



## Filming with Nature : A Conversation with Experimental Filmmaker Chris Welsby

by Beatriz Bartolomé Herrera and Sophie Cook



*Shore Line I* (1977) © Chris Welsby

**F**irst one drop of rain, then another, hit the lens, blurring the vistas in front of it. A gust of wind moves the camera, precariously attached to a homemade windmill, and frames the natural scenery. The raindrop is not a stain, nor is the wind a disruption; rather, these elements represent some of the many ways in which nature participates in Chris Welsby's films. The rain, the wind, the tide—these are his intimate co-workers, accompanying his solitary journeys to mountain vistas and coastal estuaries and actively shaping the films' form and temporality.

Welsby—born in Exeter, Great Britain in 1948—started his career as a filmmaker in the early 1970s after training as a painter and spending some time working as a sailor. His attentiveness to the structural relationship between landscape and natural systems is an integral part of his work. At the core of Welsby's cinema is a relational process with the environment in which contingency and interaction present a very particular way of understanding technologies and the apparatus of filmmaking. As part of the avant-garde collective London Film-Makers' Co-op, Welsby shared an interest in exploring the temporal and material process of film. He immigrated to Canada in 1989, where he became a professor of Film and Digital Media at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia—a post from which he recently retired. Since 1993, Welsby has been

working primarily with digital media, and he recently began exhibiting interactive video installations in collaboration with artists in the fields of computational poetics and interactive audio environments. Technological change, however, has not modified his initial interests in nature, just provided new tools to incorporate it within the films, expanding this collaboration into the space of the museum, the gallery, and the Internet.<sup>1</sup>

During two days in March 2013, the Montreal-based Double Negative Collective—devoted to the creation and exhibition of experimental and avant-garde cinema—programed a retrospective of six of Welsby's 16mm films from the 1970s at the Cinémathèque québécoise<sup>2</sup>, and invited the director to present his films. During his visit, Welsby also gave a guest lecture in Federico Hidalgo's Experimental Cinema course at Concordia University, in which he presented some of his recent work. *Landscape and Technology: Films of Chris Welsby* was the first retrospective of Welsby's work in Montreal, and it offered a great opportunity to talk with the filmmaker about his unique working process and overall career.

**Beatriz Bartolomé Herrera:** Today the Cinémathèque québécoise screened a selection of your early landscape films in their retrospective of your work. How did you become interested in landscape and how has this interest evolved since these early works?

**Chris Welsby:** Well, it started when, as a child. I lived in the country and loved to be outdoors, so it followed that this is what I painted. Eventually I applied to art school, although first I worked as a sailor and *then* I went to art school in London. There I came back to the landscape initially because of using a camera to collect images for my paintings. However, I soon found out that I was more interested in time and the sequencing of images than I was in painting.

**BBH:** Water and the seaside are common motifs in your work. Was your experience as a sailor an influence?

**CW:** Well, a sailboat is an excellent model for the kind of film I make, because when sailing you can't just go from "A" to "B". You've got to work with the wind, and with the weather, and with the tide, and if you don't, you're not going to get where you want to go. You don't go out and *conquer* nature, as some people seem to think, that's a ridiculous idea. You must work *with* it, and I think this has broader meaning, because if we're going to survive on this planet, this is what we're going to have to do. We're going to have to work with nature, not against it or conquer it. So there is a sort of implicit political meaning there as well as a philosophical one.

**BBH:** You talk about your films as collaborative works between yourself and nature, and you often discuss a new environmental model. What are the politics behind your works and how do they fit within current environmental debates?

**CW:** I don't think of myself as an environmental artist—this is where I sidestep and refuse to be pigeonholed—but my films do get shown at environmental conferences and even at the first European summits where I believe they showed *Seven Days* (1974)<sup>3</sup>. Also, I'm part of a little think tank group—we call ourselves the "New Ontologists Group"—comprised of scientists, artists, sociologists, and writers, and headed up by Andrew Pickering of Exeter University. We are very interested in, for example, Gregory Bateson's ideas about how to re-position human activity within nature. So, as I was saying at my talk last week [in the guest lecture at Concordia University], if you look at a Renaissance painting, it is very hierarchical: nature is positioned firmly in the background, a mere backdrop for the human narrative. We still have that hierarchy today, and you can see the split between nature and culture in every commercial from toothpaste to BMW cars, so what I've tried to do in my films is not exactly reverse this hierarchy, but try and position myself as a filmmaker with the technology *within* the landscape. It's the difference between collaboration and surveillance, really.

**BBH:** Your work has been related with the tradition of British landscape painting, but you've said that you resist this romanticization. How does your work speak to notions of the sublime and this landscape tradition?

**CW:** As far as I understand it, the definition of the sublime is that the landscape must be very large, and very beautiful, and very frightening. So, now as a way to think about our position within nature I don't think that's very useful. It's a superficial nineteenth century way to think about landscape. The idea that you can escape industrialization *now* is absurd. However, having said that, I just wonder if the sublime isn't some kind of red light—a warning. Because we already got the most sublime image when we first started getting images of the earth from outer space. It was really big and really frightening. You've only got to go a few miles up and then you can't see any human life on this planet. We aren't saving the planet or saving nature or anything like that, that's a bizarre notion. It's *us* who need saving. Nature really is big and frightening, and our little spot in the grand picture is pretty tenuous. Perhaps that is what the sublime is really about?

But, that all gets too grand in some ways. I'm just a filmmaker. I go out and I use the equipment that I've got available and I try to construct a film /video as a sort of model in which nature, technology, and a human being can work creatively together. This is quite different for each piece that I make. So when I make a film, I don't have a system in mind and then say, "Oh I'll go find a stream." The locations I use are all places that I know very well, so the idea grows from the place and from what's happening there, as well as my knowledge of the technology or whatever theory I'm thinking about. And gradually it sort of grows together—an interactive thing—so its not imposed on the place. So, what that means is that each film is a different strategy or a different kind of model for the way that technology and nature might perhaps work together. As I was saying [at the retrospective], I'm not using the whole of technology, but there's a certain extent to which a camera can stand in for the *idea* of technology. To pretend its not there when you're in the landscape is really quite silly. In general, the idea of using a camera to reproduce the way we see the world—which is what cameras are regularly

used for—is an awful waste of time. Why not use a camera to show us something that we *can't* see? Or use it to show us something in a way that we can't imagine?

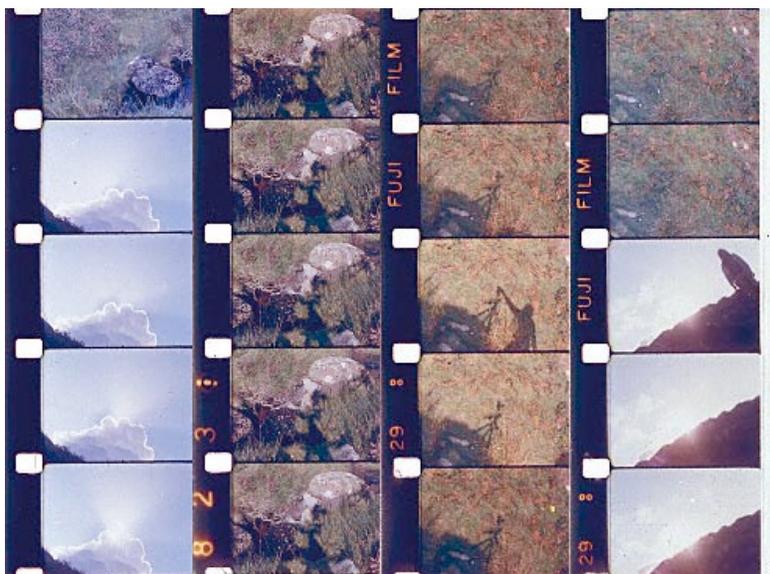
**Sophie Cook:** You've mentioned before that you often take one element of nature—for example the wind—and allow it to “direct” the film so that, in a way, you are making a collaborative film with nature, relinquishing some authorial control. What is the role that chance (because of the inability to control the weather, for example) plays in your process?

**CW:** Well, I don't see it as chance. It really isn't. It's chance-*like* perhaps, but the weather is very complex. We can model the weather in various ways, but we can't predict it very well. That doesn't mean that it's random, though. So if I put a camera up a tree you could say [what it captures] is chance, but on the other hand you could say it's kind of the way the tree grew and how it responds to having this extra weight, how strong the wind is and how often it blows... so there's a lot of structure there. I don't really see it as chance so much. As for giving up control, the thing is, if you have to give up a bit of authorial control, surely the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. If you think about it that way it is obvious that the idea (because that is what it is—an idea) of complete control is a dangerous thing. Whose control, and to what purpose? What is the cost and what will the consequences be? Surely a creative collaboration is a safer bet?

**SC:** You said in your lecture that you wanted to get away from the notion of the “heroic artist adrift in the sublime,” but it's hard to deny the labor that goes into these kinds of films and the endurance that you have to have as a filmmaker being out in these conditions for such long periods of time. Could you talk about the demanding nature of making films like this?

**CW:** Well *Seven Days* was extremely demanding because we were out from before it got light until after it got dark. [Our location] was very exposed, and we had to carry the equipment up the mountain and down again, and take it all home and strip it down,

remove the camera, dry it out, and then get some sleep and be back up there—that went on every day. It's not called *Seven Days* because it's a mythic title, its called *Seven Days* because we couldn't possibly have kept going much longer. That's what happens. But it depends on how you think about things like that, you see. I'm used to sailing, and I'm used to climbing and mountaineering and all sorts of things, and it's just what you do, you know. If you're in a small boat and you get caught in a storm, if you survive it's not because you contemplated the sublime—it's because you knew how to use the equipment, because you knew how to use the GPS, and because you found a way to get around the problem. That's really straightforward. And, ok, it's tough, but you don't go out in a small boat unless you're prepared to take the consequences. Other times it might be perfectly alright. So, this "heroic struggle" thing... I think that's just people who live in cities who don't really know what it's like. Climbing up a mountain is not a heroic struggle, it's just very ordinary work. It's no worse than going to a faculty meeting (laughs).



*Seven Days* (1974) © Chris Welsby

**SC:** What is your process of working with sound in your films? Some of your earlier films have no sound at all, while others—*River Yar* (1971-72)<sup>4</sup> in particular—have a very distinct soundtrack.

**CW:** Well, they're all different. *Fforest Bay* (1973) has no sound because it is so visually rhythmic—if you put sound over that it destroys the rhythm. I never really thought that film needed to have sound, necessarily, and I don't really see why it should. If it can add to the image in some sort of way, or tell us something different about the location, then it's worth using, but otherwise I don't bother. The lack of sound in the early films is partly because of not having access to complex equipment or being able to do mixes or anything like that. We literally dubbed the sound for *River Yar* onto magnetic stripe, because the first print we had was magnetic stripe film, and that's how we transferred it. We recorded it on a projector with a tape recorder, sort of "Start. Stop. Start. Stop." It took us all night and the rest of the day.



*River Yar* (1971-72) © Chris Welsby

*Streamline* (1976)<sup>5</sup>, although it has the appearance of being sync sound, was actually two passes, one with the camera and the second with the tape recorder, but because the carriage went up the stream at the same rate it was essentially sync-like. *Wind Vane* (1972) was sync sound, but I haven't done much sync sound, really. It's not really something I'm interested in. With *Seven Days* I was just taking samples of sound like we did with *River Yar*, where we took a sample of sound every six hours. So that's four samples in twenty-four hours, and since twenty-four hours is a minute worth of film time that means each sample was fifteen seconds long. So really we're doing the same with sound as we did with pictures, except the samples with pictures are much shorter chunks of time. I did the same with *Seven Days*, but with my more recent stuff—my

digital films—sometimes I've got ten or fifteen different sound files that get mixed together based on wind speed and direction, so it's a different mix each time. For *Trees in Winter* (2006)<sup>6</sup>, for example, we made a swarm of starlings, and we did it squawk-by-squawk, so we put all these squawks into a file and then, depending on wind speed and direction, there can be more or less of them in the flock and they can fly from and to any direction, all depending on the wind. Sometimes there's a huge swarm of very threatening starlings, and other times it's just kind of whimsical, just a few. There's a much more complex sound. It's four channels so it really makes it sort of surround sound: there's a trickling stream you can hear, there's an Aeolian harp (which of course wasn't in the space at all), there's a raven that flies across—sometimes it flies one way, sometimes it flies the other way. The sound can actually change directionally. Everything can change.

The sound in *Heaven's Breath* (2009)<sup>7</sup> is four different drumming tracks played by Canadian sound artist Andreas Karr. There is another drumming track that Brady Marks—a Vancouver sound artist who also does my software—made using a 2,000 gallon water cistern. They make marvellous musical instruments: you bang them and whack them and drop water into them and use a microphone. And then all of that gets mixed in, depending on wind speed and direction, so the sound that Brady did comes in at a freeze frame as the dancing Shiva stops. Then, as the wind blows, Shiva begins to dance again and, depending on wind speed and direction, the drumming tracks get mixed together in different ways, and the drums also get transposed from percussion into tone and back into percussion depending again on wind speed and direction.



*Heaven's Breath* (2009) © Chris Welsby

**SC:** Is *Heaven's Breath* your only film that doesn't have landscape in it?

**CW:** Yes, it's the only film that has a person in it really, apart from *Park Film* (1972-1973)<sup>8</sup>. The dance is made up of about 200 still photos. We did the photo shoot with Odissi dancer Sheherazaad Cooper dancing through the various positions of the dance. (Which incidentally, are known from temple drawings.) We then put those high-resolution still photographs into the computer, and they are accessed in an order that is selected by the wind. As in the famous eleventh century figurine depicting Shiva dancing, a circle of fire surrounds her. This we made shooting single frames of a kerosene torch attached to a bicycle wheel. We spun it, and took single photographs and then put that into a second image file. Thus, the assembled image works just like a classic flicker film. However, it goes without saying by now that both the sound mix and the image mix are driven in real time by the wind via a live feed from the wind measuring device (anemometer) on the roof of the gallery. More simply, the system as a whole tends towards instability, generating ever new and unexpected combinations of image and sound. It is true to say of these two new media pieces [*Heaven's Breath* and *Trees in Winter*] that, like the weather, they are never the same twice. Technology and nature combine in a "dance of agency" (Pickering) to create something new and unexpected in the world.

My friends back in London don't really like *Shiva*. When I talk about that film everyone looks at the ground and shuffles their feet, but I thought it was fun! It is Pink Floyd meets Structural film and cybernetic theory in some way. It is a beautiful projection on a circular screen, so the light bleeds off onto the walls of the gallery and it really looks like a spinning circle of fire. *Shiva* is about eight feet tall and you can see the projection from both sides with a quadrophonic soundtrack. It's really quite nice.

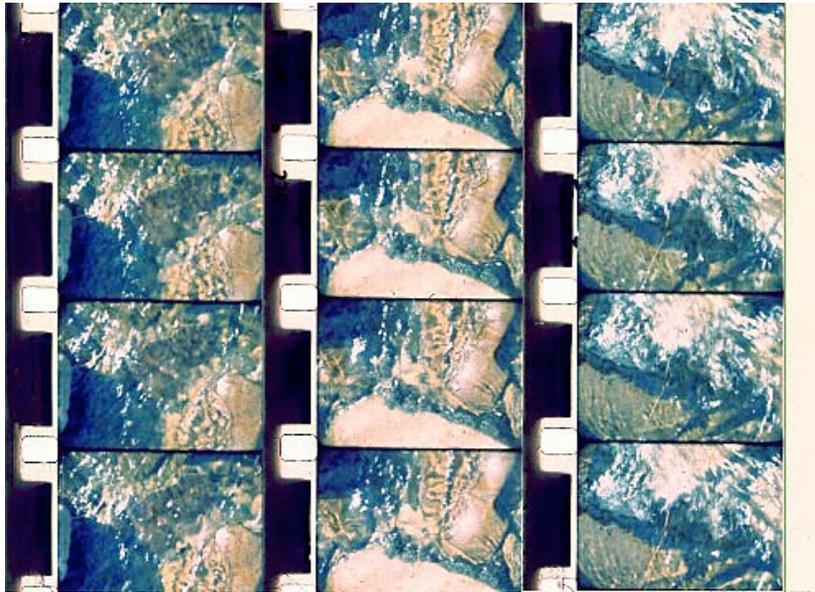


*Park Film* (1972-73) © Chris Welsby

**BBH:** It seems you have to be an engineer in a way, and develop your own technologies for your projects. Do you work with someone in particular or you invent these devices yourself?

**CW:** I like building things. I built the tracking machine for *Streamline*, and I built the wind vanes and stuff like that. But, I need help with programming Macs because it's something I'm not used to. Similarly, I never process my own film. Some people do, but I'd rather not. I'm not very interested in that. I know enough about computers and know some of what is possible. My interest in computers began when I was at the Slade [Experimental Media Department at the Slade School of Fine Art] UCL, London, UK in the early seventies. They were one of the first art schools to have a main frame computer, so some of us learned Fortran programming, which was really early almost machine code.

Oh it was awful... it took a week to draw a circle, you know. But I must have managed to pick up some of the thinking and even some of the cybernetic theories, which were about in the halls of UCL at that time.



*Streamline* (1976) © Chris Welsby

**SC:** The shift from analog to digital technologies has obviously affected your work. We see in your filmography that you stopped working primarily with film in 1993—so your work since then is mostly digital—and you’ve also begun to exhibit in gallery spaces.

**CW:** Shiva’s Dance (*Heaven’s Breath*) was fully digital. *Trees in Winter* is shot on film because I wanted to shoot it and randomize the exposure, which you could do on film but not with digital. With digital I can do the sort of thing I was doing with film in the 70s—using the wind, cloud cover, tide, sunrise and sunset, to structure the film—but now I can do these things in *real time*. For example, when we exhibited *Trees in Winter* at the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea, and there was a console in the room that showed the wind speeds in London, Sydney, Vancouver, and Gwangju; whichever weather station had the highest wind speed was lit up on the console and this was the weather which was driving the work at that moment in time. It was a large circular space

and we had LEDs in a large circle on the floor, so the whole room was turned into a big compass that showed wind direction—the LEDs would flash around the circular room as the wind changed direction. This room-size wind indicator plus the information on the console indicate which viewpoint of the tree was on the screen, and why. The whole space kind of breathes with the ever changing weather which responds to the cooling and warming of the earth and atmosphere as the planet rotated about its axis. This sort of real time data streaming and programming coupled with possibility of working on a global scale is, for me, the difference between digital and analog technology.

**BBH:** So you are not mourning the so-called “death of cinema”?

**CW:** No, not at all. I just think it is a waste of time to lament the passing of time. But I don't think film is dead. In fact, I think it will come back, just like vinyl did, because the art galleries are interested now in collecting film. So, they will have to get old projectors, fix them up and keep them running. This is why I think we are going to have 16mm projectors around for a long time, because nobody wants to buy these works in DVD—they want to show them on film, their material is film. Just like paintings really need to be seen on canvas and not on transparencies or in a Powerpoint presentation. Showing today's digital work in 20 years time will be a problem of an altogether different order! Digital is an ephemeral medium by comparison with film.

**BBH:** Yes, it is the economy of the art market with the addition of limited copies that has contributed to a revalorization of the film material within the context of the gallery circuit.

**CW:** Yes. I just think it's a different medium. It is like comparing a flute with a clarinet. To say one is better than the other is just silly. One instrument makes one sort of sound and the other makes another sort of sound. Film and digital are similar.

**BBH:** Speaking of art galleries, we also wanted to ask you about your own experience as an artist whose work is shown both in the cinema circuit and in the gallery circuit. How different is it to work in these distinct environments?

**CW:** Yes. The films like the ones we have seen tonight here at the Cinémathèque québécoise are really made for the cinema, for a situation where people sit down for a specific amount of time and feel that they should probably stay. It puts a certain kind of tension into a situation. That is very different from the gallery installation where you can go in and watch Shiva dance for a second or an hour and then come back again tomorrow, and Shiva will still be dancing if there is any wind. So it is just a very different way of working, a very different way of approaching time and space, because you are not dealing with fixed duration and the kind of tension that you have associated with it. But it is also a different audience, because a lot of people who go to see the films in movie theatres do not go to the art galleries and vice versa. So you get a bigger audience, by exhibiting in both sorts of venues and you have a very different way of working.

**BBH:** When you describe your gallery films there is an emphasis on the spatial dimension. Would you say that your films acquire a sculptural quality within this context?

**CW:** Yes, well that's gallery installation, you have three-dimensional space to play with. That's the main difference really. That and the major shift away from beginnings, middles and ends.



*Three Studies* (2006) - expanded version of *Trees in Winter* exhibited at the Gwangju Biennale.

Photo by: Mo, Cheol Hong. © Chris Welsby

**BBH:** Do you think your work has acquired a different status and value since it has entered the art gallery space?

**CW:** I don't think so. I think, because I am primarily known as a filmmaker, that I have a bit more "status" (I suppose you could call it that) as a filmmaker. I am a bit more known as a filmmaker than I am as a gallery artist, and the reason for that is that video art got very quickly accepted into galleries, whereas curators didn't like film—it frightened them—because it belonged in the cinema. You know, there is a history of that. There was a lot of hostility in the galleries—and there *still* is—towards film. Sufficiently so that very well qualified curators like at the Vancouver Art Gallery recently claimed that Rodney Graham's installation, which had two projectors in the gallery space, was the first time that had ever been done. It is complete nonsense. I did it in 1974 and in the early 80's at the TATE Gallery and Paul Sharits and others did it before me.

**BBH:** Based on your experiences, would you say that there is a general lack of knowledge about experimental film history within the art world?

**CW:** Yes, and it is quite hard to break into the art gallery scene, you know. I do all right, but you are pretty much a second-class citizen if you are known as a filmmaker. I believe that is going to change, for sure. You know the TATE Gallery is finally getting up to speed; they are doing some excellent exhibitions and programming experimental film screenings. There is even a chance I may be working with them again sometime in future.

**SC:** You have mentioned that you're interested in exhibiting your wind-powered projects and other new media works online. How do you see that working? What are the benefits of the Internet over a gallery space, for example?

**CW:** Well it makes perfect sense for something like *Trees in Winter* because I can have the anemometer up a tree outside my studio. I can drive the software and the image out on the web, and it can be hooked up to my website. People can just tune in and see what is happening to the tree, see if it's windy today. Likewise with the pixel piece *Time After*, which I am making for the city of Nantes in France. So that is what I would like to do next is get those pieces up online. I've also got this other project, which I have mentioned, about using the data from the wave and tide generating station to do something, but I'm not sure what exactly. You see, I'm not really interested in doing anything at the moment, except just consolidating. And doing some sailing. And just seeing what happens. I've done quite a lot and I don't feel I've got a lot of pressure to do anything else... but when something comes along I will definitely do it. This is what I am saying now, but tomorrow morning I could just as easily say "I'm going to go crazy if I don't make another piece of work!"

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<sup>1</sup> His films and film and video installations have been exhibited internationally at major galleries including the Tate Modern gallery in London, the Musée du Louvre and Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

<sup>2</sup> *Colour Separation* (1974, 2.5 min, 16mm, silent); *Fforest Bay II* (1973, 5 min, 16mm, silent); *Windmill III* (1974, 10 min, 16mm, silent); *Wind Vane* (1972, 8 min, double-projection 16mm, optical sound); *Seven Days* (1974, 20 min, 16mm, optical sound); and *River Yar* (Co-directed with William Raban, 1971-72, 36 min, double-projection 16mm, optical sound).

<sup>3</sup> In *Seven Days*, Welsby took a single frame every ten seconds during daylight hours for one week. Using an astronomer's equatorial mount to determine the position of the sun, the camera tracked its position from horizon to horizon. Watch an excerpt of the film here: [http://luxonline.org.uk/video/artists/chris\\_welsby/seven\\_days.html](http://luxonline.org.uk/video/artists/chris_welsby/seven_days.html)

<sup>4</sup> *River Yar* is a double-projection 16mm film made with William Raban. The camera, fixed on a tidal estuary, recorded one frame every minute, day and night, for two separate three-week periods in autumn and spring. Watch an excerpt of the film here: [http://luxonline.org.uk/video/artists/chris\\_welsby/river\\_yar.html](http://luxonline.org.uk/video/artists/chris_welsby/river_yar.html)

<sup>5</sup> Watch an excerpt of *Streamline* here: [http://luxonline.org.uk/video/artists/chris\\_welsby/stream\\_line.html](http://luxonline.org.uk/video/artists/chris_welsby/stream_line.html)

<sup>6</sup> *Trees in Winter* is a single channel "weather driven" video installation. Multiple single frame exposures were taken of a large, leafless tree over several hours, shot from three separate locations, each twenty degrees apart. The still images were then made into three QuickTime movie sequences. Data taken from wind sensors on the roof of the gallery dictate frame rate, picture, and sound track, functioning as a "wind-powered edit suite". Watch an excerpt here: [http://luxonline.org.uk/video/artists/chris\\_welsby/trees\\_in\\_winter.html](http://luxonline.org.uk/video/artists/chris_welsby/trees_in_winter.html)

<sup>7</sup> Watch *Heaven's Breath* in Welsby's Vimeo account: <http://vimeo.com/37159257>

<sup>8</sup> In *Park Film* (1972-1973), Welsby exposed a single frame of film each time someone walking through Kensington Garden crossed a particular point in his fixed-camera's field of vision, revealing not only the ebb and flow of the park's users throughout the day, but also the effect of the weather on their activity.