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PERCEPTION AS TRANSCENDENCE: INTERVIEW WITH PAWEŁ WOJTASIK

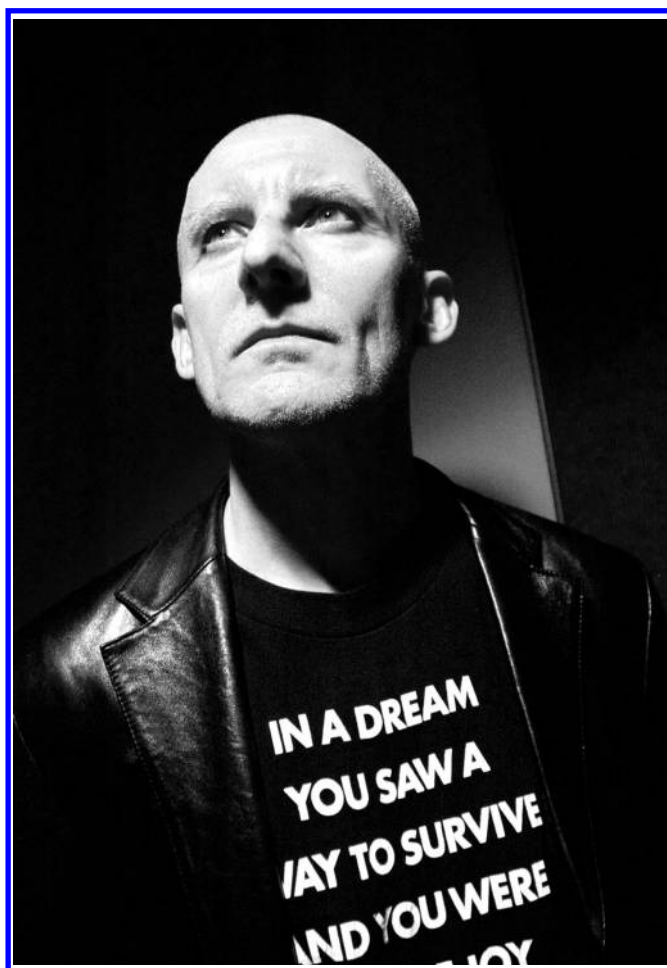
SCOTT MACDONALD TALKS WITH A POLISH-BORN ARTIST WHOSE WORK IS BOTH MEDITATIVE AND SHOCKING

An artist, to paraphrase food critic Anton Ego in Brad Bird's *Ratatouille* (2007), "can come from anywhere." Paweł Wojtasik, who spent his childhood in Poland, then moved to New York by way of Tunisia, is evidence that an artist can also arrive on the scene at any point in life: Wojtasik has emerged as an accomplished video artist during his late fifties, though his work, made in the aftermath of a mystic experience, often has a youthful glow.

Roughly speaking, Wojtasik has produced two kinds of video work: short pieces on unusual topics—sewage treatment, naked mole rats, pigs, autopsy—and large-scale gallery installations about particular places. Nearly always shot with a tripod and on digital video, and with a rigorously formal compositional sense, Wojtasik's imagery is often simultaneously beautiful and disconcerting: the elegance of the imagery at the beginning of *Dark Sun Squeeze* (2003), for example, belies the fact that we are looking at human waste in a sewage treatment plant.

For Wojtasik, making art is about facing fear—the fear of death, of pain, of loss, even the fear of seeing certain kinds of imagery on screen—and challenging taboos. Nowhere is this more obvious than in *Pigs* (like most of Wojtasik's work, *Pigs* has existed in several versions, the most recent was finished in 2010), which upends the convention in nature film that animals should be represented in a way that is not disgusting. The pigsty in *Pigs* is a pigsty, and the feeding frenzy, a horror. His most recent work, *Nine Gates* (2011), on the other hand, pays homage to what Apollinaire called the nine gates to a lover's body, in a work that is a glorious addition to an avant-garde mini-tradition that includes Willard Maas's *Geography of the Body* (1943) and Yoko Ono's *Fly* (1970).

Wojtasik's more publicly oriented work is more directly polemical. *The Aquarium* (2006) focuses on how aquariums contribute to the illusion that environmental damage



Paweł Wojtasik
Photo: Pat Mazzera.

to the world's oceans is of minor importance. *Below Sea Level* (2009), the 360-degree panoramic film created for the MASS MoCA (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art) exhibition called *These Days—Elegies for Modern Times* and recreated in New Orleans for Prospect.2 Biennial (and on view through January 29, 2012), honors New Orleans in the wake of Katrina, emphasizing the continued survival of a region that has been living on the edge for decades. The

five-screen video *At the Still Point* (2010) is an evocation of the collision of the old and new and of life and death in India, focusing on Varanasi, where the bodies of the dead are burned next to the Ganges, on the ship-breaking industry in Alang, and on a giant traditional laundry in the shadows of modern skyscrapers in Bombay.

This interview was begun at the Robert Flaherty Film Seminar in June 2010 and later continued by email.

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Scott MacDonald: Can you speak a little about your background? You're not young, and yet you're a young filmmaker.

Paweł Wojtasik: An "emerging artist"! I grew up in Poland. My father was a surgeon, and my mother a journalist—a theater critic, but she didn't write according to the government's dictates, so at some point they said, "Okay, that's enough: you don't write at all." Her anger became so profound that she would fall down in the street while walking and would be brought home by ambulance. She lived on valium until we left Poland, and the minute we left to move to Tunisia, all her symptoms stopped.

I had dual ideological input from the communist government and the Catholic Church, and I grew up being accustomed to the relativity of whatever was considered truth. As a child, I was alienated from myself, my friends, from my parents, from everybody, by such extreme sensitivity that I was unable to speak to people or to speak in public, even to let myself play. The only ray of hope, the most empowering thing that I experienced as a child, was when my parents got me an 8mm Russian camera (it had three lenses on a turret). Maybe I was fourteen.

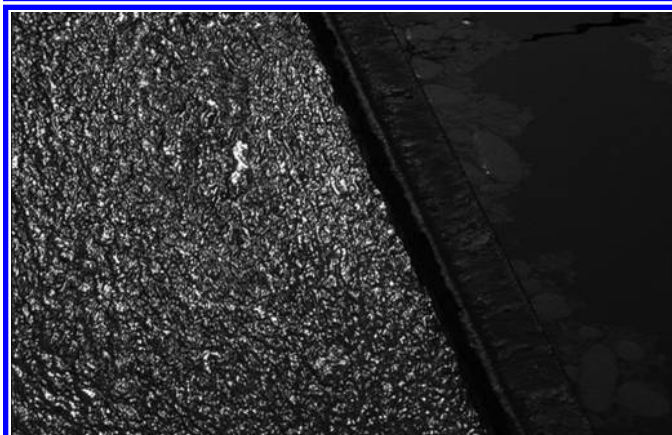
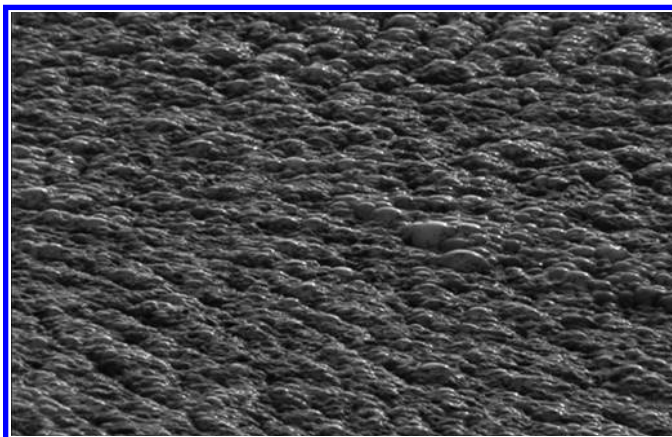
For my first roll of film I just looked out the window of our L-shaped building at the other side of the L, lit by sunlight. I filmed the light and suddenly understood something about visibility; and the world, which previously seemed alienating and cold, opened up for a moment. I've loved filming ever since; having the camera is both protection and a way to open up to the world.

When did you move to the United States?

My mother, my sister, and I moved to New York in 1972—my father stayed in Tunisia.

I got a job at Columbia University, working for the medical library. I was assigned the job of shelving books. Somehow I gravitated toward the lowest floor where there were no windows. They called me "the mole."

In addition to the library job, I was working part-time in a bookstore; and the book *How to Meditate* fell into my lap. I didn't know what exactly "meditate" meant; I thought it meant how to *think*, and I hoped that maybe I could think



Top three: *Dark Sun Squeeze*. 2003, DV, 10 mins.
Bottom: *Crush*. 2010, DV, 14mins.

my way out of my alienation. But this book was about the practice of focusing on your breath. I was skeptical, but by this time, willing to try anything. At one point the author says, “Okay, reader, you must stop reading and take fifteen minutes or so to just breathe, and count your breaths; then resume reading.” I lay down on the carpet and started to do this breathing, and within five minutes this stone, this horrific, monstrous demon that had been sitting in my chest was gone. The relief was temporary, but here was a ray of hope. I continued this practice, and my state improved somewhat, though I still wasn’t making any films.

In 1980 I began to study Buddhism more seriously, and I went to a Tibetan monastery in Vermont where I meditated every day for ten hours or so, for a whole month. During the third week of my stay, we were instructed to allow our whole being to go out of our bodies with each breath, so one day I’m imagining my self as a cannonball and my body as a cannon and with each breath I’m being fired out of this cannon—when suddenly, out of the blue, I’m projected out of the cannon with the out-breath *and I don’t return*. Suddenly I’m wandering in space. Everyone and everything in the room is *glowing*, and the suffering I had been feeling all my life was gone.

Then I looked for myself—where was *I* in this new scheme of things?—and I couldn’t find myself, though I looked everywhere. Everything had vanished, except for this radiant universe and I wasn’t *in it*, I *was it*.

That was the most important experience of my life—I’m always referring to it in everything I make. Of course, at first I thought this intense moment would last forever, but after half an hour or so I began to feel a little bit of *me* coming back, and I could see that to the extent that it *was* returning, the suffering, the dissatisfaction with the present moment was coming back, and suddenly I became jealous of *this* person and didn’t like *that* person, and after an hour or so I was back where I had been, except that now I had a memory of that new experience, and understood that my older way of being was not Reality.

You studied at Yale?

Yes, and really enjoyed it. After years of doing carpentry and painting, I was like a sponge. My schedule was full from morning to night with the classes I audited, but my favorite was Language of Film, taught by Michael Roemer, a brilliant professor. I remember him quoting Robert Young, his cinematographer on *Nothing but a Man* [1964]: “The filmmaking business is not all that complicated; you find an oncoming wave, put the camera in front of the wave, and let it do its thing.” Roemer explained that when you find “the

wave,” somehow *the film* tells you what to do and what not to do, where to focus and how to frame.

The sewage-treatment-plant film, *Dark Sun Squeeze*, framed itself, edited itself; it set all the parameters itself, and everything was as it’s supposed to be. The film was a result of a series of investigations, which began with supermarkets soon after we arrived in the States. My mother dragged me to a supermarket; she was so excited about America and all these products. I was nauseated by her excitement, but I took my camera and filmed the shelves, the products, all in negative. After that, I thought, “Trash!”—because all this stuff ends up as trash, so I went to a garbage-transfer station where trucks come in and the trash comes out of their giant bellies. Then I thought, “*Shit!*” I found out about this sewage-treatment plant in West Haven, called them, told them what I wanted to do, and they said, “Sure, why not?” They gave me a tour of the plant, an amazing place.

When I came back to film, they told me, “You’re on your own; try not to fall into the tanks, because we’re not getting you out of there”—there were no guard rails or anything. I said “Great!” and soon I was a man alone in a vast sea of sewage. Very existential. During the time when I was shooting, my girlfriend left me for someone else, and I was in a lot of pain, but somehow the smell of this sewage and the experience of documenting this process were very healing.

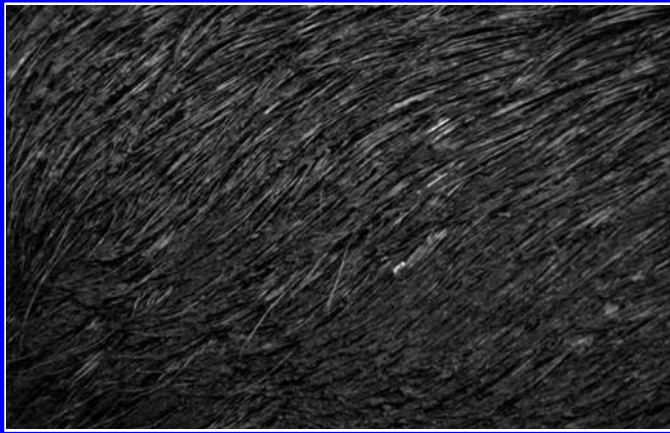
There’s a scene near the beginning of the film where I was shooting in wide angle, and you see an expansive image of this tank; you don’t immediately know exactly what is *in* that tank, sparkling in the sun, then you begin to see these chunks floating and you can hear the slapping splashes of these chunks of shit, and the sun is sparkling and it all feels kind of unreal because it’s so sunny and happy and joyful—you don’t know if you should celebrate or deplore the situation.

Each time I worked on the editing of *Dark Sun Squeeze*, I would start from the beginning, reviewing all I had done, then I’d move forward. Whenever I would encounter a problem, I’d fix that problem before going on. Finally, I started from the beginning and continued to the end with no problems, and I remember thinking to myself, “That’s very satisfying; now I can die!”

***Dark Sun Squeeze* seems a metaphor for the fundamental artistic quest: to turn shit into gold.**

Yes, yes, exactly: alchemy.

The next piece was about car-crushing, but I couldn’t get it right and didn’t show it. It has been redone, as *Crush* [2010]. The next film I *did* show was *Naked* [2005–07], about naked mole rats in a laboratory. The researcher there was hoping I would do some sort of science film about her



Top three: *Pigs*. 2006–10, DV, 8 mins.
Bottom: *Nascentes Morimur*. 2008–11, HD, 29mins.

beloved naked mole rats; she's the world's leading expert and is studying them in order to discover the elixir of youth—by size the mole rats are the longest-living animal on the planet. Most tiny animals live very short lives, but the mole rats live up to thirty years. They have a lot of Omega-3 and other fatty acids. The researcher told me to drink a lot of flax oil because it has Omega-3.

The researcher even let me stay after hours; no one was there but me and two hundred mole rats, each mole rat worth \$20,000—they're very rare. By spending time with these mole rats, I developed a tremendous sympathy and empathy for them. I could see they expressed feelings, had fights and loved each other, suffered neuroses. The plastic tunnels they lived in were a bad imitation of the mole rats' real underground tunnels, and some of them desperately chewed on that plastic—those teeth grinding against the plastic was the main sound in that lab. Even though they were treated well, for laboratory animals, I saw their situation as a metaphor for imprisonment. Of course, *Naked* is probably referring to my imprisonment in my own plastic tubing.

When I showed *Naked* to the researcher, she was appalled; she said, "Okay, it's beautiful, but I can't show it."

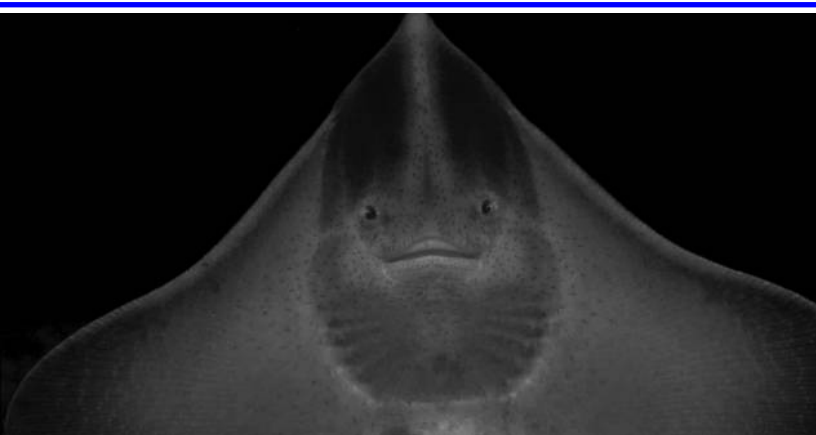
There's an unusual, mysterious sensibility behind your films, almost a frightening sensibility. The opening image of the first version of *Pigs* [2006–10] I saw was so unpleasant that for awhile I couldn't watch the piece. Also, there's a hysteria in the pigs' voices that scares me.

Especially during the feeding frenzy. The pigs normally make sounds like a dissonant symphony. In the film, we see them as individuals or in small groups for a time; then suddenly, at feeding time, we're seeing a whole mass of them, piling up on each other with the sounds of their voices drowning out everything else.

I'm sometimes asked why I choose the subjects I do. I use art, and film, as a tool to discover ways in which I can go from fear to freedom from fear. Each one of my pieces is like a small journey from a state of fear through an experience of accessing and encountering some terrifying reality which speaks ultimately of death, and becoming intimate with it, until I see that there is something beyond death. Having a kind of intimacy with death allows you to be free of it.

Some people who see *Nascentes Morimur* [2008–9—the title means "The moment we're born, we begin to die"] will have also seen *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* [1972], Stan Brakhage's visual exploration of autopsy in the Pittsburgh morgue. Not only is your topic the same, but like *The Act of Seeing*, *Nascentes Morimur* is silent.

I was aware of Brakhage's film, which, when I saw it the first time, seemed to me the best film ever made. Or, to put it a different way, all other films shoot at the target, but only *The Act of Seeing* hits the bull's eye. Because it goes directly



Top three: *The Aquarium*. 2006, HD, 22 mins. Bottom: *Below Sea Level*. 2009, 360 degree panoramic video with soundscape by Stephen Vitiello, 38 mins.

to the essence of what life is about, of what we are. It shows us as meat, animate becoming inanimate, the living and the dead as one. The living hand of the doctor holding the pale bluish hand of the dead patient. Yet somehow there is a sense of transcendence, and that transcendence is through beauty, through perception.

How did you come to decide to work with framing in *Nascentes Morimur*? Sometimes you're clearly using the technique as a metaphor: in several instances, your frame-within-the-frame creates a kind of incision within the outer frame that echoes the knife cutting the flesh.

The changes in the shape and size of the image, within the constant overall frame, can be seen as a “drawing of the curtains” on the autopsy. Until the Renaissance, the inside of the body was forbidden territory in Western culture. A lot of fear associated with the interior of the body persists, and the frame changes are meant to regulate the “dosage” of the horror.

Brakhage often hides the dead patient by showing the doctor's white coat in the foreground. Only a small, bloody fragment of the body can be seen. But that little bloody fragment is extremely important because we suddenly realize we *want* to see the whole body. In this way Brakhage addresses our voyeurism; we are repelled, yet we want to see the forbidden. So the “curtains” in *Nascentes Morimur* simultaneously hide and reveal—and, hopefully, make viewers aware of the inner contradiction of their wanting both.

I have a suspicion that perception is only a front to something that lies beyond perception and maybe is the true place of no fear. When you're making love, the orgasmic experience is beyond life and death; for a moment you're in a space outside of creation or destruction. Somehow, even on a daily basis as I'm walking around as an individual full of fear, I'm also realizing that there is a place of no fear that just witnesses the world and enjoys all kinds of manifestations of visible reality, including the horrific ones.

***The Aquarium* is very different from your earlier films. It's clearly a political film about the environment.**

The Aquarium was a collaboration with the writer, Ginger Strand, who wrote an essay called, “Why Look at Fish?” The essay describes the political and sociological economy of aquariums with witty, cutting intellect.

We didn't know exactly how this collaboration would work, but I knew I wanted to approach the issue from a political/sociological standpoint, while still maintaining my primary focus on the visual aspect of the experience. I asked Ginger to write a list of statistical data pertaining to the oceans and aquariums. Then I hired a performance artist, Kyle DeCamp, to deliver this horrific information in the voice of an airport announcer, so it would seem totally free of emo-



Below Sea Level. 2009, 360 degree panoramic video with soundscape by Stephen Vitiello, 38 mins.

tion, almost pleasant. I was hoping that the visuals would tell the story—and that the voiceover would be adding another, partly informational and partly verbally hypnotic layer.

This kind of film is not really my forte, but there is one scene that feels like my other work. When I was at the Alaska Sea Life Center, feeding time for the octopus didn't go as planned: the octopus grabbed the hand of the caretaker and wouldn't let go. I zeroed in on this struggle, the latex-gloved hand overtaken by the tentacles. That moment had an abject quality and became symbolic in the way my other films are.

The beautiful, sometimes eerie, landscape/seascape shots remind me of Peter Hutton.

I admire Peter Hutton's work.

The Aquarium was a precursor of other projects. I started to expand not only thematically but in terms of the actual presentation of my work. This culminated in the 360-degree panoramic film/sound piece called *Below Sea Level*, which was installed at MASS MoCA for about a year in 2009–10, and is part of the 2011–12 Prospect.2 Biennial, in New Orleans. The panorama is thirty-eight minutes long, and runs on a loop within the panoramic gallery space. Like the rest of my work, it's an attempt at transmuting the abject, repellent, or terrifying—in this case, the largely inundated landscape and the bleak emptiness of the Lower Ninth Ward—into something else.

Like the *Below Sea Level* panorama, *At the Still Point*, your recent installation, also takes your work to a larger space.

At the Still Point was created for Smack Mellon, a huge, cavernous space that was formerly a Brooklyn power plant. At Smack Mellon the rows of columns formed a series of naves, and I decided that at the end of each nave there would be a video image. The columns and the height of the wall (about twenty-seven feet) dictated that I film with the camera in vertical position. So when I went to India, I kept the architecture of the space in mind and shot vertically, which was a new way of seeing, as well as of framing and filming. I found that

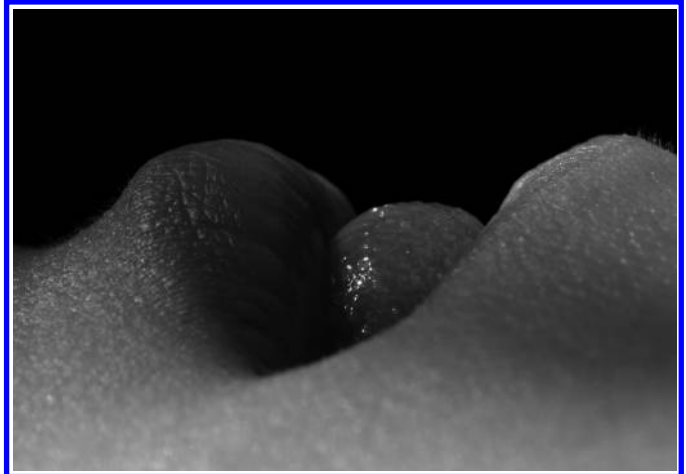
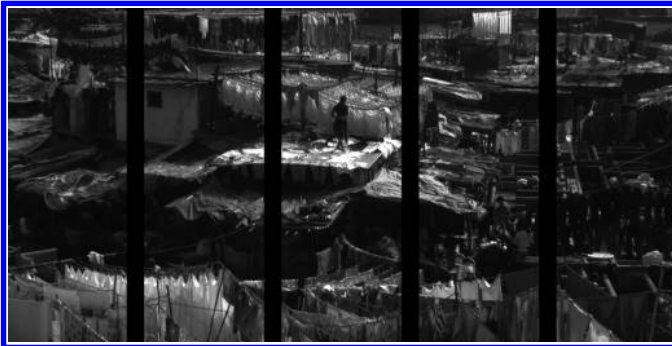
within the elongated vertical frame, space is organized like in a Chinese scroll painting, without Western ideas of perspective. A series of horizontal “layers” seem to pile up on each other from the bottom to the top of the frame.

When I went to India in 2009, the experience was a revelation—though in the beginning I didn't leave the hotel for three days. I was staying in Paharganj, a very vibrant and raw neighborhood in Delhi, and when I did try to go out, it was overwhelming. I couldn't even figure out how to cross the street!

Later, in Bombay, I encountered an archaic laundry, a huge site in the middle of the city where half-naked men were standing in pools of soapy water and washing the laundry by slapping it against stone walls. Thousands of pieces of cleaned laundry, many stories high, in multicolored Indian designs, were drying in the sun, waving in the wind, all of it surrounded by skyscrapers and train tracks and highways, symbols of the new India. I kept coming back there to film.

After Bombay I flew to Varanasi, the oldest and holiest city of India, where I met a very charismatic fourteen-year-old orphan who arranged for me to film at the Manikarnika Ghat, the site where the dead are cremated in a ritualized fashion after being immersed in the Ganges. The fire that burns the bodies is said to have been aflame continuously for 3500 years. Manikarnika is where Robert Gardner filmed much of *Forest of Bliss* [1986].

When I first saw the funeral pyres with parts of charred bodies among the flames and smoke, the giant quiet river to the side, the huge piles of brown wood for use in cremations, the scorched earth and ash, and the towers of the temples pointing heavenward, I began to sob. It was overwhelming to be part of this incredible confluence of the elements: fire, earth, water, wood, and air; and of death and life—because the place was teeming with life, even though the activity of the hundreds of people revolved entirely around servicing the dead.



Top and below left: *At the Still Point*. 2010, 5-channel video, 23 minutes. Below right: *Nine Gates*. 2011, HD. 15 mins.

Why the title?

In the *Four Quartets* T. S. Eliot says, “At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; / Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is, / But neither arrest nor movement” [*The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*, Faber and Faber, 1969, 173].

Early in *At the Still Point* you see three images: in the middle, a boy rowing, flanked on the left by a shot of bodies being burned and on the right by a shot of the ship dismantling operation: two images representing death flank an image implying continuity or eternity. The presence of death in life, the intermingling of life and death, does not have to be a cause for depression; it is also a cause for celebration. New Orleans is imbued with this idea, and I found it again in India, especially in Varanasi, but at Alang also: the ships were dying but what I saw was the intensity of life.

What are you working on now?

I’ve just finished a chamber-music type of film, *Nine Gates*, which has to do with the nine openings of the body of a lover. There’s a poem by Apollinaire, “Les Neuf Ports de Ton Corps” (that is, the nine doors, or gates, of your body), written while he was fighting in World War I. There are two versions of the poem: in one, Apollinaire names the vagina as the ultimate gate, but in the final version he names the anus. The

poem ends with the line, “I am the master of the key.” With death all around him, Apollinaire was thinking of his lover in this very carnal way, turning the horror of war into ecstasy.

My sense that presence and perception are a way of dealing with death became very actual for my mother, who had a remarkable experience a few weeks before she passed away. She was living in a nursing home at the time. At some point she stopped watching TV, and her interest in society waned. Instead, she began to take note of her surroundings, to really appreciate the sensory quality of the simplest of things. Once she called me over to where she was sitting in her wheelchair, held out a piece of lemon rind and, squeezing it, said, “Smell this!” The scent of the spray from the rind amazed us both. She died saying her last days were the happiest ever.

SCOTT MACDONALD has been interviewing independent filmmakers for thirty years. His most recent book, a collection of essays and interviews, is *Adventures of Perception: Cinema as Exploration* (University of California Press, 2009). He teaches film history at Hamilton College, New York.

ABSTRACT An interview with an avant-garde filmmaker who combines a Buddhist sensibility (emphasizing detached contemplation of the world) with sometimes shocking or disgusting subject matter (a sewage plant, autopsy). Paweł Wojtasik is a cine-alchemist whose quest is to turn the disgusting, the horrifying, the taboo into gold, using perception as a means to transcendence.

KEYWORDS Paweł Wojtasik, Buddhist cinema, *Pigs*, *The Aquarium*, *Nascentes Morimur*