TYING THE ARTS TOGETHER

The Houston Cinema Arts Festival
Houston, Texas
November 11–15, 2009

Houston stands larger than the Texas plains in the national imagination with its big oil, big energy, big medicine, NASA, cutting-edge technology, and a penchant for plastic surgery. But Houston—the third largest, fastest-growing city in the United States—offers something more: a vibrant and diverse arts community. Although many might think it unimaginable to launch a new film festival during a crushing recession, it seems perfectly logical in economically robust Houston. Elegantly curated by Richard Herskowitz, former director of the Virginia Film Festival, the Houston Cinema Arts Festival unspooled more than forty films and events, cross-fertilizing the arts and cinema.

“It’s the only U.S. film festival devoted to films by and about artists of all stripes,” says Herskowitz. “Ours is also conceived as a multimedia arts event, surrounding its films with live performances, installations, and outdoor projections.” A citywide celebration at eight venues (including the historic Alabama Theatre, Rice Media Center, the Miller Outdoor Theatre, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston), the festival provocatively torqued preconceptions of films about the arts—a genre stereotypically linked to flat, monotone explanations of paintings. Herskowitz’s rigorous, surprising curation, however, prompted audiences to consider the migrations, flirtations, and infiltrations between different artistic outlets such as writing, painting, sculpture, performance, photography, and cinema.

Exploring the interstices between the arts, commercial cinema, and public media cultures, the program was both eye-opening and heterogeneous, combining narrative, documentary, experimental, performance, and installation film. The festival opened with two sold-out screenings of films adapted from novels. Leading Texas maverick filmmaker Richard Linklater presented Me and Orson Welles (2008, UK), the fictionalized story of Welles’s production of Julius Caesar on Broadway in 1937, based on Robert Kaplow’s novel of the same name. Precious (2009, directed by Lee Daniels), which won three awards at the Sundance Film Festival, is the story of a Harlem teenager who overcomes enormous obstacles to discover her own potential.

Mexican screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga screened his landmark Mexican New Wave film, Amores Perros (2000, directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu) and The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada (2006, directed by Tommy Lee Jones, U.S./France). Warm, welcoming, and wry, Arriaga (also an established novelist) shared how his non-linear
narrative structures emerged out of his Attention Deficit Disorder symptoms, saying, “You are unable to understand logic, but it develops intuition.”

Documentaries featured at the festival included *What If, Why Not?: Underground Adventures with Ant Farm* (2009, directed by Beth Federici and Laura Harrison, U.S.), the first film to chronicle the radical Ant Farm architectural group that made such works as the land art piece *Cadillac Ranch* in Amarillo, Texas; *La Danse: Le Ballet de L’Opera de Paris* (2009, directed by Frederick Wiseman, France/U.S.); *Picasso and Braque Go to the Movies* (2008, directed by Arne Glimcher, U.S.); and *The Yes Men Fix the World* (2008, directed by Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonnano, France/U.S.). The festival featured a most intriguing retrospective by photographer Susan Meiselas, which included a selection of key works: *Living at Risk: The Story of a Nicaraguan Family* (1985); *Pictures from a Revolution* (1991), which Meiselas co-directed with Alfred Guzzetti and her late partner, experimental diary filmmaker Richard P. Roger; *The Windmill Movie* (produced by Meiselas and directed by Alexander Olch, 2008); and the experimental film *Remembering Dick Rogers* (n.d.), which Meiselas also presented.

The experimental work in the festival revealed powerful, jolting experiences. *Everywhere at Once* (2008, directed by Holly Fisher and Peter Lindbergh, France/U.S.) was an entrancing, poetic meditation on aging, memory, and female psychic landscapes with Lindbergh’s photos and French actress Jeanne Moreau’s reading of Kimiko Hahn’s voiceover script. Jennifer Reeves’s stunning and hopeful dual projection—a baroque celebration of nature and 16mm film—*When It Was Blue* (2008) was accompanied by live music from Icelandic electronic composer Skuli Sverrsron. Organized around the four seasons, the hand-painted, bleached, and chemically altered images suggest that a truly ecological mindset will lead to life emerging from decay.

Lynn Hershman-Leeson reprised her feminist sci-fi cult film *Teknolust* (2002, U.S./Germany/U.K.) with Tilda Swinton, who plays scientist Rosetta Stone and her three half-human, half-computer automatons with the ability to self-replicate. Hershman-Leeson and Swinton’s deeply collaborative feminist process intermingles high-end HD technologies with improvisation and an arrhythmic acting style to splice together, among other things, science and artificial intelligence.

The festival also showcased multiple forms of projection. H BOX, a mobile cinema the size of a living room constructed from aerospace honeycomb aluminum and designed by Didier Fiuza Faustino, screened ten international shorts. A highlight was *The Birth of RMB City* (2009), by Chinese digital artist Cao Fei, composed with Second Life machinima. On closing night, Michael Powell’s *The Red Shoes* (1948) was projected onto an oversized blow-up screen in Discovery Green Park.

“Houston has some of the best arts institutions in the country,” Herskowitz asserted. “The festival involves the collaborative participation of eighteen arts organizations that have had a hand in the conception and execution of our programs. I think it will alert the world that Houston has more than NASA and rodeos going on.”

**NOTES**

1. All quotations by Richard Herskowitz are from an email interview with the author, November 4, 2009.

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Above
Still from Teknolust (2002) by Lynn Hershman-Leeson

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