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# Who's Afraid of Film & Video in Scotland?

## The Exhibition of Single-screen Film & Video: Cafe Flicker, Museum Magogo, Canadian Fall

I would like to discuss a few recent events involving the exhibition of single-screen film and video which have sharply brought into focus for me, somewhat ironically, the *lack* of an existing infrastructure for the presentation and dissemination of such work in Scotland. The following introduction gives a concise outline of circumstances that have contributed to the current drought of regular screenings. It frames an urgent context for the appreciation of work and efforts that do still prevail in spite of a funding climate characterised by erratic and contradictory decision-making. I should say that my thoughts and feelings expressed here, though subjective, are informed by my experience as an artist/producer of experimental film and video and as a voluntary co-ordinator and curator for *New Visions Film and Video Festival* since 1993.

Scotland has never experienced a continuing and stable level of commitment from arts funders in the film/ video sector, unlike our neighbours south who can boast a number of organisations and agencies embedded and fully established in a wider cultural nexus.

Many temporary and longer term projects and events have been initiated in Scotland and have actively and successfully promoted film and video by Scottish-based and international artists over the past ten to fifteen years. *New Visions* based in Glasgow, and *Fringe Film & Video Festival* (FFVF) in Edinburgh, were two key organisations with similar aims and objectives but differing histories and life spans. Each undertook the organisation of international festivals of experimental film and video art, the bulk of which comprised single-screen programmes alongside installation and related events.

FFVF did this on an annual basis and *New Visions* biennially as well as providing a series of regular screenings and events. Each established a reputation on the circuit of international festivals as well as a platform in Scotland for the support and promotion of home-grown talent. I should say that my focus on these two organisations, not intentionally at the expense of mentioning other projects and ventures, serves the purpose of this introduction.

Speaking for *New Visions*, public funding was never secure and less money was awarded for each

subsequent festival until our final festival in 1996 when we received nothing from the Scottish Arts Council (SAC). The decision then from SAC was that Scotland's two festivals of film and video were two too many, and a preference was expressed for a single organisation with the insistence that FFVF and *New Visions* go into talks about merging. In spite of our desire to continue working separately, this option was not made available to us and consequently SAC and The Scottish Film Council (SFC, now Scottish Screen) ploughed £9,000 into two consultancies, the result of which were the reports produced in August '97: *'The Strategic Development of Creative Video, Film & New Media'*, undertaken by Positive Solutions, a private firm based in Liverpool; and *'Equipment Technology Resource for Scotland'*, undertaken by Clive Gillman and Eddie Berg of FACT.<sup>1</sup> This consultancy process was overseen by representatives from SAC, Scottish Screen, FFVF and *New Visions* and managed by Paula Larkin of *New Visions*.

The report furnished by Positive Solutions was built on the efforts of many, not least those artists,

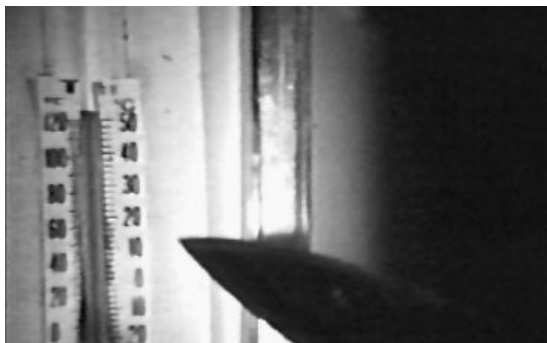
organisers and educators who gave up time and energy, voluntarily, to contribute. It took, as a springboard, the models of practice developed over the years by both organisations and put forward a number of possible options for the development of a single new organisation. These reports have since been shelved, the funders under no obligation to act upon any of the key recommendations. However, in true hypocritical fashion, they are able to quote the reports and indeed SAC have done so, in my own experience, as proof of their commitment to the issues they raise.

None of this surprises me, government bodies govern and are themselves governed by their own constrictive discourses. Arts Officers with changing agendas come and go and often fail to respond to or nourish the forms of cultural challenge already in existence. Recognising and acknowledging this makes for contestation. Neither am I surprised, only disheartened and embarrassed, at the show of blatant self-interest and divisiveness put on by a few individuals, who seem to be busy building empires and carving out careers for themselves without acknowledgement or respect for other people's efforts.

Within this scenario, the climate has not been exactly ripe for the exhibition of challenging film and video work. In spite of this however, new work can be viewed, though not always in a concentrated form—events/exhibitions occur in isolation as one-off projects, poorly funded or not at all, often with film and video appearing as an adjunctive element or token inclusion.

Three recent artist-initiative presentations of film and video in Glasgow demonstrate different levels of interest and commitment to this field of practice.

**Cafe Flicker** has been running since around 1993 and has survived for that time without public funding. Its long life-span is no doubt linked to this fact. The un-funded organisation ethic was not a driving force unlike other groups springing up around the same time e.g., *Exploding Cinema* in London. Flicker (as it was then known) aimed to serve the community of makers in and around Glasgow by providing an informal platform for the screening and importantly the discussion of film



RIGHT: *Time Passes* Nelson Henricks

and video work. Some events were pre-programmed but on the whole makers turned up on the night with work in tow. All organising was and still is done on a voluntary basis using ready resources of host venues (presently, Glasgow Film & Video Workshop plays host with fully equipped screening facilities). Flicker has evolved over the years with the efforts and vision of numerous people including Shazz Kerr, Martha McCulloch, Paul Cameron, Jim Rusk and presently Russell Henderson, Iain Piercy, John Fairbairn, Abigail Hopkins and Iñigo Garrido.

These days Iñigo Garrido takes a firm stance against funding, rejecting the restrictions and demands it brings to bare on the creative freedom of an organisation. Although Cafe Flicker has changed much since its seminal years, for him, its defining qualities are its freshness, openness and most urgently its “low profile”.<sup>2</sup> Unlike other high profile organisations who find themselves inventing their public and manufacturing evidence to justify public funding, Cafe Flicker has no interest in serving any remit other than the provision of support for the makers who pass through its doors.

Its atmosphere has swung from the awkward formalities of the first screenings with few hesitant attendees to the more convivial social night, replete with simulated cafe interior and lots of audience interaction. It now sits comfortably between the two extremes and is not as daunting for first time screeners tentative about being grilled in public.

The standard of work varies constantly and the range of styles and genres is limitless: Experimental film (which means different things to different people), drama and documentary (in all its mutant forms), comic, travelogue, home movies, found footage, video art all from first time makers, seasoned enthusiasts, hobbyists and those who call themselves artists and almost all produced on low or no budgets.

That said, the most recent screenings I've attended have been dominated by the short, straight drama. The proliferation of this genre is a reflection of Scottish Screen's overwrought focus on The Industry as the mecca for new talent. The emphasis is firmly on entertainment value; the formulaic mimicry of conventional cinema being embraced at the expense of seeking out new, challenging forms of creativity expressed in a more experimental, innovative approach to film and video production.

It is to Cafe Flicker's credit that all works are screened on a first come, first served basis, irrespective of style, genre, politics, and that criticism is constructive and genuinely helpful. An ongoing database of every work exhibited dating back to 1995 is a valuable resource open to anyone researching this area. All visitors passing through Glasgow on the first Wednesday of every month are always welcome —bring your own bottle.<sup>3</sup>

**Museum Magogo** was a recent exhibition of both pre-selected and open-entry work housed at the Glasgow Project Room. Curated, or rather fashioned, by artists John Beagles and Graham Ramsay, it showcased two hundred artworks, among them a cluster of works on video. The Project Room is an open-submission, artist-run exhibition space, self-sustained through a studio complex and premised on the basis that it is somewhere for artists to try things out.

Museum Magogo saw the overall space, not excessive in itself, divided by slim partition walls into smaller territories, each area parodying an aspect of museological and curatorial drill —the Sculpture Garden replete with grocers turf, the Lidl wing (the cheap-and-cheerful rebuttal to the

Tate's Sainsbury's wing), and, amongst others, the cuby hole that was the Video Lounge.

Here, videotapes were shelved with an accompanying list of titles and artists (running times and production dates were not listed but could be found on some individual tapes) and could be selected at random and viewed on the borrowed domestic monitor and video set-up.

While excess rather than ease was the order of the day, for me, this form of monitor presentation is not always suitable. Here the artists' work suffered to some degree in comparison with the other instantly viewable exhibits —the wanton cacophony of wall embellishment in truth looking more spacious and deliberated. Spectatorship and reception are, in these circumstances, entirely dependent on the effort made by the viewer and although it doesn't take much to stick a cassette in a player, in my experience few people bother to do so.

Overall, there has been a massive upsurge in the use of video as an art medium over the past five years. The proliferation in the use of loops and the projected image, with its attendant seductive and monolithic qualities have allowed video easy entry into the gallery site, a relatively clean, quick and easy space filler. And the reverse of this being, since the gallery now accepts video in ways it seldom did before, there is now more typecast production. Video, in all its varied forms, has not been fully embraced by the gallery, and film exhibition is virtually non-existent. Single screen work, i.e. that which requires to be viewed from beginning to end, irrespective of style, genre, format or running time seems to suffer most in this environment.

While some of the works in Museum Magogo sat comfortably with the single screen label, notably Alan Currell's dryly comic '*Lying About Myself in Order To Appear More Interesting*', and Tim Cullen's animation pieces which both suited this particular presentation method, others did not fair so well. Cath Whippey's eccentric ten-second animated loop '*Bear Tries on His New Bear Outfit*', and '*Blue Moon Over Alabama*' by Geeta Griffith were two most obvious candidates. The '*Be Er Monsta*' compilation of '96 put together by Glasgow-based artists for pub screenings is a record of activity at that time and it would have been valuable to see it again as a one-off, sit-down screening in the environment it was intended for. Chris Helson's '*Chat Show*', a documentation of Orchardton Television's live broadcast at the '98 Orchardton Arts Festival included some quirky features and topical discussion but, at two hours in length, proved impossible to view in the discomfort of the Museum Magogo set-up. While Smith

and Stewart's '97 piece '*Dual*', a characteristically tense play of performed action, and Wendy House's oddly anxious '*Untitled*' were compelling enough in entirety, I found myself losing patience and tiring with the obvious lack of cohesion of works.

I am not advocating a strict approach to the construction of “sense” as is witnessed in the curatorial obsession with theme. Accounting for the curators' intentions, as I understand it, the video works were treated no differently from the other exhibits —pre-selected or gleaned from open-submission with an express aim of parodying the strictures of the art institution, while perhaps at the same time bringing to the fore a near-neurotic obsession of artists to exhibit at any opportunity, regardless of circumstance. For me, though, this edge was lost in the Video Booth, where the unnecessary effort required to view the works was questionably as much a result of a real lack of available resources within the artistic community as any intended irony.

The presentation of film and video in or out-with the gallery must always be an issue and concern for those choosing to exhibit such work, whether they be artists, curators, gallery managers or attendants. In the case of Museum magogo, the small amount of project funding they did acquire did not cover equipment hire and as such cannot be ignored as a factor that impacted on the choice of presentation —wishfully slack or not. In fairness the resulting set-up, I'm sure, was also partly due to the non-existent support network which the commissioned reports, referred to above, identify as a prerequisite for the establishment of an effective infrastructure for film and video exhibition in Scotland.

Choice and preferred options of exhibition are all too often compromised, however there can be no excuse for well funded galleries and organisations not addressing these consequential issues.

**Canadian Fall** was a programme of recent single-screen film/ video work from across Canada shown in a number of Scottish venues in November and December. The project and tour was co-ordinated by Paula Larkin of New Visions and the programme curated by video artist Holger Mohaupt after a visit to Canada. In his words it is “an insight into the anthropology of video creation in Canada.”

It is the second leg of a loose exchange initiated by Canadian video artist Nikki Forrest who, on a trip to Scotland, compiled a selection of Scottish work, Video d'Ecosse, for exhibition at the Article Gallery, Montreal in 1998.

The curatorial slant in both programmes reflects the notion of the chance meeting, the



LEFT: Joan &amp; Stephen Monique Moublow

experience of being out of sync in a foreign land, searching for signs of familiarity and shared perceptions.

Scottish cultural links with Canada stretch far historically, specifically the link with Quebec, where many of the artists in this programme are based, in our common experience as countries within nations and the struggles for independence.

This current exchange between artists and enthusiasts looks set to continue with further projects and contact. This is not purely by chance but is rather motivated by genuine interest and the energies of individuals in both countries as opposed to the vagaries of institutions with short-term agendas.

This energy was much in evidence at the launch of Canadian Fall at Glasgow Film & Video Workshop. Nikki Forrest and Nelson Henricks, accompanied by Cindra McDowell<sup>4</sup> showed a selection of video work and gave a slide presentation and talk on the Montreal scene, the flurry of artists' initiatives, galleries, video workshops and distributors. Canada has a very rich history of independent film and video activity stretching back to the introduction of video technology in the seventies, with a solid infra-structure of organisations supported by government money.

"If such an underpopulated country produces an overabundance of video work, it is because a government obsessed with communications technology chooses to sustain it, via arm's length funding."<sup>5</sup>

The issues pertaining to Scotland's lack of that infrastructure are perhaps woven not only with the short-sightedness of government-backed funders, but also, from a wider cultural perspective, with our geographical position in relation to the United Kingdom as a whole and the Westminster government. Now that we have a devolved parliament, the rhetoric of Members of the Scottish Parliament abounds with optimism and promise of cultural/political transformation. This rhetoric raises serious questions concerning the concoction of a new, national identity. Inane definitions of Scottishness, which we have long suffered, prevail alongside prescriptive definitions of The Modern Scot. Coloured with a new corporate cosmopolitanism, these discourses are extolled with the risk, or even the aim, of smothering the indigenous voices of marginalised and alienated communities, who also contribute to the landscape of Modern Scotland.

The struggle to retain some sense of self tied to personal/ political histories un-limited by suspect nationalisms, emerges recurrently in Canadian Fall. The thirteen works "tackle the question of marginal identities from a position of instability"<sup>6</sup>, that is with a tolerance and bias in favour of flexibility and nuance.

As a whole, the programme is a finely balanced mix of styles and approaches and gives a good overview of production methods characteristic to artists' film/video—a key requirement which benefits audiences new to such work. This balance allows each work the space to speak its own language and although the theme of identity is clearly a concern, it is gradually emergent as opposed to definitive, as is the case in many themed programmes.

Canadian Fall opened with Nikki Forrest's *Shift*, a poetic expression of loss where perceptions of time and place impress upon memory and

the autobiographical to shift and de-stabilise any sense of a unified self. *Stravaig-Errance*, also by Nikki Forrest, journeys through landscape and the city seeking this sense of self or a consciousness of self and finds only, that with movement and passing time, the notion of absence inscribes itself throughout. The treatment of time as an intrinsic element of the video medium characterises both works by Nelson Henricks, *Window and Time Passes*. Through a sensual manipulation of imagery, time is condensed and moments of detail expanded as the artist creates impressions, as opposed to clear-cut representations, of his personal interior and exterior space.

Though many of these works tell stories of some sort, different approaches to narrative and the diaristic form are evident in Ghislain Gagnon's *Le Mouroir*, Rhonda Buckley's *Matter Over Mind* and *Joan And Stephen* by Monique Moublow. *Le Mouroir*, which received its world premiere in this programme, is a tragi-comic tale of a gay couple who get stuck in a heat wave while working as cooks for a tree planting camp in northern Canada. It has a beautifully dark, filmic quality which contrasts nicely with the previous work *Operetta* by Laurel Woodcock, a more conceptual video piece showing a close-up of a fly struggling to the sounds of a crashing HAL from Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In *Matter Over Mind*, Rhonda Buckley uses her own body to explore notions of seduction and the representation of femininity as stereotype and Monique Moublow constructs for herself a fantasy involving a lover who lives inside her video camera.

Looking, as voyeur, and being looked at form the basis of Paula Levine's three-minute *Mirror Mirror*. A male figure, posing with naked torso is caught in slow motion returning our expectant gaze as if to challenge our preconceptions. Steve Reinke's *Excuse of The Real*, exposes, with sinister effect, the voyeuristic detachment often deployed by the documentary film maker. A male voice speaking in the first person is layered over repeat-cut home movie footage. He tells of his interest in making a documentary about Aids and how this would involve taking a "close personal look at a guy dying", concluding that his film would not be complete without his death.

Yudi Sewraj's *Rut* lightens the tone with its more humorous approach to the question of identity. We see a man in a bear suit, entering a room and shaving his fur belly. Overlaid text tells how he sees himself as a bear but how everyone else sees him as a man in a bear suit! Finally Cathy Sisler's powerful *Stagger Stories* is a personal account of her past alcohol and drug addiction and how she came to surrender her fantasy that "deviance is necessarily an effective form of resistance". We see her moving through busy city streets, staggering, almost a danse macabre, as she asserts her right to difference, to be an "alcoholic", to be "inconsistent", to be a "lesbian".

Canadian Fall<sup>7</sup> will hopefully create a demand for more single-screen, experimental film/ video throughout Scotland. Paula Larkin, who also initiated the tour, sees it as a "prime opportunity to create links with new audiences who, whether familiar or not with these methods of practice, are sophisticated enough in their tastes to develop interest in such work and recognise its intrinsic value."

This article is a record of my experience and interest at this point in time. It is, more important-

ly, a record and assertion of the energies and unpaid efforts of many involved in short-term projects whose histories end up lost and distorted or viewed in isolation, in deference to a writing of history and culture that fails to take account of the complexities and facts that comprise their making.

#### Notes

1. Both documents are available from SAC.
2. Iñigo Garrido—In the sense that Cafe Flicker is not duty-bound by funders to market itself.
3. Cafe Flicker @ GFVW, 3rd Floor, 34 Albion Street, Glasgow G1, 7pm.  
Works over 10 min. in length must be pre-booked. Flicker database available for researchers. Call Iñigo 0141 552 9936.
4. Cindra McDowell & Nelson Henricks were also exhibiting at the Gallery of Modern Art as part of the Glasgow festival alongside Steve Reinke and Tine Keane.
5. Nelson Henricks, Canadian Fall brochure.
6. *ibid.*
7. For information and tour dates contact 0141-5720958 or 0141-4243369