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Expanded Cinema – Moving Image, Future Experiment and Exhibition

The discussion that follows is centred around two determinants on the future of experimental moving image: a). venue and exhibition (London in particular), b). critical history. The word – experiment - is important since it implies process, which is central to testing out ideas, and participatory (expanded) moving-image in particular needs a public space to complete the ‘experiment’, which may or may not work.

The *Show Experiments in Moving Image* came out of an artists’ reaction to the current context for expanded cinematic experiment, and some questions about the philosophical, intellectual, academic and institutional climate for *future* practice. Describing my work as ‘cinematic’ is to assert what it is not i.e. it is not medium specific. Cinematic connotes an era prior to the avant-garde theories, which expressed many uncertainties around narrative experiment and defined distinctions between the mediums of film and video. I like to imagine a *philosophy* of cinema, emanating from expanded film and ‘primitive’ cinema, but including the electronic, the computer, and the active spectator, sculpture, collage (or narrative), and representation. The word cinematic can be used to describe film or video or digital moving-image, and can embody a *various* history, which includes intermedia experiment, spectacle, video, art and technology, and film. The *cinematic* is not based on the material conditions of a medium and *the cinematic experience* can cross media boundaries or be achieved through a range of media combinations. Furthermore post-digital I take a position that there should be no material distinctions between film and video.

In the late 1960’s and 1970’s, the London Film makers Co-op was a place for trying out, exploring, and experimenting with the technological devices and exhibition of single and multi-screened film. It had a non-censorship policy of programming and exhibition, and dialogue, debate and theory came from the practice. The practice was deliberated through the writing, screenings and exhibitions, and David Curtis, Peter Gidal, and Malcolm Le Grice for example were championing the status of experimental film within the wider context of the conservative art-world. Similarly, from the late 1970’s London Video Arts concentrated on distribution, it did not have an exhibition space, but artists like David Critchley, David Hall, Stephen Partridge and Tamara Krikorian organised shows and events outside the organisation (Butlers Wharf, Acme Gallery and the Space Studio Gallery basement) screening multi-monitor video works. Although initially LVA also had a non-censorship policy, this was changed in 1987 when it adopted a selection process. Dialogue and debate came out of the practice, from artists such as Stuart Marshall, Cate Elwes and David Hall who were similar to their filmic counterparts and committed to writing video into the critical histories of the avant-garde.

This is a brief précis of two organisations that later merged to be called the LUX, but they are important to consider since the London Film makers Co-op and London Video Arts were established when video and film were considered physically and philosophically distinct. Film was film, video was video, and the evolving practices tended to embody the philosophies oriented around these separate technologies. Some of these differences were evident in the exhibition space. Video, which was monitor based and sculptural was inclined to the gallery (a white cube) and could be left running for days on end with its continual playback/feedback systems. The more transient projected film event needed a black space, and with the performance (of the artist) often being an element of this, it was more like a gig than a gallery show.

In current practices, technologies, mediums and genres have blurred edges. Moving image can be both sculptural and cinematic, shot on film, processed in the computer, projected in a gallery or cinema, and be tactile to the viewer. What’s more, the means of production have undergone a transformation in the digital domain. Film and video have merged in the computer for home-based editing, and domestic (and small) digital video cameras are high resolution compared with earlier electronic formats. For certain kinds of production, the organisation as the holder of the technology is superfluous and the artist need no longer rely on a third party for the means of production. However, whilst to some extent we have gained our technological autonomy, we have lost something crucial to future practice. Beyond the means of production, the London Filmmakers Coop and London Video Arts represented two close artist led communities testing out the polemics of their particular practices through process, discourse and exhibition. The need for exhibition spaces cannot be underestimated, since it was this aspect of the LFMC in particular which was essential for expanded film experiment. Trying out the work and playing with the technology within the public domain were important aspects of refining multi-screen

projected and often performative work. Current exhibition spaces have merged the black space of the cinema with the white cube of the gallery, but there seems to be no place for process, or mess.

It is also important to consider that compared with art history in general, critical writing on experimental film and video has been sparse, and this has implications on how certain practices resonate through time. Within the relatively short critical history, there has been an undue emphasis on medium in the modernist sense and debate has focussed on language and abstraction. The critical histories have been oriented around Greenbergian formal concerns or a pre-occupation with opposition to mainstream cinema and narrative conventions. In the reality of *practice* beginning with the Futurists and the Surrealists, through Fluxus to the present, many artists have explored technology, narrative, image, spectacle and active participation by the audience. Though with the exception of *Expanded Cinema* by Gene Youngblood, published over thirty years ago and aspects of Le Grice's *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age*, the histories of experimental film and video do not address these complexities. Experimental/independent artist/film-makers have questioned established narrative conventions, and found innovative narrative or non-narrative structures, this often within the context of materialist and anti-narrative theories. Paradigms tested with expanded cinema for example incorporating representation, a-temporal narrative, performance, and technological experiment, have largely fallen outside the orthodoxies of the available critical histories. Importantly the cinematic practices of the digital age provide a base from which to develop theories of narrative and technological experiment whilst at the same time extending avant-garde history.

Whilst there is now a need for a major critical review of the *practices* of the avant-garde, including expanded cinema, and analogue electronic work, there is also a need that future experiment be facilitated. For example artists exploring complex new forms of expanded cinema are likely to be located within or alongside the academic context (i.e. Chris Hales, Peter Cornwell, Bill Seaman, Agnes Hegedus, Peter Weibel, Jeffrey Shaw, etc.). Dispersed across the globe like a lost tribe, these artists have gravitated towards various academic centres¹ - an international (albeit virtually connected) community. These environments can accommodate the intricacies of cinematic experiment, and are perhaps the best places for artists to develop related philosophical discourses. I am speaking from experience, since I make expanded and participatory cinematic artworks and have grappled with the challenges of its production and staging in the UK. These cannot be underestimated, expanded cinema does not come cheap, and (state) funders, galleries/museums often find the technological apparatus difficult to understand and accommodate. So without the support of various academic institutions and artist/academics I could not have made manifest my experiments in synaesthetic immersive cinema, nor interrogated the boundaries of that critical historical trajectory imbued with the dogma of late modernism.

Given this, I do feel some nostalgia for those places of collective exploration and community of the late 60's and 70's because they stood for possibilities and endeavour. And by and large it was the artists themselves who were writing the history, which stemmed directly from the processes of practice and exhibition, of which they had direct control. Perhaps we are in a period of transition, and a wider review of some of the uncharted histories of the avant-garde will create a need for as yet overlooked work to be exhibited and screened. I am thinking here of video, and the artists who were exploring this 'new' medium in the late 1970's and 80's, (although there are other under-explored moving-image histories). Some of this work was (and is) innovative and extraordinary – consider David Larcher's beautiful multi-screen video works; David Hall's pioneering television interventions; Stephen Partridge's pure video works; Steve Littman's multi layered collage extravaganzas; Marceline Mori's expanded video; Kate Meynell's expanded, sculptural and performative artworks, Cate Elwes, Steve Hawley, Chris Meigh-Andrews etc. Fortunately this gap in the historical knowledge of the evolution of electronic media has not gone un-noticed, and Stephen Partridge, Jane Prophet and Sean Cubitt are leading the academic research project *REWIND* to investigate specifically the first two decades of artists' works in video. Starting from a point of artist centred dialogue and debate, knowledge and pluralism, edifices can be challenged and canons dissipated.

How can the potentialities of a new cinematic imaginary be built into an infrastructure to facilitate experimentation in the future? The current international movement of participatory and expanded cinema

¹ZKM, iCinema, MIT, Annenberg Center for Communication (Southern California), Central St Martins, University of Westminster etc.

that emanates in part from the experiments in expanded cinema (one of the international centres being the LFMC) and the analogue video participatory works of the late 1970's (one of the international centres being LVA/LEA) does have centres of research, though not, as yet, in the UK. Located within or alongside the academic context, dedicated production and exhibition networks such as ZKM (Karlsruhe), iCinema (Sydney), or MIT (Boston), recognise endeavours to extend the possibilities of cinema in the digital domain.

It is not impossible to imagine a National gallery of experimental moving image, for example, *X-Screen* at MUMOK in Vienna is an exhibition of expanded film and has set out to re-create as near as possible the original artworks. Technically this is complex (16mm loops screening continually from December to February, several prints per artist) but the curator Matthias Michalka has understood the need to show the 'original' rather than the facsimile. In the UK the mainstream art-world does show moving-image work, but has overlooked those artists who made the pioneering work preceding the current generation and hasn't yet caught up with those artists who are pushing the boundaries of the cinematic. It is lamentable that the National treasures of the seminal film and electronic works of the past forty years do not have a special place within the National collections, shown in their original formats and preserved (as in North America and parts of Europe) for future generations.

Reviewing (and preserving) past work should initiate confrontation with some of its history, and provide a basis for the nurturing of future experiment. We do need a National space in London for the screening and fluid trying out of work, alongside the screening of earlier film and video, though to cultivate relevant debate there needs to be an informed pluralistic (and shared) understanding of the critical histories of the avant-garde in Britain, and acknowledgement of the *diverse* practical histories.