



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
Edinburgh College of Art

UOA D32

ART AND DESIGN:
HISTORY, THEORY AND PRACTICE



RESEARCHER

Mike Windle

OUTPUT TITLE

The Unconformity Project

OUTPUT TYPE

Digital or Visual Media

DATE

March 2016

FIG. 1
The Bass Rock, from Seacliff. Film
still from *The Unconformity Project*.
Image Mike Windle.



Link to output:

https://media.ed.ac.uk/media/t/1_f20mecuc

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.7488/6f1ecdb4-f3ca-477e-9e8e-1fee76e5fda7>

01 / STATEMENT

The Unconformity Project is a 22-minute single-screen experimental artist's film. The film takes as its subject the 'Hutton's Unconformity', a rock schism and important geological discovery by the 18th century Scottish geologist James Hutton, on the South East Coast of Scotland.

Windle uses ethnographic documentary filmmaking technique to gather and weave together broad research strands from geology, theology and cultural theory. The film brings together film footage, computer generated imagery, and visual text, accompanied by a soundtrack of field recordings, conversation and a voice-over spoken by Windle.

The Unconformity Project was funded by East Lothian Council and Creative Scotland and selected for and screened at The Berlin Experimental Film Festival, now titled the Berlin Revolution Film Festival, December 2016, an internationally recognised platform for experimental film.

The research methodology involved archival, field and site-specific research. Central to the research was Windle's re-enactment of Hutton's boat trip around the South East Coast of Scotland. Over a period of twelve months, the resulting footage and sound were combined with computer generated imagery and voiceover recording, through processes of digital compositing and video editing.

02 / RESEARCH DIMENSIONS

FIG. 2
The Unconformity Project. Film still,
showing 'Hutton's Unconformity'.
Image Mike Windle.

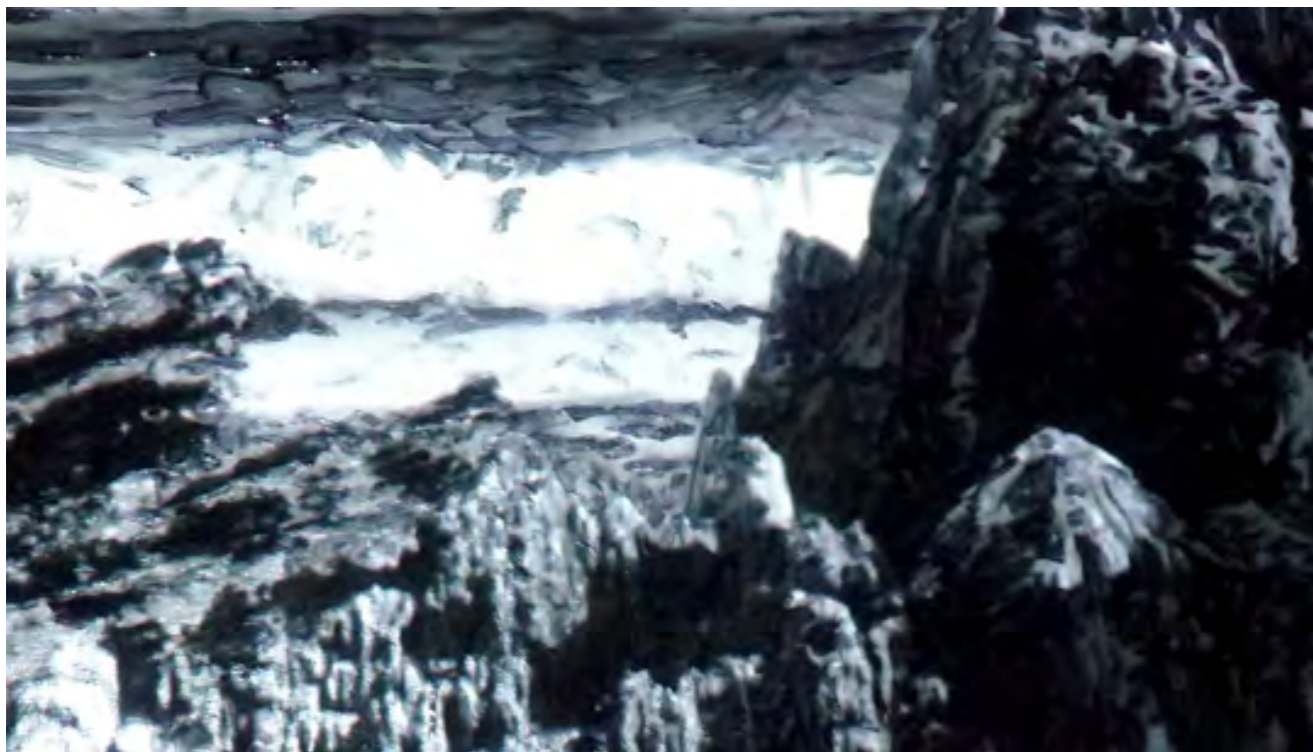


FIG. 3
At 'Hutton's Unconformity'.
Photo Mike Windle.

The *Unconformity Project* is a 22-minute single-screen experimental artist's film. The research is driven by three areas of enquiry:

1. How works of art can reanimate and bring new meaning to historical events through a combination of idioms.
2. How, in telling the stories of past events, the artist becomes anthropologist, and what these shifts of position can bring to the experience of the artwork.
3. How historical episodes can bring new light to the contemporary relation between art and science.

The research takes as its starting point 'Hutton's Unconformity', a rock schism and important geological discovery by the Scottish geologist James Hutton, in 1788 on the South East Coast of Scotland. Hutton's interpretation of this geological feature was taken as geological evidence of Deep Time, and proof of a world that is billions of years old – an idea in conflict with the Christian dating of creation to c4000BC. Windle was interested in the contradictions within the Scottish Enlightenment between religious and scientific belief and wanted to capture these tensions in film.

Windle's film retraces the events of the Unconformity story, centering around the boat trip that Hutton made with William Playfair and the geologist James Hall to investigate the rock formations around the coast of Scotland. In *The Unconformity Project* the story of the boat trip has been reimagined in a psychogeographic film work, where historical facts appear to be discovered through the process of making. Windle has attempted to retain the spirit of Hutton's storytelling that was recounted by John Playfair

The film takes a playful approach – inspired by the theories of Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag – to create a process-based narrative that combines film footage, computer generated imagery, and visual text, accompanied by a soundtrack of field recordings, conversations, and Windle's voice-over as interior thoughts that reflect upon content and structure, mirroring what is seen on screen. Together, these formal elements create an immersive filmic experience of the process of discovery.

FIG. 4
At 'Hutton's Unconformity'.
Photo Mike Windle.

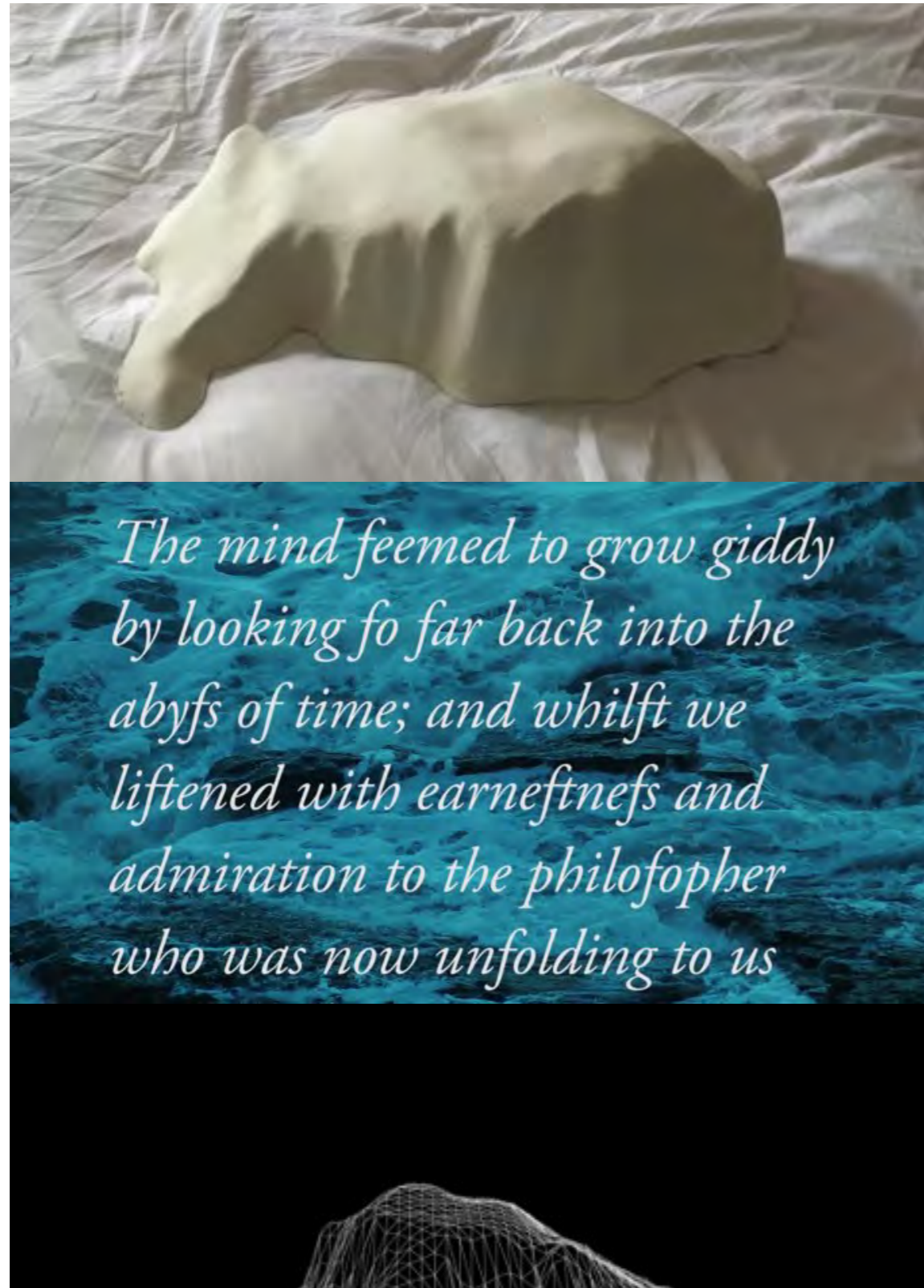


FIG. 5
St Baldred's Beacon.
Photo Mike Windle.



FIG. 6

The Unconformity Project, film still showing Bass Rock model and wireframe lasercut from Google Earth co-ordinates, the sea, and text by Playfair. Photo Mike Windle.



03 / ORIGINALITY

Production of the film was unconventional, purposefully sidestepping mainstream filmmaking techniques such as plot and action, and production teams.

Entirely non-formulaic, filmmaking was a non-scripted, non-storyboarded processual exploration that involved Windle constructing in an intuitive and responsive manner. The process is real-time in the voiceover, and structural filmic decision making is made apparent as the story unfolds.

The result was a performative and painterly use of film, that mirrors landscape painting in both process and aesthetic, and which connects to Windle's background as a painter and his broader research practice in landscape painting.

Windle takes a stance as artist as observer/witness to an event. As a non-expert, the artist is able to pose questions differently and lead the viewer to a new way of seeing and learning about the history of science through storytelling.

This is an approach that draws upon recent research (Tim Ingold) concerning the important role of the artist within anthropological inquiry.

The new knowledge embodied by the research concerns the way in which seminal scientific discoveries of the past can be re-animated and experienced anew through innovative artistic techniques, materials and processes. The film extends Windle's longstanding interest in personal cinema and is a contribution to filmic explorations of the intersections between memory, time, storytelling, autobiography and documentary. It also prompts reflection on the relations of painting and film in their ability to convey past experience.

FIGS. 7 & 8

Film stills: the Bass Rock, East Lothian, at the end of 'Hutton's Unconformity' with engraving by W. Miller after J. Thomson, 1843.



04 / RIGOUR

The Unconformity Project began with field-based and archive-based research that enabled Windle to understand the scientific and historical background of the discovery.

Archival research included research on the 'Hutton's Unconformity', and the figure of Hutton himself. Insights from William Playfair's article on the discovery, published in the proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, were also incorporated into the film. Windle's aim was to create a film that demonstrated possession of the facts whilst testing the threshold of these facts in creative ways.

During research trips to Greece in 2016, Windle researched the cultural embedding of myths in geological remnants in ancient and contemporary Greece. He was struck by displays of rock in the Acropolis Museum in Athens, and how these lent weight to mythic tales. He used this insight in his representation of rock formations in his film – experimenting with their character as fixed truths.

Research continued with interviews with professional ecologist Ewan Davidson and anthropologist and explorer Duncan Ellis, both of whom feature in the film. Windle used the interviews to explore the limits of expertise in the reconstruction of historical events. In the film, he uses his own voice to introduce query, speculation and disbelief, prompting a reflexive and imaginative relation to the story.

FIG. 9

At Sicar Point.
Photo Mike Windle.



FIG. 10
At Sicar Point.
Photo Mike Windle.

A key aspect of the production involved Windle's re-enactment of Hutton's boat trip around the South East Coast of Scotland. Over a period of twelve months the resulting footage and sound were combined with computer generated imagery and voiceover recording, through processes of digital compositing and video editing. This was a sole-authored process, and the intimate and idiosyncratic crafting of the film was important to its character as an independent research project. In this idea of personal re-creation of a collective event, and the creation of stories through individual experience, Windle was drawing on Alain Bergala's insights in his classic 2002 text, 'The Cinema Hypothesis' but also the work of classic filmmakers such as Andrei Tarkovsky.

The film was developed in iterative stages, by sharing with a selected audience of professional peers for critical review at various stages of development. Feedback was re-integrated into the work as a continual process of reflection. This enabled an eclectic, personal and open approach to filmmaking.

The final form of the film is structured into non-linear chapters, as a stream of consciousness. This narrative employs the rich opportunities of digital photography and editing to explore colour and form and present porous ideas that chime with history, religious authority, internal monologue – encouraging multiple readings.

The result is a film that, in Susan Sontag's words, is 'both about something and is something'. That is, the film is intended to be not only illustrative but also to contain something of the material of rock and wind and time, told in a personal way.

Formal features of the film

The painterly qualities of the film were crucial, as a way both of experimenting with the feeling of time, and with the integration of the artist's own experience across media. The film was made as a painter uses paint, with a 'palette' of media that was edited relatively quickly after the research process.

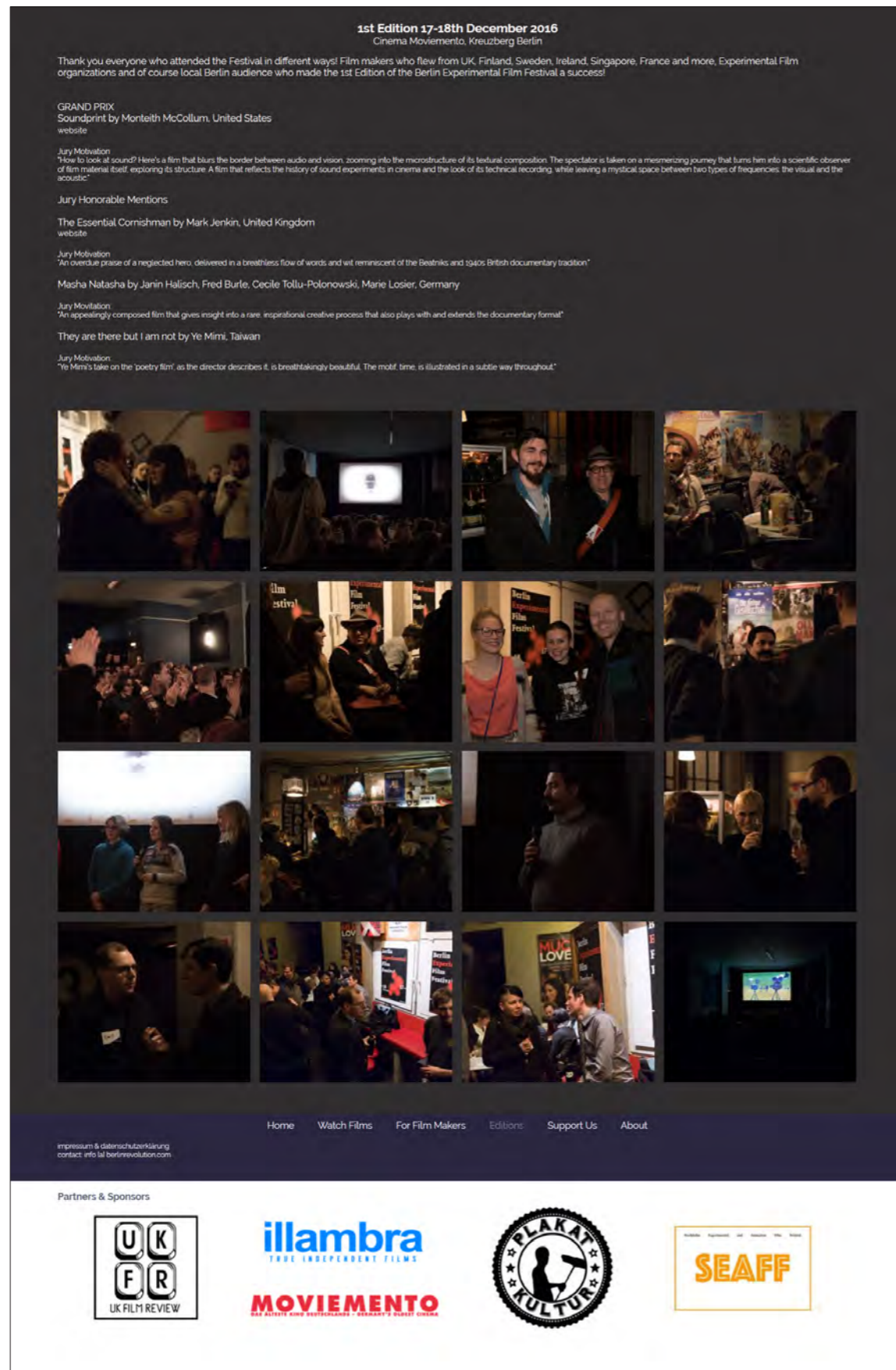
The sound was developed to communicate an often-unfocused interior voice, as in a dream.

The sea was filmed as though rotating – a metaphor for the upending of science and religion at that time.

The script, written and narrated by Windle, mixes historical fact with fiction, autobiography, and poetry.

Visual contrasts made between the island of the Bass Rock, which is well within the canon of the picturesque, and the much more difficult-to-distinguish *Unconformity*, give expression to the complex experience of discovery, relations between aesthetics and science, and the limits of visual perception.

FIG. 11
Poster for the Berlin Film Festival,
with images from the Festival
screenings.



05 / SIGNIFICANCE

The Unconformity Project was selected through an open submission process for the International Competition of The Berlin Experimental Film Festival. It was screened in December 2016 at Kino Movimiento, Berlin, the oldest cinema in Germany, founded in 1907.

This annual cultural event attracts an international audience, with submissions encouraged from all major industry hubs e.g. Filmfreeway and Withoutabox. The festival screenings are widely publicised, online via the festival's website, in printed form through the festival programme, and additionally via social media.

With its emphasis on independent and experimental film The Berlin Experimental Film Festival is an appropriate distribution platform for *The Unconformity Project*. It is an internationally recognised platform for unconventional and underground films from across the world.



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
Edinburgh College of Art

May 2020

The University of Edinburgh
is a charitable body, registered
in Scotland, with registration
number SC005336.

www.eca.ed.ac.uk
