

# TAMARA HENDERSON “WHAT’S UP DOC ?”

Tamara Henderson interviewed by Jesse McKee  
Vdrome  
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*Borrowing its title from Tex Avery’s Looney Tunes cartoon series’ most famous sentence, Tamara Henderson’s What’s Up Doc? is a 16mm non-narrative film in which DIY aesthetics meet esoteric domestic rituals. Combining old-school travel agent sets with oblique references to exoticism and to practises of self-healing, the film offers a unique entry point to the artist’s deeply idiosyncratic imaginary.*

**Jesse McKee:** *Where do we enter What’s Up Doc? (2014)? It seems like an unfixed place that collides between a travel agency and a doctor or healer’s office. Can you speak about this place, somewhere familiar and strange, which anticipates something fantastic; washed with the features of a small business or an administration setting?*

**Tamara Henderson:** A friend was visiting Toronto from Sweden and confided in me an ailment that was causing her discomfort. My inherent instinct was to find known and reliable natural remedies before paying a visit to a doctor, who would predictably prescribe antibiotics. We went about our own alchemy and dosing for a few days, which isn’t always compatible with the itinerant social patterns of a traveller whose body and mind want to become tired with absorbing the new urban setting and succumb to the pleasant vibrations of culture shock. Meaning the big pharma’s magic healing wand doesn’t require the slowness and consumptive consciousness that natural medicine needs us to be aware of and connected with. After consulting a few local artists about a doctor who wouldn’t mind a foreign patient, we received word of a Doc W.R. Angel who had the reputation of writing prescriptions like poetry. We went there immediately after locating the office and this is the first thing the camera’s eyes open to in *What’s Up Doc?*; the sign above the doc’s door. We waited for hours in a waiting room perfumed with the body odour of patients seated around the perimeter of the room, all facing inwards towards a tabletop oasis made with piles of *Vanity Fair*, *Flair*, *Metro* and a large one story box of chocolates. The sound at this moment in the film is of the waiting room, the small window to the secretary leaking appointments, and the waiting room

soundtrack itself. From the wood-burned plaque, the camera moves down towards the door handle, past the Canada food guide, a guide that has outlined a dietary guidance of mono-nutrition to the Canadian population since 1942 when it was titled Official Food Rules. The door opens and exit stage left, the clandestine Doc wearing his long white coat, swaying stethoscope and Airwalks. During the initial Doc's appointment, I sat across from the Doc with my friend under the influence of his stories and humour, that shapeshifted the experience into a location scouting for what would be *What's Up Doc?*. The wall to the left of the desk was quilted with framed certificates and calendars, all open to a different month. A visualisation of time when the Doc had to play detective as to when exactly a body had been visited by the pain, bacteria or symptoms of whatever brought the patient in.

We left with the doctor's handwriting and traded it for the capsules that would lead my friend down the road to recovery. It was then that I needed to secure my own appointment to capture these few scenes on film, and as this is an in-camera edited film, I needed to do this first on the calendar and on the unexposed roll of time the bolex holds. This took more than a week; I was on call for the Doc and in a way needed to dose myself with engaging the shutter. Finally after much anticipation, I reconnected with the Doc before clinic hours, and left with some soft focus confidential in-office scenes, and a calendar I was gifted in order to carry on with the transition shot.

*JM: The communication between objects comes up in a number of ways in the film; most striking is the scene with the phone receiver drenched with molten lead. What is embodying the objects or characters?*

*TH: A coffee cup filled to the lip with blue green algae plunges itself into an aquarium. This is some matter that grows in Klamath Lake in Oregon, and at this time I was very moved by and drawn to it. It is a celebratory plunge of knowing how to harness the energy from the sun, expanding and diluting, cyanobacteria. Michael Pollan says that plants borrow our feet to see, as they can move by way of the wind and water, but they don't locomote. We have this travelling body house, and can host resident molecules, that mingle chemically, and that the conversation is related to our perception, nervous system, immune system, etc. Here is the lecture by Michael Pollan:*

There and then after my body moves in on the blue green algae dispersing itself through the water. I would have gone to Klamath Lake to witness that hue in its natural habitat, but I hit some hurdles of practicality that were a bit tall for me at the time and that got me moving towards the travel agents; these energy centres for tripping. The travel agency was where I, without a credit card, bought my tickets. I had come down with a powerful travel bug myself. Having researched this through Akashic south path readings, I'm aware that this bug had been going on for a long time, before my spirit was in my body. In nomadic invasions,

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Bruce Chatwin looks at the coming of the tourist, the travel agency, the vehicle for our ancient nomadic selves to ride. So there is a constellation of three geographical locations; Toronto, Vancouver and Halifax. In Toronto there comes the travel agency and the travel agents, these interiors and goings on all felt a bit like Philip K. Dick's novel *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965), which I was into heavily, so this was influencing my reality at this time. The characters in the book are administered two drugs known as Can-E and Chewz-E.

As the travel agency seems to cut the speed of online booking and layers the travel experience with a personal interaction, the travel agent cares that you are leaving, asks about your trip, when you're returning, etc. It is with whom you could report to if there would be no one else. One leaves the travel agent with a package, a plastic documents folder, printed itinerary et al. At one agency, women voluntarily adorned their heads with festive hats and stood like monuments behind their desks. I found that quite beautiful and natural—a true sense of imagination inside of this machine that provided tickets to trip. A few times in the film, when there is the telephone and the receiver or sometimes the wires, coated in rubber and coiled, there is the voice of the travel agent. The xenolinguistics of the agent and the trip report, in object accents, are visually translated as assisted readymades. We arrive at the lead after the camera follows a sunny trail of two hands, played by artist Julian Hou, feeling dirt and clad in reflexology gloves. The camera is directed by the hands that are reading the soil to an object on the receiving end of a meltdown. Lead is a chemical element that has a low melting point, which we could melt down using an oxy acetylene torch. Julian's enthusiasm with the scene was integral. The camera sees the element in a few states, performing its liquid state through to oxidation, as it meets the summer breeze and the coolness of the readymade receiver. There were also two hotel settings, as I often took to staying a few nights here and there in a hotel. In this film it was the Fairmount and the Atlantica, one standing on the west coast, the Pacific, and one standing on the east coast, the Atlantic. At the Fairmount, one evening together, we held an iguana party, a party of three. Here is the invitation:

So that was where we see the travel agent's printed matter, sorted in hue on the far table; piles of desert, sea and maps of the earth. I was making paper, so blending the cutups together and pressing them with a screen device and some iguana party stationary. I would use this material and the methodology of recycling paper many times and I still do in the series of exhibitions "Seasons End", as it has a finish quite like concrete. At the Atlantica, the seaweed is laid to dry on the chaise longues, after climbing towards the camera out of Nova Scotia's ocean. Also, I was receiving some lessons in the spiral at that time, so the chain and the spiral come from the conversations with Beau LaBute about plotting the scenes on a roll of 16mm film, and what shape they would take, what structure they wore.

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*JM: When you first exhibited What's Up Doc? it was accompanied by a series of furniture, curtains and sand paintings. Can you describe this environment's relationship to the film?*

**TH:** The receiver that was executed on camera as a sculpture, moved to join the larger installation I had at Frieze Art Fair called *Resorting* (2014), which would later join the other part of the installation at Rodeo gallery, for the exhibition "Speaking in Scales". When I was in Vancouver with the meltdown and the iguana party, I also visited a past life regression hypnotherapist. Before this, working on my furniture collection, I was visiting the hypnotherapist, so not past life work, this previously was more in the form of how the body and mind recess work. So this past life regression was quite different, as the room was with a microphone and I was to answer promptly the questions. The body still was scanned as a heavy warm mass, as the induction started, as the other therapists had me getting out of body and allowed the fascia to communicate.

Since I had the recording, I put it on a small player with the speaker in the telephone receiver from the meltdown scene. It was placed on one of the chair side tables I made from steel, so you could listen in to my own past life download. It was called Lo Harvard which was the name I called myself in the past. Then there were many other furniture pieces in that installation and paintings, early paintings, where the lines all connect. They stem from that maze painting, an automatic method that now, as I continue to paint, I recognize as hours and hours of meditation and movement remembered by pigment and stroke. I like this type of meditation as it leaves this stain of your existing for that particular duration, maybe it's reassuring. All this sculptural stuff relates to the film as it was made behind the scenes, it is a few things that the camera has opened its eyes to, and that's when film time and all the other time synchronise. The film is entirely hand held, the body performs, moves and doesn't stop moving after the shutter is released, then the process becomes sculpture, painting, poetry, hypnotherapy, yoga, acupuncture, body hacking and sensory deprivation. It's those performative moments that are on film; time sort or changes there. They are also informing themselves through process, through the trips, and objects, expanding their own language as elements and systems within my practice.

*JM: Can you describe the writing practice that you were keeping at the time of making the film and what relationship does a script have to the film?*

**TH:** Especially here as I was waiting around on call for the Doc, I made storyboards of time and it's also an in camera edited film, shot on a bolex h16- which has a wind up motor which drives the camera for 30 seconds. This image clock technology encourages the counting of seconds and always plays a role in the choreography—almost like a conductor. It is an essential medium in my practise for not forgetting and a record that is definitely influential for how things proceed forward. Language and words that remember

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and suggest the mood of the scene are important too, as they play a role in communicating in terms of offering some navigation to the geography of the film. A structuralist map postcard of sorts as the compositions happen in New York. The soundtrack for the film is an integral part of its life force, Dan Riley composed this score and breathes such adequate rhythm, folly, ambience and mood into the piece— accentuating the animism and aurally driving the images through their transitions. When sound marries image, it cultivates with a consistency that of a whole a plethora of fragments draped in a harmonious biophony of wherever *What's Up Doc?* may be.

<https://www.vdrome.org/tamara-henderson/>