

## Mediating the American Idea: A Conversation with Phil Solomon

Brian Price and Meghan Sutherland

**Meghan Sutherland:** I wanted to start by asking you about popular images and popular iconography. Mainstream imagery, films, and iconography have always played a role in your work, but I think they've played an increasingly recognizable or prominent role in the pieces you've done recently—including *American Falls*, the *Grand Theft Auto* series, and *Empire*. What I find so compelling about this work is that it doesn't seem to deal with popular imagery in the way that appropriation-based art works typically do: imposing some obvious measure of aesthetic distance from it that allows the work to mock it, or to use it as the object of some kind of dogmatic lesson about capitalism, where we are implicitly instructed to think about popular culture in a very particular, and often very dismissive way.

**Phil Solomon:** Often resorting to irony or camp. As I have said before, many filmmakers seem to take the early Bruce Conner, such as *A Movie*, as their model for using found material from primarily a distanced and ironic perspective. My model for these works is closer to the late Bruce Conner, like *Valse Triste* and *5:10 to Dreamland*, coming from a place of sincerity and longing.

**MS:** Yes—there's something really beautiful and moving and disarming about the way that popular imagery appears in your recent work. So I wonder if there is something that has compelled this increasing interest in popular imagery, or else, how you conceive of the aesthetic originality of your work and its increasing interest in popular imagery.

**PS:** We'd have to talk specifically about each project because it wasn't like I set out and said to myself, "Okay. I'm going to deal with this now," as an overarching aesthetic or philosophical decision. I was a child of television and a child of Hollywood. I loved Hollywood films. I loved them on television. And I basically grew up in front of a television set in the suburbs. It was my whole world. I had a deeply vested interest in staying in my room. I really loved being in my room, as Brian Wilson sang it so knowingly. I was in my own world, with my models, comics, records, books and television—and I still am, though I no longer build models, but there lies the link to my interest in videogames, an extension of my childhood interest in using models of action figures, super heroes and monsters to create narratives in the endless landscape of my bed and my imagination because, in many ways, I hold the popular music that I grew up with even closer to my chest as I get older. Every single night I listen to music and I've realized how much I actually believed those things. And I still do. And I think that it's also damaged me in some ways in terms of my romantic foolery. Nothing to do with tomfoolery, just my foolery, my self-delusions. When I think about it, it seems like it was always there. When I look at my home movies that my father took, I look thoughtful and introspective in almost every shot, somewhat quizzical, almost melancholic. I look a little bit melancholy, a little bit quizzical. I'm not running around waving. I'm kind of considered. So, when I started to buy records I was immediately attracted to either sad songs or ballads. It wasn't the rave-ups that interested me. It was these ballads, and the way the records *sounded* on the radio and through my speakers. And I also believed what the people were saying to me. I believed in the essential *feelings* of the records, even though it's all somewhat of an illusion. Same thing with the movies. I would be watching, say, *It's a Wonderful Life* and having a full-on epiphany, weeping uncontrollably when I first saw it. This was a profound experience for me, tapping into emotions that I wasn't able to fully comprehend, but felt nevertheless, even though I

didn't have the emotional wherewithal to understand what it's like to go broke, or to not have your mother know you—all these existential things that Jimmy Stewart goes through. I had the imagination, even as a young person, to somehow understand that depth of feeling. I was inside it.

So, when I came to Binghamton<sup>1</sup> all those years ago I came with a full plate of ingested images from popular culture. And I went there fully armed with a notion of what I considered to be “film art,” which was how the letter from the film department described what I would be studying. My notion of art cinema was the more adventurous American cinema of the counter culture of the late 60s and early 70s and European art films from the New Wave, Fellini, Bergman, and so on. That's what I thought art cinema was. These days, even though I'm really starting to feel a general sense of alienation from the popular culture at large, I do love “having shows” that I regularly keep up with, just like I did as a TV kid. In fact, I find the writing for adults is generally much richer these days on shows like *Deadwood*, *Mad Men* and *Louie* than anything currently playing at the movies. TV is a writer's medium. But I'm whittled down to one or two shows now that I follow and that makes me sad. I don't keep up with much rock and roll anymore, contemporary rock and roll. I listen to a lot of old stuff, to a few hipster bands like Grizzly Bear, Animal Collective, Arcade Fire, and so on. There are some great young women around that I listen to, like Joanna Newsom, P.J. Harvey, Cat Power and a few others. But I don't buy records anymore. I have a huge collection, as you know. So, I'm feeling adrift from the culture at large but I'm still deeply connected to the work that I grew up with.

Okay, so back to your question about *Grand Theft Auto*. I really had no idea what it really was when I first started to work with it. In a way, that really freed me up, not to know the cultural importance of it at all. I was completely naïve. And then as I made the pieces I started to understand what was happening, how important they were. I would confront audiences where, as soon as I mentioned places in *San Andreas*, I could see all the boys in the room nodding their heads—they'd have these big smiles. It just happened this morning. I showed my Intro to Film Studies classes one of these pieces and I could see that I finally reached these boys who were having trouble with all of these difficult art films that I was showing, that I had finally touched a nerve with something that they could relate to generationally. The pieces really do reflect something about the nature of my friendship with Mark LaPore in the sense that we never quite grew up, as it were. We still talked about the same things we talked about when we met in college. We called each other Jippy, a nickname adopted from Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* that we started in college. When we would talk on the phone, we would say: “Did you hear Bruce's new album?” Or, “Did you hear the new Neil?” This is the same thing that we'd been talking about forever, even though he was a father with a child and we were both married and settled down, so to speak. We never really lost our original passion for the popular music that was so much a part of our formative years. We were especially interested in our heroes who had survived and lived to tell the tale. There was always that hope that they could one day make a great record again, and that idea was continually inspiring to us. Dylan, Neil, Bruce, Brian. We kinda both gave up on the Stones in that regard. Mark was terribly excited when Brian Wilson was able to resurrect *Smile* in 2004—that whole story and the legend around that album were so very important to both of us when we first met in 1973.

Okay, so when I got to the “In Memoriam” series [made in the *Grand Theft Auto* game], I wanted to acknowledge that aspect of my relationship with Mark. I liked the idea of taking titles from songs, though it wasn't an a priori decision. We originally titled the piece that we made together *Untitled for David Gatten*, which I was never happy with. It was just a fallback position. Mark just said, “Okay, let's just call it that.” But it gradually became apparent to me that this was a testament, a gift, that

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Mark had left for me and I re-titled it *Crossroad*, a song that Mark really loved as played live by Cream on the *Wheels of Fire* album. I wanted to relieve David from the burden of having to carry around the weight of that title, and also to acknowledge that this was more than just a get-well card, which was how we first meant the film to serve. It became about Mark reaching that mythical place. The character of C.J. in *San Andreas* really reminded me of Robert Johnson in certain poses, and so I put in the sounds of barking dogs, rattlesnakes, and a train whistle in the storm to acknowledge the hellhounds that both Robert and Mark had on their respective trails.



*Crossroad* (2005), Mark Lapore and Phil Solomon

*Rehearsals for Retirement* begins the trilogy proper, after Mark died in 2005. I don't remember exactly when the title came to me, but I've always been interested in Phil Ochs. I still have the obituary from when Phil Ochs hanged himself at the age of thirty-five in Rockaway. I looked at the lyrics again of "Rehearsals for Retirement" and it seemed to be weirdly relevant in so many ways. "Had I known that the world would end in laughter I would tell my daughter it doesn't matter." Mark left a golden haired daughter behind and so did Phil Ochs.



*Rehearsals for Retirement (2007)*

Mark was very specific about the importance of Van Sant's *Last Days* and Ray's *In a Lonely Place* in his life—he strongly identified with both films. He sent me an e-mail—the title of the e-mail was “Bleak House”—and he wrote, “saw *Last Days*...” He wrote it like a telegram. “Truly a film about nothing. I loved it.” And that last bit was an old joke with us since college days. When we had Dan Barnett as a teacher in Binghamton he would pose existential questions to us: “How do you make a film about nothing?” Wittgensteinian questions. We would make endless fun of those because we were having none of it at the time. So, when Mark would go see a movie I'd say, “What was that about?” And he'd say, “Oh, it was about nothing.” This before *Seinfeld* made an art out of that idea. Anyway, it was partly a joke, a running joke with us—he loved running jokes, loved riffing. But the irony is that it became a very telling description of the bleak house that he was trapped in, inside his mind. He was facing the Nothing. The Big Nothing. Little did I know. With *Last Days*, of course, he loved Kurt Cobain. I think he modeled his suicide partly after Cobain. He had a rock and roll suicide—or his romantic idea about what a rock and roll suicide might be. And also *In a Lonely Place*. Mark was very specific about his depression. He related to Nick Ray's film *In a Lonely Place* because it's about a man who could not control his own anger, which was essentially Mark's issue.



*Last Days In A Lonely Place* (2007)

The trickiest aspect of that piece for me was using dialogue from *Rebel Without a Cause*. I knew that some people might have issues with this, as I often do when I recognize appropriated imagery or sound from a film and get tripped out into my own personal relationship with the material. This happened to me recently when my friend Lew Klahr used a Bruce Springsteen song in one of his films. I initially had a jarring time with it, because it seemed too familiar and therefore not completely “Klahrian.” So I get what issues people might have when I do use familiar public material. But I had to be honest to the original impulse. What I love about that part of the video is placing the famous astronomy lecture during the opening tracking shot into the game’s Griffith Observatory, and then fast forwarding to the unanswered “end of the world” planetarium questions from the film’s finale. In lieu of Ray’s apocalyptic planetarium spectacle, I simply stood under a water fountain and let the water fall over me while a jet plane flies over head, invoking 9/11, which is the day and month that Mark chose to die four years later. *Rebel* was there to acknowledge my friendship with Mark and our being in school when Nick Ray was at Binghamton.

What most interests me in my work is to try and embed meaning whose source is initially propelled from utter privacy—personal information that people could never possibly decode or “get” unless I actually tell them the background tales. But I hope that something of the *feeling* gets through; something true will get through, even though you’re not privy to all the biographical details behind them. And I think Brakhage had an analogous premise in his work where he could film the light struck off from his family but you didn’t have to know who they were and what they were doing in order to receive the light and its movement. We could all relate to certain patterns and to certain gestures, recognition of light moving in time. By putting the voices of James Dean and Sal Mineo reciting “Do you think that end of the world will occur at nighttime?” I was intimating an apocalyptic scenario, even if you’re not familiar with the actual source. I know that Mark, like James

Dean, probably left this earth at around dusk, so that was also what that reference implied. When Mark when visited me for the last time just weeks before, we went to see a movie together. It had rained, and I get tend to cold in air conditioning when I'm soaked. So he took off his jacket—and he was wearing a James Dean jacket, but a black one, not a red one—and he took it off and gave it to me to wear and to keep me warm, which was so typical of him, always acting like a protective older brother to me. I'd like to believe that something of the loving fraternal feeling between us gets through in the piece with all of the sound and image juxtapositions and clues. I'm banking on it.

With *Still Raining, Still Dreaming*, really, it was really just the Hendrix title, and the use of the soundtrack from *Song of Ceylon*, which is not really pop culture, but is the only sound you hear on the track. Mark worshipped Hendrix, and the title was inspired by all the rain that appears in all of the pieces of *In Memoriam*.

With *American Falls*, I did an early test of the chemically obscured distressed imagery in projection onto the walls of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, who originally commissioned it. Paul Roth, who was at that time the Associate Curator of Photography at the Corcoran, thought it was way too obscure when projected that large. He said to me that he thought the more readable images would work better in this environment and for this general audience. So that in a way gave me a working guide for the nature of this piece. I couldn't do what I had been doing in my films—smearing the imagery toward a kind of hermetic ambiguity, and invoking ambiguous mysteries—which in the limited form of a time-based film you could watch over and over again and it might unravel anew with different screenings. The nature of an installation, however, was going to be different. I also wanted to acknowledge that this was a public work in a major public space, and a commissioned work by the oldest art gallery in the U.S. Surrounded by a city of primarily comprised of monuments to the dead. I knew that I needed to work, one way or another, with classic American iconography. I knew that this was going to be about the mediation of the America idea—how events were transcribed and delivered in various media. What do I really know about Thomas Jefferson, of his authentic gestalt, except for a couple of received iconic images? The same is true for Kennedy.

The Kennedy that I knew was from that box [*points at television set*] and *Life* magazine and all that. I thought that I would also parallel the history of American movies with *American Falls*. It ran concurrent with the Muybridge exhibition at the Corcoran, so that was wonderful coincidence and served as a last minute inspiration. Essentially I decided that I needed recognizable images and I needed to tap into the collective unconscious idea: here's our collective pool of images and sounds. Many of us have shared the same mediated dreams. I hoped that people wouldn't merely read it as a kind of artfully gussied up Ken Burns—that what I am doing with the chemistry both metaphorically transforms but also *critiques* the monumental iconography of the imagery. Because the cracked and chemically distressed nature of the imagery make it feel like it is all just a temporary mold and could eventually dissolve back into the soup of emulsion at any minute. That, for me, is where my politics lie—wanting America to be like the America of Capra or the America presented to me as a child in school, on TV and in the movies, but ultimately not believing in the myth, knowing now that the Wizard is a fraud behind the curtain. And the fragile nature of the image scaffold itself is the primary sign of my disbelief. So that every time an image wells up, like *The Wizard of Oz*, it eventually falls back into the river. Into my metaphorical Niagara River, which eventually runs over the cliff into the falls.

**Brian Price:** As you were talking, I was remembering a story that you once told us about showing up for the first time as a student in Ken Jacobs' class at SUNY Binghamton and raising your hand in protest—something to the effect of, “sorry, this is not a movie.”

**PS:** “When are we going to see some major motion pictures in this class?”

**BP:** So there you are in Jacobs' class certain of what a movie is—that it should have a popular form—and yet in your early work we see very few signs of that certainty, since what appears there most prominently are images not of popular culture but of your own home movies. We can see you. We can see your home movies, but we don't see or hear popular culture. And yet as you get older, and as you've just said, a bit more alienated from contemporary popular culture, popular culture seems to come forward. There's something very interesting about this passage from the image of oneself—made much more closely to the time in which certain aspects of popular culture were affecting you in fairly certain ways—to a present in which you feel less affected or less inspired by popular culture, and yet we see less of you in the image (your actual body, that is) than we do of the images of popular culture. This suggests to me, somehow, a very interesting structure of mourning that is realized in and as the trajectory of your work.

**PS:** I'm also at an age where I am inevitably getting more and more nostalgic, constantly looking back and reflecting about what it all means and so on. I'm also attempting to get over myself and the ongoing biographical issues that seem to pervade in my work, however well hidden they are—in other words to stop making work that is only inspired by my present emotional crisis, whether it be lost love or the inevitable loss of loved ones to mortality. So the *American Falls* project was definitely a conscious move toward that. The *Twilight Psalms* were also initially conceived to do just that. And I think they still will be. The Academy in Hollywood just made a new print of *Psalms I*, by the way, which looks really beautiful. The video game work in many ways took me back to my childhood mode of being. Like all children, I created narratives with whatever I had in front of me. Back then, I would use models of super-heroes as a boy's substitute for playing with dolls. Instead of fixing the Aurora Batman model to the base, I kept him free, so I could essentially have a doll, a Batman doll. That's very typical of my approach to creativity. It wasn't enough to have the beautiful Batman thing to look at from time to time on his pedestal. I needed to use him actively in a narrative, probably in the theater of my bed and body. Same thing with my work. I always seem to need a narrative hook.

**MS:** For yourself?

**PS:** As a maker, yes. One asks oneself when facing the blank timeline: What are the rules? Well, I'm not particularly interested in structuralist ideas of construction. I don't count frames, I don't count feet, I don't count shots. When I came to make *Seasons*, like Vivaldi, I needed the narrative hook of the changing seasons in order to structure the material. Otherwise, I had to look to music for formal models of arranging abstract materials. Or else do anything goes and I can't do anything goes. It just seems to me that because of where I came from, a child of TV and movies, I always have an impulse toward narrative, toward the idea that every picture tells a story. But it's also the way that I think of metaphor. I'm just not drawn to making completely non-objective work or abstract work. I always wanted things that you can take home with you. Iconic images that resonate long after the film is over.

We watched a Nick Dorsky film today [in my class], the newest one. I love those films, and I'm extremely alert to every image and gesture when I watch them. But I'll be damned if I can recall

them shot for shot when they're over or really tell one from another until I've seen them a lot—one is so very present when watching them, moment to moment, that you don't really store them away as specific memory images. They don't seem to work that way. So when I watch them again, it's seems to be refreshed anew all over again. But I can conjure up the image of the bicycle rider in *Remains to be Seen* whenever I want. It's there like an emblazoned image, just as Chishu Riyu is at the end of *Late Spring*, or Maya Deren at the window in *Mesbes*. This is what I look for. I always say that the hair on the back of my neck will stand up when I see a certain image. I'm looking for an uncanny image that I recognize, in the true sense of the word—re-cognize—that somehow seems to resonate beyond the referent into something larger. In fact, one of my students this morning showed a work about his lost love. And of course my heart goes out to him, but so much of it was literal. He was literally talking to her and the images of her were invested with his love, but I could share none of that access—it wasn't available to me in the images themselves. He didn't have the punctum. Barthes is trying to understand, as I remember, why he is so drawn to this image of his mother. So, for an artist the question is: is this anything more? Can it speak to something larger, to something about the human experience—addressing the connotative, and not just the literal denotative?



*Mesbes of the Afternoon* (1943)



*Late Spring* (1949)

**BP:** So for you, things move outward from the punctum, in terms of the production of art. For Barthes, the studium is the structure; it's what everybody sees. The punctum is the particular detail—what pricks, he says. But for you it sounds like the work of art begins with the detail, with the punctum, and moves out toward a structure that everyone can see.

**PS:** That sounds good. I like that. Yes, I was terribly moved by Barthes' great little book and recognized a kindred spirit.

**MS:** That connection reminds me of a question that comes up whenever I hear someone talk about *American Falls*, which is the idea of a collective unconscious. I wonder if that's the right metaphor.

**PS:** Or is it a collective conscious? Or better yet, a collective conscience?

**MS:** Or maybe even something less homogeneous. When you talk about images going back into the pool, what strikes me about the images that converge onscreen in *American Falls* is their singularity. It's really a violent and unstable process by which they join together, and then they dissolve or fall apart almost immediately. It's jostled. It's very turbulent water. It's not a calm, holistic—or shall we say, universal—space.

**PS:** Right. In fact, everybody's threatened. Right from the beginning, Harold Lloyd is hanging on for dear life, desperately trying to keep from dropping into the pool of the dissolved image soup below.

**MS:** Yes. Is there an analogy here for the way that you're describing your relation to popular culture? It's profoundly personal, even singular, even though it is charged by a certain idea of sharing something with someone else.

**PS:** Yes.

**MS:** In your stories about Mark and about your childhood there's something about the emotional intensity of a contact that was intimate—a very personal form of contact and very personal sets of associations that don't necessarily have anything to do with the universal aspects of that image or

that song. They're personal, emotional intensities that are opened up by a point of contact in an image or a song or a sound on a very sensual level. Could one say that there is a certain interest in the singularity of popular forms here? Could it be that popular culture is already ambiguous enough in its own right? Like in *American Falls*: you *could* put the recognizable image on the wall in the Corcoran, and there's already something personal enough about it in everyone's own very tenacious memories and sensual experiences of it, and of the popular songs that come with it. We all have these affective attachments and investments...

**PS:** I can't really speak for anyone else because I don't know what anyone else sees or hears. Everything must be affected by the circumstances of their lives and their physiology. But you're exactly right.

**MS:** I guess what I'm saying is that it seems like there's some kind of stickiness or contact there that involves something more excessive, or less, than a universal experience.



*American Falls* (2000-2012)

**PS:** Yes, and in fact, I'm trying to personalize it. That's not the *King Kong* that's available to everybody else. That particular King Kong in *American Falls* is like a hand drawing; it's more like a painting of it than a photograph. That's one of my favorite moments in the film—because of the chemistry and the way my assistant cleaned it. She cleaned it thoroughly but left a residue, so it almost looks windblown. And I changed the focus just slightly so it picked up the surface texture of the base side. And that's where you are getting these erasure streaks from cleaning. And he looks like he's filled in—like when kids would outline the figure first before coloring in. Some people would outline, some people would not. I outlined. Anyway, I made King Kong look very different from the received *King Kong*. This is not a Bruce Conner kind of collage, though he certainly informs

every maker who uses found footage. I try very hard to make the found footage inseparable from my shot material in my collaged films. But being a kind of gregarious solipsist, I never really know what other people will think. Ordinarily, when you meet someone and you become friends, you say, “You love that? Yes, I love that, too.” You find these points of relating, usually through popular culture points of intersection.

And when I show the work, I’m not being an artist at work. I’m a social being. That’s why it can be either fun or alienating. But I can’t really have the experience that my audience is having. I can’t have the shifting change in consciousness of seeing something abstracted and perhaps unrecognizable and then the pleasure of revelation when it pops into sudden recognition. I find that in a lot of less sophisticated views of the films—people who are not necessarily versed in experimental film, or with *American Falls*, many older people who have expressed to me that they are thrilled at these moments of recognition. It came to them like a revelation: oh, that’s what that is! Other people find the experience very frustrating. So they denude the work. They try to clean it in their heads and watch it straight. But the feeling is in the form itself, as Suzanne Langer told us. The idea or ideology of the image can’t be separated from its form. The image *is* the idea.

**BP:** The moments of recognition that we have in *American Falls*, when they come, also seem to suggest something very particular about the worry over popular culture that one finds in modernist art or in the philosophy of Adorno—namely the idea that mass culture provides us with an image of universality that must be critiqued or unmade. The image makes us think, and thus be, in precisely the same ways. And yet what your work expresses is the way in which popular culture never succeeds as a universal form, nor does it successfully constitute generalized and thus predictable ways of thinking, feeling, or being. Your own work, then, gives us a way of understanding what it means to come into contact with images that appear but don’t remain, that don’t actually shape our brain—at least not in any totalizing way, such that you only see things in a particular way. A normal experience of popular culture is not so different from what an experience of a Phil Solomon film would be. Although the films are in no sense didactic, they do offer a way of understanding popular culture not merely as something that sticks but also as something that moves. And if it moves, it goes away. Traces of it remain, but a trace that remains is very different from something that re-orientates your consciousness entirely.

**PS:** The very definition of a palimpsest. Yeah, my citations and borrowings from popular culture come from a place of love. I come from authentically loving this stuff and absorbing into my make-up. It’s not an ironic stance—I take the complete emotional absorption as an authentic lived experience. Watching James Dean’s tortured face when Sal Mineo dies—I had never had that experience, of someone dying in my arms essentially, but there’s a pathos there that any vulnerable person can recognize. Truth be told, I’ve always felt like an extremely vulnerable, super-sensitive person that has to put on all of these cloaks of social pretense and make jokes and ingratiate and get along in the world, but when I’m watching a film or watching a great TV show I’m in a kind of hyper state, where all of these emotions are heightened—it’s a distillation of the normal state of ups and downs of everyday life, but everything is pure signal with no noise, everything is there for a purpose, everything, when its working, is *right*. All epiphanies, all the time.

**BP:** The more I think about it, about you showing up at Binghamton when you did, it must not have felt all that strange to sit in class one day with Ken Jacobs and then the next day with Nicholas Ray, even though it may have seemed strange to Ken.

**PS:** We watched *The Big Sleep* for two weeks, but it was *Ken Jacobs' The Big Sleep!* That was a fantastic revelation. He would crack these wonderful witticisms during his amazing analysis sessions. We analyzed *The Wizard of Oz*, for a week, and he went into all these subtexts about the gold standard or the Jewish caricature aspects of Bert Lahr's portrayal of the Cowardly Lion and such. He broke open all kinds of assumptions, mostly by taking radically leftist socio-political readings of the films, combined with his own particular aesthetics, equal parts wonder and disgust. I mean, I just didn't go up to him and say, "Isn't *The Graduate* great?" Other students did just that and he just shook his head or raised a Jacobsian eyebrow. He just didn't have the same kind of pop culture reference points that we did. He's a red diaper, thirties kind of guy. That's his pop culture. But this special time that I spent at Binghamton coincided for me with everything exploding at once. I started experimenting with drugs concurrent with my studying art film, so all the doors of perception were flying wide open. I realized, like many before me, that there was an alternative way of viewing the world, and that this especially applied to music and film. I was deeply involved in what I thought of as art rock at the time, British progressive rock—Yes and King Crimson, what I took to be expanded consciousness music. Avant-garde film seemed to me then perfectly aligned with that sensibility, as was experimental jazz. Cecil Taylor, Anthony Braxton. Reading John Cage's *Silence* and especially *A Year from Monday*. All of it opened up at once for me. Then I had to go back after graduation and try to understand Bach and Renaissance painting. What seemed at the time like the straight world. But little did I know. By the way, I didn't really study with Nick Ray, as such. I was too young and he was mostly dealing with seniors only for those couple of years. But there were many other characters around to adjust to from class to class, including Ernie Gehr, Tony Conrad, Peter Kubelka, Larry Gottheim, Dan Barnett and Saul Levine. An amazing four years.

**BP:** We all get older.

**PS:** Yeah, right. But it was all terribly exciting and it felt like it was happening in the very air of the times. There was also a brief window, a glorious moment in radio and pop music when everyone was so being so innovative, everyone was trying to find the next cool sound. Every minute you felt like the rules were changing. That started happened to be around '65 and progressed right through to around 1970. I went to college in 1971 and by that time I was listening almost exclusively to this British progressive rock stuff. And the movies had gotten worse. That whole American film school renaissance that I loved as an adolescent and thought of as our American narrative film art kind of died out after 1972 or 1973. But there was really a golden age from 1967 to 1972, films like *The Vanishing Point* or *Harold and Maude*, all of these so-called counter-culture films. Even though I was a little late to the party, I felt like I was now a part of the counter culture. I remember seeing *Easy Rider* and thinking at the time—high school, pre-dope smoking days—that this was a great work of art, and I remember feeling absolutely devastated at the ending. It was truly shocking. We had no spoilers or spoiler alerts on those days.

I want to continue talking about *American Falls* for a moment. I'm curious, and maybe you know better than me, exactly what problems people in our field are having with it. My friend Abigail Child said to me that for her, it was essentially a second grader's view of history. Frankly, I was worried about that kind of response to the imagery when I made it. I was, in fact, thinking of the piece as a kind of child's primer in a way. Even though I read up on my Howard Zinn and others, I wasn't about to try and find some obscure, proletariat stories or oblique metaphors to tell the American tale for this project. It was hard enough to read any recognizable imagery in triptych form at that rate of transition and with the images so radically transformed by the chemical treatments, so I stayed away from some of the more obscure personages in history, like Huey Long, for example. I did take and

treat images of Huey Long, but I thought no one is going to recognize the distorted face, let alone even know who Huey Long is. So I left a lot of so-called minor characters on the cutting room floor that I could have used. But I didn't want to end up with an annotated parade of faces that no one would know. Hardly anyone recognizes the melting face of John D. Rockefeller, for instance.

**BP:** There's another way of thinking about that remark—though it's not, it seems, what was intended by it—which is: what would history look like to a second grader? That could be kind of interesting.

**PS:** Part of me was working with that idea, yes. Something akin to what you might see in a large, public mural. Rivera's work has a kind of naïve look to the portraiture and the iconography. But I think Abby was implying that it was a politically naïve, uncritical and unsophisticated view of the classic and standard myths that we all grew up with, closer to a *History Channel* opening montage. Again, if you actually look at what I'm doing, the piece tells another tale. There is a knowing critique built into every image and every juxtaposition. But *American Falls* is not a rant. It has truly mixed feelings about all these things. It's much more of a lamentation. A weepie.



*American Falls* (2000-2012)

**MS:** What's astounding about *American Falls* for me is that there is a clear-eyed sincerity, the maintenance of an attachment to a certain idea of America. Because if a work about the popular is only satirical, if it's *only* removed, then to me it's dishonest or under-complicated. The charge of the popular—the appeal of it and the very real meaning and affect of it—is denied in advance. Still, I think that the difficulty of the film for some people may be that they can't admit they're actually moved by some of the images, and that that does mean something. It doesn't go with a certain stance of critical propriety. As far as I'm concerned, though, if one loses any sight of any feeling or belief or investment in a political ideal that America has or could embody then I don't know what

we're doing bothering with critique. Burn things. If you are not moved by the sound of Martin Luther King Jr.'s voice, or an image that invokes the New Deal only to melt it down into something else, and say that this is just a Golden Book view of history, you leave out all of the complicated meanings and investments of these things. The difficulty of figuring out a political way forward in American culture today is figuring out how and what it means to bother, to bother galvanizing that kind of investment or belief in making something else there.

**PS:** Which is an optimistic act.

**MS:** It means engaging in social relations that demand the kind of collectivity that popular images forge, that demand an effort to admit that many of us would like to be together and that we have ideas about what that should look and feel like. If you can't admit those things, then you have nothing, politically, unless you actually decide to take up arms and carry out the revolution instead. I think that people are troubled because normally we're fed this kind of political aesthetic that is simply didactic about mainstream culture and about the whole idea of iconography or monumentalism. And I think that *American Falls* confronts the audience with their own emotional investment in these things—investments that may seem a little gauche for the typical pose of rejecting everything mainstream, and rejecting any sincere collective emotional investment in a social imaginary that is not simply an immaterial ideal.

**PS:** You know, I'm not a terribly clever artist. In the way that, say, Hollis Frampton is, for example. I'm something of an intellectual and, yes, a college professor, but I've never wanted to let the "big idea," the one liner conceptual hook that reviewers seem to love so much dominate in my creative and often intuitive approach. So I tend to leave that sort of thinking out of my work because I'm highly suspect of it. And I think I tap into an almost childlike wonder before the material at hand—I approached the videogames with that same sense of being cleverly naive. I looked around those worlds with fresh eyes of amazement, rather than approaching them with a jaded attitude. Or consider the romantic aspects and ostentatious beauty of my film, *The Secret Garden*. There's something about my artistic disposition, about the way that I work, that holds out for sincerity. I think that you're right. That's the key for me, what I'm ultimately trusting in. I'm trying to keep my aim true, like the song says.



*The Secret Garden* (1988)

**BP:** I can also see at the same time, and along the lines of what Meghan is suggesting, that the work needs to move chronologically. It's not a teleological movement so much as a forward progression. You do move chronologically, yet things break down even *as* you move forward, even—that is to say—while there remains, and rather importantly, a sense of temporal continuity. One of the bad habits of the Left, in my view—in America and elsewhere—involves an insistence on failure, in a belief that things must come apart, that emancipatory politics can only result in absolute autonomy rather than in what might hold together. What *American Falls* does, structurally, is to move forward in time, even as things are reshaping and falling apart. But they don't just fall apart. Things also come back together; images come to find new relations of resemblance.

**PS:** What would I do if I didn't proceed in roughly chronological order, for example, as some friends have expressed their disappointment with my adhering to a more or less standard chronology of events? Would I then juxtapose the death of Lincoln with the Civil Rights movement? When you're doing two apples and an orange, which is the main mode of the triptych form, there's a real potential for creating all kinds of mixed metaphors—there are just so many traps of possible mis-readings and inappropriate contextualization. I didn't want to do that. I really didn't want to be too artfully clever or cloying with this project. I needed something very basic at its heart: this happened, and then this happened, events moving inexorably into a flow, like a river of time. I needed a scaffold and a structure from which to meditate on all this glut of mediated history. And I wanted a final cadence, a cumulative effect—so that when you get to the end, when you finally reach the falls, you've had all of this backlog of images and the flow of the remembrance of things past behind you. The original inspiration for *American Falls* actually came from a *Star Trek* episode, Harlan Ellison's *City on the Edge of Forever*, where Dr. McCoy jumps into a time portal that displays

earth's history going by in seconds, dissolve after dissolve of black and white historical images culled from movies and documentaries:



“City on the Edge of Forever” (1967) from *Star Trek*

**MS:** In many ways, *American Falls* seems to me to be about gravity—taken in a number of different senses.

**PS:** I love that. Perhaps I should have titled it *Gravity’s Rainbow Falls*. The inevitable arc of the parabola of capitalism—what goes up must eventually come down. But yes, there are many ways we can consider gravity, such as the “gravity of the situation,” and the way that gravity constantly pulls the images back into the river, releasing them from their temporary molds.

**MS:** I like that. If you think about traditional critical aesthetics, one is only supposed to dissect popular culture. If you’re going to show a clip of a Kennedy speech you have to put it, say, next to an image of Marilyn or the Pope. You need juxtaposition that tells people exactly how to think about it. But being pulled along by the material gravity of dominant currents in the historical process—whether fighting or riding them—requires people to come up with some other critical relationship to that process. It’s not that the film is uncritical of anything—far from it. But going back to the question of the ambiguity of popular culture, we could say that our relation to this history is already inscrutable enough. In fact, it does not tell you what it is, what it will become, or how to fix it. One has to decide, when watching *American Falls*, how to relate to its contingencies and injustices, because you’re not piecing things together in a way that says, “Look people...” Going with the current to the bottom of the falls requires, we might say, a different critical itinerary—because not only is it not didactic, it’s most beautiful when it’s most problematic.

**PS:** The Kennedy section is, in fact, really where I tap most directly into my childhood. What was most shocking to me the weekend of November 22, 1963, was that all my TV shows were cancelled all weekend. That felt like the equivalent of the end of the world. That was something that I just couldn’t understand. And so many adults were crying. My teachers were crying. It just seemed like that weekend was black. The sun was out in the sixties. And that weekend it felt like rain, like the world had shifted, and I felt this deeply even though I was only nine. I knew the world would not be

the world the next day. So that's why I put this young boy listening to the radio, a recurring image that we've seen earlier with Babe Ruth's farewell when he was dying of cancer. He's my stand-in, my 9 year-old self. JFK was for us essentially a TV show; he was a TV star. I remember even doing Kennedy skits with my friends, using that wonderful parody *East Side Story* from Mad Magazine. We even had Kennedy and Khrushchev masks. In my world, in the world that I was in, everyone loved him. Having lived through that experience of his assassination, I tried to tap into being a child again, the shock of beholding the repeated and repeated loops of media *that* weekend, including his burial and then Oswald being shot. That's why Bruce Conner's *Report*, which I watched this morning too, is so profound. I'm partly paying homage to Bruce Conner in that section. There are additional images for that section that I've now included, which you haven't yet seen, which is the Joe Kennedy story—the bootlegging, Gloria Swanson, and so on, the beginning of the Kennedy curse. And Joe Kennedy Jr., his father's great hope, is now placed back in. When you see young John Kennedy on the left, his grandpa Joe Kennedy now pops up on the right. And I also finally got Bobby in there, whose assassination seemed to me to be the last straw, so to speak, the end of the 60's idealism for good. So, it's still getting fleshed out, still being tweaked and revamped. But I thought if I got too cute or too clever or too removed, the beholder would stop feeling the primal tragedy that these images originally invoked before they became so clichéd through repetition. There's something that gets through that is very primal, very essential and I feel it every time. The chemical treatments de-familiarize us with the original enough to bring out its resonant allegorical import. When the final triptych panel of three Lincoln memorials appears—and the black birds are flying everywhere—I feel this rush in my spine that wells up from its base. A great national and personal grief, something of what I felt in 1968—that something has died. Something has changed. I think we're still paying the price for that moment.

**MS:** And yet I know that you were also very moved by the election of Obama, which we talked about already. There's something very interesting there, to me, about what it means to live with the co-existence of such feelings in a process of going forward. We all know that American is a greedy, capitalist place, where there are all kinds of injustices that we must end.

**PS:** On the night that he was elected, my friends and I, all late boomers, spontaneously burst into a round of "God Bless America" without a hint of irony. We cried. The 60s felt vindicated. At least for a night. And *American Falls* pays tribute by its last section, the Civil Rights montage. To your second point, greed and capitalism are another subtext throughout the piece. Money is all over it.

**MS:** You continually refer to the chemistry, this gold hue. The *Greed* images.

**PS:** The Busby Berkeley "We're in the Money" sequence, *My Forgotten Man. A Corner in Wheat. They Shoot Horses, Don't They? There Will Be Blood...*

**MS:** So how do we go on, moving in ways that are not only bad but are part of what it means to confront the complexity of social existence, of collective contact—things that are absolutely essential to building a social existence and having a progressive vision?

**PS:** A lot of what I love about America is the grand parade of these wonderfully tragic figures: Charlie Parker, Elvis, Carl Wilson, Buddy Holly, Kurt Cobain, Lenny Bruce, Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin. All the people I could think of who, for one reason or another, had *fallen*. I made lists of the fallen, in every way I could think of. The original plan was that when you go finally over the falls there would be a montage of all the tragic figures from our cultural life that I had left out by

concentrating on the mostly political. All of the other ghosts—Marilyn Monroe, Montgomery Clift, Phil Ochs, and film characters like Lonesome Rhodes and Charles Foster Kane. Anywhere you look, there's a wonderful, tragic tale. As I said before, generally, in "no second act" America, what goes up has to come down. That's the gravity's rainbow of America.

**MS:** It's also the trick of materiality. There is a violence in basic material existence. That water is going to fall and it's going to make a big splash.

**PS:** Here comes the flood. Yeah. But anyway, I dumped that idea. I tried it. And I even tried to make them ripple. I just felt like it was literally too much. There was an exhaustion that was reached, even in the making of it, after we did the Civil Rights montage and MLK and RFK and the wrenching upheavals of 1968, that everything else felt like, well, everything else. To start name checking, Nixon, Watergate, etc. would have felt obligatory for me as an artist and I suspect for the audience as well. So I had to imply all the rest with the turbulent falls and the lullaby coda.

**BP:** On a different note, perhaps, the theme of this issue is distance, and obviously your work comes immediately to mind. One of the really intriguing aspects of your work is the collaborative dimension of it, the work that you've done for instance with Brakhage or LaPore. In aesthetic terms, one could very easily say that there is real distance between all of you—that each of has a very distinct style, such that one would think that the aesthetic intimacy of that encounter would be rather difficult, hard to imagine in advance. But to work together in this way I would imagine that you would have to let your aesthetic go a little bit. I'm curious about that process.

**PS:** Well, they're both contingent on circumstances. There was no great plan in either case. It's the same with all of my work, actually. It's just that things happen, circumstantial things. With Brakhage, it started with his trilogy *I Take These Truths*. He was in a crisis; actually he was *always* in a crisis. He couldn't pay for the lab work, or maybe his printer Sam Bush had left Western Cine. Stan was concerned about being able to get his newest painted work optically printed by the lab. So I said for him come over to my house, I'll make you dinner and I'll let the machine print your film, and we'll look at a John Woo movie. We loved to watch movies together, our favorite thing to do and his reward every day for hard work. So, I made him dinner and we kept putting his painted strips on the printer and let it run. And in the other room we were watching a John Woo movie.

**MS:** Which one?

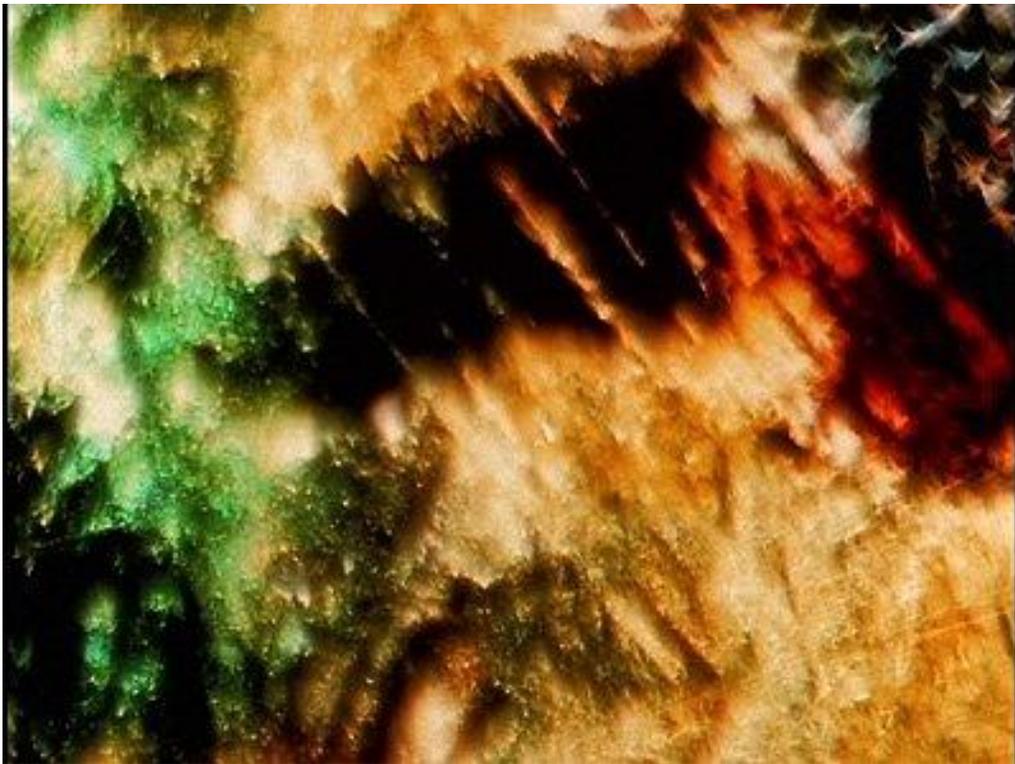
**PS:** I think it was *The Killer*. So I helped him print that and then he dedicated that entire trilogy to me, which was lovely. And then we kind of kept going. He would bring over new work, new paint, and I would say, "Let's play with this." We didn't say, "Let's collaborate." We never used those words. We were just hanging out and playing. You know, I thought I was just helping him. And I have nine hours of tapes of our working together on the flatbed—I don't know if you've seen them.

**MS:** Only some of them.

**PS:** It was summer. It was downstairs. That was the most amazing part. Optical printing was fun because I would try all of these things. I would put images—I had an image of Chris Walken, in the *Dead Zone* that I had shot from the TV screen and put it behind the paint on my double gate printer. So Christopher Walken actually stars unwittingly in *Elementary Phrases*. But that was just kind of like

jamming with someone. The way Stan and I described it was one guy is driving and the other guy is under the hood of the car keeping it going at all costs. I have another story. Toward the end of working on *Elementary Phrases*, I said to him “Let’s take out the gate.” So we took out the gate and Stan would hold the film where the gate should be and tried to approximate registration by hand, knowing that it would be impossible. And I was shooting and trying to avoid sprockets, like a tail gunner. We didn’t want any damn self-reflexive sprockets, like my friend Peter Tscherkassky (laughs). I always make fun of Peter’s “shsprockets.” Anyway, we worked for like three hours. The sweat was dripping down Stan’s face. And that got us some of the most exciting parts of *Elementary Phrases*. The footage that looks most like abstract action painting. Then we went to the movies to reward ourselves and went to see Sylvester Stallone in *Cliffhanger*. We were sitting there like this [*slouched, eyes nearly closed*] and then there’s a helicopter shot around the mountain. Stan reaches over and grabs my shoulder and says, “That’s what I want. How do we get that?” I said, “It would be very difficult do an aerial shot around your paint, Stan.”

**BP:** There is a great moment in some of the footage that you have shown to us of the two of you working together, where, if you had no idea who either of you were—if this was merely a scene of two filmmakers—you could easily be led to believe that what you were doing was editing an action film. You both talked about it in a language—the language of an action film, of narrative cinema—that does not come forward in the images at all.



*Seasons...*(2002) by Phil Solomon and Stan Brakhage

**PS:** That was the most fun part of it. I had an insight into how he thought about abstraction, which is to say, he prioritized rhythm above just about every other consideration. It was all about rhythm for him. He would say, “Now here’s the way this goes.” And there might be an optical slippage in the footage, an obvious mechanical mistake, or a barely noticeable hair in the gate that I couldn’t live

with. But he said, “No, look how it works with rhythmically.” So that’s where we did some give and take. I left in some optical errors and he let me cut away some of the redundancies. I wanted to cut much more, of course. Ultimately, he took all the “in’s” that we did and went home and arranged it by himself—which was the best way for us to proceed, since he was always in a rush of restless creativity compared to me, who struggles over every cut. And then I would get this call late at night and he would say, “Phil, I’m having the greatest editing sessions of my life!” At that point, I knew I wasn’t going to try and slow him down to wait for me. It was what it was. I was not about to say to Stan Brakhage, “Let’s sit on it and look at it carefully for two months.” Which is what I probably would have done. I do think that in the long run, *Elementary Phrases* remains a little bit redundant for my tastes and could have been cut tighter. But Stan really understood long form in a way that I didn’t, in a way that I still don’t. In long form, not everything can be equally interesting. There have to be so-called boring parts, in some ways. Or shots that are more noise than signal. Or redundancies in the short run, but add cumulative weight in the long run. And that really pays off in the end. I came from studying the economical aesthetics of Peter Kubelka and I also work frame by frame on all of my printer films. So I tend to never let any air in, any wasted space. If I have one artistic critique of my own work is that it is a bit tight. I think it’s crystalline, in a way. There are some artists that are a little bit loose and intuitive that I admire. Like Lewis Kilar. Sometimes I think that Lewis gets to new places from being a little bit more loose—he doesn’t like perfection and will often shake things up to make it interesting for himself. A very brave artist I admire.

**BP:** Your work doesn’t feel unformed, certainly, but it also doesn’t feel like Kubelka, either. Because what I do think that you and Brakhage have in common—and you’re calling it a redundancy in Brakhage—is an interest in the motif. You both always come back to this line. Things are always turning but they also always come back. Maybe that’s the part that feels tight. So it’s a little shocking for me to hear that you related so strongly to Kubelka’s aesthetic.

**PS:** His teaching and theories, more than emulating his work, *per se*. He really made me understand what it means to have a sense of economy of form because he focused on getting everything just right, down to the frame, and making something of a perfect object that you could behold every time and it would work every time. His theory on the nature of the sync event as evidenced particularly by *Unsere Afrikareise* had a profound and lasting effect on my own aesthetics, particularly in terms of sound and image relationships. It also jived with what I was already doing working on the optical printer—making films one frame at a time and looking at and working on every single one of them. I also came to realize that if you have any doubts about any gesture you make or shot you included that you’re not 100% sold on, after watching it 50 times, it will become intolerable and you will no longer look forward to seeing it. There are still a couple of sequences in *The Secret Garden* where I can’t wait until they’re over. Same for *Walking Distance*. But otherwise, the rest of my work is tight. It’s clean.

**MS:** I wonder if what feels “tight” to you can also be understood as a certain emphasis on rhythm in your own work. One of things that really struck me when I asked you about popular images is that a huge part of what you talked about involved popular music. And it seems to me that music and sound, and the rhythm of these shots—that feeling of tightness—also resonates, for me, with the way that you talk about popular music. I love watching your films with you because you will say “There’s that, and then there’s that” and they are things that I would never see, connections I would never make, that just wash over me. The stories about Mark. Everything is personally saturated. And each rhythm or trope or motif awakens this different point of contact. And it’s that part of those

objects that is still animated with some kind of personal inflection that is also ambiguous to other people and is not guaranteed.

**PS:** Give me an example.

**MS:** How about the way that you were talking about the lines from *Rebel Without a Cause* in *Last Days in a Lonely Place*? Those lines are filled with a profound resonance and meaning for you that is very personal, about your contact with Mark and popular culture, among other things. And it's about your contact with the game. It's that you were watching this game and then the Griffith Observatory was there. These things come up in your work in a beautifully rhythmic way. So I'm wondering about the role that rhythm plays even in the way that you include shifts in images and sounds. Rhythm is now striking me as an incredibly important part of why you think of your films as tight. Since those things are there and they're palpable. For instance, what amazes me most about the *Grand Theft Auto* pieces is that I would never have imagined that I could be moved by those images. My students who play *San Andreas* all of the time barely recognize it the first time that they see the work. It's beautiful, moving and beautiful. It's art: it doesn't look like what it's supposed to be, but it is.

**PS:** What you're calling rhythm I would call cadences. There's an exactness to the composition first—you feel it immediately at the head of each shot. Then one senses a clear sensitivity to the camera movement, which these videogame pieces allowed me to really explore for the first time. The moment of each cut feels precise, exact and right, and the sound goes a long way in propelling the rhythm of the editing, although I actually perform those tasks in reverse. That is, I always cut picture first and then add the sound. The film is so confident in the way that it moves from scene to scene. It moves inexorably and inevitably. Moves assuredly, without being insistent. I just heard a commercial today for Doritos that called the product, "Surprising! Yet inevitable." And I thought, yes—that's exactly what interests me. It's what I get from John Ashbery. Often, especially in the late work, I might not know what the hell he's specifically talking about, but *the voice of the poem* seems to know. There's a certain conversational calm, a conversational cadence that moves through his poetry and through those films of mine. What I love about *Last Days* is how you arrive from one scene to another without quite remembering how exactly you got there. I'll be damned if I know, even though I made it. Same thing with *The Exquisite Hour*. And you just accept these moves because there is a serene and graceful confidence in the authorship and it has to with cadences, especially the endings of my films. When they come to an end you feel this rise; you're not left hanging.

**MS:** The bells in *Still Raining, Still Dreaming*: they come, they clang, they stop.

**PS:** The girl drops her transparent umbrella right before that happens. I don't know if you've noticed this before. I had to decide whether to keep that particular take in because this crazed avatar surprised me during the recording of the scene by running out rather awkwardly from off-screen left—the game, of course, sent this character out, probably out of boredom with my infernal stillness—and it initially looks somewhat awkward and cartoony instead of dramatic. But this young blonde girl walks by. . . I imagined her to be Mark's daughter. She walks with an umbrella because I had conjured a rainstorm with a cheat. When he runs out, he startles her and she drops her umbrella. And I saw this happening as I recorded it and I gasped. The grounded umbrella is now inverted so it's *collecting* rain instead of protecting from the rain, which metaphors a bucket of tears for me. But then the game simply made it disappear, which is the exact moment I had the all the clanging bells

from *Song of Ceylon* stop. Once the umbrella was dropped, the game decided that it had no longer had any use for it, so after a while it just disappeared. It's just magical to me. But for some people, it's actually not very noticeable or they don't read it as infused with poetic resonance

**BP:** Alexander García Düttmann, in his book *Visconti: Insights into Flesh and Blood*, develops the concept of aesthetic seriousness, which involves a belief that the artist makes something in ignorance of what it is. Aesthetic seriousness, he says, begins at the point where intention breaks off. You may have an idea of where you are going to start but at some point what you know ends. You stay with it, and you shape it, and you know when it goes wrong, even though there is, at the point of seriousness, nothing against which one might measure the rightness or the wrongness of the work. One of things that I like about your work is found in these terms. Not only is there an aesthetic seriousness, but one might also say that there is a political seriousness—and it would be hard for me to separate the two.

**PS:** That is the wonderful part of the art process for me. You start with these ideas and then eventually the work does take on its own life, where *you* start to learn the rules. Not make them. With *The Snowman*, it was a rather profound experience, because I presumed it was going to be a slow elegiac meditative film and then I found myself making all of these quick cuts like I used to and I wound up getting more and more caught up in hard cut montage, after being so deeply invested in slow dissolves for so long. I saw these patterns of light that felt like a massive storm and that really surprised me. It ultimately became about being an orphan in the storm rather than a prayer for the dead, which is how I originally intended it.

**BP:** I see this in my own work, in my writing. I'll have two days where things will feel right and move well, and then all of the sudden, on day three, everything looks so confusing—it just looks crazy and I think, "Why on Earth am I doing this?" Yet, there's something interesting about what keeps you there. I'm interested in what keeps you there even in confusion.

**PS:** Usually panic! Because I have a deadline and have no other choice than to commit and commit now. That's the way I used to work. I don't want to do that anymore. But often that is what happens. Otherwise, life gets in the way. I'll do it tomorrow or the menial tasks that wear you down, day in and day out. So a pre-set finish line often does help the job done in the short run. But then I'll often revise a work it after I premiere it—especially with digital. But what keeps me there? You start to have a vision of it. You have a vision of the potential of it. But then the problems become more practical, more like interior decorating. This doesn't work because the color is all wrong and so on. It becomes a matter of formal problem solving, which is fascinating and even fun when you get into the zone. I need a bridge shot to get from here to here. What do I have in my bin? But it's the big picture of bringing a work into life from nothing, of creating a dream space that can be projected in front of an audience, something that we can all share for a moment. When I watch my films with an audience, the pleasure is really not ego driven. It's more like sharing a mutual vision. I can't bear to see credits on my films to this day.

**MS:** You've talked about needing a structure in your work, if one without structuralism. Did shifting into the medium of video games—which already come with their own structural parameters—change the way you felt, in your artistic process, about the technology that you worked with? One of the interesting things that about the *Grand Theft Auto*, *In Memoriam* pieces has to do with the way in which they take away the utility of these technologies. Interactive media, videogames—they are all

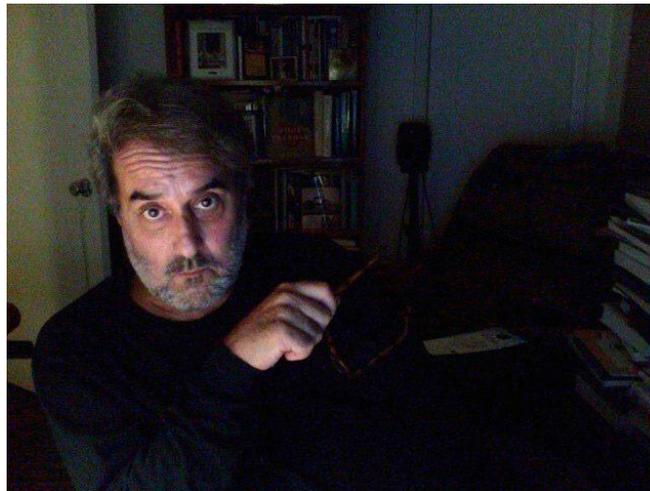
about use. You reach goals. You accomplish things. It's mission oriented. And it's the same thing with the technology in our lives. Our phones are supposed to help us accomplish more. We can work at the beach. Everything is about interactive utility and control. But that whole logic of technology breaks down. You've referred to yourself as one of those "ye-oldie" modernist types. And yet this work runs contrary to the old modernist saw about the uses or ideal uses of a technology. What is paint? What can film do? What is its essence? You do something very different with technology in these pieces. Has this work changed the way you feel about the experience of aesthetic seriousness, the materials you use, and how those materials structure what you move with or against in this incredibly goal-driven medium?

**PS:** Well, first I had to hire some students to actually play the games and go on those murderous missions so that I could open up the borders to Manhattan. I'm afraid that the action was way too tense for me—couldn't sleep—and I was constantly dying in my lame attempts to do the job. So that was a new experience in my filmmaking! But what intrigued me so much about the free roaming, sand box type of game was that I could just get in the car and drive and look around without doing a mission, without going to work. I was just looking around at details, just as I would in the real world, for things to shoot. Entering these virtual worlds as an adult gave me a much different perspective than I would have if I had been playing these games all of my life. I spent so much time just driving around, trying to get interesting, cinematic shots without any particular goal in mind. Same thing I did with the optical printer all those years. I would look around until something struck. I did some forty hours of looking at various landscapes and possible perspectives before I started to find interesting ways to frame and light scenes, get the characters in position, and rehearse the camera movements. This proved to be much closer to the traditional ways of making a narrative film than what I ordinarily do with film. And that was fun for me, to try it on and put to use all that I know of narrative film history to bring to bear on what I was doing. I referenced Lynch, Hitchcock, Kubrick, Nicholas Ray, and several others. I found the idea of creating a *mise-en-scène* in this world very exciting and perfectly suited to my artistic disposition.

**MS:** This reminds me of the way that you talked about doing work with Stan; one guy's driving while another is under the hood.

**PS:** Here's what I finally want to say about aesthetic distance, perhaps related to aesthetic seriousness. Saul Levine once said, half in jest, that optical printing is for people who couldn't get it together the first time. And for me, that was actually kind of true. I have a very difficult physical and social relationship with the world. I don't go out into the mountains or down by the rivers and shoot, and I don't shoot the people I'm close to in my life except for home movies, which is a separate practice from my work. Frankly, I actually don't know what to photograph anymore that will truly startle me. And shooting out in the real world is often very uncomfortable for me, socially—I hate being noticed and approached. I'd much prefer to be invisible, which is one of the great pleasures of capturing images in the video game world, as long as the cops aren't coming after you. When I get on the optical printer, it provides me with that one extra layer of distance where I'm re-filming a two dimensional plane, re-seeing it, re-framing it, studying it in time. I'm hovering over this old machine like my grandfather did with his Singer sewing machine in the garment district. That feels so right and magical to me, whereas shooting in the world feels so encumbered and fraught with social tension. I realize it's a kind of hermetic way of relating to life's rich pageant, whereas my friend Mark LaPore went to these exotic places and confronted them head on, confronted his own fears, and dealt with the dialectical relationship he had between his object of

desire and his own self-consciousness. I would never do that. I would be terrified and shy. There's something about the introversion of my work—where the images are one step removed from the world, they are re-seen, re-photographed—that gives them their totemic power. “Re” then plays into my thinking a lot for me. Done again. I need that secondary layer of reconsideration in order to create a tension between my simultaneous belief and disbelief in the image. I've almost never been able to make a straight film right from the original photography. It's almost like the material needs another generation for me to deal with it as a fixed image. Otherwise it gets too mixed up with the aura of the original referent, the original source, when what I am seeking is an aesthetic meditation on the imaging of that source. I once started to make a film about my mother's illness and her eventual passing. It was in black and white reversal, very traditional photography—no chemical alterations or optical printing. At the end of the day, however, I just couldn't deal with it as public material. Every time I looked at it, it made me sad, and that sadness was not aesthetic—it was personal and unavailable, having only to do with my life story and hers. It was private and the emotional power of it had more to do with what the image was referring to—my mother—than the image of my mother as such. The Barthes problem that he brings up in *Camera Lucida*. And I knew that I would not be able to watch that film over and over again as if I didn't make it, as that is so much a part of our gig as experimental filmmakers and the primary reason I take so much care to get my films and videos just right. In this case, the punctum of the images was simply too strong and belied aesthetics altogether. I didn't want to watch that film of my mother with other people. And I didn't want to subject her to that kind of post mortem scrutiny. The image treatments that I employ, including optical, chemical and now digital, provided me with a way of getting around the Brakhage premise of finding the universal in the most personal. All of my films are going through another layer of glass once again, another lens. I save them from being photographically flattened by the attention to lighting that I do. The one thing that I do like about my work is that they are luminous. They're really luminous.



*Brian Price and Meghan Sutherland are both co-editors of World Picture.*

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon was an undergraduate at SUNY Binghamton.