

Somewhere from here to heaven

Bruce Baillie

Ben
Rivers

Eduardo
Williams

Apichatpong
Weerasethakul

Ana
Vaz

"There were ages of faith, when men made connections between themselves and the place in which they lived, the plants they cultivated, the fuel they used for warmth, their beasts, and their ancestors. My work will be discovering in American life those natural and ancient contacts through a contemporary form, the motion picture."

-- Bruce Baillie

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AZKUNA ZENTROA
ALHÓNDIGA BILBAO

The exhibition SOMEWHERE FROM HERE TO HEAVEN sketches a constellation of filmmakers from different generations inspired by Bruce Baillie's universe, "essential" filmmaker of the 60s, who was one of the most influential in North American avant-garde film besides being a big promoter of the so-called experimental film. Baillie in 1961 together with other filmmaker friends organized a screening in a house in Canyon, California to show films 'unwelcome anywhere else back then' which in itself was a subversive act at that time. As a result of this spontaneous gesture a large community was created which founded San Francisco Cinematheque, as well as an avant-garde film distributor, which to this day is one of the most important worldwide, Canyon Cinema coop.

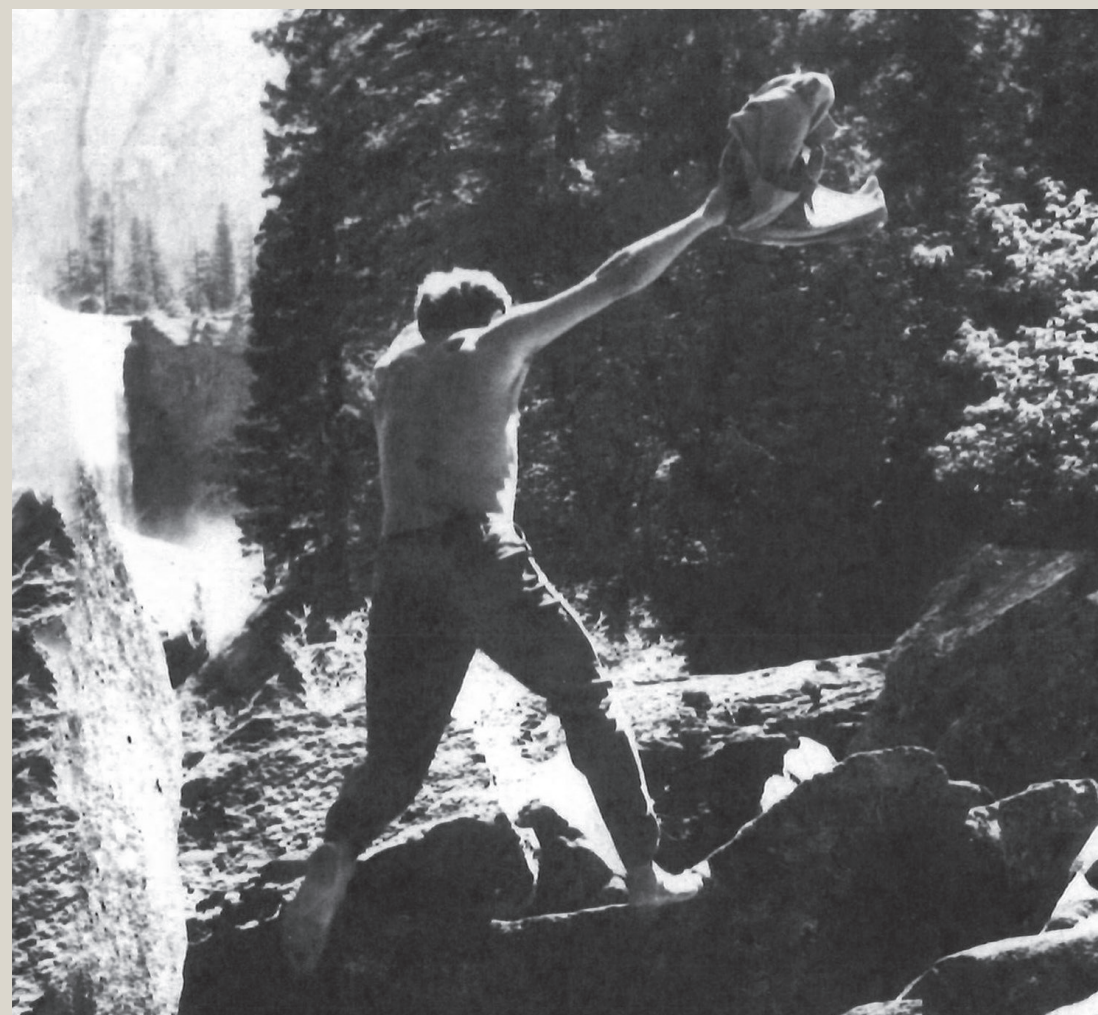
The exhibition is divided into two sections, the first connects to the period when Baillie together with Chick Strand, Gunvor & Robert Nelson, and Lawrence Jordan, among others created this vibrant stimulating "family", which is still alive today.

The second includes the works of four artists invited by Azkuna Zentroa to produce a new work inspired by Baillie's imagination, namely: Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Thailand), Ben Rivers (UK), Ana Vaz (Brazil) and Eduardo Williams (Argentina), who have produced audiovisual pieces conversing with Bruce Baillie's universe and his films (*Valentín de las Sierras*, *Here I am*, *Mass for the Dakota Sioux*, *All My Life*, among others). In addition to these new works, the exhibition also shows a piece filmmaker J.P. Sniadecki created ex profeso, a film full of intimate moments shared with Bruce over recent years, which includes footage from an unfinished film by Baillie.

All these lyrical observational films in Baillie's 16mm, likewise the works of these four artists elude any kind of category and genre yet they equally share interest in fusing the mystical and mundane, cosmic, and personal, mythological and autobiographical. A constant journey, a symbiosis between nature and modern society, an intuitive search for light, the driving force to discover the spiritual essence of things, are only some of the ideas weaving this project, sustained by a profound commitment to way of living and comprehending art – all this is found in the epicenter of these artists' practice.

Garbiñe Ortega

Max Goldberg



Photograph of Bruce Baillie in Yosemite, California

A divine power works in this mind and body and it is the same that works in All men, minds, plants, things - the whole world as an equal instrument of a divine Action and gradual self-expression.

Bruce Baillie's Notebooks, June-July, 1970.

Bruce Baillie (1931-2020), Canyon Cinema's founding filmmaker, brought to life exceptional works of film art and a thriving cinema counterculture. He died in April 2020 at his home on Camano Island, nearly 60 years after first welcoming friends and neighbors for a night of backyard cinema in Canyon, California. Long after the fact, Baillie recounted the story of Canyon Cinema's founding with a fresh sense of possibility. "Disregard established forms, invent those forms which you can see you need Now," he counseled Canyon Cinemanews readers in 1976. "This is, in fact, the way Canyon Cinema occurred in the world."

Collected here are some of Baillie's many dispatches to and about Canyon Cinema, beginning with a 1962 announcement co-signed with Chick Strand. The bulk of this material derives from the Canyon Cinemanews, which was launched in 1962 as a newsletter to solicit and circulate "fugitive information" related to a fledgling independent film movement. Years before Canyon was formally organized as a distribution cooperative, the lively pages of the Cinemanews demonstrated that there was such a community of filmmakers to be incorporated.

Baillie's byline only became a Cinemanews staple after he took to the road with his films, eventually coming to reside at various points up the West Coast. Beyond offering sparkling early glimpses of now classic titles like *Quixote* (1965), *Castro Street* (1966), *Valentín de las Sierras* (1968), *Quick Billy* (1970), and *Roslyn Romance (Is It Really True?)* (1974), the letters report on film stocks and dream visions, remedies for the common cold and poor film projection, friends in need and community prospects. With Franciscan simplicity, he is forever pointing back to first principles: "Really like to emphasize in NEWS again for everybody to send notes on what they are doing, seeing, feeling," he wrote at the end of 1967. "It's odd when you discover it, how so many people give little value to who they are: hardly anyone seems to celebrate themselves by forwarding their thoughts." And a few years later:

"We used to make up a lot of [things] in the News, that's why it felt so good in those days...When you've got too many things to do it all comes out the same. It needs all the ups and downs of an open life."

Baillie's letters plot just such a course, relaying the ideals of an independent cinema in terms of lived experience. What jumps off the page is the abundant sense of freedom in matters large and small. The letters make it easy to see why Baillie's emboldening example meant the world to younger filmmakers looking to pick up a camera and make a life of it. A voice like his never grows old.



Still from *For Bruce*, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, (2022)

Bruce, I was nearing the end of my journey in Peru, recovering from COVID with a tired chest, as I trekked in an Amazon jungle. The intensity of the colors, fragrances, and movements awoke my senses. The ants, birds, and monkeys were thriving in their own cycles and habitats high in the trees and down in the earth's passages. It was late in the morning when I came upon a little creek that twisted like a sleepy snake. It winds its way through the deep jungle to an open clearing with a wooden bridge baking in the sun. The light flickered as it passed through the river beneath. I sat in the shade, greeting curious bugs and enjoying the warm air. The simple bridge was silent, as if it was listening in on the entities around it. Bruce, the bridge was you, an observer who cast shadows and connected the spaces. You had a conversation with the sun. I took out my camera and attempted to be a part of the conversation.

Nobody knew when the bridge was built. It has been repaired through the generations. There used to be indigenous communities deep in the jungle that built this bridge as part of a trail to access the major river, the Rio Madre de Dios, which runs across Peru and Bolivia. The trail served as a means of trade, communication, and colonization. This forest near the river bank was formerly a farm, a school, and a hospital as part of the Spanish establishment. Not far from the bridge, there are still buildings, grain silos, a ship propeller, and a wrecked steamboat that inspired Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1976).

Despite all of the stories surrounding the site, I noticed that the bridge elicits no memories. It has no beginning and no end; it unifies. One crosses it in order to get somewhere, but the structure itself has no destination. As a stranger, I had no place to call home on either side; the forest and the port held no meaning for me. A sense of oneness drew me to this bridge and to you, the filmmaker whose approach is centered on presence.

During the wet season, the bridge is buried underwater. It sways and dances alongside the fish. After a few months, it elevates itself to the sun, trees, and birds. It vibrates and scatters light in every direction. I filmed in this non-place and felt like I had vanished inside you. I wanted to offer this portrait of you as a gift, as a nod to your non-seeking spirit and as a thank you for seeing.

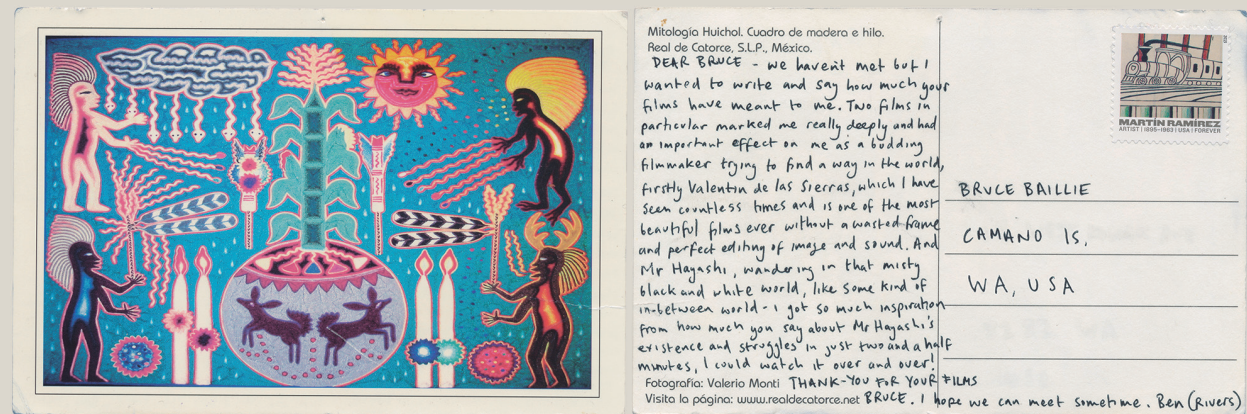
Apichatpong Weerasethakul



Still from *The Minotaur*, Ben Rivers, (2022)

Filed around the site of Lithica, an abandoned and transformed quarry on the island of Menorca, the film tells the tale of the young Minotaur, and his failed attempts to befriend children his age. This tragedy is inspired by Bruce Baillie's love of mythology and silent film storytelling, as well as his film, *Here I Am* (1962), a beautiful portrait of children in a specialist school in California. *The Minotaur* will become a part of a longer film made in a world with only children, going about their lives, rituals, game playing and journeys.

Ben Rivers



Postcard written by Ben Rivers to Bruce Baillie (2015)

*I have almost no information stored in my brain. Both my life and art are totally "non-informative". The film has a very strong critical theory and is made against contemporary society, buildings, contamination (and all those other things), and in favour of pleasure, which appears implied at least in nature, individuality and humanity!*¹

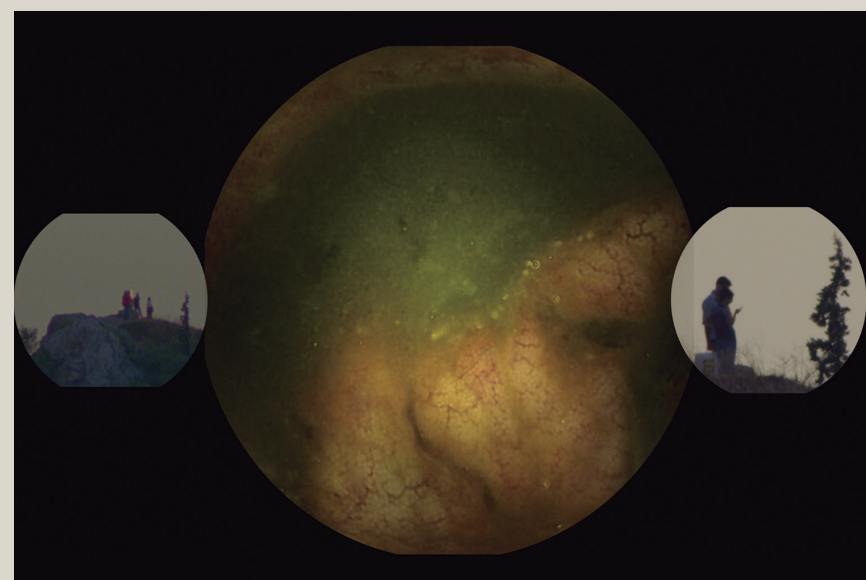
For some time now, thinking about digestion has served as an example for me to understand how to absorb everything around me. Tired of the institutions of the need to verify what was or was not learnt through exams or explanatory texts, I decided to place my trust in what I consume and how I digest it. Believing that, in this way, films, texts and experiences could be part of me in a more organic way. I do not want to remember films I saw nor become conscious of how each film influenced exactly. The fact there are people who follow that school of thought is excellent. However, equally good and necessary are those who are capable of making films or doing other works from a different perspective, of absorbing knowledge and experience in different ways. This is how I undertook this work in relation to Bruce Baillie's work. Watching his films and reading his interviews, I let myself be carried away by sensations and intuitive thoughts, as well as thoughts which continue to develop in time. I did not want to consciously and analytically connect his work to mine, so I hope that, once my video is finished, connections will be seen for me and those who watch it. Going back to working alone was important to discover the video as I was making it, testing images and sound, reflecting and going back to test instead of thinking it out prior to producing it.

Well, I will simply find out how to make films myself.

Art and its myths are that which reflects our identity, process and history. We follow the poet's path: solitary paths within the dark and snow white places of memory... and an unknown horizon.

1. The Italics in this text are Bruce Baillie's quotes.

Eduardo Williams



Frame of a *Very Long GIF*, Edward Williams, (2022)

A ÁRVORE / THE TREE

IPSA SONANT ARBUSTA¹

In October 2018, a year of overwhelming political, personal and existential transformations, I decided to start filming a diary. I wanted to free myself from cinematographic practice as a constant exercise of projection and representation, and find a living cinema that would reflect the extraordinary quotidian side of life, with everything that usually remains on the side-lines, on the edges of a film. I found myself searching more and more for what I would call a *cinema of manifestations*, rather than a *cinema of representations*. Without scripts, without projections, without writing, the camera would become an accomplice of some moments of life that would remain stored on celluloid until the day they would be revealed - a kind of metabolism of the image, where the practice of filming would be nothing more than a vital metabolic exercise. The images would thus become a mere capture of energies - spectral, historical, emotional - in the form of visual representations.

With these ideas in mind, over the last few years I have been filming these little flashes that capture the moment where celluloid meets life in a series of small film-rituals. It has turned into a not very regular and quite instinctive practice. In 2020 I made my first film from the initial images-rituals recorded for the diary. To my surprise, the film became a first rite of metamorphosis. In *Pseudosphynx* (2020), a shattering political event [the 2018 elections which brought the extreme right into power in Brazil] was intersected by the appearance of a dozen fire caterpillars preparing to turn into *witches*² and also to transform the entire political horizon with their animallistic spell, stitching together the places I passed through: Paris, Brasilia, Serra dos Pirineus and Lisbon.

The film became a brief and intense trance, in which everyday life is turned into a ritual by a magical act. It is worth remembering that magic is nothing more than the transformation of what we call *real* into something that was not there before (although perhaps it was latent, dormant or invisible before the magical act-ritual took place). Today I think that maybe these diaries are a kind of magical exercise in everyday life, à la Bruce Baillie, I would later think.

It was then, at the time of these everyday magic exercises, that I accepted Garbiñe Ortega's invitation to think about, film and honour the memory of the beloved Bruce Baillie on the occasion of the exhibition *Somewhere from here to heaven*. With his generosity, poetry and conviviality, Bruce transformed the cinema of an avant-garde and intellectual generation into a corporeal, intimate and almost journalistic cinema. A cinema that does not deny the first person. In his films, Bruce is always there, exactly where his characters are: fences, cowboys, Indians, bees, donkeys, children, letters or motorbikes, he is always *standing by what he films*. Thinking about Bruce, I believe this is his most outstanding quality: the ability to give himself over to the world he films, to embody each frame, place or impression.

A *First-person cinema* is something that the rationality of the last century flatly rejected in favour of distance as a privileged way of existing and observing others and the world.



Frame of *A Árvore*, Anna Vaz, (2022)

When I received the invitation, I decided to watch all his films again. As I let myself be carried away by each shot, it was impossible for me to imagine that for such a worthy figure as Bruce Baillie, the poet of the image, one could start from a single film or pay tribute to him in the form of an elegy. I suppose he would hate that: to be seen as an icon, a monument, a hero. It was something he constantly rejected through the films he made. So instead of an elegy, I decided to focus my reflection on the form of his soul and his cinema, and on the simplicity of his gestures, to think of a film shot alongside Bruce Baillie rather than in front of or behind him.

For this new film, I appeal to the historical synthesis of the perfect drama, *All My Life*: to the mourning and lament of *Mass for the Dakota Sioux*; to the love for a dancing body of *Tung*; to the mystical portrait of *Mr. Hayashi*; to the impossible frontier of *Valentín de las Sierras*; and to the desire to advance the western frontier in the revelatory *Quixote*. All these films seem to irrupt and converse with the nascent *A Árvore*, a ritual-film about my father - the artist, musician and mystic of the forest - Guilherme Vaz, a man who also lived and reflected on the frontier, on the fatal advance of modernity over the peoples of the earth, a man who wrote music instinctively, who thought of cinema as his "spiritual father" and, above all, whose lived life was his greatest work. I quote here a passage from a very beautiful text he wrote in the spring of 2007 in Rio de Janeiro, *Três ventos: dois vácuos e uma espada*:

1. Cinema as a martial art

Between two winds there is a void. The gaze of the sword slides through it. This is the movement that founds the equipment of cinema, before the genesis of things. We say that cinema exists before everything, because there has always been a wind between two voids or a void between two things and a widespread archaic philosophy. Between two volumes or two winds is the primordial territory of the gaze, and the notion of the *cinematic storm*, of the mind that sees. If the mind circles around objects, it does not see them. It only does so when it *enters the voids* they possess. Seminals. An object can be a society and must have a void at its centre. The more compact the object, the more hidden is the void. But they all possess it. To unite these images in a single gesture, one must know how to *glue the voids together*. The bound voids form a single gesture in which the warrior performs a full swing with his long sword in a single circle. The sequences of these circles of decapitation, evacuation and baptism produce a sequence of meanings, *quipos*³, from the work⁴.

And so is born

A *Árvore*: a meditation-film in 30-second sequences that links geographies, times, the living and the dead with a metal sword - the montage - joining voids - internal presences in the sequences.

A *Árvore*: a film about the metamorphosis of a giant.

A *Árvore*: a dialogue with the father through the voids.

A *Árvore*: orbital planes that seek to connect the places we have passed through, where our ancestors may have passed through.

A *Árvore*: Rio de Janeiro, Brasilia, Porto, Lisbon, Belém.

A *Árvore*: portrait of the father who is not there and is there.

A *Árvore*: cinema films absences, it is fundamentally phantasmagorical.

A *Árvore*: following traces, trusting in the movement and metamorphosis of all things.

A *Árvore*: a chapter of a long living film that walks alongside all the others, that walks with ghosts.

A *Árvore*: cinema of the sword, cinema as martial art.

A *Árvore*: if the traveller already knows the way, it is because he has lost his way.

A *Árvore*: second chapter in a series of gestures that are linked together.

A *Árvore*: a diary in which the first person is inside and not outside the world - the self leads to the world and not the other way around.

A *Árvore*: crosses, absences, ghosts.

In *A Árvore* I seek to honour my ghosts rather than a stranger. The film is not an elegy to Bruce Baillie, but a reflection on everything that underpins his work: the frontier, the desire for encounter, metamorphosis, the Americas.

1. Até as árvores cantam. Phrase engraved on the cover of the album *O Anjo sobre o Verde* by Guilherme Vaz (non-commercial album released by the artist), 2001.

2. The Portuguese word for butterflies in Brazil.

3. "According to experts, the curious knotted Inca cords known as quipos were probably used by chiefs and accountants for collecting taxes. They conveyed both numerical and textual information. The coloured cords have confused researchers since they were first described by the Spanish conquistadors 500 years ago. Most experts agree that they represent some kind of accounting but no one has been able to decipher them. On the website of the Periódico de la Universidade de São Paulo, journalist Marcello Rothenberg says: "But what does the work quipos really mean? This word means "knot" in the language of the Peruvian ancestors. And these knots were used to record important data: knots of different thicknesses and colours, forming messages interpreted by the quipucamayocs: experts in this type of writing in Inca society". Cited in *Guilherme Vaz: Uma Fração da Infinito*. CBB (Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil), 2016.

4. The Italics are mine.

Paris, June 2022. To G. Vaz.

Ana Vaz