

FILM AT REDCAT PRESENTS

Mon Oct 3 | 8:30 pm |

Jack H. Skirball Series

\$11 [members \$8]

Disruptive Film: Everyday Resistance to Power

**Curated by
Ernest Larsen and Sherry Millner**

<http://www.redcat.org/event/sherry-millner-and-ernest-larsen-disruptive-film-everyday-resistance-power>

Starting with their first presentation at the 2008 Oberhausen Film Festival, Sherry Millner and Ernest Larsen—artists, filmmakers, writers, educators, troublemakers—have curated and exhibited multiple programs of short films that critically and/or actively represent resistance to power all over the world. Carried out over decades, the duo’s groundbreaking research demonstrates not only the variety of everyday resistance strategies, but also a surprising diversity of experimental approaches to short-form nonfiction media. Their selection for REDCAT draws from works by an array of filmmakers including Ariella Azoulay (Israel/USA), Zanny Begg & Oliver Ressler (Australia/Austria), Filipa Cesar (Portugal), Chen Chieh-Jen (Taiwan), Chiapas Media Project (Mexico), Sylvain George (France), John Greyson (Canada), Armand Guerra & Le Cinéma du Peuple (France), Birgit Hein (Germany), Mosireen Collective (Egypt), Olga Poliakoff & Yann Le Masson (France/Algeria), René Vautier (France/Rhodesia/Algeria), Želimir Žilnik (Serbia), and Millner herself.

In person: Sherry Millner, Ernest Larsen

“Demonstrates the remarkable power of film to engage, move, provoke and contend.” —Bill Nichols

"*Disruptive Film* creates a constellation where the past and present meet. Film becomes a perfect metaphor where the past is simultaneously both too far and too near. It's always beyond one's reach, nothing more than the flickers of light and shadow, yet it's also so immediate as it unfolds before us like a fevered dream, tempting us into its movement and ephemeral images." – Chris Robé, *Pop Matters*

"A visual demonstration of the powers of film. Such a collection of rare and precious items from many times, places and conflict situations, not only provides a strong perspective about film history, but also transmits to us the practical energy to struggle with our present injustices." – Nicole Brenez

"The love of cinema also means knowing what to do with images that are really missing." –Serge Daney

Program

Armand Guerra & Le Cinéma du Peuple:

La Commune

(France, 1914, 90 second excerpt from 20-minute film)

Produced by an anarchist cooperative (probably the first in film history), directed by a Spanish anarchist, the film dramatizes key scenes from the 72 days and nights of the 1871 Paris Commune – still counted as the most extraordinary urban revolt in European history. Just before the film ends, there's an unexpected leap from historical re-enactment to the actual. Suddenly, before our eyes, the last 20 or so living veterans of the Commune are standing in front of the Louvre in 1914. Due to the technological marvel of cinema, a full century later, we can see these stalwart revolutionaries move, smile, stare back at us quizzically. Before the camera's lens, they seem bemused and yet proud. If it is true that in the cinema there is essentially no past – only the present moment of projection – then these aged men and women offer a direct, immediate and inspiring challenge to the present-day. Vive La Commune.

Olga Poliakoff and Yann Le Masson:

I Am Eight Years Old (J'ai Huit Ans)

(France/Algeria, 1961, 8 min.)

Secretly filmed in a Tunisian refugee camp, subsequently banned for twelve years in France but clandestinely circulated to many thousands, *J'ai Huit Ans* powerfully portrays the trauma of the Algerian war from

the perspectives of nine boys and their extraordinary drawings of their war experiences. No one who saw this beautiful film in the early Sixties could in conscience have reasonably denied the daily brutality of colonization. The film is based on a scenario René Vautier developed with the directors – acting upon the suggestion of Frantz Fanon, whose therapeutic approach in the refugee camp included the children’s visualization of what they’d experienced under the ceaseless barrage of the French military. **Olga Poliakoff** (1928-2009), the daughter of Russian émigrés, and her husband, “direct cinema legend” **Yann Le Masson** (1930-1912), were among the four French independent filmmakers, friends of René Vautier, who joined the cause of the Algerian freedom fighters.

René Vautier:

The Death Knell (Le Glas)

(France/Rhodesia/Algeria, 1964, 5 min.)

This impassioned film, made literally on the fly, at the invitation of ZAPU (Zimbabwe Party for Unity), is a militant plea for three revolutionaries hanged in Salisbury in white minority-ruled Rhodesia. Framed as an excoriation of Ian Smith, then Prime Minister of Rhodesia, the film was long banned in France. *Le Glas* features a voiceover by the very young Senegalese filmmaker/actor/composer Djibril Diop Mambéty (*Touki Bouki, Hyenas*). Forced to leave Rhodesia, his footage confiscated, Vautier constructed this visual poem upon landing in Tangiers, with Mambéty and a young painter who were on the same plane. The resulting immediacy is still palpable. **René Vautier** (1928-2015) made more than 180 films – including the award-winning *Avoir 20 ans dans les Aurès* (1972), many of them banned or destroyed by the French government.

Želimir Žilnik:

Inventory

(Germany/Yugoslavia, 1972, 9 min.)

Each of the many residents of an old tenement building in Munich descends the stairs, pauses to introduce him- or herself, often speaking haltingly in inadequate German, directly to the camera, and then continues down the next flight of stairs... All but a few of the speakers turn out to be guest workers (from Turkey, Italy, Spain, Greece) or their children. This simple but conceptually savvy accumulation of one plus one plus one slowly gathers ever-increasing weight. One of the major figures of the Yugoslav Black Wave, **Želimir Žilnik**, himself an immigrant in Germany at the time, uses a single

camera set-up to produce an ever-growing sense of economic displacement and alienation, a parade which is nonetheless oddly entertaining as each individual chooses how to present his or her existence at that given moment, speaking as part of an inventory of persons rather than things.

Birgit Hein:

Jack Smith

(Germany, 1974, 10 min.)

A meeting of fearless giants: German experimental filmmaker/underground activist and theoretician **Brigit Hein** follows the legendary New York performer/filmmaker Jack Smith in a Cologne zoo, where he writes checks to gorillas and then, while garbed in an elaborately feathered head-dress, expounds on the evils of museum culture and the exploitation of art by the rich—thereby richly satirizing how the patron reduces the artist not to the status of a wild animal captured in a zoo but to the despised dependence of a commonly neglected pet.

Sherry Millner:

Shoplifting: It's a Crime?

(US, 1979, 15 min.)

The film begins with a scene from a supposedly educational documentary on the evils of shoplifting, which is itself shoplifted, mocked, and then remade on Proudhon's famous principle (from his 1840 book, *What is Property?*) that "property is theft." The figure of the shoplifter is freed from the zone of morality and far more comfortably resituated within an alternative economy, thereby shaking up conventional definitions of criminality and private property—and the secret sympathy between the two. The arthritic conventions of the educational documentary are also bent out of shape.

Ariella Azoulay:

The Food Chain

(Israel/USA, 2004, 14 min)

This inventive investigation of the question "Is there hunger in Palestine?" leads to a disquieting conclusion. It finds that Israeli military and government are positively nourished by the spread of humanitarian speech and ideas, which directly support their continued aggression against Palestine. An all-women's chorus, blindfolded and shrouded in blankets, obsessively chant the question between scenes

of so-called humanitarian food exchange, which is deliberately planned to be inadequate. In the end the film's title takes on a steely irony. Born in Tel Aviv, **Ariella Azoulay** is an author, art curator, filmmaker, and theorist of photography and visual culture.

Chiapas Media Project

The Land Belongs to Those Who Work It

(Mexico, 2005, 15 min.)

Collectively made, this film details a tense confrontation between masked Zapatistas farming unused land and federal and state officials intent on exploiting the land for eco-tourist development. The elaborate politeness exercised on both sides of this struggle never masks what is at stake, as the suspense builds. To whom does the land belong?

Chen Chieh-Jen:

The Route

(Taiwan, 2006, 17 min.)

In complete silence and amid stifling heat, Taiwanese dock workers, collaborating with the filmmaker, break into a seaside warehouse. Why? What are they doing? Then, with precisely choreographed gestures and solemn stillness, they enact their parts in solidarity with a worldwide dockers' protest against the unloading of a container ship, the Neptune Jade, originally loaded by strikebreakers in Liverpool. Months earlier, the Taiwanese government had allowed the ship into port, without their knowledge. The dockers' aim? To "Reclaim the Future," as one of their picket signs says. The question silently and elegantly answered by the film is: Do workers in one country have the right to support strikers in another? "The World is Our Picket Line." Since the early 1980s, experimental video-maker/performance and installation artist **Chen Chieh-Jen** has produced a body of work examining the often-repressive history of Taiwan.

John Greyson:

14.3 Seconds

(Canada, 2009, 10 min.)

The premise of this hilarious and yet haunting speculative fiction: a close examination of 14.3 seconds of film fragments salvaged from the Iraqi film archive – all that remains, so we are told, in the wake of the 2003 U.S. bombing of Baghdad. "In 2004, ICARP, the Iraq Coalition Archives Project, announced that it would use these scraps to

painstakingly reconstruct what was once considered the greatest collection of Arab cinema in the world.” And so one surreal ‘reconstruction’ after another is spun out, from these pitiful 14.3 seconds of scraps. It is at once satiric and compassionate in detonating the claims to narrative coherence that structure both documentary and fiction film—as well as the storytelling capacity that gives history its enviable veneer of plausibility. In the words of the critic Susan Lord, “in *14.3 Seconds* the powers of the false are brought into the service of speaking truth to power.” **John Greyson** is a Canadian director, writer, video artist, producer, educator and political activist, particularly known for *Zero Patience* (1993) and *Lilies* (1996).

Sylvain George:
They Will Kill Us All
(France, 2010, 11 min.)

Since his beginnings in 2006, French experimental filmmaker, writer and stage director **Sylvain George** has been involved in the issues of immigration policies in Europe, and this is his contribution to *Outrage and Rebellion* a collective DVD project organized by Nicole Brenez, for Joachim Gatti, a French filmmaker seriously injured by police during a peaceful demonstration in Montreuil in 2009. This film, shot in inky black and white, displays the slightly conflicting impulses of a poetic anthropologist. In Calais, we watch migrants scramble over a fence, the flash of lights from patrolling police cars, a chat around a campfire, with an old model TV, just a few feet away, the single dead eye reflecting the fire. George says: “Description in the dark of the night of a raid against migrants near the Calais harbor. Description, in the dark, of a political night. To choose one’s side.” When the title appears—and the film seems at an end—George’s voice begins reciting an anguished angry militant poem.

Filipa Cesar:
Conakry
(Portugal, 2012, 11 min.)

Shot in the House of World Cultures in Berlin, this is a sensitive homage to Amilcar Cabral, the Guinea-Bissauan nationalist thinker, who led the victorious struggle against Portuguese colonialism. The young black Portuguese writer Grada Kilomba and the radio activist Diana McCarty respond in turn to projections of the fragile, newly recovered film, mostly shot by Flora Gomes in 1972, during the struggle for independence, which ended when the Portuguese dictatorship collapsed in 1974. “They capture the blinks of strength,

the looks of competence and sovereignty,” Kilomba says of the Cuban-trained filmmakers’ images of Cabral and others. Within a few months Cabral was assassinated. The supple tension of the single-shot, roving camera performance unifies the fragmentary projections of the silent footage of a revolutionary moment. Both women experience that as a loss not only for the subsequently tragic history of Guinea-Bissau but for the world—and for themselves. This speculative stirring of memory in the contemplation of raw images invokes the work of Chris Marker, whose spirit swirls through the film. Born in Portugal, artist/filmmaker **Filipa Cesar** lives and works in Berlin.

Mosireen Collective:

Prayer of Fear

(Egypt, 2013, 4 min.)

A montage of unfolding events on the streets of Cairo, with a woman’s voiceover of a poem by Mahmoud Ezzat, a lament in the wake of the many clashes and massacres in and around Tahrir Square, by a young revolutionary, questioning the value of martyrdom. Mosireen, which is a play on the Arabic words for “Egypt” and “determined”, was founded in the wake of Mubarak’s fall. A group of filmmakers and activists inaugurated a collective space dedicated to supporting citizen media of all kinds.

Zanny Begg & Oliver Ressler:

The Right of Passage

(Australia/Austria, 2013, 19 min.)

Evocatively shot in nighttime Barcelona at the airport, the bus station, the harbor, those sites of transition where legal travellers will be asked by customs officials to show their passports to establish nationality and the rights of citizenship. For most of us, the right of passage is little more than a rite. This film obsessively returns to those passports but centers its attention on the plight of people living in Barcelona *sans papiers* (illegally). Featuring clever animation and interviews with theorists Ariella Azoulay, Sandro Mezzadra, and Antonio Negri, among others, the film explores questions of global citizenship—in the midst of the most severe financial crisis to hit Europe in decades. Austrian artist **Oliver Ressler** produces theme-specific exhibitions, projects in the public space and activist videos – often done in collaboration. For this piece, he worked with the Australian artist, writer and curator **Zanny Begg**.

Note From the Curators

We have been incubating this collection of short films for decades. We saw a few of them as far back as the late 1960s. They were projected on the walls of lofts or in funky theaters on the Lower East Side of New York City. The audiences were made up of hippies, impatient radicals, artists, and troublemakers—people who, like us, believed they were going to change the world. So the collection of films we are in the process of assembling is the distillation of our lifelong engagement with the intersection between the stirring histories of struggles for freedom across the globe and the wide-ranging, often surprising, history of short-form experimental non-fiction media... an engagement both passionate and critical.

These films make propositions—or “escape routes”—from exhausted classical documentary forms. They each employ critical interventions intended to contest, resist, or imaginatively overturn repressive conditions, stale culture, the violence of the state, patriarchy, racism, the rule of global capital.

We are aiming at a gradual construction of an alternative history – a history that has at times been blocked, repressed, censored or hijacked – of short-form radical experimental non-fiction media, from 1914 up to the present. The films that we selected address radical potentiality. They ask and often answer the complex question of how political resistance can be articulated in forms that are not only appositely representative of resistance but also embody that shape-shifting force in their own diverse historical moments and contradictions.

Today or tomorrow any and all of us are very likely to be caught up in the crossfire of our era’s global upheavals and sudden revolts. The films shown tonight offer precise and often deeply affecting visions that evoke previously underexplored potentials for common understanding of these unending crises.

According to the French critic and filmmaker Jean-Louis Comolli: “Defeating or overcoming the existing order of things requires the invention of forms that are different to those serving to repress our consciousness and our movements.” The requirement to which Comolli refers should, we feel, encompass the invention of forms of life, of politics, and aesthetic forms, as an intentional project that produces the conditions through which such revolutionary change could begin to be achieved. And the invention of such forms is always experimental.

Our search for these little-known and under-valued films continues... We hope that our archeological effort, which often meant dusting off, translating, and subtitling uniquely moving films never before seen by English-speaking audiences, will prove to be as much a discovery for the spectators as they have been for us.

The Curators

Ernest Larsen writes fiction, media criticism and frequently collaborates with co-curator Sherry Millner on film and video projects. His criticism has been published in *The Nation*, *Art in America*, *The Village Voice*, *Art Journal*, *The Independent*, among others—along with essays in a number of anthologies. Larsen is also a scriptwriter and contributing editor for several PBS series. He has received grants, residencies, and awards from the Jerome Foundation, Paul Robeson Foundation, MacDowell Foundation, Blue Mountain Center, Gunk Foundation, and the Blumenthal Foundation.

Sherry Millner was the initial Chair of the Media Culture Department at College of Staten Island, CUNY. Her many films and videos have been exhibited at festivals throughout the U.S., Europe, Australia, and Asia. In addition to festival awards, for her work she has been the recipient of residencies and grants from NYFA, NYSCA, the Jerome Foundation, Long Beach Museum, the Ucross Foundation, Can Serrat, Babayan Culture House, and Light Works, among others.

The Jack H. Skirball Series is curated by Steve Anker and Bérénice Reynaud and supported, in part, by the Ostrovsky Family Foundation.