

Medal Day Weekend 2007

This year, Medal Day was more than a day; it was, thanks to the occasion of the Colony's Centennial, a weekend of unforgettable moments.

Beginning on Friday, August 10th, the Colony kicked off the weekend underneath bright stars and inside a warmly illuminated and oversized tent (capacity 2,000 people). The dinner, toasts, and reunion of many who had come to partake in the festivities were followed by Saturday's twilight performance, the first stage of *Landlines*, an installation created by **Anna Schuleit** and a group of more than 200 volunteers. *Landlines*, a year in the making, had been designed to "violate MacDowell's trademark privacy in order to bridge the inside to the outside, to lift the boundaries between the Colony's walls and those beyond." On a stage set before darkening pines and lit by spotlights and two screens casting imagery, *Landlines* began first with a performance by 10 teams of artists and students who had worked to capture each decade of MacDowell's 100 years. Each discipline was represented through

the work of renowned Colony artists (**James Baldwin**, **Milton Avery**, and others) and those of potential new ones. The students sang, performed puppetry, created a suspense film, danced, and improvised on saxophone. All this was capped off by an excursion



into the MacDowell woodland, where 100 telephones — hooked up by thousands of feet of cable — rang, linking the vast MacDowell network around the world with the place it all began.

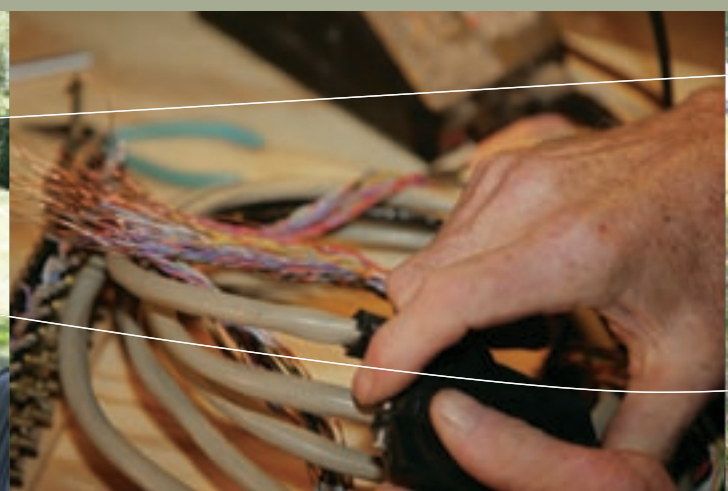
And, of course, we didn't forget the cake! Or, rather, cakes. One hundred individual delights were quilted together to form a confection of Centennial proportions. For all who had worked up an appetite from

chatting on the phones, the MacDowell "gateaux" awaited in the amphitheatre. With the storied view of Mount Monadnock as its backdrop, the night became even sweeter.

Sunday — Medal Day proper — the phones rang again, but not before more than 2,000 visitors enjoyed a moving tribute to documentary filmmaker Les Blank by equally acclaimed filmmaker Fred Wiseman. With their speeches taking on an even greater significance this year, MacDowell's yearlong theme of giving artists "freedom to create" could later be seen in every studio opened to the public.

It is hard to capture in two dimensions what transpired at a very multidimensional Medal Day weekend. But in the following pages, you can get a feel by reading the speeches of Les Blank and Fred Wiseman, taking in the imagery from *Landlines*, and hearing from some of those who participated. As with the entire Centennial year, Medal Day weekend was really an accumulation of many shared moments yielding a memory likely to outlast any single one.

Landlines



PRESENTATION SPEAKER Fred Wiseman

I am pleased to be here and participate in the 100th anniversary of MacDowell and to join the ceremony honoring Les Blank and his films.

Les is a skilled, adventurous, compassionate independent filmmaker. I admire his talent and his perseverance. It is not easy to reach his level of achievement and accomplishment. I will briefly try to explain why.

To make his films and give expression to exactly what he wants to say and in the form he chooses requires qualities in addition to imagination and technical skills. The words stubborn, obsessed, and tough come to mind. The independent filmmaker has to navigate many rocky passages. He has to work hard to get money, write proposals for films that exist only in his head (and then only in incomplete and perhaps inchoate form) — proposals that he knows may have little relation to the final film but will help the funders in foundations and networks decide to award the grant or contract that make the film possible.

Sometimes the people who control the money know something about filmmaking; often they do not. Some have a real interest in assisting the filmmaker; others are more concerned with their place in the arts bureaucracy. The independent filmmaker must be informed about the internal politics of the granting organizations. Often grantors with no knowledge or experience will try to impose their mark on the film because of either an internal organizational political agenda, an ideological or social goal, or as an exercise in power.

When filmmakers meet, their talk is not about the aesthetics of filmmaking (assuming such a thing exists) but about money and distribution. Boring but necessary exchanges. Unlike people working in other forms, filmmakers need more money to do their work than novelists, poets, painters, and many other artists. However, unlike Hollywood filmmakers, independents do not need a lot of money. Production costs, which may range from \$20 to \$50,000, are puny and are not even the cost of lunch for a Hollywood movie production. Money is nevertheless hard to find,

and once the film is finished it is difficult to arrange distribution and to get paid by the distributors.

Despite these real obstacles it is very fashionable now to want to make movies. When I finished college — or when college was finished with me — in 1951, it was similarly trendy to want to become a writer. My friends and I were certain, in our hubris, innocence, and naïveté, that as soon as we had run with the bulls at Pamplona we



all would be recognized as the next Hemingway. In 1951, our common fantasy was that artistic success, fame, riches, and — although we perhaps could not then talk of it openly, nubile women

he had to have the technical competence, energy, drive, and ambition to harness his imagination to the hard, frequently boring, day-to-day work that is actually involved in making films in his unique way.

About 15 years ago, I was in Berkeley. I was about to go into a bookstore when I saw a tall, burly, bearded man standing in front of a table stacked with T-shirts and videocassettes. When I saw a T-shirt with the words “Gap-Toothed Women,” I knew that the vendor was the filmmaker Les Blank, whose work I so much admired. I went over, introduced myself, and asked him, “How’s business?” He said he was doing a brisk trade. My first thought was that maybe I could become his East Coast rep. Then I thought, why not strike out (if that is the right expression) for myself? Since then, each Saturday afternoon when the weather is good, I stand in front of the Coop in Harvard Square and sing and sell pencils. Thank you, Les. Your good example has helped me to continue to work.

Les’s life as an independent filmmaker has been both intellectually and physically adventurous. His filmmaking has taken him to such exotic places as the Amazon, China, Louisiana, and California. Perhaps Les will tell you some of his adventures since his career is a good example of the rewards, adventures, surprises, fun, comedy, risks, and thrills of filmmaking. The fulfillment of a sense of anticipation and adventure is one of the principal reasons to be an independent filmmaker.

“For Les to make his films, he had to have the technical competence, energy, drive, and ambition to harness his imagination to the hard, frequently boring, day-to-day work that is actually involved in making films in his unique way.”

— would attend us or attend to us, not *if* but *when* our first novel was published.

We sat in cafés in Paris with *The Sun Also Rises* and *What Is Existentialism?* on the zinc table next to our empty notebooks. Most of us had no idea of what it actually meant to be a writer. The same fantasy exists today although the form is different. Substitute filmmaker for writer and the rest is the same. The arrival of relatively inexpensive, light, mobile cameras and digital editing programs makes it tantalizingly possible for this generation to think they can easily achieve fame, fortune, and public recognition as “artists.” The fantasy is the same, the equipment is different, and the result is equally hard to achieve. For Les to make his films,

I will give you one example.

Twenty years ago I was making a documentary in the medical intensive care unit of a hospital in Boston. When a patient I was following for the film died, I needed to get permission to shoot in the morgue. I became friendly with the man responsible for the morgue, and he arranged on several occasions for me to film there. On the last day of shooting I went looking for him to thank him for his help. I found him in the hospital cafeteria and thanked him. We shook hands and he said to me, “See you soon.”

Les, congratulations. You have made distinguished, original films. Your imagination and vision are there for all to see. See you soon.



Landlines Stories and Reflections

“What lingers in my mind the most was the end of Saturday night, going into the total darkness of the pathways and seeing the faint ‘booths’ of light that surrounded the phones. It was magical to have the phone ring and be able to answer it. It was a mixture of both utter solitude and a sense of being profoundly connected to the world. Art happens in solitude, but it is when it connects to the world that it finds its meaning and reason for being.”

—Landlines volunteer Nori Odoi

Volunteers unspool and prep the miles of telephone cable that hung from the trees throughout MacDowell’s 450 acres.

MEDALIST Les Blank

Thank you very much, very resounding. I'm still reeling over the idea of Fred out there selling pencils, not to mention his closing comment.

Anyway, I'm glad to be here, especially on the 100th anniversary. It's interesting to look ahead and think about art being something that sticks around after we are departed from this happy place. And how long it sticks around is a good question ... it's something that has always interested me. It's my idea, I hope, that these films do last a while.

What got me started was I always thought I wanted to be a writer because I like to read, I like to see stories — Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad. So I took up my pencil and started writing, and I would send them off to *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's*, and couldn't understand why I kept getting these reject slips. I thought they were pretty good stories. But then after a while I got depressed over it all, and I went to college and thought well, if I can't write at least I'll get a job teaching writing or literature. I got as far as graduate school at Berkeley in the English department, and we were being trained how to do the rhyme schemes of Spencer or Milton, and it just didn't excite me much so I dropped out. I thought well now I'll just get a job at least, but no one would hire me — I had too much education or I couldn't work up my enthusiasm when I was interviewing for a dull job.

So I was unemployed, and I hit bottom real quick, and I went to a movie by Ingmar Bergman called *The Seventh Seal* when it first came to San Francisco. Here, I saw a man who was so much worse off than I was that I felt light and happy by comparison. And as I skipped out of the theater I thought, "God, this feels great! I think I'll look into being a filmmaker!"

I didn't have a clue how to do that because I didn't know there were film schools — there were actually two in L.A. and one in New York that I found out about — but no one ever



talked about becoming a filmmaker ... it was always a writer.

So I was on my way to Florida to actually join the naval flight program — and at least have a job — and on the way I met a professor named Robert Corrigan. He was in the theatre department; I'd had him as an undergraduate

"It's interesting to look ahead and think about art being something that sticks around after we are departed from this happy place."

at Tulane. He and I got along, and he asked me what was I doing? And so I told him: "Well, I've been trying to be a filmmaker but I don't know where to begin." He said, "Well, we're starting a brand-new program in the theatre department offering a master's of fine arts in playwriting. Maybe if you apply, you can get the job or fellowship, and you can work on actors for the stage, scripts for the stage, and then segue into film later." So I took him up on that; I got the fellowship and then on his



Two Fellows were reunited on Medal Day after being in residence together in 1958: writer and board member **Bill Banks** (left) and visual artist **Richard Mayhew**.

recommendation I got accepted to USC — in their film program and theatre program in Los Angeles. I took all of my courses in film and I got out, and I was ready to be the next Ingmar Bergman. It didn't happen right away.

I would write these scripts ... I even had an interview with Otto Preminger; he actually hired me. I had my foot in the door at Columbia Pictures; all I had to do was keep my mouth shut and read scripts for him, and plays and novels, and say, "I think this is a good one. Why don't you try this one?" But I knew I had to convince Mr. Preminger that I was a film artist myself — I wanted him to read *my* script. So, he picked it up, looked at one page, put it down, and said: "Mr. Blank, it's been real interesting knowing you, but having read how you think I don't think we'll ever be able to work it out. I wish you the best of luck with your career, though." And so that was my short, happy life as a Hollywood film person.

So then I started doing industrial films, films for chicken companies — I believe they're showing one today, in the building over there, one of the short films. I learned how to tell stories about how chickens are grown and slaughtered and eaten ... that didn't

"One of the young artists working on the [*Landlines*] film was to go to Maine for a family vacation. She told her mother that she needed to be in the editing room with her team rather than at the cottage. When asked why it was so important, she impatiently exclaimed, 'Well, after all, it is my first film!'"

—Relayed by MacDowell board member David Baum

On these pages: Performance by puppeteer **Kevin Augustine**; a phone in the dark, waiting to be answered; the luminous *Landlines* stage; and the MacDowell cakes waiting to be consumed. On the following page: a switchboard operator connecting calls; a young participant; Cheryl Young, executive director, answering a different call of duty.



State of New Hampshire
By His Excellency
John Lynch, Governor

A Commendation

THE MACDOWELL COLONY 100TH ANNIVERSARY

WHEREAS, The MacDowell Colony was founded [in] Peterborough and is celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2007; and

WHEREAS, The MacDowell Colony strives to cultivate the arts by providing talented and imaginative artists with an environment in which to work and create; and

WHEREAS, The MacDowell Colony is host to more than 250 artists each year; and

WHEREAS, The MacDowell Colony is a dynamic community of many diverse artists including writers, composers, visual artists, photographers, printmakers, filmmakers, and architects; and

WHEREAS, The MacDowell Colony has inspired and nurtured the artistic careers of many of our nation's finest artists including Aaron Copland, James Baldwin, Alice Walker, Thornton Wilder, and Leonard Bernstein; and

WHEREAS, The MacDowell Colony has contributed much to the arts by fulfilling its motto and "giving artists the freedom to create";

NOW, THEREFORE, I, JOHN H. LYNCH, GOVERNOR of the State of New Hampshire, do hereby commend **The MacDowell Colony** on the occasion of its 100th anniversary this year.

Given in the Executive Council Chambers this 12th day of August in the year of Our Lord two thousand and seven, and the independence of the United States of America, two hundred and thirty-two.

John H. Lynch
Governor

take long to master. And I did tools, and nuts and bolts, and the National Association of Cemeteries — we were trying to justify why it cost so much to die and be buried in a cemetery. And then I just got really upset again about my status in life.

I was walking home from the unemployment office one day, with my check in my hand, back in the days when you had to go present yourself in front of them and show them you're hale and hearty and looking for work. Walking along the Hollywood Walk of Fame, between the unemployment office and my apartment, I would walk down Hollywood Boulevard and look at all these names engraved in the bronze plaques on the sidewalk, and I wondered, "Will I ever be here?" And my answer was, "Not any time soon, if things keep going like they are now."

A couple of blocks beyond that, one block from my apartment — half a block from my apartment — I passed a corner where there was a big tree with blossoms on it. I'd always gone by this corner and had never really paid attention. But that day, I was trying to procrastinate getting

home to face the reality of my situation. So I looked over at this corner, and I saw behind these branches something sort of white, like a sculpture, back there. I peered in there and made my way into this undergrowth, and pulled aside some vines, and there was this statue of an old man. Where there should be eyes he just had eyeballs, and at the bottom of the statue was the saying, "Life is short, art is long, the experience

wonder, "What drives me? What am I doing?" And I kept saying this little slogan over and over: "Life is short, art is long." And it applies today, and I hope the art that is created here will last a long time, and I hope this place will last a long time. Thanks a lot.

"I peered in there and made my way into this undergrowth, and pulled aside some vines, and there was this statue of an old man. Where there should be eyes he just had eyeballs, and at the bottom of the statue was the saying, 'Life is short, art is long, the experience difficult.' And I thought, hmmm ... that's a pretty catchy slogan."

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I couldn't get it out of my head; ever after that, when I started doing my own independent films, I would work through the night and



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