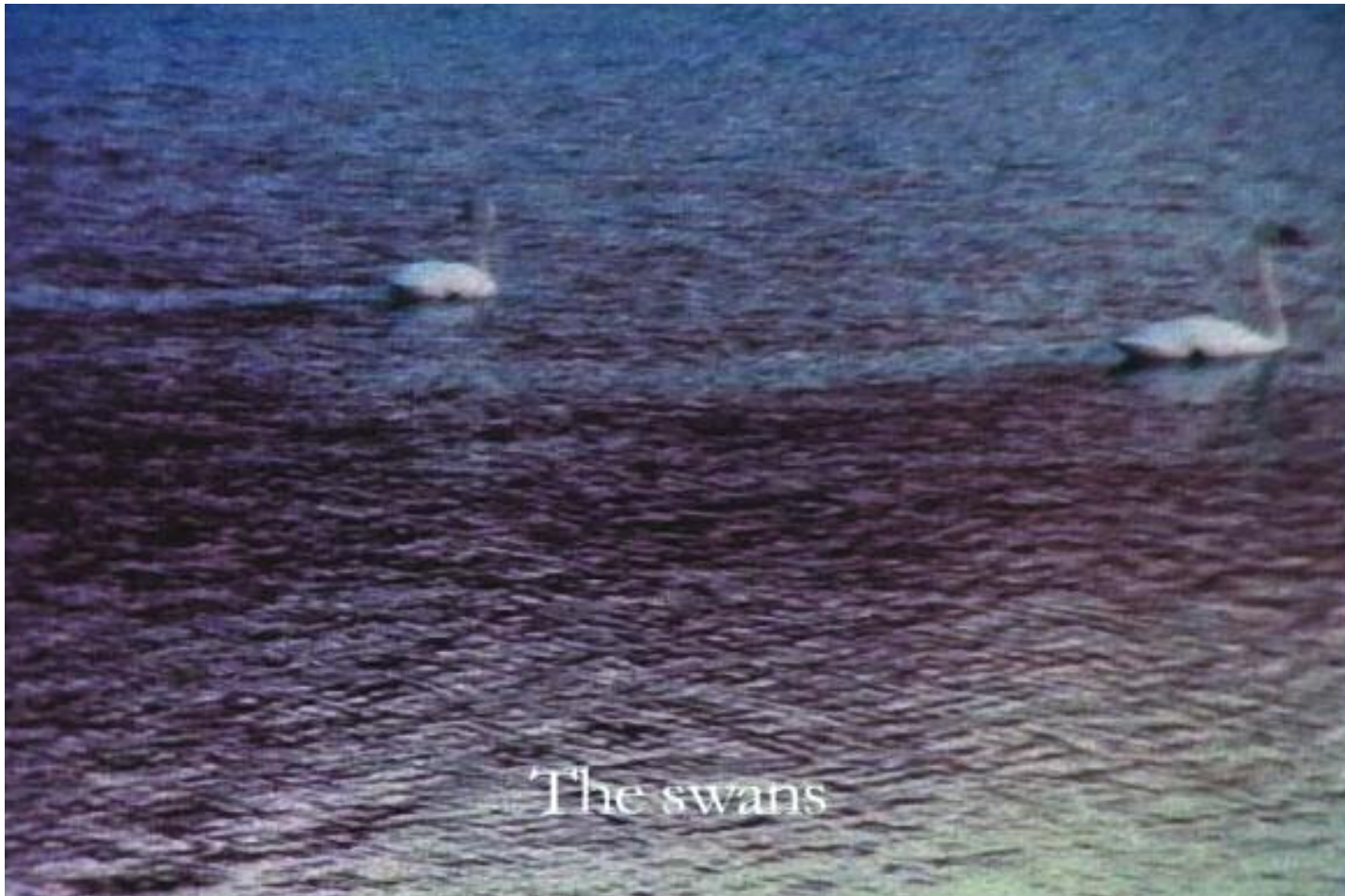
DAWN: THE DIGITAL AGE

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