This page and opposite: **Five stills from Luke Fowler's *All Divided Selves*, 2011,** HD video, color and black-and-white, sound, 93 minutes.

Undivided Attention

MARTIN HERBERT ON THE ART OF LUKE FOWLER

LUKE FOWLER'S *All Divided Selves*, 2011, a ninety-minute film centering on the once-notorious "anti-psychiatrist" R. D. Laing, divides documentary filmmaking against itself. Assembling archival footage of Laing, his critics, and his freewheeling treatment sessions, the Glasgow-based artist offers an intricate composite of clashing opinions and incompatible filmic registers, weights and counterweights. For seemingly every clip of Laing calmly unpacking his thoughts on, say, schizophrenia and the military-industrial complex to a (typically hostile) interviewer, there's a fusty mainstream psychiatrist spewing scorn. If a stretch of footage features Laing's patients taking a sanctioned ramble through mazy verbal abstractions or getting thumped on the back of the head by a group-therapy leader—Laing advocated such protocols in lieu of medication or conventional therapeutic methods—there's also a dazed woman consulting

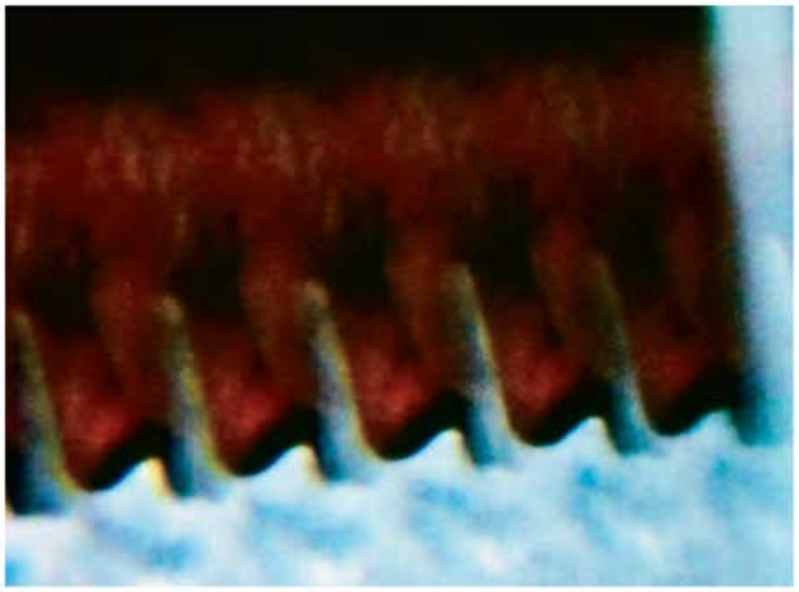
Two stills from Luke Fowler's *The Way Out*, 2003, digital video, color and black-and-white, sound, 33 minutes, in collaboration with Kosten Koper.

While each of Fowler's films has a charismatic individual at its core, they are not lone heroic *Rückenfiguren*. Each is embedded in an improvised and often threatened microsociety.

a conventionally tweedy shrink. He exhorts her to take her medication until she says, in a defeated monotone: "OK, I'll take the lithium." Laing is a visionary; he is an idiot. His methods ease suffering; no, they don't.

But even though the vintage footage is pieced into a linear chronicle of Laing's darkly picaresque life (moving from the streets of Glasgow, where he was born, to London, where he founded his live-in therapy center in the '60s, to evenhanded depictions of his later questionable forays into advice columns and poetry LPs), it is also intercut with another, nonarchival kind of filmmaking. Culled from 16-mm rushes shot by the artist over the course of two summers, this light-suffused secondary footage hews ardently to the natural world. Bugs struggle in soupy algae; sun dances on streamlets and on a wrinkled polyethylene bag in the backseat of a car. The stamens and pistils of plants shine greenly; bright color washes over the screen in intermittent abstract bursts. Occasionally, the images chime cleanly with Laing's own on-screen pronouncements and the film's consideration of alternative approaches to mental illness. We see a cow being branded as Laing talks about how social "laws" are implanted in individuals, and after glimpsing a page of a book about communism that a girl is reading while sunning herself on some rocks, we're shown a swath of billowing red cloth. The presence of Fowler as filmmaker is emphasized: More than one shot features him, Bolex viewfinder pressed to his face, reflected in a rearview mirror. But most of these interlaid vignettes are close-ups, magnifications of the richly changeable, sumptuously colorful texture of reality. It is hard to imagine how Fowler could more forcefully convey sheer presence and sensual immediacy—qualities in tension with, if not directly opposed to, the historicizing impulse of documentary—via cinematic means. Affect and cognition collide.

In their collaborative 2008 work, *B8016: Draw a Straight Line and Follow It*, Fowler and sound artist Lee Patterson shot footage and made field recordings on a highway cutting across the isle of Islay in the Scottish Inner Hebrides, splicing the results into a contemplative 16-mm film. In notes about the piece, the pair write that the project "shares concerns that are at the heart of both our practices: the art of observation—looking beneath the surface—and the art of collecting—reclaiming the undesired and overlooked." The tension between these two concerns or, perhaps more precisely, the effort to bring them into some kind of consonance, however glancing or tenuous, is palpable in *All Divided Selves* and is crucial to Fowler's larger ambit. For him, "the undesired and overlooked" is a category that enfolds, and puts into improbably meaningful conversation, a certain kind of historical



Two stills from Luke Fowler's *Pilgrimage from Scattered Points*, 2006, digital video, color and black-and-white, sound, 45 minutes.

figure and the minutiae of the physical world, which Fowler views with a naturalist's attentiveness.

Fowler made his first film on Laing in 2001, when in his early twenties. Titled *What You See Is Where You're At*, it offers a look at the broken residents of an East London community center used by Laing and others as a communelike asylum for the schizophrenic. Ever since that project, the artist has been an inveterate comber of the celluloid and videotape archive. The snippets he collects have found their way into a number of works that focus on denizens of the political, cultural, or social margins, with an emphasis on the problematic protagonists of the long '60s. Together these subjects form a loose constellation. As it road tests the polyphony of archival opinion that Fowler would later essay at feature length, *What You See Is Where You're At* offers glimpses of characters who will return in subsequent projects. Among them is mentally dislocated mathematician David Bell, the fulcrum of Fowler's installation of film, sound, and archival materials *The Nine Monads of David Bell*, 2006–2007. We also meet Laing's colleague Dr. Leon Redler, who helped Fowler realize *Bogman Palmjaguar*, 2007, a cinematic portrait of a grizzled, delusional environmental activist living a hermit's life in the Scottish wetlands. Just a few degrees of separation beyond these casualties of the counterculture are the determinedly outré British musicians Xentos "Fray Bentos" Jones and Cornelius Cardew, the respective subjects of Fowler's paradocumentaries *The Way Out*, 2003, made with British filmmaker Kosten Koper, and *Pilgrimage from Scattered Points*, 2006. Fowler's most recent film, *The Poor Stockinger, the Luddite Cropper and the Deluded Followers of Joanna Southcott*, 2012, deals with New Left historian E. P. Thompson, author of the epochal tome *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), and examines the Workers' Education Association in Yorkshire, a night school that brought laborers together with academics *engagés*.

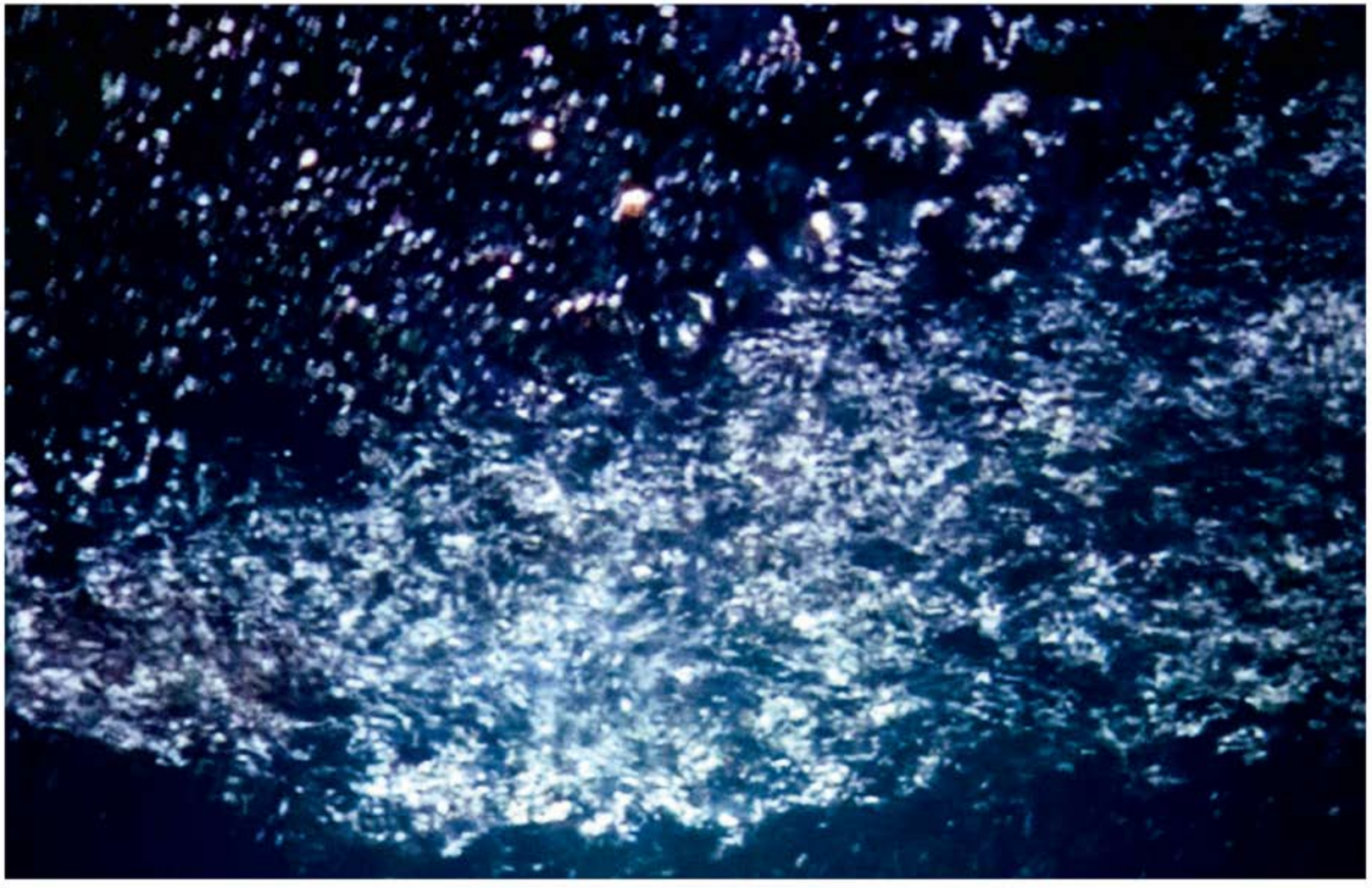
It's important to note that romantic nostalgia is not the common denominator of these forays into the recent past. If anything, an ingrained antiromanticism informs Fowler's work. In an interview with Redler in 2000, he said: "First and foremost I was drawn to [Laing's] experiment[s] because of personal circumstance, i.e., my own experiences of contemporary psychiatry . . . disillusion with the way in which my father was treated by the system, and an overall healthy, cynical attitude towards institutions." Beyond this hint of personal investment, one might say that Fowler's interest here, as in much of his work, is in a *group*, a community—in this case, the mentally ill. While each of his films has a charismatic individual at its core, they are not lone heroic *Rückenfiguren*. Each is embedded in an improvised and often threatened microsociety. The key issue in *Pilgrimage from Scattered Points* (which quotes extensively from Hanne Boenisch's 1971 film on Cardew, *Journey to the North Pole*) is the Marxist composer's efforts to create an orchestra of amateurs, the Scratch Orchestra, run on inclusive socialist principles. And though Xentos Jones is an outsider in one sense, he's part of an international, supportive community of otherwise untethered individuals (with discrete hubs like the London Musicians' Collective, operative since the mid-1970s) who've immersed themselves in making and listening to experimental music.

One senses that for Fowler there's a meaningful parallel between the microcommunities of his films and the microcommunities he himself is part of. Far from being merely an interested, *Wire*-browsing observer, Fowler has been a long-term participant in an experimental music scene that brings him into proximity with Jones and to Cardew's living colleagues. He has been in two bands, Rude Pravo and Lied Music, and has run the small label Shadazz for more than a decade. He has also made films and installations with sound artists such as Patterson and Toshiya Tsunoda. Other projects, meanwhile, trace links within the particular microculture of Glasgow—climatically harsh, creatively nurturing, Fowler's hometown as well as Laing's. The Glasgow footage

It's as if Fowler seeks to suture the divide Peter Wollen famously detected between avant-garde formal experimentation and the politically radical documentary of the '60s and '70s.

in *All Divided Selves* flips between grainy shots of the city as it was in Laing's day and contemporary images—we see the exteriors of old tenements and their relatively cleaned-up contemporary interiors, including what is presumably Fowler's office, with its slimline Mac. We could—and the film seems to imply we should—map Laing himself onto the same network that connects Fowler to the four subjects of his quartet of 16-mm shorts, *Tenement Films*, 2009, which were shot in an apartment building that Fowler lived in for eight years. In a 2009 exhibition catalogue published by the Serpentine Gallery, London, and Kunsthalle Zürich, Fowler describes the project in telling terms: "The films involve reflections on the four individuals, how they occupy these particular spaces and our relationships together."

Formally and aesthetically, Fowler's films also stake out particular sociocultural spaces. The *Tenement Films*, strikingly, are punctuated by flickering overlays, tricky views of reflections, near-abstract accelerated footage, accumulations of texture, color, and light, and impressionistic nonlinearity. On the sound tracks, arrhythmic handclaps and sine waves by Taku Unami, drones and field recordings by Patterson, crackling electronics by Tsunoda, and a lambent composition for cello and sine wave by Charles Curtis further undercut any semblance of naturalism and heighten associations with the lineage of nonnarrative filmmaking that culminated with the structuralists. In a 2007 piece for *Frieze* enumerating the filmmakers who have influenced him, Fowler cites Hollis Frampton while also expressing admiration for the documentary work of Lindsay Anderson and Peter Robinson. One way to understand his appearances in his own films *as* a filmmaker, camera in hand—in *All Divided Selves*, for example, or in several shots in *Tenement Films*—is as instances of reflection on what Fowler calls "our relationships together." Here the implied *we* is a community of filmmakers, one that would also include immediate predecessors like



Luke Fowler, *All Divided Selves*, 2011. HD video, color and black-and-white, sound, 93 minutes.

Above, from left: **Luke Fowler, *Anna (Tenement Films)*, 2009**, 16 mm, color, sound, 3 minutes. **Luke Fowler, *David (Tenement Films)*, 2009**, 16 mm, color, sound, 3 minutes. **Luke Fowler, *Lester (Tenement Films)*, 2009**, 16 mm, color, sound, 3 minutes.

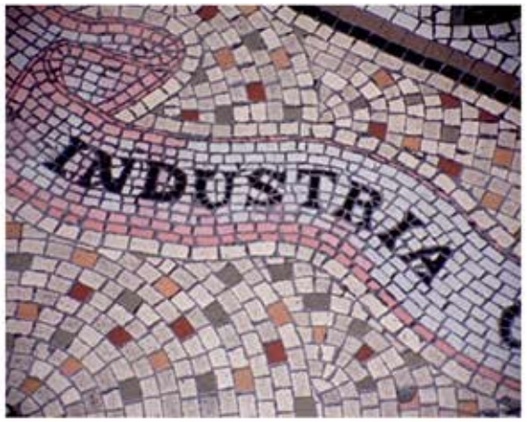
Mark Leckey and Johan Grimonprez, who made landmark use of archival footage in the '90s, as well as artists like Duncan Campbell and Elizabeth Price, who also take up documentary tactics. It's as if Fowler—or at least this representation of him, this Bolex-toting persona—seeks to suture the divide Peter Wollen famously detected between avant-garde formal experimentation and the politically radical documentary of the '60s and '70s.

Atomization is a word that, to my knowledge, never features in Fowler's art—but his practice feels defined against it. Its unnamed specter looms most frighteningly, and heartbreakingly, in *Bogman Palmjaguar*, the 2007 film facilitated by Redler. The fifty-seven-year-old Palmjaguar is a former radical conservationist and self-appointed protector of Scotland's waterways and wetlands, a would-be white knight for pond skaters and flowering bog weed. He is also seriously damaged, a haunted recluse, his face always hidden by a mask or visor. As he is interviewed by Redler, we learn that his mother is mentally unstable, that he has been accused of being a paranoid schizophrenic and of having "uncontrollable sexual urges," that he has long been caught up in labyrinthine legal proceedings, and that he is the victim of more than one attempted sectioning (i.e., involuntary commitment) by mental-health authorities. But between excerpts from this unreliable and splintered testimony, Fowler's camera roams through a verdant world, the Scottish countryside Palmjaguar loves. We seem to inhabit the point of view of this troubled man's best and happiest self, and his solicitude for nature appears increasingly admirable and moving. Observation, perhaps, is the way out of this diffuse, particulate atmosphere, this epistemic swampland.

In 2008, Fowler and Tsunoda produced *Composition for Flutter Screen*, an installation for which Fowler filmed, among other things, objects—a candle, a relief map, skeins of wire, a glass of water—after placing them in sites where Tsunoda had repeatedly

Above: **Two stills from Luke Fowler's *Bogman Palmjaguar*, 2007**, 16-mm and Super 8 film transferred to video, color, sound, 30 minutes.

Below: **Two stills from Luke Fowler's *A Grammar for Listening Part 1*, 2009**, 16 mm, color, sound, 22 minutes, in collaboration with Lee Patterson.



Three stills from Luke Fowler's *The Poor Stockinger, the Luddite Cropper and the Deluded Followers of Joanna Southcott*, 2012. HD video, color and black-and-white, sound, 61 minutes.

Fowler, in his bifurcating and intertwining works, suggests that one must always approach things aslant, masking one's advance.

made field recordings. The artifacts are employed as improvised meteorological instruments, visually registering shifting conditions of wind and light as the camera maintains static close-ups. Redoubling these fluxions, the footage is projected onto a suspended sheet, intermittently blown by a fan, with the screening room's darkness periodically undone by timed bursts of light. Another motif in the film, of a trembling butterfly gripped between two fingers, is perhaps metonymic for attempts to trap the evanescent. *Flutter Screen* thus connects itself to the tradition of difficult, interruptive experimental film that refuses the blandishments of narrative and the narcotizing suspension of disbelief. But it also has another function. At the Yokohama Triennial in 2008, where the work premiered, I watched Fowler and Tsunoda present a live performance involving, in part, slowly pushing various lengths of metal along a table until the objects fell, clanging, to the stage. Unappealing as this may sound, it had the virtue of attuning one entirely to the action—instigating uneasy and surprisingly riveting anticipation and release, followed by a private, inward comparison of sonic events.

Increasingly, Fowler (following the Cagean legacy) proposes hearing as a primary observational sense, and he uses sound to lock his audience into a moment, an event. In 2009, he pushed this emphasis on alertness to the qualities and properties of noise with *A Grammar for Listening*, a trio of films (or, perhaps more precisely, visual accompaniments to intricate, contingent sound tracks) made in collaboration with, respectively, Patterson, Tsunoda, and Eric La Casa. In the segment created with Patterson, for example, layered aural textures located by underwater microphones in Scottish rivers and lochs, as well as the surprisingly cacophonous sounds of burning walnuts, are amplified and isolated alongside Fowler's macro close-ups of the sound-producing subjects' surfaces. One is immersed, via immensely sensitive digital recording, in teeming sound worlds. An immolated walnut, it turns out, squeaks, roars and whooshes; water clicks and scratches.

But how to reconcile observation and collecting? How to map such experiential raptures or paroxysms onto the very particular histories Fowler explores, with their very particular politics? His recent *The Poor Stockinger, the Luddite Cropper and the Deluded Followers of Joanna Southcott* throws the question into sharp relief. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* and other landmark texts of the time, such as Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*, were written while their authors were teaching under the auspices of the Workers' Education Association. The film seems to acknowledge the fact that this class, and thus the brand of Left social history pioneered by Thompson, has effectively been torn asunder. It is also pertinent that such a film—concerned with democratic access to learning—is being made at a time when, thanks to increased tuition fees, higher education in the UK is becoming inaccessible to anyone outside the middle and upper classes. However, Fowler's film doesn't spoon-feed this topical resonance. Implicit here is a key issue in his art: the problem of dogmatism and of how one might articulate a nondogmatic cultural politics. Fowler, in his bifurcating and intertwining works, suggests that it can't be done directly, that one must always approach things aslant, masking one's advance.

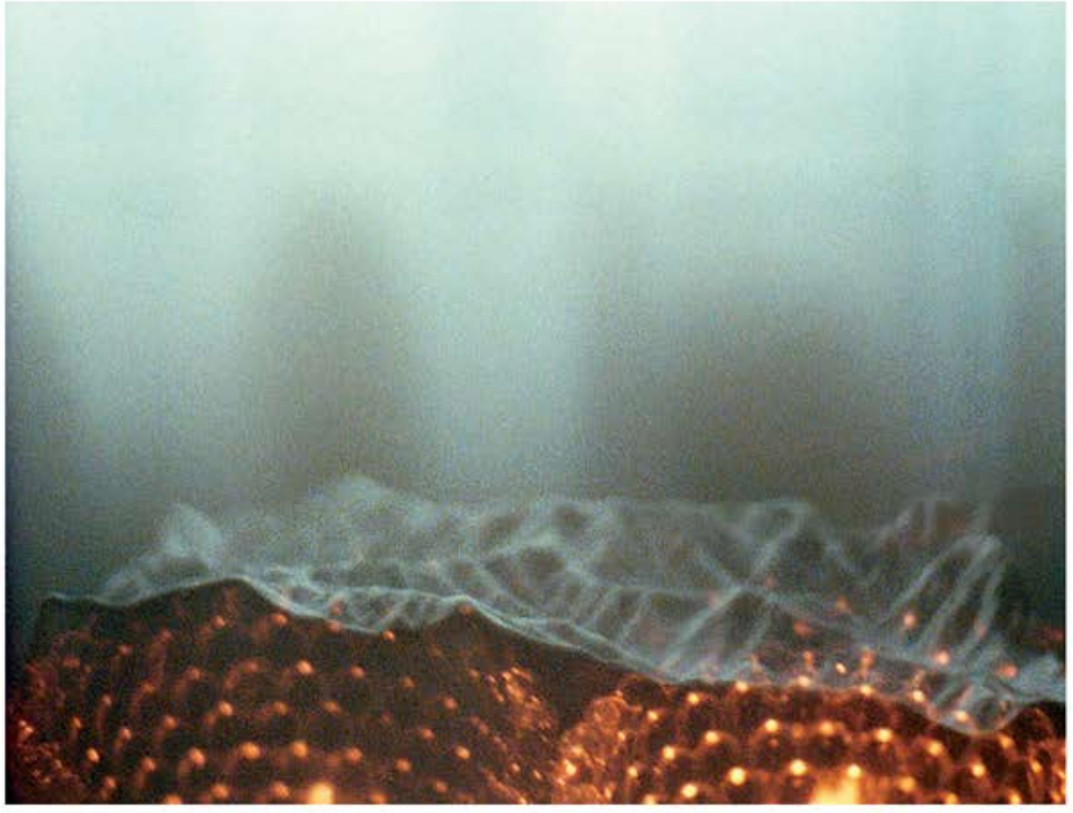
Aptly, then, Thompson's writings within *The Poor Stockinger* are narrated by the artist Cerith Wyn Evans, whom Fowler has said he views as a representative of a kind of stubborn, resistant practice. Certainly, the older artist, who breaks the fourth wall a couple of times by commenting on the beauty of Thompson's writing and addressing Fowler directly, is as far from the conventional BBC-style authoritative narrator as one can get. The film subtly reprises the fracturing and ruptures of Fowler's earlier paradocumentaries, as one is asked to harmonize the historical texts with the artist's on-the-hoof shots of towns and cities in Yorkshire. Such footage, clearly, can never hope to summarize these communities' complex histories and presents, just as the film in its entirety can't possibly do more than limn the complicated shifts in the UK's sociopolitical structure since Thompson's day. In a work such as this, a figure whose contrary precepts might be useful to think *with*, or *through*, sits at the heart of a filmic structure that

also demands different kinds of close focus. In other words, though one senses that Fowler broadly approves of the ideas and the tenacity of the cultural avatars he elliptically profiles, it seems irrelevant whether we agree with his subjects or even whether we judge them. They occupy the same space as the clang of a piece of metal falling to the floor or the play of light on a bundle of wire. In some ways, Fowler might be seen as pursuing an updated version of Thompson's approach to social history while conceding that models of historical practice have to change with the times—that they ought to develop a heuristic model and a historical methodology around the networked and spectacularized realities of our postindustrial present. As such, Fowler's emphasis on sound also makes sense as a method of countering spectacle, which is abundantly visual; so, too, does his shattering of linear narrative.

On the one hand, then—whether by closing in on the fine grain of the quotidian world or by returning us to the "undesired and overlooked" aspects of the recent past—Fowler proposes a ramifying, conscientious mode of attention. He suggests, without the dogmatism that would seem inimical to his modeling of thoughtful engagement, that our orientations toward an iridescent bug on a leaf and toward an educational policy—each soliciting active engagement with our environment, from the tiniest scale to the largest—are points on the same axis. On the other hand, Fowler implies that this engagement is always mediated, and that it's only by torquing those mediations or rerouting them—via sound, for example—that we may, if we're fortunate, apprehend the conditions that envelop us.

Not that we should dismiss as incidental Fowler's narratives concerning the fate of the Left over the past half century, of course, or his determined nods to self-organized cells—blooming from a tenement kitchen outward—that resist the imperatives of a stultifying monoculture. But that's not the place to start, or end. Note that the image on the cover of Fowler's 2009 exhibition catalogue is not one of some historical, or even contemporary, figure of resistance but a still from *Composition for Flutter Screen*, the skittish butterfly held tenderly for observation, pointedly letterboxed by sprockets. And note the closing lines of the song that plays over the credits of *All Divided Selves*: "In the underworld of feeling / Divided selves will all be healed." □

MARTIN HERBERT IS A WRITER AND CRITIC BASED IN TUNBRIDGE WELLS, KENT, UK.



Still and filmstrip from Luke Fowler's *Composition for Flutter Screen*, 2008, installation with 16-mm color film, projector, screen, timer, wire, fans, lights, dimensions variable, in collaboration with Toshiya Tsunoda.

Herbert, Martin: 'Undivided Attention', *Artforum,* October 2012