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Front and back covers: frames from *Album* (1970) by David Perry
Opposite: From *Incubus* and *The Fat Brain* (lower right) by Marie Hoy.

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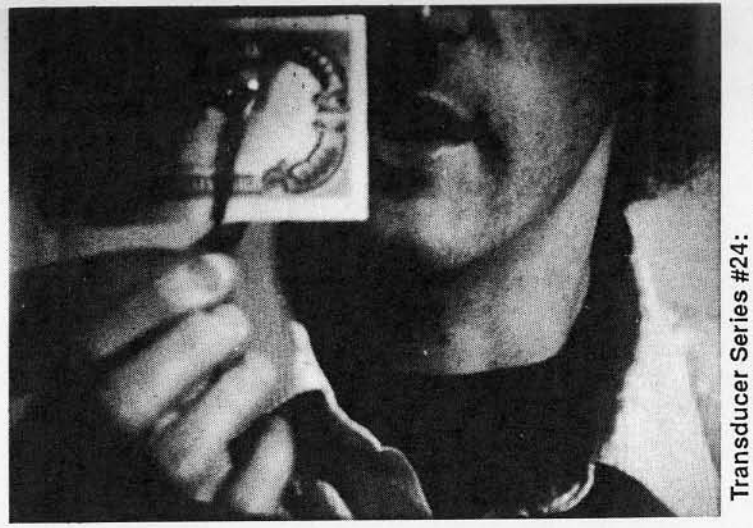
Interview with Richard Lerman



Transducer Series #24:
A $100 dollar-bill microphone (1986)

Richard Lerman is an American artist working with unusual applications of sound and film involving the attachment of piezo transducers to a variety of materials to convert them into 'microphones'. He visited New Zealand and Australia in 1986 to show his work, give performances, and collect new material for his Transducer Series of super 8 films. We recorded the following interview in Melbourne. . .

Somewhere round the time I got into high school I started to play trombone, became involved with jazz and through that with more classical kinds of music. I fell in love with a piece of music by Darius Milhaud, *Le création du monde*, quite an astonishing jazz-like piece. I also began to check musical scores in the library at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and simply, before I graduated from high school I had explored most of 20th century American composers. By the time I got to college I'd heard electronic music and decided that was what I wanted to do when I grew up! There at Brandeis University I was eventually given permission to use the electronic music studio, and I just knew that I wanted to pursue that course. The only major change was being thrown out of graduate school because I refused to write a piece in the style of Brahms! I was doing electronic music and that was what I wanted to get credit for. At that point I'd already started to make films, the initial ones were using oscilloscope images to expand upon the sound sync – sounds/music heard produced the scope images.

You were creating sounds and filming the oscilloscope patterns of the sound?

Yes, I had found complicated ways of sending sound into scopes, and I expanded on it by shooting through gels and getting coloured images, and cutting them together. Now, Brandeis at that time had a very intriguing film area, run by David Hardy. He had done a lot of documentary work in India, and while in the publicity department of the school he managed to convince them that a film department could be set up, financed by people who would give money to be filmed by the students! So the film students were given large amounts of footage to film wealthy people, one of whom was Ferdinand Marcos! Of course we never did anything with this boring footage, it was just talking heads and zooming around, but we did get some experience from this novel approach, and some of the graduates went on to do some good stuff on film. Peter Gidal was there for a bit.

What that did for me was to take me out of the music area for a while, and I really began to focus on film. My first job was to teach film at a junior high school for three years, then I did some teaching at a private school for troubled adolescents, and I taught for a year at an independent film school in Boston called the Orson Welles Film School, it's since gone bankrupt, then I knocked around with a little super 8 film company and worked part-time at the Museum School in Boston, and finally got a full time job there. I've been at the Museum school for 13 years, altogether. I'm sure that working in a visual arts school has affected my work a lot. When I entered as an instructor I had already been working with the visual medium of film, but visual artists who work with their hands a lot work in a very different way, I think, than filmmakers, and that really affected my work in a very positive way. On the other side, when I see the sort of discipline music students have in pursuing music, some of that would go a long way in helping visual artists. Also the looseness of an art school would definitely help a lot of people in music.

My approach had always been personal, experimental film – I don't know which word to use. I always did my own sound tracks, my own compositions, and early on I made some films in 16mm which were meant to be performed with. I had one performance in 1970, called *Third Book of Exercises* where the idea was that a person working in electronic music must work directly with the recording tape. So I made a track on a tape which was all unwound in a trash

basket, and I would have to work very quickly to untangle the tape, feeding it by hand into the machine to be played. It was a kind of exercise. I made a film of this in 1971, and if I did it now I would do it live against the film, with the new technique of getting the film and the performance to be in sync with each other. Another performance film is called *Sections for Screen Performers and Audience*(1974), where I took oscilloscope imagery and combined it with high contrast black and white footage of music notation: panning across it, tilting, close-ups, medium shots etc. The moving graphic oscilloscope images printed through the notation footage. The idea was that whenever I went to a concert there was always that mystery of what were the performers looking at – we can't see the music. This piece was a way of revealing to the audience what the performers were seeing. So that was a very specific music notation film performed to by live musicians – and they would turn their backs to the audience and read the notation and play. The film was the score. It essentially was a kind of improvisation piece, and in the instructions to the film the audience was told it could join in if it wanted. I would go to different places and gather people to play it and sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't.

Fairly early in my film experience I was thinking of analogs between sound techniques and film techniques, and one I hit upon was the idea of using a tape recorder with three heads and getting the sound slightly displaced: you get a little movement in time, and a slight repetition with feedback: an echo. I was thinking about the equivalent with film, which could be making a triple exposure of a zoom shot through a window, with red, green and blue filters, not attempting to keep it all in registration, and you'd get colour in the middle of the image pretty much as it is, but with red, green and blue fringing on the edges. That was part of a narrative film based on a science fiction play that I'd written music to in 1968. I made the film in 1971, called *Think Tank*. The last 16mm film used the optical printer – going through many generations of bipacked material. That was enjoyable. I decided I enjoyed it so much I didn't want to do it again! I hit a point with editing where there was something about the process I wasn't happy with. I used to love getting into the cutting room with the freedom of chopping up the film, but recently I got more into the camera. I think it probably had to do with my confidence in the solo performance work I was doing at that time. With problems of the availability of film stocks and lab difficulties I feel like I've reached the end of working in 16. What I'd like to do is shoot a transducer film in 35 with a magnetic sound track!

When did you start seriously working in film?

In 1968. I did a lot of work in regular 8, then I moved on to 16, and then I moved on to super 8. There's always been that kind of sound or music emphasis in my work and that's why I have naturally evolved into super 8 because of the quality of the sound. There is the great problem of sound quality with 16, and I think, also, some of the type of camera work I've been doing really lends itself to the kind of cameras that are available in super 8, the light weight helps me get close to the things.

And the super 8 camera is so manoeuvrable, which is suitable for your work. The filming is often like a performance in itself – the shots tend to be long running. Sometimes the film is one long take.

Yes, although I am working on a film now – it's all shot in the same location as the pond film I showed – which will have more editing in it.

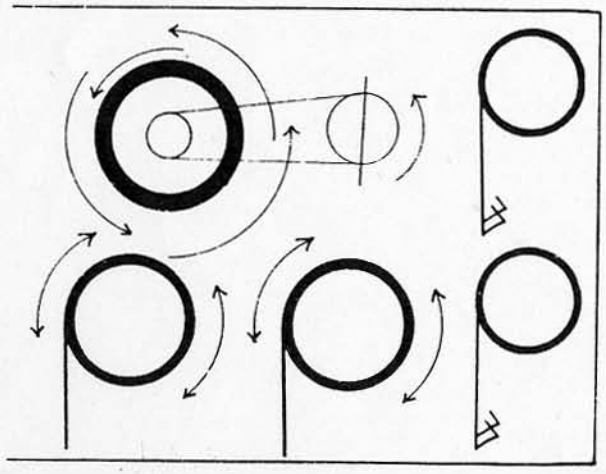
And you prefer to work with film rather than video?

I always have trouble with the sound of video. I always hear a little buzzing in it which distracts me a lot. I've worked with professional video makers, spending hours trying to get rid of a buzz, while thinking, "My god, I could be doing this in super 8!" I have done some video, but it's different from the films in that I put the camera on a tripod and just did a slow zoom in or out, taking advantage of the fact that with video you can get 20 minutes without interruption. But I like the look of super 8: it gets certain textures and subtleties in the material that video couldn't get. I use Kodachrome, as it's sharper than Ektachrome. I'm not interested in having an image shot in anything other than Kodachrome for super 8.

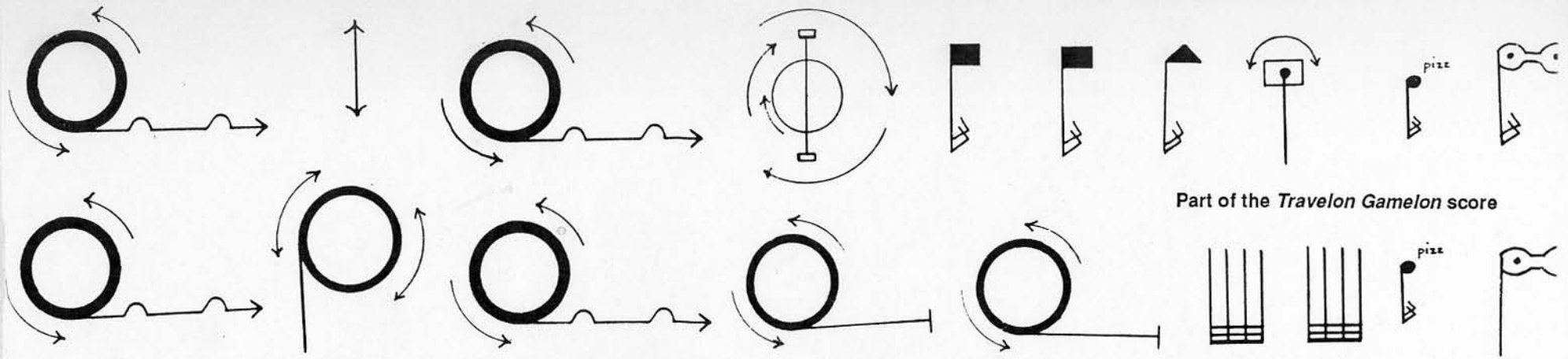
You've done some performance work in city spaces, such as the one with bicycles.

Yes, the bicycle piece absolutely goes into the cities. That's a kind of political piece in a way. I've always been interested in new music and aware that new music or any new art form is difficult for people to get involved with. And part of that is a lot of attitude that artists bring along with their work. So I've chosen to, at times when the work happens naturally – I don't want to force it – try to make the work more accessible.

First was the concert version of that piece, which was rather demanding to play, where the bicycles were turned upside down, the transducers fixed to the axles. The performers play from a score, and the music sounds like gamelon as it's amplified through large loudspeakers. The score was designed as a kind of



Part of the *Travelon Gamelon* score



Part of the *Travelon Gamelon* score

musical joke, I used symbols which suggested the relationship between bicycles and musical notation. After playing a bunch of carefully notated rhythms on the spokes the performers were told to explore all the other sounds that are inherent in a bicycle: striking the handlebars, the rubber of the tyre or the axles, spinning the pedals, applying the brakes, plucking the brake cables. They are told that their job is to listen to each other, and in a sense to improvise with these things.

How many performers?

Six, and three bicycles: two to a bike. The piece ends by going back to the earlier notated stuff with rhythms to make it into a retrograde canon, so it has a real musical structure. It's a stationary piece, but I thought, now here's a way to make a piece that one could do literally on the streets. I made up 40 or 45 little amplifiers, battery holders and pickup devices, bought some loudspeakers and fixed them on to bicycles which are ridden through the streets, giving a large sound that moves. There's no way that most people looking at that don't get a smile on their face, and I want them to have a smile on their face. And I can take that piece and follow it with, say, the concert version, and then follow it with a more abstract piece, and people who ordinarily wouldn't give this stuff the time of day are suddenly led into it in a very non-threatening way. So, politically, I view that as almost a responsibility, in terms of building an audience. But, as I say, I don't have that responsibility to do that all the time, because I'm an artist, and if at times I want to go very abstract, or very political or whatever, that's my right as a person living in a free society.

How long have you been working with the transducers?

Since 1978, and they were designed out of the need that arose from making this bicycle piece. Before that I'd use contact microphones. The piezo transducers make better contact microphones; there's less in the way of the sound and it's more sensitive. The piezo system is based on a specially treated ceramic in a thin slice – when it bends it gives out a voltage, and when it receives a voltage it bends, so it can go either way.

What range of frequencies are they sensitive to?

That depends on what they are attached to. They're not very good on the bass end, although if you put them on something very large... the other night I put one on a large heavy paper photograph and it really brings out the bass then because there's so much bass moving about in that material that it literally overwhelms whatever treble is there. They do have a tendency to give very sharp, high frequency sounds. In film that's not a problem because the camera does have a cut-off point.

It seems that you are interested in the idea that materials, because of their different structures, have inherent sound qualities which we normally can't hear, unless perhaps we clamp our ear against it, but by using the transducers you're able to exploit the sound characteristics and capabilities of given materials.

Yes. I think there are a couple of reasons for that. I can remember many times looking out a window, and if a beetle or a bumble bee crashed into the insect screen, remembering the reverberation of that sound, they really hit! That's a real experiential reason for this. I kind of walk and bang signs as I go through the streets, and I'm always listening to things – it's something I've gotten into. Another thing, of a more personal nature, is that I've stuttered most of my life. I've been to speech schools but it never really had much of an effect. But because of the way I speak, I listen very carefully to things, and I think if you speak to other people who stutter you'll find they will say the same thing – they listen very carefully. I can think of at least three other persons involved in new music who also stutter – I don't think it's a co-incidence. I'm aware of those blocks in my speech, and the ways I get round them. There's an image in that which I've made into a performance piece about stuttering, using some of the metal with the blowtorch as a way of showing the rapid release of sound. So that whole image of the sound: the release of tension in the sound was part of this thing of exploring sound inside of material.

When you do your sound pieces you are obviously performing, but at the same time you look as if you are actually exploring the material, rather than repeating a rehearsed performance.

Always.

So there's that sense of the audience participating in that. And the filming also has got something of that quality of using the camera to explore the material but in a more intimate way than in the performances. The camera shows the material warping and colouring, as you often work with macro.

Yes, I use the macro a lot, I really love the way things look. There's another point there – the whole idea of microphone and microscope: taking a tiny sound or image and making it large.

Some of your pieces have an element of humour, when you play a little game using various materials as a microphone and talking at it, getting it to respond to your voice, so it's a combination of your voice and also the inherent texture and sound of the material.

And I like that kind of duality in work, that it has a funny edge to it. It still amazes me that a letter from the Guggenheim Foundation sounds different from a banknote from some place, than does the 20x24 picture.

You showed several of the Transducer Series in Melbourne. Number 11 involved heating a metal strip with the piezo transducer attached, and I gather you're holding the blowtorch in one hand and the camera in the other.

I held the camera and torch together, but not all the time. My sons, Joshua and Jesse (then 14 and 12) got to do some of the torch work. This was a copper burglar alarm tape, gotten in a surplus place in Boston, stretched between two pitch forks: a little pun, and there was a lot of musical sound going on in them. There's another film where it is just blowing in the wind, but in this film it is heated with a blowtorch, which incidentally was the only way I could remove the adhesive on it – solvents wouldn't touch it. I've used other metal strips such as rather thick stainless steel tape, or aluminium. When aluminium is heated you start to burn the metal which has a different sound again.

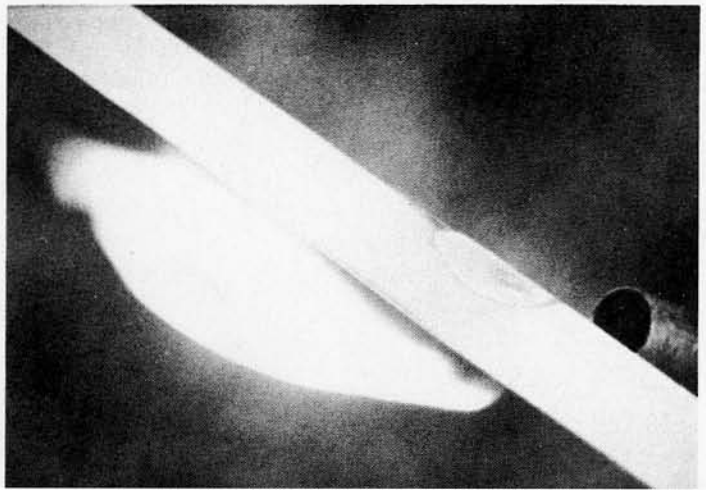
So we're hearing the sound of metal heating and expanding and reacting to the heat: bubbling, buckling, warping and so on.

Yes, all those things happen. It's a real physical phenomonen that you hear, and that's simply again because the little piezo-electric piece on the copper strip is sensitive enough to feel all the vibrations of the metal.

When you apply the blowtorch, how far away is the transducer, can you damage it?

If they get too hot they destroy themselves; they always give a beautiful sound when they go, so it's not so terrible! They're not expensive, I can get them from 40 cents to $1.25 US. I go through a lot in a year – I don't treat them preciously. In that film I started in the middle of the tape and worked towards the transducer, so that by the end of the film, which is the most close up and you can see the flame clearly, that's also when it's the loudest, as it's closer to the transducer.

Would the transducer pick up the sound if you had applied the blowtorch at the extreme end of the tape?



Transducer Series #11: *Copper Strip on Fire* (1984)

It would make it vibrate, but I believe the full energy of the vibration, or the flame burning would not be heard – it would be absorbed by the material.

There's a little philosophical aspect to it, in that the design of regular microphones is based on the structure and operation of the human ear so they react to sound much as we hear it, as this is the only reality we know. But the transducer operates differently as it's in more intimate contact with the sound-producing material, and they make one think about other ways of hearing, insects for example, may hear through their feet, while we hear through the medium of air, the sound is transferred to the molecules of air which mediates it before it arrives at us.

Yes, it's more direct, but if you are near the copper strip blowing in the wind you hear much the same sound through the air, although the air is not sensitive enough to transmit all those vibrations to us. There is that secret world of sound in there that we just don't get to.

Do you sometimes use more than one transducer on a strip?

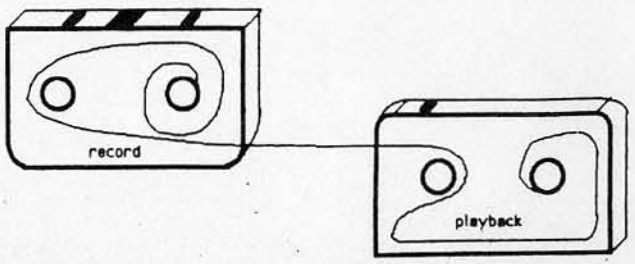
In film, no, but I do in audio work. I've made a lot of audio tapes in this series, and I may use two: one each end, and make a stereo tape. I haven't used more than two – I don't think there's a point – at least I haven't got there yet. In the Transducer Series film #16, *David and Sharon with Pond Life* (1984), it was more complex, there were a few transducers mixed into one source. There was a nylon cord stretched very taut across the pond, again between two pitchforks, so the transducers picked up the wind vibrating it. Hanging from the cord was a mesh window screen, a copper strip was hanging in the water, a blue ribbon was amplified and hanging in the water. Some fish hooks were tied to that stuff and every now and then a fish would grab at the bread and then add another sound. That whole pond was amplified.

That would have been nice as a stereo environmental sound piece, to reproduce the spatial effect.

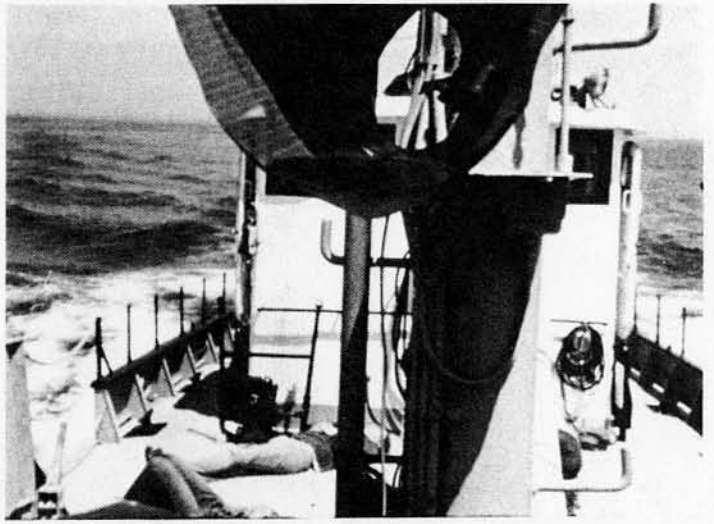
I've been doing more installation work like that, which in a sense has grown out of my film work, and some are very environmental type pieces.

The other night you were using delayed sound coming from different points around the space.

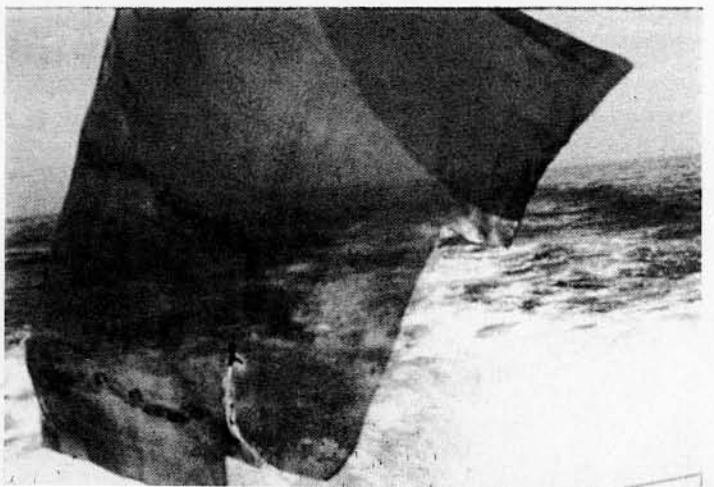
They were simply the sounds picked up by the transducers being delayed with two cassette recorders. The delay was there as a way to thicken texture and to avoid some kind of feedback – a storage device.



Transducer Series #16: *David and Sharon with Pond-life* (1984)



Transducer Series #12: *On Board the SS Edgerton w/ Brass Screen Tube, a Blue Ribbon Microphone, and a Copper Screen* (1984)



It's also convenient in the sound composition, as it takes over and fills the silence while you prepare materials for the next segment of sound.

Right.

Do we want to discuss the film you shot at sea?

That's #12: *On Board the SS Edgerton* (1984). I used three different transducers: one was fixed to a beautiful bronze window screen rolled into a tube. The image I had was like the figurehead on a ship – I felt it was like that on this boat. I tied it up with cord, and you could hear the wind blowing this thing round and making the cords sing. And then I noticed the sunlight coming through it with the moiré patterns. The blue ribbon there was another way of hearing the wind flapping around, almost a brutal sound, very loud, without pitch. The final one was the copper screen at the back of the boat. I filmed through it and I loved the colour of it against the blue-green water. And I also shot from below and got the light showing through it. You can see the wake of the ship through it and you can hear the wake: there is a high pitched hissing sound which is the sound of the water being picked up by the screen. I had coated that transducer with black plastic to make it waterproof, because I had experimented to drag the screen through back of the boat, right in the water – trawling with it – but to my surprise it didn't make any sound. Maybe the mesh was too fine to let the water through, at that speed.

In the snow scene you use a hanging square of metal with the transducer attached.

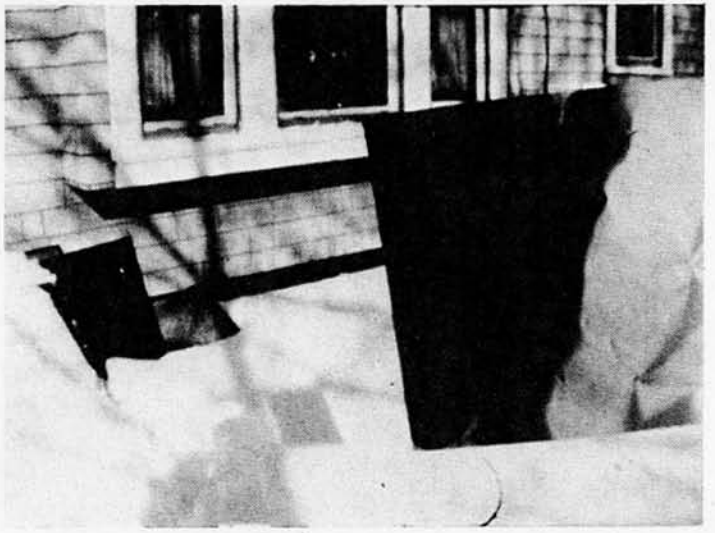
That was # 20: *Two Square Microphones in the same Month* (1985). A philosophical question: if I could be out in the redwoods of California why was I living in the frozen wastelands of Massachusetts? It was literally the same month: the temperature difference in the two places was all but 80° F – it was ridiculous. The snow scene was where I had been living two weeks previous to the redwoods scene. There the square microphone is a sheet of blue gel. In the snow scene it is a stainless steel square, hanging from a line. It was a very cold day, probably about -5° F, it was frozen. There was a cold wind and I thought it was a perfect day to film it. I was worried that the square would come flying off the line and hit me. I was so surprised at how much the thing was blowing around – it was so filled with energy.

So you see the redwood forest and the snow scene as one piece.

In a sense I have unified those two pieces filmed in the same month as one piece. I had no idea I would put them together when I shot them. That was the first time I shot at 24 fps – hoping to get better sound quality. I'm still not sure if I believe in the difference or not. The thing is that the fast moving things like the blue ribbon would probably have looked sharper at 24, but then I was intrigued with getting 3 ½ minutes without stopping.

What did you do in the bridge piece?

That one, number 22, is simply filmed with an amplified straw hanging off the bridge. It's hard to see until the end where I look over the side and there's a



Transducer Series #20: *2 Square Microphones in the same Month (stainless steel and a blue gel)* (1985)

white thing swirling in the wind. This brings up a point: when is a film finished? I have always had a hard time finishing my films. Titles have always been the bane of my existence. For the Transducer Series I made 21 titles all at once which I thought would last forever, but now I'm up to film number 28 or 29 – so I'll have to shoot more titles. This one, *French King Bridge with a Straw Microphone* (1985) may need a verbal title, it's one of these things I'm not sure about. I'm often not sure how to finish work, which is one reason I work in performance so much. This is a beautiful location in Western Massachusetts near the town of Turner's Falls. There's this great bridge which is starting to come apart a little, and it vibrates a lot when heavy trucks go over. I'd like to clamp a transducer on it and literally amplify the bridge. What you hear in the piece I've done is the cars and trucks going by making a resonance in the thin straw – and that seemed to me what I wanted to do sonically because it was such a foggy day. I'd like to film the bridge in all seasons.

When you heat the strip in the snow – Transducer Series #18 – there must have been great extremes of temperature between the flame and the metal.

Yes, it was so cold, it was hard to keep the propane torch alight. And somehow because of the light that day you could see right through the flame. It's almost like a superimposition, seeing the snow through the flame: the blue jet and the slightly golden snow.

I would like to do some with more very quick shots – short enough to make a fast rhythm, but long enough for the sound to work well. I have been doing more on this trip. I did one in St. Johns, Newfoundland which physically is a city similar to Wellington, New Zealand: they both have beautiful harbours and incredibly steep hills. There I made one short film by taking a couple of straws and putting them on the microphones and holding them in one hand with a wide-angle lens: 5.7, and simply walking down a steep hill towards the harbour – just trying to control my walk, my lurch.

What have you done in Australia?

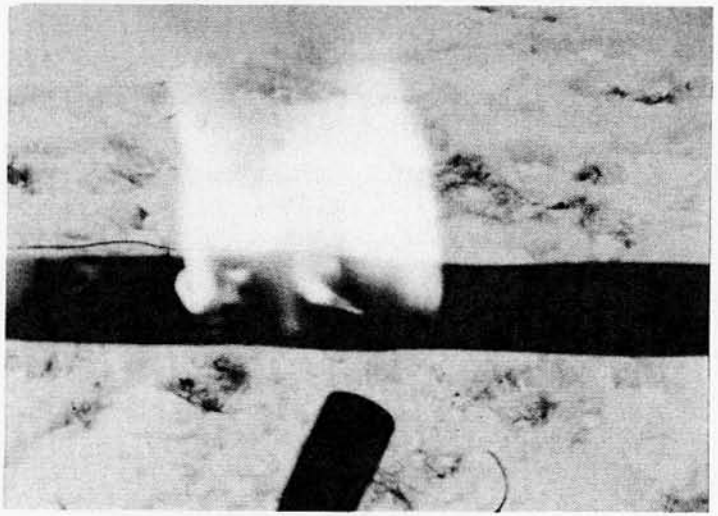
I've done some work in trains, trams and Victoria Market; birds, and I'm really saving some film for getting into the bush somewhere: some exotic areas.

In Auckland I rolled a deep violet gel into a tube and put it round the lens and shot some traffic, flowers, and going up to the Auckland Domain in the park, trying to capture the light, and the transducer is attached to the tube, so you get camera noise as well as traffic noise or fountain noise. I've shot a lot of fountain and water stuff.

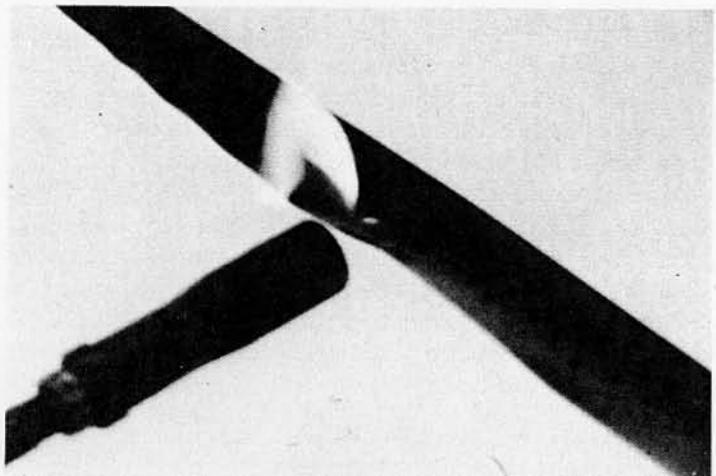
You've been making audio tapes, too.

The filmed transducer series came first and then I made a large number of audio tapes because I wanted sound people and radio people to hear the sort of sound I was getting on film. These are stereo cassettes. I work strictly with cassettes, as I can go anywhere with them. In a little fishing village in Newfoundland the wind was so violent off the ocean, I went into the forest and put the transducers on the trees – you could hear the wind whistling right through the trees.

Transducer Series #22: *French King Bridge w/a Straw Microphone* (1985)



Transducer Series #18: *2 Pieces in the Snow* (Stainless steel tape on fire) (1985)



Is there an ecological angle to your work?

When I did the series in Wisconsin, one of the things that prompted me to work in the area was a book by a famous naturalist, Aldo Leopold: *Sand County Almanac*, one of the really early books about the ecology. So I was somewhat cognizant of that, but to get into that whole ecological movement is something else. As an artist, I would reserve the right to do it if I felt like it.

The pond film has a sense of this – it was opening up the life of the water and making the viewer more sensitive to the idea of water almost as a living organism. You've tried fixing transducers to spider webs.

Yes, I've done a few spider films, but I'm not really happy with them, so in my mind I haven't done them yet. There are other things I'm trying to do: with a condenser microphone, if you take the cover off you're left with a silver surface which is very delicate. If I can pull down a piece from a web and stick it on to that it would be great. It's just one of the things I have to try. My guess is that in some research lab somewhere some of this is happening, but they have access to different kinds of money than I do!

You're showing originals, as do many super 8 filmmakers, as prints are often disappointing. Do you worry about the eventual destruction of the original?

I do have videotape backups, but I am reconciled to the possibility of losing a film, as I have made so many in this series. If I lose a film, I lose a film. □

NEW BOOKS

ABSTRACTION IN AVANT-GARDE FILMS by Maureen Cheryn Turim. UMI Research Press: Studies in Cinema, Michigan, 1985. 165 pp., illus., hardcover. $US 50.75. (Supplied by Wildwood Distribution Services, Unit 3, Lower Farnham Rd., Aldershot, HANTS GU 12 4DY, England.)

This is number 32 in UMI's Studies in Cinema series, an impressive publishing project. (See *Cantrills Filmnotes* #41/42 and 43/44 for reviews of nine other books in the series.) The author of this study is a professor of film at State University of New York at Binghamton, the Cinema Department of which is well-known for its commitment to avant-garde film. The author confesses her fascination with avant-garde films and here attempts "to develop theories which help to explain their functioning."

Well-armed with a knowledge of the work of theorists concerned with so-called 'dominant" cinema (and critical of their tendency to overlook the existence of other cinemas) Turim searches out and develops leads in previous critical writing which provide fruitful strategies for dealing with contemporary avant-garde film. The term 'abstraction" in the title refers to the manipulation of primarily representational imagery and sound in a certain type of avant-garde film – the book does not deal with totally "abstract" films such as computer-generated work. She is careful to define her criteria for selecting films for discussion: in the main, she has chosen films that have been widely seen (at least in the US), given the impossibility of adequate verbal description (although black and white stills augment the discussion of some films). The filmmakers most discussed are Brakhage, Conner, Conrad, Frampton, Gehr, Gerson, Gottheim, Sharits, Snow, Kubelka, Nekes and Dore O. Turim makes clear that her selection is not intended to suggest the limits of avant-garde filmmaking: she recognises the existence of many avant-gardes and that it is "a growing category and practice which thrives on the expansion of its principles and techniques rather than the reiteration of standardised formulas." However, her strategies of analysis are so clearly presented that the reader can usefully apply them to films not mentioned in the text.

After the introductory chapter, the following two grapple with the problem of finding ways to explore the practice of the avant-garde in its "undercutting and transformation of representation", the first dealing with the image, the second with sound. The remaining four chapters closely analyse the way various types of avant-garde films function, making use of the theoretical principles developed earlier.

Happily, the study is not another example of critical theory existing for its own sake, as the author's primary concern is with the films. Her discussions are often quite illuminating, bringing a fresh approach to works about which one assumed the last word had been written. Although it doesn't have the same scope, in a sense this book takes up where Sitney's *Visionary Film* left off, utilizing the intervening developments in critical theory. AC

As Australia's 'Performing Arts Publishers', Currency Press continues to release an impressive collection of books on theatre, film and television. See *Cantrills Filmnotes* #37/38 for a review of their *Legends on the Screen.*

The following are five of the twelve titles on Australian film and television currently published by Currency Press (330 Oxford St., Paddington, NSW 2021):

AN AUSTRALIAN FILM READER (Eds. Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan, 1985, 391 pp, paper, $24.95) offers a useful historical overview of writing on Australian cinema, dating from as early as 1919: an unsigned plea for support for local film production – and 1923: a short piece by Millard Johnson describing his early films – up to 1984. It is divided into four parts: *Early Cinema*, which includes early and recent writing on early filmmaking; *Documentary Hopes*, with pieces by John Grierson, Stanley Hawes, John Heyer and Harry Watt on documentary aspirations of the forties and fifties, as well as writing by Colin Bennett, Tom O'Regan, inter alia, on more recent documentary activity. *Renaissance of the Feature* includes writing dated from 1958 to 1983 on the 'revival, decline and recovery' of Australian feature film production with contributions from Peter Weir, Sylvia Lawson, Sam Rohdie, Meaghan Morris, Robin Wood, Pauline Kael and others.

In the final part, *Alternative Cinema*, 'mainstream film realities' are counterpointed with 'comments on another kind of film.' (Is that a suggestion that mainstream work is more 'real' than non-mainstream, or are we reading too much into the back-cover blurb?) Here is grouped together writing on the avant-garde in