



Pat O'Neill MATRIX 262 SEPTEMBER 28–NOVEMBER 27, 2016
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM & PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

Since the 1960s, Pat O'Neill has been creating work in varied media—films (originally in 16mm, then 35mm, and now in digital formats), installations, drawings, collages, photographs, and digital prints, as well as sculptures and assemblages. His work draws on an extensive library of images he has shot and scavenged, often reworking them and combining them optically into multilayered compositions and complex juxtapositions. The influences of Surrealism and pop culture are reflected in his attention to the subconscious and perceptual ambiguity and in his use of wit and irony, which he tempers with humanism. O'Neill was a founding member of the film faculty at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, where he taught for five years before developing a business doing optical composites and special effects for the film industry. On July 5, 2016, O'Neill talked with exhibition curators Apsara DiQuinzio and Kathy Geritz about his work and MATRIX presentation, which includes screenings in the Barbro Osher Theater, in Theater Two, and on BAMPFA's outdoor screen in addition to a gallery installation.

KG How did you come to work both as an artist creating your own films and doing special effects work in the film industry?

PO At UCLA I studied product design for a while. I loved the process of design, but eventually became troubled by product work. So I took a few courses in sculpture and photography. I was in the first graduating MA class in photography; my main advisor was Robert Heinecken. That opened up a whole lot of possibilities, because I began to see how when working in photography I could find parallels to my own thought, and I could find subjects that had resonance for me. I began to realize that I didn't necessarily want to make "pure" photographs, with no changes done after I made an exposure, which was the canon of fine art photography at the time. I began to do some research and saw what a few artists were doing,

like one who made multinegative prints, and that seemed interesting to me.

About then, in 1960 or so, I saw my first experimental film at the Coronet Theatre in LA. The Coronet showed unusual films, including avant-garde work out of New York and Europe, and films from the silent era. I started looking at these films, and then looking at photography, and thinking about how one could combine multiple images to make a phenomenon that you couldn't actually see in the real world; it was interesting to try to see what I could do in that context.

A friend of mine, Bob Abel, was also just learning about film, and he wanted to team up to do a live action film. We decided to shoot at the beach in Santa Monica, at the apparatus where people trained and exercised. Some of them were circus people, bodybuilders, and people who loved to perform in public; nobody objected to our having a camera there. We borrowed a Bolex. It was Bob's uncle's camera. And we made *By the Sea* (1963), a documentary piece, which is also treated abstractly.

After UCLA, I wound up doing a business on my own. I bought an optical printer [which makes it possible to rephotograph film images and to make composite images]. By then, my wife Beverly and I had moved into a house that had a big three-car garage, and we turned that into our studio and a darkroom, and gradually got equipped to work in motion pictures. I really wanted this equipment that was basically in the hands of commercial companies, and it was expensive gear. But people from the film industry were coming to me with projects. We would put lettering into pictures, and animated figures into live backgrounds, and we got work from George Lucas for a few years, putting glows around Obi-Wan Kenobi. I also was continually generating ideas that I wanted to try to do. Before long I was making a living doing other people's work, and doing as much of my own as I could. It was about a twenty-year period of trading off from one activity to the other. It's curious:

the people that I worked for didn't have any idea that I did anything else, and very few people in experimental filmmaking wanted to get into special effects work to the extent that I did.

I tried to be careful about keeping the two separate, but the one place where they overlapped was that in the industry we generate a lot of material, some of which is left over from the process, and some of it had possibility for me to use as a base for creating a new image. I might have fifty rejected takes of a girl on a diving board, and I could use that. I was becoming acquainted with Man Ray's and Bruce Conner's work and with Robert Nelson's, and starting to see that there was this whole world of reusing, rephotographing things. I was fascinated with the idea of making work that contained the ideas and thoughts of industrial producers that had moved on and left these things behind. They had meaning for me that often was not the intention of the producer, but which made a comment on the original subject.

I also used my Bolex to record things wherever I went. I would go out looking for things that seemed to have some kind of subversive meaning in terms of what they showed about the culture, or about our frailties as people. I liked finding situations that were somehow open-ended so that the way I altered the resulting image would make a difference to what it was. I shot quite a lot of material in 16mm for a while, and made this library of possibilities, rolls and rolls of film.

The third film I did was *Runs Good* (1970). It's a collection of ideas that don't necessarily relate to one another, but all have to do with old newsreel material from maybe twenty years before. There was a dealer of 16mm films for hobbyists in LA called Gaines Films, and you could buy titles through them—entertainment films, educational films, instructional films. But the one that I really went for was the by-the-pound. You could get a neat little bag weighing five pounds, more or less, and then you could figure out whether there was anything in it that was of any interest. Out of those

collections came things like in *Runs Good* where there's a man being booked, and he's covering his face for a while, and he's very sad, but also somewhat sinister looking. I thought, what if there were separate panels within this picture—because he was in the center of the frame, and sometimes there was a person on either side of him. I could drop in a square on either side of him and he'd still be visible. I tried a lot of different things inside those rectangles. But finally, colors wound up being what I used, bright colors against this black-and-white film material.

ADQ You made *Runs Good* after a visit up here to BAMPFA (then the University Art Museum), where you saw Hans Hofmann's paintings. How did seeing those paintings inform the work?

PO I was familiar with Hofmann's work. I came up here and had an afternoon to spend looking at the way he handled color, and the way the space of the painting changed according to which color you were looking at. Some colors are coming toward you, and some are receding. Some you can't tell, really. It wasn't altogether unexpected—I had some knowledge of color theory, and I'd read Josef Albers—but I wondered if that would hold on the screen. I figured it would, and it did. It became an emblem, in a way, for that film, and is echoed in the work of some other artists.

KG *Runs Good* exists both as a single-screen film and as a three-screen piece, which is showing in the gallery, and which is part of our collection. Were they made at the same time?

PO I made the original film in 1970, and it showed a fair amount. But during the course of making it, and at other times, I would often set up several projectors in a room, and run several films at once. That always seemed interesting. It never really was a practical possibility to do it—the setup was just too much of a hassle and synchronizing was difficult. Something like forty years passed, and now the digital phenomenon was here, and it became much easier. So I tried a number of things, and



finally wound up making this new *Runs Good*. I essentially started out by just cutting the film into thirds, and then going through and re-editing it, and taking things out. I shortened it by a few shots, and extended some of them. That raised the whole question of using your own work as raw material, and turning it into something that's quite different, but is made of the same original material. That, as a way of working, means that you don't treat something that you've finished as necessarily being too precious to change.

I was really pleased, because the three-projector *Runs Good* had a nice reception, and we made an edition of six, and at the end of a year we'd sold all six of them. I think I completed it in 2012. This was a really significant moment, when a gallerist, Philip Martin, showed up and was interested in this work. For years it had been impossible to deal with the gallery and museum culture because they were only interested in the one-night stand with a single projector. Finally you could have any number of projectors, and you could synchronize things, or you could deliberately make it so they could never synchronize so they would always have a different relationship. As a viewer, you got to edit between these pieces. My contention is that because you're making these choices, no one is going to see exactly the same movie.

I'd done other installations; it was something I'd tried to do for years. They didn't receive much notice at the time. The first one I did was actually in 1969. I made a piece called *Screen*, which was, in a way, the simplest film I ever produced. It was basically about a two-foot length of clear 16mm leader that I spray-painted and made black dots on it, and from that original I made generations of copies so that I could, in an optical printer, assign value and color to each of these and I could have multiple levels. Oliver Andrews organized a show called *Electric Art*, pulling together artists who were using neon, or motors, or anything that required power. At the last minute he said, "Wait a

minute, this is electric art. Do you want to be in it? It opens in three weeks."

We showed about a four-minute loop of this material, which was basically a set of tests I had made to see what I could get out of that material. There were some number—I don't remember, maybe twenty-five—tests which I edited together. We set up a little booth that had the projector in it—we made it as dark as we could—and the booth had a square cutout with a rear projection material inserted into it. So you walked by the wall, and there was no equipment or anything, just this opening, and through it you saw all these dots doing all the things that random dots do. For those of us who looked occasionally at television with no program on, it was fairly familiar.

KG I'm interested in some of your reactions to seeing your films shown as installations versus in theaters, now that you're having more gallery exhibitions.

PO As much as I love seeing films in theaters, it was never an ideal experience for my work. It's a little different if it's a one-person show, but if not you would see your film and, particularly if it's something that's of a formal interest, when it was over, where were you? To me it just called for it being projected in a room where you could come and spend a little time with it, and leave at will. I did a few pieces that way, but it was hard to get a place to show them, and I just left it alone for quite a long time.

Some of the films that I've made require a theater. *Water and Power* (1989), for instance, is as close to being narrative as I've gotten so far, and for that a conventional, one trip through is fine. I'm dealing with light and with a rectangular frame, and the notion of what can I put in that frame that we haven't already seen a thousand times. You had to put this in the framework of filmmaking in the seventies worldwide, which got to be dominated by the structuralist notion that one didn't have a subject matter other than the film itself, what could you do with that. Well, I was never really

completely satisfied with that, although I did maybe three films that might fit in that category.

But I wanted to be able to bring some narrative in as part of the mix, or put some fantasy in, to just corrupt it completely. I didn't want to be stuck with the New York framework that was coming down. Not to say that I wasn't respectful and affected by it. But as soon as I start thinking about what I'm going to do in advance, it always makes it nearly impossible to start, and the only way I can honestly do anything is to lighten up and just let it happen, and not be afraid of throwing some things away. I think it puzzles people, critics in particular, because they don't think it's serious, or they don't think it's substantial, and that's always been sort of a bugaboo that's thrown at West Coast artists and filmmakers generally, or used to be; I don't know that that's really true anymore.

ADQ Your films seem to be somewhat of a hybrid between narrative and non-narrative; would you talk further about the importance of narrative in your process—do you start with a loose idea of the structure?

PO I start completely without preconception, and, as it turns out, the narrative parts of each of these films are added in the last part of the editing process. That's when I begin to write short episodes or quotations or overheard dialogue, because it reaches a point where if somebody doesn't talk, we just tend to feel disappointed—or maybe that's just a quirk of my own. I've always been very sensitive to what's going on with the audience during a screening, whether people are with it or not, or if it's running too long. I don't like to bore people, and that's really easy to do.

One of the solutions seemed to be to use material that had documentary significance. I mean, there are real people doing real things, but they're not the center, they're not the reason that you're there. It's a real editing challenge, to try to gently insert dialogue or music or recorded casual sounds, and feel what that's doing to the picture. Generally we would make the picture first and then, in the

course of editing, begin to insert other materials. It might have language in it. That became a habitual way of editing things. I don't claim to be able to actually make these films so much as I get into a state of mind where the thinking is subconscious and multileveled. It's completely intuitive. I surprise myself. And that experience seems to be what keeps me going.

ADQ Would you talk about some of the drawings, collages, and photographs that are in the gallery exhibition in relation to your films? Do they evolve separately or together, and are they interrelated?

PO I work in several media in parallel. I like having several things going at once, which may affect one another. I like the fact that the way you are that day, that hour, is what's going to happen in that drawing, and it's a lot more immediate than filmmaking, which is kind of a deliberate process. But they're all about conflict between this shape and that line, and decisions about when is it two things and when is it one thing with another, different thing. I guess it's just all the questions that are always there in the form.

Some of the drawings are preparatory to making something in film, so they start off utilitarian. The drawing *Untitled (animation cel from Saugus Series)* (1973) is actually a rectangle that was spray-painted on through a mask, and then soaked with solvents, and later shot under an animation stand one by one by one. It's part of the film *Saugus Series*. You know, I never throw anything away, so forty years later it becomes a still.

The photograph *Untitled (Marble)* (1974) was done when I was working in the darkroom. These two sculptures are from the Parthenon, now in the British Museum in London, and they're fragments of sculptures that have been badly damaged. I ran across a Chevy hood in Baja California. The photograph is basically just those two negatives! Expose one half, mask it off, and expose the other half. They seemed like similarly ruined representations.



ADQ Could you talk about the importance of landscape in your work?

PO I've always worked in California, although I've photographed in a few other places. I happen to be in a place that is spectacular, and within California you can find just about any kind of situation, from very high mountains to desert and urban wastelands. There are possibilities in all of it. Maybe the biggest danger is to be in love with it too much.

Let's use *Water and Power* as an example. I deliberately recorded empty or unoccupied places, with the intention of filming performers in a controlled environment—the studio. When the two are combined in postproduction, I am interested in the tension between them: the different speed, lighting, scale, and perspective. Thus I produce a scenario of impossibility, and at the same time, hopefully, sometimes delight.

FRONT
Still from *Runs Good*, 1970/2012; three-channel video projection, transferred from 16mm film; color, sound; UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, museum purchase: Phoebe Apperson Hearst, by exchange. Image courtesy of the artist and Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles.

BACK, TOP & BOTTOM
Still from *Trouble in the Image*, 1996; 35mm film; color, sound; courtesy of the artist.

Pat O'Neill: *Untitled (Marble)*, 1974, printed 2016; archival pigment print; 3¼ × 5 in. Image courtesy of Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles. Photo: Brian Forrest

ABOVE
Still from *Water and Power*, 1989; 35mm film; color, sound; courtesy of the artist.

Biography

Born in Los Angeles in 1939, Pat O'Neill received his BA and MA from the University of California, Los Angeles. In 1970, O'Neill was a founding faculty member at the California Institute of the Arts. The artist established Lookout Mountain Films in 1974 and was a founding member of Oasis, an independent film screening collaborative, from 1976 to 1981. O'Neill has exhibited his work and screened his films internationally at institutions such as the Centre Pompidou; Tate Modern; Santa Monica Museum of Art; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art; Cornerhouse Manchester; Les Abattoirs / Frac Midi-Pyrénées; and Foire Internationale d'Art Contemporain, Paris, among many others. The artist has won numerous awards including the Maya Deren Award for lifetime achievement (1993), the San Francisco International Film Festival's Persistence of Vision Award (2003), and the Los Angeles Film Critics Association Award for Experimental Film (2004). O'Neill is a recipient of numerous grants from organizations including the National Endowment for the Arts (1979, 1985, and 1992), Guggenheim Foundation (1992), and Creative Capital (2014). O'Neill lives and works in Pasadena, California, and is represented by Cherry and Martin Gallery, Los Angeles.

PAT O'NEILL / MATRIX 262 IS CO-ORGANIZED BY APSARA DIQUINZIO, CURATOR OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART AND PHYLLIS C. WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR, AND KATHY GERITZ, FILM CURATOR. THE MATRIX PROGRAM IS MADE POSSIBLE BY A GENEROUS ENDOWMENT GIFT FROM PHYLLIS C. WATTIS AND THE CONTINUED SUPPORT OF THE BAMPFA TRUSTEES. FILMS COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, ACADEMY FILM ARCHIVE, AND CHERRY AND MARTIN, LOS ANGELES

Film Screenings

THEATER TWO

September 28–November 6

Wed & Thu 11–2 & 5–7

Fri 11–2 & 5–9

Sat & Sun 11–7

Program restarts at the top of each hour
Included with admission

Saugus Series (1974)

Sidewinder's Delta (1976)

Foregrounds (1979)

Total program time: 55 mins

BARBRO OSHER THEATER

Pat O'Neill in person at both screenings

Tickets available online or at the BAMPFA admissions desk

Wednesday, September 28, 7 p.m.

Trouble in the Image (1995, 35mm)

WITH SHORTS: *Down Wind* (1973, 16mm);

Horizontal Boundaries (2008, 35mm)

Total running time: 73 mins

Thursday, September 29, 7 p.m.

Water and Power (1989, 35mm)

WITH SHORTS: *By the Sea* (with Robert Abel, 1963, 16mm);

Bump City (1964, 16mm); *Screen* (1969, Digital)

Total running time: 71 mins

OUTDOOR SCREEN

September 28–November 27 (except October 25–28)

Daily; program restarts at the top of each hour

An Extra Wander: For Miss Chickie (2016)

Gallery

Runs Good (1970/2012)

Three-channel continuous video projection, transferred from 16 mm film (color, sound; 15 mins). Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; museum purchase: Phoebe Apperson Hearst, by exchange 2013.57

Safer than Springtime (1964)

Fiberglass, aluminum, steel, paint; 48 × 39 × 30 in. Courtesy of the artist and Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles

Plus a selection of photographs and works on paper.



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