



A Few In-Camera Observations about Louise Bourque

Clint Enns

This essay has been somewhat challenging to write, so perhaps I will start with a few facts that reveal why. Fact #1: I consider Louise to be a friend. I enjoy spending time with her and often wish our time weren't relegated to the brief occasions before and after screenings. Louise has many of the qualities that I seek in camaraderie, traits that I will now state as self-evident facts. Fact #2: Louise is exceptionally clever. Fact #3: Louise has both personal and artistic integrity. Fact #4: Both Louise and her work are challenging. Fact #5: Louise is generous with her time, feedback, and creative energy. Fact #6: Louise is a character. Fact #7: Louise is incredibly courageous. I feel many of these qualities allow for the production of exceptional art. Although I have presented these as self-evident facts, I will now introduce a few personal anecdotes that will solidify these claims and, perhaps more importantly, provide new insight into her work.

Let's begin with one of the things I find charming about Louise, namely, that she consistently shows up to screenings fashionably late. While she almost never entirely misses the first act, she always manages to find the most dangerous seat in the house. In particular, at *la lumière*, a microcinema in Montreal, there are two stools that are too high and wobbly, making them treacherous even for people who are tall enough for them. When I arrive at *la lumière*, I usually attempt to snag the comfiest seat in the house; however, when Louise arrives, I often silently offer her my seat, which she always graciously refuses. Given the dangerous nature of the stools, they are quite undesirable and, as such, are often left vacant in spite of the fact that they are high enough to provide an unobstructed view of the screen (and those one-inch barriers, subtitles). Out of the corner of my eye, I always watch as Louise summits the stool, ready to lend a hand if anything were to go awry. For the rest of the

screening, Louise watches, teetering high above the ground, a ritual that, at least to me, functions as an apt metaphor for the cinema Louise produces, a devotional cinema that lives dangerously on the brink of falling apart while never quite toppling over.

Louise attends screenings not only to see films, but also to participate in a social gathering, in particular, one that revolves around an underground society that she has been a member of for many years. This underground society has only one condition for membership: one must engage with the experimental cinema community in some way, for instance, by facilitating screenings, writing about the work, or by actually producing new types of moving images. This is one of the main differences between commercial and experimental cinema—the latter forms a networked society in which those involved develop personal relations with each other. Since Louise has been involved with the community for many years, screenings are often a way to check in on old friends and to develop relationships with new members, since the artists will often accompany their work.

In regard to the work shown, Louise is an observant critic who, during Q&A sessions, often manages to provide new insight and readings of the work through well-informed observations and by attentively recognizing the through lines that connect seemingly disjointed films. No doubt the skills to both recognize and effectively communicate ideas hidden in difficult work were developed through her years of teaching. As observed by Michael Sicinski, the ability to transform seemingly unrelated ideas and concepts into new forms is also a trait found in Louise's art practice. Sicinski argues, "Bourque has moved through numerous strands of experimental film and video history, grounded herself in practices and traditions that once seemed incompatible, and is now pointing the way to something new."¹ Moreover, Sicinski's observation reveals Louise's familiarity with and understanding of the traditions she has devoted herself to.

Louise often expresses her gratitude for being able to attend these events. This gratitude is twofold. First, she appreciates the tremendous effort and dedication it takes to organize these types of events. Second, she is grateful that she is feeling well enough to be able to leave the house, an event that seems fairly mundane to most of us, but that with a debilitating illness can become nearly impossible.

Louise and I got to know each other at Don Blanche, an artist residency that takes place near Shelburne, Ontario. Louise was one of the artists-in-residence, and I was simply attending the public open house, a two-day art party with performances, pirate radio, art installations, and dancing. Gabrielle Moser provides a description of the residency:

No proposals. No resumes. No deadlines. Much like the small, independent farm on which it's hosted, the Don Blanche residency is an anomaly in an increasingly globalized world. Created in 2009 by Don Miller and Christine Swintak as "a gift to artists," Don Blanche is a ten-day residency that takes place each summer near Shelburne, Ontario, a small town two hours north of Toronto.

Centred in and around a huge 6,000-square-foot building that Miller constructed from century-old dismantled barns and an array of purposefully placed found window panes (Swintak has affectionately nicknamed it the "Frankenbarn"), Don Blanche hosts up to 80 artists who come from across the country to work on projects. There is no running water, and limited electricity comes from solar panels and wind turbines. Most participants camp outside or sleep in a dorm in a wing of the barn.²

Don Blanche is a happening straight from another era. At the farm, Louise created a film installation in a sculpture created by Felix Kalmenson. The sculpture was a small elevated room on stilts approximately seven feet above the ground, whose entrance was a small door made out of nine cut-glass panels set into a wood frame. Opposite the entrance was a window in the shape of a pyramid. In essence, entering the structure was like entering a camera with a fixed view.³

While at Don Blanche, Louise asked for my assistance to set up her installation. There were a few hurdles to overcome, like getting electricity to Kalmenson's structure, which was in the the middle of a field, and figuring out how to get the heavy 16mm projector into the sculpture given that it was already difficult enough simply to climb into it. Louise and I bonded while setting up her installation, a result that is worth emphasizing since this social aspect of artmaking is not often discussed. The installation was quite intelligent, beautiful, engaging, and intimate; however, the process of artmaking, although often enjoyable in and of itself, is also an opportunity to spend quality time with the people around us. Some play cards or backgammon together; others make art.

Louise's film installation at Don Blanche activated Kalmenson's sculpture, which, like a camera without a flash, was ineffective at night. The images on the loop consisted of found footage showing an unmade bed and a closeup of a woman's face moving towards the camera. On the images Louise carved the phrase "ma déchirure, ma blessure, ma suture [my tear, my wound, my suture]," one that was reused and re-contextualized in her film *Auto Portrait /*

Self Portrait Post Partum (2013). Moreover, the filmstrip had been ripped apart and sewn back together, providing the filmstrip with both a wound and a suture, one that is both visceral and cathartic. The loop was an intimate articulation of heartbreak, and Kalmenson's small room amplified the personal nature of the work. Moreover, the image was projected where the bellows once was, transforming the camera-like nature of the sculpture from one that captures images, to one that is used to transmit images.⁴ Finally, given that the images were presented inside Kalmenson's camera-like structure, they can be seen as being presented "in-camera," a term used in relation to discussions in which personal or sensitive material is presented with the desire that it remain secret.

Artists Leslie Supnet and Guillaume Vallée both have had similar experiences working with Louise. Leslie spent time with Louise at the 2012 Film Farm (an analogue film residency located near Mount Forest, Ontario), helping her contact print some of the elements used in *Auto Portrait / Self Portrait Post Partum*; Guillaume co-edited Louise's film *Bye Bye Now* (2021). According to Leslie, she was quite in awe of Louise and had admired her work for many years. In the darkroom, they spent the afternoon talking while contact printing, a process that Leslie felt was "inspiring and a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to hear from a unique storyteller"; however, she was also grateful for the opportunity to get to know Louise better.⁵ Guillaume similarly described his experience working with Louise.

We bonded quite a bit while editing, but we were close friends long before that. Working with her was interesting and inspiring. Her process is really intuitive while still remaining controlled.⁶

I contend that, in addition to enjoying the social aspects of screenings, Louise finds pleasure in the social bonds she forms through collaboration in her filmmaking practice.

Given that Louise and I first bonded over artmaking, I have attempted to focus on the social aspects of her work. Owing to the length of time that Louise has been involved with the underground film scene through teaching, curating, producing, and distributing personal, handmade films, she is deeply embedded in the scene; although it is not the sole focus of her existence, this scene is a major part of her life and social interactions. While Louise has made a significant body of work and notable contributions to Canadian cinema, the social aspects of her production, the bonds made through the production and screening of experimental works, have provided an impetus for her to continue to pursue difficult work. Fact #8: I am grateful for my time spent with Louise, and for the underground experimental film community, the