Open Play: The work of Riccardo Iacono

Before he made films Riccardo Iacono made paintings. He became interested in them as physical objects, stretchers filled with paint were torn and twisted so that textures and surfaces reflected light, emphasising their three-dimensionality and, as with sculpture, the viewer's relationship to the object becomes spatial.

When Iacono makes films he paints. In 'From Memory' (16mm colour silent film, 15 minutes, 1994 - 2003) and 'Series A' (16mm optical sound film, 2 minutes, 1994) Iacono's painting and scratching on film process is a composition for the camera describing the optical process employed photographically, anticipating the movement to be achieved through printing. Viewing 'Series A' one becomes lost in the microscopic universe of the frame, hypnotised by the vertical sliding movement of the play of tinted, textured surfaces, like little abstracted frosted panes. The translucent surface of 'From Memory' refracts an exaggerated play of light on dancing aqueous substances, candy coloured globules suggest organisms, an illusion that results from a complex process of moving light over the surface of the film and the movement of the frame in the optical printer gate.

Like light and shadow on reflected crumpled cellophane, reflections suggests a surface plane, but remind one that surface is also three-dimensional having depth and dimension. The abstracted scratched figures animated by light are reminiscent of a Paul Klee drawing and suggests that, like Klee, here Iacono is taking a line for a walk; the work has a charming provisional, improvisational quality. 'Open' (16mm colour sound film, 2 min, 1994 - 2003) with its playfully ghoulish music track like a home-made Bernard Herrmann, is a meditation on the drama of slippage as the static image attempts to mimic or reproduce the sensation of movement in the abstract, like the shorthand cartoon blur, the Duchampian irony of movement in stasis descending and ascending all over again.

Painting, drawing, scratching on the surface of the material are familiar and extensively used techniques in avant-garde film and Iacono's films might invite comparison with other artists' works in their complexity and movement. But unlike say Stan Brakhage, they are not attempts at the representation of other types of vision, nor are they abstractions purely for the sake of exciting colour and movement, or the didactic abstraction of a

polemical materialist approach. Rather the work is predominately process based as Iacono pursues an open-ended experimentation influenced as much by *Arte Povera* as it is by avant-garde film practice. Painting, drawing, scratching on film is not so much an end in itself and the working process cannot be conceived of as arriving at formal closure. Process and improvisation is integral throughout, its manifestations evolve in restless inquisitiveness as he moves within and between media.

The interchangeability of processes within different media in Iacono's work embraces the sense of a totality of creativity, multiple threads run through works interconnecting activity, places of reception and the elements that influence and determine the perception of the works. This is well demonstrated by 'Universe Energies Sustain Us' (mini DV colour stereo video, various editions, 2001 - 2002) in which the artist is a shadowy presence in sound and image. Earlier film and video works are sampled, along with documentation of installations. The surface, material and apparatus of film and video are all in the mix, including the brief appearance of the notice encountered in editing software when a video sequence is played back unrendered. This casual database of material is reprocessed and manipulated into a video of multi-dimensional self-reflexivity and layered recycling, video keying, saturated colourful fidgety pixellated abstract mosaics in an excessive megamix: what Iacono refers to as 'babble... the language of languages', the piece is a kind of abstract metadata, data about data.

When Iacono makes a video he uses his ears. His recent works explore the possibilities of the digital camcorder, playing with technical specificities of autofocus and audio levels. The simple immediacy and eccentric austerity of the direct approach superficially contrasts with the abstract complexity of his other film works, but it shares their indeterminacy. The act of videoing is unplanned, a performance in itself, the results are fortuitous. In the silent 'Myeyeye' (miniDV, colour silent video, 3 minutes, 2000) the camera is the wrong way round but the ear is clear, in focus, drawing attention to the act of shooting as much as any ostensible subject. 'Walk' (miniDV, colour stereo video, 4 minutes, 2001) has a refreshing Cageian openess to chance in choreography for movement of the camera, taking a line for a dance. We see the dancer's feet drawing lines in the sand, the camera moves with them, she sits down and flicks a casual V sign at the camera. Giggles.

'The Electric Garden' (miniDV colour stereo, 6 mins, 2004) is a one-take exploration of place as sprinklers in the garden perform a hypnotic dance accompanied by the insistent rhythm of the stuttering scattering water. The image divides into two surfaces, as the camera lingers and focuses on a plant in the foreground, in the middle ground a sprinkler spits a million darts of water. The sprinklers stop suddenly. The garden breathes in the calm aftermath as the scene acquires dimension and depth. Another one-take piece, 'More Light' (miniDV, colour stereo, 5 mins, 2004) draws attention to the presence of the artists' body as macro fingers in front of the lens provide an ad hoc matte filter, a close focussing mask, rendering the filtered sunlit landscape hazy and indistinct, just as the close sound of breath and tapping on the microphone mingle with the ambient sounds of wind and crickets.

The indeterminacy in Riccardo Iacono's work is a parallel to the active philosophical approach of John Cage, who wrote about the importance of purposeful purposelessness. Cage was writing about making music and went on to write '...play... is an affirmation of life not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way to wake up to the very life we're living...' (Experimental Music, Silence, John Cage, Wesleyan University Press, 1961), and this is very much the world that Iacono's work inhabits, it constructs systems for waking up to the immediacy of life and experience. It is a world of small gestures, the play of surfaces and light, quietly speaking to the granularity of experience, while eschewing the bold and the impressive. Material that arises through the chance, experiment and improvisation feed both into the production of the works, back into the body of work, manifesting itself in both as material and process.

Throughout Iacono's work there are parallels with other artists and forms. Marcel Duchamp, *Arte Povera*, John Cage, Stan Brakhage and Paul Klee have already been mentioned here. The structural fragmentation of much of the film work, the heuristic process used in both film and video making, are all badges of the historical avant-garde, however his is not simply nostalgia for modernism. The aesthetic experiment extends very much into a contemporary cultural ecology. It is not so much an idealistic or conceptual practice but a sensuous and material one, organic in its development and processes. Through play and metaplay Riccardo Iaconos work describes a kind of complex open system within complex systems. It

becomes about the artist in relation to the world, the body of the artist in relation to the body of work, the viewer in relation to the work at the time of reception, the unique event of performance that redoubles the act of making and the re'entry of the work into the world.

The individual works are like nodal points on a larger network, but a network that is not determined by specific communication technologies. In being guided by intuition through and with physical movement, the improvisational becomes part of an ongoing choreography, the body of the artist producing a body of work that is extensible and mutable, intersecting and interacting with culturally located bodies (with or without organs). It is a promiscuous trans-discipline practice which might as well be thought of as much dance and/or music as film and video, and with the potential to converse in the language of any other discipline, within other areas of cultural production, with other artists' works.

As a demonstration of this potential a recent project of Iacono's 'Transparency and Difference' digitally remixes and remodels recycled imagery from his own drawings, films and videos, with samples from images by Tom Hackney and Gordon Cheung. His reworkings, made especially for the magazine (*WideShut Magazine*, Castlefield Gallery, Manchester, 2005), are literally alongside the other artists' originals within the pages of the publication. This reinforces the idea of a practice predicated on the idea of dynamic openess where nothing is ever really finished or complete.

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