From the Curator

The VSW Film Series was in full swing when Covid-19 closed our doors in March of 2020. I recall introducing the fourth event of the year (Media Underground: Naked Eye Cinema, curated by Louis Chavez) to an unsettled audience, hesitantly thanking them for coming and unsure of whether or not to invite them back. The next day, VSW was closed to the public, and remained closed for the next fifteen months.

While the VSW auditorium was dark during quarantine, we found alternative ways to exhibit moving images, and began streaming online and hosting outdoor screenings on the front lawn of VSW. Programs curated by artists, students and community groups presented rare material found in archives or filmed in the streets that featured a wide variety of voices from the past and present. Motivated by the support of our community to resume programming once it was safe to re-open, the staff of VSW discussed ways in which we could integrate the Film Series, Project Space Residency, and VSW Press activities to continue to stimulate productive conversations. We collectively decided that our new series would follow the salon tradition, bringing together an audience for critical engagement centered around media, images, and archives as powerful social forces. We set about renovating a former gallery adjacent to the bookstore into a screening room outfitted with a soundproof projection booth equipped to show 16mm, Super 8, and video on state of the art equipment. This new space, affectionately called the “microcinema” due to its intimate capacity of fifty people, would allow audiences to connect more directly with the work being presented, and nurture a conversational atmosphere for discussions and presentations. In June of 2021 we held our first public event in the microcinema (Ephraim Asili and Greg de Cuir Jr. Discuss The Inheritance) and the VSW Salon had officially begun.

The VSW Salon takes place bi-monthly and features film screenings, artist talks, performances, and conversations led by local and national artists working in film, photography, books, gaming, sculpture, installation, and hybrid forms of visual art. Salon events begin with an Open Studio featuring the current VSW Project Space Residents, followed by the main event in the microcinema. In the first season, the VSW Salon hosted seven events. While each event was unique in both form and content, all of the Salon events incorporated some form of media as a launching point for discourse about media, and covered a wide range of topics including: archival activism in Rochester and Palestine, ecological theory in studio practice, reinterpretation of the language of lantern slides, and queer video game art.

What you are reading now is the VSW Salon Review, a limited-run publication dedicated to reflecting upon the previous season and anticipating the next. In this issue, we have invited a selection of artists, curators, and Project Space...
residents involved in the first season of VSW Salon to write about their experiences, share their work, and continue the conversation in print form. I am deeply grateful to all the contributors for sharing their insights with us in this inaugural issue.

As we prepare for our second season, yet another strain of Covid threatens to prevent us from gathering together in a shared space. This time, however, I enthusiastically invite you to return when you are comfortable doing so because the VSW Salon offers evidence of a resilient community with a steadfast commitment to communication, conversation, and critical engagement. I look forward to seeing you in the Salon!

Tara Merenda Nelson
Curator of Moving Image Collections
Programmer, VSW Salon
January 2022

The Framing Struggle film series took place over the course of four evenings throughout the second half of 2021, in VSW’s recently constructed microcinema. It materialized during the pandemic, just as we were beginning to watch films together again, and in the midst of a city-wide rebellion triggered by the state-sanctioned murder of Daniel Prude. In the tradition of the film club, the series sought to produce an intentional and discursive space for reading movies as expressions of solidarity by tracing image production strategies developed within and alongside social movements here and elsewhere. At a moment when images from the Rochester uprising were inspiring action across the country and around the world, we gathered together to watch and talk, in search of solidarity connections yet to emerge.

The series found both its conclusion and its genesis by looking toward Palestine. Khaled Jarrar’s visceral road movie *Infiltrators* (2012) opened the program, just six weeks after the largest Palestine-sol i darity protest in the history of Rochester was held outside the federal building on State Street. Jarrar’s embedded and experimental documentary provided an intimate lens through which to view the crime of apartheid, tracing the myriad strategies used by Palestinians to sur mount the walls and barriers constructed by the occupying power. The discussion following the film was led by Iman Abid, co-founder of Free the People ROC, alongside Abdalrahman AlMallahi of the University of Rochester’s Students for Justice in Palestine. Responding to Jarrar’s images, Abid and AlMallahi made the case for renewed action in solidarity with Palestine, building on the legacy of anti-apartheid activism in our city.

Our second film, *Empty Metal* (2018) by Adam Khalil and Bailey Sweitzer continued the decolonial thread provided by *Infiltrators*, regrounding it in the struggle against police violence in North America. Khalil and Sweitzer’s psychedelic tale of a punk band...
recruited to avenge the deaths of young Black men provided the context for a rich conversation led by artist and filmmaker Martin Hawk. Drawing on his own experience documenting the uprising in Rochester, Hawk explored the themes at Empty Metal’s core: art and revolt, solidarity and collaboration, violence and apocalypse. This brief turn toward narrative cinema introduced a fruitful question regarding strategies of representation and the role of abstraction in the fight for abolition.

We returned to the documentary frame for the third evening in the series, with two films directed by pioneering director Bonnie Sherr Klein: Through Conflict to Negotiation (1968) and Building an Organization (1968). Commissioned by the National Film Board of Canada, these were two chapters in a five-part series entitled Organizing for Power: The Alinsky Approach documenting the efforts of legendary organizer Saul Alinsky, and the community organizations he worked with in the late 1960s. Discussion of the films was led by two leaders of the movement in Rochester today, Ashley Gantt of Free the People Roc and Tonya Noel Stevens of Flower City Noire Collective. Speaking back to Klein’s images, their reflections centered less on Alinsky himself than on those behind his approach: the neighborhood leaders, church-goers, and workers who fought to take back control of the cities they lived in.

The fourth and final installment in the Framing Struggle series also looked back in order to look forward, reconsidering the collectivist film practices of two groups of documentarians active in the 1970s: the Palestine Film Unit and Rochester’s own Portable Channel. Returning to the question of Palestine, this time through images from the militant period, offered an opportunity to ground the emergent solidarity project in a shared history of self-representation. We were fortunate enough to be joined by Director Sandy Rockowitz of Portable Channel, who reflected on his film Community of Witness (1982) alongside VSW Curator of Moving Image Collections Tara Nelson. Placed in conversation with Mustafa Abu Al’s seminal works for the PFU, They Do Not Exist (1974) and Palestine in the Eye (1976), Rockowitz’s film recalls not only the history of purposive image production in our city, but the international tradition it was a part of, and the role of solidarity in the struggle for liberation.

Casey Asprooth Jackson, curator
Dark Matter

GRANVILLE CARROLL

The overwhelming reach of the mind into the past
The tug
The pull
The squeeze
The pressure
The weight
The heaviness
The pain
Stagnation

Where do I go?

Down
Down
Down
Up Up Up
Eternal, cyclical, infinite

Existence
Reading Sweetgrass was a panel of six area artists who presented their work in relation to Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants by Robin Wall Kimmerer. Each artist shared a brief talk, slideshow, or reading that resonates with or is in direct response to Wall Kimmerer’s incomparable text. On the panel were interdisciplinary artist Lee Cannarrozo, book artist Michael Darcy, photographic and textile artist Hernease Davis, industrial designer Mindy Magyar, cultural anthropologist and artist-publisher Kathryn A. Mariner, and ceramist Kate Whorton, it was moderated by VSW Director Tate Shaw.

The following essay was included in Reading Sweetgrass and edited for Salon Review.

I’ll frame this excerpt from a longer essay—very much a work in progress—with three quotes from Robin Wall Kimmerer’s Braiding Sweetgrass. The first appears when Kimmerer is describing sitting with and seeking wisdom from the Sitka Spruce:

“I am not from here, just a stranger who comes with gratitude and respect and questions of how it is we come to belong to a place.”[i]

She says the following about finding her house in upstate New York:

“This is where we would fall to earth.”[ii]

And later:

“Once you develop a relationship with a little patch of earth, it becomes a seed itself.”[iii]

As a cultural anthropologist, artist, and writer, my work exists at the intersection of Anthropology and Black Studies, and I’ve been trying to make sense of what it means to be a Black person in this place (Rochester, New York), occupying Indigenous land. La Paperson argues that “land serves as an important connecting node between Indigenous struggle and Black resistance,” but also reminds us that non-Indigenous people, including non-Indigenous Black folks, are by many accounts, settlers.[iv] “Indigenous vanishing” they argue, “is essential for the twenty-first century ecological settler to become the new adoptive ‘native,’ and thus rightful reinhabitant of Native land” (2014: 117). Paperson develops the concept of ghetto colonialism to describe the violent synergy between Indigenous dispossession and Black displacement, describing the United States as a “settler nation burdened by slavery.”[v] This got me thinking about how one makes a home in a place like Rochester, a place historically characterized by various forms of colonization, segregation, immigration, and circulation.

In the preface to Braiding Sweetgrass, Kimmerer contends that “people and land are good medicine for each other.”[vi] Julietta Singh says that the body is an archive.[vii] If these things are true, it would explain why I’m always catching the scent of petrichor and wildfire smoke. A glint of obsidian or iron pyrite by the side of the road, sinking into fingertips pruned by a winter creek. Growing up, I was fed from raised beds and a small orchard. Pie cherries, marionberries, Santa Rosa plums, miner’s lettuce, and Best Foods mayonnaise. Tillamook cheddar and Umpqua ice cream. Wild rosehips, fuzzy seeds scooped out and discarded. As a young child, I dropped the last egg from our aging hens on the front steps of the house my parents bought in 1975—broken yolk and shards of eggshell melting into the wood grain. That was the first time I remember being trusted with something precious. I was watered by cool rains, a well that was occasionally oversubscribed, and the South Umpqua River. A glass of juice every morning.

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KATHRYN A. MARINER
The two landlords I had before I bought this house were both white men. Now we're in deep with a bank. The realtor drove a white Tesla and wore a blue mask. Our loan officer’s name was Adam Smith. You can’t make this shit up.

I am truly smitten with this patch of ground and its accompanying structure built from harvested materials, with the elderly cottonwood towering over the side yard, the Douglas fir beams holding the living room ceiling aloft. Our taxes go to the city, not the suburbs. We feel calm and rooted.

Kimmerer talks about becoming Indigenous to the land. She writes, “By honoring the knowledge in the land, and caring for its keepers, we start to become Indigenous to place.” In Arthur Jafa’s 2014 film, Dreams are Colder than Death, one of the Black Studies scholars who he interviews says that getting tenure in the academy is all well and good, but getting “tenure in the community” is a more important accomplishment.

So in a nutshell, I think my ethnographic work in Rochester, which I’m calling fertile ground, is a philosophical, analytical, and empirical attempt to think through what it would mean to try to get tenure in the community, or to become Indigenous to this place. I say attempt, because I’m not sure either of these goals is possible; but with a tiny pink disk of fluoride. I remember the taste, chalky bubblegum on my tongue.

I was born on Klamath land—ceded in 1864 in accordance with a treaty that was broken almost a century later by the federal government—but learned to run and read and talk and dream on ten acres of stolen Umpqua territory, nestled between a forested hillside and a small river, shallow and teal blue in the summer, raging and frothy like chocolate milk, in the winter. I have only ever been a transplant, cut off from my original context, grafted onto something, someone, someplace else. Like the branch of an apple tree spliced into a trunk in the orchard beyond the chicken coop. The periwinkle, beautiful and invasive, took over the side yard.

I was thinking about all this—roots, routes, transplantation—in August 2021, when my partner and I purchased four tenths of an acre of Haudenosaunee territory, lands of the Onondaga Nation, first “purchased” in 1788, on the very edge of what is now called Rochester. The borders defined by the Phelps-Gorham purchase were later affirmed in 1794 through an as yet unredressed and frequently violated treaty. On this patch of contested land sits a house—a “picturesque colonial” to quote from Zillow—that was built in 1947. It was the fourth house we made an offer on that year. The housing market was “hot” the same way stolen things are. Unlike a lot of Rochester houses, this one did not have a racial covenant. At least not one I could readily locate in the hundred-plus-page abstract of title. There are squirrels, groundhogs, chipmunks, and a fox in the backyard.

“This is where we fell to earth.”

Dream lives, shadow-worlds, and aspirational selves.
The debt.
The emotions.
The intimate speculation of imagining a future in a place.[i] [xvi] The cruel optimism of developing an attachment to something that isn’t yours and then “losing” it.[x]
The security cameras on the $36,000 house in the Black neighborhood. When the white folks flipped it, they put in a dry sauna. It’s still across the street from a brownfield.
The property taxes. The permanence.
The need/desire for more space after a period of confinement.
The volatile market.
Is this the thing we’ll pour our heart and soul and disposable income into instead of children, as the oceans rise and the forests burn? Is this an investment we’ll regret?
The tear-off roof, a house backing up to the woods.
Renting forever—building wealth for someone else but staying out of debt.
keeping them in sight helps me conceptualize my place here and my temporal, emotional, intellectual, and economic investments in these surroundings. Indeed, Kimmerer admits that “Indigenous is a birthright word. No amount of time or caring changes history or substitutes for soul-deep fusion with the land.”[xiii] She concludes, “As the world changes, an immigrant culture must write its own stories of relationship to place...but tempered by the wisdom of those who were old on this land long before we came.”[xiv] Or were brought here by force, violently transplanted.

The “American Dream” of homeownership, a potent form of “putting down roots,” is deeply imbricated in a set of intimate inheritances and violent histories. To think through these entanglements is to confront complicity, the fact that there is no ethical consumption under capitalism. I find it helpful to think with Tiffany Lethabo King, who has theorized encounters between Black and Indigenous life as a kind of shoal—the shallow place where the land meets the water. She argues that “‘innocence’ does not exist within the lifeways of this hemisphere or the modern world. The endeavor of surviving under conditions of conquest is never clean.”[xv] Kimmerer, read within the context of this particular place and time, helps us navigate the fraught politics of home, of space, of settling down, of falling—as she says—to earth.

Notes

[vi] Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass, x.
[viii] Thank you to Robert Foster for helping me learn this history.
[xi] An earlier Adam Smith was an 18th century economist and philosopher often known as “the Father of Capitalism.” He wrote a very well-known book called The Wealth of Nations. I had to read it in the theory core of my Anthropology PhD program.
NO TIME IS LOST
Multi-Media Lantern Slide Installation November 18-December 3, 2021 in the VSW microcinema

The slides originate from the VSW Lantern Slide Collection.

Right: Installation view
Above and left: stills from No Time is Lost by Beina Xu, 2021
Makes Waves

In the near future, sound activists respond to new threats trained at a vulnerable area of a city. Urban developers now deploy sonic weapons used at protests to clear neighborhoods for luxury high rises. Unbeknownst to them, their constructions undermine their aggressive renewal campaign. Sound medics on the frontlines tend to the injured. As they respond, one member of the team documents the incidents to create a future archive for other sonic activists.

Emergency alert system sirens were already in place around the city. Those sirens could be repurposed in particular areas to stimulate development opportunities.
The videos in SCREEN/DOOR work within a conflicted sense of dread or of a deep longing or from within struggle. They address problems, personal and structural ones, some with names, and others without. The binary is present, dismantled or turned away from. Play is essential to this communication, but pleasure is often problematized.

Screens are ubiquitous, the phone screen, the tv screen, this screen, your screen, the screen beyond the screen. Through this glass, our eyes meet, but...
swampbabes is a tiny, artist-run, no-Profit organization in Rochester, New York devoted to fostering a games/art/queer local/regional community and inclusive space. Swampbabes is interested in sharing experimental, non-commercial, renegade games-related art and projects and providing a platform for diverse voices and bodies outside of the already established structures and hierarchies. Visit swampbabes.org for more info.

Peter Besma-Lord
HTTPCSAR Desktop Runthrough

Evan Bobrow
Moonrise
Stage 1.1

Tetsuya Fukui
Ignis/Requiem

http://swampbabes.org

Please Set Up High-Vo...
As the dark and cold grow longer and deeper, the veil between this world and the spooky one grows thinnest. The Christmas spirit as it is practiced is a hedonistic scramble to distract ourselves from the deepening darkness. This midwinter screening event honors the uneasy feeling of being overtaken by the nighttime season, when underworld spirits feel truly free to roam an earth settling into the death of a wintry slumber.

Here at VSW we tend our own climate-controlled crypt of media ancestors, holding the bodies of over 5,000 16mm films slumbering in their little round casket-cans. Most of our collection comes from Rochester public libraries, where the films enjoyed a robust, active life of social interaction. Let us take this midwinter moment to crack the tomb and let lose the spirits once again!

16mm film is an extremely bodily medium. The projectionist knows this most of all. Most of the preparation work for this screening was inspection—scrolling and hand touching every inch of each of these films (and many others that did not make the cut). To inspect a library film is to witness its relationship to the public, the record of its treatment. 16mm is dual: extremely durable in some respects (marvel at the film on its harrowing journey through a projector!), and yet vulnerable—very ready to bear the evidence of its life in damage and decay. Scratches and splices, blown sprockets, shrinkage, color fading, and even occasionally a frankenstein film (different prints cobbled together, fading with different qualities) are all testament to the individual life of a film title in the hands of the general public.

We’d like to thank Nancy, Jean-Pierre, Frank, and the other 16mm projectors working tonight, without whom all film would be woefully incomplete.

Mary Lewandowski, Curator
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MARY LEWANDOWSKI is a performance-based materials artist operating in Rochester. As a curator, projectionist, and filmmaker, she is interested in 16mm films specifically as a magical medium. She currently works in the VSW Moving Image department as Collections Assistant.

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SWAMPBABES is a tiny, artist-run, no-profit organization based in Rochester, New York devoted to fostering a games/art/ queer/local/regional community and inclusive space. swampbabes is interested in sharing experimental, non-commercial, renegade games-related art and projects and providing a platform for diverse voices and bodies outside the structures of already established hierarchies. swampbabes is not seeking profit and is against competition. All are welcome. swampbabes.org.

BEINA XU is a writer, filmmaker, and researcher based in Berlin, Germany. Born in China and raised in the US, she studied comparative literature and visual anthropology in Europe and the United States. Her work is often situated at intersections, and examines the relation between personal and collective historiography. Her essay film Forget Alberto For Now premiered at International Film Festival Rotterdam in 2020, and has gone on to win several awards.

VSW Salon is programmed by Tara Merenda Nelson, taranelson@vsw.org | VSW, 31 Prince St. Rochester, NY, vsw.org.