Video and the Argument from Design

Art always tries to control the conditions of its own performance, differently so in each medium. Where the scale is fixed, as in a painting or sculpture, the frame edge or the standing base will secure the boundaries within which the work is seen. In modernism, the frame itself can be painted as an additional marker between art and space (e.g. from Seurat to Hodgkin). The canvas can also be shaped (e.g. from Vuillard to Stella), or the edge can be determined by its distance from the viewer and by internal rhythms (e.g. from Pollock to Newman). When sculpture abolished the plinth, the base became coextensive with the floor or ground. In minimalism, base even became identical with form (as in the sanded floors of David Hall, or the spread and piled material of Robert Morris).

Museums are art spaces in which these variations are played out. Since the 18th century, the museum has taken individual art works from their original site or ensemble and put them into new contexts. They have been condemned for doing so by the dispossessed or those who speak for them, but the complaint is short sighted. To make private or cultic art into art that anyone can see is not elitist. At the same time, however, it gets harder for the individual or grouped work of art to assert and control its range of meaning for the spectator. Subsumed under a rubric - from This to That - or a concept or a logo, flattened out by explanations on the wall, pushed together so that Richard Long confronts Cezanne (as in 'Landscape Art' at Tate Modern) or Canova hooks up with Kiki Smith (Thierry de Duve's 'Voir/Look' show of 2001), the individual work of art must fight to keep its integrity and inner coherence.

By contrast, the pioneering galleries of early modernism, often run by artists themselves in the name of self-propelled groups like the Futurists, Dadaists or Constructivists, made space for experiment of a different kind. El Lissitzsky's *Proun* installations and Tatlin's corner reliefs brought into play unexploited and decentred aspects of the gallery space. The 1947 Surrealist exhibition in New York festooned the gallery with string so that it

was near impossible to see the works on the walls. Jackson Pollock artfully banked rows of his small paintings between larger ones, multiplying the relations between them, for the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1952. In *This is Tomorrow*, ICA1957, pop art and the new brutalism appeared alongside Robby the Robot from the film 'Invisible Planet'.

Suitably trimmed or tamed, these artist-led interventions have long been imitated in the age of curator power, but rarely surpassed. When they have been equalled, however, the media frames have often broken down, and screen projection interrupts the established sight lines of paintings on the wall and sculptures on the floor. Impelled by a mixture of constructivist art and soviet propaganda, the 1971 *Art in Revolution* show transformed the Hayward Gallery into a multi-dimensional space-frame. On a massive scale, and in the same era, *Paris-Berlin* and *Paris-Moscow* similarly expanded the media of exhibition and display, just as much of the work itself questioned the boundaries of art disciplines. More recently, exhibitions of Kinetic and Sonic Art (also at the Hayward), similarly dealt with a mixture of media that resist the white walls, finding new ways to show and play the arts of light and sound in movement.

This is a quite different trend from the over-theorised musings of the New Museologists, whose dead hand is revealed in the explanatory texts on the walls and the solemnities preserved in vitrines, art's own pickle-jars. These tactics may be intended to distance the viewer from the work on show, to cut the art off from its sensuous appeal to eye and body. In reality, art of the last fifty years or more is quite able to perform that trick on its own, in a strategy of engagement through displacement (as with Warhol). The last thing it needs is a form of exhibition that redoubles the alienation effect along with the entry ticket, when the price of entry to alienation is often enough the art itself. This is why neat rows of Duchamp ready-made duplicates sit so uneasily in exhibitions of concept art; they got there first.

Every artist or group mentioned so far has had a connection to film or photography. But film as a gallery art form, or even as an art form at all, has had a curious history, all the

more so now that it has become a group member of the expanded field of time-based arts in the digital age.

The first generation or two of experimental or artist filmmakers, from the 1920s to the 1940s (i.e. from Viking Eggeling to Mary Ellen Bute) shared the same 35mm celluloid technology as the industrial cinema. Their films were shown in artist-led Film Societies and arthouse cinemas across Europe and the USA, and in a few venturesome museums such as MOMA (led by an English modernist film curator, Iris Barry). 16mm film projection was growing for schools and smaller clubs, but 16mm avant-garde filmmaking, cheaper and more flexible, only became standard from the 1940's, as in Maya Deren's campaign for her 'Cinema 16' distribution group which showed work generated as well as screened in that format.

From then on, only a few artists with classy connections, like Anger and Burroughs, worked in 35mm, with the important exception of the Film Workshop in Lodz, a dissident 1970s offshoot of the Polish National Film School that included Bruszewski, Rybsczynski and Robakowski. At the other end of the scale, artists who work in 8mm 'home movie' film formats include Jeff Keen and Stan Brakhage in the 1960s to Tacita Dean and other contemporaries today.

Video took the same trajectory, but speeded up, from broadcast-standard (and largely uneditable tape) in the 1970s to the quasi-industrial Sony and Beta formats of the 1980s-90s, which introduced high-grade edit suites to artists. After that, the slippage to VHS and then to digital video was easy, with a corresponding rise in individual editing software and DVD multi-channel outputs. But, as industrial cinema itself also turned to digital production and editing, a degree of shape-shifting occurred which leaves the present-day scene in some disarray. The energies of earlier film avant-gardes and video artists were bent on transforming or opposing industrial cinema and television, or making up a lyric, personal, abstract or formal alternative. Today techniques and technologies have since fused, while domestic-scale viewing and making brings cinema closer to home. In different ways, a disapproving Clement Greenberg and an optimistic Michael

Snow foresaw these trends in the 1960s, as of course did New Media theorist Marshall McLuhan.

Much of this has done no good to artists' film and video, since it strengthens a perception shared by art curators and gallery goers that experimental audio-visual art is a kind of Cinema, and has to provoke the same response as a movie. At the same time, the gallery has to disavow the Cinema straight, to preserve the special conditions and functions of the viewing of art. Drawn and contorted between these two asymmetrical expectations, it is no wonder that so many gallery film artists have responded with cinematically-coded and hyper-emotive work which plays to the same sense of spectacle as its distorting mirror, the master Cinema itself.

While Bill Viola has gradually become the worst-case scenario in this saga, turning sentimentality into kitsch, there are few major figures untouched by the appeal of the Cinema at its most manipulative and exploitative. Douglas Gordon, Peter Greenaway, Stan Douglas, Isaac Julien and even Bruce Nauman have made expanded screen works that replay the sounds, codes, words and gestures of commodity culture cinema and TV, to effectively validate the lure and control of the global image-bank. On the single-screen front, Matthew Barney exemplifies this hyperbolic trend.

Critics who still maintain (as most seem to do) that film in the gallery began in the 1990s are necessarily on wobbly ground as they skate over the long history of multi-screen and expanded cinema in the artists' domain. This stretches way back to light-play experiments at the Bauhaus through to the 'Expanded Cinema' defined by Gene Youngblood in 1971. Boosted by the light-show culture of the underground and the multiple-screen projections of Warhol, a newly stripped-down expanded cinema flourished throughout the 1970s. UK examples include the spartan lucidity of 'Line Describing a Cone' by Anthony McCall (with smoke), Lis Rhodes 'Light Music' which generated its own graphic sound from films projected on two opposing walls, Chris Welsby's display of sea waves spread over six or more vertical screens (with projectors on their sides), live-action projection events by Tony Sinden, Malcolm Le Grice and Annabel Nicolson, and a host of two and three

screen films by Gil Eatherly, William Raban, David Crosswaite and many more at the London Film Makers' Cooperative.

Some of this was shown in small, adventurous galleries as well as by the LFMC, but many of these artists avoided the gallery scene as a residue of conventional and privatised art. Galleries were anyway rarely interested in the awkward, laborious and unsaleable business of film or video projection. The same split had happened in New York, where the increasingly smart minimalist artists showed in galleries and museums while the Film Co-op showed in a variety of workshop spaces, lofts and hired rooms. Michael Snow reported that the gallery artists saw the film scene as downbeat and 'grungy'. He and Hollis Frampton were among the few to cross the line between the two camps.

In the 1970s, David Hall recast this difference, to separate 'video art', which he championed, from 'artists' video', which he saw as a broader use of the medium to expand or enhance a body of work beyond the video frame. While the borders are fluid, Hall distinguished art that interrogates its medium, and art in which the medium is a form of display or is subordinate to content. This distinction may seem less than clear cut for the 1990s, which saw the rise of gallery video and film led by a generation which knew little of its medium-specific ancestors and who were inspired, so they said, by cinema and tv rather than structural film or experimental video. Even so, it is not difficult to apply the Hall test to these artists. Gillian Wearing's audio-visual experiments are her strongest and most rigorous works, focused on the medium as well as the message in the spirit of video art. Closer to artists' video is Douglas Gordon's quasi-structural use of slow-down and repetition to boost big-screen cinematic spectacle and drama.

The big screen itself is not necessarily cinematic; it all depends how it looks. Between Hall's edicts of the 1970s and the New Gallerists of the 1990s came a cluster of expanded video with origins in structural film, political art and new media technologies. Enlightened producers, some galvanised by the efforts of David Curtis and John Wyver, commissioned new work for TV or showed the classic avant-gardes at length in programmes such as Ghosts in the Machine, Glasgow Interventions, The Late Show,

Midnight Underground. Major exhibitions outside the London orbit, notably inspired by Eddy Berg in Liverpool, featured a new kind of video sculpture such as the 'video walls' of Stephen Partridge, Steve Littman and others. Direct and frontal, they contrast to the imposing banks of reversed monitors in Hall's 'The Rite Envisaged', backs turned to the viewer as reflected light pours onto the walls. Installations by Judith Goddard, Cate Elwes, Chris Meigh-Andrews and Kate Meynell similarly explored new venues for technological art: videos were shown in disused buildings, temporary galleries, in forests and open spaces.

An ambitious and fiercely urbanised 1990's generation largely fled the Co-op and Video Art axis, even when the White Cube and the Lux faced each other in Hoxton Square (for a brief time until the Lux lost out to rising costs and inflated hopes). The natural home for Steve McQueen, Tacita Dean and Jane and Louise Wilson was the conventional gallery, darkened off. But while they took over the viewing space, and ably controlled the viewing conditions for their work, they also took with them the naïve assumption that the viewer was a free-floating agent in a transparent medium. The emotive appeal of their expanded cinema is coded by the norms of cinema that put identification before investigation. Meaning, for example, is locked into the image and the viewer opens it up. The primacy of the shot as reality-index is the underlying assumption, but the process of construction in editing is a kind of secondary dreamwork that makes the image mysterious again.

This romantic quest art sits well in the idealised spaces of the contemporary gallery, which feeds a cycle of public consumption and private ownership. The fantasy factories of the gallery system have little space for the kinds of materialist cinema that challenge fantasy itself as a mode for art. The peekaboo culture of installation art, which leaves the viewer free to glance at projected work without engagement or focus, *en passent*, permits a walk-through attitude to time-based art. Not surprisingly, 90's artists such as Catharine Yass, Dryden Goodwin and others tend to specialise in images of the floating world, literally so with cameras hanging from balloons, turning in lighthouses, sliding down

office-blocks and lift-shafts or flying over institutional spaces. This uncanny personification of unanchored vision is also a metaphor.

Consequently, the critical reception of installation digital video also lacks anchorage in a critical history. One example of many appears in the 2003 Turner Prize supplement for the Guardian newspaper. Jonathan Jones writes on 'The Moving Image' that "when the tradition of imaginative British art film-making, from Michael Powell to Ken Russell and Nicolas Roeg, vanished beneath a sea of light London comedies, the art gallery often seemed a place where non-mainstream film-making took refuge". Cut to Derek Jarman's Caravaggio, Isaac Julien and Douglas Gordon, in a neat jump from a garbled account of commercial cinema in the 1960s to the New Wave of the 1990's that is totally unaware of the vibrant film and video art inbetween.

"The most radical new idea has been the video and film installation as a genre in itself, independent of cinema while seeming to fill the absence of an alternative culture of the moving image." But five columns later the movie mainstream is back in the frame when Jones adds states that the gallery film artists "are competing with David Lynch and the Sopranos". Ironically enough, he says that "the most beguiling film art is that which takes the history and possibilities of film seriously and is aware of the power of painting, itself a projected fantasy". The ahistorical example given for these brave if confused words is Tacita Dean's lighthouse film, Disappearance at Sea, compared with Powell's Edge of the World, wrongly described as a documentary.

" Film and video installation as a genre in itself" is the crux. Forget that this genre is no genre at all, and that the various art practices in this conjunction share and compete with their different histories, technologies and contexts. It may be that genre's sister-concept from film theory, 'authorship', is more pertinent. In a chapter on the Auteur Theory in 'Signs and Meaning in the Cinema', Peter Wollen outlines the breakdown of the mediaeval system by which a client specified the content and style of a work of art which the artist then executed. The work is planned or composed by the client and carried out or performed by the artist. In early renaissance painting, 'design' and 'colouring' were the

two stages of this separated activity. By contrast, Romanticism affirmed the individual and unique creative role of the artist, who both composes (conceives) and performs (makes) the work as a whole. In turn, modernism rejected that model too. Gauguin's symbolist programmes, Duchamp's diagrams and Constructivist graphs are all attempts by artists to re-invent plans and schematas for themselves, so that each becomes "a designer in his own right."

Wollen traces this dialogue between composition and performance in many other arts that later fed the cinema, such as music improvisation and graphic scores by LaMonte Young and Cornelius Cardew, or free jazz. Like the Baroque poets, or 'Tristram Shandy', modernist writers from Mallarme and Pound to the Concrete Poets collaborated with typographers on the visual form of the text. In theatre, especially in its cinematic side, he cites Wagner's Bayreuth, Meyerhold (Eisenstein's 'master') and Max Reinhardt (an influence on expressionist film) for instances of visual or non-verbal dramatisation that over-ride the script. Plays were cut and pasted, and stage style embraced "mime, *commedia del arte*, set design, costume, acrobatics and the circus".

Meyerhold and Reinhardt "insisted on full control." Their parallel in cinema is the author-director, who links the script and scenario stage to the act of shooting and then to post-production editing. From this process a personal style, signature and thematic may emerge, to identify authorship in wholly commercial or collaborative studio products. Transposed back into gallery art, and coupled with new and direct kinds of film making made possible by the home computer, the attractive model of the author-director has fed back into the art world from which in a sense it was born. The earlier model of the avant-garde film or video artist as creative author, different from the cinema and 'other' to it, is supplanted by the artist as film director.

This image or fantasy is acted out by in the installations of Mark Lewis that reference Orson Welles, Michael Powell and the anonymous Hollywood 'extra'. In disavowing its own history in the film and video avant-gardes, current video installation replays and recycles the Hollywood film and its contents. There are two options here. One is to re-

edit existing footage, the other is to direct an artist's drama. Matthias Muller takes the first option in his assemblage films that cut together related scenes from Hollywood movies. Candice Brietz at MOMA Oxford in winter 2003 showed a series of cited works from TV soaps and MTV to the 'Soliloquy Trilogy', which "reduces blockbuster films to the stars' speaking parts only", according to Jean Wainwright. Clint Eastwood in Dirty Harry, for example, speaks for a surprising six minutes and 57 seconds. In this strategy the artist is more editor than author, in control of the performance but not the design, which the original movie supplies along with its other recognisable and consumerist contents.

Also in a Hackney gallery this winter is an example of the other tactic, the self-directed or designed artists' film. Fisun Guner praises 'Hit' by Stuart Croft for understanding "the language of film". It recalls Lynch (again) or "even better" Tarantino, as befits a "generation growing up on television" not "seduced by shaky hand-held camera and blank backdrops", the hallmarks of older and "moribund" video art. Bar room conversation between two cool guys is said to have 'pace' and a 'plausible structure' but apparently the characters are'nt convincing.

These and many similar installation or single screen gallery works cite or celebrate grand masters like Hitchcock and other box-office winners. In contrast, such film and video artists as Martin Arnold, George Barber and Bruce Conner are heretics of the cinema canon who cut up low-grade movies to bite more deeply into the material than mere 'appropriation' allows. The original material is set in a new context, often radically politicised. New meanings are produced, using techniques like conflict-montage and flicker edits to challenge the supremacy of the given shot. This approach can be graphically decorative, as in Peter Tscherkassky's hand-printed phantasmagorias, or over-didactic, as in Thomas Draschan's recuts of medical films, but it is functionally distinct from movie citation as power trip or reflected glory.

But rather than looking to the cinema as the content of art, Wollen's analysis of the closing gap between composition and performance in modern art might be applied to art

as a current professional practice. Here, a single curator may commission a work, organise its display and finally write a critical text to interpret it, functions that were formerly split between different agents. Meanwhile, the artists themselves act as designers of work which will be carried out by technicians and 'studio assistants'. In both instances, the work itself is entwined with the particular conditions of its performance.

There is an obvious sense in which the designer-curator and the artist-as-designer complement each other, to exert creative control over the product and to maximise artistic control in exhibition. An installation determines the shape of the space in which it is shown, and can be re-sited far less than an easel painting or a freestanding sculpture. But another aspect of the design concept ties the work in to the specific conditions (social, cultural, physical) that allowed it to be made in the first place. In the case of live art, especially, access to the work is reserved for those who can get to the gallery or venue where it is enacted. All that is left is the record, in photographs or on tape. 'Documentation', or the follow-up video version, can re-circulate the original work, or 'situation', but in radically changed form.

Many early video artists opposed the gallery and private ownership, which some now regret as they find themselves written out of art history or pushed to its margins. Later generations who have embraced and been embraced by the gallery find themselves in a different kind of dilemma on their way to or from canonical status. Only a few works are likely to survive in their original state, permanently installed on museums, and they may not be those that shout loudest today. This will be determined not just by the creative merit of the work, but by the survival factor of the different and often transitional media in which it is materialised. The mass-produced neon tubes used by Dan Flavin forty years ago are no longer made, and museums have to have them manufactured by hand to preserve the work. How many artists will get that kind of treatment when the factories run out of 8mm film, VHS recorders and CD-Roms?

The design strategy is also being outstripped by the filtering down of the means of artistic production into software and the internet. Here the issue is exactly the reverse. Digital

media maximise design-control for the artist at the workshop stage of production, even when the work is meant to be interactive. But the point of access, and its fate thereafter, is wide open. The museum can only put art objects here or there, depending on the physical space available. On the net they can appear anywhere, alongside anything, reworked and recited.

Artists' responses to these developments behind gallery walls and in abstract cyberspace have been just as various. Artist-led screenings by Karen Mirza, Lucy Reynolds and Peter Todd at the 291, the Gas Works and many other venues have turned galleries back into cinemas, reinventing the improvised aura of the Arts Lab and the Film Co-op when David Curtis was the programmer. Sometimes the process is reversed, and the cinema becomes an installation space, as in the 'Train Films' multi-screening event run by Guy Sherwin and Chloe at the Royal College of Art in 2001, or Steve McQueen's recent films at the Metro Cinema with the seats removed.

In part, these strategies are part of a wider multi media culture predicted in the last century by science fiction and the cinema. It includes public surveillance, live music to old films, cinematic projections onto buildings, screens in offices and streets, club projections, visual music events, live dance and drama with projection, digital video large and small, downloadable movies and archives on the net, video games and visual advertising. But film and video art for the screen or gallery has a specific role and context, and it will seek new ways to assert itself as more cultural options open and as media technologies and venues expand.

In this light, David Curtis' 'A Century of Artists' Films in Britain' explores many facets of the current state of film art and its exhibition, as well as provoking alternatives like the present show. Putting all the work on digital video makes it freely available to new audiences. The quality may vary, but among its stunning successes are the 4-screen 'After Manet' by Le Grice in programme 2, which would be impossible to set up for daily film performances over three months (as would many other films in the series). The repertory cycle that changes every three months is an original structure for both sampling and for

deeper study. The categories that order the films, always a contentious topic short of continous open screening, are as much anti-canonic as otherwise. Some follow the book ('Expanded Cinema", 'The Undercut Generation", 'Structural Film") but others are intuitive or unbounded ("Games and Devices", "B Movies", "Conflict", "Cosmologies"). The viewing gallery is indeed 'walk-through', but turned to advantage. Some visitors in transit will stop to watch, just as others will come to see specific films or programmes. In either case, it makes available on a daily basis a selection of British work largely ignored by the state and private galleries. It opens the work to audiences who have never heard of it and who would otherwise never encounter it.

If that leads to a wider interest in art for screen and space, it will have been worthwhile doing. There is room for much more, including artist-led events, which - in a different sense - have always been part of the experimental sector's bid to close the gap between composition and performance, between making the work and showing it, with minimal curatorial intervention. Some film is for galleries, some for darkened rooms; the technology of projection is not determining. The films come from different sectors. Some time-based artists cross from one exhibition space to another, composing for different kinds of performance on the single screen, in the gallery or for television; they include Malcolm Le Grice, Tina Keane, William Raban, Jayne Parker, Nicky Hamlyn, Judith Goddard, David Larcher, David Hall, Lis Rhodes, Emily Richardson, and many others. For each of them, the space for viewing follows the statement made by the work, not the other way round, even when this is the easier and sometimes profitable route for the cinematized gallery.

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