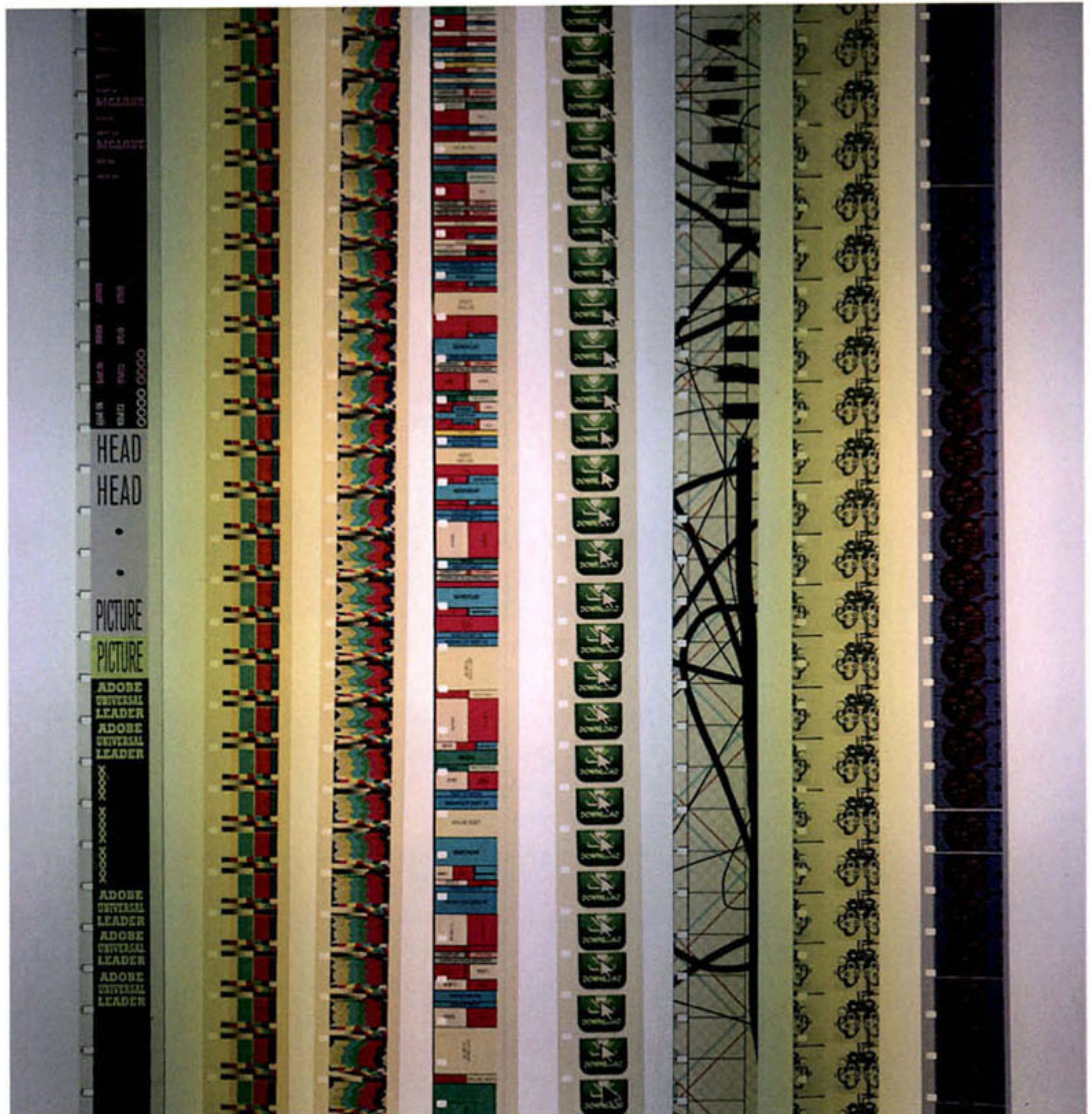


CONVERSATIONS

TOP Karissa Hahn,
Turnaround Time (2016),
frame enlargement.
Courtesy the artist.

BOTTOM Karissa Hahn,
Inkjet 3056A (2014), Print.
Courtesy the artist.



MICROCINEMA OFFICE FOR HOME USE

An Interview with Karissa Hahn

CLINT ENNS

Karissa Hahn is a Los Angeles-based moving image artist who works between analog and digital mediums. When producing hand-made films, videos, and installations, she utilizes relatively simple techniques to maximum effect. Her ability to incorporate a DIY ethos into a daily studio practice allows her to place playful experimentation at the forefront. Through blending performance, diaristic filmmaking and materialist approaches, her work uncovers beauty in the everyday and the mundane. In particular, she often incorporates the ubiquitous digital devices that dominate our day-to-day lives. It was Hahn's Super 8 performance piece *I___I* (2015) that first captured my attention although I am certain I had seen her work previously given her omnipresence in the microcinema circuit over the past ten years. *I___I* sets up a delicate balance between artist and camera. Tension and suspense are created through a relatively simple set-up: Hahn precariously leans back on a chair that is attached by string to a tripod with a bulky (and priceless) Super 8 camera recording the artist (and her precious skull) as she performs this simple, singular gesture. I had the opportunity to meet Hahn in April 2019 at La Lumière in Montréal where she presented a program of her work. The following interview was conducted by email and collaboratively edited into its present form.

Clint Enns: How did you begin making work? What was your first encounter with experimental cinema?

Karissa Hahn: I have mini-DV tapes on my studio shelf dating back to 2003. The tapes from 2003-2010 are labeled "Braces," "Faces," "Windows," and "Random Interviews." The tape labelled "Braces" has a series of close-up shots of my braces. The one labelled "Faces" consists of close-up shots of strangers' faces. "Windows" is a series of shots looking into my neighbors'

windows at night (which I quickly learned is illegal). "Random Interviews" has footage where I am at a local park conducting an interview with a man while holding a microphone that is not plugged-in. As he goes on, seemingly about a boat he owns, I make faces at the camera to demonstrate how interested I am.

These weird tapes somehow got me into CalArts. I felt at home there and liked being able to speak conceptually about my strange impulses and obsessions. To film something, and then to have a conversation about it, was a new and transformative experience. At CalArts, I was introduced to analog film processes by John Hawk, optical printing by Charlotte Pryce and experimental techniques by Betzy Bromberg. I took a class with James Benning where we would take long walks to look and to listen. My introduction to experimental filmmaking began when I learned to use the optical printer. The idea of image replication left me with the desire to rephotograph a frame over and over again in hopes of uncovering something hidden within the image. For instance, in *Effigy in Emulsion* (2014), I had a frame of a film where a camera flash washed out the subjects, and I used a series of filters to try and uncover the image that was hidden within this frame.

CE: Your work often challenges the verisimilitude of representation. For instance, in *computer sky and self* (2016) you use remediation to call into question which version is the "real" or "authentic" recording. This is taken one step further in *Please step out of the frame* (2018) where you use Super 8 to document recordings, and recordings of recordings, to challenge the viewer's perception of reality. Do you see these works as demonstrating some of the epistemological problems associated with replication in the digital age?



LEFT Karissa Hahn, *Please Step Out of the Frame* (2018), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.



RIGHT Karissa Hahn, *computer sky and self* (2016), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

OPPOSITE Karissa Hahn, *Apertures (a Brighter Darkness)* (2019), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

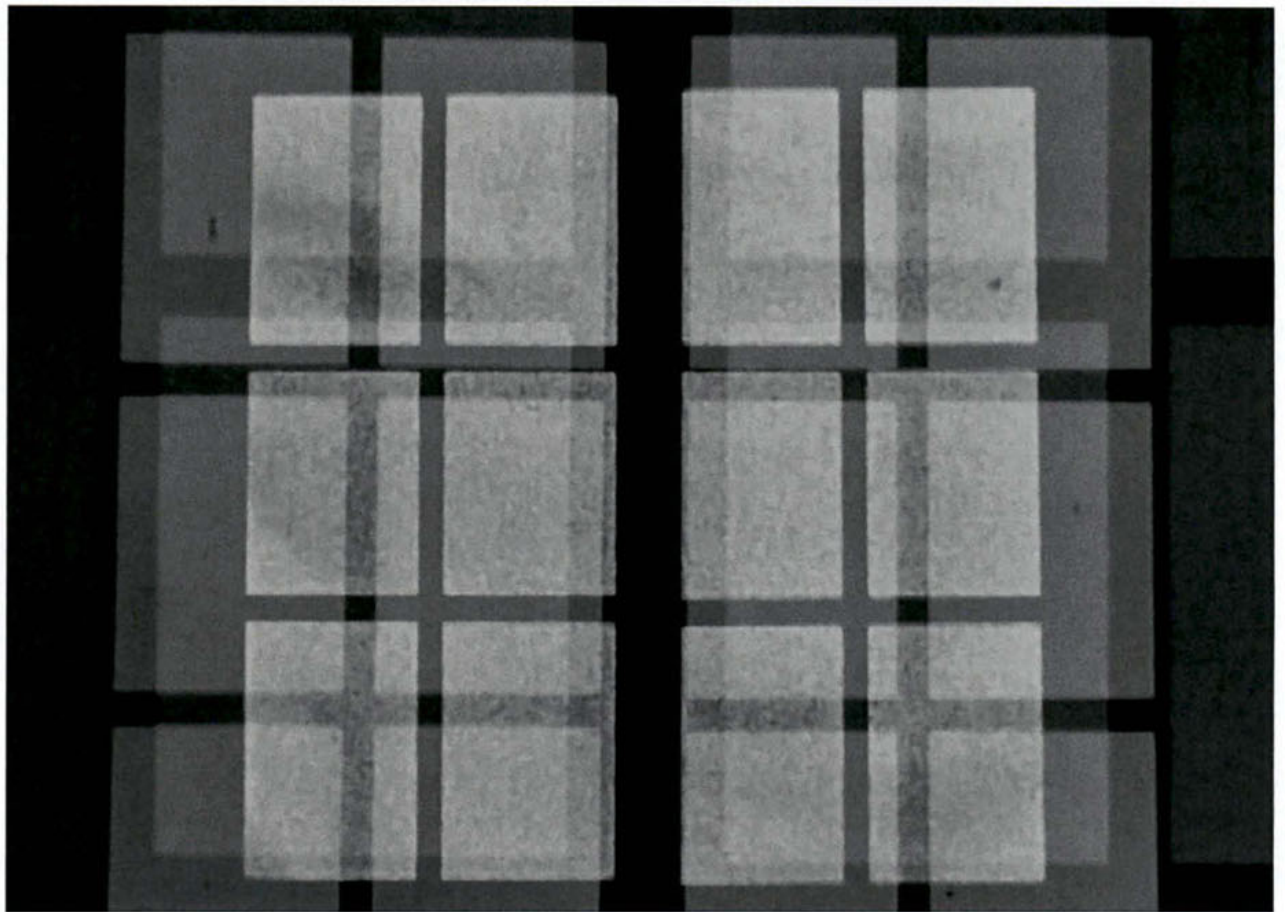
KH: I recently read an article in the *New York Times* about auction houses using “super zoom” technology to allow potential buyers to visit artworks virtually, providing them with the opportunity to zoom into the work, seeing much more than the naked eye. The head of corporate and digital marketing for Christie’s, Matthew Rubinger, commented on how the intention is not to replace being in a room with the work. He argues that they aren’t attempting to recreate the experience, they simply want to enhance it. When I use a film camera to re-film a digital image off the screen, I am doing the reverse of this. I am not seeking a more enhanced image, but rather, one that can be transformed into something tangible: a strip of film. It stems from a simple desire to transform digital objects into something real.

My work plays with photogrammetry and lives in the space between the analog object and its digital avatar. Rather than making digital avatars of analog objects, I tend to make analog objects out of digital images. In a *Harper’s* article titled “Preservation Acts, Toward an Ethical Archive of the Web,” Nora Caplan-Bricker writes about how digital objects decompose faster than physical ones. Technology evolves quickly, rendering old formats unreadable. In treating the film camera as an archivist’s tool, I try to capture digital images by simply filming my screen

or by printing them straight onto film using an inkjet printer. It is a form of reverse-copying, a response to notions of replication in the digital age. Digital images circulate quickly; I slow them down by transforming them into filmic images.

CE: One of the more fascinating formal elements of *Please step out of the frame* is its iterative or fractal-like nature. In essence, you are replicating a delayed feedback loop on Super 8, an effect usually performed on video in real-time. Can you talk about the processes used in the creation of this film. In addition, can you talk about its relationship to some of your other feedback experiments like *open window* (2016) and *Apertures (a brighter darkness)* (2019).

KH: *Please step out of the frame* started with a very strict and precise storyboard which quickly unraveled as I began filming the first of the eight Super 8 cartridges. The first roll was supposed to act as the backbone of the piece, simple shots of my desk – slow zooms of an Eadweard Muybridge image on my computer desktop. I got a bit carried away, and began stepping in and out of the frame. I knew it would throw the whole piece off, but I couldn’t resist. Each roll of film took a week to process at the



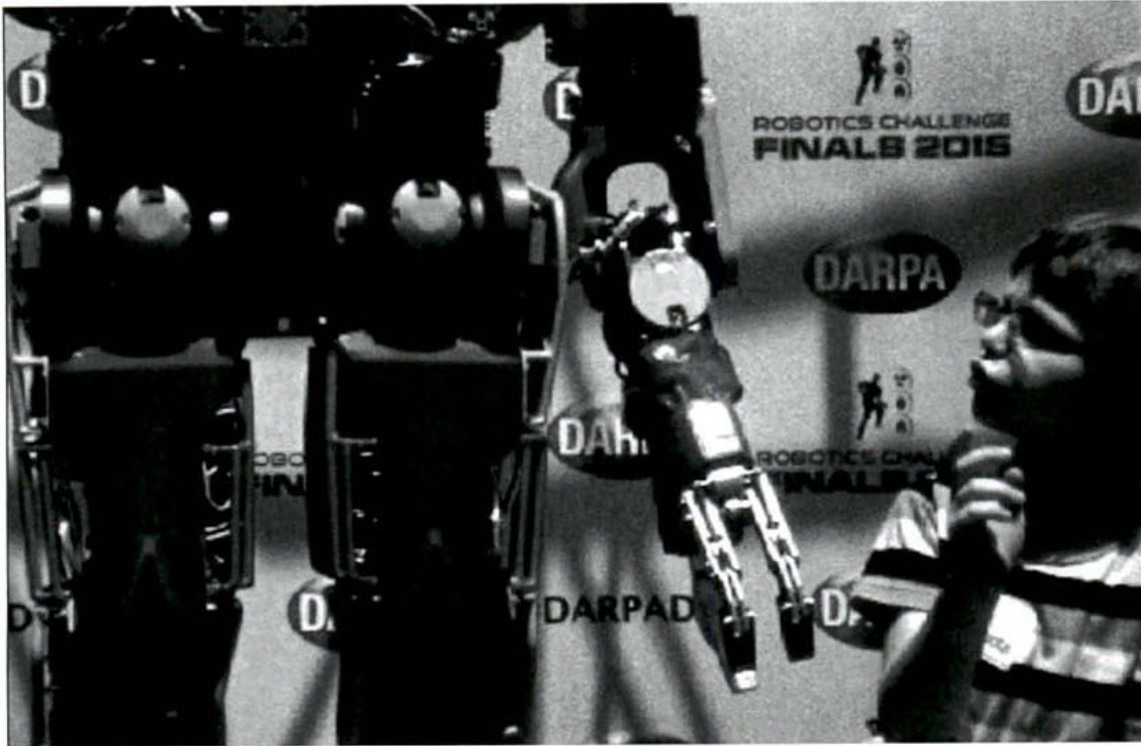
lab. While the film was being processed, I would use this time to edit the previous roll digitally and to shoot a new roll of film where I interacted with those freshly edited images playing on my computer screen. In a sense, this was a slow performance lasting eight weeks documented on Super 8. I edited the digital version and then painstakingly recreated these edits on Super 8; however, in the Super 8 version there is a bonus scene where the film appears to burn (which didn't translate well digitally).

open window was an experiment that only took an afternoon to create, but played with similar ideas. I filmed my desktop with a digital8 camera, creating a feedback loop. This was 80% real time recording and 20% trick shot. *Apertures (a brighter darkness)* was an attempt to step out of the digital realm. I wanted to explore similar ideas related to feedback loops using a new and simpler technique: filming myself interacting with projected images. I also did not want to rely on the shock-value and confusion that *Please step out of the frame* created. Looking back, I wish I filmed this at an IKEA because they have the exact same window display used in the film.

CE: You also explore the limitations of remediation and mediated vision in some of your works. For instance, *(I)FRAME* (2015),

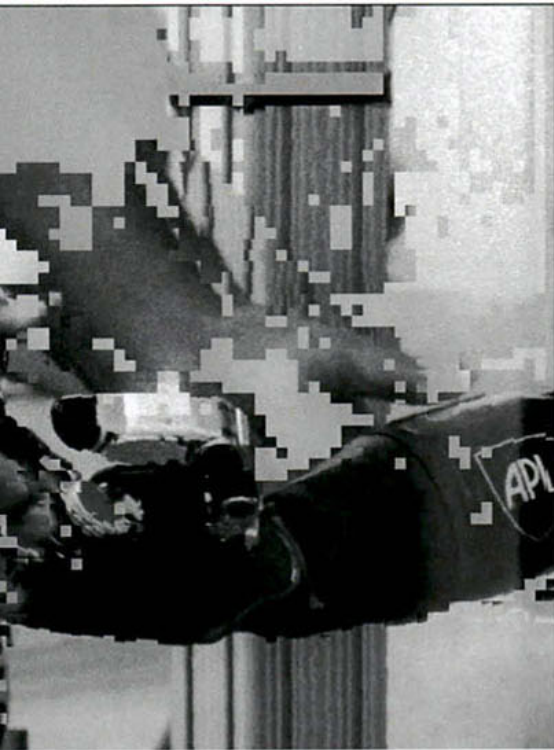
a collaboration with your partner and master cinematographer Andrew Kim, presents a visual argument regarding robotic vision. We imagine a world through the eyes of a robot, cameras scanning the world for visual information, complete with errors. Where was the film shot? How did you achieve this robotic vision?

KH: The film was shot at a Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency [DARPA] event. In a video advertising the event, there were all these mean and fast looking robots, so we were prepared to be on our toes in order to catch action shots. When we arrived, we were shocked to see how slow and lumbering they turned out to be in reality. When we went home, we revisited the YouTube video and realized that we had been deceived...the video had been sped up. At the event, there were families crowded onto bleachers, and hot dogs were served, but there was a real sense of fear in the air. It felt like the 'calm before the storm.' At the event, Andrew and I each had a 16mm film camera (we later blew-up the film to 35mm) and these cameras have similar mechanisms to those used in the bots. The film looks flickery, mimicking a form of processed vision; however, this result was obtained through the use of an editing formula. Further, by deleting or misplacing the I-frames (the frames that act as reference points between which movement



TOP Karissa Hahn, *I/FRAME* (2015), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.

BOTTOM Karissa Hahn, *Regal* (2015), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.



is interpolated) a disruption occurs and a machine-like vision is achieved. This formulaic disruption is a form of malfunctioning. I imagine it similar to that which was “experienced” by the robots that day.

CE: Can you talk about the soundtrack for *(I)Frame*? What song do you use in the trailer? The sound was made using a manipulated version of the soundtrack for Fernand Léger’s *Ballet Mécanique* (1924) and a contact mic recording of our hard drive playing back the film in real time. In other words, a portion of the soundtrack is the sound of the mechanical sounds of the film trying to process itself. The trailer was inspired by *Hesher* (2010) and uses a Metallica track, but I don’t want to say which one since Lars might sue us.

CE: Many of your works involve pushing machines until they fail, in essence, seeking out errors. When a machine reaches beyond its intended limitations, does it transform into a creative device?

KH: It is a natural impulse for me to seek out deteriorated devices. I am drawn to these sick or ailing mechanisms since I like collaborating with the instrument and being surprised by the result. I prefer to work alone, and these objects provide me with a sort of dialogue. I also get excited by products that have cameras on them: spy pens, rings, doorbells, cars, etc. They

provide me with a conceptual starting point. For instance, I can’t stop thinking about this pair of binoculars I recently saw in a Hammacher Schlemmer catalogue. They are listed as “The Best Digital Camera Binoculars” and are going for \$199.95. There is a camera on the binoculars!

I have an impulse to seek out cameras that are intended for purposes other than *storytelling*. I have a fascination with pushing devices to their limits, and literally seeing the results. Performance artists often set up systems and await their outcome, becoming passive observers to the scenario as it unfolds. I am attempting to do something similar with media production tools. My work is very much process-based, and sometimes the act of doing is more interesting than the end result. The film that comes out of the camera is sometimes just a ghost of the event, a mere documentation. The experiments inform the product, and the films often fold back on themselves as the errors contribute to the end result. For instance, in *Inkjet 3056A* (2014) I kept running out of printer ink – so it became a scene in the film.

CE: By re-printing digitized film gels back onto filmstrips, *Inkjet 3056A* examines the way in which “color” is mediated through digital devices. Like many of your other inkjet-to-16mm experimentations, it ultimately explores remediation. For example, in *REGAL* (2015) and *NewsReals* (2018-2021, on-going) you use the same process to breakdown and distort found images. What do you see as being gained or lost through this process?

KH: The term “re-mediation” is intended to describe transitions between mediums, but this word can also mean to *heal* or *cure*. That is, “the act of remedying something undesirable or deficient.” I think this might be one way of thinking through these films.

The source footage of *NewsReals* is solely video footage found on news sites, so they are birthed to analog for the first time, losing quality in this new granular form. Knowing the footage will end up on 16mm, I try to find detailed video clips – condensing the information into a small square. By scaling down and then projecting it – all these details seem to emerge from the ink itself. It also gains a new type of grain; not film grain, but the grain of the printer trying to articulate the image. *Inkjet 3056A* gained visible printer RGB pixels and lost its integrity as a “filter.” *REGAL* gained another run on film, and lost quality along the way. It has also taken on a life of its own with someone torrenting a digital version of the film which I recently found as a .doc file. The image is now totally out of my hands.

CE: *Disaster Reproduction* (2017, on-going) is an inkjet print of Andy Warhol’s *Black and White Disaster* obtained as a digital image through Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) complete with watermark. What form do you see *Disaster Reproduction* taking?

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KH: I began to think about copyright, plagiarism and the censorship of images when I was working for the Internet Archive. The work is more of an investigation into the privatization of pixels than a film. While I was looking through the LACMA private collection online, I saw Andy Warhol's *Disaster Series* with a watermark across it. I thought about all the legalities involved in using an image from LACMA, despite the fact that my version of the image would never be distributed commercially.

I called the Artists Rights Society (ARS) and submitted several requests for copyright. I finally reached someone who said that for \$250 I could acquire the rights to use the image. We had a brief back and forth about how I wished to use the image: as a looping installation or as a single-channel work for underground screenings. In order to show them my proof of concept, I printed the image onto a filmstrip and showed them a picture of it. Their last response was in 2017. Of course, the image is readily available on the Internet, but I wanted to see how to do it the "legal" way. I recorded these conversations with ARS and they are more

interesting than the images produced. Although, a sheet of film with the watermarked image is pretty funny. Literally, a disastrous reproduction.

CE: Can you talk about the role that humor plays in your work?

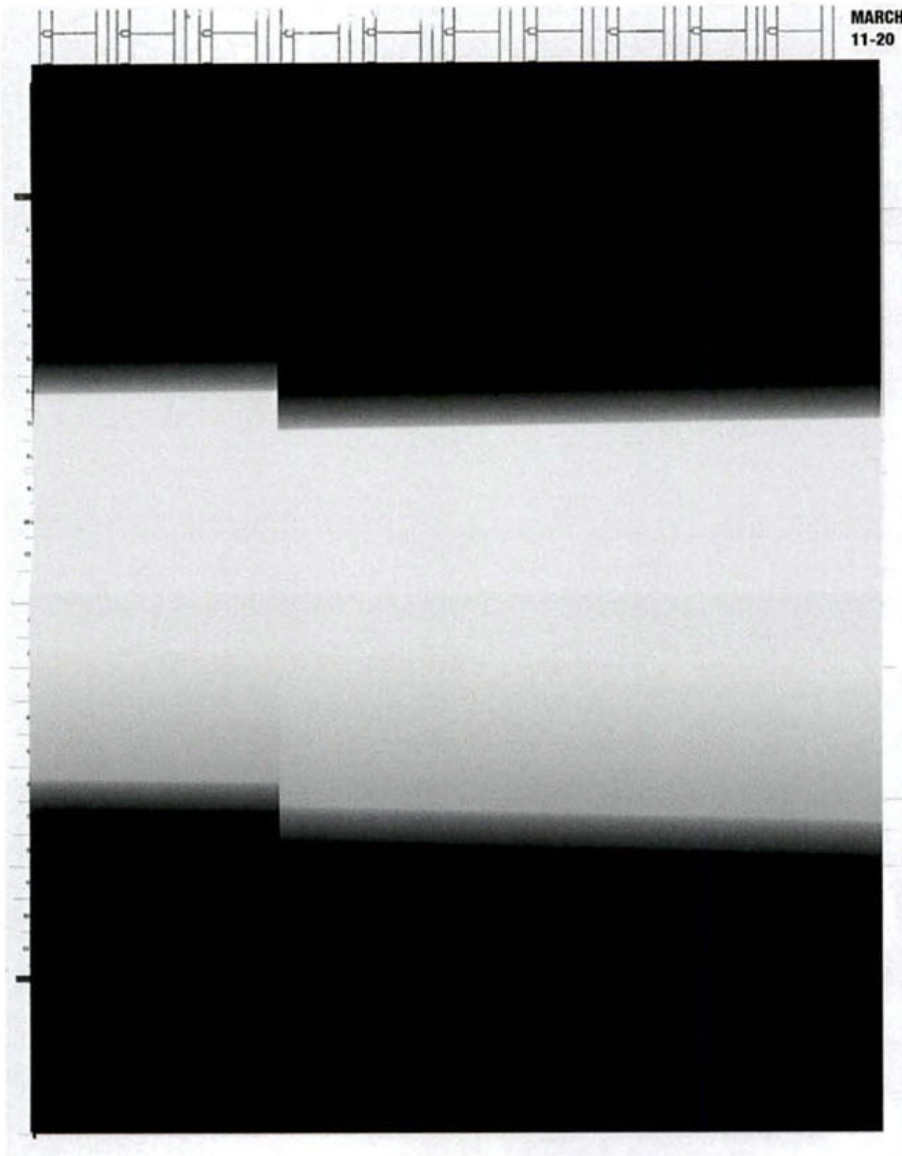
KH: Humor is very important to me, and it has trickled into my work or, more precisely, the way in which I produce work. I try not to take myself too seriously. I have noticed during screenings that people make these grunting sounds when they 'get it.' I prefer communal laughter to communal grunting. Though, at experimental screenings, people are often unsure if they should laugh or not.

CE: Your fan letter to Canadian moving image superstar Christine Lucy Latimer is beyond charming.¹ It is possible to see the playful spirit that informs CLL's formal experimentation in many of your works. Have you written many of these types of fan letters?

LEFT Karissa Hahn, *Disaster Reproduction* (2017, ongoing), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

RIGHT Karissa Hahn, *News Reals* (2018-2021), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.





Karissa Hahn, *Future Light* (2018), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

KH: CLL was one of my first introductions to work that formally played with the space between mediums. I discovered her work while at CalArts and became super hooked. I suppose I have written more of these types of fan letters, but not to people... to corporations. Not out of a fan mentality, but out of a love of writing hand-written letters. I wrote to Home Depot with a business idea, and to Martinelli for nutritional information. I am currently working on a letter to Staples with some questions about their 'home office' products. Who knows, maybe they will sponsor my next *Home Office Cinema* workshop. As much as I like writing letters, I love receiving responses as well. I keep getting tricked by GEICO because they mimic a hand-written letter in order to fool you into reading their advertisement. Since I often spend all day emailing, it is nice to sit at my desk and write a letter. Similarly, if I spend all day digitally editing, I like to find time to work with film as well.

CE: You state that the oil painting "Jeune fille se défendant contre Éros" ["A Young Girl Defending Herself against Eros", 1880] by William Adolphe Bouguereau is an inspiration for *I_ _ _ I* (2015). Given that this film isn't a direct adaptation, what role does the painting play in its conception?

KH: It is a description of this painting that inspired me: "Yet she smiles and struggles unconvincingly against the mischievous little god." I was working on a series about "cinematic tension and suspense" and was drawn to the tension within this painting. Or rather, a "lousy" tension. The way she is barely trying to push Eros away. The idea was originally to collaborate with someone and tether our cameras together to make them fall, as we leaned back on our chairs. In the end, I decided on just the camera and myself. The film took on a completely new conceptual form, but there is something in that painting that I find striking.

CE: Do you see Eros as a surrogate for the camera? In other performances, there is also a tension between you and the camera. For instance, in *Turnaround Time* (2016), you put a heavy super8 camera on a selfie stick with the gratification of seeing yourself as an image delayed due to your medium of choice.

KH: Yes, exactly. Eros acts as a surrogate for the camera. *Turnaround Time* is part of an ongoing series exploring tension and includes *I_ _ _ I* and *_____* (2016). In the work, the tension is two-fold. First, there is the tension that the audience sees, that of the heavy camera on the selfie stick (which ended up breaking). Second, there is the tension that only I experience but every analog image-maker recognizes, that of waiting for the film to be processed at the lab.

CE: *Future Light* (2018) transforms the passage of time into space. The year 2021 is printed on 365 strips of film with every hour of the day, represented by the corresponding amount of daylight in

Los Angeles, printed on each frame. A year is condensed to seven minutes. Why did you choose the year 2021?

KH: This piece started when Trump was elected and I wanted to assure myself that the world would still be spinning in 2021, so I started to copy charts of sunrise and sunset times in Los Angeles for that year. I like the idea of having a document for the future. I think this piece functions better when displayed on a wall, where you can actually see the seasonal changes. I think the research and the graphs that I made to measure civil twilight and daylight savings is more interesting than the film itself, but these lack duration.

CE: In contrast to *Future Light*, *Bouyenance Pt.1* (2020) tracks the transformation of space over time through the use of slit-scan animation or time-displacement. How did you achieve this effect on Super 8? What does “bouyenance” mean?



Karissa Hahn, *Quarantine* (2020, ongoing), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.



Karissa Hahn, *CATSIT commands* (2020), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.

KH: The slit-scan animations are made digitally, using a gradient in After Effects and Signal Culture's slit-scan app. I re-filmed the results onto Super 8 by projecting them onto various surfaces in my studio. I wish I had the patience to create some sort of slit-scan super 8 mechanism. I researched Douglas Trumbull's apparatus for *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and became intrigued with ideas surrounding time-displacement. In the process there is mention of a *controlled blur*. This technique seems more relevant since time has seemingly become displaced. In 2020, our minds have difficulty differentiating between time and memories, creating a blur of events. *Bouyissance* is a holiday my brother made up, that I used to believe in. He would tell me on the day after Halloween ghosts inhabit human bodies. Basically, it is a holiday that lives inside of you. I believed in this strongly, only to realize later that I had been duped, the holiday is fake. Through this film effect, I am thinking through the idea of ghost inhabitancy. The best way to capture this idea seemed to be by using Super 8 and old cassettes.

CE: What drew you to Super 8 and tape cassettes as your medium of choice for your diary films? For instance, your recent series *Quarantine* (2020-ongoing) incorporates in-camera edits and fades, and audio on a cassette tape recorder. Is this choice purely aesthetic or is it due to the limitations that the mediums impose?

KH: During my undergrad I bought a Super 8 camera on eBay without knowing if it was working properly. I also had an old projector that was always breaking down, as well as cassette recorders that would eat up batteries and then start to stammer. I ended up enjoying this weird little group of gizmos and favoured the results I would get. The limitations act as a starting point. The length of one roll of Super 8 is helpful in visualizing the start and end of a piece.

The current *Quarantine* pieces use in-camera editing and in-camera fades, which means you always have to consider the next shot. It feels a bit strange to be shooting film this year, but it also acts as a document of sorts. Tangible proof that the day has occurred.

CE: In *CATSIT commands* (2020), a Super 8 camera is placed on Roomba and the audio consists of absurd demands made of you while cat-sitting in Beverly Hills. Was the piece inspired by those commercials where a cat sits on a Roomba or by those viral videos?

KH: I wasn't thinking about these connections. I had been sitting on this essay for a while – all the things people said to me while cat-sitting and I really wanted to use it. I was never able to film inside of the homes I worked at since I was always the one being surveyed. Everyone had these cameras all around and it started to make the job feel like a performance. I would get into character

before entering and shake it off on the drive home. I really do like those viral videos though.

CE: You have recently coined the phrase *home office cinema*. How is this phrase defined? What are some of the genre defining films?

KH: While at a residency, I was trying to come up with a workshop that could be done while in quarantine. *Home Office Cinema* began as a workshop on how to make films by using your inkjet printer at home. The non-film tools used in the workshop (scotch tape, 8"x11" paper, scissors, inkjet printer) are all labeled as "home office" by Rite Aid. In my head, I pictured business people, working from home, making 16mm films using hole punches, staplers and highlighters. For the workshop, I produced a zine called *Home Office Cinema* inspired by Helen Hill's *Recipes for Disaster*. It begins:

Make films with your inkjet printer! Using readily available software and strips of recycled film, we will explore how to turn your home office into a film studio. Participants will learn how to make moving images on 16mm film with household inkjet printers. We will traverse digital and analogue realms to turn downloaded videos and images into celluloid motion pictures.

Genre defining films include Roger Beebe's *TB TX DANCE* (2006), Scott Fitzpatrick's *Wingdings Love Letter* (2011), and Devon Damonte's *Photocopy Checker* (2012).² *Home office cinema* is directly related to another sub-genre of experimental cinema, namely, *desktop cinema*.

Notes and Citations:
[www.millenniumfilmjournal.com/
mfj-74-supplements/#74-footnotes-enns](http://www.millenniumfilmjournal.com/mfj-74-supplements/#74-footnotes-enns)

