

**Conversation between artist Jem Cohen and Walker Art Center Assistant
Film/Video Curator Dean Otto, September 17, 2003**

Otto: When you were at the Walker for *Benjamin Smoke* in 2000, you and your co-director Peter Sillen were shooting film during the day. At the time I remember that you said that you shoot almost every day and certainly while traveling. Did you have this project in mind over the six years you were shooting, or is this something that developed out of what you shot?

Cohen: There are usually a couple of years when something is in the back of my mind fermenting, and I shoot to draw the project out. Because I often shoot for pleasure, without a set plan or agenda, the original idea may be sparked by some footage, rather than the other way around. At a certain point I know what I'm after and then I'll shoot more specifically. This project followed that pattern. I mean, it's been over six years now since the first footage appeared that I consider to be part of the *Chain* project, but during that period I was also working on *Benjamin Smoke*, finishing *Instrument*, doing other things. *Benjamin Smoke* was a 10-year project. *Instrument* was a 10-year project. *Lost Book Found* was a six-year project, but obviously there is a lot of overlap. Even though on a given day I might only shoot a few seconds of stock, it's still too expensive to shoot film on a daily basis, so "every day" is an exaggeration. The territory of *Chain Times Three*; concentrating on generic and corporate landscapes, is one that dominated my shooting in the last few years.

O: At what point of your shooting did you find out that this was going to be the project that you would be working on with the footage?

C: Well, I think the project came out of my work doing city portraits. I travel a lot, sometimes just to go, sometimes for film festivals or jobs or commissions. For example there are two Italian projects (*Amber City* and *Blood Orange Sky*) where I was asked by small municipal arts groups to make portraits of their cities. Earlier, in '92, I went on my own to Central and Eastern Europe and did the *Buried in Light* project. I found that I was often dealing with older, sometimes very beautiful areas that were on their way out. Places that had a regional character that was strong, but endangered. So I was often having to frame things out; a billboard or a new skyscraper or a franchise hotel or a mall encroaching on some extraordinary neighborhood. I'd be shooting a beautiful street in Prague in the middle of the night and I would have my back to the new McDonald's that was ruining the view in that direction. Even with *Benjamin Smoke*, we witnessed it with the changes in Atlanta's Cabbagetown neighborhood. So, over years of shooting, this experience seemed to be inevitable and frustrating.

After contending with that, often by documenting the very thing that was disappearing, I began to feel that I had some kind of obligation to deal with this new world and to face these issues head on. I forced myself to put those things that I had long avoided square into the center of the frame and to examine the changes.

I also started to shift the way that I shot, and the formats used. This project is mostly color 16mm and the camerawork is much less raw than I used on, say, *Instrument*. That was because I felt the subject warranted a kind of colder, more direct way of looking, so that I could say through the choice of filmstock that these subjects need to be looked at very clearly. It becomes less about my own presence and my altering the reality, and more about making a very straightforward document of this reality. Rather early on I made that shift and started shooting the color 16mm instead of, say, black-and-white Super 8 or 16mm reversal, which I had often used in the past.

O: Did your other travel dictate where you shot for this piece or were there specific places that you went because of the project?

C: The grim fact is that I can go anywhere in the world, with rare exceptions, and shoot for this project. That's the sad thing. I didn't really have to make much effort to find places that were losing their regional character because it seems to be going on everywhere. I didn't have to, for example, worry about not being able to shoot at a mall because there is almost *always* a mall. It did become kind of insane because I would go to a beautiful part of Spain for a film festival and people would say "What do you want to see?" and I would sheepishly say, "Where's the mall? Come on, take me there." Or they would take me to a beautiful beach and it was nice to be there, but I couldn't use it for the project so I'd move on.

Of course, I can't generally afford to go around the globe just to pursue my filmmaking, so I often depended on travels that I already had to make. Film festivals got me to places like Melbourne, Rotterdam, and Berlin. A teaching gig got me close to Orlando. Occasionally when I felt that there was some particularly vivid demonstration of the *Chain* phenomena, I would go out of my way. The shooting and production strategy is inextricably tied in with the project. All of my projects are based on what I'm *capable* of doing, usually without a crew, usually without a lot of money, in this case usually using a spring-wound Bolex and very little else. In *Chain*, the generic quality of the landscapes really became a production strategy because I could always juxtapose or join locations that were completely removed in geography and time just because the nature of those places was so indeterminate in the first place. It really became harder *not* to find the perfect locations for *Chain* than to find them.

O: Was it difficult in the editing process to differentiate where these places actually existed?

C: I have a terrible human memory for names and things, but I have good memory for my own shots. Then again, it didn't really matter in this edit; differentiating or remembering the details. After a certain point it just didn't matter at all. Vancouver next to Dallas next to someplace in Germany . . . Of course, it's not that these places are *only* made up of malls and corporate centers, but the project shows a logical outcome of a global tendency that is increasingly dominant.

O: It's very poignant that you're presenting this work here because the first indoor mall in America was at Southdale in Edina. With the explosion in the number of corporate mergers, it seems as if a small number of corporations are dictating architecture through branding and franchising and there is a real comfort that people feel through corporate identity. People feel at home no matter where they are.

C: That's an integral part of the project: it isn't about any *one* thing, but that is as important as any other theme in there. There is a very bizarre thing that happens globally. In the new economy, places tend to want to drive their service-based tourist industries, and in order to do that they need to initially attract people by the specificity of the locale. Then what they tend to do is to erase that very specificity in order to make people more comfortable there.

You see it on a much more mundane level in terms of fast food restaurants, franchises, and malls. Corporations want to have some kind of magnet that excites people and yet what they tend to do is to make that magnet pretty much exactly the template for countless other magnets until eventually there isn't any obvious distinction between them. Corporations are faced with this endless, brutal game of trying to create the impression of novelty while really destroying difference. Those two ideas *are* in a sense inextricably opposed, and yet they've managed to make them connected. It's a very interesting phenomenon. I have to say, it's kind of devastating, but it's really important that we take a closer look at it.

I can't believe I came out to the Midwest and didn't get out to the Mall of America; the über mall.

O: But I also see it as something that isn't just happening in the suburbs. I've seen in more increasingly in urban areas as well.

C: Absolutely.

O: There is a generation of people who grew up in the suburbs who are moving into the cities to gentrify areas, yet they don't respect what's going on in the neighborhoods. They really want to have the suburban experience and comfort of the chain stores in their neighborhoods.

C: Another thing that I'm seeing over and over again is that the suburban phenomena of a large mall or series of "Big Box" stores will help destroy a nearby urban center or downtown. People will stop going to the smaller retail stores in favor of going to one place where they can do everything at once and do it cheaper. Maybe you can't blame them for that. The urban centers are devastated and when the city notices that, they say "we have got to reinvigorate the downtown." Then, what they basically do is create a slightly different kind of mall out of the downtown to pull people back in. Eventually what you end up with is suburban malls and urban malls which in the long run are hard to differentiate.

In the Boston and New York waterfronts, they took the idea of a seaport or a wharf and all of that history and created this comfortable mall experience out of it. On one hand they were thrilled because they were drawing people back to what had become a decayed urban area; on the other hand they homogenized it and took all the edges off. It's pretty much like being in the suburbs anyway.

When one looks at this kind of phenomena in terms of intentions, it isn't necessarily a matter of villains bent on destruction. Oddly enough, one of the first guys to develop the shopping mall concept as we know it was named Victor Gruen. He had a lot to do with this whole thing unfolding, yet I think his intentions were interesting and in some ways genuine. I think he ended up kind of appalled at what he had wrought. He was thinking about creating spaces where community was possible, where people would gather and would mix, where people would have these kind of vibrant new experiences that mixed culture and shopping. He didn't realize the degree to which it might succeed and what that might entail. In terms of this whole idea of branding, it's so central to global culture now that it's very hard to separate intention from result. On one hand you have what may be a perfectly innocuous beginning, like Starbucks as a local coffee venue that might have nothing wrong with it. There may even be nice people and good ideas involved, but then it becomes this global steamroller where all these other small mom and pop coffee shops are going under because they can't compete. You also have the fact that it's an extremely expensive thing to buy, their coffee, and people are left without affordable alternatives. You have this end result which is out of control. Another example of this would be The Body Shop. Anita Roddick, who started that, had some very interesting and progressive notions about products and beauty. She thought it would be great if these ideas spread. Eventually she was elbowed out of her own idea. You just end up with another kind of cookie cutter phenomena.

One of the things that's important to note about the whole *Chain* project is that in talking to you like this I'm betraying a certain amount of opinion. To some degree it would be disingenuous to say that I'm not appalled by a lot of what has happened, but from the very beginning I was aware that to approach it as some kind of finger-pointing, anti-capitalist, dogmatic charge would be pretty boring. It's like shooting ducks in barrel for one, and, two, it doesn't encourage people to look carefully. My primary goal is to start there, to have people look carefully. Everything else is secondary. And hopefully, someone could watch the piece and not just see it in terms of what we're discussing.

All though the project I've had to force myself to at least try to be dispassionate and to try to get rid of my own preconceptions. I had to try to understand what makes these kinds of places appealing and what it is that makes this phenomenon happen over and over again. I also feel there is some kind of political importance in that *looking*, just in itself, because much of this is happening in an invisible, seemingly inevitable way. People lose sight of the fact that it's not inevitable. It has to do with the local vote on the zoning change that they may have some input into. It has to do with what happens when they move into a neighborhood that has a certain kind of regional character. How do they deal with that? How do they respect that? How are they being respected for what they can bring into that community? There are a lot of things I'm hoping to spark in terms of discussion, but it

doesn't interest me to make a polemic or a blanket, propagandistic attack on things I admittedly find troubling. There is a certain kind of critique that is inevitable in my work because I'm not objective about these things. I do feel passionately about them and yet I'm trying to encourage something other than making a piece that preaches to the converted. And some of these place have their own strange beauty.

O: Why did you choose to present this piece as a triptych?

C: One reason was that I had done a triptych before, and it's exciting. *Buried in Light* was originally an installation at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. In that case it was partly just using the three screens to capture the phenomena of travel, which is inherently panoramic and not single-image oriented.

In these new landscapes, on top of the panoramic; there is a sensory overload that I wanted to echo in the form. I was really intrigued by this idea of occasionally taking a shot from Atlanta and putting it next to a shot from Melbourne and putting it next to a shot from Düsseldorf and having that work so that you really felt that you were in a consistent environment and couldn't tell the difference. With a triptych, you can do it literally, across the three screens rather than just by cutting from one to the other. But I didn't want it to become a parlor game where I was just trying to play tricks on people. I really felt that the form and the function were echoed quite effectively by having three screens at once.

Then again, in my work I always want a contemplative experience. In other words, multiple screens are sometimes used to bob people's attention from here to here to here in a dramatic Ping-Pong, low attention span kind of way. I tend to use it for opposite results. I tend to use the three screens so you can feel enveloped by environments, but I tend not to have radically different things happening that are pulling your attention away from one screen to another all the time. Sometimes when I want people to focus on one thing I'll fade some screens to black to force more concentrated energy on the single image. I like taking a format that could create more confusion and distraction and trying to do the opposite with it. It also does weird, interesting things to narrative, and to time. In *Chain Times Three*, you can't really look at the channels alone. It only really works in a triptych, whereas in *Buried in Light* I made the center channel the primary focus and made it also work as a single channel piece, without recutting. Here it doesn't work well that way because I really tried to concentrate on editing across the frames.

O: How did Godspeed You! Black Emperor get involved?

Basically, while I was working on this I heard their music and was blown away. I found out that they were interested in having some new films for their roadshow which, totally by coincidence, uses three 16mm projectors. I started to donate material to Godspeed because I loved their work and I felt that we were on a similar wavelength in terms of certain aesthetics and political concerns.

One of the reasons I was happy to work with Godspeed is because they are one of the few bands that I know of who have turned down big commercial offers to have their music used in ads. While I understand that some musicians feel that they just can't turn these down, I do like celebrating bands that have good reasons for not doing so and refuse. In the spirit of returning the favor, I wanted to donate some work to them. I felt that it was a nice way to express camaraderie. I started to give them stuff and we hit it off well and I started to occasionally tour with them and project the films. We started bartering; I would donate work to them and they would donate some soundtrack to me. With some of the material that I used for the soundtrack we remixed or re-recorded pre-existing music, and some of it was made specifically for this project. I think we connected well partly because we share a sense of punk as an activist way of working and thinking. And Godspeed is a band that is taking on big issues through purely instrumental means. It's a very unusual thing, to combine music and political ideas, and to do it without lyrics. They are trying to create panoramic landscapes of sound that are not devoid of content. One of the things that I've been trying to do with film is to use documentary images without a traditional documentary narration that says, "Here is what I'm talking about and this is what you should get from it. Here is a story or history going from A to B to C, and here are some talking heads to confirm that."

Lastly, I think that the three-screen work has a symphonic element to it, and it was great to have Godspeed's music to use, because they are capable of creating sounds that are both delicate and massive. Really massive.

People sometimes think that I primarily do music films. I don't think of it that way, but I do think that all of the films do, in a way, try to *be* music. I probably get more inspiration from music than I do from film. This doesn't mean I'm trying to make films about music or films that use music; it's just that film and music are totally intertwined to me. Editing is like a form of musical composition, even if you're dealing with silence, because of the rhythms, and the juxtapositions. People shouldn't limit their sense of music film to films that are about music. That's what interested me about a band like Godspeed. You can't really define what they are. Are they a punk rock band? Yeah. Are they using classical music? In some ways, they're really influenced by classical music. More importantly, rather than just be pinned down as a "rock" band, there are other things going on in terms of ideas of collaboration, activism, how you can move people through your work. In the same vein, I'm trying to take this work that I've always done with musicians and make it inseparable from the way that I think about filmmaking. I'm trying to keep the gray areas between things a beautiful gray, instead of saying this project is "this," and that project is "that." As long as people aren't thinking "music video" I love that people look at what is musical about my work.

O: You've said that you plan to rework this piece. How will the next stage of the piece come together?

C: The next stage is a narrative feature. There is a certain amount of overlap in terms of the landscapes themselves, but it will be a very different thing. The feature, which is just called *Chain*, is about two women who are navigating these landscapes. So it drops you

into their lives. The installation, the three-screen version, has a number of implied or submerged narratives that surface once in a while. You get a sense of characters who are moving through this territory, trying to deal with this world, and you get little tastes of their stories. In the feature version I'm going in deep on two of these narrative touchstones. One character is the Japanese businesswoman who appears in *Chain Times Three*, the other is a young girl, working poor, who lives off of the residue of a mall. It's interesting to keep reworking it, plus I have a lot of this material.

O: Do you view this current version of *Chain* as a draft or a complete work now?

C: It's really a thing unto itself, a complete work. The three-screens work so differently, and the use of sound is so different. The feature actually has very little music. *Chain Times Three* can be seen as a three-screen movie, and I prefer it to be experienced starting with Chapter 1 on the DVDs, but it can also be experienced in pieces, with viewers coming in at any point. It was made to work both ways, and in some respects it just makes a big loop, a circle. The feature has a different arc altogether, although it isn't a Hollywood arc. I hope it will be interesting for people to see where they overlap, but *Chain Times Three* was way too much of a pain in the ass to make to be a draft.