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Arthur and Corinne Cantrill: the film's the thing. [Experimental film makers interviewed by Burt, Warren.]

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Arthur and Corinne Cantrill: the film's the thing. [Experimental film makers interviewed by Burt, Warren.]

Abstract

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Keywords

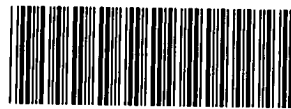
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►warren burt

arthur & corinne cantrill

the film's the thing

Arthur and Corinne Cantrill, arguably Australia's most important experimental filmmakers, have been making films since 1959, when they worked on films on child art.



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This is a severely edited version of an interview conducted by Warren Burt via telephone on 2 September 2006.

[Arthur Cantrill: AC, Corinne Cantrill: CC]

Warren Burt > *It seems that a lot of your work is concerned with what might be called materiality. That is, the materials that you're using not only determine what you do, but form the subject matter for a lot of the pieces. I'm thinking of, for example, the three-colour separation films, and so on.*

Corinne Cantrill > Yes, that would be true. But we were always interested in the materiality of films. I mean, even with the workshops we ran in handmade film in 1970. There has always been that interest in the materiality of film, and the processes and the equipment all that aspect of it.

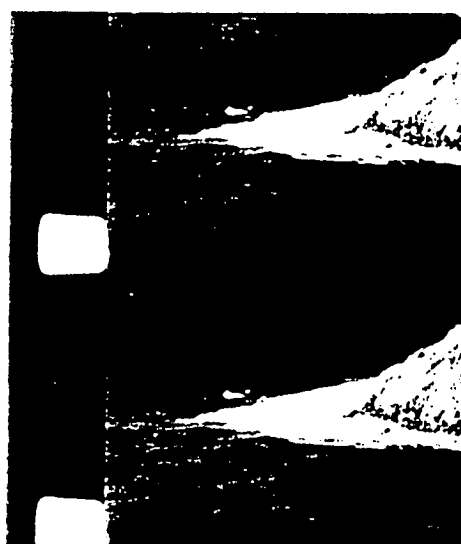
The question is, then, does this concern with material and the integrity of the image that results from that particular material, lead to your decision, for example, not to have video copies of your filmwork?

CC: Yes, I think so. But there are much bigger issues here, because of the whole push to make videos of our film work – it's always been this cheap and nasty economic argument that it's cheaper. Especially in Australia, there was always that thing of cheapness and convenience that I always saw as the underlying real reasons and I reject that.

FACING PAGE: *In This Life's Body* 1984, still of 'mirror selfportrait' of Arthur and Corinne from Corinne Cantrill's autobiographical film. BELOW: *Eikon* 1969, triptych portrait contrasting stillness and movement. RIGHT: *Bouddi* 1970, a 'camera calligraphy' of the coastal bush near Bouddi, NSW.



LEFT: *Waterfall* 1984, a 3-colour separation film shot in the Grampians. The two frames show colour differences in the moving water. BELOW: *Floterian* - hand printings from *A Film History* 1981, fleeting images from Cantrill 8mm and 16mm films hand-printed onto 35mm film.



Arthur Cantrill > The photochemical basis of all our work is very important, and we just see this as being two separate media: the electronic digital media, and the photochemical media, and as far as we were concerned with our work, the two just don't mix. Our three-colour separation work, when transferred to video, or television, or anything like that, generally looks like some kind of technical mistake, when you lose all the very fine definition and colour qualities which change, and so on. It just doesn't transfer well.

CC: Even prior to video coming on the scene, we also had a great resistance, because back then, there was great pressure on you from the film laboratories and the distributors, to make what were called duplicate negs, in which you get a couple of generations between the original material and the print. We always resisted that because there was always, again, that loss of definition. We've even now sometimes moved to the quite extreme situation where we don't make a print at all, and we project the original. That was what we did with *Projected Light – On the Beginning and End of Cinema*. We've always shown the original, the Kodachrome original, you know, the prince of film materials. The funny thing is that time has proved us right, because so many people who made these dupe negs, have found that their work has faded, whereas all the expensive colour reversal prints we made are still good. After more than 30 years, they haven't faded at all. That was a forerunner to making videos of films to reduce cost.

I made a little note here – the two of you have remained young longer than many other artists because you were willing to put in all those years organising shows at La Mama, putting out Cantrills Filmnotes, and so on.

CC: For many years in the seventies we had a weekly Sunday night film evening at our place in Brunswick. Finally the energy behind that petered out, and we called it a day, but it was wonderful while it lasted. And of course the other wonderful moment was the Melbourne Super 8 Film Group, which had a monthly screening, and for a few golden years [in early-mid 1990s], that was something fantastic. But then, various people left town, like Steven Ball and Pete Spence, who are no longer in Melbourne, and gradually the thing was taken over by other people and fell apart. But that was another wonderful coming together of people once a month.

AC: And then of course, before all that [in the early 70s], there was the Maze in Flinders Street, where we took over a music venue up several flights of stairs every Sunday night and gave film screenings there.

CC: Yes. That lasted five months until the winter came, it was so cold and draughty and windy it was like being in Antarctica. (laughter) But for five wonderful months, that was the thing to do.

AC: But you're right, our life's a whole history of setting up screenings, sometimes alone, and sometimes with other people, because if we waited for the film establishment to give us screenings, we'd still be waiting.

It seems that over your career, you actually GAVE an incredible amount to culture at large. I'm thinking both of your own work and of Cantrills Filmnotes, which for so many of us in Melbourne for so many years was a source of information, and it also provided a written context for a struggling scene.

CC: It's very interesting, because when we started the magazine in 1971, the whole film society ethic was very powerful. They were all hooked on Godard and Antonioni, but not only that, they were so hostile, I mean pro-actively hostile, to experimental film, and people like us and Albie Thoms, were derided all the time, in print as well as socially and verbally. So there was this feeling that the only way we could get some acknowledgement was to publish something. We kicked off with the first issue of the magazine not knowing whether we would go on with it, and then there just seemed to be so many possibilities, so many things to be written about, that it went on. It became quite apparent that there was a need for an ongoing voice for independent, not even big-name independent, personal type film-makers, including quite unknown, obscure people, even high-school students, and people like that.

AC: Yes, finally the magazine as a whole is a record of a lot of work that has more or less become lost, or was never printed, or never appeared in lending collections of any kind, especially all the 8 mm work, and of course, some video work that's not playable any more, that sort of thing. So it's now a record on paper of a whole body of work, a large amount of which is no longer accessible.

What is your current project?

AC: We had a show in Brisbane in March, at the *OtherFilm Festival*. It was a retrospective, and also a revival of our action-on-film screen performance work, *Expanded Cinema* and we thought we should have a new film, so we completed a film we had been working on for several years. That's our latest film, *Room of Chromatic Mystery*. It's quite wonderful again, a three-colour separation, shot on high contrast black and white, so that the colours are completely out of this world. There are a couple of unfinished projects, but we're not shooting much. We've been shooting some super 8 footage, which may finally work together. We've done a lot on super 8 in recent decades, and copying the best up to 16 mm for exhibition.

CC: Back in the past, 30 years ago, we were really working very fast, but we don't work fast any more. One reason is: where is the possibility to show it, or to sell prints of it? That is a factor, and we can't deny that. The only thing that keeps film somewhat alive in the lending collections is the growth of the post-graduate industry, and it IS an industry, in the universities. There are so many post-graduate students researching aspects of experimental film, or us, or animation, or surrealism, artists as filmmakers, all these sort of things, and these people are enormous borrowers of film. So if it wasn't for this post-graduate industry, I think it would be very difficult for film collections to survive.

AC: And as a byproduct, some of these people are setting up public screenings of material that they're discovering as well, and this is great. It's a sort of unexpected boost to the whole field, really.

One of the difficulties we're facing is the incredible obsolescence of every piece of equipment that we've ever put our hands on.

CC: I feel that with film, where the equipment is more mechanical, it is less of a problem. We keep things serviced, of course, but I feel that there's something about the mechanical nature of film projectors, and film cameras, that maybe saves it from that obsolescence, at least while there are still spare parts.

AC: The analogue equipment does take longer to run down – we're still using the Bolex 16 mm camera we bought in 1960, and it works fine. I shot some titles on it recently, and the poor old thing sort of sprang into life again after I wound it up. It seems to be indestructible.

CC: But I feel where we've transferred things to video, or digital, or CDs, you've got this whole thing hanging over you as to how durable are they, and how long will they last, where we don't have that same anxiety about film, to that extent. I do feel that one of the nightmares for the artist as they get older is the responsibility for the future of their work from an archival point of view. I feel that the burden of one's archives is one of the last things you want to struggle with as you get older. If you die, you really can't count on anyone else. We really want to preserve our stuff, but you also want to go on living, and not spending all of your time archiving. A lot of our time in recent years has been involved with archiving, not just our own work, but also our books and magazines, a lot of which are quite unusual and rare and important.

AC: Yes, that's the other unexpected problem of being an elderly artist!

CC: Do we live for future researchers? [general laughter] ☺

► The unedited version of this interview can be found at www.artlink.com.au

Warren Burt is an acclaimed composer and performer of electronic and acoustic music and currently a research fellow at the University of Wollongong. A recipient of a major Australia Council award in 1998-2000, he has worked internationally with performers and artists in video and sound since the 1970s.

FROM BELOW: Arthur & Corinne Cantrill *City of Chromatic Dissolution* 1999, 3-colour separation film of Melbourne cityscapes; *Warrah* 1980, a 3-colour separation film; *The Land is Not Empty* 2000, a meditation on Aboriginal country in the Black Range, Western Victoria.

