

ARDA OZ

---

**Report:** *The 68th Flaherty Film Seminar*


---

*The 68th Flaherty Film Seminar.* Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York.  
June 17–23, 2023.

This year’s Flaherty Film Seminar Fellows were greeted upon arrival with less-than-ideal weather conditions and uncomfortable pillows in our dorm rooms, but the mood took a positive turn as we helped ourselves to slices of pizza and viewed each other’s works-in-progress in a small theater at the Tang Teaching Museum, located on the campus of Skidmore College. The meeting allowed the fellows to connect on a more personal level and share our particular take on this year’s theme, “Queer World-Mending.” For most of us, “Queer World-Mending” meant undoing gender and sexual norms through filmic praxis. The methods proposed ranged from asking an autonomous chatbot the meaning of love and intimacy and making audiovisual installations out of its responses to exploring the complicated relationship between trans and nonbinary communities and medical providers through self-reflexive filmmaking. “Queer World-Mending” was conceived as not just about transmitting unruly desires onto the screen but also about highlighting the relationality of racial, Indigenous, and (not-so-post)colonial struggles across seemingly disparate spaces—seeking ways to transform nation-based solidarities. The initial meeting was followed by a two-hour movement workshop intended to provide us with tools to cultivate sensitivity and creative intimacy with self, other, and world. Throughout the seminar I kept returning to the simple orientations and practices from the movement workshop as there were days we all seemed deeply in need of healing.

This year’s theme was curated by two programmers working in parallel: Jon Davies, a Montreal-born art historian, writer, and curator (formerly at Oakville Galleries and the Power Plant, Toronto), and Steve Reinke, an artist and writer best known for his monologue-based video essays who teaches in the Department of Art, Theory, Practice at Northwestern in Chicago. By the end of the week, it seemed clear that Reinke brought works with compelling and complex uses of the voiceover to the fore (including works by James Richards, Angelo Madsen Minax, Theo Jean Cuthand, and Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby, among others) while Davies furnished the seminar with a strong presence of artists who faced and/or grew up in the shadow of the first decade of the AIDS crisis. “The program joins the living and the dead,” wrote Davies and Reinke in their program notes, as “the only way into the future is through the ashes of the past.” Those ashes were felt through works by pioneers of queer cinema such as Chantal

---

*Afterimage*, Vol. 50, Number 3, pps. 3–9. ISSN 2578-8531. © 2023 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/aft.2023.50.3.3>

Akerman, Kenneth Anger, Barbara Hammer, Curt McDowell, and Marlon Riggs. But what to make of the violent ruptures that these ashes carry? How to redeem a present in which global racial structures are ever so persistent in politics, in the university, and in the street?

The seminar began with the screening of *Autre fois j'ai aimé une femme/Once I Loved a Woman* (1966, US, 24 min.) by the Black queer filmmaker Edward Owens, whose works had been largely forgotten until they were rediscovered by (former Flaherty) programmer Ed Halter in 2009 while he was going through a catalog from Film-makers' Cooperative. Halter then showed a selection of Owens's work at the Brooklyn screening space Light Industry, in 2015, inserting Owens back into the avant-garde purview. *Autre fois j'ai aimé une femme/Once I Loved a Woman* is known to be Owens's very first film, shot when he was a seventeen-year-old student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. It was an aesthetically challenging watch, especially for an opening film, demanding patience from the audience as long sequences of darkness are disturbed by dramatically lit nudes, glossy magazine cut-outs, superimpositions of dreamy photographs, and lights that fluctuate in pitch black. Only three figures are identifiable in the film: a young, blond, isolated masculine figure staring directly at the camera at the beginning; an adult male who appears to be kissing and caressing the young man; and a woman in white lingerie who also addresses the viewer with her piercing gaze. The still photographs that depict these figures bleed into each other through various superimpositions. The woman appears later in the film in an embrace with the second man, but it is unclear whether these three figures form a coherent love-triangle narrative. As the program notes state, upon viewing the film, Owens's teacher at the time, Gregory Markopoulos, wrote, "[Owens] may well be one of the few for whom 'amateur' and 'professional' need have no significance whatsoever: [he is] true to his own native talents, with grim determination uncanny, whether the mind in the arts is for or against beauty or its opposite twin, chaos." For reasons articulated by Markopoulos, the film seemed particularly fitting for this year's theme, "Queer World-Mending," as it was charged with sexual longing, and for the Flaherty Film Seminar in general, as it seeks to dissolve boundaries between amateur and professional, beauty and chaos.

The first program of the week also included two shorts by Angelo Madsen Minax, best known for his experimental and essayistic films that focus on trans intimacies and structures of kinship, including *North by Current* (2021, US, 86 min.). My personal favorite short by Minax was *The Eddies* (2018, US, 16 min.), which depicts a trans filmmaker named Eddie (played by Minax) who watches war films as he tries to find connection with people in Memphis, Tennessee. We first encounter his voice, describing flood lines, levees, and trivial histories of the crumbling infrastructure of the city. We then see him post a Craigslist ad asking men to masturbate on camera with their firearms beside them. He receives a single response from a man whose name is Eddie. The Eddies meet at a motel and as Eddie from Craigslist—whom we only see from below—prepares to masturbate with a shotgun, he asks the filmmaker to join him, to which the filmmaker responds, "I'm trans." His guest does not mind, and they masturbate together. I found the film to be refreshingly queer mainly because it attempts to complicate conventional



Still from *Autre fois, j'ai aimé une femme/Once I Loved a Woman* (1966) by Edward Owens.

definitions of queerness and where it can be found. It was rather amusing to find out in the seminar discussion that most people thought the fictional encounter depicted in the film was based on a true story. This resulted in a generative discussion on what happens to our sense of “truth” when filmmakers employ fiction in documentary format. It also helped us conceptualize queer world-mending as an attempt to undo our impulse to document “facts” and lean on fantasy and imagination instead.

In terms of logistics, there were several changes to the ways in which things were run at the Flaherty this year. The name tags did not indicate any titles, ranks, or institutional affiliations—only attendees’ names and pronouns. The change was welcomed by many as it was a clear attempt to create a space that was not dominated by the industry and competition. However, some participants still experienced the intimidating effects of status and power as in previous years. For them, the Flaherty elevated the presenting artists’ knowledge and put other participants’ contributions on a lower pedestal—especially in larger discussions where the artists-in-attendance took center stage. I would also note the role of many discussion facilitators in unnecessarily fostering those dynamics. One participant said that this was particularly uncomfortable in previous years as the post-screening discussions sometimes stretched up to three hours. This year, however, the duration of artist talks was limited to one hour and there were frequent breaks after the screenings.

Arguably the most concrete effort to democratize the seminar was the inclusion of pods that helped extend the seminar’s geographical reach. The Flaherty partnered with cinema arts organizations and spaces globally to achieve this. Pods in New York City; Toronto; Mexico City; Lisbon; and Bengaluru, India, were able to interact with the audience at Skidmore on a daily basis through “postcards” in video format—each one addressing the question of the day. One question was “Whose world are we mending?”

for it was necessary for us to think of the world through its multiplicities. Internationalizing a seminar that had been bound by geography for nearly seventy years, through digital means and pods, was highly innovative. Not only did it demonstrate the organizers' dedication to making the Flaherty more accessible, but it also generated simultaneous transnational dialogue that is often absent in the programming world.

While the intervals between screenings and discussions opened up space to decompress, I wished we had more time to discuss certain films and crucial topics that they brought up—especially films screened in the first three days of the seminar. These included Theo Jean Cuthand's early works such as *Untouchable* (1998, Canada, 4 min.), which addresses the complicated subject of consent in queer relationships, and *Anhedonia* (1999, Canada, 10 min.), which brings up the relationship of depression, suicide, and indigeneity. Owens's *Remembrance: A Portrait Study* (1967, US, 6 min.), by its very existence in some of the programs, challenged the issue of the whiteness of the avant-garde canon, and *If From Every Tongue it Drips* (2021, directed by Sharlene Bamboat, Canada/Sri Lanka/UK, 68 min.) allowed space to discuss the glaring issue of conceptualizing queerness in North American terms—both subjects we never touched in larger discussions. Films such as *The Infernal Grove* (2021, directed by Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby, Canada/US, 38 min.), *60 Unit: Bruise* (1976, directed by Paul Wong, Canada, 5 min.), and *Perfect Day* (2007, directed by Paul Wong, Canada, 8 min.), on the other hand, were grouped together and address the issue of drug addiction and the processes of recovery, but only from a white perspective. Arguably, it was these under-addressed issues and concerns around the centrality of whiteness in a number of programs that gave rise to a heated conflict on day three. Several BIPOC participants did not join the morning discussion to show their disappointment, and those who did join addressed the issue head-on with the artists in attendance. Due to the Flaherty's tradition of holding a discussion with the programmers about their curation only at the very end of the seminar, continued debates over what was included in the program and what was absent (and the implications of such absence) had to be addressed in casual, off-the-record discussions.

In the days that followed, the programmers tried to respond to a number of questions around the prominence of white North American canonical work in various programs, but whether these responses managed to mend the rupture is up for debate. One thing is certain: the sense of mourning, yearning, and exhaustion was palpable because of a seeming lack of understanding and acknowledgement of what minoritized attendees needed from the seminar. For many of us, the healing balm was delivered through recent works by Bamboat, Cuthand, Amina Ross, and Wu Tsang. Ross's *Man's Country* (2021, US, 8 min.) focuses on Chicago's oldest gay bathhouse, which the filmmaker often passed by in its final months of operation in the early 2010s. As the director indicates in the program notes, they were "curious about what lay inside but concerned that they wouldn't be admitted because of their embodiment. [For this film, they] have used publicly available footage of the club's interior to create a three-dimensional animated model of its lounge and performance space, placing themselves within the architecture visually." Embodiment was valorized once more in Ross's *Eclipsing (Body)* (2014, US, 7 min.), in which the



Still from *Remembrance: A Portrait Study* (1966) by Edward Owens.

artist attempts to create a sense of absent presence through their handling of a light source. The idea of absence of presence is also central to Tsang's *One emerging from a point of view* (2019, Greece, 43 min.), where the artist takes a magical realist approach to the refugee crisis on the Greek island of Lesbos, located in the Northern Aegean Sea off the coast of Turkey. Conceived as an exploration of a "third" space between two overlapping video projections, the work depicts two narratives of departure that parallel one another, drawing from history, mythology, ancestry, and science fiction. Both of the stories are about the island and migration, yet not a single refugee was present in the highly aestheticized film. I was among many who found it refreshingly free from "migration porn" that fetishizes the precarious body of the refugee, while others were troubled by the absence of refugee bodies (even though the allegory of the mythical tale was conceived and performed by a Syrian refugee). Yet the politics of absence/presence was not raised in the discussion following the screening. What did get addressed was the question of ancestry in relation to Tsang's *One emerging from a point of view* and Bamboat's work-in-progress, *Both, Instrument & Sound* (2023, Canada, 30 min.), which focuses on intergenerational conversations and tensions in queer communities and on how our discourses and practices of solidarity have changed since the rise of neoliberalism. Cuthand's *Medicine Bundle* (2020, Canada, 10 min.) also focuses on the question of ancestry, but with regard to one's biological family and ways of healing that have broadly fallen out of remembrance. One of the participants remarked that older works from

North America that were included in this year's Flaherty, such as works by Anger, Hammer, and McDowell, among others, might seem to be mutual ancestors for queers of all kind, but BIPOC audiences might not consider them as such. Hence, the debate circled back to the issue of the centrality of whiteness in relation to queerness at this year's Flaherty. The question that begged an answer in this cyclical debate was "Whose world are we mending?" and perhaps, "What kind of mending can actually be done at the Flaherty?" Arguably, these issues are not just about the programmers or their version of a reparative program, but also about the limits of the institution and the kind of healing it can provide for the very severance it historically perpetuated.

The issue of "the institution" and politics of visibility and circulation came up once more with regard to one of the most controversial films screened that week: Israeli American filmmaker Roe Rosen's thirty-four-minute short, *Out (Tse)* (2010, Israel). The film presents a domination/submission thrashing scene of what Rosen describes as a form of "political exorcism," performed by two women whose real-life preferences include BDSM. The film blurs the boundaries of documentary and fiction, presenting us with an interview with the Sub and the Dom whose BDSM ritual we are about to witness. We learn that the Sub was raised in a family that considers Arabs and other Middle Easterners to be racially inferior "monkeys" while the Dom finds Israel's occupation of Palestine problematic. Hence, in the scene that follows, blows meted by the Dom cause the Sub to recite hateful sentences against the people of Palestine and the Middle East, all of which are quotes from Israel's minister of foreign affairs Avigdor Lieberman, an extreme right-wing politician. The ritual ends with a final musical scene in which two musicians play a song set to the words of the Russian poet Sergei Yesenin's "Letter to Mother," written in 1924. The film was extremely difficult to digest, especially for someone whose place of origin is the so-called Middle East. Its absurdist style, to my surprise, even elicited laughter from the audience. The artist was present for the discussion following the screening and I was curious about his target audience as well as his thoughts about the very ability of his work to circulate in A-list film festivals, despite the aestheticization of hate-speech in the film—so I asked. His response felt generic but generous nonetheless—underlining the fact that his work sought to provoke the audience through absurdity to think critically about far-right ideology not just in Israel but also the kind that might be lurking within the most progressive selves. But the issue was not that one could not understand that the artist did not support Lieberman's racist views. The issue was the limits of an artist's ability to experiment with absurdity. To put it differently, it was about who had the ability to make art out of hate speech and actually get funded and even praised by it, and who simply did not. The absence of queer Palestinian voices was deeply felt in the film and at the seminar, but the presence of that absence offered much food for thought for us all.

This year's Flaherty generated a few explosive debates, for which the seminar has long been renowned. I sensed that the contrastive nature of the program combinations (which often felt like a pattern of rupture and repair) triggered combative and complex energies. Such moments of rupture, however, helped cement newly found connections that have the potential to last a lifetime. It left most of us with more questions than

answers—which, for me at least, is almost always a good thing if we actually want to mend the messy world in which we live. Despite its loaded history, the Flaherty remains one of the few institutions that opens up a space for such questions to be raised and rigorously discussed in a collective form over an extended period. For that alone, I will surely return—perhaps with my own pillow. ■

---

ARDA OZ is a PhD candidate in English at Syracuse University. Their research focuses on the ways in which queer and trans people in Turkey perceive and reimagine the aesthetics of old nightlife cultures in the face of systemic and social negation under authoritarianism and neoliberalism.