



Ille Arts Film Screening Weaves into “Figure and Ground” Exhibition

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by Andrew Botsford

“Art film.” The label means so many things to so many different people that it has practically lost its usefulness.

To some, most if not all movies from other countries—especially foreign language films from Europe and Asia—are “art films.” To others, independent films—especially those made on shoestring budgets with an avant garde edge—have to be called “art films.” And what about films that are made *about* art, or artists? Surely those have to be considered “art films,” right?

Art lovers, movie lovers and the merely curious who are interested in the distinction will have a chance to decide for themselves if the label applies to a film being screened at Ille Arts in Amagansett on Sunday (Oct 13, 2013) at 7 p.m., following a reception that starts at 6 p.m.

Ille Arts owner Sara De Luca is offering the screening in conjunction with the gallery’s current exhibition, “Figure and Ground.” The exhibition, which runs through Oct. 15 2013, features works by Alex Katz, Rudy Burckhardt, Juan Eduardo Gomez, Jan Henle and Vivien Bittencourt. The show was co-curated by Bittencourt and Vincent Katz.

There are a dizzying number of connections between the film, the exhibition, the curators of the show, and the artists in the show: Co-curator and artist Vivien Bittencourt and artist Jan Henle co-directed the film, which has as its subject a work created by Henle. Co-curator Vincent Katz is the film’s associate producer. Artist Alex Katz is the father of co-curator Vincent Katz, who is married to Vivien Bittencourt.

The film, it seems, is near the center of this web of connections. So, what is this film, and how does it weave these connections together?

Visitors to janhenle.com land in a clearing in a tropical forest, a screen-filling scene of a rolling hillside of brown-red earth splashed with bright green ground cover. A white-haired man wearing white pants and a gray coat, quite small in the scale of the landscape, is walking into the lower left side of the frame, shot from above as he makes his way uphill to just about camera level on a footpath that crosses the hill. Bird songs from the surrounding woods are the only sound.

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Film still from Con el Mismo. Courtesy Jan Henle.

When he reaches and exits the right edge of the frame some 35 seconds later, the scene cuts to a much wider view, shot from below and much farther back, of the same landscape with the same man, now tiny from the camera's new perspective, walking from the uppermost right side of the screen toward the center. When he has made it part way to the middle, a jump cut takes the viewer to a still shot of the man shot from much closer up in the center of the composition, a freeze frame of a figure on the ground .

The man is presumably Jan Henle, since that is the name superimposed on the upper left of the screen the whole time. If the cursor is outside the frame, the still photo will remain on the screen with the birds continuing their song, presumably forever. Bring the cursor into the frame, and a link appears on the lower left. Try to click on it and it jumps over to the right side. Move the cursor to the right and the link goes back to the left.

Visitors can get past this touch of whimsy and website mischief by clicking anywhere on the screen to link in to the center of Henle's [website](#). There they can click their way around to learn that the scene they viewed on arrival is an excerpt from the beginning of "Con el Mismo Amor" ("With the Same Love"), a 20-minute film that is part artwork and part documentary on the subject of the artist's monumental land sculpture of exposed earth in Puerto Rico that shares its title with the name of the film, *Con el Mismo Amor*.

In addition to providing a sense of the scale of the sculpture, the film includes documentary-style statements from the men who provided the often difficult labor required over the course of over 10 years to create the sculpture.

In a statement about the film and its connection to the exhibition, the film's director, Vivien Bittencourt, and associate producer, Vincent Katz, wrote: "The film, 'Con el Mismo Amor,' is hybrid in form—not purely documentary. Although it clearly shows Jan Henle's huge earth sculpture in Maricao, Puerto Rico, it is considered by Henle to be a work of art in itself, and he has shown it in exhibitions in conjunction with other works by him."

"Everything about the film—the choices of the angles (often very wide), the use of stationary camera, the editing together of several different times of day and weathers, and the ambient sound—are all in concert with the concept of Henle's work as a whole ..."

Con el Mismo Amor is directly related to the concept of our exhibition, explained the pair.

"We chose to include in the show two of Henle's images (he calls them film drawings) of *La Jibarita*, a previous earth sculpture also done in Puerto Rico," wrote Bittencourt and Katz. "We wanted to present in this exhibition a specific selection of artists who have used abstraction as a jumping off point to experiment with how figure and ground can blend and how abstraction and representation may overlap. As with Henle's *La Jibarita* studies in the exhibition, the film 'Con El Mismo Amor' also makes analogies between the earth and the human form (the contours of the land), connections signifying the passions of the people who live and work in the region."

The film's connection to the exhibition from the curator's perspective adds an additional layer to

the film screening experience set among the artworks.

“The idea of Figure and Ground is an old, though not necessarily ancient, preoccupation. Figure calls to mind not only the human figure but also a motif, decorative element, or subject,” wrote Katz in his online catalogue essay. “Ground is the depth of field of an image, but also the basis of our walking and thinking. The artists in this exhibition have in various degrees reacted to the history of abstract expressionism and its radical reinvention of the idea of figure and ground. In different ways, these five artists are involved with the physical nature of the body and the experience of light and air in outdoor and indoor environments.”

So is “Con el Mismo Amor” a work of art, an art film, or a film about art? For anyone who shares the joy of venturing into the cinematic and artistic world created by Henle and Bittencourt in this beautiful film, it doesn’t make a bit of difference.

BASIC FACTS: The Screening of “Con el Mismo Amor,” a film by Jan Henle and Vivien Bittencourt, takes place on Sunday at 7 p.m. with a preceding reception at 6 p.m., at Ille Arts in Amagansett.

“Figure and Ground” remains on view through Oct. 15, 2013. The exhibition features works by Alex Katz, Rudy Burckhardt, Juan Eduardo Gomez, Jan Henle and Vivien Bittencourt. It is curated by Vivien Bittencourt and Vincent Katz.

ILLE Arts is located at 216a Main St., Amagansett, NY 11930. The gallery is open Thursday through Monday from noon to 6 p.m. www.illearts.com.

For information on Jan Henle, visit www.janhenle.com.

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