

The Artist as Bricoleur

Talking Shop with Guillaume Vallée
by Clint Enns



I first met Québécois filmmaker Guillaume Vallée in Percé, Quebec, at Les Percéides: La Grande Rencontre des Arts Médiatiques. At the festival, Vallée presented *Le bulbe tragique*, 2016, a film which was awarded Best Canadian Work at the 2016 WNDX Festival of Moving Image, and performed *Promenade Éphémère*, an expanded cinema collaboration with filmmaker Charles-André Coderre and musician Charles Barabé. Until that point, I had enjoyed many of Vallée's films at festivals, but never had the opportunity to hear his legendary, jovial laugh, nor see him perform live. Their performance was unique and innovative, transforming 16mm films into multilayered feedback loops. It would be an understatement to say that it has been a pleasure to develop a friendship over the last year.

This interview was conducted in person in Montréal while attending Contre-Courant, an intimate experimental film conference. It has been collaboratively edited into this current form.

Clint Enns: You identify as a bricoleur, a French term that has two translations in English: (I) a person who creates bricolages, that is, makes use of whatever materials are available; (II) a skillful handyman or tinkerer. Can you discuss the bricoleur methodology and how it informs your practice?

Guillaume Vallée: Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his book *La Pensée Sauvage*, talks about the handyman that accumulates different objects without using rational thought. Artists make sense of this impulsive and obsessive accumulation when they attempt to re-contextualize their collections by re-organizing them and by placing them in new contexts. By expanding Giorgio Agamben's notion of the apparatus (*dispositif*), bricolage can be seen as a form of DIY apparatus. By using and modifying the materials that are available to us, we are able to understand their underlying ideology. To Agamben, the apparatus is "literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings." The DIY apparatus is a way of building our own means of communication, a way of hijacking and subverting the conditioned manner.

As a bricoleur, I scavenge obsolete technologies and use whatever technologies are available to me including 16mm and VHS. I often modify these devices, a form of technological re-appropriation. Donation culture often determines the bricoleur's practice, since the bricoleur artist creates using whatever they have access to. Creative misuse and re-use are important aspects of being a bricoleur.

How did you begin making videos?

My first cinematic obsession was with *Hellraiser*. As a young teenager, I rented it for a dollar and, fortunately, wasn't asked to show my ID. At college, I discovered experimental film while working at the cinema department's *vidéothèque*. Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*, 1929, had a huge influence on me and I later created my own film, *The Soft Giraffe*, 2013, by decaying its images using camera-less techniques.

While in college, I began doing basic animation and discovered experimental music. Eventually, I pursued a BFA in Film Animation at Concordia University; however, it was difficult since I didn't speak English at that time, and I couldn't draw. I developed

my own practice out of these limitations, working with direct animation on 16mm film. Around that time, I discovered the direct animation of Norman McLaren, Len Lye and Stan Brakhage.

In the middle of your most recent work, *Le bulbe tragique*, there is an intertitle that reads “Beyond the Hellraiser.” Is this an attempt to reveal your teenage *Hellraiser* obsession or is there something else going on?

While I was struggling to structure the film, I had a dream that I was peeking into a movie theatre. On the screen, I saw that intertitle intensely flickering. The effect was powerful, so I attempted to re-create it.

Can you talk about the narration? In the film you use the voice of West Coast filmmaker, provocateur and fellow bricoleur Al Razutis. In the 70s, Razutis made use of hybrid film/video techniques and often created his own custom video synthesizers. How did you come to work with Razutis? The text in the film relates both to the physical/chemical make-up of film, but also cinema’s connection to this human consciousness.

We’ve been in touch for some time now. A couple years ago while I was doing the creative side of my MFA in Studio Arts, I decided to contact him to discuss the piece I was working on. Since then we’ve been keeping a virtual friendship. His thoughts on expanded cinema are unique and refreshing.

I have always been influenced by Razutis’ work and I wanted to pay homage to his artistic contributions. For *Le bulbe tragique*, I wanted to integrate a voice-over that would describe the mechanisms behind the work, in addition to ideas around nothingness, the immaterial state of the projected image and the ephemeral aspects of cinema. Knowing that Razutis had studied mathematical physics and that he also worked with found footage, I asked him to record his response to the images in my film. His voice lends a metaphysical dimension to the work, in addition to making some conceptual connections between the material aspects of work and perception.

The source footage is of a harvest and seems to comment on the way in which you harvest your own decayed footage. What was the original source footage? How did you obtain those beautifully decayed images?

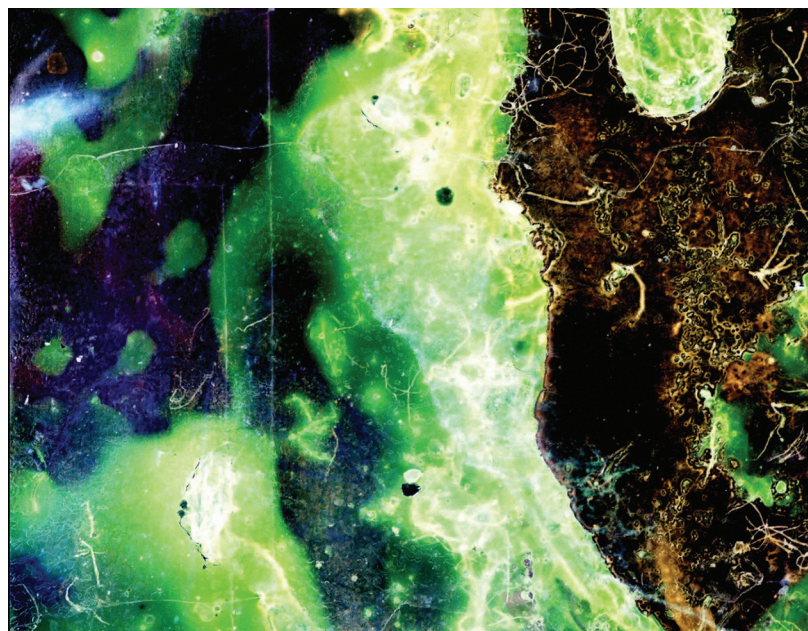
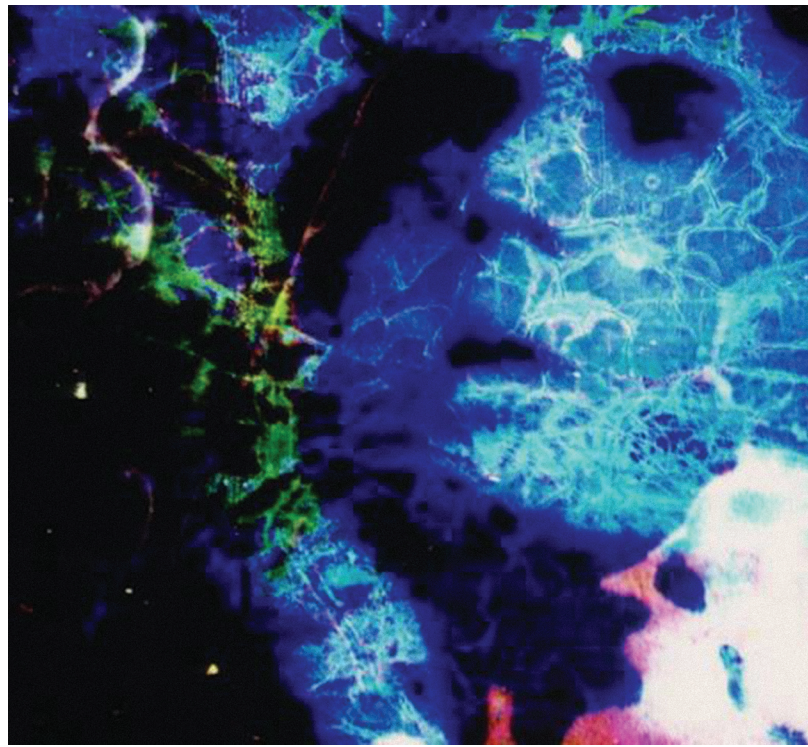
The source material is from a National Film Board of Canada (NFB) documentary film about Canadian farmers from the 40s. My friend Éric Gingras found the film print in a garbage bin. The Kodachrome print was beautiful, and the film was in excellent condition. I have always been obsessed with repetitive movements, and the farmers in the film have ritualistic ways of working the ground. It took me three years to achieve some of the colors that are in the film, with many layers of emulsion lifting, collage, paint and organic decay.

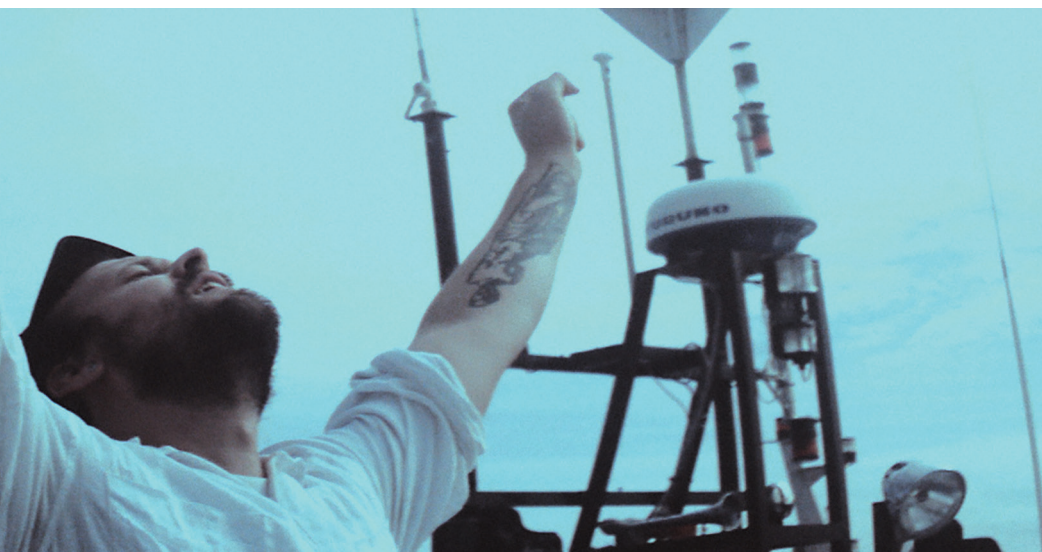
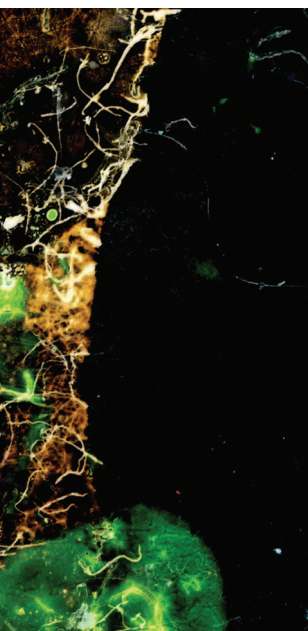
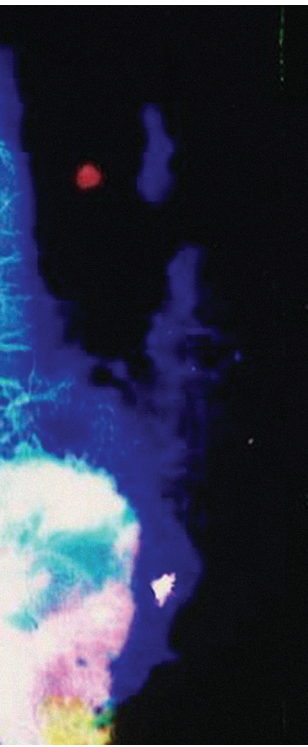
Can you talk about your abstract, camera-less super 8 films, namely, *Analog Hellraiser*, 2013, and *Sacred Bloom*, 2014? Have you explored similar techniques with 16mm?

In these films, the super 8 film was exposed to light, in the dark, using different light sources and filters. I would advance the cartridge by hand. My 16mm film *The Yellow Ghost*, 2012, was made using a similar technique. To create the film, I destabilized a 24-frame filmstrip of a yellow spectre riding a horse by emulation lifting it onto clear leader. I then repeatedly transferred it to an unexposed filmstrip using different light sources and filters. The unexposed filmstrip was finally hand-processed to produce the images you see in the film.

The *Yellow Ghost* has an intense noise soundtrack. How do you approach collaboration with musicians?

The work is intense since it is a visual realization of a re-occurring nightmare. The work is my first collaboration with a musician. Éric Gingras composed the music after seeing the images. I give total cart-blanche to my collaborators and choose to work with them





based on their abilities. I trust that my collaborators will provide an extra dimension to the work. There is a major difference between working for someone and working with someone.

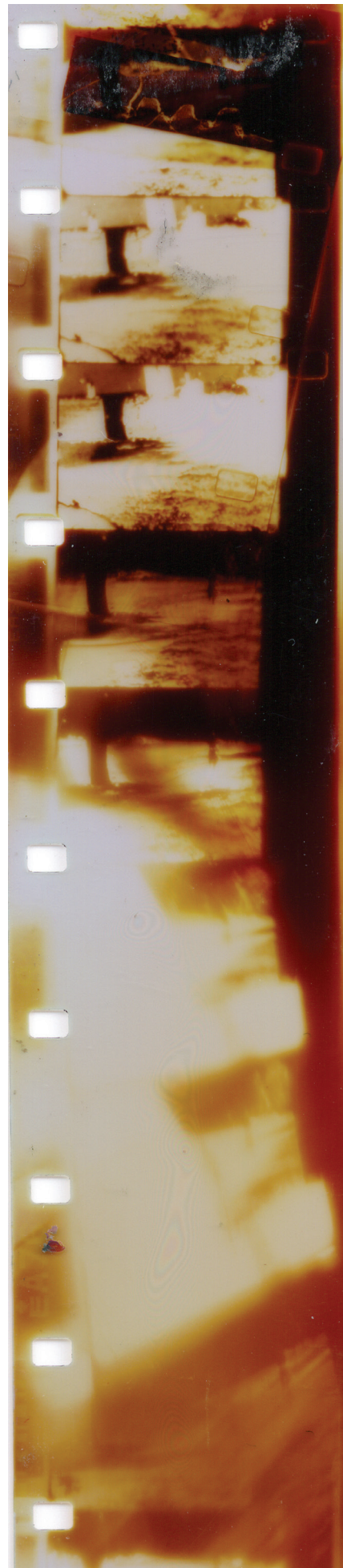
Your live performance *Promenade Éphémère* was a collaboration with Charles-André Coderre and Charles Barabé, and was created using video feedback generated from a live 16mm film projection. The video feedback you created provided depth to the filmic image, seemingly responding to the critique that filmic images have more depth than video images. Can you talk about your performances?

I have only recently begun to perform with other visual artists, and this has led to some of my favourite performances. Charles-André Coderre uses 16mm projectors to generate images that I record off a screen while simultaneously digitally re-projecting them, creating visual feedback loops. The work is rehearsed, but performing live allows some improvisation.

When I perform with Sonya Stefan, the work is more spontaneous and embodied. In the performances, we create our own DIY apparatus by re-appropriating obsolete machines from our collections; we attempt to understand them by destroying them and modifying them in a live context. There is an intense physicality to the performance given that Sonya has been a contemporary dancer for over 25 years.

I've also been collaborating with Chittakone Baccam of the sound project Hazy Montagne Mystique for a few years now, and we often explore different contexts of creation and performance including working with contemporary dancers such as Kim-Sanh Chau. Lately, I've been working with Montreal-based experimental musician Jean-Sébastien Truchy to explore composition and synchronization. I should also mention Alain Lefebvre and the music project *evoked response* are regular collaborators. At this point in time, my art practice is fully collaborative, and I enjoy working within several different communities. I don't want my work to only show in cinema spaces. Collaborating with different musicians allows for your work to show in different contexts, from DIY spaces to music venues to galleries. I think it's essential, as an artist, to explore all these possible contexts, alternative spaces just as much as the institutionalized spaces; I think this is one of the ways the DIY apparatus can function.

Clint Enns is a video artist and filmmaker living in Toronto, Ontario. His work primarily deals with moving images created with broken and/or outdated technologies. His work has shown both nationally and internationally at festivals, alternative spaces and microcinemas. His writings and interviews have appeared in Leonardo, Millennium Film Journal, Incite! Journal of Experimental Media, Spectacular Optical and BlackFlash.



Page 4: Still from *Analog Hellraiser*, 2013, scanned Super8, courtesy of the artist. Page 6 (top): Still from *The Soft Giraffe*, 2013, 16mm, 07:30, Sound by Jane L. Kasowicz. Page 6 (middle): Still from *Le bulbe tragique*, 2016, scanned 16mm, courtesy of the artist. Page 6 (bottom): Photo of Guillaume Vallée by Clint Enns. Page 7: Scanned 16mm film strip from *The Yellow Ghost*, 2013, courtesy of the artist.

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