

## FLUIDITY & THE PHOTO-FILMIC GESTURE

In the last seven months I've been making color photographs using the whole surface of 35mm film rolls. To expose the totality of the surface in a single gesture, I am rewinding or pulling the film in front of the lens with the shutter open. I am interested in the notion of fluidity and continuity and their relation to reality. Are fluidity and continuity characteristics of reality? What is the potential of photographic and cinematographic processes to record such qualities?

My research alternates between three mode of production: photography, reading and writing. Most of my work focuses on image-making. I explore the possibilities contained within the camera (Flusser, 1983) by questioning the role of the shutter in photographic and cinematographic techniques. I build and use shutter-less cameras or I deregulate existing one to make my photographs. With existing cameras, I use the rewinding mechanism to pull the film behind the aperture, with the shutter wide open. One of the images has been scanned and animated in a five-minute digital film. With the film, I explored the convergence of two historically and culturally determined categories: the photographic and the filmic (B. Cohen, A. Streitberger, 2016). How can these two medias be merged, weaved or bridged to create new representations and reflections on realities? One method I use to deregulate these categories is to question the frame-by-frame ideology inherent in photo-filmic systems. I try to shake this deep-rooted ideological system by using a single frame-image. I refer to my practice of photography as a photo-filmic "*gesture*" (Flusser, 1991).

Most of my images are color photographs made using kodak color negative film. Most of the images are on 35mm but I also worked with medium format. The film is moved linearly by using the rewinding mechanism of the camera. At the same time, I hold the shutter open by positioning the setting on bulb. This is a technique called strip-photography that dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Reading the book, *The Art of Strip Photography: Making Still Images with a Moving Camera* (2011)

by Marteen Vanvolsem was decisive to understand the particular history and the specificities of this technique.

## **How to explore the fluidity of reality with photographic and cinematographic apparatuses?**

It is with this question in mind that I started my research. One of the main things that photographic and cinematographic techniques are doing is breaking and fragmenting the continuity of light. They record a discontinuous sequence of frames. In cinema, technical means of projection and psychological means of identification transform the sequence of still image in a continuous reality (Baudry, 1975). It is a very efficient illusion of continuity and therefore of reality. Can we record or represent the continuity of reality outside of this frame-by-frame ideology? Is continuity a characteristic of reality?

I built a medium format shutter-less camera but I extensively used my manual SLR camera from 1966, a Minolta SRT101. This camera has a manual film-advancing and rewind mechanism. It utilizes conventional perforated 36mm film. After each exposure the film is shifted into place for the next one. This is performed by means of a thumb gesture that pushes a crank and subsequently moves the reel and compresses the shutter's spring. The shutter release button operates the deflection of the spring which opens the shutter. It is the frame-by-frame advancing mechanism. Each frame is separate in time and space. In cinema, *“these separate frames have between them differences that are indispensable for the creation of an illusion of continuity, of a continuous passage (movement, time). But only on one condition can these differences create this illusion: they must be effaced as differences”* (Baudry).

## **What will happen if frames aren't separate?**

What interests me here is that the shutter is limited to a binary control, light or no light. This specificity, whatever the speed of the shutter, promotes the sequencing of images. It is a fragmentation of the flux of light, and this fragmentation seems to be a fundamental structure of photographic and cinematographic apparatuses and, more widely, in the way we understand things. I work against this fragmentation trying to deregulate some of the processes.

Whether mechanical or electronic, it is mainly the shutter that controls the flux of light and paces the imprinting of frames. The first thing I did was to remove or keep the shutter open to allow a continuous input of light in the camera. This resulted ultimately to an overexposed image. Overexposing a print film means getting closer to its maximal density. The film loses the ability to show tonal variations when overexposed. One way to regain control over duration of exposure is to move the film away from the light source.

I work with the rewinding mechanism. Once the film has been loaded, I advance it without exposing it until it is fully loaded in the take-up reel. From there I re-engage the shutter spring and push the small rewind button to allow the rewinding. The shutter dial has a manual control program called Bulb. It is a momentary-action mode that holds open for as long as the operator depresses the shutter-release button. To expose the film, I open the shutter and start rewinding the film in front of the aperture. It is done in a circular gesture. The combination of this rewinding mechanism and the manual control over the shutter is the base of the technique. The shutter's power to control the light flux is transferred to the moving of the film and the duration of the exposure is virtually unlimited. The image in my case is limited materially by the length of the film roll. It is the physical aspect of the sensitive surface that determines the form of the photograph. An unlimited or continuous exposure coupled with the moving of the surface provide the setting for a potential continuous recording. The continuity of reality is approached here by linking both a materialized space (film) and a duration (exposure) through motion. How could we potentially transfer this process to digital imaging systems? The image below shows an exposure of approximately 8 seconds over a distance of more than 260 meters, taken from the train. The image is 72cm long.



Fig 1: Train Window, whole film exposed over 8 seconds

## EXPOSURE & SYNCHRONISATION

Moving the film in a shutter-less apparatus allows for a different type of exposure, not dictated by the usual settings found on time dials (For Willem Flusser they represent Kant's categories of space and time). The continuous light input creates in strip-photography what Marteen Vanvolsem called a "*dynamic exposure*" (Vanvolsem, p153). The dynamic exposure is a direct result of the speed of the film and the aperture. The exposure time is the duration of the shooting process. These are the two main parameters of control. A constant speed will give a

constant exposure as variations of speed will bring variations to the exposure. The amount of exposure variation that a given film can tolerate is called its exposure latitude. In the first image I made (Fig 2) the variations of exposures are clearly visible in the shape of vertical lines. Those lines are created by a multitude of superimposed frames. This clearly indicates the struggle I had to perform a smooth circular movement when I rewound the film.

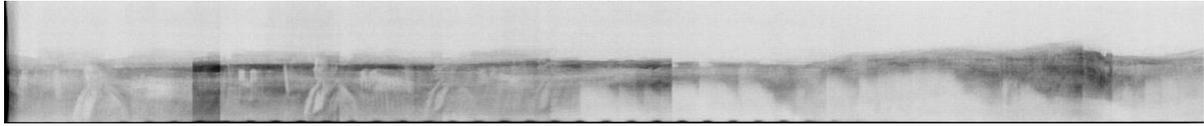


Fig 2.0 : First trial, Margriet walking in Winjhaven (1/6<sup>th</sup> of the roll)



Fig 2.1 First trial, Margriet walking in Winjhaven (1/6<sup>th</sup> of the roll)



Fig 2.2 First trial, Margriet walking in Winjhaven (1/6<sup>th</sup> of the roll)

The jerking motion is visually printed onto the film. It is hard to get a smooth motion with a small rewind crank. The size of the crank indicates that it wasn't designed for filming. A larger crank gives more amplitude and therefore a smoother motion. I had the chance to build a medium format camera during a workshop, on which I stick a larger crank. As the contact sheet below demonstrates, the frame lines disappeared with a smooth motion. But I should ask myself why would I want to erase the mark of the making? For J-L Baudry the cinematic apparatus is ideological because it hides his means of production to create an illusion of continuity. I think in my case because the technique is not based on a frame-by-frame recording, the mark of the making should be read through the particular depiction of the objects and the size of the images. Being able to understand the way images are constructed is of importance for me but I am still reflecting on how to introduce it to the viewer. In most cases the viewers of my photographs or my film asked me: "*How did you do it?*"

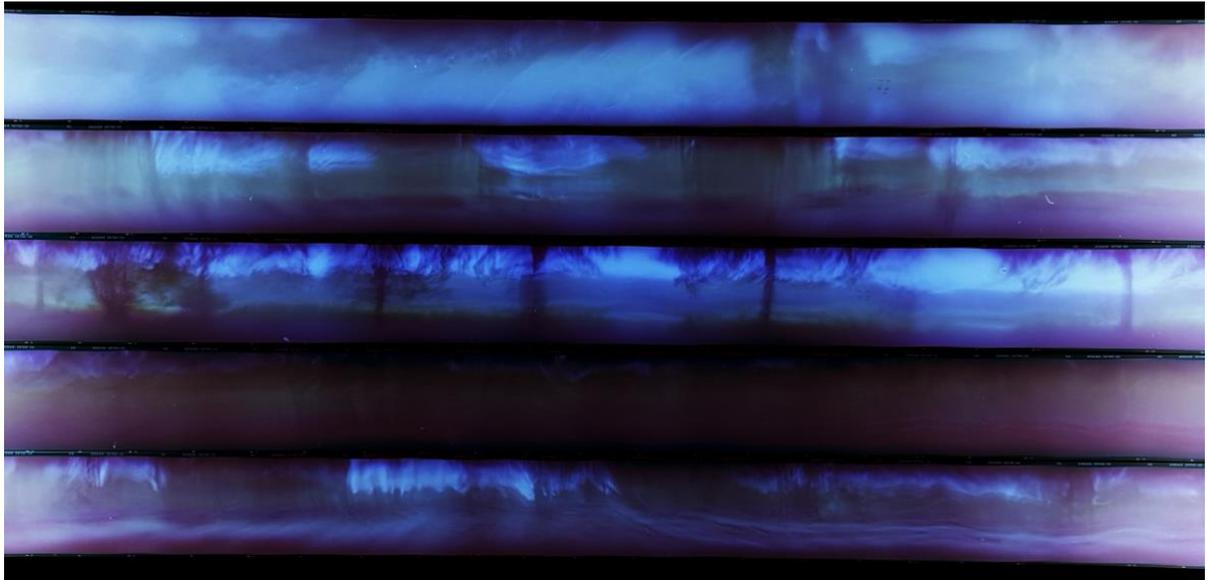


Fig 3: Medium Format contact print

Not only the movement of the film impacts the exposure, it also plays a major role in the depiction of objects. The depiction of object is relative to the movement of film, the movement of the camera and the movement of the operator's body. I believe here lies an important difference with classic photography: the photographer's body or the object of the photography must be movement. Movement is a fundamental condition for figurative depiction. Traditional practices overcome movement by the "freezing of time".

To sharply depict an object onto the film, the object and the film should travel at the same speed. This is well described in slit-scan photography techniques. This complex relation is not possible to achieve manually and only a mechanical device that will synchronize the film's speed with the object's could potentially approach the equation. I try to match the speed of the passing landscape from a train window. I rewind the film intuitively, trying to match the different speeds. It became even more difficult when I realized that the distance of the object from the camera influences its relative speed. The background moves slower than the trees in the foreground (Fig 4). Sharpness and motion variations seems to reinforce the dynamism of the image.



Fig 4.0: Objects partly synchronized trees



Fig 4.1: Foreground objects of synchronization



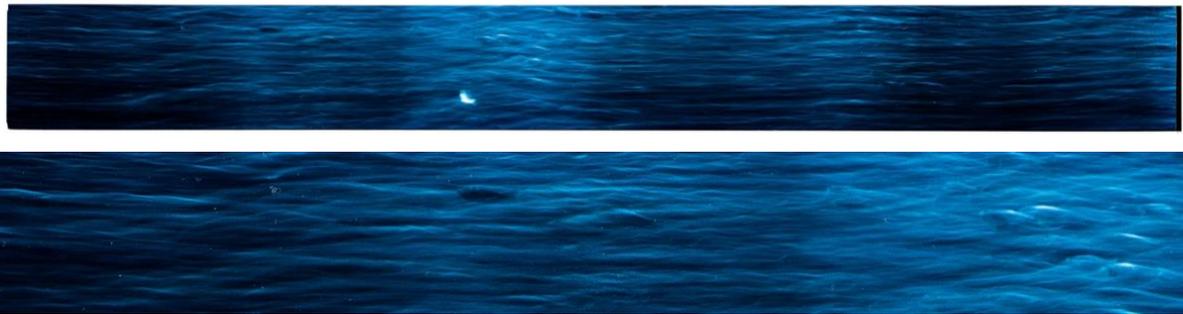
Fig 4.2 : A house stands out in the flux

*“That open whole Bergson conceives of as a universe of images, an incessant flow of matter-movement within which certain specialized images appear – living images that interrupt the constant flow of motion”* (Bogue, R. *Deleuze on Cinema*. p198)

The objects alternate between abstraction and figuration. Can we interpret those figurative apparitions with the “pensive spectator” of Raymond Bellour? Do these objects help us to take distance on the process? Do they allow us to reflect on the larger photo-filmic apparatus? The impossibility of synchronizing with reality is of importance for me because it pushes away the idea of a perfect representation of reality ruled by sharpness, fixity and balanced exposure. Paradoxically, it seems like elements are connected by motion blur while the relation with the object is somewhat disconnected. But does one need to synchronize with the world, especially the less predictable variables of the natural one?

Fish schooling requires coordinated body positions and synchronized movement. The circular motion of the group echoes the circular motion of the rewinding gesture. Fishes communicate by motion and body language. Here, synchronization is a type of relation to other member of the group to achieve

specific goals. Schooling can be seen as a synchronized gesture. This idea of interaction and relation through gesture will be developed later.



(Fig 9:Harrings schooling in the Rotterdam Zoo

For Chris Welsby (2011), natural and elemental processes should be given the space and time to participate in the process of representation. In his film *Seven Days* (1974), he explores interconnectedness between the cinematic process and the environment by synchronizing the camera with the rotation of the earth. Maybe this is what Vilem Flusser (1991) meant by investing our knowledge into our vision to create new perspective on the world?

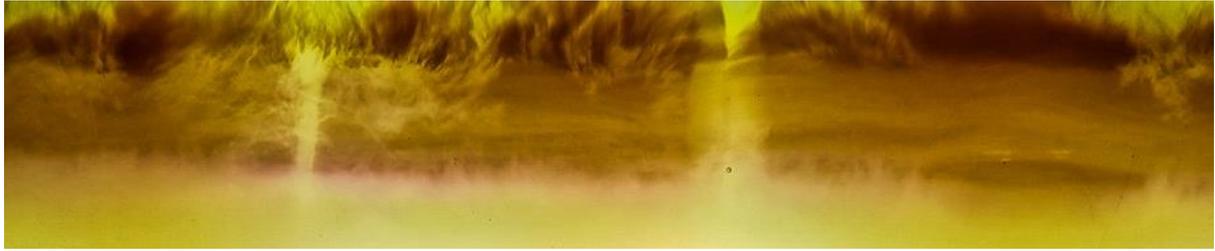
## ON FLUIDITY, PERSPECTIVE, BODY & GESTURE

### Fluidity

Fluidity as a concept, metaphor and quality has been of interest for me in the last few years particularly what Georges Didi-Huberman called “*the images of fluidity and the fluidity of images*” in his chapter *Ninfa Fluida (A post-scriptum)*. In my past work *Layered Identity*, I used fluidity to question the representation of identity within the photographic process. If identity is fluid how can we represent it with a process ruled by stillness? Since then I leaned on fluidity and liquidity to explore and open fix conception and categories.

“(…) matter resolves itself into numberless vibrations, all linked together in uninterrupted continuity, all bound up with each other, and traveling in every direction like shivers (…)”

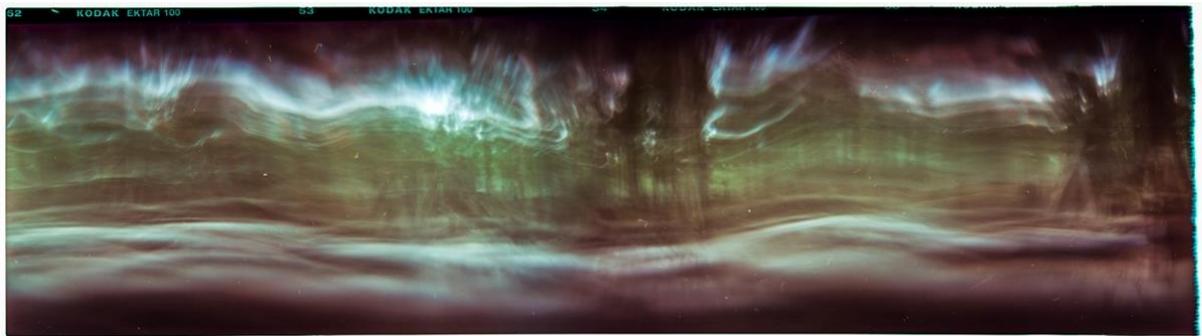
(Bergson, H. *Matter and Memory*, pp.208-209)



(Fig 9: Cycling in a forest)



(Fig 10: Walking in Blaak)



(Fig 11: Walking in a forest)

Liquids are flowing but they possess a potential for deformation, transformation and stabilization: they have phases. Images are flowing between our internal sensibilities and external forms. In the images, separate objects like tree or houses can be seen connected together, linked in the image by drooling colors and shapes. Solids appear to be melted, as if the photographic surface regains its liquid quality, its state of emulsion. The photo-chemical surface highlights what Jeff Wall called it's "liquid intelligence". The image illustrates in a way the fluids and liquids involved in its technical and historical making.

*"liquid intelligence connects photography to the past, to time, in an important way. By calling water an "archaism" here I mean that it embodies a memory-trace of very ancient production processes—of washing, bleaching, dissolving and so on, which are connected to the origin of technè—like the separation of ores in primitive mining, for example. I think that this "prehistorical" image of*

*photography—a speculative image in which the apparatus itself can be thought of as not yet having emerged from the mineral and vegetable worlds—can help us to understand the “dry” part of photography differently.”*

*(J.Wall, Photography and Liquid Intelligence)*

For Zygmunt Bauman (and for all the thinkers influenced by: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Max Weber etc.) the liquid state is achieved by deregulation of the traditional norms and values (Bauman, 2000). Deregulation creates fluidity. Fluidity deregulates. Neo-liberal economy feeds on deregulations: Climate, Market, Information and more. What does my practice of strip-photography deregulate? (...) To develop.

### **Perspective**

Does strip-photography deregulate the norm of central-point perspective?

Movement is a condition to depict an object but it is also a condition to change point of view and perspective. For M. Vanvolsem, *“The continuous movement of the film and the camera while recording means that there is no longer any centrally focused viewpoint. The central perspective is abandoned here in favor of a variable perspective”* (p155). The Variation of perspective is best exemplified by images that contain artificial construction (fig 6.0 /6.1) than images containing natural phenomena or “empty” spaces (fig 7) & (fig 8).

Thinking of strip-photography in term of variable perspective leads me to the following question:

- If we consider fluidity and mobility as a change of perspective, can the multi-point perspective or variable perspective created by the technique be useful to understand contemporary mobility? The physical and mental mobility? The increasing globalization?

We could develop in that direction using the concept of “grammar of the multitude” coined by Neo-Marxist philosopher Paul Virno (the idea of multitude originated with Baruch Spinoza (1677)).

“The formal characteristics that Virno ascribes to the multitude are in line with those suggested by Hardt and Negri: it is hybrid, fluid, in constant flux and deterritorialized. Moreover, the multitude fosters a permanent sense of not feeling at home (...)” (Pascal Gielen, *The murmuring of the artistic Multitude* p16)



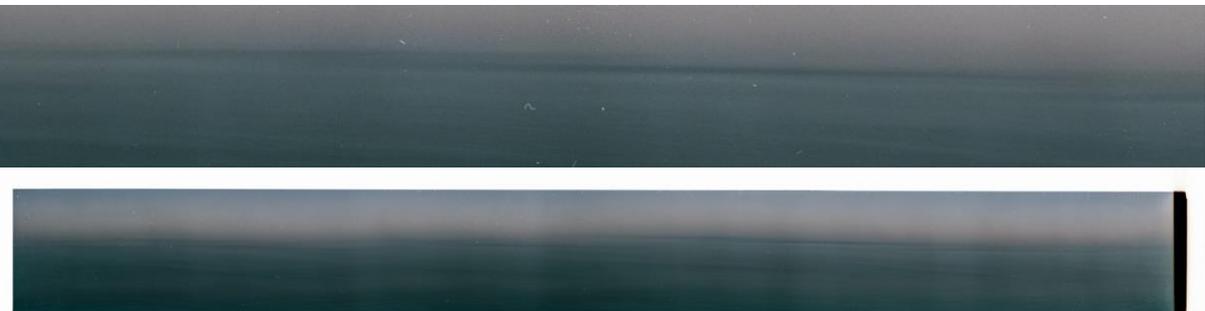
(fig 6: A village)



(fig 6.1: An industrial complex)



(fig 7: The north sea & waves from the ferry + detail)



(fig 8: The north sea & horizon from the ferry + detail)

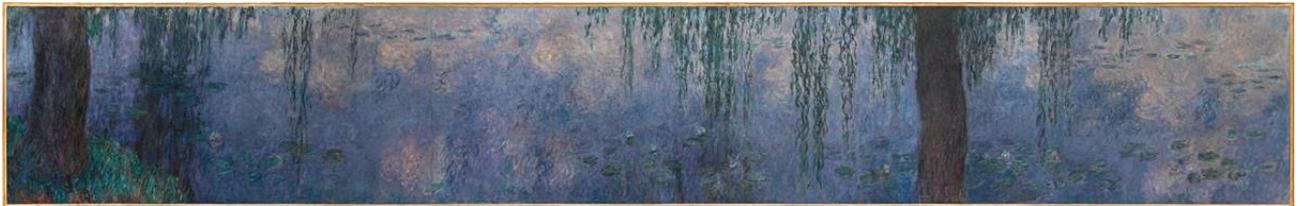
Other points to develop:

- Flux and variable perspective and the non-western philosophy systems like Buddhism
- Traditional Chinese scroll painting and their reading system / orthogonal perspective



Wang Ximeng – A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains 1113

- Meditative and Panoramic paintings by Claude Monet that we can find at the Musée de l'Orangerie



Claude Monet: The Water Lilies – Morning with Willows 1915-1926



Claude Monet: The Water Lilies – Green Reflections 1915-1926

“The temptation came to me to use this water lily theme for the decoration of a drawing room: carried along the length of the walls, enveloping the entire interior with its unity, it would produce the illusion of an endless whole, of water with no horizon and no shore; nerves exhausted by work would relax there, following the

restful example of those still waters, and, to whoever entered it, the room would provide a refuge of peaceful meditation in the middle of a flowering aquarium.”

Monet quoted by Roger Marx, *Les Nymphéas de M. Claude Monet*, *Gazette des beaux-arts*, June 1909, p. 529

## **Gesture**

**Another point I would like to take time to develop is the one concerning the gesture. The photo-filmic gesture in my case.**

Gesture can be approached as the “*wide variety of ways in which humans give what is usually regarded as willful expression to their thoughts and feeling through visible bodily action*” (Kendon, (2001). It is our corporal engagement with the world through practical actions (Kendon)

For Vilém Flusser, “*a gesture is a movement of the body or of a tool connected to the body for which there is no satisfactory causal explanation.*”

To me strip-photography enables another type of relation with the reality: a photographic gesture embracing movement, intuition and asynchronism. Following Vilém Flusser, I consider the gesture of photographing as an inclusive gesture. If photography represents something it is less reality than a set of relationships between elements. Those relations are of dialectic nature, aim / position, subject / object, photographer / apparatus. For Vilém Flusser, the gesture of photographing is a gesture of philosophizing.

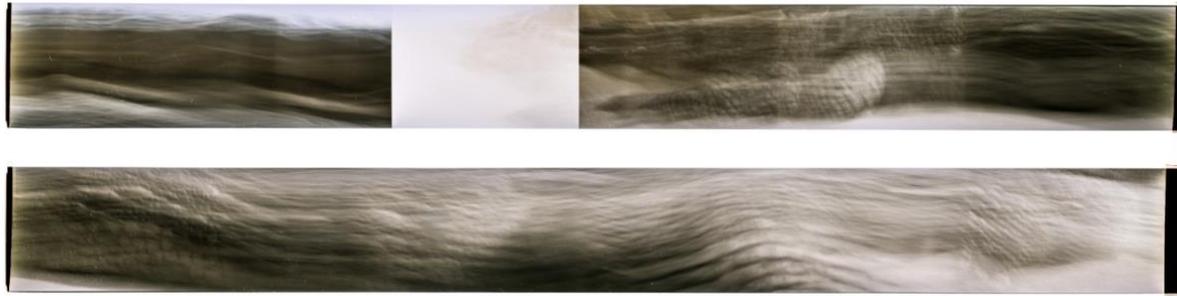
How can we use gestures in a way to produce other perspectives, non-western point of view?

Does strip-photography help our understanding of contemporary mobility?

What kind of meaning can we produce with this technique?

(To develop in this part)

- **Comparison with VR perspective & Embodiment**
- **Gesture: analyzing gesture**



(A crocodile resting in the Rotterdam Zoo.)

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