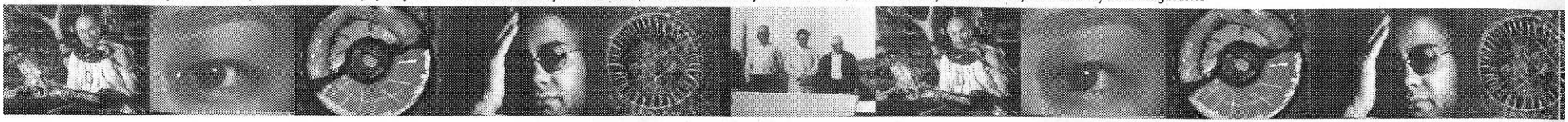
Cover images: (clockwise) *3 Trucks* by Euan Macdonald, *Hawkesville to Wallenstein* by Richard Kerr, *The Durham Projection* by Wyn Geleynse, *Is Dad Dead Yet* by b.h. Yael
Collage below: (left to right) *Elephant Dreams* by Martha Davis, *Beauty Spot* by Helen Lee, *Linear Dreams* by Richard Reeves, *Letters From Home* by Mike Hoolbloom, *Linear Dreams* by Richard Reeves, *Sweetblood* by Steve Sanguedolce

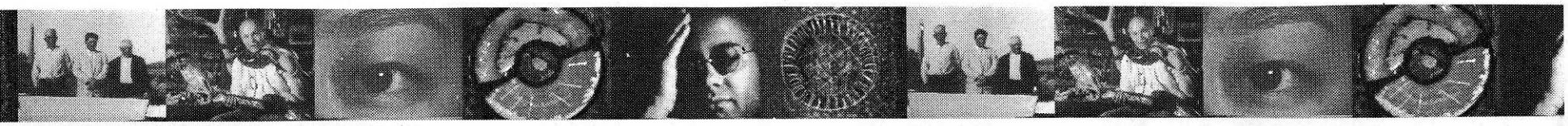


A Brief History of Interventions Through Film

by Chris Kennedy

Experimental cinema, with its usual position counter to Hollywood, has often attempted to go beyond the limits of the cinema screen. Much of this has primarily been theoretical, relying on the conviction that art matters deeply and that personal filmmaking has the potential to intervene in a person's life much more strongly than a Hollywood blockbuster would. This position has encouraged filmmakers to foster the active participation of the audience in the understanding of the film—whether it is deciphering the rhythms of an abstract piece or decoding the hidden meanings in a diary film. This affords the audience member a more privileged position than a Hollywood film allows them for it encourages the audience to intervene in the production of meaning.

Some filmmakers have attempted to develop the role of film in people's lives even further by making film a more physical presence than the

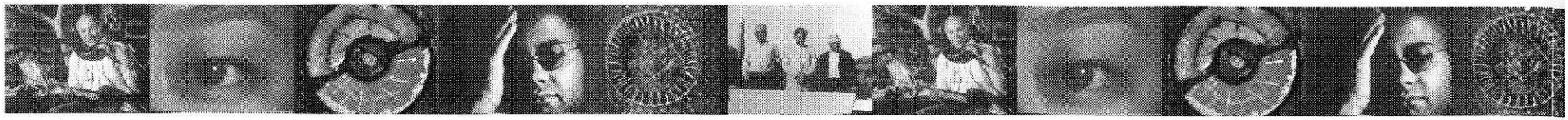


normal static reception found in a movie theatre. Sometimes this involves just thinking creatively about the theatre space itself, but often it means taking the film outside of the theatre altogether. Filmmakers have shown in bars and on the street, in picturesque natural spaces and in industrial lofts. These attempts at engaging a different space can have a number of motivations, from a politically activist desire to confront the viewer towards social change to the less overtly political desire to redefine the role of the spectator. In the end, these interventions expose the artwork to the unpredictability of an audience's active reception and participation.

Experimental filmmakers often look back to the pioneers of the early years of cinema as their direct antecedents. Indeed, the first ten years of cinema was a very free period of discovery, as filmmakers and exhibitors figured out different ways to engage with the medium before the dominant feature film mode became entrenched. Tom Gunning labeled this period the "cinema of attractions" because films were showcased in circuses, penny arcades, travelling fairs and the vaudeville house.[1] A typical film screening would be in a makeshift tent not unlike the one housing the bearded lady on the other end of the fairgrounds. The facade would be covered with garish posters on wood-paneled walls, hiding the rather fragile interior where the audience would be treated to early, single shot films—perhaps a Lumière *actualité*, the early form of documentary; or perhaps a new example of trick photography or a re-enactment of a prizefight. The audience would engage with the films in a way that they would not be allowed within the future cinema setting, as the raucous nature of the fairground bled through the canvas walls and influenced the reception of the films.

Needless to say, the economic growth of the medium necessitated the removal of the stench of disrepute by building cinemas where "respectable citizens" would feel able to attend. And so, cinema became more entrenched in an economic system that encouraged the timely and orderly reception of film as an entertainment rather than an interactive part of life. While the dominant mode was developing, the surrealists and the Dadaists of the late 1920s insured that a certain level of impropriety continued with the film screenings and art shows in the salons of Paris. These salons were not structured theatre settings and would involve multimedia performances (one surviving film from that period, Rene Clair's *Entr'acte*, was exactly that, an intermission *between acts* of a longer play) within a room where drinks were served and loud conversations would ensue. On occasion, artists like Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel would premiere a piece that would offend and blaspheme the audience enough to turn those loud conversations into riots.

The intimacy, if not the rowdiness, of the salons would be mimicked in the forty years following through the introduction of the cineclub. These clubs were again committed to the possibility of film to engage constructively with people's lives and encouraged this through the exhibition of alternative work, whether it was experimental cinema or foreign "art cinema." These clubs tended to mirror the conditions of legitimate cinemas, but their eclectic programming and social settings allowed for a more ⇨



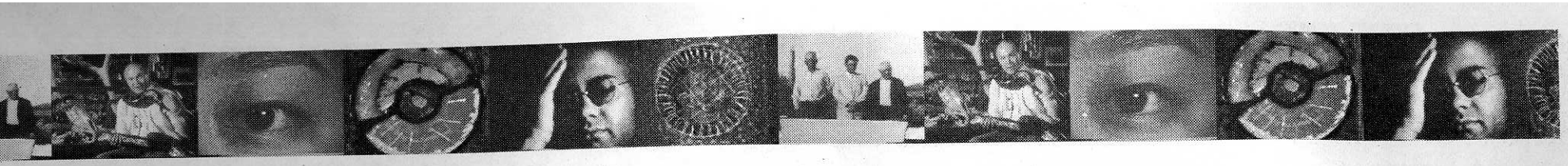
⇦ engaged audience who were often influenced and challenged by the ideas they saw at play on the screen.

The energy fostered by these cine-clubs, most notably New York City's Cinema 16 which had seven thousand members by the time it closed in 1963 and the screenings in Bob Cobbing's bookstore in London, was channeled into new film movements during the late fifties and early sixties. The New American Cinema was one such movement devoted to changing the way films were made and exhibited. During the early sixties, these films began to encroach upon the dominant cinema, but were still defined by alternative sensibilities and alternative venues. The films were often shown in artists' lofts or basements to a small, dedicated audience, but as the decade progressed, they began to make more appearances as midnight movies at regular cinemas. With the publicity of Jonas Mekas' *Movie Journal*, the huge economic success of Andy Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* and the obscenity trial of Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, experimental film was beginning to intervene again in the public sphere.[2]

By the mid to late 1960s the movement had reached such a momentum that filmmakers began to feel encouraged to move beyond the single screen theatre setting. This further experimentation, which focused on more performative film, was reminiscent of the happenings of the Beats. It was inspired partly by the contemporaneous multimedia performances of collectives such as Fluxus, the Judson Church movement and the Viennese Aktionists as well as by the increased cultural legitimacy of mind-expanding drugs. This heralded a new period of "Expanded Cinema", which lasted for about ten years before splintering into art world installations or being subsumed into large format events like Expo '67 and the introduction of IMAX film. With Expanded Cinema, experimental cinema moved beyond the cultural intervention which was implicit in the seeking of different communities and different ways of seeing (and was sometimes explicit in the emerging representations of sexualities) into an actual material intervention into everyday life.

art matters deeply

The Expanded Cinema as extravaganza was the more communal aspect of this new interventionist cinema. Inspired in part by hippie ethos, eastern mysticism and the teachings of Buckminster Fuller (who wrote the introduction to Gene Youngblood's seminal text on this movement, *Expanded Cinema*), artists who developed these full-scale cinematic experiences believed in an organic cosmology of experience that would create new vision. Jordan Belson and Stan Vanderbeek were major filmmakers during this period (Youngblood called them "ecologists"). Belson was an early practitioner of expanded cinema who, with his partner Henry Jacobs performed the Vortex Concerts at the San Francisco Planetarium from 1957 to 1960. These consisted of very popular abstract performances that pushed the technology of the planetarium to its limits. Stan Vanderbeek initiated similar performances almost ten years later



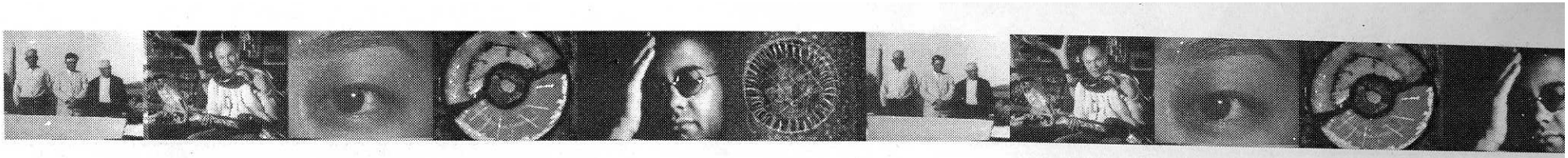
in a homemade spherical "Moviedrome" in which he projected multiple 16mm films and slide projections that commented on the rampant nature of consumer society. These types of performances were mirrored widely by other artists and, despite the predominance of multiple images and sometimes cacophonous sound, the pieces were developed as a way to build a communal spirit. As David James describes it rather than manifesting in other spheres the categorical producer/consumer relationships, filmmakers were more like surrogates for or proxy agents of the community; and the values, optical and social, enacted in the visual displays were communally produced and experienced as subcultural self-representation.[3]

Other practitioners of expanded cinema were much more explicit about the political aim of their work and saw their active physical intervention in the social sphere to be a step towards creating change. In effect, they paralleled the direct cinema and *cinema verite* documentary filmmakers, who posited that the active intervention of the camera in daily life could lead towards social change. Some of these filmmakers intervened within the theatre space itself. Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* is one example of a piece that required that the space of the cinema be completely rearranged. Designed as an arc of light that actually carved a space in the air before the screen, this film required that spectators be free to move around the space of the theatre, which was filled with smoke to aid visibility. The ability of the audience to freely examine the play of light across the theatre, rather than solely on the screen introduced a more playful experience to cinema, allowing the audience to move away from the rigid role of spectators, receiving indoctrination from the front.

Other filmmakers found that the best way to intervene with cinema was to take it out into the streets. There was a strain of these filmmakers who formed production collectives that were designed to engage with minorities and the working class to create new films and videos that challenged the dominant cinema and ideologies of the time. The French *Etats Generales du Cinema*, an attempt to represent the radical politics of May 1968, and the *Miner's Campaign Project* during the 1984 British Miner's Strike are two of the many organisations who have played a role in intervening politically with cinema as a tool. In many ways, this example of interventionist cinema has had the most lasting effect as grass roots independent media collectives continue to be formed as oppositional forces.

Other artists, such as Valie Export, worked more independently and took their political work even more literally to the streets. Export was a committed Austrian feminist artist who worked in film, performance and photography. One of her most famous pieces was her *Touch Cinema* piece, where she donned a miniature proscenium arch with curtains over her chest. She would walk out into public and invite men and women to touch her breasts. Export considered this a "woman's first step from object to subject. She disposes of her breasts freely and no longer follows social prescriptions."[4] This was particularly challenging in 1968, when the struggle for women's rights and recognition was just emerging even in progressive circles.

During the late seventies and early ⇨



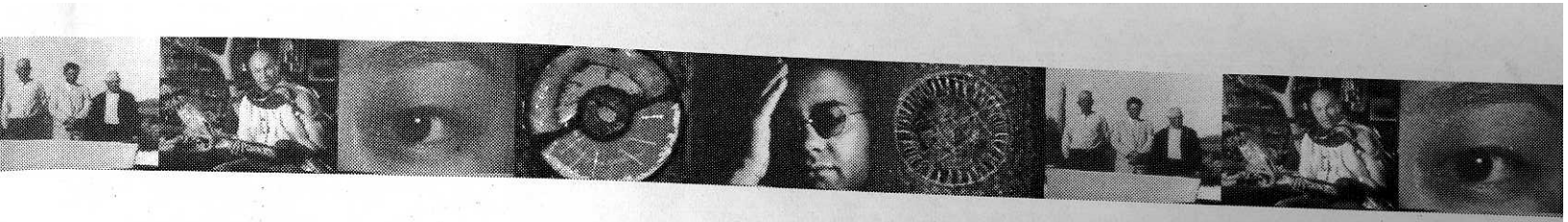
"FAITH that the experimental film" has a larger place

⇦ eighties, punk filmmakers such as Vivienne Dick, and Beth and Scott B followed Export's confrontational lead by continuing to challenge cultural and political conservatism with their films. This new wave of filmmakers tended to avoid the cinema circuit and found their most receptive audience in bars, where they would show their super 8s and videos as weekly serials before the headlining bands came on. These films tended to be particularly aggressive, largely due to their participation in the punk subculture. Loud music and strobic light shows would usually accompany the screening, once again creating a more active environment for the reception of the films.

As Janine Marchessault points out in a recent issue of Public, Toronto's art scene during that period was also largely focused around the bar as an active venue during the seventies and eighties.[5] The flourishing of a dynamic performance, music and film & video scene around Queen West aided in reinventing the theatre space into a more fluid and sociable arena. This was seen in General Idea's beauty pageants, Colin Campbell's video serial about the Cabana room and the development of the Funnel, an artist-run film production and exhibition co-op, all of which actively encouraged their audiences' participation within their performances.

One particularly prolific filmmaker from this period was John Porter, who championed the Super 8 film format as his medium of choice. The portability of Super 8 equipment allowed him to develop new ways to interact with his audience while showing his films. This is best represented by his *Scanning* series, in which he recreates the motions he initially used while filming by panning and tilting with his projector during his performance. The resulting effect for the audience is that of seeing through walls, as the image moves around the walls of the theatre to the back and even onto the ceiling. Porter has continued to play with the freedom of Super 8 through similar pieces and through film busking at various events around Toronto. By walking along the sidewalk with a small projector equipped with a screen, projecting films that reference his surroundings, Porter is able to include passersby into his film experience.

The increased focus of art galleries and museums on installation work is ushering in a new era of environmental art. It is rare to find a film and video festival which doesn't include works that attempt to develop new filmic interventions into everyday life and some festivals even focus on commissioning work that interacts with the broader local community. One notable example was the recent Vision Ruhr show in Dortmund, Germany where eighteen artists were invited to



develop projects that intermingled with the old equipment of a large, dormant coal mining facility. While many of these festivals are tied to a passion for new technology as a way to expand the cinema even further, other filmmakers continue to rely on the particular magic of simple projection in an unconventional space. Robert Beavers has continued to hold semi-annual screenings on a hill in the small village of Lyssaraia, Greece as part of the Temenos project that he developed with his late partner Gregory Markopoulos during the eighties. The screenings of 16mm films draw an audience from the local village as well a small group of outside spectators who decide to undertake the pilgrimage.

The *Fabulous Festival of Fringe Film* is not unlike the Temenos project with its faith that the experimental film has a larger place than usually assumed. It fits well into the history of filmic interventions into daily life, sharing a distinct curiosity towards expanding cinema, both as a way to interact creatively with an audience and to engage with the larger environment that surrounds and informs the concept of cinema. The Grey Zone Collective / Durham Art Gallery exhibition project in Hanover, Durham and Walkerton this summer engages the belief that personal and experimental filmmaking can resonate with a diverse and interested audience. Like all the experiments in interventionist and expanded cinema, it works towards the idea that the film is only complete when it is received by an active spectatorship. It is that trust and interest in audience response that allows for cinema to take an active place in the social sphere. ❖

1 Gunning, Tom "The Cinema of Attractions - Early Film, Its Spectators and the Avant-Gardè", *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* Ed. Thomas Elssaeser (1990).
2 *Flaming Creatures*, a transgressive, sexually explicit cinematic ode to B-movie star Maria Montez, holds the distinction of being the only experimental film to be screened in the US Senate office building, when Senator Strom Thurmond used it to halt LBJ's nomination of a Supreme Court Justice who had dissented during the film's obscenity trial (*On Jack Smith's Flaming Creatures, and other Secret Flix of Cinemaroc*, J. Hoberman, Granary Books and Hips Road: 47-40. 2001).
3 James, David. *Allegories of Cinema.* Princeton, 1989: 136.
4 Quoted in Mueller, Roswitha. *Valie Export: Fragments of the Imagination.* Indiana, 1994: 18.
5 Marchessault, Janine. "Film Scenes: Paris, New York Toronto." Public 22/23, 2001: 59-83.