

# Something, Everything

Manuela De Laborde on AS WITHOUT SO WITHIN

—By Blake Williams



First a title card, clean and neat; the film's four-word name split and divided between the upper- and lower-centre regions of a large, red rectangle, itself surrounded by a thick black border. Cut to darkness. Mammoth blue grains of emulsion wriggling through near-black crevasses beside veins of softer blues and the occasional speck of yellow; scratchy pink noise is audible. Again to black. The same image again, pulled back slightly, the angle skewed from where it was. A fuzzy blue glow retreating to the left edge of the frame, celluloid granules shifting in staccato approximately five or six times per second. Black again. Now an object that can be most efficiently described as planetary; perhaps just the first image again pulled back much further—perhaps a moon, its craters dissolving into the void of its dark side. Black. Back in, very deep in close again, a pointillist, whitewashed aquamarine with suggestions, maybe, of a small dimple. Then total noise, in an assertive primary blue, with vague intimations of something peeking through, trying to differentiate itself from the haze.

So begins Mexican filmmaker Manuela De Laborde's *AS WITHOUT SO WITHIN*, a deeply mysterious and wholly enveloping experimental short film that, over the course of its 25-minute duration, becomes placidly militant against the primacy of form in image-based media. Snowy blankets of scattered matter are repeatedly and methodically juxtaposed against other, more secure (yet equally ambiguous) images of alien sculptural objects; De Laborde literally piles it on by often superimposing two or more layers atop one another. These coloured masses—red, pink, blue, grey, yellow—are always transforming, if not in the moment then cut by cut, across time, conjuring aspatial territories of activity, of things working towards or against some unknowable resting point. Information regarding the materiality, multitude, scale, volume, function, and origin of these objects is entirely obscured, the experience bleached entirely of anything that might resemble context, and our access to anything that could help organize these images and incidents into meaning patently refused.

Indeed, *AS WITHOUT SO WITHIN* is one of the most direct confrontations with representation and meaning-production to occur outside of Peter Gidal's polemical circle of Structural/Materialists. To watch and listen to this film—any film—is to participate in a thinking-through of its information, to make an effort to assemble something spatial from its temporally constructed logic, and to understand it as a whole that we can narrativize and believe in. De Laborde's film, like many of those made in the heyday of the London Film-Makers' Co-op, deliberately bypasses our gestalt-forming tendencies, leaving each element to exist as its own autonomous moment. More than tools for us to arbitrarily create some totality that is stable and static, grain and information exist here in order to foreground the process by which images and ideas come into being. We, the audience, become agents in producing them, but, crucially, they never become a production *for us*.

Similarities aside, De Laborde is not simply engaging in a late-to-the-party restatement of decades-old ideals; in fact, there are very important differences between her aims and those of the LFMC group. Gidal, for instance, situated his denial of representation within a dogmatically political framework. By positioning the audience so that they were always actively working toward—but never

reaching—an image or meaning, he waged war on the default, so-called “natural” reproduction of capitalist and patriarchal forms. We aren't so much “seeing” as always “trying to see.” Thus, every moment is a contradiction of itself; opposites hold up one another in a drunken, dualistic dance, subjects and objects giving to and receiving from one another at once. Viewer and viewed thus are able to exist in a non-hierarchical relationship, which, as described by Marx and Engels, sets the stage for advancement towards a classless society—the basis of dialectical materialism.

De Laborde's ambitions are less overtly grandiose, but no less noble. Though likewise attuned to the subjective decipherment of surging information, images, and thoughts, her skill set extends to activating the theatre space itself, both responding to it architecturally and acknowledging that it's a communal space for collective introspection. Indeed, sitting with *AS WITHOUT SO WITHIN* provides an experience analogous and not at all distant from the meditative grace of being in the Rothko Chapel—that late modernist symbol for conflating abstraction and spiritualism. Favouring modesty over awe, De Laborde's film manages to manufacture something rapturous despite an amorphous body that privileges indeterminacy. It is perfectly content with being about nothing other than the 25 minutes in which it is present in front of an audience of spectators—all of them encouraged to look, listen, and be comfortably uncertain about everything they're thinking or think they ought to be thinking.

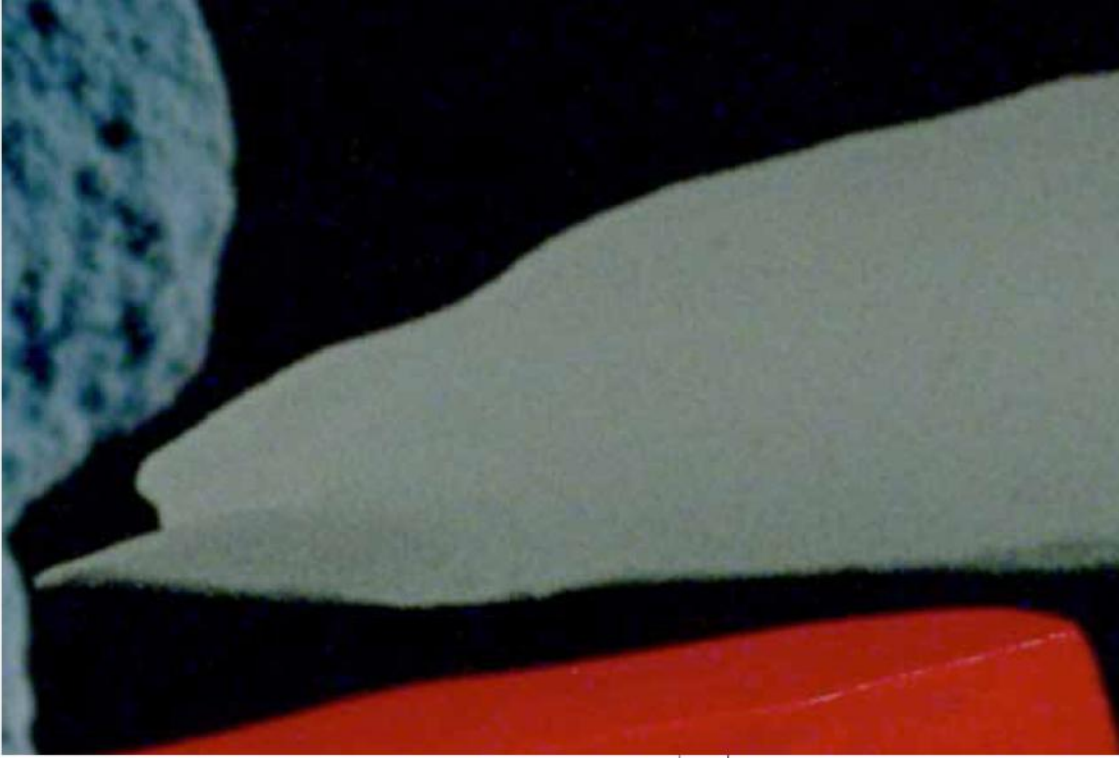
**Cinema Scope:** What are the forms that we see in *AS WITHOUT SO WITHIN*?

**Manuela De Laborde:** They are small sculptures I make that I like to refer to as props: objects made out of plaster, sometimes with colour pigment but mainly dipped in watercolour. They are quite small, about the size of my hand. I used condoms to contain the plaster, just because they happen to produce the shape I wanted, and then I would break or sand them down. My idea of them was based on drawings that I had done while trying to understand what an abstract form might be, and also on drawings of abstract shapes that came to my mind while seeing other films.

**Scope:** It's interesting to hear that they originated as drawings, as something flat. A number of your films flatten three-dimensional space very dramatically, as if they're trying to put extra emphasis on the medium's two-dimensionality. Are you very consciously thinking about depth—or the lack thereof—when you're creating images?

**De Laborde:** Well, my concern for the abstract image arrived as I became more sensitive to the action of abstracting—wondering what it meant to abstract things, to reduce them to their bare minimum, to something primal. Abstractions might seem evasive to some people, but to me they're a way of achieving simplicity or frankness. They're very liberating. My problem was that I realized that with many abstractions I could still pick up on their sources; I could still distinguish the reality they came from, and so I was seeing two things—the separation from reality and the reality itself—and I wanted to see if I could make something where I could only see the former, where only the abstracting process itself was visible.

This was where I turned to doing drawings based only on thoughts or memories, and I made my objects from these. As ob-



jects they gave me multiple new views and angles, which was very revealing to me. When I see the cinema image, I always immediately notice the flatness (unless there's a story to get sucked into, or other perceptual things at play like the afterimages in a flicker film). Weirdly, though, it was only when I saw my objects through the camera lens that I recognized how three-dimensional they were, and this fought with my desire to just present an image and not a documentation. Returning them to flatness felt essential if I wanted them to be abstract and face more directly the inherent flatness of the image.

**Scope:** Your images also obfuscate our ability to identify the exact nature of these forms' scale and material make-up, which has led many viewers to ascribe celestial characteristics to them—likening the forms to things like moon rocks or planets. This is something we also see a bit of in your earlier video and performance pieces—namely, *Sun* (2013), *Blueprint of Moving Image* (2013), and *The Exponential Nature of Images* (2015)—which rely on this confusion between the microscopic and the cosmic, zooming in so as to create a vastness. Is evoking the cosmos specifically a very important aspect of these films?

**De Laborde:** I don't really believe in a hierarchy of thoughts, or that art should prefer one specific result over any other; at the same time, this is the most logical and immediate reading of these films. Having said that, it was not necessarily my main intention or the way that I always think of them. Of course, the word "cosmic" changes depending on how it's said. It can mean vast, which I think my film is, but it can also be read as a figurative description or be narrowed down to evoke very familiar images like those of the universe.

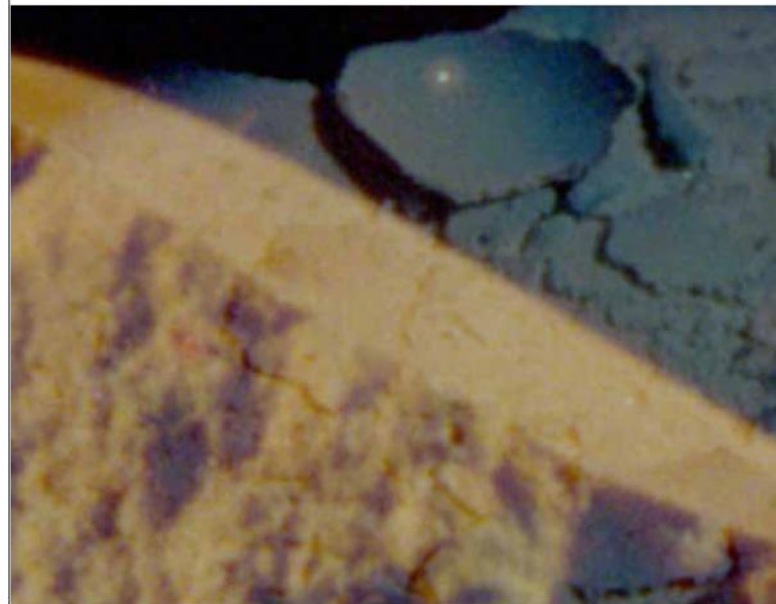
Although I didn't want to make a film that's about outer space per se, I do like the metaphor, and also the relation that it suggests between cinema and the theatre. We go into this neutral non-space and we have to make sense of these self-contained universes, with their own balance and rules and life of their own, which works according to a language or order that was born from these materials,

and yet they are also just these floating bodies in the middle of a dark, empty room.

**Scope:** Your lighting is also very spare, which helps create this sense that we're catching glimpses of objects in a void or vacuum.

**De Laborde:** Yes, and it was with the intention of making this project economically and simply that I selected only one light source. I kept thinking of the projector's singularity, that there's just this single source of light in the theatre. Now that I think of it, perhaps I've had a predisposition towards this chiaroscuro effect for a while.

I wanted to create a film that had site specificity, that talked directly to the infrastructure of the theatre, which is like an echo of the space outside. I recreated the theatre's enveloping emptiness with the framing and the sound, as I mentioned, and also with the black velvet,



which helps mimic this darkness that is outside the body but also inside, like in the mind. It's this internal space, practically pitch black.

**Scope:** There's certainly a seduction in the unknowability of the objects and the space they inhabit, and yet I think they do still activate this part of our brains that tries to make sense of what we're seeing. We want to name these things, to create boundaries for them.

**De Laborde:** And I think our own universe, as we think we know it, influences us when we see anything we have not seen before, and it becomes a confirmation that there will always be inescapable images, archetypes, some sort of frame—like that we think of outer space when we see lit objects against darkness. For me the desire is always to work towards new visual material, but also to accept that larger constructs make their way back to us, or into the work, over and over again.

Regarding this film and its unexpectedly space-y look, I'm also drawn to the idea that the presence of celestial bodies has motivated the human mind to think afar, as if the stars were pin-boards for questioning and interpretation. That being said, I didn't want to evoke a sense of escapism. There are many things that offer this already and I was more concerned with notions of presence and agency, to see for myself if it was possible to create an abstract film that could capture some truth about our present moment in history.

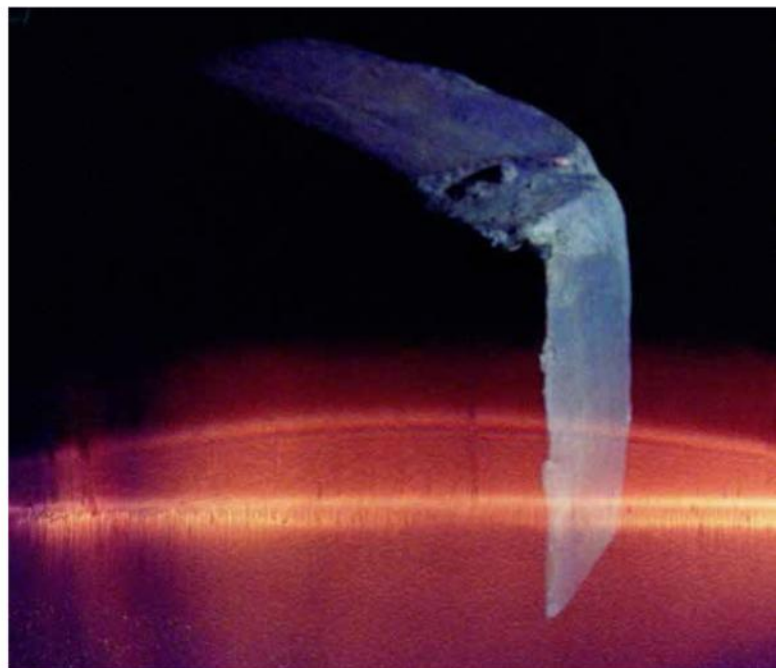
But the more I work, the blurrier the boundaries are, or the more evident it becomes that the notion of a boundary is our own construct or projection. Often, the image carries a negative connotation—e.g., that it is superficial or that it thins out the experience of what we see documented—and so we might bypass this first contact, the image itself, in search of a “deeper” meaning. That act of searching, to me, feels too invasive, like I am tricking myself to go into the subject, away from the image, while simultaneously still reading from the image. There's something about that which feels off to me; the image isn't some boundary keeping us away from something, but perhaps a dead end of sorts. We can search for something deeper, but I feel we'll just end up arriving at a more acute reading of what was already visible.

**Scope:** To return to the look of your films, you seem to have embraced a very liberal stance on compression. There's your compression

of space and objects into a flattened plane, but then also the compression of your images into a low-fidelity sea of noise and static. What are some of your strategies for producing this type of image quality?

**De Laborde:** I used a telephoto lens when I'm filming, both because it adds to the flatness—something I learned from James Benning's films—and because they're easier to use while framing. I also used extension tubes, which allowed me to move and accommodate the objects while looking through the viewer. The tube makes the camera a bit temperamental and can fuck with the optics, but at a specific range I am able to focus more, and have a higher depth of field.

Because my concern was to make the image itself both my object and my subject, I didn't have to worry about fidelity or faithfulness to the source. These objects really were intended just to be props, sit-ins to create images. I decided to not completely hide them from the viewer



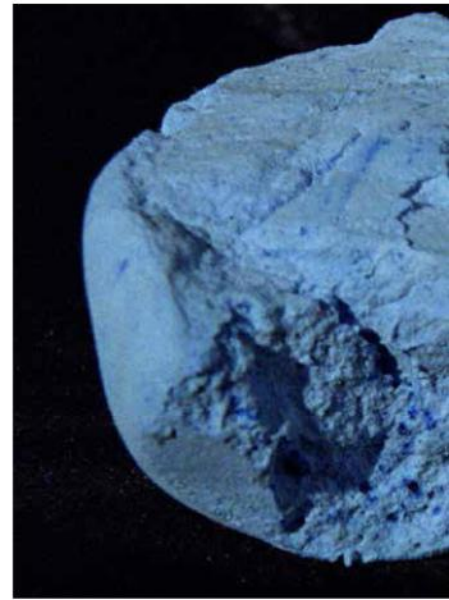
once I saw the first dailies. After that, blowing them up, superimposing them, etc., to me all of this just meant creating new images with their own feeling and movement.

For the noise it was a matter of cropping the images and framing their more “un-frameable” parts. I found that I favoured compositions that were perhaps less obvious, which meant, for example, enlarging sections of the image where the props were barely or no longer visible. This includes even some frames of just the velvet backdrop, where you actually can see a lot of things happening.

**Scope:** What was your process for reframing the images, technically speaking?

**De Laborde:** The workflow was a digital-analogue mix. I shot only 300 feet of film; since I was intending to extend and analyze all the footage in the optical printer, I made each shot only a couple of seconds long. I got a telecine to do some experiments with looping, cropping, editing, etc., which would have been the blueprint for when I started working with the optical printer, but this didn't end up happening; by then my edit had grown to be larger than I thought it would,





and there are actually a lot of limitations involved in editing with the optical.

With other projects this editing process worked fine, but after doing some tests I realized that this time the kind of contrast and feel it was giving the material was killing it. It was very frustrating! So instead, I got a 2K telecine, translated my edit, and then brought it back to film at the end. For the 35mm print I used a Cinevator printer that Ben Rivers recommended to me, and for the 16mm print (which I actually prefer because of its density), John Hawk helped me film off of a monitor screen before going on to do the traditional AB neg cutting, lab colour correction, and printing.

**Scope:** There's also the sound component, which is extremely minimal, verging on pink noise. How did you assemble and think about the sound design?

**De Laborde:** The sound for me is what really made this film a *film*. It was done by my younger sister Camila, a musician who sings and makes electronic music. She had never created a film score but completely understands my work so we were able to work very well together. She lives in London, England, so for a year we would Skype every couple of weeks, sending material from the film back and forth to each other.

The visual material was very picky about what sounds or score we could put with it. It rejected a lot of the things we tried, since any single component had the possibility of drastically pushing it in one specific direction, we wanted to retain its multiplicity. In the end we discussed two types of sound elements: there is that which is continuous, in a state of becoming, and textured, like a room tone; and then there are the sounds that are more finite, objects themselves, like beings and events. We discussed the role and presence of both types, how many there would be, and what each one signifies.

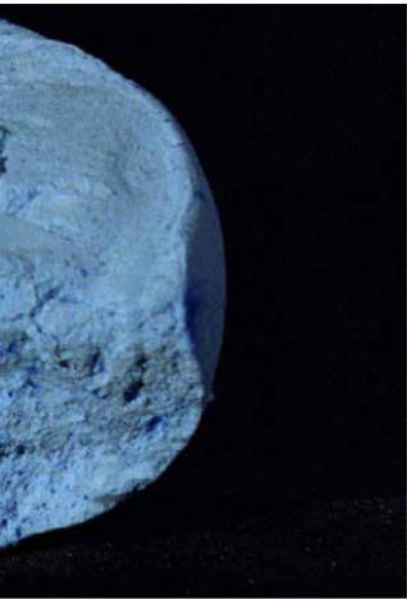
It was important that the sound never made your body tense up, that it not break a silence, that it not let you relax into the film, refresh the process of seeing, only to then bring the attention back for a poignant or humorous moment. Camila was amazing at this, and brought in sounds I would have never thought of. It was great because even though she knew my work she was very free from the influences or expectations of how sound is used in experimental filmmaking.

**Scope:** *AS WITHOUT SO WITHIN* is your first time finishing on celluloid. What prompted the transition away from video?

**De Laborde:** So many things: the more tangible aspect of film, its character, its challenge, the pace it gives to the practice and the thought of it, its performance, and also that it was new to me. But also that it's an object. In the end it gets experienced in a similar way as video once it's projected—as a flat moving image on a screen—but before that you get to work with it over a light table...it's very different. It also seemed to me that I could only address, respond to, or get to know about other films by using film.

On a more personal note, I found it troublesome that for some it is a medium of the past and therefore becoming irrelevant. Wanting to invalidate a medium altogether and not just the specific ways it is approached is extreme, even if there are things about it that are more challenging. There are so many crafts that have been dried out, that offered a special practice and an inside to creativity, and it's always such a loss. I understand that popular interests change, but at least in an academic respect everything remains relevant as long as the way we think about it changes.

**Scope:** You mentioned earlier that these forms come to mind while you're watching other films, and you've written elsewhere that *AS WITHOUT SO WITHIN* is informed by your active filmgoing. Can you elaborate on the role other films have played in your creative process?



**De Laborde:** Well in a way, experimental filmmaking as a practice is new to me. I wasn't familiar with the history or the major works in that tradition, or about the connotations and discourse around it, and so I also didn't have a clear sense of the kind of experiences it provided. Betzy Bromberg's *Voluptuous Sleep* (2011) was the first experimental film I ever saw, and since then films and videos by Benning, Chantal Akerman, Pat O'Neill's optically printed work, and some of Kurt Kren's numbered movies have left an impression on me, to name a few. But even films that had nothing for me to relate to or that I have hated can be important, if only to tell me what not to do.

Making *AS WITHOUT SO WITHIN* was the result of my trying to understand these works that I was now encountering. What constructed what? What evoked what? Then, and this is especially so when I was watching 16mm films, I wondered about how elements like processing, overexposure, etc., would affect my experience. What builds the film's personalities or what personality do they build for themselves?

Filmmaking and filmgoing have also been very moving processes for me. In comparison to other mediums I've worked with, it seems more welcoming to outside forces. In order to make and see a film requires so many steps and so many inputs from so many subjectivities, yet the process still feels very reassuring and personal. Going into a cinema is a communal experience, but it's one that offers a moment to be with oneself.

**Scope:** Does this ongoing exchange between interior and exterior phenomena that you're describing extend to your personal life? Like with meditation, for example?

**De Laborde:** I do often try to meditate, but it has never become a practice for me, although while I'm working I'm sure it comes into

play somehow. But there have been various consciousness practices that I've been influenced by since I was little; no one single method, but they certainly all add up. There is also this small sentence from Clarice Lispector's great book, *The Passion According to G.H.*: "It concerned a visual meditation." This kept resonating with me while I was doing this film.

**Scope:** And your title, *AS WITHOUT SO WITHIN*, inverts the Hermetic phrase many are familiar with and might associate with Zen doctrine.

**De Laborde:** A year ago my psychologist/philosopher friend, with whom I would often discuss my creative process, talked to me a lot about alchemy and conceptual constructs that interpret our world. This film started to become a sort of psychotic experience where images would reproduce and exponentially grow the more I edited, like a cancer. At the same time things within me, from my personal life, started appearing and overflowing, and it was both a very confusing and exciting thing to watch develop. So my friend would tell me: "Well, it's like 'as above so below,' 'as within so without,' and while you are working on it, it is also working in you." I completely understood this and saw the truth in it.

In the end I rearranged the phrase into "as without so within" because I saw that my thoughts had started from the outside; what I saw, what I made, the materials, where it was going to be shown, etc., are all external forces coming back towards me. When you watch the film, it also moves from a very distanced view to one that's more internal; it becomes inverted, its opposite, and that reflects how I made it. I shot and assembled it chronologically, so what you see at the beginning is the first of what I filmed, and so on. It's where the work and thought processes all began. From there, you just get deeper as you go along. You just go further and further in.