

# The Place of Artists' Cinema

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*The Place of Artists' Cinema: Space, Site and Screen*

Maeve Connolly

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On picking up and reading Maeve Connolly's *The Place of Artists' Cinema* I was immediately struck by two things. First, the scope and depth of the work as the concept of 'artists' cinema' is tirelessly operationalised and consistently enlivened across five detailed, rather different and differentiating (but always cogent) substantive chapters. Second, Connolly's passion, perhaps even advocacy, for the works she discusses comes through strongly and the reader is left with the distinct impression that while not simply a work of canonisation (a possibility or danger Connolly herself acknowledges early on in the text), this book is moved by a desire to praise rather than bury, and is therefore critical in an affirmative and productive sense. In other words (and as we shall see from our brief survey of the five substantive chapters in a moment), Connolly's arguments force us to think of 'artists' cinema' as a form or practice that raises interesting questions, for example, about the nature of 'place', about the 'market' or 'post-Fordist capital', about the notion of the 'public space', about the status and scope of 'events' and so on. Let us, then, survey in rather brief and broad brushstrokes how Connolly's discussion of 'artists' cinema' engages these (and other) ideas as they unfold across the five substantive chapters of the book.

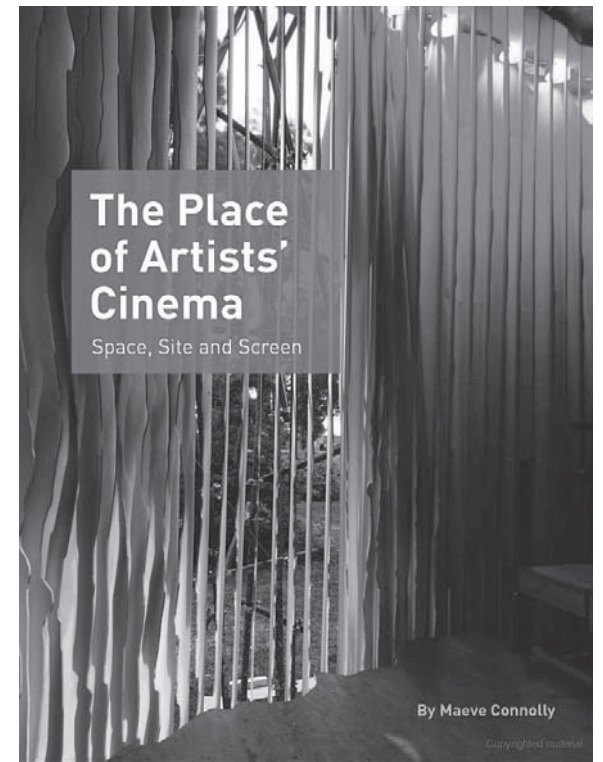
In chapter one, artists' cinema is identified with notions of the interstitial or 'betweenness'. This discussion is worthwhile and productive precisely because Connolly immediately dispenses with any suggestion of a definitional game, where 'artists' cinema is X', and that X is 'betweenness', and 'betweenness' might be then seen as Y. Rather, the concern here is to operationalise the concept of artists' cinema by connecting it in interesting ways to different logics of betweenness that could be found in, say, art theory, film studies, European philosophy, and significantly in studies of organisational culture and in the machinations of the 'knowledge economy' that are taken to be characteristic of 'post-Fordism' (for instance, Boltanski and Chiapello's *New Spirit of Capitalism* is a key text for Connolly). More particularly, or to give some working examples, Connolly charts how the idea of artists' cinema emerges from in-between contesting genealogies which seek to frame it as an extension of either experimental film, or installation, or video, or performance; how its reception can be thought to move between the habitual practices of the 'exhibition visitor' or 'cinema spectator'; how it functions between and across the art market (as an 'art object') and the film market (as an 'arthouse film').

The notion of where and how to place artists' cinema in a market is also a central concern in chapter two. Focusing 'on developments in the marketplace since the mid-1990s', and informed, as we said, by Boltanski and Chiapello's *New Spirit of Capitalism* 'which charts the reorganisation of capitalism in the wake of 1968', Connolly is keen to track movements in-between the 'production and 'circulation' of art practices and practices in broader audio-visual cultures. For example, she argues that from the mid-90s we can see how the need to secure funding for projects has compelled filmmakers to take up the position of artist in the gallery, or, conversely, how artists often have to show they have the skills of a film producer in order to resource,

manage and promote their projects. Connolly's point, as I understand it at least, is not simply the general one that such movements between art practices and practices in broader audio-visual cultures reproduce a logic of production and circulation peculiar to the current economic conjuncture; that is, 'post-Fordist capital'. For it is also important to understand how the state or institutions – in particular social-political formations – can specifically operationalise logics of flexibilisation in organisation and employment practices. Pointing, for instance, to the history of the 'Workshop Agreement' in a UK broadcasting context (a union-backed agreement that allowed various workshop groups to work on low-budget film and television productions), Connolly puts to work the analysis of labour and organisational culture offered by Boltanski and Chiapello.

In chapter three, Connolly shifts focus to consider how certain forms of artists' cinema (particularly multi-screen projections) are implicated in the 'staging of publicness in contemporary art museums'. The following eight works are discussed: Jane and Louise Wilson's *Stasi City* (1997); Doug Aitken's *eraser* (1998); Willie Doherty's *Re-Run* (2002); Isaac Julien's *Baltimore* (2003); Jaki Irivine's *The Silver Bridge* (2002); Eija-Liisa Athila's *Consolation Service* (1999); Shirin Neshat's *Turbulent* (1998); Anne Tallentire's *Drift: diagram vii* (2005). As Connolly herself acknowledges, these works are rather disparate, but the overwhelming impression created by the engaging and thoughtful analyses provided here is of a formal homology between them, at least to the extent that they are all concerned to engage with problems of public memory or political questions about the formation of public space and the social body. Personally, I was rather taken by the analysis of Eija-Liisa Athila's *Consolation Service* (1999), particularly the way in which Connolly folded the key themes she saw operating in the work (namely, the relationship between 'conflict resolution, public space, and the spectral or supernatural') into a discussion of what Oliver Marchart would call the 'post-foundational' political theory of thinkers such as Claude Lefort (see pp. 92-97).<sup>1</sup>

In chapter four, Connolly examines 'the relationship between site, document and location in several examples of artists' cinema works, many of which seem to operate between 'originating and displaced contexts' (110). Now, although most of the works discussed seem to exhibit or appropriate modes of address from documentary film and television, and although the thematic concerns of these works (say, labour and migration patterns in an increasingly globalised world) are commonly explored through documentary media, they are not, in the majority of cases, making any claim to be documentary in form. Connolly's discussion of these works is organised in two parts. First, she looks at a selection of works by Laura Horelli, Tacita Dean, Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor (known also as the 'desperate optimists'), and Jeremy Deller and the concern here is to show how their mode of production and exhibition gives rise to what she calls 'the hybrid formation of the event-site' (111). Second, she looks at a selection of works by Pierre Huyghe, Stan Douglas, Melik Ohanian and Gerald Byrne, to show how these works imply or involve 'the reconstruction, remaking, re-staging or re-enactment' of events (111). Indeed, the dramatization or re-enactment of events or occurrences that have been depicted in other forms (say, Hollywood, TV, press, documentary or whatever...) itself becomes a



new 'event-site', where an 'event-site' implies, in Huyghe's phrasing, a 'replay' that 'supersedes' the original actual occurrence as such.

In the fifth and final substantive chapter, Connolly is interested in how artists' cinema can function to physically construct 'a cinematic kind of space in museums, galleries and other art world spaces, and the immaterial processes and strategies involved in the staging of these spaces as cinematic' (165). Focusing primarily on works shown in galleries and museums by artists such as Bea McMahon, Aurelien Froment and Carlos Amorales, or works presented in adapted or invented versions of 'pavilions' at the Venice Biennale (for example, Aernout Mik, Andreas Fogarasi, Francesco Vezzoli and Tobias Putrih) or other biennial exhibitions (for example, the work of Thomas Demand), Connolly wants to show how they are all intrinsically or immanently concerned with the formation of social space. Again, the argument comes in two parts. The works discussed in the first part are shown to explore notions of the collective through 'the architecture of the cinema and the material physical structures that reference the movie theatre, sometimes staging the exhibition "pavilion" as space for reflection on...spectatorship' (166). In part two, we are offered a different perspective on the relation between spectatorship and materiality as Connolly focuses on a diverse selection of moving image works that 'explore the material properties of the screen, rather than the cinema environment' (166). In some works (for example, the works of Aernout Mik) screens are used to organise and control movements, evoking the material architecture of social control and law. Or, to take but one other example discussed by Connolly, in Bea McMahon's work the position of the screen and the treatment of the screen surface form 'part of a more open-ended exploration of identity, architecture and public space' (166).

If you read this book (which I wholeheartedly suggest you do) I fancy you will experience, as I did, the author's demand that you shift focus and re-orient your intellectual compass as you move from chapter to chapter, and it is clear (as Connolly makes clear) that all the chapters in the book have been written and reconstructed out of a series of previously, perhaps even rather disparate, articles, reviews and conference papers. Perhaps in the hands of a lesser author, the diversity of material dealt with here would have meant the text risked falling into incoherence. But time and again, Connolly dispels any concerns the reader may have in this regard as she always take great care to map out the key themes of her argument, is always very generous in acknowledging the sources from which she is drawing her inspiration, and is always critically sensitive to the context of the discourses and concepts she so adroitly engages with.

Of course, there is always the possibility of engaging other material or sources and the reader may well find herself or himself supplementing Connolly's argument in ways that inevitably move

beyond the confines or frame of her argument. For example, and I'll conclude my remarks with this minor quibble, I found the discussion of Pierre Huyghe's work *The Third Memory* in chapter four slightly surprising, even odd. For after suggesting at the beginning of the chapter a concept of the 'event-site', a notion which she says is 'informed by Pierre Huyghe's claim that "replay" now supersedes the event itself' (111), Connolly then discusses *The Third Memory* later in the chapter (see pp. 139-142) against the backcloth of Frederic Jameson's ideas of 'authorship, characterisation and performance', ideas that are said to run through '*The Third Memory* and Huyghe's practice as a whole' (142). Why, then, did this strike me as odd? Well, it seems to me that the concept of event-site, implying as it does a replay of an event that supersedes its original actual occurrence, inevitably brings to mind Alain Badiou's notion of the event, where the 'event' itself precisely becomes a kind of replay, a new site in which the original actual occurrence is played out in a mode of subjectivity that is structured by a 'fidelity' to it.<sup>2</sup> In other words, I did expect that a discussion about the nature of events would inevitably entail an engagement with some of the most currently influential philosophies of the event, and particularly Badiou's as this seems to connect explicitly to Huyghe's notion of the 'replay' as used by Connolly in the text.

#### Notes

1. Marchart, O. (2007) *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
2. See Badiou, A. (2006) *Being and Event*, London: Continuum.