

MILLS

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THE SHAPE OF A POCKET: ANNE COLVIN AND MARGARET TAIT
January 22-March 16, 2014

OAKLAND, December 12, 2013 — **The Mills College Art Museum (MCAM)** is pleased to announce *The Shape of a Pocket: Anne Colvin and Margaret Tait*, a rare West Coast opportunity to see the artists' works within a unique and intimate framework. The works of Scottish, San Francisco-based, moving image artist Anne Colvin and mid-twentieth century Scottish filmmaker and poet, Margaret Tait unfold through gallery installations, film screenings and readings. Colvin's non-linear interruptions complement Tait's 'film poems' to create an experience of found and readymade 'imperfections'. The relationship between these two women—as painterly, poetic and experimental artists—comes to light in a chorus of image and sound.

With screens set amongst paper rock sculptures, Colvin's newly commissioned three-channel video installation *A Granite Note* creates a haunting call and response refrain using abstracted

visual and sonic fragments of boats, flowers and pipers that extend and shrink the chasm between time and image.

A separate screening room features two of Tait's films, *Portrait of Ga*, a delicate and nuanced portrait of Tait's own mother is evoked through glimpses and personal histories. *Colour Poems* is a series of lyrical short pieces where spoken word, image, memory and observation serve as existential markers.

To frame the collection of Margaret Tait's idiosyncratic poems and short stories, Colvin has created a reading room installation complete with books, ephemera, images, stools recreated from Tait's 1960s reading at the Richard Demarco Gallery in Edinburgh, the U.S. premiere of a new Margaret Tait documentary produced by The Glasgow Women's Library, as well as her own botanical, collaged cut-outs.

For the duration of the exhibition a mini film festival will present a selection of Tait's works, which explore an ephemeral sense of self and place.

Anne Colvin is a Scottish artist based in San Francisco who works primarily with the moving image. Working with a combination of found footage and her own filmic observations, Colvin's work has a heightened awareness of time, frame, texture, and gesture. Colvin's work was most recently included in One Minute Film Festival: 10 Years, MASS MoCA (2013); Modern Edinburgh Film School, Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop (2013); *The Very Eye of Night*, Jancar Gallery, Los Angeles (2012); *System Operations*, Eli Ridgway Gallery, San Francisco in conjunction with the ZERO1 Biennial (2012); *As Yet Untitled*, SF Camerawork (2011) and *Long Play: Bruce Conner and The Singles Collection*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2010). Colvin is Visiting Faculty at the San Francisco Art Institute and California College of the Arts.

Born in 1918 in Kirkwall on Orkney, Scotland, **Margaret Tait** qualified in medicine at Edinburgh University 1941. From 1950 to 1952 she studied film at the Centro Sperimentale di Photographia in Rome. Returning to Scotland she established Ancona Films in Edinburgh's Rose Street. In the 1960s Tait moved back to Orkney where over the following decades she made a series of films inspired by the Orcadian landscape and culture. She wrote poetry and stories and produced several books, including three books of poetry. Screenings of her films include the National Film Theatre (London), Berlin Film Festival, Centre for Contemporary Art (Warsaw), Arsenal Kino (Berlin), Pacific Film Archives (San Francisco), Knokke le Zoute, Delhi and Riga. Her final film *Garden Pieces* was completed in 1998. Margaret Tait died in Kirkwall in 1999.

The Shape of a Pocket: Anne Colvin and Margaret Tait is supported by the Agnes Cowles Bourne Fund for Special Exhibitions. Margaret Tait's films are courtesy of the artist and LUX, London.

Image: Anne Colvin, video still from *A Granite Note*, 2013, three-channel video installation.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

The Shape of a Pocket Opening Reception

Wednesday, January 22, 2014 | 6:00-8:00 pm

Join MCAM for the opening reception of *The Shape of a Pocket*: Anne Colvin and Margaret Tait. Refreshments provided.

Margaret Tait: Poet, Filmmaker, Beachcomber Artist

Wednesday, January 29, 2014 | 7:00 pm | Danforth Lecture Hall

Dr. Sarah Neely, Senior Lecturer in the School of Arts and Humanities at the University of Stirling, explores the work and practice of Margaret Tait (1918-1999), a Scottish filmmaker whose approach is largely characterized by its intimate relationship with the immediate surroundings.

Anne Colvin Lecture: 30 Seconds Over Danforth

Wednesday, February 5, 2014 | 7:00 pm | Danforth Lecture Hall

Anne Colvin is a Scottish artist based in San Francisco who works primarily with the moving image. Working with a combination of found footage and her own filmic observations, Anne's work has a heightened awareness of time, frame, texture, and gesture.

On Throwing a Film Festival

Wednesday, February 12, 2014 | 7:00 pm | Danforth Lecture Hall

Wednesday, February 26, 2014 | 7:00 pm | Danforth Lecture Hall

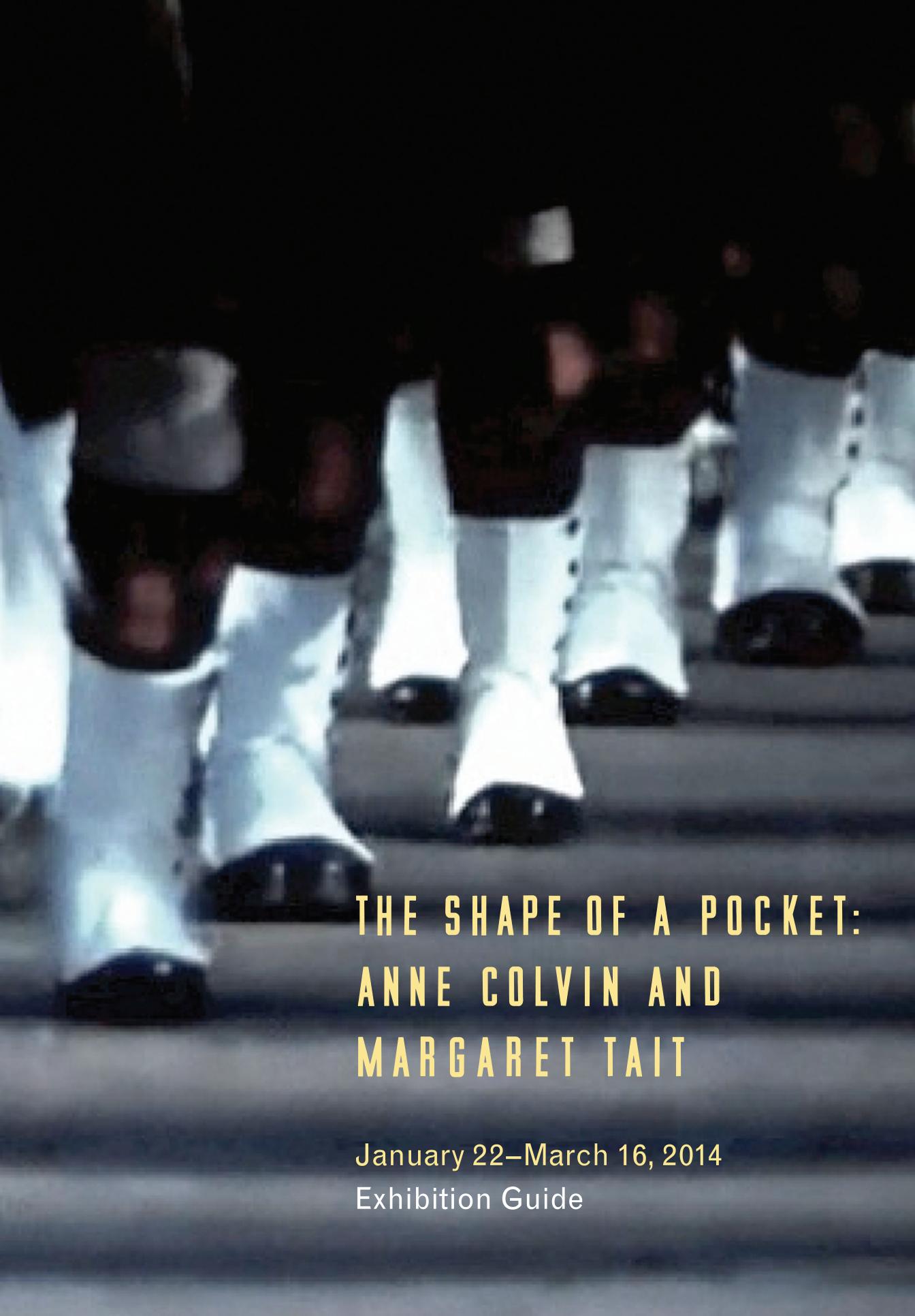
"I had films to show, produced by myself and the two groups I work with, Ancona Films and Sperimental Film, and a place to show them in, in Edinburgh, so I decided to use this festival time of public receptivity to show our wares..." – Margaret Tait December 1954

Films to be shown include Margaret Tait's *Aerial*, *Hugh MacDiarmid: A Portrait*, *Land Makar*, *On the Mountain*, *A Place of Work*, *Tailpiece*, and *Where I Am Is Here*.
Courtesy of Margaret Tait and LUX. London.

ABOUT THE MILLS COLLEGE ART MUSEUM

Founded in 1925, The Mills College Art Museum (MCAM) is a forum for exploring art and ideas and a laboratory for contemporary art practices. Through innovative exhibitions, programs, and collections, the museum engages and inspires the intellectual and creative life of the Mills community as well as the diverse audiences of the Bay Area and beyond. MCAM is located at 5000 MacArthur Boulevard, Oakland, CA 94613. Museum hours are Tuesday-Sunday, 11:00–4:00 pm and Wednesday, 11:00–7:30 pm. Admission is free unless noted. mcam.mills.edu.

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THE SHAPE OF A POCKET:
ANNE COLVIN AND
MARGARET TAIT

January 22–March 16, 2014
Exhibition Guide

THE SHAPE OF A POCKET: ANNE COLVIN AND MARGARET TAIT

The title *The Shape of a Pocket* evokes an image that is intimate, a shape that is discovered by touch rather than sight. Scottish filmmaker and poet, Margaret Tait and Scottish-born moving image artist Anne Colvin share a commitment to making the ineffable visible. As painterly, poetic, and experimental artists, through their work each demonstrates an ephemeral sense of place and temporal elasticity that “. . . allows us to suddenly and disconcertingly see between two frames.”¹

Working in Orkney and Edinburgh, Scotland, Margaret Tait (1918–1999) was a pioneering filmmaker and poet. She produced thirty-three films, and published three books of poetry inspired by the Orcadian landscape and culture. Tait described her work as “film-poems” and Colvin’s newly commissioned three-channel video installation *A Granite Note* is an homage to Tait’s unconventional artistic practice. Working with a combination of found footage and her own filmic observations, Colvin produces work with a heightened awareness of time, frame, texture, and gesture. The conversation between these two women artists’ work highlights the places where real and cinematic time meet.

Tait’s lyrical films were shot in Edinburgh—where she attended boarding school, studied medicine in the 1940s and went on to set up her own film production company—and Orkney, where she was born in 1918 and where she died 80 years later. In the early 1950s, she travelled to Italy to study film at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, later claiming in an interview that “I thought medicine would be my life work but I gradually came over to feeling that it was necessary to do something more than just simply bringing people back to bodily health.” That something was to make films that are true to her location and life, that explore and revel in the gardens, seas, cities and people of Orkney and Edinburgh.

By using images and sounds from the environment in which she lived, Tait was closer to an artist, poet, or composer in her approach, than the business life often associated with more mainstream filmmaking. Her work explored and revisited landscapes, sounds, and people familiar to her since childhood, and her films have an easy use of poetry, music, and painting. Many of her films seem to just emerge in their own time and space with images and sounds blending or blurring. Her film *Colour Poems*, 1974, links nine short films in which memory and chance observation are subsumed into one another. Previously, she had made several short animated films and later integrated sequences of animation into other films, including *Colour Poems*, in which Tait hand paints and scratches directly onto the film stock. The resulting unique and spirited work is both poetry and painting; short spoken and visual phrases that convey specific yet abstracted evocations of place and time.

1 John Berger, *The Shape of a Pocket* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2001)



Margaret Tait, film still from *Portrait of Ga*, 1952. Photo courtesy of LUX, London.

Tait's watchful eye is consumed with small but meaningful details, whether it be a close-up of her mother's wrinkled hands removing the wrapping from a piece of candy in *Portrait of Ga* or the synchronized movement of people's legs as they march to work in *Where I Am Is Here*, her impressionistic exploration of everyday Edinburgh. Colvin's work utilizes a similar strategy of capturing small gestures and movements that are at once intimate and monumental.

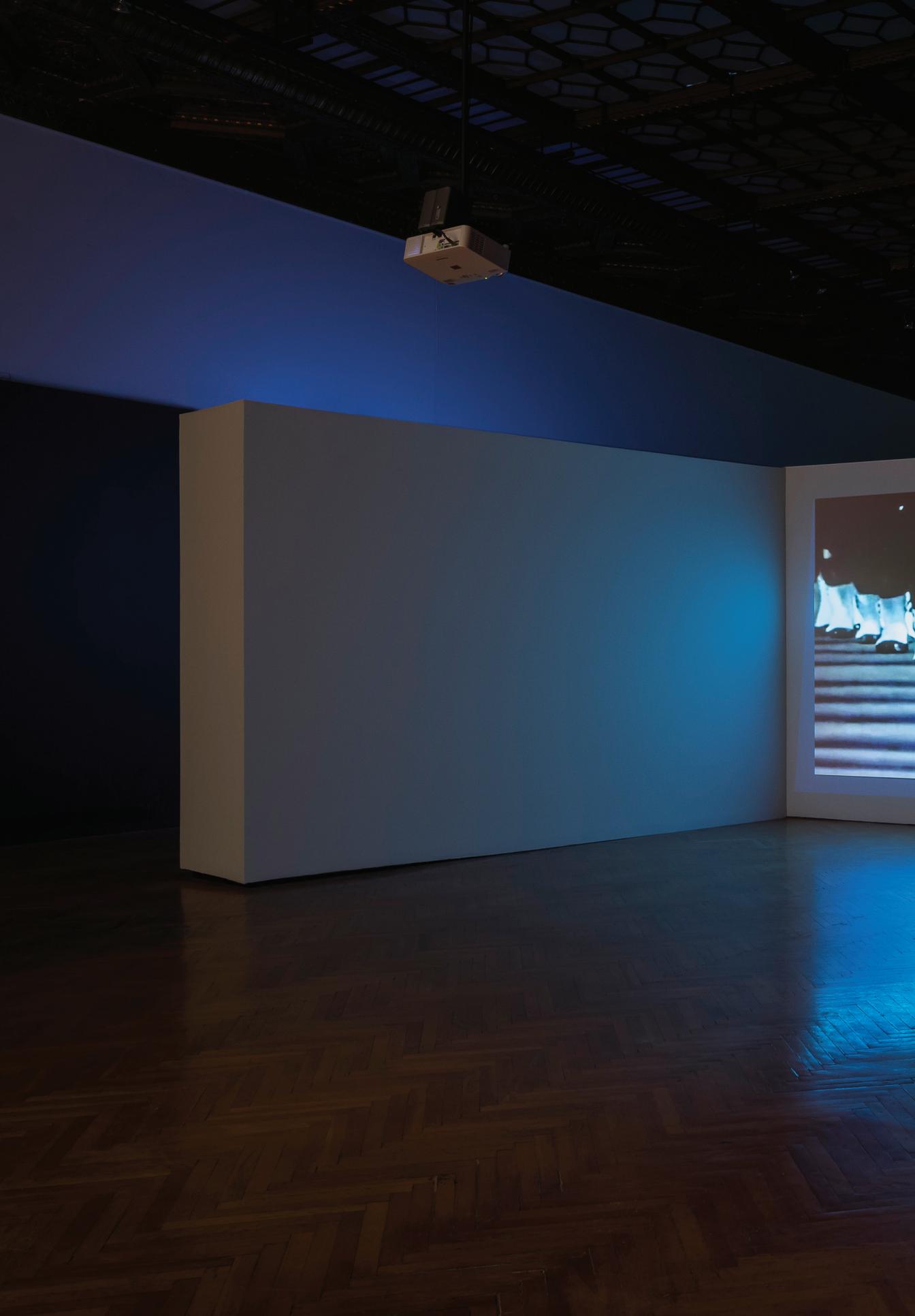
Colvin weaves together both found and original footage, then alters and transforms them into collages of intense moments to create nonlinear filmic experiences. Through editing, specifically the expansion and contraction of time and a particular attention to movement across the frame, she often assumes the role of choreographer.

A Granite Note features abstracted visual and sonic fragments of fishing boats, flowers, and marching bagpipers; three separate non-linear film loops combine to create a haunting call and response refrain on large walls set within a cinematic landscape of sculpted

rocks. Using temporal disruptions of speed, repetition, and changes in direction, Colvin combines fleeting fragments to create a poetic unity within the space of the gallery.

While generally recognizable in their content, the moving images become abstracted through Colvin's editing and the scale of their projections pushes the images to become sculptural in form. In keeping with her interest in exploring the sculptural qualities of the body in motion, Colvin explores the line, fluidity, and rhythm of her subject matter as the images move on each screen and as the viewer navigates the installation. Together the films and objects create a liminal space where real and cinematic time meet.

While the films' structure already existed within Colvin's work, *A Granite Note's* content has a direct relationship to Margaret Tait. As an artist living and working in San Francisco, Colvin's previous work has not dealt with her Scottish heritage in a direct way, but the process of creating *A Granite Note* has been a kind of philosophical coming home for the artist. The imagery





Anne Colvin, *A Granite Note* installation view, 2014.
Photo: Phil Bond (www.philbondphoto.com)



in the films subtly references themes explored in Tait's films and poetry, evoking the fishing boats and gardens of Orkney. The marching bagpipers may be the most overt reference to Scotland, but Colvin reduces the imagery to a tight, repeating close-up of a seemingly endless line of pipers. The strong graphic quality of the moving image enhances the sculptural aspects of the work and brings to mind the structural film montages of Sergei Eisenstein, deemphasizing the specific cultural references.

The paper boulders are created from modified copies of found turn-of-the-century photographs of the Scottish landscape. The craggy faces of the sculptures are echoed in the mountainous depictions in the photographs, which are strikingly familiar to the mid-nineteenth century images taken by early American landscape photographer Carleton Watkins. His arresting images of the Yosemite Valley were a testament to both the monumentality of nature and to the endurance of American pioneers in the American West, ideas that resonate with the themes central to Tait's work in the remote Orkney Islands.

The themes of monumentality and endurance are also echoed in the fact that Edinburgh is a granite city, a city of monumental stone architecture that speaks to a history of austerity—a melancholic sentiment that both Colvin and Tait use for poetic effect. While not directly autobiographical, Colvin's use of this imagery is an exploration of on-going identity and progress.

Tait and Colvin share an intrinsic interest in examining the world and developing meaning through unexpected visual and lyrical synchronicities. While the word "note" references music and the related processes of improvisation and composition that is key to Colvin's work, it also can be a short written text, where the essence of an idea is captured in only a few words. Although more than a generation apart, these two artists use the structure of experimental film and poetry to illuminate meaning in unexpected places and time.

Stephanie Hanor, Director
Mills College Art Museum



Anne Colvin, *A Granite Note* installation views, 2014.
Photo: Phil Bond (www.philbondphoto.com)

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PUBLIC PROGRAMS Full details available on www.mcam.mills.edu

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Left: Margaret Tait, film still from *Colour Poems*, 1974. Photo courtesy of LUX, London.

Front: Anne Colvin, video still from *A Granite Note*, 2013, three-channel video installation.

Museum Hours:
Tuesday–Sunday, 11:00 am–4:00 pm
Wednesday 11:00 am–7:30 pm
Closed Mondays

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ART MUSEUM

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Oakland, CA 94613
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