

Phi Lee Lam  
Film-performances

at 8 p.m. Thursday April 13<sup>th</sup>, Saturday April 29<sup>th</sup>, and Saturday May 6<sup>th</sup> 2006  
Within the frame of the group exhibit "*Public Domain*: Raphaël Blum, Agnès Fomells, Phi Lee Lam, Alexandra Sà", April 14<sup>th</sup> to May 6<sup>th</sup> 2006.

Immanence  
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« Regardez avec vos sens et pas seulement avec vos yeux. Déplacez-vous dans l'espace. Ressentez avec vos mains. Laissez vos sens vous guider. Vous êtes des images qui comme le vent passe à travers votre corps. »



## In search of an authentic vision

In search of an "authentic movement, an authentic vision"<sup>1</sup>, Phi Lee Lam attempts to be as close as possible to the relationship her body and mind have with the space around her while she is filming.

This experimental practice of the act of filming is comparable to a form of improvisation. It lies within the line of experimental film research/trials in the 1950's in America (Maya Deren); or in the research/trials of the 1960's New York scene, in particular those of the Judson Dance Theater (Yvonne Rainer, Robert Morris, or Trisha Brown and Rauschenberg).

The films composed by Phi Lee Lam, with the help of her portable super 8 camera, are both the trace and the incarnation of the movement. In this manner, the artist seems to carry out the reflections begun by Maya Deren in her film: a study in choreography for camera (1945), in which the camera starts up a choreography in response to that of the dancer being filmed. The approach used by Phi Lee Lam evokes the thought which Brakhage considered to be the foundation of experimental film: "Filmmakers seem to forget that movement, in itself, is already used in every respect in dance and, to a lesser degree, in theater. In order for film to contribute, even minutely, to the field of movement, so that it may claim its place in a domain of immeasurable richness, then it must be in the field of cinematic movement, strictly speaking – that is to say, as an entirely new dimension of movement."<sup>2</sup>

Phi Lee Lam not only provides us with moving images, her films are also moments of life, periods of improvisation during walks with her friends, travels... Though her personal life mingles with her artistic approach, it does so within the framework of chosen moments, the fruit of an intuition. These moments are the occasion to experiment with a structure, a process. In this way, her work is not a matter of daily note taking, a personal diary, or of the detailed record of an experience. Her search falls more within the process which occurs when she starts filming. The basis of each new process comes from taking into account chance, accidents, spontaneity, intuition, and voluntary intervention.

Phi Lee Lam thus puts back into motion certain research started by members of the Judson Dance Theater in New York at the very beginning of the 1960's (emphasis on the process, the interaction between the body and the space, the refusal of fiction). But contrary to the objectives of Yvonne Rainer or Robert Morris who aimed to compare the body to an object, Phi Lee Lam reinvests the concerns of the Judson Dance Theater to replace the body's awareness of the space around it, the emotion, and in some ways the unconscious, at the heart of the process.

Each film is shown as is, and is unaltered by editing after the filming process. Editing only comes into the picture when several films are put together, one after the other, in preparation for a public projection.

Although the films are not meant to represent fiction, each film may in itself constitute the beginnings of a narration, a discontinuous narrative, fragmentary, founded upon rupture and the juxtaposition of various events. Through the repetition of the same gesture, the acceleration or the slow motion of a sequence, an unexpected close-up or a long pause on a detail, Phi Lee Lam provokes the imagination without ever imposing a precise meaning – leaving each spectator's subjectivity to take over the film and construct their own story.

The poetic dimension of her work thus takes its source in the free association of images and meaning, the alternating of abstract and figurative sequences, but also finds itself replaced by the possible disappearing of the films. Each reel exists in only one copy. Thus each film bears the trace of deteriorations caused during previous projections, which evokes one aspect of Nam June Paik's work, *Zen for Film* (1964). The fragile and delicate aspect of handling the film, felt by the audience during the projections, partakes of the desire to have the audience share in the risk-taking, in the possibility of a loss. Each new projection then may be perceived as a discreet and softened echo of Annabel Nicholson's concerns, whose film performances such as *Reel Time* (1973) shone a light on the fragility of the medium, resulting even in its veritable destruction.

The projections of Phi Lee Lam's works are the occasion for a direct exchange between the public and the filmmaker. She prefers private spaces, limited audiences and short projection times. Placed amidst the spectators with her portable projector, the artist reinitiates the performance dimension of her film work: by intervening with the projection speed, the size of the image, moving about the space herself, thus proposing the movement of each spectator in turn... The projected image spreads out and moves about the exhibit space, playing with its dimensions, passing from the ceiling, to the walls, to the floor, eventually reflecting on the body of a spectator – disposing of a traditional frontal orientation and flat projection of films.

How the body relates to the space is thus at the very heart of the projection process, revealing the mechanism to the spectator, inciting each one to choose an active bodily position. In this way, each new projection is a unique moment to live, to share. This approach goes along with that of the *expanded cinema* of the 60's and 70's: a heterogeneous phenomenon which can briefly be characterized by the attempt at an extension of the special limits of the projection space (*expanded screen*) as well as a critique of the *ocularcentrism* (the priority accorded to the visual)<sup>3</sup>.

Neither filmed dance, nor danced film, the work of Phi Lee Lam is both the representation of an experience as much as it is the experience of a representation. Looking to energize the very act of filming with regards to the surrounding space, and to "spatialize" the projection, Phi Lee Lam thus renews the practice of filming and the mode of projection – to replace it with poetic and authentic film.

Albane Duvillier

Phi Lee Lam, independent filmmaker based in New York, was born in 1978 in Singapore. It was in that country, where censure still reigns, that she studied filming techniques before pursuing her studies in the United States. She graduated from Purchase College in the state of New York in 2004.

1 Interview with Phi Lee Lam, April 2005

2 May Deren "an anagram of ideas on art, form and film", 1946.

3 Liz Kotz, "disciplining expanded cinema" in *X-screen, film installations and actions in the 1960's and 1970's*, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Walter König, Cologne, 2004.