Kidnappers Foil is an immersive moving image installation by Toronto-based artist Gareth Long that explores reproduction and circulation in mainstream media and the social, cultural, and technical histories of amateur American filmmaking through the lens of the itinerant Texan filmmaker Melton Barker.

Between the late 1930s and mid-1970s, Dallas native Melton Barker traveled from town to town across the American South and Midwest, using a single script to produce hundreds of unique iterations of the same film: Kidnapper’s Foil. Offering local children an opportunity to see themselves on the silver screen and a shot at fame, Barker convinced families to pay to cast their children as the stars of his Hollywood-style production. Over the course of one week, Barker...
would assemble his young cast, produce and print the film, and
screen the finished movie in a local venue for all of the town
to see. At the conclusion of each screening event, Barker would pack
up his filmmaking materials and make his way to the next town to
begin production on the next iteration of Kidnappers Foil. In total,
he directed more than three hundred productions, most of which
have been lost. The surviving copies of Kidnapper’s Foil have been
preserved thanks to the extensive efforts of the Texas Archive of
the Moving Image and its director and founder Caroline Frick.

Interested in histories of amateur production and seriality, Gareth
Long utilizes the surviving prints of Barker’s cinematic oeuvre as
ready-made material for his installation. The artist’s synchronized
projection reveals the contrast between these films, and how the
aesthetics change in response to the time of their making. Yet in
these differences, the collected films reveal themselves as an
unlikely archive of American history and culture: capturing forty
years of social life, appetites for fame and celebrity, and the evolutions in
technology that allowed these films to be made and preserved.

Long’s gallery presentation reframes Barker’s work as a conceptual
project by isolating the films from the local context in which they
were made and screened. The artist’s juxtaposition of the films
compromises the assumed authenticity and originality of Barker’s
output, resuscitating the films in their digital afterlife, allowing them
to be copied and decontextualized endlessly.

This installation—shown here for the first time in North America—
features recently discovered prints of Kidnappers Foil. And like
Barker’s films, this installation constitutes an artwork that is the
same but different in its new iteration.

**Transcript of Dialogue**

**KIDNAPPER 1:** Look, that’s Betty Davis over
there giving that party. Get her and her old
man will pay big dough for her.

**KIDNAPPER 2:** Oh, let’s wait around after
the party and catch her.

**KIDNAPPER 1:** Citron, let’s hide.

**JEAN DAVIS:** Thanks, see you later.

**GIRL 1:** Bye!

**KIDNAPPER 1:** Look out for Betty Davis, we
getta watch her.

**KIDNAPPER 2:** Oh, you grab her and I’ll get
the car started.

**BETTY DAVIS:** Help, Help!

**KIDNAPPER 1:** Look out for Betty Davis, we
have to get the tickets too.

**KIDNAPPER 2:** Ok, let’s wait around after the
party and catch her.

**JEAN DAVIS:** Thanks, see you later.

**GIRL 1:** We sure enjoyed the show, Jean!

**JEAN DAVIS:** Betty’s been kidnapped!

**KIDNAPPER 1:** I’m big enough. I’ll show them, I’ll get
out of the car and scream. She was screaming for help.

**BUTCH:** I say we could.

**JEAN DAVIS:** Betty, my little sister, has
been kidnapped. Oh, what shall I do? Dad! Dad! Dad! Dad!

**DAD:** What’s the matter Jean, what’s wrong?

**JEAN DAVIS:** Betty’s been kidnapped!

**DAD:** Kidnapped?!?

**JEAN DAVIS:** Yes, she was standing right over
there. A man came out and put her in the car and drove off. She was screaming for help.

**DAD:** What did they look like?

**JEAN DAVIS:** I don’t know. I didn’t see his face.

**DAD:** C’mon, let’s call the police.

**BOY 1:** Look, there’s a bunch of the gang.

**BOY 2:** What’s up?

**BOY 3:** I don’t know, let’s go and see.

**BOY 4:** Hi gang.

**OTHER BOYS:** “Hi, boys! Sit down.”

**BUTCH:** Listen to this gang, Betty Davis has
been kidnapped

**BOY 1:** Betty Davis, well I know her.

**BOY 2:** So I saw, what’s it say, Butch?

**BUTCH:** It says she was kidnapped yesterday
afternoon after her birthday party. And her father’s offered a ten thousand dollars reward
for any information leading to the capture of the
kidnappers.

**BOY 3:** Ten thousand dollars? Gee whiz, that’s
a lot of dough.

**BOY 4:** Boy, I say it is.

**BOY 5:** What could we do with a thousand
dollars?

**BOY 1:** I say we could.

**BOY 2:** I’ll tell you what we’ll do, Gang. We’ll
find those kids and maybe we’ll get the
thousand bucks.

**BOY 4:** That’s a swell idea.

**YOUNG 1:** May I go too?

**BUTCH:** Naw, you’re too little you might get
hurt. Come on, Gang.

**YOUNG 1:** I’m big enough. I’ll show them, I’ll get
my gang and get those kidnappers too.

**YOUNG 1:** We are going to look for the
kidnappers that have Betty Davis.

**YOUNG 2:** But what if they get us too?

**YOUNG 3:** Oh, they won’t hurt us I’m not afraid.

**YOUNG 4:** Well, why don’t we go look for them?

**YOUNG 1:** Let’s look on the other side of
town.

**YOUNG 2:** Come on, let’s get going!

**GIRL 1:** Listen girls, have you heard the news?

**GIRL 2:** What is it?

**GIRL 1:** Betty Davis has been kidnapped

**ALL GIRLS:** Kidnapped?!?

**GIRL 3:** Gee, I sure would hate to be in her place.

**GIRL 1:** I wonder what they’ll do to her.

**GIRL 2:** I don’t know, but her dad’s offering a
ten thousand dollars reward.

**GIRL 1:** Here comes Butch and the Gang. I
wonder where they are going.

**GIRL 2:** Hi Butch, where you fellas going?

**BUTCH:** We’re going after the kidnappers who
look Betty Davis.

**GIRL 1:** Oh boy, can we go too?

**BOY 1:** Nah, you’d probably crumb everything.

**GIRL 2:** Oh, is that so?

**BOY 2:** Yeah, we don’t want any sissies in
this gang.

**GIRL 3:** How you gonna track them kidnappers
anyway?

**BOY 4:** Yeah we’ll show you about that if we
find them.

**GIRL 1:** Well, if you did find them, all you’d do is
run. And we can run as fast as you can.

**BOY 2:** Says you smartly.

**GIRL 2:** Oh come on, please let us go.

**GIRL 3:** That’s what I say. We never have any fun.

**BUTCH:** Well, what do you say gang, should we
let them go?

**BOY 1:** I guess so, they stay out of the way.

**BOY 2:** Let’s get going.

**YOUNG 1:** Gee, I’m tired and hungry. I could eat
almost anything.

**YOUNG 2:** I bet Betty’s hungry too.

**YOUNG 1:** I bet those kidnappers won’t feed
her a thing.

**YOUNG 4:** I wouldn’t cry if they kidnapped me.

**YOUNG 1:** I bet you wouldn’t.

**YOUNG 2:** I wish we could find Betty and get ten
thousand dollars.

Cover Image: Gareth Long, Childress, Texas version (1936) of The Kidnappers Foil, filmed by Melton Barker. Courtesy of the artist.

YOUNG 3: If I had a ten thousand dollars I’d buy a bicycle.

YOUNG 4: If I had ten thousand dollars I’d buy a thousand worms.

YOUNG 1: “Get them, and you’ll get the stomach aches too.”

GIRL 1: What are you going to do with your part of the reward money if you get it?

GIRL 2: I’m going to take my part and go to college and learn my ABCs.

GIRL 3: I’m going to take my money that I get and buy me some new clothes.

GIRL 4: We better wait until we find the kidnappers before we start spending the reward money.

GIRL 2: We’ve been looking three days and we haven’t found them yet.

GIRL 3: Let’s not give up gang, we may find them.

BETTY DAVIS: Help!

KIDNAPPER 1: Stop your crying, nobody can hear you around here.

BETTY DAVIS: You just wait, they will get you for this.

GIRL 1: Listen gang. What was that?

GIRL 2: That sounded like someone screaming to me.

GIRL 3: Its coming from that old cabin over there.

GIRL 4: I bet that’s her gang, c’mon lets go.

GIRL 2: I’m scared; I don’t believe I’d want to go.

BOY 1: I thought you girls would be trouble if you came along.

BOY 2: Yeah, just a bunch of sissies.

BOY 3: Well, you’re not so brave yourself smarty.

BUTCH: Well, there’s nothing sissy about us, c’mon gang.

BUTCH: Go gang go!

JEAN DAVIS: It’s Betty! It’s Betty! It’s Betty!

DAD: My Betty, safe at last.

DAD: Gang, the police just phoned and said that you captured the kidnappers and deserve the reward.

BETTY: And to show my appreciation, I’m going to give a party for the entire gang tomorrow afternoon.

YOUNG 1: Ahh Gee, we’re too late they already found her.

YOUNG 2: We are late for everything.

YOUNG 3: We never have any luck.

YOUNG 4: Maybe we’ll get some of that money.

YOUNG 2: Maybe we’ll be invited to the party anyway.

YOUNG 1: Go up there and see.

DAD: Come on in gang, and get the money.

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