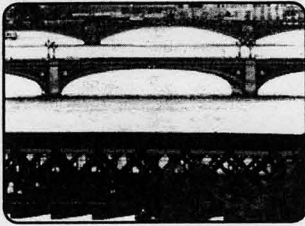EDITORIAL DECLARATION

The Art in-Sights section of Filmwaves is dedicated to creating a discursive space in which artists and writers can discuss the magic and meaning of the moving image. It seeks to tease out cross-generational links in spite of commercial imperatives to suppress film and video history. It situates artists' practice in the social, political and national context of its day without denying the agency of individual creativity. In the Polemics section, vitriol and constructive criticism can find a place while features and reviews argue the validity and continuing relevance of artists' interventions into our moving image culture.

Starting a conversation about...
artists' film, video and installation.

Ever since the call first went up in the middle of the 20th century that art was dead, practitioners have turned to film and later, video as well as digital technology to explore new means of expression. The dematerialisation of the art object has stimulated some of the most challenging, disturbing and innovative contemporary art. The loss of the art object has been partly mitigated by the 1970s preoccupation with the material specificity of film and video. But whatever materialist arguments have raged around the apparatus of film and video, whatever cultural icons Marxist or Feminist deconstructions have attempted to demolish, moving image remains the servant of enchantment and illusion, of desire and the transcendental. Its allure takes many forms: Nicky Hamlyn refers to film's sense of "things ungrasped...of things slipping by."[1] Anna Thew sees film as the medium of dreams and is seduced by "film's lascivious surface."[2] Gillian Wearing becomes caught up in the manipulation of the video image:" I really like the editing process... I get totally into it."[3] Classic film directors and artists alike are seduced by the immersive qualities of the moving image and the ability it affords them to draw the viewer into their imaginative worlds.

Whatever their motives, artists have not been shy to harness the power of cinema and broadcast television. At times, the viewer may be forgiven for wondering how the artists' work differs from mainstream entertainment. For instance, is there a difference between Gillian Wearing's masked confessors in *Confess all on video* (1994) and any media-hungry punter participating in the carefully orchestrated political vacuum of an Oprah show. Why are Shirin Neshat's extraordinary films shown in a gallery and is Michael Maziere's most recent film not as comfortable in a cinema as it is in a gallery? What is the difference between the cinematic space and the gallery environment?

Classic cinema depended on the darkened arena of the movie theatre to produce what Raymond Bellour termed a collective "experience of visions". Each individual took up a fixed viewing position in relation to the screen that corresponded to the eye of the camera and conformed to the dictates of Euclidian perspective. Darkness was key to the ability of the individual to lose the immediate bearings of environment and life and become spellbound by the illusory world being played out on the screen. The fascination for film's ghostly cast of players became total and most easily observed in the close-up. As Barthes has observed, in close-up the face of the star can "plunge the audience into the deepest ecstasy."

The shifting of sensory awareness from the immediate, spatial environment to the perception of illusory space and time on the screen is never total. In spite of the isolation of the projector in a soundproofed room, the beam of light that it throws is a physical entity and delineates the space of the

cinema. The viewers intersect the journey of the light onto the screen and the meaning of the film is precariously held in the acquiescence of the viewer to suspend disbelief and in the specific life experiences that are brought to bear on the interpretation of the narrative.

Many filmmakers in the 1970s ascribed to film a more totalising effect and formulated the viewer as a passive consumer of dominant ideologies thinly disguised in Hollywood narratives. But many artists returned us to the sculptural space that is cinema. Nicky Hamlyn has pointed out that "the best work... plays on the contrast between the sculptural/mechanical presence of the projection, the film strip and the projected image itself."[4] In 1972, Anthony McCall's installation, *Line Describing a Cone,* animated the physical space occupied by projected light. In his film, a point of light draws a circle, but the main emphasis of the installation was on the beam of light as it was made visible by smoke, incense and particles of dust swirling in the air. This year in Soho Square, Tony Oursler video projected faces through smoke to similar, but more theatrical effect. His smoke-screen asserted the material but evoked the immaterial, the mutable with a sense of human endeavour lost to history.

Artists like Michael Maziere, Shirin Neshat and Douglas Gordon have created a new cinematic space within the gallery. No longer constrained by cinema schedules and a fixed viewing position, spectators are now free to determine the length of exposure to the images and can enter into a more physical and more intimate exchange with the work. As Shirin Neshat has commented, "I create an experience rather than an object."[5] The notion of a more active viewer is fundamental to contemporary work although many of the ingredients of classic cinema survive – the physical space of the 'throw' between projector and screen, the darkness, the illusion of depth on the screen and the magic of the image that "..is not so much an object, but rather something that permeates the space."[6]

When film is broadcast on television, the viewing conditions change dramatically and the arguments of video artists take over. The Canadian commentator Peggy Gale has characterised video as the medium of truth with its links to television, where film exists in the realm of the imaginary. Television functions as a domestic object that emits coloured light into the home where it has to compete with furnishing and family distractions for the viewer's attention. In this context, the close-up of Garbo's face might be no more arresting than the framed studio shot of the actress that is hanging on the wall. In a gallery space, the monitor is hampered by its small scale and insistent physicality. Many artists have explored the tension between the electronic image playing on the monitor's glass face and the sculptural box that acts as its support. In this country, David Hall made a number of works in which walls of television receivers became the object of contemplation, their seductive screens frustratingly turned away from the viewer. In the US, Nam June Paik further undermined the intended function of a television by creating families of tele-robots made of stacked TVs randomly tuned to broadcast stations. With the sounds merging into a cacophony of telebabble and the electronic visual material subsumed into the sculptural, these works disrupted the smooth flow of an evening's viewing and the ability of television, and film on television, to exert its narrative hold.

Although the physicality and almost anthropomorphic nature of video has preoccupied artists, they have been equally attracted by the intimacy of the medium. It is axiomatic to point to the ease with which the personal can be elaborated on video. The possibility of lengthy recordings, the simplicity and portability of the technology and the independence from film crews has made video the medium of choice for artists investigating subjectivity, identity and history. But a paradox resides in the video image, particularly in live relay or in the fantasy relationships played out over the net. Even riding on the most devastatingly 'real' autobiographical revelations, video blocks any actual, interactive or physical contact with another individual. In the end, the video image speaks most eloquently of what is absent, and we remain, in Blanchot's words, "locked in an essential solitude". An even greater distance is created by daytime television confessionals. Not only do they safely remove us from direct contact with our fellows, they also deliberately extract human misery from its social and political causal roots. There is a danger that in art as in television, the commodification of the personal might lead to regressive voyeuristic pleasures replacing the realities and responsibilities of human interaction.

In spite of these problems, video remains a powerful agent of individual sensibility. Early feminist work, and contemporary pieces by artists such as Gillian Wearing, Michael Curran and Smith & Stewart demonstrate that like film, and like cinema, video has the power to draw the viewer into a spectral world of the imagination, or to participate in a radical re-staging of the real. It offers, through a sensory and conceptual engagement, an opportunity to refresh our view of the world and our place within it. Lynne Cooke has argued that given the immutable narrative structures of film and the omnipresence of broadcast actualities, the moving image artist can't fail. The viewer will "...embrace what is presented as real, automatically/inevitably, routinely..."[7] I have a more positive sense of a critical viewer, and not only as Peter Gidal argues in this issue, when she is deprived of narrative immersion. Artists use narrative, visual seduction, conceptual and material manipulations of the apparatus to reveal their truths about the world – however provisional they might be. If art has the power to shape rather than simply reflect culture, then cinema shares art's ambitions and many of the strategies it deploys to achieve them.
Catherine Elwes

1. Nicky Hamlyn, "Film, Video, TV", Coil 9/10
2. Anna Thew in this issue
3. Gillian Wearing interviewed by Donna de Salvo in "Gillian Wearing", Phaidon Press, l999
4. Nicky Hamlyn, Op cit
5. Shirin Neshat in conversation with Jenni Sorkin, MAKE 88
6. Nicky Hamlyn, Op cit
7. Lynne Cooke, "Gary Hill: who am I but a figure of speech, Pakett 34