

Pat O'Neill

(Los Angeles, 1939)

At the start of the 1960s, before digital software made techniques of moving image manipulation widespread and accessible, Pat O'Neill emerged on the Californian scene with his visionary experimentations with film, the montage of found materials and optical printing. Pre-empting the development of special effects in Hollywood studios by a few years, he gave rise to an original corpus of anti-narrative films, accompanied by distorted and estranging electronic music, stressing their perceptive ambiguities. For his effects, he would make use most of all of an optical printer, allowing him to return to the images once filmed and to manipulate them directly on the celluloid, producing double exposures and overexposures of blocks of colour which would wear down and hide the original contents. After obtaining a position at the newly founded California Institute of Arts in Los Angeles, O'Neill became a figure of reference for both his colleagues and for an entire generation of students. Thanks to the movie production house Lookout Mountain, founded in 1974, he placed his skills at the service of the film and advertising industry, while continuing nevertheless to support independent local productions together with the Oasis Collective. Indeed, the Los Angeles landscape, with its beaches and populous suburban areas, is often at the heart of his narratives, albeit altered to the point of appearing unrecognisable. The debut film *By the Sea* (1963) focuses on the crowd of bathers, funfair customers and the outgoing bodybuilders to be found around Muscle Beach in Santa Monica, in a previously unseen cut, without a plot or documentary intent. Far more experimental is *7362* (1967), which owes its title to the Kodak film used in the shooting: on the screen, monochrome shapes alternate with one another, on first sight akin to Rorschach inkblots, which are simply dancers and gymnasts split in two and then reproduced as a mirror image.

Shot in 16 mm and with no soundtrack, the film in the collection *Let's Make a Sandwich* (1978) leads the explosion of the image begun over the previous works to its most extreme consequences. Starting from pieces of footage from various sources and of various kinds that have no direct link with one another, O'Neill analogically overlaps as many layers of film as possible. In this way, the original images blur into one another until they disappear yet not entirely, re-emerging suddenly in a confused pattern reminiscent of the effects of décollage.

Maintaining his collaboration with great cinema, in the experimental works of his maturity, the artist continued to rely on celluloid, moving up from 16 mm to 35, making it easy for him to produce more substantial films: from his masterpiece *Water and Power* (1989) to the vertiginous *Trouble in the Image* (1996) right up to the noir *The Decay of Fiction* (2002), inspired by the atmospheres of the golden age of Hollywood. Only in 2009 did O'Neill finally give way to digital techniques, in part driven by the need to conserve his works from the obsolescence of their media.

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