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INTRANSITIVE MOVIE

(About Water and Power: It has received the 1990 Sundance Festival Grand Jury Prize as a "Non-narrative documentary" and the American Film Institute Maya Deran Award in 1993. It is an optical composition on film, based on collage and animation. There is only one 3D computer graphic image.)

Patrick Robert "Pat" O'Neill is a witty man. He appears many times, in his film *Water and Power*, usually doing senseless things. Fabulous black and white images of his feet walk on the film, his long legs inserted like fragments of broken statues. Electrical impulses reject them, sometimes, from the film. At other times his out of measure naked foot is still, a kind of magic pedestal, the same kind of large foot that appears as a source of movement in Giacometti's statues. Feeling uncomfortable, he puts a paper bag on his head, and a hat over the bag. When he takes the hat off, his head extends in an arc of light recalling his sculptures, created in fiberglass from 1965 to 1970, before he made films.

In the United States and Europe many artists, in the late 60's, moved restlessly from one medium to another. O'Neill was instinctively attracted by surrealism. But he was surrounded by Robert Rauschenberg's combine paintings, Bruce Conner's assemblages, Joseph Cornell's poetic boxes, a kind of work that collects the already made shapes of our lived time. Each object was made a symbol of memory. This art of memory, dwelling in the present, was a way to feel how history can be a personal collage of disconnected experiences in films, combines, paintings, etchings. In reverse order, O'Neill went from sculpture to photography, to films. *Water and Power*, his most recent film, accomplished after ten years of work, was born on the same disenchanted ground of Conner and Rauschenberg, very far from any traditional American optimism.

Water and Power is a combine film. A bridge supported by gigantic pylons is the first image. Clouds stretched in the sky flow through the bridge's legs. The cone of a mountain sitting in the left corner makes a solid shadow. It is a matter of fact that the ground's weight is not able to prevent time from running away. A tiny man jumps off the bridge and disappears, never reaching the bottom. The scene is too fast to be tragic.

"When you jump out" Pat told me, smiling in his eyes, "maybe only then can you do what you want". O'Neill doesn't hold any theory, any abstract idea of life. As John Cage, as Allan Kaprow, he is devoted to an art which is, first, a way to pay attention, to embody experiences, a way to collect and receive gifts by chance, and to give them back as involuntary thought.

Artists cannot yet give back to the world the same order and regularity built for hundred of years by scientists and philosophers. More, they challenge the continuous change of reality, and our extremely variable perception, trying codes and vocabularies different from those that shaped art for a long time. Pat O'Neill's films, like John Cage's music or Allan Kaprow's environments, have lost even the idea of harmony as a preconceived structure, something we can repeat and interpret in only one way. These artists move from one trapeze to another, without a net. Whenever chance is accepted, and has its place in a work of art, we can only receive it as an active, unpredictable demon modifying the composition without destroying it. Cage found his theory of silence, wanting to introduce chance in his music, O'Neill made more perfect his

optical tools, revealing how subjective memory can be. Memory becomes a passage in which the real event disappears and the idea takes a shape, becomes an image.

In 1984, one of the first years O'Neill was working on *Water and Power*, another artist looked at his own mind as an empty landscape. Jean Dubuffet was obsessed by the idea that mind might be empty of any narrative convention. The two men never knew each other, never suspected they had something to share. Abolishing punctuation, for instance, and the distinction between capital and small letters: "you will refuse what you had taken for reality you will dehumanize your sight you will clean it from everything you had to learn you will clear it from names given to things you will focus on everything not yet interpreted not yet made inhuman by names given to things there will not be things anymore when there will not be names anymore then you will discover that there are in the world many more things than enumerated by the old exhausted repertoire and they are not the same kind you had been invited to believe what you had taken for objects and bodies were nothing but transitional figures deceiving you not paying attention anymore they shape and destroy themselves they haven't their own substance they are only mirages of a lost instant now out of the false direction of the humanistic fable being is not in the few points where you had thought to see it being is everywhere an uninterrupted soup which circulates inside and outside the figures you had taken for bodies having their own existence nothing exists that you have seen... try to enjoy what is immaterial allow your ideas to become real things". (*Oriflammes*, Ed. Ryoan-ij, 1984).

While Dubuffet headed for the immaterial places in his mind, O'Neill, helped by Mark Madel, kept building optical instruments to make visible the idea that figures appear and lose their shape, or they disappear, though still existing as imagined realities through sounds, voices, a written sentence. Figures and stories have no dimension at all out of the space and time of their transitory life.

There are many stories in *Water and Power*, one after the other, because the film is long and narrow; without connection, each story appears, elusive.

The humanistic fabula had introduced an illusory realism. The name was supposed to reveal the thing, as architectures of thought corresponding to the real structure of the world. Pat O'Neill's fable tells the opposite: the life of nameless things, a space-time combination of different events falling together. A collage of films, therefore a moving combine. The function of chance is perhaps not the main factor. Figures on different layers are interconnected in a very studied way, having the power to open new possible visions...

Let's dismiss the film for a moment. My memory goes back to O'Neill's house, on a hill that becomes a wood a few steps from the road. I drink a glass of water in the kitchen looking out of the window. There is an orange tree outside, overloaded with fruit and leaves. Suddenly, I rest my eyes on the small white image of Saint Rita that floats, suspended in the air, surrounded by the natural frame. Through a different window behind my back I discover an actual statue of Saint Rita, standing in another garden. Tangible and surreal images reflected on the glass are nothing more than an historical special effects technique called the glass shot, discovered in the 1890's. A small sign on the kitchen window sill says: DREAM.

I begin to grasp Pat O'Neill's purpose: to go further with the idea that art images are not objects. Images are something you can see or not. It depends... if your mind has room. Surrealism, cubism, collage, chronophotography are examples, not models. Stories from reality are the matter of his art. Once inserted in his film, they do not stop changing ("I like the idea of places that are subject to change"), they move in different directions that join or collide with

each other, displaying an unnatural, intransitive movement which does not go anywhere. The pieces in the film are incoherent, as in a dream.

"I like the fact that my film makes people non specific, kind of not really people. They are like a bridge to the screen". The human protagonists of *Water and Power* are no more relevant than a chair, a window, or a street in the city. They belong to the scene, which is not unlike a sandwich: background and foreground with some dramatic action in the middle.

The camera and the 35 mm. film are protagonist as well. The portable camera getting impulses from a computer is allowed to film many hours, at preprogrammed intervals (every ten seconds, for instance), and to move in programmed directions; which is a technical possibility that goes beyond the natural limits of our vision, deforming time. The spectator (and also the author of the film), is allowed to abandon the usual static geometry of a place and follow its change, during the conflict between shadow and light.

The physiognomy of places is written by time, a time impossible to describe, unless we use images. It is the same for human lives, which are not abstractions at all. Pat O'Neill's life began and grew in Los Angeles, a large space, where the fight between the desert and the town is permanent. Because art is able to do what nature cannot do, O'Neill, in *Water and Power*, breaks the assumed adhesion of humans to the earth. Phantom like feet dance around the old fountain. The people of Moses, shot by Cecil B. De Mille, spread over the desert mountains and disappear, as an extinguished sound.

Inadvertently, *Water and Power* is also the history of Los Angeles. Someone, in the 20's, secretly bought the rights to the water of the Owens Valley, 300 miles north of the city. Then the big town drained the valley, and the valley became a desert. Los Angeles grew into a shapeless town, flooding beyond its original limits. Cars, today, run the roads as drops in a river, and natural streams slip quietly into the channels of concrete. The title also is a part of a local scenery: The Department of Water and Power owns the rights to the water.

The Big Tube, carrying the water from the Owens Valley to Los Angeles, crosses the screen twice, and it is so clearly recognizable that it could justify by itself the odd idea to give a prize to *Water and Power* as a "non-narrative documentary". The Sundance festival did it, in 1990. The opening of the Big Tube dates back to the same days the Hollywood movies industry was shooting the scenes of the Red Sea for *The Ten Commandments*, just out of town. But it is not this set of references that makes *Water and Power* a work of art on film.

It is the shapeless story that distinguishes this film from either the Western epic or the intimate psychological narrative. The camera talks to the landscape, the light to time, voices do not interfere with images, written words have no causal connection with scenarios, O'Neill's actors are nothing but shaking bodies scraped by light. Not one word from their mouths. Despite the optical layering, each layer, each fragment of narration dissipates in its own space. The metropolis erases the old warehouse, a man talking to himself buzzes as a bee. We have just enough time to realize this is happening, and then each thing disappears, without reflection. The four panes of a window are definitely empty.

Human bodies are the main battlefield of light. "This film in my own imagination is rendered in harsh black and white. Everything is back lit so all people and horses are seen with glowing outlines". Even the collage seems to stress how its elements become unstuck, in conflict with each other. Not only a film collage: we have 54 minutes and 55 seconds of theater, painting, poetry, prose, radio, music, movies, video art. In one word: spectacle.

Images, like sounds in the new music, are measured according to their frequency, duration, intensity and direction. There is no staff. What is performed is the ballad of life

between the desert and the ocean. Every small drama among the humans lasts no more than a match's flame. Nature, instead, changes slowly. In waves, nature increases its power, human stories vanish.

Indians, farmers from the valley, pedestrians waiting for the traffic light are variations of the same history, a big movement that doesn't progress. The optical composer is able to alter the quality of time, transforming the ocean waves into mad dancers, or runners in a marathon into a waterfall. The author shows the pretended magic by accelerating the hand of the watch with his finger. It is not completely clear if he is exorcising or accelerating death, which is really able to flatten human existence.

Altered time becomes the chiaroscuro of the visual music. About the American flag painted by Jasper Johns, John Cage liked to find an earlier example in poetry: "... by means of language, caesurae, iambic pentameter, license and rhymes to obscure and clarify the grand division of the fourteen lines into eight and six. The sonnet and the United States flag during that period of history when there were forty-eight states? These are houses, Shakespeare in one, Johns in the other, each spending some of his time living." (John Cage, *Silence*, 1961)

An imaginary geography is also drowned in *Water and Power*. Nameless figures move with repetitive gestures in its houses - obsessed with the fear that everybody is nailed on his own chair, that each being is buried in his own being. O'Neill's creatures, instead of speaking, expand themselves beyond their physical boundaries; their movements become spirals and arcs of luminous energy.

"Silence is in the stone. Our pains will be stones when our gestures won't have sense anymore" (Edmond Jabes, *Le Livre des Questions*, 1963). That's why O'Neill's mountains are melancholic, because our gestures are becoming undirected, convulsive, and human figures in the film, after the luminous expansion, seem compelled to return to the starting point, never having abandoned the pedestal. On the stage of a theater the microphone (an animated image) goes away easier than the actors.

I listened to Pat talk, while leafing through a small mountain of photographs. I could imagine him, motionless, for hours, with his camera, waiting for... The landscape's outline starts talking to him as the light walks across. No, this is not naturalism. This landscape has been worked by human history so deeply that it is very difficult to imagine how much it has changed. Pat, actually, was waiting for a mirage of a story generated by that particular situation, listening to the things as they are, not looking to change them. Listening to the distance. Trying not to be guided by an idea. Far from the white noise of words, feeling that the world can grow without us.

O'Neill's stories sound like music by Cage: "Notable qualities of this music, whether electronic or not, are monotony and the irritation that accompanies it. The monotony may lie in simplicity or delicacy, strength or complexity. Complexity tends to reach a point of neutralization: continuous change results in a certain sameness. The music has a static character. It goes in no particular direction. There is no necessary concern with time as a measure of distance from a point in the past to a point in the future, with linear continuity alone. It is not a question of getting anywhere, of making progress, or having come from anywhere in particular, of tradition or futurism... As for the quality of irritation, that is more subjective matter ... its source is not in any form of aggression or emphasis. It is the immobility of motion. And it alone, perhaps, is truly moving." (From an article by Christian Wolff quoted by John Cage in *Silence*, 1961).

Movement, in a symphony, was a precisely calculated process. A bridge of sounds between two silences. O'Neill's silence, filling the entire canvas, is the strongest voice of his

film. The geological surface covers stories and stories of human lives so deeply that there is no way the mind could tell them. The ground remains. Lakes and waters can be dried. Human stories absorbed. The ground is covered with dust. Someone has been there, as the birds on a beach. The landscape movie always sees them at a distance. They are prisoners of their excitement. They can vanish. The camera continues, until the final empty house. No time, no identity: the human mind makes everything flat, on a scraped wall, on a page.

- Rosanna Albertini, Los Angeles, January 29, 1994.