The attractiveness of fire lies in its infinite changeability, modulation, transitivity and the continuous coming into being of images... The very enumeration of the traits of fire, as an object of contemplation, demonstrates how close its attributes are to the principles governing the Universe!—the principles of dialectics. Fire as a spectacle, a spectacle which is not bound by the question of good or evil, a spectacle of aesthetic an und für sich [in and of itself] contemplation... it's as if there were strewn the theses of the aesthetic system of fire.

— Sergei Eisenstein

Fire, as a physical mechanism, is the chemical combustion of fuel yielding CO2, H2O, and energy. As a metaphor, film theorist Sergei Eisenstein described the medium of cinema as comparable to those patterns recognized in the flicker of flame. Considered as both a product and an antagonist to the process of ignition, this program enlists the element of water in a dialectical conversation with the element of fire. In confluence with the Institute at Brown for Environment and Society's conference “Earth, Itself: What Fire Does 2017,” these documentaries and experimental shorts animate film’s environmental status as an exchange of heat, light, and energy.

Featuring moving image works by Kenneth Anger, Elaine Byrne, Robin Lehman, H. Paul Moon, Chick Strand, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and a recently uncovered and long-redacted Shell Oil Company documentary on climate change. Curated by Jessica Barsley, Cassandra Guan, Thomas Patrick Pringle, and Caufield Schnug.

Magic Lantern is generously supported by the Malcolm S. Forbes Center for Culture and Media Studies at Brown University.
Program: approx. 91 mins.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul, PHANTOMS OF NABUA, 2009, 11 mins, color, sound, digital video

Palme d’Or-winning director Apichatpong Weerasethakul described this short as “a portrait of home.” Lightning strikes in a small village in Thailand, causing sparks and flames to coalesce with a projector beam in an outdoor cinema.

Chick Strand, KRISTALLNACHT, 1979, 7 mins, b&w, sound, 16mm

Chick Strand was a renowned American filmmaker and anthropologist. She created groundbreaking work combining avant-garde and documentary techniques. Kristallnacht is a haunting night swim, dedicated to Anne Frank.

H. Paul Moon, SIMPLE MACHINES, 2012, 9 mins, b&w, sound, digital video

Machines—technological and organic, micro and macro—are the focus of filmmaker H. Paul Moon’s study, beginning with the massive diesel engine in Copenhagen, Denmark built in 1932 and the world’s largest for more than 30 years. The film debuted at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in concert with the 21st Century Consort, and features an original sound score by acclaimed new media artist and composer R. Luke DuBois. Between the combustion of industry and the exchange of heat and energy in the cinema, the film is reminiscent of Donna Haraway’s maxim: “our best machines are made of sunshine.”

Kenneth Anger, EAUX D’ARTIFICE, 1953, 13 mins, color, sound, 16mm

Kenneth Anger is one of the most influential directors in the history of American underground filmmaking and the importance of his contributions to queer cinema cannot be overemphasized. Here, a woman traverses a mysterious blue world where water flows all around, creating a spectacular liquid display.

Robin Lehman, COLTER’S HELL, 1973, 11 mins, color, sound, digital video

An acclaimed documentarian and two-time academy award winner, Robin Lehman brought a signature perspective to wildlife and nature cinematography. This ethereal landscape montage of a thermal field near Yellowstone Park captures goo, geysers, and other land masses in a state of change.

Elaine Byrne, COLD RUSH, 2017, 12 mins, color, sound, digital video

Elaine Byrne is a contemporary Irish artist, whose research-oriented practice reanimates the residual content of overlooked histories and media texts. Her short film Cold Rush (2017) is a work in progress commissioned by the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin. Cold Rush explores the fraught history and ongoing politics of natural resource extraction in the Bering Strait.

Shell Oil Company, CLIMATES OF CONCERN, 1991, 28 mins, color, sound, digital video

Produced 25 years ago by the Climate Research Unit at the University of East Anglia, the film commissioned by Shell Oil is a document of both knowledge and ignorance. Conceived with an educational purpose for a public audience, Climates of Concern is a comprehensive study as far as climate change documentaries go, with references to the culpability of the fossil fuel and automotive industries, while forecasting “greenhouse refugees.” Today, the film also stands as a testament to the lengths that industries underwent to both understand the consequences of continued extraction while working to manufacture ignorance about these conclusions, here, through redaction. This was generously supplied by the journalists Jelmer Mommers and Damian Carrington, whose recent piece on the film titled “If Shell knew climate change was dire 25 years ago, why still business as usual today?” is essential reading.

Curators: Jessica Bardsley is an artist and PhD Candidate in Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University, where she is also a Film Study Center Fellow. Jessica received an MFA and an MA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Cassandra Guan is a Ph.D student and Presidential Fellow in the department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University. She received a BFA from The Cooper Union School of Art in New York City and subsequently attended the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. Thomas Pringle is a Ph.D student and Presidential Fellow with the department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University, studying digital media and documentary with reference to environmental politics. Caufield Schnug is a PhD Candidate in Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University. He is currently writing his dissertation entitled SCREENING ATMOSPHERE, which explores the intersections between screens and atmospheric things like air, wind, and clouds.