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An art practice sustained

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AN ART PRACTICE SUSTAINED

by

Courtney Paige Davids Cable

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
Master of Arts degree in Art
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2009

Thesis Supervisor: Assistant Professor Sarah Kanouse

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Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

_____

MASTER'S THESIS

_____

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Courtney Paige Davids Cable

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts
degree in Art at the May 2009 graduation.

Thesis Committee: _____
Sarah Kanouse, Thesis Supervisor

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CHAPTER 1

SUSTAINABLE ART PRACTICE IN THE UNIVERSITY

Image makers are often—and rightly—held to task for what they produce. Eddie Adams, the photojournalist who changed the course of the Vietnam conflict by snapping a photograph at the instant the bullet fired by police chief General Nguyen Ngoc Loan entered the skull of captured Vietcong prisoner Nguyen Van Lem, had to repeatedly answer the question of why he didn't *do* something to stop the shooting, rather than document it. The collectively generated answer is that this image was able to communicate to a larger public the atrocities being committed and helped to expedite the American withdrawal. In theory, from the destruction of these two lives, thousands more could be saved; in other words, the ends justified the means.

This example is often cited when teaching young artists in the academic system about the importance that we, as image-makers, must place on the lives our images have after we set them free. This is a necessary lesson, but the time has come for us to cast a critical eye on the processes that lead up to the creation of that image in the first place, especially as it relates to sustainability and environmental cost. When asking the question of "what does this work say and who is it saying it to?" we must concurrently ask "what is the environmental cost of making this work and is that cost balanced by what it is saying?" If the equation of ends justifying means is allowed into the conversation, then there is no reason that questions of environmental sustainability should be excluded. Up until this point, artists, for the most part, have been exempt from pressure to examine how it is they do what they do and to explore greener alternatives. It is no longer enough to justify these practices as valid simply because that's how the masters did it or because this is how the artist envisions it. After hundreds of years of building a society on unsustainable practices, the time to change—in attitude as well as practice—is now.

Before I became a graduate student in Intermedia and printmaking, I had incredibly romanticized notions about what these endeavors entailed; I envisioned half moons of ink under my fingernails and late nights alone in the print studio where I would painstakingly etch plates. I foresaw countless hours spent shooting video and editing on my computer. What I didn't anticipate were the myriad of toxic chemicals that I would be exposed to or the excessive wastefulness that is normalized though claims of need, or the environmental impact of the e-waste I help create by giving money to an institution that routinely upgrades computer equipment regardless of whether or not that equipment is still operational or useful.

I am surely not the first person to call for change in this area. A simple Google search of "green printmaking" will bring up hundreds of results of individual printmakers and presses who are stepping up to the plate. So my question, then, is why haven't academic studios—the very institutions that codify and pass along these processes—begun to teach them exclusively, or at the very least, more diligently? It is true that individual professors and artists have taken up this banner and do work very hard to educate their students in sustainable practices. But, the institutional support and responsibility must also be there. After all, according to a recently released report by the National Endowment for the Arts, 54% of all American artists have at least a Bachelor's degree. That number rises to 83% when you include artists who have some college and those who are currently enrolled. Because of their access to such a large majority of artists—and in the stage of their careers in which they are forming habits of practice—it is the responsibility of academic institutions to be leaders in teaching sustainable arts practices. This critique isn't reserved to printmaking or video and is applicable to all areas of studio art. By shifting our perspective from teaching what has been done in the past, to teaching responsible and sustainable ways of doing things in the future, we can quickly and easily encourage all artists to employ sustainable arts practices. While

universities currently have generally set clear policies about handling toxic chemicals in a responsible manner, providing ventilated work areas, and encouraging the wearing of gloves, masks, and eye protection, this only mitigates the problem rather than solving it outright. It is up to these very institutions to take the lead in this crucial area. If the medium is the message, there is no reason that medium can't be sustainable.

Materials such as solvents, rosin, asphaltum, and aquatint each have adverse health effects that are so well documented that they require materials data sheets. The very fact that one is encouraged to wear a ventilator to use a material should make us take pause and question whether or not this is something that we should be releasing into the atmosphere at all, even if personal safety precautions are being taken. If mineral spirits and solvents can cause liver and kidney damage in me, then it is not hard to imagine what effect they will have to the river ecosystem into which they will eventually go after I am done using them. Additionally, there is the issue of where my materials come from and how they are collected. The copper plate that I use as a matrix was probably mined in an open pit and went through an extensive physical and chemical process (one that includes sulfuric acid, which is highly corrosive and can cause serious burns and poses an inhalation risk for those who work with it) to be extracted and formed into a plate for my use. The coltan for the superconductors that make my video editing possible were most likely mined in an environmentally irresponsible manner amidst the genocide that currently rages in Congo. To make art that is both socially and environmentally responsible, I believe that it is crucial for each of us to acknowledge and deal with the complete lifecycles of all of our materials: from raw material to disposal.

Once academic institutions take responsibility for what they teach their students, we can then start to examine the role of environmental cost in evaluating artistic merit. If weighing the environmental impact of the production of a piece of

work against that work's larger social value were a valid way to judge the worth of artistic contribution, then we would have a codified way by which to hold artists accountable for their practice. In my opening example, the logic used to justify Adams' choice to document rather than intervene placed more value on the broader social good that could be brought about by that image and placed less value on the immediate event as it was taking place: i.e. the lives of these two specific men. If we were to replace "social" impact with "environmental" impact, would critics be as willing to accept this as a rubric?

CHAPTER 2

THE PRAIRIE SERIES

In my own work, environmentalism is at the forefront. I am especially concerned with water and prairie and so for me to ignore the environmental impact in my choice of an artistic vehicle, such as printmaking or video-making, directly undermines the message of my work. As both an artist and an environmentalist, I sometimes struggle to bring these two roles into balance. I do believe, however that there is value in the relationship between art and ecology and that artists can be of great use to the environmental movement in at least two ways. The first involves recasting the aesthetics of the environmental movement and the second involves reconceptualizing how we situate ourselves within it. The value of these roles can, I believe, help to balance the scales of environmental cost. Being aware of these environmental costs of my arts practice is the first step and it has allowed me to make choices that have the least net negative impact. As our society and our institutions move towards greater awareness, better choices can and will be made.

There is an apparent push and pull that exists between land that is used for agricultural purposes and land that is set aside for conservation. For many, the prairie and images of the prairie represent romanticized notions of a pre-pioneer past. In Iowa, a state most well known for its production of corn, efforts to preserve existing prairie or to return agricultural land to a prairie state are often seen as poor uses for our fertile soil. While this bifurcation of land use may be a true representation of the situation with current conventional farming practices in place, it need not always be the case. The prairie can serve as a model for an agricultural practice that serves as an alternative to conventional farming. Leaving wide swaths of prairie (and other native ecosystems) intact can have beneficial results for humans. Making the choice to work with natural systems rather than against them can be easier, cheaper, and mutually beneficial to both humans and to the myriad of

other species who are members of those natural systems. My goal as an artist is threefold. I want to expose, break apart, and then reassemble how we make our choices about land use and how we understand and interact with the effects of those choices. I have attempted this through a series of small preliminary projects that include prints, objects, and books; and which culminates in a three-channel video installation.

Representative of these preliminary projects is the book *Prairie Fracture*. It allows the viewer to hold the divided prairie/agricultural space in his/her hands. This flag accordion book can be viewed in at least two different ways. It can be paged through, like a codex, so that the reader can follow the text—which is comprised of early twentieth century conservation writings—or it can be pulled fully open to reveal a composite image of the fractured prairie/agricultural space. When fully extended, the book appears to be an artistic object, and operates similarly to a painting or a drawing, in that the viewer can observe an image of vastness and appreciate some concept of beauty. The pages, and therefore also the physical spaces that are depicted on these pages, physically collapse and this action explores how the place of the prairie and the place of agriculture intersect and interact and how they fracture each other. By weaving these two spaces together, I am attempting to broach the possibility of a harmonious relationship between the two. By allowing them to remain fractured, I am acknowledging the complexity of the situation and competing interests. By placing the choice of how to view this space in the hands of the viewer, s/he is implicated in how that space exists and s/he is in control of how s/he situates him/herself within it.

The videos that comprise the three-channel video installation are projected in a line next to each other and on a single wall. From left to right, I refer to them as *Prairie Full*, *Prairie Shift*, and *Prairie Obscure*. In *Prairie Full*, the commonly held view of the prairie as an empty space that is defined by its lack of civilization is

challenged. Through demonstration and exploration of the microcosms that exist in the space and by forcing the viewer to spend time with prairie images, it posits the view that the prairie is a full space that has its own internal logic, rhythm, and reason, independent of human intervention. By lingering on imagery of the prairie and allowing it to build slowly, the viewer is encouraged to notice the complex detail of the scene that is presented before him/her and to see the changes that his/her presence bring.

The center video, *Prairie Shift*, is a transitional piece that revisits and reinforces the themes first explored in *Prairie Fracture*, Through erratic camera use and editing, the viewer is unsure whether s/he is watching footage of natural space, a manmade space, or both. Disorientation is the goal, in order to encourage the viewer to step outside of his/her comfort zone of opinion on the matter. It is intended to help open him/her up to the possibility of other options. This helps to further blur the line that I'm drawing between different types of land use.

Prairie Obscure, on the right, works against the viewer's instinct to view the prairie romantically. It highlights the restriction of vision and movement that occurs when one finds oneself inside the prairie and it foregrounds the distance between daily life and an interaction with natural space. We are the aliens. The viewer is not allowed to linger on images, but s/he is forced into different spaces without a reference point from which to draw comfort. Into the black screen, holes open and close to reveal fragments of the prairie. This replicates an experience of sensory overload while in the prairie, while also highlighting the fact that an individual's experience with the space is unique to a specific moment in time and space. But, unlike the agency that s/he has when viewing *Prairie Fracture*, s/he has no control over how to view the space. This juxtaposition is intended to highlight both the total control and the lack of control that we have over place and ourselves in it.

I do believe that humans are at a time of crisis. It is the responsibility of all to be actively engaged in the choices that we make in our interactions with each other, other species, and the natural world. With these projects, I hope to disseminate that message and encourage that goal while continuing to be reflective of and taking responsibility for my own choices.

Figure 1. Prairie Fracture—Front Cover

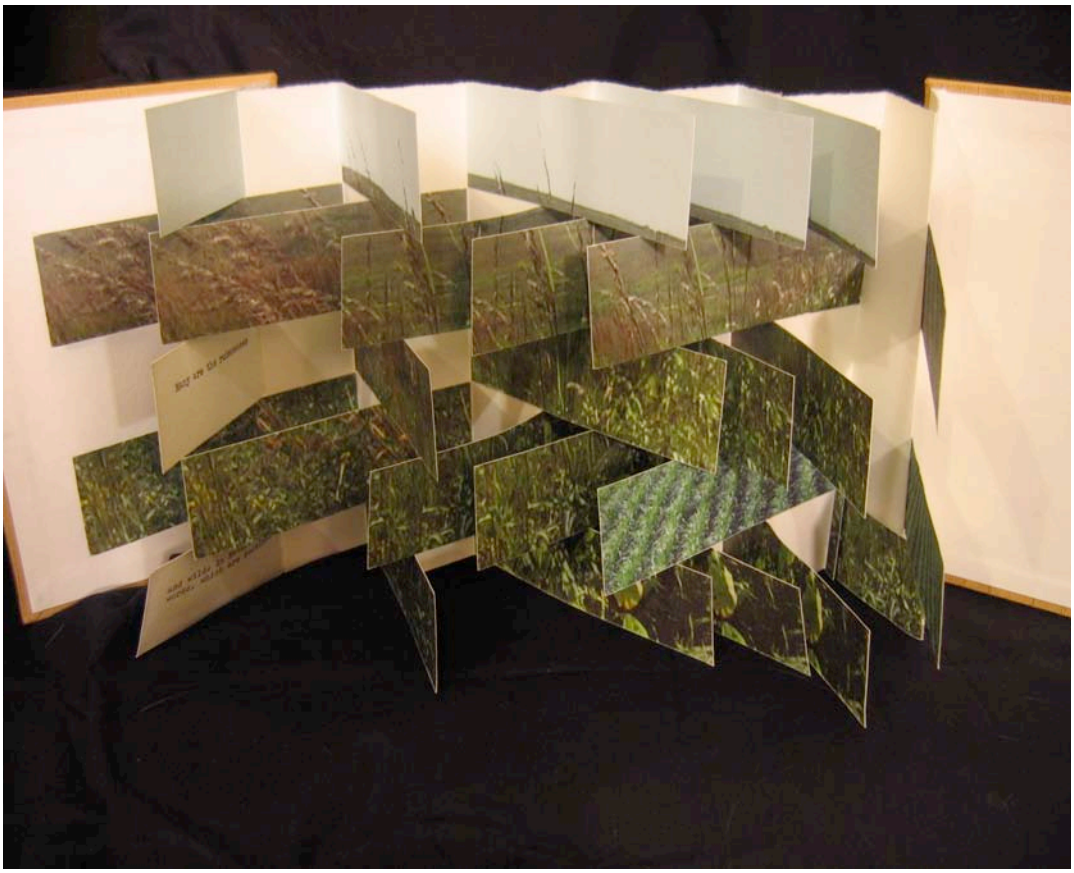

Figure 2. Prairie Fracture—Extended

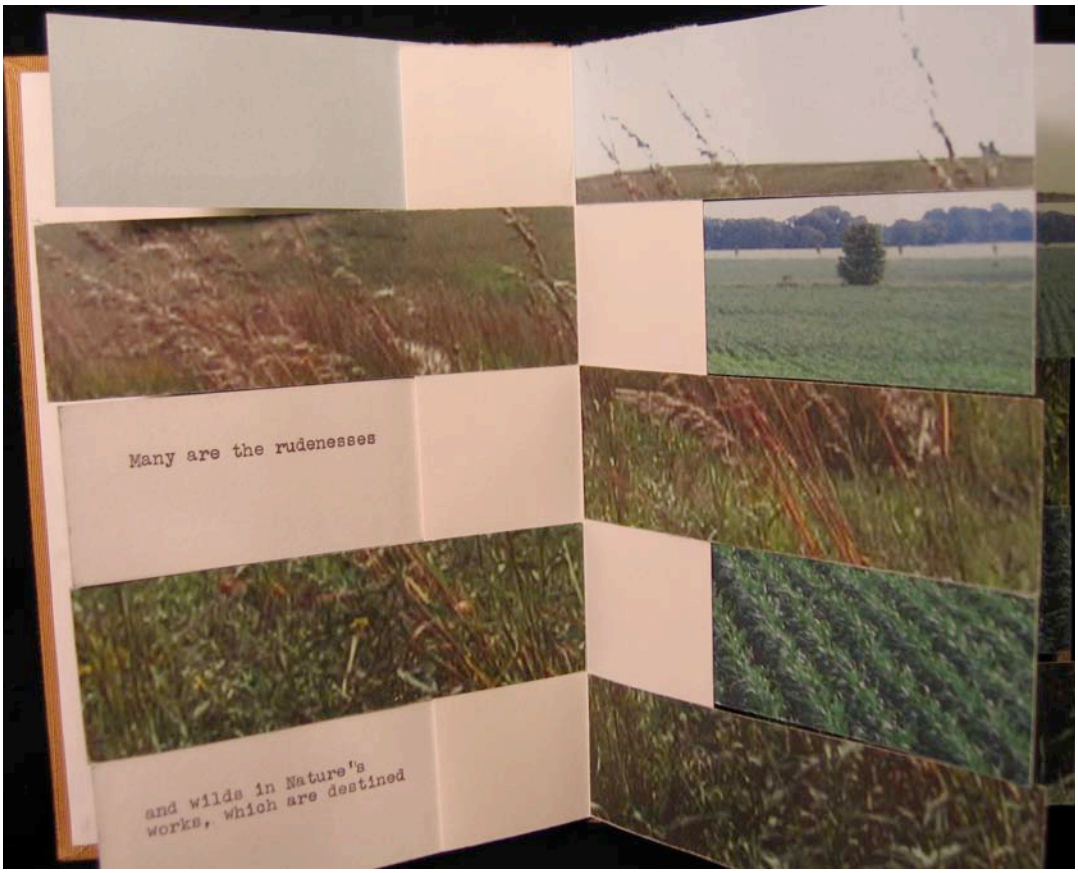

Figure 3. Prairie Fracture—First Page Spread

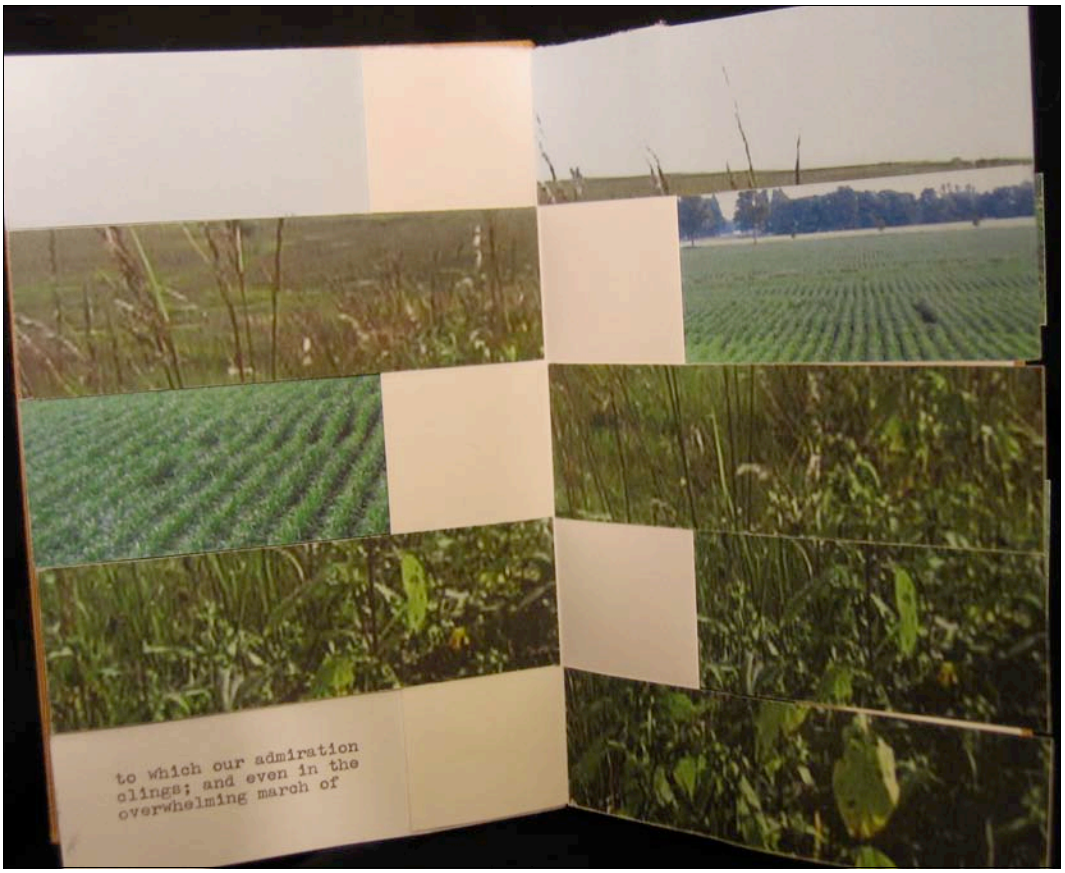

Figure 4. Prairie Fracture—Fourth Page Spread

Figure 5. Prairie Full—Video Still

Figure 6. Prairie Full—Video Still

Figure 7. Prairie Shift—Video Still

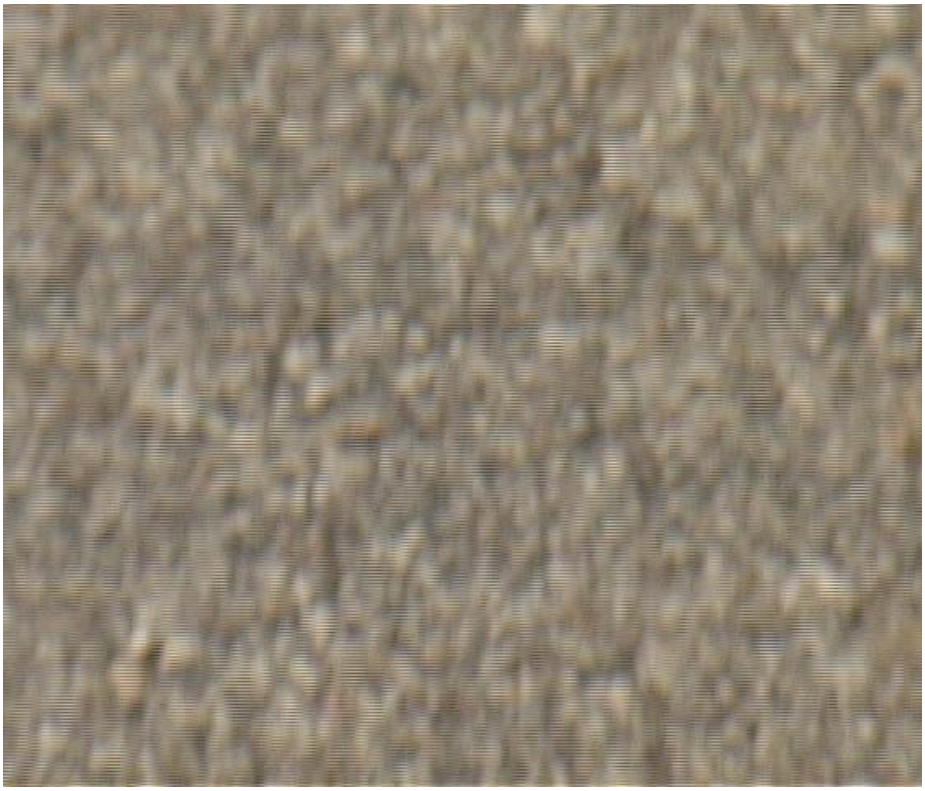

Figure 8. Prairie Shift—Video Still

Figure 9. Prairie Obscure—Video Still

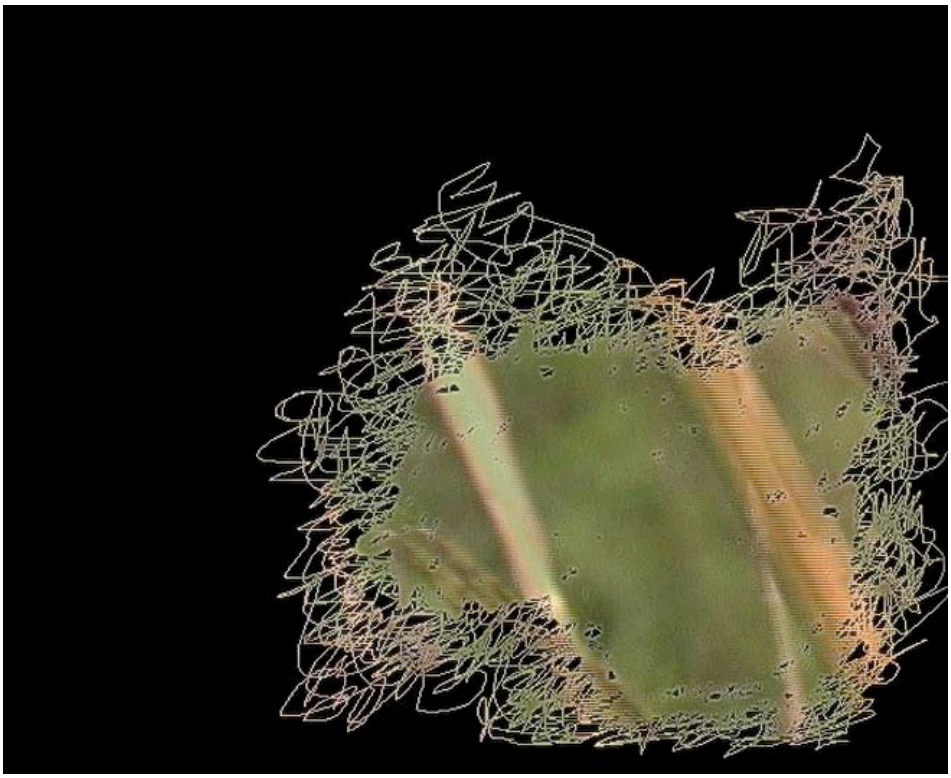

Figure 10. Prairie Obscure—Video Still

Figure 11. Prairie Obscure—Video Still