

Remembrances of things past

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The hum of super 8mm and 16mm projectors, the bodies and places that populate their images have become ghosts of a nostalgic past, a paradise lost, associated with the birth of photography, photographs and the flickering light burning through last century's celluloid. The baby in the Lumiere Brothers' *Le Petit Gout de Bebe* was the blueprint for all our home movie memories to follow and the leaves rustling in the wind behind the baby which so fascinated Melies would fascinate all potential filmmakers thereafter.

Super 8mm and 16mm have for some time been released of their function, reduced in the broadcast media and advertising world to a marketable and usable style quality where scratches and dust are acceptable as long as they are artificially created and suitably sanitised. Video has now replaced super 8mm in the creation of home movies and popular travelogues. Kodak has now brought onto the market super 8mm negative, not for the reason of making several copies from a master negative—the super 8mm enthusiasts dream—but in order to transfer direct onto video for home editing on the computer.

Super 8mm home movies are now in the public domain, their time honoured function is up and they now are material for artists, TV and music companies to exploit. The developments in video, new media and digital technology now liberate traditional forms from their functionality and industry-orientated constraints.

For many of us super 8mm was the first step in representing the moving image, its versatility and simplicity captured the imagination of many art students, experimental and independent filmmakers and film groups. With the advent of television and mass media in the 1960s and 70s artists discovered anew (after the experimentation of the 20s and 30s) the plasticity and possibilities of film. Then in the 80s, 16mm film was relieved of its educational and 'light industrial' function, helping it achieve its fully 'liberated position' as a creative art form. But now the post-production processes are disappearing, 16mm editing tables gather dust in workshops, television studios and schools and 16mm labs are closing down. The creation and post-production process that began with the birth of cinema itself, marking the beginning of experimental film history in the 20s and 30s has been undergoing a gradual change. Cutting of film is rapidly becoming a thing of the past as celluloid is now transcribed and digitised, becoming numbered data interchangeable with sound and text that ultimately influences the editing process. 16mm film is a dinosaur in its last death throws, on the verge of extinction and obsolescence, the specificity of its medium threatened.

So why is there so much film work present in galleries and museums?

Those who continue with super 8 and 16mm film will be the experimental and independent filmmakers who see themselves within a specific historical lineage and artists who are always re-inventing new ways of seeing. Abel Gance brought us multi-screen projection too early, too ahead of its time. Out of the birth of cinema grew an experimental form of cinema. The birth of video also temporarily gave us new forms of experimentation with the medium. It is these high points of experimentation which are being rediscovered and reconsidered today. Those who choose to work with 16mm film will persist with Steenbecks at home: self-sufficient filmmakers who retain control over their material, those who want to continue to work with the tactile nature of film and with those who want to continue to sculpt in time.

Filmmaking that exists on the margins retains a kind of constant marginality, a stability on the edge. It finds itself a position of opposition and learns how to operate from this position of sur-

vival. This nucleus of activity sometimes moves closer to and sometimes farther away from the activity of its parallel universe and at times the paths of players from each side cross over into the other camp. The border-line between what constitutes art and what constitutes film is being broken down partly due to the prevalence of video/moving image present in gallery spaces.

With these thoughts in mind I would like to discuss four exhibitions I have seen this year. The first: an exhibition where an artist working with film has made inroads into the gallery system and art world. The other three are filmmakers associated with more marginal and experimental practices showing their work in gallery spaces.

In spring of this year Tacita Dean presented seven film installations in her solo exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London. All of the them had their own sound-proofed spaces and all worked with a straight forward, classical frontal projection. In six of the spaces a loop system was set up for continuous viewing. Dean's installations are minimal in the way they intervene with the space. The film is projected onto a wall, at times filling the full wall, at times occupying a centre space. The spectator can either stand or sit according to whether a bench is available. The arrangement of these varying viewing spaces where one can pass from one film into another make the spectator the interactive component in a medium that does not normally lend itself to interruption, repetition or spectator control. As well as making us aware of the gallery context, this passing from one space into another helps us relate one film to another, giving us an enhanced understanding of the artist's approach. Dean's images are well composed and considered, with their own sense of pace and rhythm. Her images and subject matter paired down to a minimum giving the work clarity and simplicity. Her approach is akin to that of documentary in the treatment and research into her subject matter but unlike most documentaries is devoid of commentary, voice-over or text. The images speak for themselves.

The documentary genre is becoming increasingly popular as it crosses over into fine art territory with artists producing experimental documentaries and approaching documentary in unconventional ways. Galleries and museums appear to be willing to accommodate such work because it deals with recognisable subject matter that is accessible and understandable for the viewer while still retaining a bold artist's signature.

Matthias Müller is a well-known filmmaker on the independent/experimental film scene. His

work is toured internationally by the Goethe Institute. Müller's former work borrowed from, analyses and deconstructs Hollywood narrative structures. It is beautifully shot and well constructed. In *Home Stories*, an early film work, Müller, sampled scenes from typical melodramas. Varying scenes from films showing women entering and leaving rooms, switching on and off lamps, anxiety, fear and apprehension on their faces were edited together, exposing and in so doing, deconstructing the repetitive formula of Hollywood narrative structures.

Müller's most recent film *Vacancy* was shown at an exhibition at the Royal College of Art in London *playing amongst the ruins*, organised by the students of the RCA curating course. *Vacancy* was filmed in Brasilia, Oscar Niemeyer & Lucio Costa's utopian city built from scratch in 1961, the year of Müller's birth. Mixing his own images of the city with found footage and archive material, he unearths a strong poetic portrait of the hopes and subsequent demise of a utopian dream and the ruination and degradation of a modern utopia. Historical images of the pristine city dissolve into shots of a crumbling contemporary Brasilia. Present day footage is treated in such a way that the distinction between what is archive footage from the 60s and what is contemporary footage is totally blurred. A voice over accompanies us through these strange and beautifully composed cityscapes with texts from Italo Calvino, Samuel Beckett, David Wojnarowicz and Müller himself. The film moves into documentary territory then pulls out as Müller's subjective poetic vision begins to refer not only to the past and present of a utopian city but to his own life.

This is the first time I have seen Müller's work in a gallery. This film would seem to have been chosen for its suitability to the theme of the exhibition, (other works in this show included Martha Rosler's *How do we know what home looks like* shot in Le Corbusier's *L'Unité d'Habitation* at Firminy-Vert and Sarah Morris' film *Midtown* shot in New York). But *Vacancy* works well in a gallery space and it is easy to imagine these images in other larger spaces where the spectator can physically engage with the projected images of Brasilia past and present. The spectators' physical presence becomes an architectural component and human reference in Müller's filmic representation of this modern city.

Yann Beauvais has been making experimental films since the 1970s. He is co-founder of Lightcone Distribution Co-operative in Paris (distribution and archive of experimental film) and programmer of *Scratch Projection*, a weekly screening of experimental cinema in Paris. At C.R.E.D.A.C. Centre d'Art contemporain d'Ivry just outside Paris. Beauvais presented a complex and compelling film installation titled 'Des Rives'. Typically French in its play on words, *des rives* meaning river banks and dérives meaning to wander in the city with no particular aim or reason.

Des Rives comprised of two screens set at a 120° angle making the spectator the third point in a three dimensional virtual space. Like a large fan opened out, moving images of New York passed horizontally across vertical strips creating a surface pattern like windscreen wipers moving back and forward across the screen. The panoramic scenes and tracking shots of New York, the layering of images and the slow-moving zoom kept the viewers gaze in motion and unstable, constantly shifting between construction, analysis and collapse. At times our eyes would focus upon one cut-up New York urban landscape before shifting to another urban scene, the foreground becoming the background and vice versa. The image has no centre, no sides, we are neither guided by a linear narrative or chronological editing. As the films





repeat themselves through the use of a loop system we begin to recognise and familiarise ourselves with a taxi, a street scene, a corner but never enough to fully identify with it.

The sound accompanying the installation created by Thomas Köner is not intended to make the images more realistic but to make the space more real. Köner states that it is impossible for sound and image to interact totally because they assume different dimensions. This collaboration created a

merging of two different audiences, the experimental film one and the electronic music one. Historically these two fields have much-in-common and it was inspiring to witness their coming together and fusing on equal terms. Beauvais' film installation in a gallery context brought together in a positive way the three different strands of film, art and music and the intertwining of their past histories and present developments.

At the Centre National de la Photographie in Paris were the filmmakers Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, a formidable couple working with 35mm. They have been active since the 60's and were part of the initial energy and vibrancy of the Nouvelle Vague. Refusing to participate in the Algerian war, Straub was treated as a deserter and facing imprisonment in France left for Germany. Current debate in the French press on the use of torture during the Algerian war has revealed Jean-Marie Straub's political position at that time, which was to have a negative effect on his cinema career in France.

The films of Straub and Huillet are rigorous and their continuing vision is exceptional. They fit into no camp, their work is difficult and unique, it demands time, attention, patience and a new way of thinking of cinema, their work is totally unconventional. They challenge and upset cinema, their engagement with it is artistic and political. There is an economy in the organisation of audio and visual space, each scene is rigorously constructed and articulated, each event leaves the spectator free to interpret, to make his/her own decisions. Their films never leave you indifferent. For this

very reason, Straub & Huillet are often at their screenings to discuss their work afterwards. Showing their films at the CNP was problematic for two reasons. Ink jet prints of film stills, texts and diagrams occupying the gallery spaces were a superfluous and unnecessary attempt to justify their presence. No justification was needed. Secondly their films, although shown in a cinema-like space with adequate projection and seating facilities lacked the collective cinema experience of being in an audience where the possibility of dialogue afterwards would add to that experience. (This situation did take place over a weekend where screenings were programmed). Art galleries diffuse collective experience emphasising instead our individual responses.

Yann Beauvais and Straub & Huillet's work is a cinema of resistance, a political engagement, a combat. The question of film and cinema is for them an integral part of the work itself. Tacita Dean's uses film as a painter uses paint and Matthias Müller's recent work is fittingly elegiac in spirit.

As we rush headlong into the techno-scientific world of industrial and post-industrial capitalism with its meticulous programming and fabrication of beautiful images perhaps there is a need to reposition ourselves before we take the giant leap forward.