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Author(s)	Amy Taubin
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Intense Moments

Amy Taubin

Sheila McLaughlin
Collective for Living Cinema

The Collective for Living Cinema devotes about a third of its programs to younger filmmakers, some of them showing for the first time in NYC. On June 9, Sheila McLaughlin showed *Artificial Memory*. It is very difficult to describe or to account for the intensity of a film, and I felt McLaughlin's first film more intensely than I have any new film for a while.

Artificial Memory is black and white, silent, about 20 minutes long and in three sections. The three sections have in common their extension, in time, of a particular kind of psychological moment: the moment which is "prior to," a moment where the energy which is being accumulated to be used "when something happens" causes one's head to whirl, the ground to become unsteady, and the bottom to drop out of one's stomach.

Sometimes the subject knows the form of what will happen (as with the runners in the last section); the uncertainty is only about exactly when the moment will occur. Sometimes the subject is not consciously aware that something is about to happen, so the energy keeps shifting and reforming without a specific direction. There is a rapid alternation of building and leveling out.

McLaughlin extends this already extended moment through a structure in which an activity is repeated many times with minute variations, and without builds or climaxes.

The extended moment is the structure

of a number of films, with Michael Snow's *Wavelength* coming quickest to mind; but *Wavelength* has very little, if anything, to do with McLaughlin's film. In *Wavelength*, a crescendo is built as the camera slowly approaches a goal which becomes steadily more and more clearly defined. And because the focus of the extended gaze of the camera is an almost empty room, the few human actions which do occur seem speeded up, almost pixillated by contrast.

In *Artificial Memory*, the camera is focused on human activity and for the most part, focused in close-up. There is no build and no release. The moment is extended and the tension is achieved through repeating again and again "the moment before." Very far from *Wavelength*; much closer to two remarkable films of the '60s, both by women: Joyce Wieland's *Catfood* and Barbara Rubin's *Christmas on Earth*. McLaughlin shares the directness of these last two filmmakers. They see an activity which seems important to them. They film it head on and film it again and again.

The first section is the portrait of a young girl. She faces the camera. She is about 11 years old, at the edge of the transformation which will begin to occur in her at puberty. McLaughlin makes manifest on film the instability and fluidity of this particular moment in her life in a number of ways. The position of the camera is always pretty much the same, but the shots are brief, connected by jumpcuts. There are frequent changes of exposure with fades up and down and of lighting set-up. The girl's face changes radically with each shift of light. She watches, she talks silently, her face com-

poses itself, is recomposed and decomposed by the camera. Her own mobility (she can wiggle her scalp) is matched by the camera's mobility. And then she begins to sweat. More and more water pours down her face, her face is dissolving in water and is recomposed by the light reflecting off the water. She dissolves and recomposes again and again and then it's over.

The second section is a children's party. One at a time the children, blindfolded, try to break a *pinata* with a huge stick. Here the camera is more mobile, more changes of angle, more long shots. The film is very gray, optically reprinted in places flickering and fogged. The children thrash at the flickering, grainy space over and over again. They move dizzily in the gray space. At one point the *pinata* is broken. Tiny gray flickering pieces fall out of it and are absorbed by the space. It is replaced by another and it all begins again.

In the last section, two women are getting ready to run a race. Again, mostly in

closeup, they make those movements of getting on your mark, getting set, while eyeing each other, assessing the competition. The scene is the most theatrical of the film and, for that reason, is the weakest. In the first two sections, we see a real limbo, a real space and time, in which the parameters have become unfixed and the edge of a real terror. In this section, there is only an acted energy, an acted tension. The potential race is ironized by the camera position. The runners can't get past the starting line because they'd run right into the camera. And the irony seems to belong to another film.

I think McLaughlin should reconsider both her title and this section. But despite these reservations, I felt more intensity from her film than I have from any film in a very long time. It made me remember and reaffirmed what attracted me to independent film in the early '60s, and it also pointed toward a number of new possibilities. I don't ask for anything more. ●