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The Abominable Community. Notes on Independent Filmmakers' Laboratories

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Fifteen years after major film studios announced the end of celluloid, and four years after the digital conversion of the world's cinemas was declared to be nearly complete, photochemical filmmaking not only persists but, in some important respects, even enjoys a modest resurgence.^{1} In Hollywood, a number of high-profile directors and cinematographers obstinately continue using 35mm or even 70mm film in the production and distribution of their work. On the small-gauge side of the market, Kodak's reintroduction of Ektachrome and the Super 8mm camera in 2018 signaled the triumphant return of this beloved format from near-extinction. One of the most surprising developments of the past two decades, however, has been the emergence of independent photochemical filmmakers' laboratories. These shared, often collectively run workspaces are replacing disappearing commercial film laboratories, and, despite their DIY origins, they seem to proliferate and become stronger and more innovative each year.

A filmmakers' laboratory focuses primarily on small-gauge photochemical film practices, to which end its members collect, repair, refurbish, and modify discarded commercial and amateur film equipment, which has been abundantly available in the years following the digital conversion. The commonly accepted historiography of this movement begins well before the changeover, in 1995, when the French performance group Metamkine organized a meeting in Grenoble in order to encourage filmmakers to establish experimental laboratories according to the model of Metamkine's own Atelier MTK. This gathering led directly to the formation of six filmmakers' laboratories in francophone Europe. Some parallel activities in the Netherlands were integrated into the burgeoning network two years later, as part of a gradual growth that would, within a few years, include collectives in other parts of Europe. This was followed by other regions of the world, such as Australia, Southeast and East Asia, and the Americas, with especially vibrant activity in the 2000s and 2010s—the years of cinema's digital transformation.^{2}

There is a growing body of enthusiastic research on the independent laboratory movement, and like many others, this essay comes from the perspective of an admiring participant.^{3} There are now between forty and fifty independent laboratories in operation around the world. Although their technical capabilities and organizational strategies vary widely, the laboratories' activities converge on a number of important points that merit our attention. First of all, the many practices dedicated to the maintenance of the photochemical medium, as well as to its re-evaluation, deviation, and subversion, provide an occasion to reflect on the role of technology in art, within a culture increasingly defined by

the imbrication of these domains. Furthermore, as I will explore in this text, working with an *obsolete* artistic medium is the first step to creating an alternative economy outside of the commercial cinema industry, in line with certain currents of anti-capitalist thought. Considering the network of laboratories from this perspective will help us to look beyond the surface *nostalgia* of Super 8 and 16mm films and articulate the political potential that lies within this curious project. L'Abominable in the Paris region is a particularly interesting example whose practices will be my primary focus here. As a *veteran* laboratory that has existed for almost twenty-five years, it has considerable technical capabilities, organizational experience, and institutional connections, which allow it to launch and participate in many initiatives with significant influence on the course of the laboratory movement. Moreover, in its endless search for a perfectly sustainable operational model, it represents, perhaps, more than any other laboratory, a fascinating experiment in community building with a level of influence that goes beyond the milieu of analog film.

ORIGINS AND OPERATIONS

The London Film-makers' Co-operative (1966–1999, hereafter LFMC), originally conceived as an independent film distribution network similar to the Film-Makers' Cooperative in New York City, is an important precursor to the contemporary laboratory model. Against the panorama of the numerous independent filmmaking collectives that appeared around the political events of 1968, the LFMC holds a special place in the history of experimental cinema. Soon after its founding, the group expanded its activities, quickly becoming, according to Malcolm Le Grice's recollections, "London's principal center of experimental screenings and cinematographic production."^{4} In 1969, the cooperative acquired a Debie step-printing machine, which gave the filmmaker-members the technical ability to reprint their footage in various experimental ways, playing with temporal and spatial givens of the cinematic image and thus challenging and deconstructing its diegetic illusion.^{5} This technical context proved to be a fertile environment for theoretical debate and discussion, accompanying the elaboration of the Marxism-inspired Structural/Materialist current of cinema over the next decade, a movement that aimed, in the words of Peter Gidal, "to break given terms of unity, to explore the heterogeneity of film in process."^{6}

The LFMC model was a vital inspiration for experimental filmmakers outside the UK. In France, at the end of the 1970s, a number of “independent, experimental and different” filmmakers unsuccessfully attempted to replicate it with official funding from the National Center for Cinema. {7} Two decades later, when the days of LFMC were coming to a close, a project of similar ambition could finally begin to be realized. Starting with the creation of the *Ébouillanté* group in 1996 following the aforementioned Grenoble meeting, L’Abominable was established in a basement space on the outskirts of Paris by a dozen filmmakers who had met each other at experimental film screenings around the city. {8} By 2012, when it was forced to relocate, the group had amassed a large amount of know-how and equipment, and its next home would be a large industrial kitchen in the working-class suburban town of La Courneuve. Today, L’Abominable receives sizeable municipal, regional, and state funding and operates an impressive amount of professional-level equipment, including two developing machines, optical and contact printers, a *sound camera* for creating optical soundtracks, a 16mm laser subtitling machine, as well as more common DIY laboratory tools such as editing tables and a darkroom for manual film processing. A limited number of digital filmmaking tools are also available, including homemade telecine setups for digitizing 16mm and Super 8mm footage and a digital post-production suite. As for social activities, the kitchen/dining room/office accommodates daily meals, meetings, and administrative work, while the sophisticated screening room welcomes private and semi-public projections. The laboratory is staffed by several employees, allowing it to dedicate time and energy to grants, film programs, workshops, and other outreach projects in the community and beyond, all while maintaining a membership base of nearly one hundred filmmakers and managing a seemingly endless waiting list of new applicants. {9}

An artist’s preference in choosing her or his medium is a complex and ultimately mysterious matter. Still, there are some overarching political concerns that link many filmmakers’ attachments to the photochemical medium. Above all, it is the increasingly opaque design of commercial digital tools, often described as *black boxes*, which threatens to transform media makers into submissive consumers of constantly updating products. Consider, for example, cloud-based post-production software that severs access to the user’s creative projects if the monthly subscription is not paid. {10} This disconnect with one’s creative instruments speaks to a greater alienation of the individual with respect to the products and services that govern one’s interactions with the world. Starting in the 1950s, philosopher Günther Anders wrote about what he saw as the dictatorial nature of mass-produced,

“ready-to-consume” commodities. {11} Speaking of mass media in a way that seems more pertinent today than in 1979, he described the “abyss” in the consumer’s perception “between the mass character of the products, identical everywhere, and the private character of their reception.” {12} Although Anders wrote at a time of analog media, his predictions regarding the evolution of media services for private consumption, clearly tied to the emergence of digital technology, have been prophetic. Writing in the introduction to the second volume of his opus *The Obsolescence of Man*, Anders critiques the increasingly solitary, asocial nature of media consumption, asserting, “the technology of reproduction of the media not only does not have a democratizing effect, but to the contrary, it has a directly anti-democratic and atomizing effect.” {13}

Commercial digital tools that facilitate media production today insist on individual use and consumption, effectively impeding the formation of artist collectives that might attempt to combine their resources. The photochemical laboratory offers a sanctuary from this form of private and individuated economy. For example, at L’Abominable, nearly the whole chain of analog film production is represented, so it is possible to complete a film, from the shoot to the striking of a release print, without coming into contact with commercial services for much of the process. {14} But, L’Abominable offers more than just tools for analog film work. The laboratory—and especially the darkroom—is also a place that embraces formal experimentation and play, allowing for an open-ended artistic process that does not follow the frenetic rhythm of contemporary professional activity.

The independent laboratory is a proposal for a particular kind of community, one that takes inspiration from a number of historical precedents. Its *modus operandi*, described as “open-access do-it-yourself” in an early zine made within the network, implies collective responsibility for the filmmaking tools and, simultaneously, efforts to elevate the technical capability of each filmmaker-member. {15} Hence, the filmmaker is compelled to assume all of the technical roles of the filmmaking process, in addition to creative ones. Within the discourse of the movement, the concrete, material nature of the workspace is often emphasized; manual activities are valorized over intellectual ones. The smaller of the Paris-based laboratories, L’Etna, describes itself as “above all . . . a space. A place made of wood, metal, plastic, machines, basins, beakers, tables, chairs, projectors. We, members of L’Etna, are its reverse side.” {16} In a certain way, the laboratory fulfills the late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century anarcho-communist dream of a workplace where the worker and the intellectual are

one. In *The Conquest of Bread* (1892), the anarchist Pyotr Kropotkin described a future where a writer would get unparalleled enjoyment from typesetting his own manuscripts in like-minded company, rather than charging an exploited worker with the technical execution of his intellectual labor. {17} L'Abominable would have pleased Kropotkin: here, filmmakers don laboratory coats and goggles and get their hands dirty in photochemistry baths. An ordinary day involves a collective meal prepared by one of the laboratory's members, a daily ritual accompanied by informal discussions, before everyone returns to the machine, the darkroom, or the desk. Often, colleagues from other laboratories or cultural organizations visit in order to learn about the space or to discuss a collaborative project. The laboratory posits itself as a non-hierarchical space that allows for various creative and organizational trajectories to cross and interact. Whether or not the non-hierarchical aspect is fully true in practice, it is enough to spend a small amount of time here to get a sense of L'Abominable as a kind of hub of diverse and enthusiastic activity.

In its broader structure, the network can be compared to early- and mid-twentieth century utopian proposals, such as those of the philosopher Martin Buber, an important supporter of the kibbutz movement. Buber's idea of a working community based on affinity rather than religious or economic utility is particularly relevant here. {18} His strategy consisted of the creation of "islets of socialism" within the dominant system, little communities composed of even smaller ones, that would eventually organically renew the "cellular tissue" of society. {19} Similarly, the laboratory network is composed of many small collective spaces that interact and bond with each other in order to grow. These collaborations often lead to concrete projects. For example, the RE:MI project, forged in 2015 by LaborBerlin (Berlin), Mire (Nantes), and Worm Filmwerkplaats (Rotterdam) with financial support from the European Union, aimed to increase the laboratories' competence in using and maintaining complex re-printing and animation machines. {20} The 2014–2016 Maddox seminar brought together scientifically inclined filmmakers from laboratories in France, the Netherlands, Canada, and the United States in a coordinated attempt to improve the tools and processes necessary for small-scale fabrication of photosensitive film emulsion. {21} And, on a more basic level, many new laboratories have been formed or expanded thanks to the technical participation of more experienced members of the network. When Richard Tuohy and Dianna Barrie from Nanolab (Australia) assist with the establishment of a laboratory in Jakarta, or when the Distruktur duo from LaborBerlin help to establish one in Cairo, they affirm the ideal of Buber's affinity-based communities, while also revealing the capacity of such

communities to propagate across national borders.

In addition to their shared ethos, which is further encouraged by collaboration, laboratory-based filmmakers also share aesthetic predilections; most noticeably a certain *handmade* look. Since films made in this context often rely on DIY instruments in the hands of artists learning technical skills as they go, the results are prone to imperfections and typically bear traces of photochemical inconsistencies and mechanical errors. Moreover, since only one or two prints of a film are usually made due to the cost and effort involved, repeated projections result in an accumulation of visible scratches, burns, fading, etc. The handmade, DIY look of laboratory-made films is often described as *artisanal*—and some might view it as hopelessly nostalgic. Extending the parallel to nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century critical thought and practice, the laboratory focus on materiality and artisanship has inspired comparisons with the British Arts & Crafts movement, which famously attempted to resist industrialization. {22} Seen from this angle, can the laboratory produce work of contemporary relevance?

Perhaps, the focus should be shifted away from the aesthetic implications of film's materiality and toward the workings of the laboratory community and its particular convergence around technical knowledge. Writing today, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben puts the question of artmaking in terms of its opposition to the *work of art*. In his view, the art market—the “artistic machine”—has been “idling” since the emergence of the artistic avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, and particularly, of Marcel Duchamp's readymade. {23} A wholly new direction is necessary, he argues, for art to maintain its social relevance. For Agamben, the process and context of artmaking are more interesting than its fruits. Along these lines, it may help to elucidate the contemporary value of laboratory-made films if we approach them not as artistic products, but as continuations of other processes that take place at the lab: the technical and social processes that maintain and develop its operations.

In his multi-volume *Homo Sacer* project, Agamben discusses the division of human life into its vital and social aspects that is continually effected and instrumentalized by the state. {24} As an alternative to the divided life, he proposes the concept of “form-of-life” as an ideal of life reunified, where living would become one with its form “in the materiality of bodily processes and habitual ways of life, as well as in theory,” where a primordial openness and potentiality could again be found. {25} Artistic

practice, according to Agamben, is a space where this aspiration is continually played out. This tendency characterizes many artistic practices of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, where the work of art and the artist's creative activity, or even her or his private life, often become interchangeable. {26} Taking a cue from Agamben, we might regard the complex of laboratory activities as a small-scale attempt to unify social, creative, political—and even, possibly, biological—aspects of life into a continuous whole. By its very nature, this multifaceted experience produces particular ways of perceiving, analyzing, and interacting with the world and with cinema itself. Perhaps, we can discuss films not as artistic products, but as processes or machines, as communities or even dwellings.

In order to delve into the artistic and political implications of the laboratory, it is fundamental to understand its technical environment. Crucially, the laboratory's ability to function depends on an ensemble of specific technical objects; in a sense, the laboratory *is* an ensemble of objects—a collection of *wood, metal, plastic, machines, basins, beakers, tables, chairs, projectors*, which enables a certain community to take shape as its *reverse side*. Yet, in today's digital landscape, where manufacturers of analog equipment, film stocks, and chemistry sporadically discontinue essential products, simply maintaining regular operations is a constant challenge. This speaks to philosopher Gilbert Simondon's concept of the “associated milieu”: the combination of technical and natural resources that surround technical objects and make their existence possible. {27} In the case of filmmaking, this milieu has been profoundly affected by the mainstream industry's digital turn. Today, the sudden discontinuation of something as innocuous as a projector bulb or a certain film stock can upset the already fragile equilibrium that underlies the workflow of a photochemical laboratory, ultimately threatening its very existence. In a situation such as this, preservational activity is as central to the lab as the creative activities that are conducted there. There are a number of approaches to this problem: the preservation of machines and techniques, which is more akin to maintenance than to conservation {28}; bricolage using discarded elements; and the invention of hybrid objects that put digital-era technologies at the service of analog ends.

MAINTENANCE OF TECHNIQUES AND OPEN MACHINES

“Too fast a change is contrary to technical progress, for it impedes the transmission, in the form of

technical elements, of what one era has achieved to the one that follows,” wrote Simondon in 1958. {29} There is a general sense among the laboratory community, as was expressed at a meeting in Nantes in 2016, that such a disruption has occurred in the film world and that, perhaps, many institutions have rashly folded to the change before a real conversation about the specificities of analog and digital film media could have taken place. To fill this perceived gap in the transmission of film knowledge, independent laboratories assume the task of maintaining and transmitting tools and skills that are no longer current anywhere else in the film world. Of course, film archives do preserve technical objects and often put them on display, as was done, for example, during the immense special exhibitions *Lumière! Cinema Invented* at the Grand Palais in Paris in 2015 and *From Méliès to 3D: the Cinema Machine* at the French Cinémathèque in 2016–2017. {30} As if unearthing an ancient culture, these exhibitions solemnly displayed tools and devices from the beginnings of cinema—the zoetrope, the Kinetoscope and the Lumière camera—as well as equipment that is still in use on some film sets today. It was clear from the presentation of the objects that these exhibitions did not intend to transmit an understanding of their mechanics to the viewer. The technical object, placed under protective glass and with its output approximated with digital video regardless of its actual format, is untouchable, like almost any museum piece. Accordingly, the gestures that animated it and the specific sensations it elicited remain a mystery. For the viewer, therefore, the object’s “nature” and “essence,” to use the words of Simondon, are hidden and, ultimately, lost. {31} The loss of connection with this knowledge is not only technical, but cultural, since, according to the philosopher, “to play its role fully, [culture] must incorporate technical beings in the form of knowledge and sense of values.” {32}

In this light, one could say that by transmitting technical skills such as negative cutting or the operation of the optical printer or the film processor, the independent laboratory serves as a depository of a specific kind of cultural memory. Unlike an archive, however, the former is not constrained by professional protocol, and this freedom allows for a wide range of experimentation. Speaking of the laboratory model in 2014, one of L’Abominable’s founders, Nicolas Rey, defended the idea of a “production space that [would also be] a conservatory of techniques,” that, unlike a “dead conservatory” or “a museum,” would be a “creative tool shared among filmmakers.” {33} As media theorists Rossella Catanese and Jussi Parikka phrase it, “the lab becomes a stage for performing film history, by negotiating the space between preservation and experimentation in contemporary audiovisual culture.” {34}

At a large laboratory such as L'Abominable, for the professional-size machines to become practically usable, they often have to be reduced from industrial to *artisanal* scale. For example, the laboratory's physically imposing film processing machines, originally intended for a resource-intensive workflow involving powerful water jets that remove the anti-halation layer of film have been *domesticated* with a home-made sprinkler mechanism requiring less water, while, at the end, processed film is dried with an ordinary hairdryer. In addition to being a practical necessity, this gesture of downsizing an industrial object is metaphorically significant, for it proposes a path of reduction, rather than endless growth for its own sake.

This gesture finds its expression in certain films made at L'Abominable, perhaps most explicitly those of Rey himself. In his most celebrated film to date, *Differently, Molussia* (2012), Rey proposes a reading of several passages from Günther Anders's 1931 novel *The Molussian Catacomb*, which consists of a series of fables recounted by underground prisoners in an invented totalitarian state. Anders was a techno-skeptic philosopher who, like Hannah Arendt, to whom he was married in the 1930s, was consumed by questions of the nature of totalitarianism. Like Arendt, Anders too linked the conditions for totalitarianism to the self-perpetuating growth of technology. In the wake of the Holocaust and the bombing of Hiroshima, Anders wrote a number of texts discussing what he saw, already in the 1950s, as a point of no return in the increasing "machinization" of society, where catastrophic events are caused by activities that have been fragmented to such an extent that no one can take responsibility for the results. {35} More importantly, the very scope of the catastrophic events produced by humanity has become so great that "the capacity of our imagination (and that of our feeling and responsibility) cannot compete with that of our *praxis*." {36} In other words, the instruments we use carry a potential so large that it completely escapes our comprehension. Updating Kant for the Atomic Age, Anders commands, "have and use only those things, the inherent maxims of which could become your own maxims and thus the maxims of a general law." {37}

In *Differently, Molussia*, Rey symbolically responds to this commandment by constructing, together with L'Abominable's engineer Christophe Goulard, two fantastical cameras: the *spinning-top-camera* and the *zephyrama*. The first camera spins freely around the horizontal axis; the second fluctuates its lateral movement and the speed of its motor (thus affecting the shooting speed and, hence, the

exposure) in relation to the movement and strength of the wind. As film scholar Christa Blümlinger suggests, these “human-scale” machines can be seen as ecological responses to large-scale technology. {38} The latter is alluded to in the film, on one hand, through landscapes dominated by mysterious constructions and apparatuses from the realm of industrial agriculture and, on the other, through images of meteorologists analyzing data on computer screens. In contrast to the unidirectional, data-based analysis performed by the meteorologists’ computers, the zephyrama obviously tries to provide a more sensory representation of the force of the wind. Not only is it an object “within man’s reach,” but, to return to Simondon, it actually integrates itself into the associated milieu of the natural space, modifying its behavior with respect to the weather conditions. {39} This apparatus is similar in concept to the setups used by LFMC member Chris Welsby in his 1970s films. For example, in the series of films *Wind Vane* (1972-1978) and *Windmill* (1973-1974), it is the wind that directs the composition of the frame, while in *Seven Days* (1974) the direction of the camera is determined by the level of cloud cover. {40} Speaking of Welsby’s films in a way that could also apply to *Differently, Molussia*, film theorist Peter Wollen has pointed out that they “[make] it possible to envisage a different kind of relationship between science and art, in which observation is separated from surveillance, and technology from domination.” {41}

The apparatuses used in Rey’s and Welsby’s films are “open machines,” the higher form of technical object for Simondon, which integrate themselves into the associated milieu while allowing for a “margin of indetermination” in their functioning. {42} The opposite of an open machine is a closed one: an automaton impervious to the outside world. In fact, *Differently, Molussia* itself is a kind of open machine: Rey has built a chance operation into this piece, compelling the projectionist to randomly determine the order of the nine 16mm film reels. In Simondon’s view, engineering decisions have an ethical depth that affirm the profound connection, rather than division, between technology and humanity. According to the philosopher, technological changes bring about evolutions in “technical thought”—our ways of understanding and interacting with the world informed by the technical environment we create around us, which is inseparable from the development of human culture. {43} Importantly, the role of art in this process is to transform abstract concepts into perceptible and shareable experiences; it is the “mediator between knowledge and will.” {44} Although Simondon’s optimistic outlook on modern technology clashes with Anders’ more pessimistic view, the underlying ethical implications of their reflections resonate, and help to illuminate the creative engagements with

technology that occur within the context of the independent laboratory.

BRICOLAGE AND COMMUNITY

In addition to the maintenance of techniques and the reduction of industrial tools, an important activity that defines the laboratory is *bricolage*. In its common contemporary sense, this French word conveys tinkering with objects, whether to repair them, rejuvenate their mechanisms with new parts, or purely for the pleasure of the process. Claude Lévi-Strauss, who brought the term into anthropology in the 1960s, explains that the word has from the outset carried a sense of *détournement*. {45} In *The Savage Mind* (1962), Lévi-Strauss discusses the figure of the *bricoleur* in opposition to that of the engineer: while the latter invents new objects and structures, the former merely reconstitutes pre-existing ones by filling them with “odds and ends,” “remains and debris.” {46}

A literal—and ingenious—example of bricolage in the laboratory context is the design for an optical printer by Georgy Bagdasarov, co-founder with Alexandra Moralesová of the small laboratory LaboDoble in Prague. {47} Unlike the typical horizontal setup, Bagdasarov’s design is vertical; it uses the column of a photo enlarger as well as its bellows; a Bolex camera is mounted on top with its lens pointed down. The most surprising element is the projector, which points upward: to allow for step-by-step advancement, it is outfitted with a three-phase motor recycled from a washing machine, while the too-bright light bulb is replaced with a LED. In fact, Bagdasarov and Moralesová have mentioned that their laboratory project involves collecting designs for filmmaking tools that can be constructed from simple, non-cinematographic components: a kind of catalog for a post-analog—or post-apocalyptic—era.

Building on Lévi-Strauss's characterization, sociologist Roger Bastide has continued the discussion of bricolage as a cultural phenomenon, specifically in the context of the African diaspora. {48} In his view, bricolage is a means to fill a cultural absence of pre-existing ensembles. In our case, we can imagine Simondon’s technical ensemble, the chain of analog film production of the past, whose gaps bricolage strives to fill with its Frankenstein objects. Moreover, looking closely at the laboratory space, one can see bricolage in a more general sense. L’Abominable, for example, is outfitted with a large amount of *debris* recuperated from various defunct technical spaces: typewritten instruction manuals

and logos from commercial laboratories, Soviet technical books on photosensitometry and engineering, seats from a closed-down movie theater, even signage remaining from the former industrial kitchen. In his article, Bastide speaks of an underlying drive on the part of an uprooted community to “break down” and “cut up” the dominant surrounding culture in order to use the resulting pieces to reconstitute the missing structure of its own, lost culture. {49} This action brings forth “a new signification” that “springs from this disparate ensemble.” {50} In the case of the laboratory, this playful activity can be seen on two levels. Most directly, it is an attempt to reconstitute a technical cinematographic place that no longer exists in the *real world*. But it can also be seen as a desire to rearrange vestiges of the formerly dominant commercial cinema industry, fragments of which, intersecting in this incongruous encounter, would signal the emergence of a qualitatively new filmmaking space. Fittingly, upon entering L’Abominable, members and visitors are greeted with what appears to be a 1970s-era signboard, whose movable letters have been rearranged to say, “Stranger, you are in the service of no one.” {51}

A characteristic project, whose production has been inextricably linked with L’Abominable in subject and form, is Jérémy Gravayat and Yann Chevalier’s multidisciplinary endeavor that has produced the 2019 film *A Lua Platz (Taking Place)*, directed by Gravayat. Starting around 2012, the filmmaker began researching the history of a shantytown known as La Campa that had existed from the late 1950s to the early 1970s in the vicinity of the present-day laboratory. {52} Within two years of beginning the project, Gravayat received a regional grant and took up an artistic residency—the first of its kind—at L’Abominable. In its early form, the project consisted in collecting photographs and testimonies of the shantytown’s everyday, a collection of which were published in the single-edition journal *Atlas* (2015) and distributed in the surrounding town of La Courneuve. In his words, the journal was an “active object” that allowed him to share the project with the community and to reach out to those who had spent their childhoods in La Campa. In parallel to this research, Gravayat and Chevalier became involved in local protests and sit-ins to oppose the expulsion of a contemporary shantytown, known as the Platz among its predominantly Eastern European residents, many of them Romani. This experience led to a more direct engagement alongside the Samaritan collective, which involved breaking into and occupying uninhabited houses to accommodate displaced families, as well as accompanying them in the ensuing bureaucracy and legal troubles. *A Lua Platz* shows a number of moments from this experience, as well as some elements from the La Campa research.

In discussing the future film two years before its completion, Gravat spoke of *weaving*, for he had planned to collect a number of testimonies of La Campa and blend them into anonymized, but truthful, narratives. The direct experience of the Platz eventually entered the film. It appears to have reaffirmed Gravat's view that, despite the difficult material conditions of shanty and squat living, this type of environment nurtures affinitive links, a *social fabric*, which can be *broken* when people are relocated into atomized living environments, such as the housing projects that increasingly fill the area. This line of thought brings us back to Martin Buber and his organically growing cellular tissue of society. Naturally, bricolage is an important component of the community portrayed by Gravat: when building one's home in conditions of scarcity, one is forced to use any available materials, to resort to *ruses* to achieve a functioning structure. *A Lua Platz* itself resembles a bricolage composed of various cinematographic registers: fictional and seemingly reenacted scenes intermix with direct interviews; black-and-white Super 8mm and color 16mm film alternate with digital video and cell phone recordings; essay film gives way to drama, etc.—as if the film resisted formal unity. Diegetic illusion is constantly constructed only to be ruptured, as when the crew places itself into the frame, suggesting some degree of fluidity in the creative roles and leading one to wonder about the nature of the filming process. Perhaps unconsciously, the film's form suggests a resistance to being an art object, as if it would prefer to be a manifestation of a process, a construction of something, rather than an end in itself. Over the course of its making, the film had been a community that, transcending steep social barriers, intertwined the artists' lives with those of struggling immigrant workers.

Five years earlier, a similar film was completed at L'Abominable: *Brûle la mer* (2014) by Nathalie Nambot and Maki Berchache, which focused on the latter's experiences as a 26-year-old Tunisian refugee in France. Like *A Lua Platz*, this film mixed traditional on- and off-screen space and wove its narrative from a variety of formats and temporalities. Like *A Lua Platz*, it attempted to draw people living on the very margins of French society, who had never made or acted in films, into the creative process. With perceptible nostalgia for that brief moment of community, Nambot reflected, "The film acts as a place of temporary refuge for things that could be simply articulated: Dreams, home, land, love, revolution, work, and friendship. . . . Maki says that we worked as a family, creating a structure that would function like a home. [*Brûle la mer*] was our shelter." {53}

CONCLUSION: HYBRID MACHINES AND POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENTS

These few examples reveal how, far from contenting themselves with pure formal experimentation, even the smallest films and technical gestures made within the laboratory movement can articulate a political position. In some projects, one can even observe an earnest desire to extend the *refuge* of the laboratory beyond its walls, to create a wider community through participatory film work. But these intentions often end at the creation of aesthetically beautiful and thought-provoking films, leaving the more radical dream unrealized.

A number of texts that discuss and analyze the analog film network point to the *hybridity* of certain laboratory activities, which transform and extend photochemical practices with digital-era tools. {54} In my view, this still-marginal direction within the network is a key innovation with a potential to greatly expand the artistic, theoretical, and even political possibilities of the movement: the intersection of the laboratory model with digital open source culture.

Efforts in this area have been undertaken on a number of occasions but have yet to grow into a widespread practice. For example, at the 2016 meeting in Nantes, a member of the Brussels laboratory Labo BxL, Maxime Fuhrer, unveiled the wiki-based project “Wikipelloche,” which allows any interested person to contribute technical information about photochemistry to the open online platform. {55} At the same meeting, Nicolas Rey presented a system that he had developed with Christophe Goulard to synchronize analog film projection with an accompanying digital soundtrack, based on the open source software “Film-o-sync” created by Zach Poff. On the other side of the ocean, Matthew McWilliams, who is affiliated with the laboratory AgX in Boston, has developed a number of projects that extend the possibility of analog filmmaking using tools that have been on the consumer market for no more than a decade. His best-known design is perhaps the “Intval,” an intervalometer that allows one to program the Bolex camera for frame-by-frame shooting, with the ability to change the frequency and number of frames or reverse the direction. This elegant object, constructed at a cost of about fifty dollars using a laser-cut wooden body, 3D-printed plastic pieces, electronic components and an Arduino microcontroller, is simultaneously more affordable and more portable than the commercially-produced equivalent. {56}

These are instances where bricolage transforms into invention, giving birth to hybrid objects that combine analog and digital-era technology. Some laboratory-based filmmakers are enthusiastic about the possibilities offered by this path. For example, Esther Urlus of Worm Filmwerkplaats in Rotterdam considers the hybridization of tools, which she groups under the concept of “re-engineering,” an important direction for the laboratory movement. {57} In fact, the RE:MI project mentioned earlier, in which Worm Filmwerkplaats participated, was partly conceived with this idea in mind.

Like the laboratory filmmaker, members of open source and hacker culture also fight an uphill battle against proprietary software and opaque hardware. Among them, the French artist Jacques Perconte, who subverts the functioning of digital cameras and editing software to create beautiful impressionistic video pieces, is a striking example of “technical non-cooperation” in art. {58} Digital bricoleurs could become the perfect allies for the laboratory movement. Expanding investigations into hybrid analog/digital technologies would attenuate the supposed analog *purity* of laboratory film work; it would undercut the auratic quality of the films and, perhaps, open the path to new aesthetic and conceptual investigations. By fully adopting the model of the *open machine*—by accepting to further integrate the emancipating aspects of digital culture—the independent laboratory not only has a chance to become more inclusive, thus expanding its capacities of continual adaptation to changing technical conditions, but to further invent new significations through the meeting and interaction of different strains of technical thought.

ENDNOTES

{1} Regarding the digital conversion of cinema, see: Laura M. Holmson, “Film studios said to agree on digital standards,” *The New York Times*, July 27, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/27/business/media/film-studios-said-to-agree-on-digital-standards.html>; and David Hancock, “The global digital conversion of cinemas is almost over,” *IHS Markit: Technology*, May 3, 2016, <https://technology.informa.com/577835/the-global-digital-conversion-of-cinemas-is-almost-over>. 98.2 % of the world's cinemas were said to be converted to digital projection in the latter article.

- {2} Much of this research comes from my Master's thesis: Mariya Nikiforova, *Laboratoires argentiques indépendants. Politique, technique, esthétique* (Paris: Sorbonne-Nouvelle, 2016). The genealogy of the laboratory network is also described in a number of texts, including articles by two of L'Abominable's founders: Pip Chodorov, "The Artist-Run Film Labs," *Millennium Film Journal* 60 (2014): 28–37; and Nicolas Rey, "From the basement to the kitchen (2007-2012)," L'Abominable (2014), http://www.l-abominable.org/en/history/a-traduire-en-en_us-de-la-cave-aux-cuisines.
- {3} See, among others: Kim Knowles, "Self-Skilling and Home Brewing: Some Reflections on Photochemical Film Culture," *Millennium Film Journal* 60 (2014): 20-27; Genevieve Yue, "Kitchen Sink Cinema: Artist-Run Film Laboratories," *Film Comment* (March 30, 2015), <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/artist-run-film-laboratories>; Noémie Martin, "Pratiques des émulsions artisanales," *La Furia Umana* n°33, 35, 36 (January 2018 - April 2019), <http://www.lafuriaumana.it/index.php/66-archive/lfu-33/767-noelie-martin-pratique-des-emulsions-artisanales>; Rossella Catanese and Jussi Parikka, "Handmade films and artist-run labs: the chemical sites of film's counterculture," *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies* (2018), <https://necsus-ejms.org/handmade-films-and-artist-run-labs-the-chemical-sites-of-films-counterculture>.
- {4} François Bovier and Adeena Mey, "'Discours' versus 'médium,'" *Décadrages* 21-22 (2012), <https://journals.openedition.org/decadrages/675> (my translation).
- {5} Michael Maziere, "Institutional support for artists' film and video in England, 1966-2003," AHRB Centre for British Film and Television Studies: British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection, November, 2003, <http://www.studycollection.co.uk/maziere/paper.html>.
- {6} Peter Gidal, *Materialist Film* (London: Routledge, 1989), 2.
- {7} Patrice Kirchhofer, ed., "Cinéma indépendant différent expérimental - Le colloque de Lyon" (May, 1994).
- {8} *Ébouillanté* (Scalded) was a collective zine alternately published by the burgeoning laboratories between 1995 and 1999.
- {9} It must be mentioned, however, that the space currently occupied by the laboratory is doomed to demolition in a still-unknown number of years.
- {10} For example, the Adobe Creative Cloud.
- {11} Günther Anders, *Obsolescence of Man, Volume II: On the Destruction of Life in the Epoch of the Third Industrial Revolution*, Ch. 16, §1 (digital version translated to English from the Spanish

translation: Günther Anders, *La Obsolescencia del Hombre (Vol. II) Sobre la destrucción de la vida en la época de la tercera revolución industrial*, Josep Monter Pérez, trans. (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2011), <https://libcom.org/library/obsolescence-man-volume-2-g%C3%Bcnther-anders>.

{12} Ibid.

{13} Ibid.

{14} This excludes, of course, the film material itself, although, even the fabrication of film has been attempted in the laboratory network, including at L'Abominable (See Martin, "Pratiques des émulsions artisanales.")

{15} "Do it yourself en libre accès," Collective, *L'Ébouillanté* 7 (1996).

{16} Emmanuel Falguières, "À propos de L'Etna," *L'Etna*, April 8, 2015, <http://www.etna-cinema.net/a-propos-de-etna>.

{17} Pyotr Kropotkin, *Хлеб и воля (The Conquest of Bread)* (Saint-Petersburg: Svoe izdatelstvo, 2013), 154–155.

{18} Martin Buber, *Communauté* (Paris: Éditions de l'éclat, 2018), 25.

{19} Patrick Marcolini, "Présentation" in Martin Buber, *Utopie et socialisme* (Paris: L'Échappée, 2016), 19–18.

{20} The Crass animation stand, the Debrie contact printer, and the Oxberry optical printer.

{21} See Martin, "Pratiques des émulsions artisanales."

{22} Ibid.

{23} Giorgio Agamben, *Création et anarchie* (Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivages, 2019), 24–26.

{24} Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: L'Intégrale, 1997-2015*, Marilène Rail, trans. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2016), 1259.

{25} Ibid., 1271.

{26} Ibid., 1304.

{27} Gilbert Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* (Paris: Éditions Aubier, 1989), 57.

{28} Thanks to Julia Gouin for suggesting the distinction between "preservation" and "maintenance."

{29} Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, 70.

{30} *Lumière! Le cinéma inventé*, Paris, Grand Palais, Jacques Gerber and Thierry Frémaux, curs., March 27 – June 14, 2015; *De Méliès à la 3D: la Machine Cinéma*, Paris, Cinémathèque Française, Laurent Mannoni, cur., October 5, 2016 – January 29, 2017.

{31} Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, 10.

{32} Ibid., 9.

{33} Éric Thouvenel and Carole Contant, eds., “La Véritable clé c'est d'avoir un outil,” in *Fabriques du cinéma expérimental* (Paris: Paris Expérimental, 2014), 116 (my translation).

{34} Catanese and Parikka, “Handmade films and artist-run labs: the chemical sites of film’s counterculture.”

{35} Günther Anders, *Nous, fils d'Eichmann (We Sons of Eichmann)* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2003), 91.

{36} Günther Anders, “Commandments in the Atomic Age,” in *Burning Conscience* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1962), 12.

{37} Ibid.

{38} Christa Blümlinger, “The Double Paths of Nicolas Rey: On *autrement, la Molussie (Differently, Molussia)*,” *Millenium Film Journal* 58 (2013).

{39} Ibid.

{40} Chris Welsby, “Films/Videos,” Chris Welsby (2001), <https://chriswelsby.uk/decade/1970s/>.

{41} Peter Wollen, “Landscape, Meteorology, and Chris Welsby,” *Millenium Film Journal* 16/17/18 (1986/1987), 210.

{42} Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, 141.

{43} Ibid., 179-240.

{44} Ibid., 193.

{45} “In its old sense the verb ‘bricoler’ applied to ball games and billiards, to hunting, shooting and riding. It was however always used with reference to some extraneous movement: a ball rebounding, a dog straying or a horse swerving from its direct course to avoid an obstacle.” Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 16.

{46} Ibid., p. 22.

{47} The optical printer, a tool for post-production special effects, allows to rephotograph footage frame by frame by alternately advancing film on the camera side and the projector side, according to simple algorithms programmed by the user.

{48} Roger Bastide, “Mémoire collective et sociologie du bricolage,” *L'Année sociologique* 21 (1970), digital version by Jean-Marie Tremblay (Chicoutimi: Université du Québec, 2013),

http://classiques.uqac.ca/contemporains/bastide_roger/memoire_collective_socio_bricolage/memoire_coll_texte.html.

{49} Ibid.

{50} Ibid.

{51} “Étranger, tu n'es au service de personne.”

{52} The quotes in this and the following paragraphs are by Jérémy Gravayat, recorded during a discussion organized by the journal *A Bras le corps* in Les Lilas on April 2, 2016.

{53} Nathalie Nambot in Aaron Cutler, “Public Works: MoMA’s ‘Documentary Fortnight,’” *The L Magazine*, February 13, 2015,

<http://www.thelmagazine.com/2015/02/public-works-momas-documentary-fortnight>.

{54} Catanese and Parikka, “Handmade films and artist-run labs: the chemical sites of film’s counterculture”; Knowles, “Self-skilling,” 26-27; Martin, “Pratiques des émulsions artisanales.”

{55} See <http://www.filmlabs.org/wiki/en/start>.

{56} The “Revolution” intervalometer, available for the Bolex at a minimum price of about 1000 dollars (<http://www.intervalometers.com/rev/bolex/index.php>).

{57} Martin, “Pratiques des émulsions artisanales.”

{58} Bidhan Jacobs, “Jacques Perconte : voies et formes de la libération du signal,” *La Furia Umana* 26 (Winter 2015), <http://www.lafuriaumana.it/?id=436> (my translation).