



AN INTERVIEW WITH ARTIST AURA SATZ

Submitted by Rachel Pikus, March 25, 2015

On display at George Eastman House through April 26, 2015, the installation *Eyelids Leaking Light* features two recent works by the London-based artist Aura Satz. Featuring close-ups of eyes from early experiments in color printing, *Chromatic Aberration* (2014) uses film elements from George Eastman House to explore the aesthetics of “color fringing.” *Doorway for Natalie Kalmus* (2013) is an audiovisual work that transforms a Bell & Howell lamphouse used for color grading into a grotto of prismatic lights and clanking doorways. The work pays homage to Technicolor’s color consultant Natalie Kalmus, whose name appears in the credits of hundreds of color films including *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Gone With the Wind* (1939), and *The Red Shoes* (1948). Satz has created works that engage with a wide range of technologies throughout the twentieth century, but the two works currently on display at Eastman House highlight her investment in questions surrounding early color film technology.

Satz’s work cuts across film, sound, performance, and sculpture. Her art focuses on the complex intersections between the history, technology, and aesthetics of media, while exploring the ways in which they inform human perception and agency. Satz is also interested in bringing to the fore key female figures that are largely excluded from mainstream historical discourse in an ongoing engagement with the question of women’s contributions to labor, technology and scientific knowledge. Often involving extensive research, consultation and collaboration, her work is informed by the histories of media and the ways in which these technologies overlap. Satz has performed, exhibited and screened her work nationally and internationally at the Tate Modern, Tate Britain, Barbican Centre, ICA, BFI Southbank, Whitechapel Gallery, Oberhausen Short Film Festival, International Film Festival Rotterdam, Paradise Row gallery, and the New York Film Festival.

Ryan Conrath, one of the curators of *Eyelids Leaking Light*, recently spoke with Dr. Satz about her work.

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Ryan Conrath: How did you become interested in color?

Aura Satz: My interest in color followed on from a body of works I made about sound and sound technologies. I have always been fascinated by the inherent vibratory and unsettling qualities of sound that make it unwieldy to write or encode. There is a sense of approximation or loss of authenticity, an inevitable interference of noise and distortion. Looking closely at color made me realize how inherently unstable it is. Colors will inexorably fade, dissolve, and degrade, which makes it impossible to fully systematize or standardize. Color is highly unreliable and subjective on the level of perception; it is difficult to translate effectively into language or describe with any precision. Color has often been accused of being distracting, disruptive, garish, child-like or feminine. In working with forms of notation, transcription and reproduction, I am drawn to those points at which sound or color reveal an intrinsic resistance to codification.

I am also very much committed to revisiting the undervalued (and mostly underpaid) contribution of women to the history of labor and technology. It was through this research that I came across the women who hand-colored and hand-stenciled early color films at the turn of the century. This in turn led me to explore the history of Natalie Kalmus. She was the color consultant for Technicolor (and wife of Technicolor inventor Herbert Kalmus), and worked on most of the classic films we associate with hyper-saturated Technicolor. She also wrote about composing color scores for narrative films, much like a piece of music. Sadly, none of her scores survive, but this concept of a “color score” really

appealed to me. Intriguingly, the Bell & Howell color-correction machine used punched paper tape to encode the color sequence, much like the perforated paper familiar from pianolas or the punched cards of early computers. I have made works featuring both of these and found the idea of color data stored in punched tape highly resonant with a musical score, and tangentially connected to earlier inventions such as Rimington or Wilfred's Color Organs.

RC: You are deeply invested in so many of these complex questions around the history and technology of film, in an almost scientific way at times. At the same time, ambiguity and indeterminacy lie at the heart of your work. How do you make room for both of these impulses as you proceed with a given project?

AS: I am really interested in exploring modes of sustained attention, of close looking and listening. This is clearly echoed in the scientific methods for examining and studying the world. Several of my films employ the microscope or magnifying lens in order to facilitate a more intense, at times almost disorienting tactile experience. This allows viewers to see something from a different and unexpected angle. Some of my projects make reference to historical subjects who worked in this way, such as the women hand-painting each individual film frame, or in *Her Luminous Distance*, a project I made about women astronomers studying small differences of star patterns on near identical photographic plates. At the same time, I want to facilitate such a mode of perception in the viewer by offering an almost trance-like experience through the act of close attentive looking. By looking in this way, one begins to discern visual and aural patterns, like an underlying code. My works encourage a reading that is still uncertain of its intended purpose, a visual or auditory meandering. As I mentioned earlier, I am attracted to those subjects which allow me to reveal a certain resistance to codification. I like to defamiliarize the sense of scale, of agency, or of structural stability. In *Doorway* for Natalie Kalmus the valves or doorways which control the amount of color become hinges which do not commit to a topographic inside or an outside. The camera is continually shifting position, hovering, not quite at an exit or an entry point. Likewise in *Chromatic Aberration* the close-ups of eyes in early color film experiments are both from behind the camera lens and in front of the screen, inside the perceptual body and outside of it. I was inspired by a scene in Powell and Pressburger's 1946 film *A Matter of Life and Death* (US: *Stairway to Heaven*), where the transition from the reality of color to the black and white of the afterworld is conveyed from the viewpoint of David Niven's eyelid, from inside the body, behind the eyes. Technology is clearly a tool for extending and projecting outwards, but it also collapses or folds back into the body, blurring boundaries in the object/subject relationship. So to answer your question, I am interested in a scientific approach to uncertainty and indeterminacy, without necessarily aiming for resolution.



RC: Along similar lines, can you talk a bit about your approach toward archival materials? I am particularly interested in this because so much of the archive is about notation, accounting, and categorizing.

AS: In my research processes I delve into history, but I like to think of my work as dialogic, whether I am in conversation with the past, encountering a material relic or artifact, or in dialogue with contemporary collaborators, musicians, historians, archivists, etc. To me these past moments in history, the technological or archival objects I investigate, or the people I approach as collaborators or consultants, are all elements which speak back to me. So I suppose I see my work as attending to modes of storing, archiving, inscribing, and bringing these elements into speech, both in terms of my subject matter, but also in my conceptual framework. My films about sound reproduction devices are very much about these language containers which preserve the voice and then play it back, as well as the slippages, distortions, glitches and interferences that are integral to this process. For example, my project about Daphne Oram and her invention of a graphic sound machine centers on a notation system that translates writing directly into sound or music. The film is simultaneously about her notation system, her musical output, her writing, her invention, and her voice, as much as it is about the conversation I am having with her in the past, through her work, and how I am to certain degree

spoken through by her.

My interest in working with the early color film experiments at George Eastman House came from a fascination with technologies at patent stage, that are not quite successful yet, which still reveal a hesitant experimental quality. I consulted the archivist James Layton in trying to identify which early technologies might allow for more color fringing effects, and came up with the Two-Color Kodachrome process, in particular the test shots done in 1922, which were not at the service of a cinematic narrative. The purpose of these was most likely just to try out how effective the color film might be in conveying skin tone, which also brings to mind later calibration reel leaders known in film labs as *China Girl* (a few frames of an anonymous woman accompanied by color bars), but also Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests*.

I wanted to try and rewind to the moment when people had not yet seen themselves in color film, and to evoke the de-familiarizing experience of seeing oneself reflected in color, perhaps distorted, abstracted, and therefore open to a more surreal and dream-like inner vision. I was keen to use the archival reels in a way that highlighted the materiality of the film strip, so that through magnification you would start to see what happens on the surface of the print, such as the fringing effects of misaligned colors. In doing so, one can become lost in haptic qualities of the film grain. I was equally keen to make the film lab technologies that I was using to handle this reel speak back through the footage, so the contact printer blinks back at the footage of the eyes. The process of handling the archival footage feeds into the rhythm of the film, providing an acoustic rhythmic pulse and an editorial pacing which is not quite animation but somehow disrupts the framerate, from a slow stroboscopic flash to a flickering eye blinking, much like the flutter of an insect trapped in a peep hole.

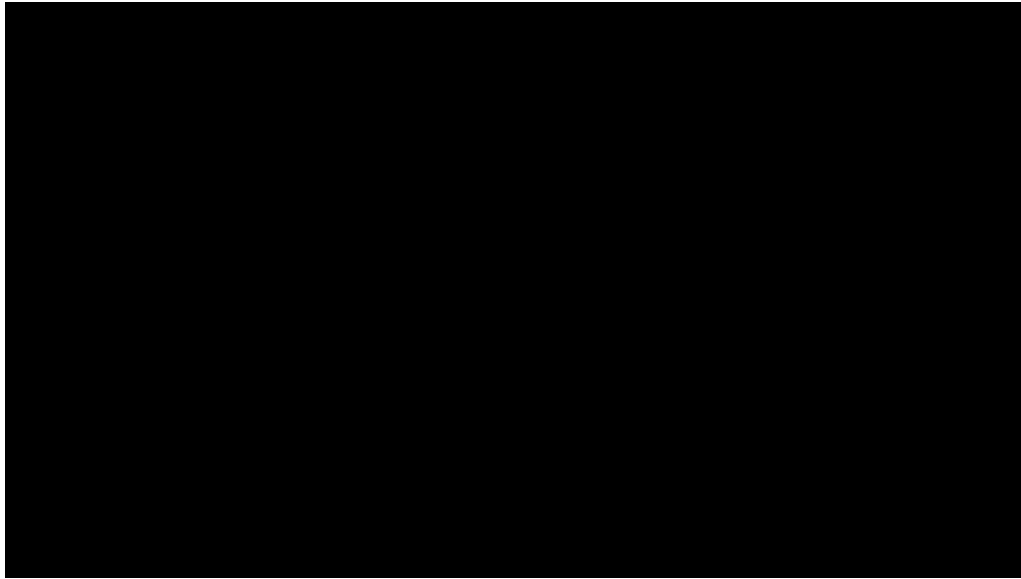


RC: What role do you think experimental cinema has played in suggesting alternative directions for color in film? What other artists/filmmakers have you drawn inspiration from in this sense?

AS: As I said earlier, what draws me to use color is the impossibility of truly fixing it, and the potential of creating a perceptual experience that somehow exposes this. The doorways or peep-holes onto color in the two films at George Eastman House highlight the impossibility of preventing one color from bleeding into the next, either in the actual print, through a doorway crack, in the editorial pacing which on occasions rises to a flicker, or in the afterimages that are created through accelerated chromatic juxtaposition. These color fields become an unstable environment that draws the viewer in and washes them over. Rather than systematically structuring or fixing color it revels in color's ability for dissolution.

There are so many fascinating and completely unexpected crossovers between more experimental practices and the more mainstream film industry. For *Doorway for Natalie Kalmus* I was inspired by the history of Technicolor, but also by the horror films of Dario Argento, and most crucially, the experimental filmmaker Paul Sharits. I am really drawn to his work with flicker and color after-images (such as *Shutter Interface*), but his color scores are especially astounding. They are scores and notations for films, as well as artworks using the actual filmstrips themselves, which he termed Frozen Film Frames. These are closely aligned with color organs and some of the scores made by Alexander Wallace Rimington, or the ones I imagine Natalie Kalmus might have made for films such as *The Wizard of Oz* or *Gone with the Wind*. For *Chromatic Aberration* I had several points of inspiration: Powell and Pressburger's *A Matter of Life and Death* mentioned before, but also *Peeping Tom* and the importance of

image seen through the camera lens, including the grid. I was also inspired by Marie Ellen Bute's films, and Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight*. To me these unusual crossovers between mainstream and avant-garde or experimental practices are of interest precisely because, again, it is about disrupting boundaries, examining what is usually overlooked, and finding improbable anachronistic connections in order to dismantle hierarchies.



George Eastman House is excited to welcome Dr. Satz to Rochester on April 16, 2015. At 6 p.m. that day, she will deliver a talk at the Dryden Theatre. To supplement the show at Eastman House, Satz will also present a screening of several of her other works at the University of Rochester, in the Gowen Room (Wilson Commons). For details on the on-campus event, please contact Ryan Conrath (rconrath@geh.org).

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[Rachel Pikus's blog](#)

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