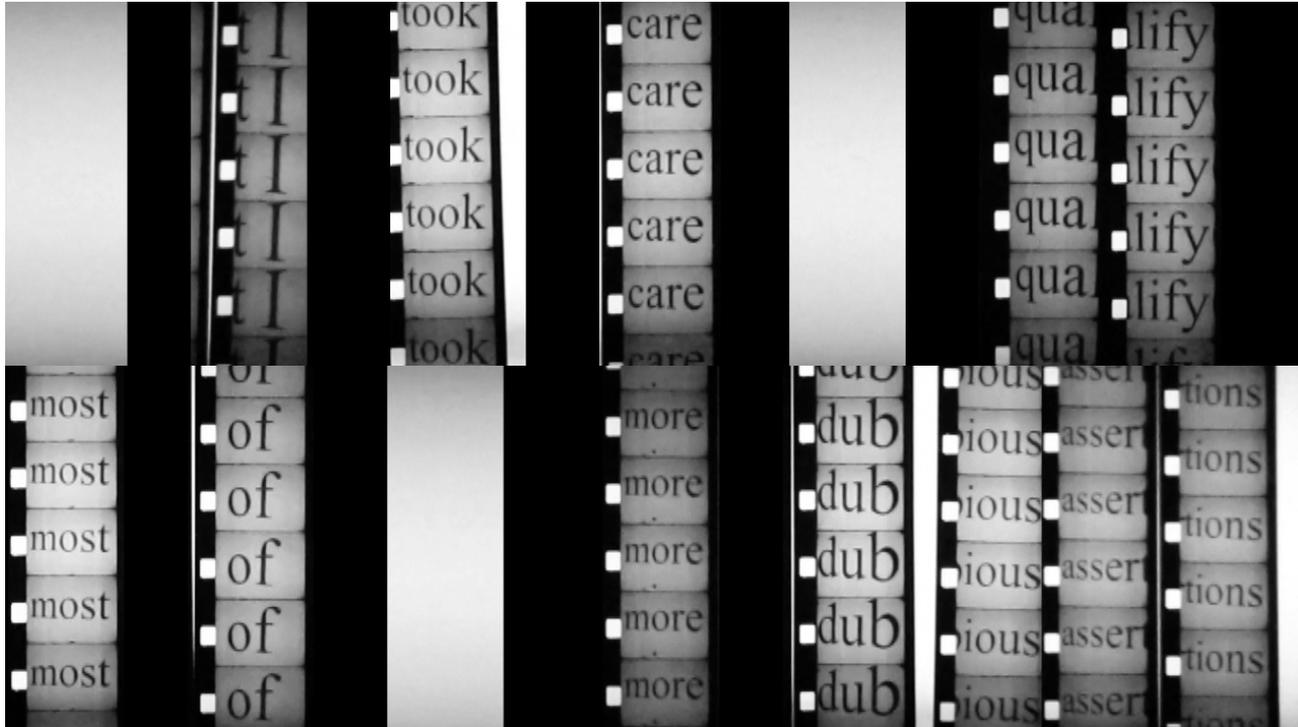


# PERIPHERAL VISION

peripheralvisionarts.org/journal/kaufmannbuhler-interview

February 24, 2017



Toby Kaufmann-Buhler, *2 fragments of motion (self surveillance)*, 1:33, HD video/sound, 2014

By **Scott Gleeson**

*Personal family history offers media artist Toby Kaufmann-Buhler rich terrain for exploring interrelated phenomenologies of memory and sense perception. The artist's sound and video/film installations reconfigure content harvested from the family archives - photos, home video, and texts - transforming the source materials into time-based, multi-sensory archaeologies of the self. Peripheral Vision discusses with the artist the motivations behind the "self-surveillance" project, his inspirations and working methods.*

**Describe a work of art that has been meaningful to you or influential in some way.**

I first experienced Chris Marker's *La Jetée* as an undergraduate student; it's an absolutely beautiful work that really made me realize at an early age that an emotional core and a rigorous, formal construction can go hand in hand and reinforce each other. Marker's use of stills and a spectacular sound design creates a chilling, mournful yet magnetic atmosphere that pushes the boundaries of film and sound as art.

**What is the first work of art you remember experiencing as a child? Was there something about the experience that influenced your practice or decision to become an artist?**

My earliest memories of experiencing art are from being taken to concerts at Carnegie Hall in NYC, and to a variety of rock concerts throughout the tri-state area as a child. I was a bit young to really understand the music (especially the classical music), so I really experienced these concerts as multi-sensory events on a very basic level. Looking back, I would say these experiences influenced my trajectory into art (via music), and probably demonstrated to my young mind that at its best art can be a total sensory experience.

**How old were you when you decided to become an artist? Describe your training and how it has contributed to your current practice.**

I decided to become an artist as an undergraduate student (so around age 20); this decision was tied to my education and a vague sense of where I thought I could see myself going with it. I was going through the standard US university liberal arts/fine arts education, and began by thinking that I would go into music. However, I quickly found that music wasn't a good fit for me, and moved completely into art when I realized I could marry my interests in sound and the visual. I went on to grad school in England, and there was able to continue building a rich foundation for the latter interests, reinforcing my direction while challenging my sense of self.

**What are the dominant themes in your current body of work and how did your practice evolve to focus on these concerns?**

Some of the dominant themes in my current work have to do with sensory perception, memory, history, and personal relationships amongst my own family. My work has evolved with the latter themes in direct relationship to my experiences while living in the UK. Before relocating back to the US after school, I found out that I was entitled to receive a German passport; this caused a latent interest in my family and identity to grow in my work, developing after several years and continuing in my present body of work. Another formative experience I had in the UK was associated with the then-prevalent presence of surveillance throughout London (and the attention and public conversation paid to this after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001). Having never experienced this atmosphere before, it was a shock and became a growing concern in my own work.

**Describe your studio practice and working methods? How does this space contribute to your process and development of idea?**

My practice involves a great number of devices and technology, and my most fruitful processes involve using these devices in unexpected and unusual ways. While usually the center of this is a computer (and for the most part everything involved does move into

digital form), I tend to get excited about using older technology in (for me) new ways, whether it is a musical saw, a slide-video converter or a super-8 film viewer. This allows my studio to become an incubator, and I can push ideas in ways I wouldn't expect them to go.

**How do you make your art? Please describe your materials and techniques and how they developed.**

I have a background in photography and music; visually my work in video (and recently with film) involves careful composition and framing. I have also been quite involved in analog video manipulation, particularly after a residency at the Experimental Television Center. This has led me into exploring processes with video signal manipulation, and also allows a parallel process with audio input manipulating the video image as well. This latter relationship has become an important technique in my work, as sound and its relationship to the visual has been an ongoing concern. With sound I am particularly interested in the use of field recordings, noise and musical sound to create abstract sound spaces within my work (whether for video soundtracks, installations or sound work alone).

Toby Kaufmann-Buhler, "Stand in Memory (self-surveillance)", 13:28, HD video/sound, 2016

**You have one-way tickets for an all expense paid trip on the time machine! Where would you go and why?**

I would travel back to North Carolina in the 1950s to attend Black Mountain College as a student, in order to study with the amazing faculty (and other students) there and soak in the atmosphere of that time period and its possibilities. Then (since this is a one-way ticket) I would travel around Europe (visiting Jacques Tati on the set of his film "Playtime"), northern Africa (to visit Paul Bowles in Morocco) and the US during the 60s, ending up in New York City during the early 1970s, the time when the downtown scene there was really exploding and musicians and artists were exploring new ways of working individually and collectively. I would be fascinated to witness this atmosphere first hand, along with all the artists who had their start during the time.

**If you could travel back in time to hang out with a famous artist for a day, who would it be and what would the day be like?**

I would want to travel back to London 1975, and spend time with Brian Eno in the recording studio while he works on his album "Another Green World". Eno is holed up in the studio, working somewhat frantically with a rotating cast of musicians as he stitches together the music for the album. I spend the day witnessing all the activity, with breaks for tea and discussions of strategy (along with Oblique Strategies).

**Dogs or cats? Beach or mountains? Urban or rural? Salt or no salt (it's a margarita thing)?**

Dogs and cats (I have both, but the cat might have the advantage); mountains; urban (with good access to the country); definitely salt.

### **What kind of music do you listen to? Do you listen to music in the studio?**

Since I can remember music has been a very important part of my life, and these days I tend to listen to quite a bit of experimental electronic, ambient and indie music. When I'm not working on my own sound, in the studio I tend to listen to ambient and so-called neo-classical music as it puts me into a contemplative and balanced state of mind (without being too intrusive).

### **Tell us about your current body of work?**

My work is currently divided in two parts, which at times do intersect. One part is an ongoing body of work, a project titled "Self-Surveillance". This is work I have been doing for the past several years, in a variety of media including video, sound, film, installation, print and mixed-media assemblage. It is a research project that examines texts published by members of my family (along with other elements and artifacts) and seeks to create relationships amongst these disparate people, eras and cultures, while also building relationships between them and myself. By focusing on my family as a (quite disorganized) collective, along with my relationship to them, I have become more interested in work exploring issues of identity. Parallel to this, I have been interested in surveillance as a personal as well as a political issue, encompassing collective and individual concerns that are becoming more pronounced in my work as I develop the "Self-Surveillance" project.

My other current body of work encompasses my interest in the manipulation of analog video and its relationship with sound. I'm particularly interested in the live performativity and interaction associated with this manipulation, and am seeking to begin a performance project based on this work.

### **What work in your portfolio do you consider your most pivotal accomplishment and why?**

I consider a video/sound work I did in grad school (and finished afterward), "Dishscape" (2003-05), to possibly be the most pivotal piece I've done, in that more than any other work it helped me move from a reliance on ambiguity to a direct and succinct statement, using the sparsest of means.

"Horizon Life" (2005-06) is a piece that was transitional; it was my first full-fledged work after grad school (during a long transition into post-student life), and it was my first work in a new video process that continued for several years in other work. I've never been completely satisfied with it as a work unto itself, but it was also key in the later development of a new successful strategy for installation work.

**Talk about a recent exhibition of your art. What pieces did you show and how do they relate to other works in your portfolio?**

I recently had a series of videos included in a three-person show at Cleveland Print Room in Ohio. This is recent work made during the past two years, which I refer to as the VIDEFILMOTEXT series. These are part of the “Self-Surveillance” project, using text I have researched and appropriated, shot on super-8 film, which was then transferred to video and edited. This work was among my first attempts at working with this text and creating the relationships that have continued to fuel this project.

**Tell us about your experience at an artist residency. Where did you go and who did you meet? Would you recommend the residency to others?**

In 2008 I was able to take part in a residency at the Experimental Television Center, which was a great experience. It was very focused (just 5 days) and I was able to spend the entire time working with analog video and sound in a studio setting, on a large array of equipment originally designed and made by artists and engineers (including Nam June Paik, Shuya Abe and Dan Sandin) dating back to the 60s. Unfortunately the ETC had to close down in 2011.

**Describe a grant or award you have received that has contributed to the development of your practice?**

In 2003, towards the end of my time in grad school, I won an award as part of the Adobe Design Achievement Awards, which provided a big affirmation of my work at the time. This is a competition amongst a number of art colleges and universities, and I was a finalist in the Time-based media category; part of my winnings were a selection of software packages which contributed a great deal to the work I continued after I left school.

**What is next for you in your art practice?**

I have recently relocated and am not working a full-time job for the first time in over 10 years; I am taking the current year to focus on making new work, putting my work into as many exhibitions and other opportunities as possible, and also taking part in residencies if possible. Overall, I am working to expand the “Self-Surveillance” project, in order to plan solo exhibitions, performances and installations for the future.

Artist Profile