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Interactive Coast

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INTERACTIVE COAST:

A FILM INSTALLATION

by

MANUELA MONSALVE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Film
in the College of Science
and in the Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

Interactive Coast is a moving-image art installation that will mix 16mm film and digital footage. Inspired by the cyclical nature of the biological concept of *succession*, this installation will focus on human interactions with nature and architecture, specifically at the beaches on the East Coast of Florida. In its biological definition of the word, “Succession is the gradual transformation or creation of a biological community as new species move into an area and modify local environmental conditions” (Rehkopf 1581). The coast, once with its undeveloped tract of mangroves and sand dunes is now interspersed with construction, oil spills, and commercial development of natural habitats on the coast. The timeline of humanity on earth seems bleak, but may just be part of a cycle that ultimately leaves nature to one day take back its environment. My creative process of making this installation involves exploring and drawing critical conclusions about the effect of human development and activity on the cycles of the natural environment—with Hollywood beach as a visual, creative, and exploratory case study. The evolution of film stock succeeded by digital data, will act as a parallel motif in the project—this will serve as a form of a cycle, like the nitrogen or phosphorous cycle. The installation will place the viewer surrounded by three screens and observing the cycle take place. In the end, I hope that the installation will assist in drawing more attention to the current epoch of human destruction known as Anthropocene.

DEDICATION

For Hollywood.

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INTRODUCTION

The title “Interactive Coast” stems from the Intercoastal Waterway along the coast of Hollywood, Florida and how through the process of dredging, humans have displaced and killed thousands of species based on choices that were loosely decided upon by certain historical figures. Human actions have consequences for the environment. My interest in documenting human recreation and action along the coast of Hollywood, Florida originates from philosophical interests of choice, commercial development, human recreation, and their impacts on the environment.

The exposure to an environmental life beyond me, began at a marine magnet high school. There, I learned the complex marine ecosystem in South Florida, dissected the anatomy and taxonomy of most marine life on the cladogram, tagged sharks, and searched the halophyte coastline for small critters. I saw the world differently and applied what I learned into my filmmaking and photographic style. I focus on how the natural environment interacts with humans and its fluctuation based on certain factors leaning into whichever side, like grass growing through concrete or manatees with dorsal scars. Having no observation on our surroundings is a common fault in human characteristics, we learn as times grows and eras pass.

An era can define the actions of human choice. We evolve as time evolves all things around us. The study of choice and human action and why I choose to film them was a topic I had always struggled with comprehending until coming across *Existentialism is a Humanism*, by Jean Paul Sartre. This essay explores the study of human choice within existentialism and how it

is perceived through the mind of Sartre. “The first objection, that you can choose whatever you like, is simply incorrect. In one sense, choice is possible, what is impossible is not to choose. I can always choose, but I must also realize that if I decide not to choose, that still constitutes as a choice” (Sartre 44). Here, Sartre suggests that the very nature of human evolution is based upon choice and the results of why people do the things they do and in not choosing to do the right thing, they choose to do the wrong thing. For instance, the choice in exploiting and polluting an environment will eventually lead to an extremity of mass casualty in biotic and abiotic production. Sartre also brings up the point of humans being confined by an era and therefore limiting the choices they can possibly make. “Human nature does not exist; in other words: every era evolves according to its own dialectical laws, and men are defined by their era, not by human nature” (Sartre 70). This quote leads my search in understanding the history of my hometown a bit further and leading me to the question if choices being examined through an era changes the way we study human choice.

History has a way of resurfacing and can be compared to the process of *upwelling*, a phenomenon where wind blowing parallel to a coast causes water from the deep ocean to be brought up to the surface (He & Mahadevan, 2021). This process is helpful in replenishing marine life lacking nutrients at the surface, the same way history replenishes us with knowledge and an understanding of how we got to where we are.

The era of John D. Rockefeller and his right-hand man, Henry Flagler, spawns the company of *Standard Oil* in 1870 (Gallagher, 2018). This company ran on the choice to deplete North America of its natural resources for more capital through the symbiotic relationship

between a producer and a consumer, by supplying the crude and refined oil for light fuel. Oil redefined life in America and Europe as the two dominated in the oil industry making longer days and shorter nights. The era in which they lived could never see the consequences of their actions and therefore never saw the symbiotic relationship turn parasitic. This unnatural fluctuation of power is an unhealthy dynamic that has consequences from the exploitative action of purging the earth. What else can be said about the Gilded Age than its false pretense of progressive, evolutionary change than proposed by people like John D. Rockefeller and Henry Flagler. Eventually, Flagler found himself on the outskirts of Standard Oil and in charge of the railroad expansion in Florida. He sensed the potential of tourism, so he built hotels, bridges and railroads, a catalyst that led to the boom of economic welfare in Florida. The state was an untouched promised goldmine of financial opportunity and is referred to as such in *The Cleveland Correspondence* that explores the past choices and conversations between Julia D. Tuttle and John D. Rockefeller. Talks of investing and failed winter planned trips to Italy between neighbors in Miami, the two billionaires discuss their business affairs and rumors of pouring money into this tropical swamp. But eventually, Rockefeller denies being interested in buying land in South Florida (Akin 59). It is fair to assume that the purely capitalistic venture to extend the Tuttle legacy in Miami and the rest of Florida drew more tourists, and therefore more money seeking businessmen to tear up the coastline for luxurious living. This industrial change occurring along the coast were the results of choices made by Flagler and Tuttle to destroy land and natural environments for the sake of wealth and commerce. But if it weren't them, it would be some other billionaire--because history has a way of repeating itself and land mass always has a way of being colonized.

With the success Flagler and Tuttle brought to the east coast of Florida, it was only right for Mr. Joseph Young to take his big Hollywood, California dreams and recreate them nowhere else but in Hollywood, Florida (“History of Hollywood”, 2021). Young planned for large parallel streets from the beach to the Everglades with circles interspersed into the boulevard of his “Dream City”. The history of Hollywood Archives discusses how “One end of each lake would empty into the Intracoastal Waterway and the other would serve as a twin turning basin for private yachts’ (“History of Hollywood”, 2021). This only further proved that the coast was mainly for the wealthy who would displace poor, working class people to the other side of US1. The long-term effects of redlining couldn’t be more obvious in the 21st century. History can be seen in plain sight in the form of mansions with boat docks on the intercoastal, to smaller homes surrounded by motels that are later torn down and are replaced with condos all down the boulevard. The construction of unaffordable living spaces in any location is harmful to those being displaced. Whilst living wages stay the same, the markets for living spaces get higher and harder to afford and for many, they’re left with no option but to move out and even lose their home. When one building collapses due to poor management and ignorance to complaints, two more take its place, as seen in the tragic collapse of a surfside condominium (Martinez, 2021). This and all the buildings built along the coast, that were brought by Flagler and Tuttle’s apparent idea to make Miami the next New York, were built on marshes and mangroves that were once the homes of thousands of species, are now likely doomed to be swallowed back up by the sea or collapse due to poor sedimentary infrastructure. If a course of action isn’t taken, Miami and the rest of Florida will someday be underwater where the very same limestone and coral sediments that make up the buildings will be submerged once again.

The intention with this installation is for it to serve as an observation of the evolution between humans, nature, and architecture. This Venn diagram, where humans are the union of its interaction, has brought destruction and creativity, art and demolition, construction and gentrification. I often find it difficult to identify the meaning of what I choose to film and photograph. I ask myself: “Why am I drawn to people and their choices? What does nature and architecture, as a dichotomy, have to do with the future of civilization?” I hope that with this film installation, the audience can take away some feeling of responsibility—that choices carry on and can lead to damaging consequences for the environment. I want for them to also hold the billionaires, bringing the irreversible change upon our hometowns, responsible for the damage they cause in this country and all around the world. Even if their choices were made an era where they seemed to be the best option, it has led us to an era where we are forced to deal with them in a life or death situation. The Era of Anthropocene can only be defined by the choices of those living it and the actions that will be taken to change the course of history. Not only do we need change on a smaller scale, within ourselves and our choices, but within the small percentage of people that have the power to end the mass destruction of our planet. Awareness is not enough to save humanity from nature’s rightful vengeance.

AESTHETIC LITERACY

Kathryn Ramey's *Experimental Filmmaking: Break the Machine*, examines experimental cinema and explores all of the techniques that make analog filmmaking an art and science. Ramey goes into how to 'destroy' film in chapter one, and is achieved by scratching the emulsion side of the film strip. I achieved an effect of "dredged emulsion" for my rolls of film to represent decay and or evolution by burying the rolls in sand collected from the beach. Hand processing your own film is an experimental technique that allows a filmmaker to experiment with the production of their own film (Ramey, 144).

My desired experimental narrative can be compared to Stan Brakhage's *The Dante Quartet*, a short experimental film that depicts the stages of hell through the use of direct animation on clear leader film. This film is an evolutionary walkthrough Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* and does so with visual storytelling by the means of the film create technique mentioned in Ramey's book. This form of film art brings awareness to the film medium and detaches the viewer from the mindset of this being an average narrative film. but instead has its own form of narrative and characters given to it by the artist and an entirely new meaning from its audience. The same way I arbitrarily filmed Hollywood, I created a story that depicts the past and future of a city destined for chaos if not dealt with the environmental issues at hand.

For my photographic and auditory inspirations, I look to no other than Agnès Varda's *Du côté de la côte (Along the Coast)* (1958). This film serves as a documentation and travelogue of the French Riviera and used as a means of historical journalism through nostalgic and witty story telling. She explores her attachment to the location by recalling memories whilst also critiquing

capitalist classism and the nature of humanity as a whole. Varda uses satirical narration to communicate what the audience is seeing and creates poems and stories based on the people she films, creating her own immersive world on the screen. For my film, I captured wild tracks and crafted a sound design to narrate what I record as I film the coast—like a documentary would, but, in a way that evolves into the distortion of the voice of humanity as the film begins to decay. With the undertones of a docu-fictional tale, the narration was scored by an original track, made on my Akai MPK Mini III sound system. I wanted the sound to feel viscerally haunting to put the audience in a time and place not so far away, somewhere where we can find ourselves if we let the fight for a better future dissipate.

Sound as a literary technique can draw in an audience member and guide whatever it is they're focusing on in the installation. Sound in film, or lack thereof, is one of the most important mediums in telling a story. *Interactive Coast* is comparable to the work by the artists and scientists *Coral Morphologic*, a duo that use their platform to draw attention to marine species that habituate Miami coral reefs. The creators of the group, Colin Foord and J.D McKay, take their footage documentation of corals that they have successfully grown in a controlled lab environment meant to mimic the South Floridian photic zone and project them onto Miami landscapes. "The idea of projecting corals onto limestone was a really important part of our artistic practice. The cement and limestone that comprised the buildings of Miami, is actually fossilized coral from ions passed when Miami was underwater" (Mcswain, 00:12:17-00:12:23). This installation of projecting living corals onto fossilized corals is a motif that inspired me to use the dead organic materials that make up the sand of Hollywood beach and place at the base of the screens where my film will be projected upon.

The immersive installation, *Ngurini (Searching)* (2015), by Jessie Boylan, is another example of how I wanted my installation to look in terms of isolating the viewers with the use of large screens and diminishing their options of what they're looking at in the space. By magnifying the coast and immersing the audience within the world of *Interactive Coast*, I can produce a means of bringing out emotion and curiosity in the audience while also making them feel small in the grand scheme of things (see fig. 5).

PRODUCTION LITERACY

The installation consisted of three large 12 by 10 white sheets, for rear projection. The base each screen had collected sand from the Hollywood beach to connect the installation with the actual pieces of raw organic material that makes up the sandy intertidal. The film strip itself was manipulated by burying the film and creating a dredged effect on the emulsion of the film strip. This is a type of ‘film destroy’ technique, such as scratching or bleaching the strip that bring awareness to the medium being used as an expressive conduit, that is explored in Ramey’s book. As shown in the works of Jennifer West’s *Pink Beach Red Desert Dream Sand* (2017), the technique of dragging the film strip along the coast in the sand serves as a metaphor for a migrating human pattern interacting with the dead animals that make up the sandy intertidal.

Over the summer, I used the Blackmagic Pocket Cinema camera with a pistol grip to capture the digital footage being used in the piece (see fig. 1). This was a camera I had never used before and was a fun experience to get to use a digital camera of that caliber. I used a 75mm Canon zoom lens to capture people down the coastline, off the pier, and from the tops of parking garages. Later at the start of the fall semester, I filmed two rolls of black & white Reversal stock and 2 rolls of black & white Negative stock 16mm Kodak film via the Bolex H-16 with a Angénieux 12-120mm zoom lens. Shot through out two different days in Hollywood beach, I captured different areas along the coast, filming different tourist and beachgoers alike thanks to the help of my assistant cameras: Maya Fiorella and Tatiana and Valeria Monsalve.

The idea to use black and white film instead of color is to emulate the idea that this installation is a look at the past of what once was our way of living, in hopes that we act on our

current and past mistakes. After filming with the Bolex, I collected buckets of sand from the beach to use as part of the installation and film destroy prop. As aforementioned, Ramey composes different hand processing techniques for experimental filmmakers that work with 16mm film, in her book. In high school, I had the opportunity to shoot and develop my own photographs, so I thought it would be another great experience to evolve towards hand processing motion picture film. I developed both negative films in a Morse G3 developing tank in the dark room located in the Visual Arts building on the main UCF campus. This tank works as a turning mechanism that allows you to spool and unspool the rolls of film at a rate that exposes the emulsion to the developer. Though there are many other ways and chemicals to use to process film, I decided to use Kodak D-76, film fixer, and water. Developing my own film allows me the opportunity to take my time on the film process and have full responsibility for the eventual outcome of the image. This way, the film will have a natural progression to destruction. Because of the much complicated and expensive processing that reversal stocks entail, I shipped the two rolls to Cinelab in Massachusetts to get processed and digitized. After having developed the negative films, the digitization of them entails using the 16mm Steenbeck Flatbed and capturing the projection with a digital camera. The idea is to have the film de-evolve back into film from digital, the installation will be left on loop leaving the beginning and end up to the audience. This way, one can enter the installation midway and still have the experience if they stay long enough to witness the loop.

Going into the editing process, I knew that I wanted to devolve from the digital footage I had captured to the reversal stock to the negative stock, that I later inverted on Premier Pro. The handheld digital footage had quick pans that seamlessly cut to different scenes together in a blink

of an eye, as if we were witnessing a memory of something calling our name. In certain moments, I tend to film scenes that call out to me begging to be immortalized. Then the film backtracks to reversal stock shot with a rather sessile approach with the help of a tripod. The film is cut with in-camera editing visual effects, another technique used by experimental filmmakers. This effect took the film itself and disrupted its reality of having just one image in the frame and serves as another transition to devolve even further to the hand processed negative stocks that were buried in the case study itself. The film destroy technique was very apparent in sections where I had taped the sand on and sections where I wiped the sand off with an alcohol wipe that smudged away at the chemical residues. After this section of the loop, I mix all digital and film footage as if it were the upwelling of all the prior footage compiling at the bottom of the ocean waiting for it to be used again. And eventually the film loops.

EXHIBITION PROCESS

After picture-locking and crafting the sound design and score, I prepared for the setting up of the installation (see fig. 6). With the help of the workers in the Film equipment room, I was able to set up on the UCF film soundstage a day before the event took place. I decided to use four high roller stands, two 12-foot speed rails, and two 6-foot speed rails to hang the screens from. The rest of the stage was curtained off with the use of solid side floppies and 8-foot solid flags. The screens were set up in the manner of a welcoming hug, a caved reality. After getting the screens all taut and wrinkle free, I set up and cribbed the projectors until I found the right height and distance away from the screens. Then using three speakers for each screen and one for atmospheric ambience, I brought the soundscape to life. The middle screen held the audience captive with its narration, but the two side screens held side conversations and foley sound effects. The top speaker was a wild track of the waves crashed on a loop on top of an original score that brought tension to the room. The idea of putting the waves above the audience was to bring the idea that Florida will one day be submerged and that our voices and of those around us be drowned out below the surface. My family helped me finish up of the deployment of sand at the base of the screen. I then reunited the rolls of negative footage and the Hollywood beach sand, nodding to the main issues of pollution found all around the world on all coastlines and river banks. Getting to hear from people and their experience within the three screens was an exhilarating form of critique: what stuck with them the most, what they felt was the most intriguing, and how the sound made them feel.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Seeing how people reacted to the film was enough for me to feel like I achieved what I planned. People said they felt as if they were watching the past from the future and that the sound was effective at immersing them in the film. Friends and family from my hometown felt I captured a fleeting memory. I explained my process and ideas with them and in the end felt as if I was exposing information to people that isn't as attainable to everyone. This installation is a culmination of me and my hometown and in a way, a form of immortalization for a landscape that's bound to evolve one way or another.

APPENDIX A:
FILM STILLS AND EDITING PROCESS



Digital Handheld Still (Figure 1)



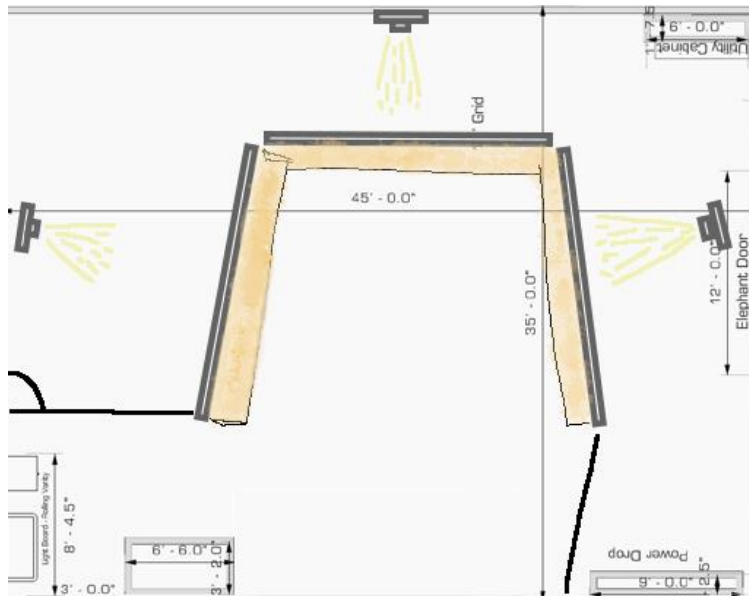
Digital Handheld Still (Figure 2)



In-Camera Editing Reversal Stock (Figure 2)



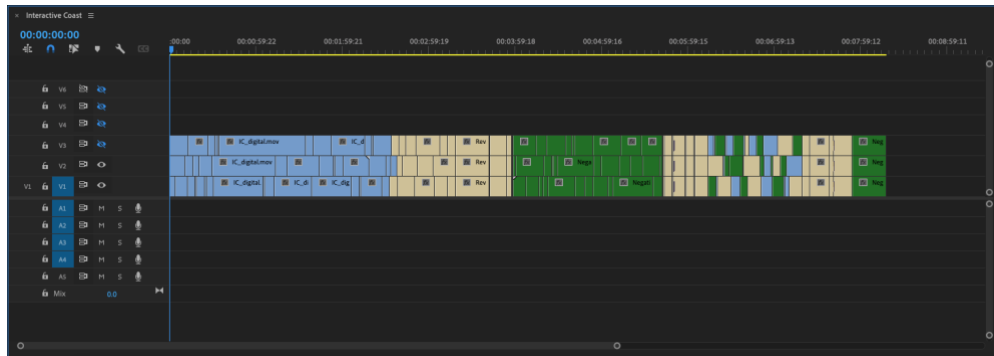
Hand Processed Negative Stock (Figure 3)



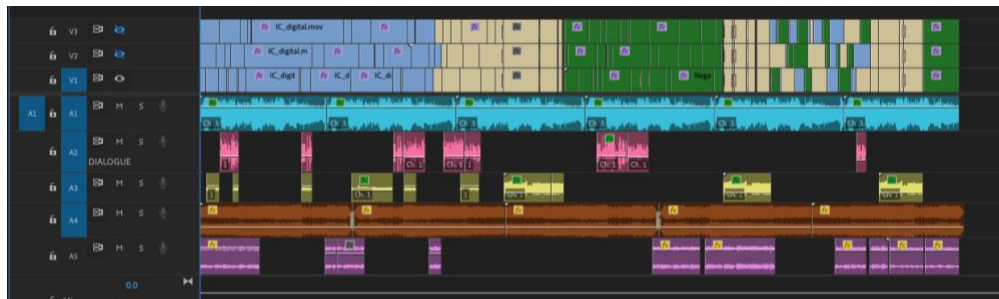
Installation Blueprint (Figure 4)



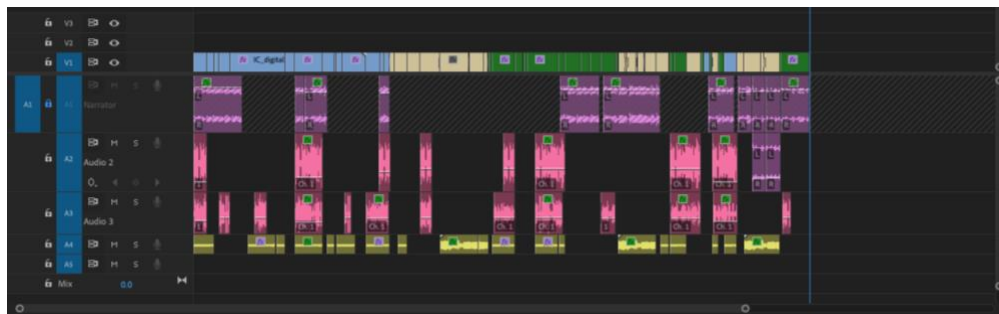
Installation (Figure 5)



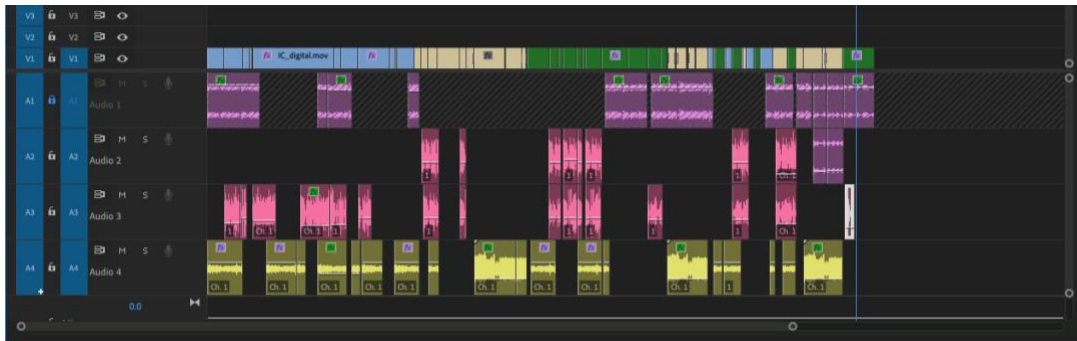
Editing Timeline (Figure 6)



Screen 1 Timeline (Figure 7)



Screen 2 Timeline (Figure 8)



Screen 3 Timeline (Figure 9)

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