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SUNDANCE
FILM FESTIVAL

Evolving the Cinematic Frontier

The Sundance Film Festival

As the Sundance Film Festival turns 25, it is most arguably one of the world's best venues for film. Keeping with tradition, Sundance is keen to explore new ideas, and this year their New Frontier on Main programme illustrates their commitment to new territories through film.

The Sundance Film Festival, held annually in Park City, Salt Lake City, Ogden and Sundance, Utah, is one of the world's most recognisable venues for independent film. Set amidst snow capped peaks and the wilderness of the American West, it is a far cry from the seedy grind of Hollywood and its steady churn of meaningless mass-market movies.

With more than 8,000 submissions for only 200 slots, the Festival has become infamous for bringing the crème de la crème of independent voice, by way of documentary, drama, and short film to the big screen and arguably to the world.

Now in its 25th year, the Sundance Film Festival has brought us some of the most beloved and respected independent films since its inception in 1985. The Sundance Institute, overseer of the Sundance Film Festival, continues to serve as an incubator where the independent film artist thrives. Since its early years, many classic films have put roots down in film history via the Festival and the Institute, including: *sex, lies and videotape*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Clerks*, *Crumb*, *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, *Boys Don't Cry*, *American Movie*, *Memento*, *Secretary*, *Born into Brothels*, *Maria Full of Grace*, *Dogtown and Z-Boys* and *Supersize Me*. And that's the short list.

However, Sundance has been watering another beanstalk. New Frontier on Main, a voluptuous accessory to film proper at the Festival, is now entering its 3rd year in its present incarnation. The initiative "champions the expansion of the craft of cinematic storytelling beyond what is traditionally found in cinemas." New Frontier works permeate various parts of the Festival, but are also part of a show that stands squarely on its own. It also provides a social space at the Festival — a place for gathering, conversation and an exchange of ideas. New Frontier on Main's high-spirited director, Shari Frilot, says, "The concept of the initiative is to look at the crossroads of the art world, the film world, and the world of emerging media technologies. The work coming out of that crossroads is incredibly important right now."

There's something powerful about showcasing an alternative to film culture, which for a large part, is market driven. To inject momentum and put weight behind New Frontier on Main, via the Sundance Film Festival, gives exposure to ideas and methods that will eventually drive a paradigmatic shift in cinema. Frilot says: "New Frontier on Main stakes a space where rethinking what cinematic image and culture are allow audiences to become part of an evolving experiment."

In the past movie-goers would visit the cinema to watch films or turn on the TV, however, "the screen" now takes up residence in our pockets, on billboards, on buildings, at our computers, at the

gas station and in the cars we drive. Screens with a message are popping up like prairie dogs around every bend. The quotidian is peppered with these experiences so much that the cinematic is now immersive and mobile, which is permeating people's consciousness unprecedented ways. "The screen", once stationary, is now fluid moving both with us and around us.

This evolving media landscape "is becoming our new cinematic language, and aesthetic," Frilot states. "So much of this new language has to do with selling products and advertising. It's important to establish a space and a showcase that engages with this emerging cinematic language in an independent and artistic way." We can only hope that infusing creativity and art into moving image packaged in these rapidly evolving mediums will serve to keep us human.

In a universe where the screen is no longer bound to four traditional walls for passive viewing, New Frontier, open and free to the public, is "a creative festival within the festival," Frilot says. "There's a full schedule in tandem with the traditional Sundance offerings. Its aim is to provide an alternative space that challenges traditional notions of cinema and cinematic presentation, and also film festival presentation. It's about emerging and expanding and evolving and exploding the traditional boundaries of moving image."

If cinema in its most basic sense is *storytelling* — a timeless, ageless pursuit and the theme of this year's Sundance Film Festival — then innovative ways of telling a story are certainly called to action in an environment as fertile as Sundance. "2009 is an incredibly exciting year for New Frontier on Main. So much of the show implicates the audience's physicality. There's work in this program that concretely points to revolutionary ways of filmmaking," contends Frilot.

Specifically, John Underkoffler comes to mind. In *TAMPER*, John Underkoffler and the media scientists at Oblong Industries have developed magical gloves that promise a groundbreaking method of film editing. Gestural interface — "g-speak" — allows for hand movements to replace the mouse and keyboard. The technology beckons the audience member to become a cinema collage artist, whereby they literally use their hands to grab and recompose elements from different movies. "It's gestural cinema: a way to poke and prod and grasp and grope film, to shimmy and jostle a film's parts into new configurations, to upset careful filmic structures that had nothing like it in mind. *TAMPER* is a fleeting tactile space for talking back to the screen," says Underkoffler. Frilot tells it in laypersons' terms: "The process has a very *Minority Report* quality," which Underkoffler can also take credit for, as he was a technical consultant on the film.

It may be antithetical to consider science and art in the same breath,



but there is a massive amount of new technology emerging to support cinematic expression. And this technology is not relegated to video cameras alone. "The tools we use to generate cinema effect how the story gets told," Frilot posits. "We aim to put the scientists in the same room as the artists so that they are actually a part of the creative process. When you put engineers, media scientists, and programmers together with the artists, you no longer get fancy toys with no story."

Each of the 2009 New Frontier on Main, artists share their "story" in dramatically different ways. Artist, Omer Fast, repositions traditional cinematic storytelling via innovative structural scaffolding and

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content. *The Casting*, winner of the 2008 Whitney Biennial prize, employs four channels that recount two Iraq War incidents, as told by a US Army sergeant: meeting a young German woman he feels a romantic attraction toward who mutilates herself, and the accidental shooting of an Iraqi. Actors perform the script in silent tableaux on two screens, while the sergeant's recollections move between setting and story run on a third screen. The fourth screen shows the filmmaker as the story unfolds.

Jonathan Harris and Sepandar Kamvar are computer engineers. Their work, *We Feel Fine*, scans blogs to find expressions of human feelings. By searching for sentences that begin with "I feel" and "I am feeling" participants can explore the emotional content of the blogosphere. Several filters are employed, such as geographic location, gender, age, etc. to narrow down results and engage the viewer. Real time results are delivered through six different modes or "movements"; madness, murmurs, montage, mobs, metrics, and mounds. Through this beautiful artistic tool, the audience member gets a sense of the individual and the collective, emotionally and simultaneously.

The designated venue at the Festival for New Frontier challenges

the traditional film festival construct, as well. "It was a very conscious choice to engage with the language of the sensual — or to use Audrey Lorde's term, 'the power of the erotic' — and the space is in complete contrast to the rest of the Festival, which is characteristically fun and energetic. We sought to provide a place to consider new kinds of work by calming the senses in a compelling way. It is very sexy and has a tone to it that really engages the audience member's body and hopefully paves new streets into the minds of our viewers."

The pace at which new technology emerges is staggering. The innovative minds at New Frontier on Main and the Sundance Institute, ever thirsty for the evolving edge of cinema, are bringing the confluence of art, technology and film together in ways that blow the mind. The term "physical cinema" is seeping through film's bedrock, suggesting that future forms of cinema will appoint body. "You may no longer park yourself and forget that you have a body for two hours when you watch a movie," Frilot suggests. "This is a cinematic culture that engages with the body. It is happening right now, and will continue to evolve. It will be as important, and perhaps even more important than the traditional stands right now."

Consider that in the near future, we may be able to take the bones of a film and sculpt our own version of it using our hands. Characters in film may be responsive to our touch. We may watch film on our bodies, and our experience of the film may be derived from our kinetics. These are just a few possibilities.

Where the most innovative and creative in film finds us now is clearly not in the cinema, but on the frontier. Frilot concludes: "Just the sheer innovation, like being able to edit a movie with gloves, approximates art. When you see it in progress, you taste and you feel the future."

The 25th Sundance Film Festival runs from 15–25 January 2009. Visit <http://festival.sundance.org/2009/> for details.

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