
Sculpting with Cinema
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Sculpting Cinema
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What Was Will Be: Magic, ural Cinema

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What Was Will Be[1] brings together works by Kristie MacDonald and Christina Battle, two projects interrogating the archive and the role of the artist as historian. Exhibited together at Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography (Toronto) in January of 2014, MacDonald's *Mechanisms for Correcting the Past* (2013) and Battle's *dearfield, colorado* (2012) both challenge the lens-based image's straight-forward claim to fixed veracity, instead proposing alternative and multimodal ways of coming to terms with—and pushing against—historical records of natural disaster. I propose that, in looking at the two bodies of work side-by-side, we might experience their convergence as a powerful instance of secular magic—magic without religious connotations or elements; a performative and site-specific ritual that extends and shifts both space and time, allowing for radical forms of presence.[2] In doing so, not only do historical lineages emerge but also, more importantly, the potential of a magical interpretation of the works as sculptural cinema begins to manifest, considering the politics of the image and its material, spectatorial, and temporal concerns.

MacDonald's *Mechanisms for Correcting the Past* brings together a vernacular archive of black and white decommissioned press photographs and postcards that the artist sourced from eBay. Depicting houses unmoored from their foundations and deposited askew after various unspecified natural disasters, *Mechanisms* re-visions them, reorienting the horizon and, in effect, proposing a rectification of past tragedies. The body of work consists of a cluster of framed photographic prints, an alignment of images like a mystical card configuration, foretelling a future based on infinite cycles of past occurrences.

The centrepiece of the body of work is a mechanical table built by MacDonald that steadily rotates a projector in order to continuously realign one particular photograph of a disaster-stricken home. This convergence of lens-based image, apparatus, and movement conjures a cyclical repetition of ontological and epistemic puzzlement: an image that is neither strictly still photography nor cinema, supported by a physical assemblage that is neither simply functional equipment nor ornamental sculpture. fig. 1

In her review of the exhibition in *BlackFlash* magazine, Daniella Sanader recounts her own descriptive dilemma, wondering,

> At what point is the image upright? When the photograph is in a standard horizontal orientation, the pictured landscape equivalent to my own? Or, when the home's vertical orientation is restored, the frame of the image drastically lop-sided? MacDonald's work plays with this confusion in alignment, a gravitational imbalance between architecture

and the external world that surrounds it. It's as if these two spaces (interior and exterior, private and public) can no longer exist on the same register, as if the trauma of destruction and loss has left them radically out of sync.[3]

This disjunction and constant oscillation of alignment and perspective is at the heart of the work. By using a mechanical apparatus to physically shift and re-place a single still projected image, the assemblage here is as crucial as the content of the photograph. Its ability to fill the gallery space and to engage the spectator not only ocularly, but more holistically through a haptic bodily encounter is a vital element of the project, as the viewer's very centre of gravity and perspectival alignment may be skewed and rendered strange in an embodied defamiliarization. The configuration of mechanical furniture + projector + historical image + motion + embodied spectator makes MacDonald's *Mechanisms* a unique magical rite and a powerful instance of expanded cinema, as the movement normally within the frame is re-placed onto the projector itself, shifting the kinesis of cinema into the sculptural forms that surround the image in an electrified archival reanimation.

Kristie MacDonald's vocational in-between place is perhaps integral to this configuration. After completing a degree in Visual Arts, MacDonald went on to earn a Master of Information in Archival Studies. She proceeded to work with moving-image collections in several artist-run centres, before returning to the academy to pursue an MFA. In these shifting contexts, MacDonald has consistently worked at the intersection of artistic and archival practices, inhabiting this gray zone in order to pursue rigorous research-creation work and expand the parameters of both realms. In *Mechanisms for Correcting the Past*, MacDonald gestures towards procedural concerns of archival practice—chain of custody, custodial responsibility, and provenance, for example—by upending them altogether. Using images sourced from personal vernacular archives, and eschewing the linear narrative implied by chains of custody, *Mechanisms* instead brings out the shadow side of the materiality of these images, reminding us that something as rigidly archival or academic as the issue of provenance also has a mysterious quality, when we consider questions like 'whose hands has an object passed through?' and 'what energies get absorbed—and released—by an archival object?'

The ontology of the source materials—press photographs and photo postcards depicting natural disasters—imply circulation and disposability; a fascinatingly ephemeral type of material object. Taking the objects at face value, rather than investigating their history and provenance, MacDonald revels in their unknown aspects. Subverting 'proper' archival training, MacDonald instead

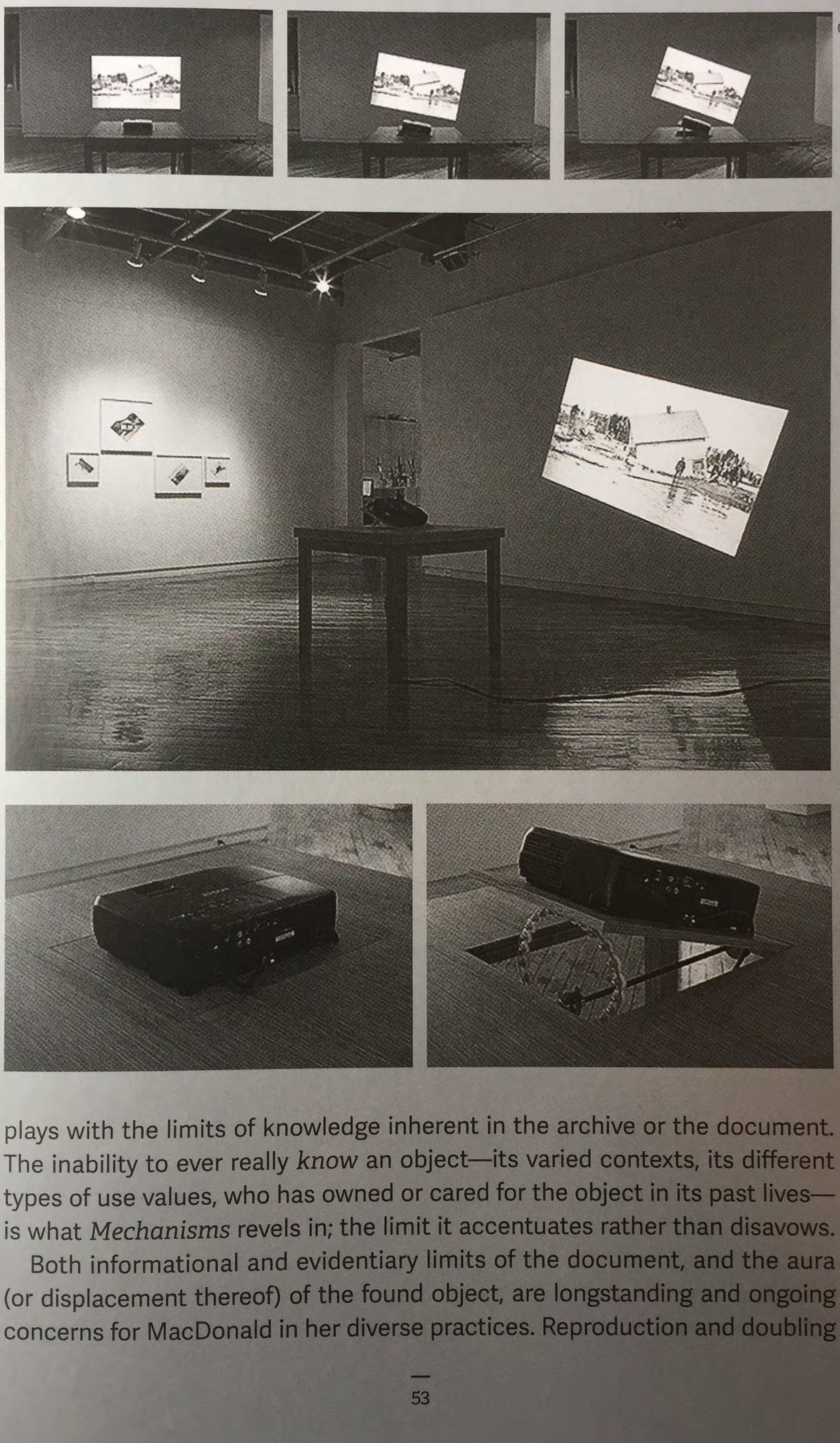


fig. 1

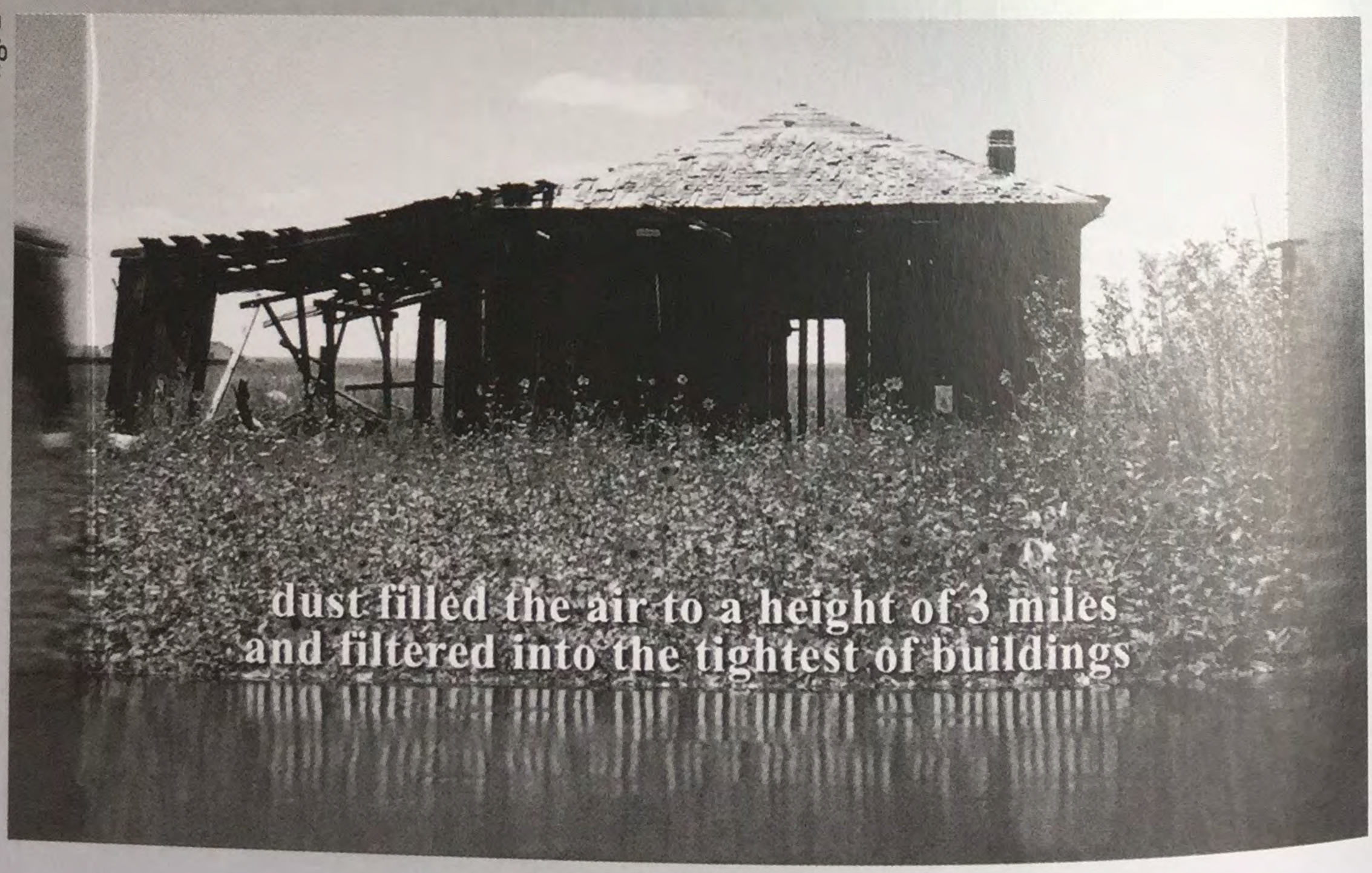
plays with the limits of knowledge inherent in the archive or the document. The inability to ever really *know* an object—its varied contexts, its different types of use values, who has owned or cared for the object in its past lives—is what *Mechanisms* revels in; the limit it accentuates rather than disavows.

Both informational and evidentiary limits of the document, and the aura (or displacement thereof) of the found object, are longstanding and ongoing concerns for MacDonald in her diverse practices. Reproduction and doubling

can be both rigorously scientific processes and strangely mysterious elements of the unknown. MacDonald's work has a tendency to slip between these poles. It is in this space between science and the occult, between the quantitative and the inexplicable, that *What Was Will Be* operates most compellingly. Both projects exemplify the changing of states inherent in creative research. Research-creation as magic, as alchemy: transforming photography into sculpture, the archival into the contemporary, the still into the moving, the past into the present, the present into the continuous and cyclical.

The double valence of the word 'magic' is powerful here, the energetic properties of paranormal phenomena and the illusionist's sleight of hand coming together in a performative transmutation. MacDonald's *Mechanisms for Correcting the Past* conjures up a magician behind a curtain, pulling levers and using strange apparatus to generate mysterious phenomena, bringing to mind the awe summoned by, for instance, the zoetrope or the magic lantern for the first viewers of these pre-cinematic optical technologies. The ideological aspects implied by the notion of 'correcting' the past, coupled with the technology on display, results in a decidedly utopian reanimation of the archival images. Conversely, Christina Battle's *dearfield, colorado* (2012) harnesses projection's magic as electromagnetic energy and indescribable force, the shadow-side of any utopian reading. Playing with (pseudo)science(fiction), Battle's work haunts the archive that MacDonald's *Mechanisms* invokes.

fig. 2



Projected in the cavernous space of Gallery 44's second gallery, *dearfield, colorado*[4] is a two-minute video depicting the architectural ruins of the titular town, a once-flourishing African-American settlement founded in 1910 that was decimated by Depression-era dust storms and eventually became abandoned. The video shows the wooden remains of the false-front architecture, a real-life ghost town made all the more eerie by the disjunction of blue sky, soft breezes, butterflies, and gently swaying yellow flowers that envelop the buildings. fig. 2

The nearly motionless video images are animated only by a gentle breeze as it stirs the foliage. The tranquility is broken only by the chirp of birds and the occasional passing vehicle, the only indications of life and present-tense-ness. Lines of text languidly fade in and out of the frame, describing a dust storm:

> the day was warm and dry
> and when a cloud appeared in the evening sky,
> many hoped for rain
>
> fields sizzled under the metallic sky
>
> dust filled the air to a height of 3 miles and filtered into the tightest of buildings
>
> everything made of metal was charged with electricity

These foreboding first-hand historical accounts of the drought and dust storms of the prairies are paired with pastoral video imagery and sferics recordings (the broadband electromagnetic impulses that occur during lightning discharges), another assemblage of components coming together like a magical ritual. The sferics recordings add another layer of transubstantiation, from the electromagnetic impulses to very low frequency (VLF) radio frequencies. This sonic and optical energy is then extended, the video projected in a room covered in aluminum, the imagery spilling out of the frame and shimmering like the electrified air and metallic atmosphere the video describes. fig. 3

Explorations of the mysterious power of nature as a catastrophic force are fundamental to Battle's practice at large. *dearfield, colorado* is a chapter of an ongoing project, *Mapping the Prairies Through Disaster* (2012–present) that explores first-hand accounts of five natural disasters common to the region (blizzard, drought, wildfire, flood, and grasshopper infestation). Self-proclaimedly "obsessed with disaster",[5] Battle set out from her current home on the edge of the plains near Denver, Colorado and traveled to the edge

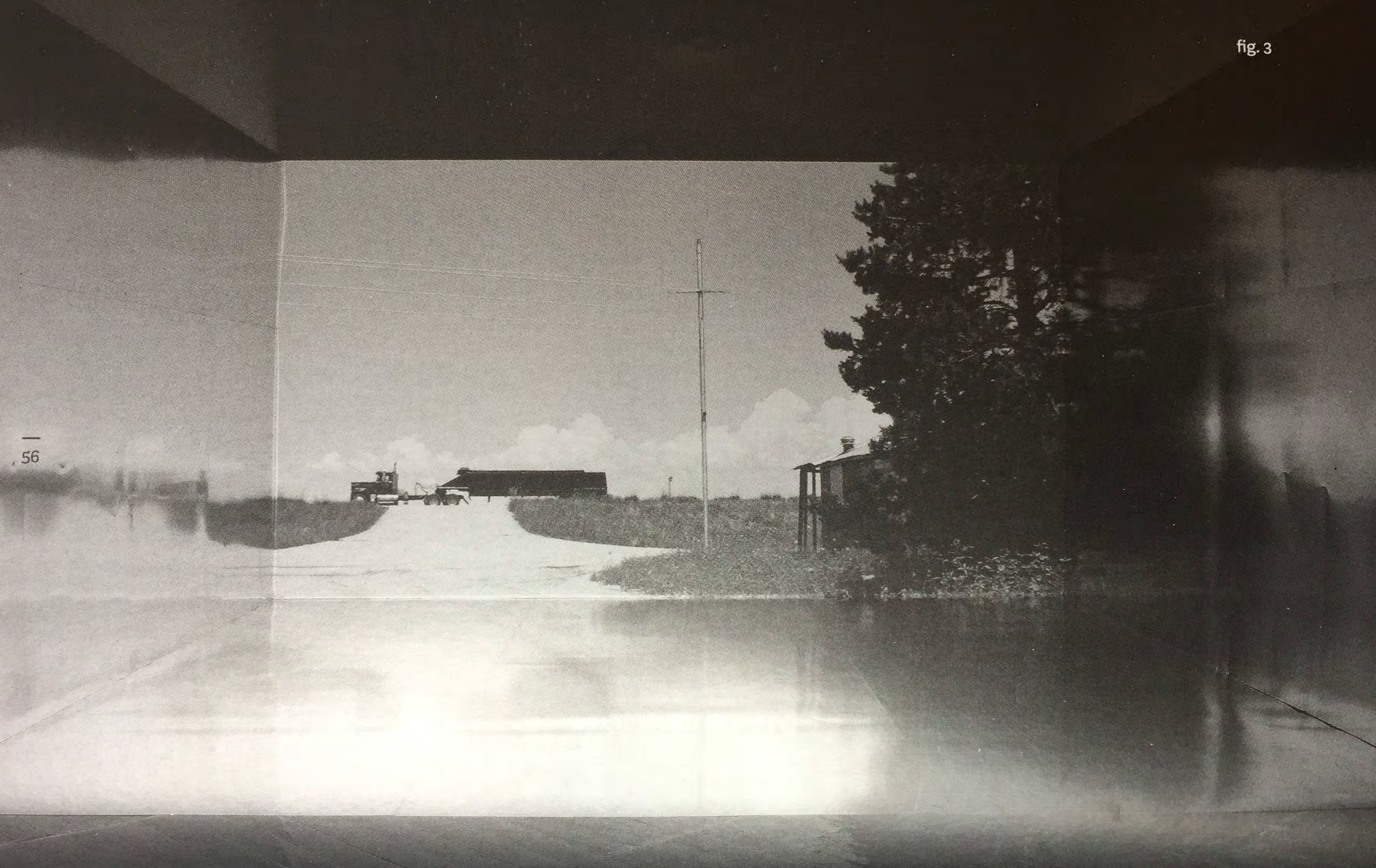


fig. 3

of the prairies near Edmonton, Alberta where she grew up, visiting various archives along the way, in order to collect first-hand accounts of these occurrences. Performing her artistic research as aleatoric, intuitive, and mobile acts of gleaning, Battle drove a specific route in order to uncover facets of histories largely unwritten in institutional archives. In *dearfield, colorado*, the electrified air of the dust storm, the implied conductivity of the shimmering metal, and the projector's beam of light act as transmitters for these histories. These elements work within and upon the architecture of the gallery space, turning the walls and floors into a mirror in which to glimpse cycles of time. Like the magical divination practice of scrying, looking into the future with a body of water or a mirror, this mirroring has the capacity to show more than the original, more than simply what is reflected. The reflection merges with the apparatus, and it becomes physical, extended in both three and four dimensions.

The spatio-temporal politics of disaster and the absence of the human body are recurring concerns for Battle. Her investigations of geography and landscape often depict empty locations, seemingly devoid of people. In an interview with Clint Enns, Battle describes this tactic as a consideration of the difference between 'place' and 'space,' situating the work decidedly within 'spaces,' "...geographies that lack specific locational or historical markers, that can't easily be recognized as belonging to a specific timeline, and can be utilized as stand-ins for whatever narrative".[6] Collapsing or confusing temporality by creating these depopulated spaces, Battle's practice highlights the cyclical and ongoing aspects of so-called 'natural' disaster, as natural, economic and political phenomena coincide in these events. *dearfield, colorado*'s accounts of drought and dust storms could have been pulled from contemporary headlines: Battle recounts that a stage-two drought was declared in Denver in 2013, and "talk of recession and foreclosures further exacerbated by the extreme drought of the Great Depression sounded like they were current headline news".[7] Allowing us to slide between temporalities, time folds in upon itself in a vaguely dystopian manner in *dearfield, colorado* and the *Mapping the Prairies Through Disaster* series. It is this uncanny repetition and temporal slippage that makes the series akin to science fiction, as archival texts are woven into narratives of impending disaster or the post-disastrous future. Indeed, in describing her practice, Battle states, "I often explore the idea of legitimacy within science and wonder about the boundaries between the legitimate science and the unknowns that hover on the fringe, and about how these notions change over time".[8]

Temporality, flux, and changes of state are pervasive in *What Was Will Be.* Whether magical or scientific—or existing somewhere in between—the works in the exhibition share a common enchantment with stillness. Both Battle's

and MacDonald's works embody a specific type of stillness; the calm before and after the storm that references and contains violent motion within it. Trauma and disaster are explored not through sensationalism or the tradition of 'concerned' documentary, but rather through absence and stillness, and the ephemeral spaces between the still and the moving image. The specific calm of aftermath, the period in which we attempt to come to terms with radical shifts (of buildings, of climates, of populations), provokes the question of 'now what?' Where do we go from here? How can the past be corrected, and how can our awareness of cyclical temporalities perhaps be generative of that reparation?

Here the title of MacDonald's work is illuminating. Proposing that the past can be corrected through mechanical means, or ironically negating this proposition by highlighting futility: either reading of the work makes the apparatus central. *Mechanisms for Correcting the Past* animates the still image by physically moving the projector, while *dearfield, colorado* expands the projection outwards into an ephemeral realm beyond the crisp borders of the frame and beyond the running time of the video, into a looping temporality and spectral sonic emanation.

By extending and amplifying projection through sculptural means, these works return magic to projection itself. The moving image has always been closely tied to notions of magic; the magical technologies of projection enchanting the earliest spectators, and the earliest practitioners and performers (Georges Méliès for example) being stage magicians. Indeed, the magic in and of the moving image has, from the earliest days of cinema, entwined documentary and illusionism, awing us with the medium's ability to collapse time and space. Workers leaving a factory, the train travelling through exotic landscapes, or arriving at a station—these views of the real bewitched viewers of early cinema through technological means. In his article "'Now You See It, Now You Don't': The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions," film historian Tom Gunning describes parallels between the early films of Georges Méliès and 'curiosity-arousing devices' of the fairground (and, of course, the magic show), describing cinema's simultaneous "fascination with novelty and its foregrounding of the act of display".[9] Introducing the term 'cinema of attractions,' Gunning foregrounds spectatorship, describing the spectator's position in relation to the enigma and unfolding of narrative, which, in effect, turns the viewer into an unacknowledged voyeur. Conversely, the cinema of attractions confronts the spectator head on, addressing them directly like a fairground performer, satisfying a curiosity.[10]

In addition to exploring the formal, stylistic, and narrative particularities of early film, Gunning's work is equally concerned with the cultural history

of technology. Considering spectatorship's changing relationship with technology, Gunning has described the "move from dazzling appearance to nearly transparent utility, from the spectacular and astonishing to the convenient and unremarkable".[11] Jonathan Gilhooly describes this tendency for the "astonishment at the technologically new to 'fall off' into inurement or habituation" as intertwined with the two common perspectives on cinematic spectatorship, the "desire for submersion, and the…curiosity for technical explication".[12] Indeed, cinematic spectatorship is forever mired in a battle between our awareness of film's artifice and its submersive and bewitching effects. But while the projected works in *What Was Will Be* can be read as harkening back to, citing, or utilizing certain tendencies of early cinema, such as the technological curiosity and astonishment of MacDonald's mechanical table/projector, or the dazzling yet immersive magical shimmer and temporal disjunction of Battle's video installation, they are clearly not 'films' as such. As much as the pieces might be akin to early cinema in their respective monstration of the apparatus and aesthetics of astonishment, these works have, at their hearts, aspects of not only sculpture but also expanded cinema.

Expanded cinema, of course, is as elusive and ephemeral as a ghostly haunting, defying definition, and with as many configurations as there are practitioners or theorists. Sheldon Renan, in 1967, asserted that:

> Expanded cinema is not the name of a particular style of filmmaking. It is the name for a spirit of inquiry that is leading in many different directions… It is cinema expanded to include computer-generated images on television. It is cinema expanded to the point at which the effect of film may be produced without the use of film at all. Its work is more spectacular, more technological, and more diverse in form than that of the avant-garde/experimental film so far.[13]

Of course, expanding any definition thusly runs the risk of exploding it past the point of utility. Offering a less expansive but equally interpretable definition, A.L. Rees has described expanded cinema as that which is "made in and through its projection"[14] rather than being simply a record of a previous event. In the same volume, artist-theorist-activists and no.w.here co-founders Karen Mirza and Brad Butler offer a dialogic interpretation of the mode, proposing that it is because its parameters are still moving that expanded cinema is so exciting. Mirza describes expanded cinema as "the spatial aspect of the moving image" that includes its physical expansion outside of one screen, as well the specificity of its context. For Mirza, "the spatial or architectural element is an integral part of the meaning that the work explores," and it

does so while negotiating a complex relationship with the intersection of time, tense, and duration, incorporating "a past within a present moment".[15] Mirza's spatio-temporal expanded cinema is critical, immersive, "in dialogue in some way with cinema, but interrogating the exhibition space",[16] allowing for performative actions and ways of engaging the body. In short, as Butler adds, expanded cinema problematizes spectatorship, and, in effect, it is "a way of thinking that questions where cinema begins and ends".[17]

In all of these crucial ways, the works in *What Was Will Be* expand the cinema, bringing considerations of the architectures of disaster into the spatial context of a photography gallery, expanding projection outside of a single screen, engaging the body of the spectator, and negotiating complex temporal relationships. The exhibition troubles any hard delineation of where photography ends and video begins, of where projection ends and sculpture begins. In "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," Rosalind Krauss discussed similar problematics of definition with variegated notions of what constitutes sculpture. Rather than submitting to an "infinitely malleable"[18] universal definition of sculpture, Krauss describes it as historically-bounded, with its own rules and internal logic which is, Krauss claims, "inseparable from the logic of the monument," and is therefore a "commemorative representation" situated in a particular place and speaking "in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place".[19] However, of course, such logics are not immutable and not immune to fading and failure, which, as we know, was the case with this sculptural logic. Krauss describes the crossing of the "threshold of the logic of the monument, entering the space of what could be called its negative condition—a kind of sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place" characteristic of modernist sculptural production.[20] Sculpture began to exist in the space between 'not-landscape' and 'not-architecture,' as "a combination of exclusions" or an "ontological absence".[21] Without attempting to neatly graft Krauss' diagram onto the exhibition, I will argue, however, that while *What Was Will Be* is transportable to different contexts, it is decidedly *not* placeless, homeless, self-referential, or nomadic, nor is it a "black hole in the space of consciousness." The works in the exhibition are not upholding any "strict opposition between the built and the not built, the cultural and the natural".[22] Instead we might say that *Mechanisms* and *dearfield* are, like labyrinths and Japanese gardens, *both* landscape and architecture—as these terms intertwine with (the)expanded(field of) cinema—to propose a certain formulation of *sculptural cinema*.[23]

It is material culture that brings together sculpture and secular magic. Artist-theorist-magician Jonathan Gilhooly, in his doctoral thesis, considers

the art object's similarities to the magical 'prop' as objects with agency, following anthropologist Alfred Gell; they are both essentially "living objects…as part of performative rituals".[24] In discussing these incantatory objects, Gilhooly claims, "magic objects (and, by extension, art objects), disclose their meaning through what they are (conceptually), and via what they do (performatively)",[25] containing within them an excess or surplus of meaning in relation to their functionality. In "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology," Gell asserts that, "the enchantment of technology is the power that technical processes have of casting a spell over us so that we see the real world in an enchanted form".[26] Nothing would better describe the spectatorial potential inherent in the enchanted technologies of *What Was Will Be*. This is the essential phantasmagoria within the convergence of these two works as magic assemblage: the uncanny conflict between our rational beliefs and our sensory experiences. Harkening back to our discussion of early cinema, this also resonates with the astonishment and attraction of the proto- and early-cinematic technologies, as well as the ontology of the photographic image itself as the bearer of a double nature: "both guarantor of the real and purveyor of the uncanny".[27]

The material, sculptural elements of the exhibition's assemblage contribute to its otherworldly quality. However, it is the moving-image components that bring with them the essential quality of the supernatural. As Rachel O. Moore reminds us:

> The film image can be seen as the spirit double of the real thing it shows, always independent of that thing, an exact copy that is thoroughly autonomous and exists as part of the spirit world that is cinema. The magical nature of the spirit double is very evident in films that play tricks with the frame and thereby highlight the delight got by its autonomy.[28]

In playing tricks with not only the frame, but also the apparatus used to extend and displace it, MacDonald and Battle embrace doubling and the phantasmagorical in their fantastic and deceptive oneiric manifestations; optical illusions created in the imagination through the changing and shifting nature of their projections. The works contain both site and nonsite, the exhibition offering both historical and geographical specificity as well as radical indeterminacy, provoking the question of 'whose traditional land are we on?'[29] These fruitful ambiguities are particularly extant in the co-presence of the spectator's (potential) willingness to suspend their disbelief and their desire *to know* the documentary and evidentiary facts within the images.

This concurrent openness and closure highlights uncertainty within these enchanted experimental documentary practices. Perhaps *What Was Will Be* is an apotropaic assemblage, an exhibition possessing the power to ward off evil. At the very least it provokes us to ask important political questions. Because, of course, "art and magic are both intended to *change* things in the world".[30]

1 Alongside the exhibition was Alexis Dirks's Yellow Font Forest Green, presented in Gallery 44's vitrines, a very apt "hybrid cabinet of curiosity". Morgan-Feir, Caoimhe. "What Was Will Be and Yellow Font Forest Green." Exhibition Catalogue, Toronto: Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography, 2014. pp.6–14.

2 Jonathan Gilhooly describes secular magic as theatrical, "the realm of the conjurer" in Gilhooly, Jonathan "Enchanted Objects: Agency in the Magic Act and Contemporary Art Practice." PhD Thesis, University for the Creative Arts/University of Kent, May 2010. 9. I use the term more openly, as magic without religious connotations or elements.

3 Sanader, Daniella E. "What Will Be: Christine Battle and Kristie MacDonald." *BlackFlash*. 31:3, 2014. p.11.

4 Battle, Christina. Dearfield Loop. https://vimeo.com/38849808.

5 "Brunch Talk: What Was Will Be, with Christina Battle, Kristie MacDonald, and Alexis Dirks, Moderated by Caoimhe Morgan-Feir". Vimeo, uploaded by Gallery 44, https://vimeo.com/93074591.

6 Enns, Clint. "Investigating the Unexplained: An Interview with Christina Battle." *C Magazine*. 120, Winter 2014. p.33.

7 Ibid., p.34.

8 Ibid.

9 Gunning, Tom. "'Now You See It, Now You Don't': The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions." *Silent Film*. Edited by Richard Abel. London: Athlone, 1996. p.73.

10 Gunning, Tom. "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator." *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*. Edited by Linda Williams. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995.

11 Gunning, Tom. "Re-newing Old Technologies: Astonishment, Second Nature, and the Uncanny Technology from the Previous Turn-of-the-Century." *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition, Media in Transition*. Edited by David Thorburn, Henry Jenkins, and Brad Seawell, Cambridge, Mass. & London: MIT Press, 2003. p.39.

12 Gilhooly, Jonathan. "Enchanted Objects: Agency in the Magic Act and Contemporary Art Practice." PhD Thesis, University for the Creative Arts/University of Kent, May 2010. p.71.

13 Renan, Sheldon. *An Introduction to the American Underground Film*. New York: E.P. Dutton and Co. Inc., 1967. p.227.

14 Rees, A.L. "Expanded Cinema and Narrative: A Troubled History." *Expanded Cinema: Art, Performance, Film*. Edited by A.L. Rees, Duncan White, Steven Ball & David Curtis, London: Tate Publishing, 2011, p.14.

15 Mirza, Karen and Brad Butler. "On Expanded Cinema." *Expanded Cinema: Art, Performance, Film*. Edited by A.L. Rees, Duncan White, Steven Ball, and David Curtis, London: Tate Publishing, 2011. p.258.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., p.259.

18 Krauss, Rosalind. "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." October. Vol. 8, Spring, 1979. pp.30–44. p.30.

19 Ibid., p.33.

20 Ibid., p.34.

21 Ibid., p.36.

22 Ibid., p.37.

23 As Krauss asserts, sculpture is "only one term on the periphery of a field in which there are other, differently structure possibilities. And one has thereby gained the 'permission' to think these other forms" (Ibid 38). I hope that, through this discussion, we may have gained the permission to think sculptural cinema in these ways.

24 Gilhooly, Jonathan. "Enchanted Objects". p.45.

25 Ibid., pp.137–8.

26 Gell, Alfred, and Eric Hirsch. "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology." *The Art of Anthropology: Essay and Diagrams.* London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology, V.67, New Brunswick, N.J. & London: Athlone Press, 1999. p.163.

27 Gilhooly, Jonathan. "Enchanted Objects." p.88.

28 Moore, Rachel O. *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. p.25.

29 Celia Haig-Brown's article of the same name.

30 Gilhooly, Jonathan. "Enchanted Objects." p.33.