

FILM AT REDCAT PRESENTS

Mon April 18 | 8:30 pm |

Jack H. Skirball Series

Radical Intimacies: The 8mm Cinema of Saul Levine

Practically synonymous with personal small-gauge filmmaking, Saul Levine has created more than 100 largely improvisational films in a half-century of remarkable, uninterrupted activity. His painstakingly crafted, exquisitely kinetic work deals with people and episodes from his life, but derives universal poetic meaning from its urgency, tactile presence, and range of themes, from the most personal to the political. In his key series—*Notes*, *Portrayals*, and *Light Licks*—Levine uses combinations of black-and-white and color, multiple images, accidents of exposure, and hand-carved collaging to expand upon his already rich, expressive cinematography. The Boston-based legend, a mentor to scores of avant-garde filmmakers throughout his teaching tenure at MassArt, brings a selection of work that includes entries from *Light Licks*, early 8mm *Portrayals*, and several Super 8mm sound films.

In person: Saul Levine

"Saul Levine is the foremost dissenting filmmaker in America. With about 35 years of consistent production behind him, and no signs of fatigue, he can show us the shape of a life passionately and uncompromisingly devoted to filmmaking. His works are high-energy messages of friendship, records of sexual love and political activism..."
— P. Adams Sitney

Program

Regular 8mm prints:

Ivan's Scarf (1965, 4 minutes)

The Queen of Night Gotta Box of Light (1965-66, 4 minutes)

Tear/or (1966-67, 4 minutes)

Note To Eric (1966-68, 4 minutes)

Note One (1968, 6.5 minutes)

Lost Note (1968-69, 10 minutes)
Note To Pati, Portrayal: Memorial Day Weekend
(1975-78, 7.5 minutes)

Super-8mm prints:

Wasted Days Wasted Nights
(2001, 12 minutes, Double Super-8mm projection, silent)
Light Lick Series (1999-2000, 30 minutes, silent)
Crescent (1993, 5 minutes, sound)
A Few Tunes Going Out (1978-84, 30 minutes, sound)

Saul Levine will present programs of different films

* at Echo Park Film Center on Saturday, April 16, at 8:30pm (recent Super-mm films plus new Super-8mm films by Chloe Reyes, Rick Bahto, Eve Luckring and others).

* with Los Angeles Filmforum at the Spielberg Theater in the Egyptian Theater on Sunday, April 17, at 7:30pm (16mm blow-ups of *New Left Note* (1968-82) and other early regular 8mm films).

Artist statement

I have been a filmmaker since 1965, before that I was attempting to be a writer. I also went to the movies a lot. I would sometimes think I wanted to make films but even though I loved movies there was nothing I was seeing that I wanted to make. A friend of mine who worked for Yale's AV department showed me three films that changed my life. Maya Deren's *At Land*, *Choreography for the Camera*, and Viking Eggeling's *Symphonie Diagonale*. From Deren's films I saw that cinema's ability to represent figures in time and space poetically could be a paradigm of consciousness; Eggeling showed me that nonfigurative shapes could evolve and change musically. I saw that I could use film to understand the world around me directly. I could also use editing to make relationships between what I was seeing in front of the camera and what was going on in my mind. I stopped making editing decisions based on story and started making them based on shape, memory and association.

The first film I made that I was happy with, *Salt of the Sea*, came about when I was out sailing with friends. I had brought a regular 8mm camera with me and started filming. One of my friends jumped from the boat to a buoy climbed to 8ft top of it and said: "Saul

you could get some great shots from here." So I jumped didn't make it and sunk into the water clutching my camera. The water was warm compared to the air since it was a cold fall day. It was like being embraced by the sea. I thought I was dead. However I wound up bobbing to surface clambering onto the buoy still clutching my camera and was able to jump back into the moving boat. Cold, humbled, my camera ruined I returned home and sent the film to be processed. I wrote a script intending to have actors reenact the event but couldn't find any one willing to jump in the ocean. The footage came back and was mainly abstract images of swirls of magenta and turquoise which I spent a month editing. I edited in terms of rhythm, shaping the abstractions by cutting. There were glimpses of sun, sea, and sky moving finally toward an image of my friend on top of the buoy, shot from the moving boat and then whiting out. I felt it was much closer to making use of the experience than the 16mm narrative film I had written.

During this period I evolved a film practice in dialog with other filmmakers and artists I was seeing and meeting such as Stan Brakhage, Carolee Schneemann, Andy Meyer, Tom Chomont, Marie Menken, George Landow, Marjorie Keller, Jack Smith, Andy Warhol and many others. I worked very inexpensively mainly in regular 8mm and made non narratives, formal, silent films. I tried to film what was going on around me and value it as much as the heroics of the big screen.

In 1968 I started a series of films, which is still ongoing, The Notes. The first of these was *Note One*, a black and white portrait of my parents with in camera superimposition. My mother knitting, talking on the phone, sleeping, my father reading the newspaper, ending with my mother lighting the Sabbath candles. The last one completed *Whole Note*, a b/w portrait of my father in the last days of his life; sleeping, watching television, playing cards with my Aunts and ending with him putting on Teffilin. All shot with overlap dissolves so you see the beginning of actions before the end of the prior activities. Both the *Notes* are very personal portraits and silent visual meditations on the ordinary.

The series includes *New Left Note*, a portrait of the late 60s early 70s movement against racism, sexism, and imperialism. *Notes of an Early Fall* (super8 sound) in which I use duration and repetition. *Notes After Long Silence* in which the sound and images are cut rapidly and rhyme as frenetically based on shape, visual and verbal puns. I collage jackhammers breaking ground, with sexual intercourse, with BB King solos, with ducks on a pond, with helicopter machine gunners, and with children at play.

In the early 70s I worked on Marjorie Keller's documentary on

welfare rights and her experimental documentary of a birth, *Misconception*, this experience made me want to work with sound mainly to record speech. When I was five years old my first criticism of the media was that no one in the movie or TV spoke or even looked like my family and community did. As an adult I was happy to discover the pure visual joys of film and work completely silently, I was tempted by sound because I wanted to include speech in portraiture. I made a sound film, which focused on speech, *Departure*, where as a professor gave a speech during the takeover of the administration building at Binghamton where I taught. I talked about how the cut back we were protesting meant the elimination of speech therapy courses which trained people whose work allowed me to speak at all. I used super 8mm sound to extend my film practice because it was a media I could use by myself. When Kodak stopped making super 8mm sound film it was like having my tongue ripped out. Eventually I replaced it with mini DV.

In the last seven years I have continued to make *Notes*. And have started a series of films called the *Light Licks*. These are a series of films that are made frame by frame by flooding the camera with enough light to spill beyond the gate into frames left unexposed. *Light Licks* are ecstatic flicker films inspired by jazz and mystic visionary practice. I have completed 8 of these and am currently working on two more. The *Light Licks* extend my interest in the ways film can be a media of visual improvisation. It also has allowed me to find new ways of using the camera to make images. The last two films also use figurative images to explore the post 911 world. *Light Licks by the Water of Babylon in the Hours of the Angels* was filmed partly in Boston and partly in New Jersey looking at the New York City skyline and the river traffic. *Light Licks by the Waters of Babylon Jamming* includes the 2004 demonstrations in NYC at the National Republican Convention. Super 8 remains a viable media for me, in my film work I am challenged after over forty years to find new ways to explore its formal possibilities and find myself still entranced by film's light rhythms and shape-shifting.

Around the time I started the *Light Licks* I started to work in miniDV I made one collage video, *Sad Gun*, on the Avid using rapid cutting, layering of sound and image, and other digital effects. Most of my video work uses real time recording, very little cutting and synch sound as it is recorded. I have mainly done portraits of people talking sometimes to each other and just to me. I know this is unusual in the current era when they're so much emphasis on short sound bites but I am interested in how people speak and how they look when they are thinking about what to say. As someone who once couldn't speak at all, I am driven as a film/video maker to be a medium for others

speech. This has been the impetus for much of my recent work in video.

On September 11th, 2005 a former student, old friend, and a colleague, Mark LaPore took his own life. I responded to this and my grief by video taping people close to him, recounting their dreams and visions of him. I recorded them using an old b/w Panasonic Studio tube camera using a miniDV deck as a video and sound recorder. The camera softens the edges and often makes trails and ghosts when people move. This gave me the opportunity to make a series of portraits of how people appear when they're looking inward to call up an emotionally charged dream. When I show *Dreams and Apparitions of Mark LaPore* (2006 - 2007) either publicly or privately I have been surprised at the intensity of the emotional response. People who never met Mark are drawn into the work and want to talk about their own dreams and personal loss. I feel good about having made a piece that gave others a voice that will be evidence in the future of how some people spoke and felt today.

About the Artist

With a monumental filmography that dates back almost fifty years and seems to grow monthly (if not weekly), **Saul Levine** (b. 1943) long ago established himself as a central figure in American experimental cinema. He is also a key member of the filmmaking community in Boston and Cambridge, not only because of his own work but also for his passionate, tireless and inspiring roles as both a professor at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design and the programmer of the MassArt Film Society, one of the foremost venues for experimental cinema in the area.

Levine's prolific filmmaking career began in 1965 in his hometown of New Haven, Connecticut. He quickly gravitated to 8mm and Super 8 as formats in which he could work easily and inexpensively, shooting the world he saw around him: colleagues, collaborators, lovers, political actions and demonstrations, the city and landscapes of New England and Chicago. Like other filmmakers who emerged on the experimental scene in the mid- to late 1960s, including Warren Sonbert and Robert Beavers, Levine's work embraces the structuralist impulse to foreground cinema's formal elements while celebrating the camera's ability to capture the beauty and texture of everyday experience.

Helpfully, for one as prolific as he, Levine organizes many of his films into series, indicated by the title of the individual films. Although the series continues to this day, the "Notes" cycle encompasses much of his work from the 1960s and 1970s. By labeling these films "notes,"

many addressed to friends, Levine foregrounds their brevity and intimate nature. The label also helps give the works a casual quality, something off-the-cuff, rather than a grand statement.

Almost all of Levine's work is based in montage, and the splice becomes a recurring visual event, especially in the films shot on 8mm and Super 8. While the splice—the joining of two pieces of film by tape or glue—is typically invisible by the time a film is projected, Levine foregrounds his splices, partly by necessity but also as a gesture that brings together the body of the film and the mind of the filmmaker, as well as the hand of the filmmaker and the spirit of cinema.

Smitten, melancholic or tender, what Levine's films have in common is a heartfelt quality—the films always seem completely honest and direct. To experience them is to understand what has made Levine such a profound influence, especially on such former students as Luther Price, Pelle Lowe, Anne Charlotte Robertson and Jonathan Schwartz.

– David Pendleton, Harvard Film Archive

For more information, please check: www.saullevine.com

*Curated by Film/Video faculty Steve Anker and Bérénice Reynaud.
Presented as part of the Jack H. Skirball Series.*