

ARTFORUM

FIRST TAKE

Elizabeth Schambelan on

Amy Granat

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Composite of projection details from Amy Granat's three-film installation *Stars Way Out (for O.K.)*, 2006. Photos: Amy Granat

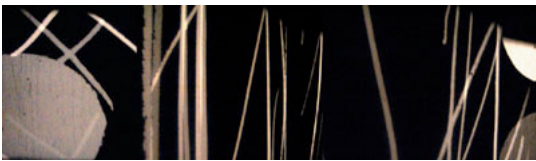
NEW YORK–BASED ARTIST AMY GRANAT makes films but generally dispenses with the camera, producing images by damaging film emulsion through direct manipulation. Or, as she put it in a recent interview, “Whatever kind of assault you can make on film material, I’ve done.” Her first such attacks were carried out when she was studying for her BA at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, in the late ’90s; working in total darkness, she would dump a spool of 16-mm stock into a bathtub full of (highly toxic) chemicals, then mash and grind the film against itself. Around the start of the current decade, Granat developed a somewhat more controlled and less hazardous process that involves manually scratching the film (always 16 mm), using razors, hole punches, and other tools.

Watching one of these manual “scratch films” wending its way through a projector, you can see a certain pattern in the marks she makes: Scrolling down the length of the strip are undulating lines or zigzags, often punctuated by hole-punched disks. In projection, however, the works are spectacles of Brownian chaos in which luminous figures—vertical lines that jump frantically from left to right, disks that seem to jitter up and down—flash by against a black background too quickly to be fully apprehended.

Subverting the persistence of vision that is the sine qua non of the moving image, Granat’s films picture a disconnect between vision and cognition. But in effecting this breakdown, the artist establishes a different kind of perceptual connection, a synesthetic

one. "What you hear is what you see," she says. With the aid of guitar amplifiers, Granat captures the sound of light itself as her film passes through the optical sound head that produces audio signals in film projectors. The indexical sound tracks that result are eerie washes of popping, hissing, static, and percussive rumbling.

But, austere self-reflexive as it might seem, Granat's work sets off cascades of associations. Recalling the light-against-dark interfaces of early computers and cold-war-era tracking systems (radar, sonar) as much as they evoke the imagery of film-leader countdowns or the abstract cinema of Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling, the scratch films appear haunted by histories of the moving image within and beyond the context of art. This historiographical resonance echoes Granat's immersion in avant-garde film, which she became seriously interested in while at Bard a decade ago. As illustrated by the omnivorous programs she puts together for Cinema Zero, a nomadic film-and-performance series begun in 2004, she has a nuanced grasp of the experimental-film corpus.



Composite of projection details from Amy Granat's three-film installation *Stars Way Out (for O.K.)*, 2006. Photos: Amy Granat

In the case of her own work, the most relevant precedent might be the radical '70s nonfilm of Anthony McCall and his fellow New York experimentalists (contrary to what many viewers of her work might expect, she doesn't identify strongly with the work of Stan Brakhage, despite the correspondences between their processes). Granat cites Paul Sharits as an early influence, and her installations, which typically include two or more looped films running simultaneously, evoke his "locational" version of expanded cinema. In *Circle Jerk (for N.S.)*, 2006, on view last fall at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in New York, three of her scratch films ran while a trio of spotlights cast bright circles onto the black-painted walls, indirectly illuminating three round photograms made of stills from the films. The work as a whole fragmented the projector-to-screen vector into multiple sight lines, fully encompassing the space while accessing the uncanny charge of Granat's temperamental old 16-mm projectors, which flickered and whirred away atop pedestals, their lens apertures and vents emitting a vaguely infernal glow.

Granat's cinema is also "expanded" in that it permeates and is permeated by her other, frequently collaborative activities. These range from curating Cinema Zero's programs, to making various types of photographic prints (Xeroxes of broken mirrors, scans of layered imagery), to producing performances and sound compositions. At the opening of her first New York solo gallery show, "Scratch Films/Stars Way Out (for O.K.)," at Oliver Kamm/5BE last winter, she and composer Stefan Tcherepnin staged a performance in which the films' sound tracks were channeled through a vintage Serge Modular System, the pioneering synthesizer designed and built by Serge Tcherepnin (Stefan's uncle); a CD Granat and Stefan Tcherepnin had made together, *Teepees and Igloos*, was available at the gallery during the show. Granat produced a CD to accompany *Circle Jerk* as well, working in collaboration with musician Chris Anderson.

For "Scratch Films/Stars Way Out," Granat divided the gallery into two spaces, a black room and a white room. Her accompanying statement read, in part, "These films are movies made . . . from the attack and scratch of their own emulsion. . . . In nature we see it all around us. At the same time something is being created, something is being

destroyed.” The impulse to conceptualize her work around such binaries—black/white, creation/destruction, mechanical/organic, absence/presence—is also evident in her current plans to make negative, black-on-white versions of her scratch films. But, like the zeros and ones of binary code, these base components are deployed or activated in myriad (theoretically infinite) ways. Granat unlocks the recombinant potential of her work by recycling its elements (making a negative of a positive, making a print from a film still, wresting a kind of life-in-death from analog technics like the Serge Modular System) and reusing them in various permutations (as when she presents the same projectors, like kinetic readymades, in multiple installations).

And it is the logic of recombination, and the layering of meaning that can come from it, that accounts for the complex address of Granat’s art. If her work in some sense extends the tradition of filmmaking that “creates itself out of its own experience,” to quote curator John G. Hanhardt’s characterization of the tradition of medium-specific cinema that culminated with Structuralist film, it creates itself out of other experiences as well, expanding into other disciplines, other registers. The motif, for example, of an effulgent circle (hole punches, spotlights on walls), which crops up throughout her work, could be linked to blankness, ciphers, to the “zero” in *Cinema Zero*, to the reduction of film to the barest of terms. But it could also be linked to the moon—a figure Granat invokes in talking about her art, drawing a parallel between its cycles and a looped reel of film. Falling somewhere between Méliès’s iconic fantasy of lunar voyage, the archetypal establishing shots of vampire movies, and McCall’s projector-beam-as-sculpture, Granat’s luminous disks illuminate a cinema that is historical as well as temporal, allegorical as well as material.



Amy Granat, *Holepunch (for O.M.)*, 2005, still from a black-and-white film in 16 mm transferred to video, 1 minute.

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