

WestminsterResearch

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/westminsterresearch>

**'The Artist as Filmmaker': Modernisms, Schisms,
Misunderstandings
Reynolds, L.**

This is a copy of the author manuscript of a chapter published in Cinematic Intermediality: Theory and Practice, ISBN 9781474446341.

© Edinburgh University Press 2021

The published version by Edinburgh University Press is available online at:

<https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-cinematic-intermediality.h...>

The WestminsterResearch online digital archive at the University of Westminster aims to make the research output of the University available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the authors and/or copyright owners.

The 'Artist as Filmmaker': Modernisms, Schisms, Misunderstandings

Lucy Reynolds

In 1972 Annabel Nicolson wrote a provocative article for a special issue of the art magazine *Art and Artist* devoted to artist filmmaking. Entitled 'Artist as Filmmaker', Nicolson addresses the potential role of the film medium (referencing predominantly the 8mm and 16mm gauges) in the art practices of herself and her contemporaries. As her article makes clear, through an argument at times passionate and polemic, artists were using the medium in two distinctive ways. Whilst some found it a useful means of documentation 'to deal with concerns arising out of other works',¹ others focused on its medium specific qualities as a means of creative expression, which Nicolson describes as 'a fluent, organic approach to their material and an awareness of its structural implications'². Nicolson builds her argument on close analysis of key works from artists associated with these stated tendencies, comparing the contrasting ways in which they were approaching the possibilities of the medium in their art practices. Despite recognising that both approaches came from the same fine art roots, Nicolson is however categorical about the divergent paths their use of film follows:

It may seem tenuous to distinguish between artists and film makers, many of whom come from a background in painting i.e. Legrice {sic}, Drummond, Gidal etc., but the use of film as an expedient for demonstrating concepts is diametrically opposite from structural use of film and still more so from the perceptual and psychological exploration identified with personal film makers.³

To make her case, Nicolson refers in particular detail to the conceptual use of the camera by Dan Graham, John Hilliard, the Canadian artist David Askevold, and Jan Dibbets in Holland, whose work she was encountering as installation works in the spaces of London galleries supporting less traditional art practices, such as the Lisson Gallery and Nigel Greenwood, the ICA and the Camden Arts Centre. In her analysis, she argues that film functioned for

them as a documentation device for actions and ideas with a time-based dynamic, whether performative or photographic. In contrast, Nicolson argues for film to be considered as a creative medium in itself, where it might be assigned the same value as other forms of art media such as paint or plaster. She expresses frustration at how the 'plastic possibilities of film',⁴ as she puts it, were not being realised by many of the artists from the conceptual field then beginning to pick up a camera. She contrasts Graham and Hilliard's conceptually driven use of the film camera as an instrument of documentation with that of artists such as William Raban and Chris Welsby, for whom the mechanics of filmmaking, such as camera speeds and exposures, become a visible and integral element of the image, rather than the means through which documentation might be produced. Writing of Raban's double screen time-lapse film with Welsby, *River Yar* (1971), for example, she applauds how the 'different time analogues [...] are the most interesting in the use of film as film by providing scales to register different perceptions of time.'⁵

Nicolson clearly identifies herself in this latter camp. A painter who had recently finished a postgraduate course at [Central Saint Martins School of Art](#), she had gravitated to the newly developed space for film, which Malcolm Le Grice had initiated within the sculpture department there. Her own films and film performances of this period also clearly show how a fascination with film's materiality is at the fore of her practice. As she stresses: 'What might appear didactic concern with the chemistry of the medium is an essential landmark in an overdue, radical re-examination of the nature of film.'⁶ Her short film *Slides* (1971), for example, turns the 16mm contact printer into an agent of magnification, arguing for the minutiae of her film's celluloid surfaces as a representational force more fundamental than cinematic fiction. In this regard 'Artist as Filmmaker' might be read as a means of working through her own allegiances in the competing practices around film as a viable artistic medium. It is significant that her article is placed in *Art and Artists* alongside those of Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice, two prominent fellow members and friends from the London Film-makers' Co-operative. Their contributions 'Film as Film' and 'Real Time/Space', as the titles suggest, underline the common goal she also argues for in her article: to both define and defend the medium-specific

potential of film, which was central to the London Film-makers' Co-operative during this period.

Nicolson's close and often eloquent readings of the works themselves, rather than the theories or context around them, reveals what was at stake for her in terms of her own creative identification and questioning around the medium. In retrospect, she recalls the writing of her article as 'a way of working out what I thought about what was going on around me.'⁷ But her article is also revealing in a number of unexpected ways for the retrospective reader. It offers a fascinating snapshot of how artists on the cusp of the 1970s were exploring the potential of the film medium within their artistic practices, at a point when video as an art form was still in its infancy, and not yet widely available for artistic experiment. In her discussion of these divergent experiments with the film medium a retrospective record of it is thus possible to trace the wider cultural networks, allegiances and art communities circulating in London and internationally during the early 1970s can be traced. Recognition of conceptual art practices came late to Britain, but it was already a well-established movement internationally, in which the films, photographs and performances of the artists who Nicolson refers to, such as Graham or Dibbets, were well known. 1972 was a significant year for the emergence of conceptual art in London, where it was beginning to be taken seriously, both in terms of a number of exhibitions and writing around the phenomenon, particularly through the advocacy of Charles Harrison and Richard Cork, editors of the art magazine *Studio International*. Harrison was responsible for bringing the influential 1969 exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* from the Kunsthalle Bern to the ICA later that year, which introduced key practices and figures to a wider art audience in London. Nicolson's 1972 article reflects this flurry of activity, when Graham showed at the Lisson Gallery, and *The New Art* exhibition at the Hayward Gallery (17 August-24 September 1972) provided one of the first British surveys of the movement,⁸ whose key exponents were delineated by its curator Anne Seymour in the exhibition catalogue's foreword:

The systems into which materials are fitted are arbitrary, quasi mathematical, always self-contained, often constructed directly out of

the materials themselves. Among other things John Hilliard uses photography to discuss photography, David Dye film to discuss film, Art-Language philosophy to discuss philosophy, Long to discuss landscape.⁹

Experimental film was also in the ascendant, having now established a stable infrastructure of exhibition and production through the London Filmmaker's Co-operative, in association with a wider film co-operative movement which spanned Europe to the US and Japan. The special artists' film issue of *Art and Artists* reflects a greater understanding from more traditional art quarters of the importance of film as an art medium, and acknowledges its widespread practice. As Cork remembers, this was a time 'when the centuries-old dominance of painting and sculpture gave way at last to a general acknowledgement that "art" could assume a far greater range of material identities.'¹⁰ However, film was not yet to be found in the galleries of the Lisson, ICA or the Hayward, unless it was connected to a conceptual practitioner such as Graham. Screenings of the single screen and multi-disciplinary 'film actions' of Nicolson and other Co-op filmmakers – however experimental in form – were limited to cinematic contexts, even those as informal as the Co-op cinema. Thus, for all the appreciation of film experimentation, which Nicolson and the Co-op were leading, their work was held separate from their conceptual art counterparts. Nicolson's argument for a greater appreciation of film's materiality could be seen as a response to this implicit division, and the lack of dialogue between two areas of practice that might have much to share. In the title of her article is imbricated the question of an identification in conflict between the contrasting modes of reception and endorsement associated with the gallery or the cinema. Where might the 'artist filmmakers' locate themselves in order to fully realise the potential of their work?

And were these two conflicting understandings of the film medium really as 'diametrically opposed' as Nicolson argues? As she insightfully observes:

The lack of cross reference between artists' and film makers' films is disheartening since these polarities of conceptual and perceptual emphasis could throw illuminating perspectives on each other.¹¹

As I write from a time when the term 'artist filmmaker' is common parlance, Nicolson's prescient comparison of how film was used and understood within these two distinct fields of art practice may yet throw light on the elisions still occurring around the term, both in current curatorial practices and historical understandings of them. And by examining the slippages and distinctions, the similarities and the divergences raised in Nicolson's text, a picture emerges of how group identifications and institutional interests within the art community have come to obscure approaches to the medium's potential, which weren't really so different after all. For, as this chapter argues, the questions which the camera brought to art practice, concerning time, process and technological mediation between artist, space and audience, were common to both artist filmmaker and filmmaker alike. To draw out these institutional determinants and shared concerns, my chapter begins with an examination of the contradictions inherent to Nicolson's foundational text, before turning briefly to a rare congruence between the 'conceptual and perceptual' in the film installations of the artist David Dye. My conclusion addresses the question which implicitly frames Nicolson's article: if much common ground can be found in the approaches that conceptual artist and structural filmmaker brought to film, why was there so little cross-over between them?

Reciprocities

To begin with Nicolson's critical analysis of the work itself: one of the key contentions she levels at her conceptual art counterparts concerns their lack of engagement with the inherent properties of the film medium and its apparatus as a space of experimentation. Dan Graham's two-screen film work *Two Correlated Rotations* is held up as exemplary of this tendency. Seen by Nicolson at the Lisson Warehouse space in 1972, it demonstrates a reflexive use of the camera, which expressed for Nicolson 'reciprocity of process and content'.¹² Shot on super 8 and projected on 16mm on two walls adjacent and at right angles to each other, Graham's film documents two cameramen under

instruction to keep each other in their cameras' sights whilst they spiral away from each other in different directions – turning inwards and outwards of a circle previously delineated by Graham on the floor.

But Graham's systematic brief yields no straightforward document of a performance to a set of instructions. The films do not only record the difficulty of the cameramen keeping each other in view, but the technological limits of the camera as a recording device, manifested as a series of disorientating rotational pans, blurred shifts and loss of focus. The incoherence of the images that register from this camera dance may certainly be seen as a record of the performance, which Graham has put in motion through the imposition of a given set of concepts. But instead of neutral recording devices, the cameras function like perceptual prosthetics, held close up against the eye and body of the performer. The shifts of focus and blurred images might thus be read as an assertion of the camera's own mechanical agency, which asserts its awkward and weighty presence in a reciprocal exchange of image creation with the camera holder.

Graham's notes on his intention for the work also suggest that he was as much interested in the nature of the documentation as in the ability of his performers to fulfill his instructions. He describes how, inspired by the Gestalt psychology of James Gibson in his book *The Perception of the Visual World*, the work intended to 'relate perception to perceived motion to the perception of depth/time.'¹³ The work was also intended to act as an improvisatory dance, where its success depends on what Graham termed a 'learning process'¹⁴ between the two participants as they circle with each other in their sights. *Two Correlated Rotations* might be seen to collapse the boundaries between form and content, where Graham's performative experiment actively foregrounds the technologies of film's apparatus in a way that would be familiar to Nicolson and other Co-operative filmmakers.

Turning to Nicolson's work, this dialogic interplay between performers and the film apparatus recalls her participatory film performance of the following year, *Precarious Vision* (1973), in which the artist involved performers (often volunteers from theand audience)~~members~~ in a game of interruptions and instructions between screen, viewer and projectionist. She

invites ~~a volunteer an audience member~~ to read aloud a short poetic text with their back to the screen, on which the same words – ~~typed~~handwritten and filmed by Nicolson – are projected. Nicolson/the projectionist uses some playful cues to help the reader ~~viewer~~ to keep pace with the writing on-screen which they are unable to see. ~~If they read;~~ too fast ~~and Nicolson holds her hand over the projector lens, so the~~ the participant has no light to read and must stop until the words projected in the film have reached the same point in the text, when Nicolson lifts her hand and light is restored. If the reader is ~~onscreen image is hidden until they slow down,~~ too slow ~~and Nicolson uses the projector's freeze frame mechanism to still the~~ onscreen text image until they have is frozen for them caught to catch up with it. Like *Two Correlated Rotations*, *Precarious Vision's* dialogic game of reading and speaking was also marked by fallibility and contingency as human comprehension is tested against the mechanistic pace of the projector, in a work that explores not only keeping time, but also the power dynamics of trust, instruction and control. These were elements also at play in a further performative piece, *Graham's 2 Consciousness Projections*, which ~~he~~Graham tried out whilst in London, using televisual apparatus to mediate expressions of consciousness between two people¹⁵. ~~Over the following years,~~ Nicolson was already engaged in a fascination with 'the invisible space between projector and screen', suspending a series of small paper screens in her studio to explore the density of light at different distances¹⁶. ~~Like these earlier works, would engage further with the games of reading and language she first explores in~~ *Precarious Vision*, developing an idea of cinema as a form of 'light reading', in recognition of the light beam's role as a luminous transference of information from projector to projection surface in a game of reading and language. ~~It could be argued that these exercises in technological comprehension are~~ Common to conceptual artist and structural filmmaker alike. ~~Both~~ Nicolson and Graham use instructions or tasks to activate a performance in dialogue with the film or video apparatus, which will test the technology's limits as a transmitter of information and precipitate a complex reciprocity both human and mechanic.

In this regard, both artists could be understood as heirs to the discourses around cybernetics then circulating in both exhibition and

educational contexts, as Norbert Wiener's influential theories of 'information-communication' found their way into artistic practice not only through early explorations of computational systems, but also through the use of feedback loops, dialogues between different people and groups, often with a social contextualisation. In Britain, I argue, art school pedagogy, particularly through Roy Ascott's influential 'groundcourse' programme at Newcastle School of Art, with its emphasis on the implementation of 'behavioural' exercises, and the teachings of Le Grice's colleague Peter Kardia at [Central Saint Martins](#) School of Art, encouraged students to explore the notions of reciprocal processes, and information systems, as potentially more relevant to their practices than traditional media.¹⁷

However, it is important to stress the different discursive emphases from which the work of Graham and Nicolson emerged. An image of *Two Correlated Rotations*, for example, can be found in Lucy Lippard's 1972 book *6 Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*. The inclusion of Graham's work in Lippard's paradigmatic index of conceptual art – devoted to works where 'the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary'¹⁸ – exemplifies film as an instrument of dematerialisation rather than a focus in itself. Or as Harrison put it in 'Against Precedents', his defining essay in the catalogue for *When Attitudes Become Form*:

[i]t is no longer necessary for the artist to make his work finite in terms of area or form: it need be neither tangible nor visible so long as his particular intention will carry into 'mental space' without an object to remember it by.¹⁹

Harrison's assertion of the intangible as art addresses the spectre of its modernist forebears, and the medium-specific creed of Clement Greenberg, whose influential 1961 book *Art and Culture* advocated art's material autonomy. Notably masticated and spat out by the artist John Latham in his piece *Still and Chew: Art and Culture 1966–1967* (1966), the perceived orthodoxies of *Art and Culture*, as Andrew Wilson argues, were consequential in the emergence of conceptual art, which he argues are a response to 'a crisis of modernism, driven by a reaction to the established edifice of Greenbergian modernism.'²⁰ Nicolson, on the other hand, tellingly commends

the relation between the 'tactile potential of film' and the 'post-war unshackling of painting by the Abstract Expressionists'²¹ and we see this attention to materiality in films such as *Slides*. Like many of her fellow Co-op filmmakers she had come to film through a visual arts practice, but it could be argued that her touchstones – and those of her contemporaries – were not the burgeoning practices of art as idea but the earlier modernisms of process and medium that Graham and Lippard wished to leave behind. That she and fellow Co-op filmmakers should still find potential in medium specificity returns us, I would argue, to Nicolson's point about the 'overdue, radical re-examination of the nature of film', which not only sought to challenge perceptions of the medium in the visual arts, but to use film's ontological specificity to argue for a different model of cinema from its commercial counterpart.

However, ~~as my comparisons of her work and Graham's already show,~~ the dividing line that Nicolson draws between conceptual practice and a materialist filmmaking ~~indebted to modernism might also be considered a false dichotomy~~ is troubled by ~~Paradoxically, the sticking point for her neat delineation lies with film itself, and film's~~ embedded relationship to contexts outside art. To be self-referential with paint, as Greenberg argues in *Art and Culture*, requires an attention to its systems of support such as stretcher, canvas, or the reference to authorial performance found in the brush stroke. Yet film technology implies contexts that lie outside the studio and in the commercial arena of cinema production, distribution and its exhibition. This was the argument later followed through by Peter Wollen in his polemic 1975 article 'The Two Avant-gardes', where structural filmmakers are cast as caught in a formalist endgame when a cinema of radical representation is sought. However, it could be argued that it is in structural film's attempt to purge film of cinema's indelible associations that its most interesting experiments are forged. For even the tropes of modernism cannot erase the intrinsic technological presence of the camera.; ~~D~~despite the artisanal settings created at the London Filmmakers' Co-operative for singular control of its processes, film refers back irrevocably not only to its celluloid materiality, but also to its industrial contexts and origins. Whilst the films of Le Grice and his American counterpart Ken Jacobs both used found footage to explore cinematic beginnings, most famously in Le Grice's *Berlin Horse* (1971), it is

the experimental attempts – and failures – to challenge ~~and negate~~ this crucial element of film's identity as a technology harnessed to representational form that are often most compelling, as *Precarious Vision* or *Slides* show. And whilst Nicolson or Le Grice might have seen art as an alternative model for filmmaking, less tainted by the commercial imperatives of cinema, so for the same reason their conceptual art counterparts were drawn to the camera for its quotidian associations with popular culture. Even if their positions might appear diametrically opposed with in regard to how they identified themselves to modernism, both conceptual artist and structural filmmaker alike are exercised by the conundrum of how to assimilate film – and later video – technology into their practices and the wider cultural communities, and popular cultures, of which they were a part.

At stake for both is the question of representation and the film image. The concern for Nicolson stems primarily from a critique of mainstream cinema and its industrial contexts, manifesting through film's employment in the service of fiction film 'as a vehicle for literal and dramatic content,'²² a view shared by other Co-op filmmakers such as Le Grice who, in the same issue of *Art and Artists*, refers to the 'prestructured substitute and illusory reality'²³ of conventional cinema representation. The root of this critique of cinema is less indebted to film theoretical sources than to the diverse, politically infused currents of counter-cultural ideas then circulating in London at hubs such as the Arts Lab,²⁴ from experimental music, cybernetics and the anti-psychiatry of R. D. Laing, to modernist literature and radical theatre. In retrospect, Le Grice relates their approach to a 'radical aspiration'²⁵ where 'we discussed philosophical questions and related them to the practice.'²⁶

For conceptual artists such as Graham, representation in its widest definition was under scrutiny, rather than the representation associated with cinema in particular. Returning to Harrison's edict that art should occupy 'mental space', their interest was not in the optical certainties of film as a representational medium, but the question of how the film or photographic document might function as a referent for actions and events, ephemeral both in form and idea. Andrea Tarsia has argued (with reference to the photographs of one of Graham's contemporaries, Richard Long) that artists of the period were concerned with the denotation of 'a field of representation, the

allusion to something or some place other than the image or object before us.²⁷ Tarsia suggests that representation becomes palpable only as a point upon which to reflect, ~~indicated through a play of authorial absence, presence and elsewhere, aided by the technological record of the camera:~~ 'our attention is drawn to the artist (conspicuously absent), his gesture, its mediation and our reception, holding us in the gap between artistic intervention and our own reception of that intervention.'²⁸ Following Tarsia's argument, the conceptual artist asserts the temporal and spatial remove at which representation has placed us from the scene of creative activity, whether it is two cameramen spiraling away from each other or a photographic record of a walk across a field. In this sense Nicolson is indeed right that conceptual artists regarded 'film as an expedient for demonstrating concepts'. However, it could also be argued that the unique temporal and spatial capture of film technology was as integral to their creative enquiries as to her own. As Graham's work shows, the film projections for *Two Correlated Rotations*, projected on adjacent walls at the Lisson, assert the marks of the camera's technological presence, at the same time that they register the performers' attempts to stay in frame. In the films' inability to fully capture the movement of the turning performers is contained a record not only of a past performance, but a material assertion of the camera's technological struggle to represent the contingencies of another space and time. Nicolson herself describes this sensation in the work of David Askevold, writing that 'Askevold's films have a sense of somewhere just out of reach, they build their own space.'²⁹

Confine

Graham's choreographic test of the limits of both human and technological movement could be said to find parallels in the time-lapse records of landscape produced by Raban and Welsby, which register not only temporal changes in the landscape, manifesting in weather and light, but the elusive presence of the film camera, and the artist, in the landscape. As Nicolson writes with regard to *River Yar*: '[T]he reflection of the camera in the window (closed because of heavy rain at night) provides a self-referential context at intervals.'³⁰ She also recognises 'parallels with the concerns of structural cinema'³¹ in John Hilliard's serial photographic works and double screen films,

such as *Ten Runs Past a Fixed Point* (1971), and his twin-screen projection *From and Two* (1971),³² for their use of 'camera variables, developing and printing factors determining and becoming the subject of photographs.'³³ But whilst Nicolson recognises the 'self-referential aspect' of his work, she implies that his 'controlled experiments' limit the richness of experience available to the viewer of structural film, which are, she explains ~~ss—somewhat obliquely—~~ as, 'inevitably more subjective in that perceptual time plays havoc with one's responses'.³⁴ Her remark briefly crystallises an unspoken suggestion that threads through her article: ~~that~~ about the more engaged relationship to film ~~which she and her fellow filmmakers shared was available to herself and her fellow filmmakers~~. As David Curtis has since observed ~~s retrospectively~~: 'Both forms tend to reflect upon the nature of their medium and the process of their making, though *enjoyment* of the medium is supposedly unique to the structuralists.'³⁵

One artist in Nicolson's article who appears to have straddled both conceptual and structural concerns was David Dye, a friend and fellow student at Saint Martins. Nicolson commends his work for its sensitivity to medium and critique of representation, acclaiming him as 'probably the only artist who consistently rejects the use of film as a retrospective reality referring to another time/space by initiating specific projection situations for each film for dialectic between image, process and content.'³⁶ Rather than rejecting representation, it could be argued that Dye practiced a more nuanced dismantling of it through his playful exploration of scale and time frame. In his film performance *Confine* – presented during a one-week exhibition of his work at the ICA in 1972 – the artist holds a 8mm projector which projects a film of a still photograph of himself onto the same photographic image of himself pinned to a wall. However, Dye has utilised a zoom lens on his camera so that the film image slowly zooms in to enlarge his picture, meaning that he must keep moving towards the photograph that has become the screen in order for his film image to correctly match his unmoving still image on the wall. *Confine* draws the mechanical time of the camera and the projector into a reciprocal equivalence, in which the performing artist becomes the intermediary, demonstrating the difficulty of a neat alignment. Nicolson praises the film as a 'radical divergence from conventional

acceptance of projection as the relaying of an earlier completed activity.³⁷

Here she ~~reflects the betrays what will become her~~ enduring exploration in her own practice about how light relays information through 'the giving or withholding of information through light'³⁸ ~~which is seen in *Precarious Vision*, when and how, through performance,~~ the projection beam ~~is might be~~ intercepted ~~by the projectionist~~ to reveal or ~~withhold deny the words at hidden message before they it reaches the cinema screen, as seen in *Precarious Vision*.~~

However, Dye's performative interventions return us to Tarsia's point about how the gesture of the artist is instrumental in pointing us towards an undoing of the illusion which the technology of the photograph or film upholds – often through the artist's failure in relation to contingent factors such as environment and the inability to correctly follow out instructions. Dye takes this notion of a destabilised authorship further in his installation *Unsigning for Eight Projectors*, presented in 1972 in the Hayward gallery *New Art* exhibition. A ring of eight 8mm projectors each project an image of Dye writing a letter of his name, but as the dangling screen in the middle twists and moves in accordance with movement in the gallery space, the letters jumble and superimpose, and those beams not caught by the expanse of the screen are cast unfocused and out of scale on the gallery walls around the circle of projectors. As Dye said: 'I wanted to do a work that was the opposite of the meaning behind the signature, identity fixture and projection and turn it inside out.' But whilst this is a conceptual play on the artist's gesture of identity, and its negation, it also asserts the intrinsic properties of film projection – using the unpredictable turns of the suspended screen to draw attention to its beam of light as the conveyer of information that so interested Nicolson.

Nicolson was not alone in appreciating Dye's work. The young critic Richard Cork, a key advocate for conceptual art practices in Britain, also visited the show and writes enthusiastically in the *Evening Standard* of the potential of Dye's work to speak across fields of practice which had held themselves distinct. He praised:

This was the excitement of Dye's exhibition: the realization it offered that the boundaries between two media of expression need not be

tightly sealed off, that both sides can converge and yet succeed in defining their different priorities with exactitude.³⁹

Yet it could be argued that what sealed off conceptual art from experimental filmmaking was the exhibiting context and its attendant endorsements, rather than the practices themselves. A further part of Dye's appeal to both conceptualist artist and structuralist filmmaker was his work's ability to cross the continued disconnect between the temporal and spatial conventions of galleries, designed to illuminate painting and sculpture, and the cinema's immersive auditoria. He was the only artist using film to be included in surveys of conceptual practices in Britain, such as 'The New Art' at the Hayward. Even though the relevance of film to dematerialised conceptual practices was acknowledged, it wasn't part of the major conceptual shows circulating in Britain and Europe at that time. One rare occasion to counter this cautious approach can be found in the third part of the ambitious *Survey of the Avant-garde in Britain* at Gallery House in 1972, based at the Goethe Institute's South Kensington address, where conceptual artists working with film were placed alongside their structuralist peers, thanks to the adventurous approach of the curators Rosetta Brooks and Sigi Krauss, whose inter-generational exhibition programme embraced radical art practices, from David Medalla and Gustav Metzger to younger conceptualists such as Hilliard. In their survey, John Latham's *Erth* might therefore screen before Peter Gidal's *Movie* or Anthony McCall's *Landscape for Fire Film*, adjusting to the durational conditions of the gallery through a number of repeating film programmes, situated in rooms adjacent to early video installations, such as David Hall and Tony Sinden's *60 TV Sets*.

However, with this notable exception, it was when film approximated sculpture – as was the case with Dye – that curators could more readily understand its relevance in the gallery. As Dye reflected in a 1972 interview with Simon Field, comparing his experience of showing at the Hayward and the ICA:

The Hayward was a straight gallery situation in which it's not normal to see film. Although it is much more now. And so there are other kinds of

problems involved about showing things, there are problems of presentation involved to begin with. Whereas with the ICA show, because I was there, projecting... it was strange because it related to a normal cinema situation, in a way, and yet it wasn't. It's very difficult to work out... they are very different situations. In a sense I learned as much from both of them because, in a sense, more than most, my work doesn't exist until it is being shown... it's hardly there.⁴⁰

As his reflections suggest, it was through his performative interactions with visitors that Dye was able to resolve his initial ambivalence about the presentation of his films within the gallery, and it could be argued that it was his ephemeral and contingent presence that came to determine the experience of the work, not simply the film projections on display, nor their sculptural connotations. Dye's tentative comments also reflect the awkward place the film medium still occupied between two distinct cultural contexts, replete with established and very separate models of reception, exhibition and validation. Indeed, a case could be made that differences were less in the work itself – as Nicolson's close readings of Graham and Dye show – than in the contexts around them.

In his insightful dissection of the disconnect between conceptual artist and structural filmmaker, David Curtis argues that the Filmmakers' Co-op was both geographically and theoretically distant from its conceptual counterparts, making the Co-op cinema 'a place of film pilgrimage, attracting devotees only, offering little cross-over potential.'⁴¹ As Dye's remarks already suggest, the tight-knit circles of the Co-op, with their distinctive approach to film, could also be seen as limiting to some in terms of exhibiting opportunities as well as contexts for making work. By not aligning himself fully with the Co-op's structural film culture, Dye ensured he was not defined wholly with its associations, leaving him open to other exhibiting opportunities such as the Lisson gallery or the attentions of Richard Cork or Charles Harrison. However, the institutional acceptance enjoyed by conceptual practitioners reflected for Nicolson an uneasy relationship to the supposed critiques made in their work. As she observes: 'I felt very uncomfortable with the values of the gallery system and how some artists whose work may have been considered radical

at the time were co-opted into it.⁴² It could be argued that the facilities at the Co-op, low cost and collective, enabled artist filmmakers such as herself to create an alternative system through which to find validation and afford to continue their work.

Furthermore, practical issues of display could be seen to determine the interest of galleries and exhibition curators, who were more comfortable with two-dimensional works and sculpture. Whilst Dye's ring of projectors could be supported in a gallery group show, what of an exhibition where time-based film performances and film installations were predominant, requiring the more immersive conditions of darkened spaces and regular maintenance? The opportunities that Dye received to present his film installations during 1972 and 1973 affirms how curators and critics at the time limited their dissemination and validation to artists who were not only able to position themselves within familiar conceptual art circuits of known galleries such as the Lisson or the ICA, but whose work was conducive to established models of reception: whether the gallery or the cinema. With this in mind it is instructive that it was in the ad hoc and more indeterminate conditions of Gallery House that artists' experimental film was to find one of its first homes outside the Co-op and the cinema auditorium. The success of the *Filmaktion* exhibition at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, in June 1973, with its ambitious programme of screenings, film actions and installations,⁴³ could also be attributed to the on-site expertise and maintenance provided by Co-op filmmakers such as Nicolson and Raban, which was not standard in art spaces more generally. Nicolson indeed observes that 'the alienation of distribution and unsuitable projection conditions are as unattractive to artists as to any discerning independent film maker.'⁴⁴

At issue was how artist filmmakers located themselves within this divided cultural landscape. For Dye, like more conceptually aligned artists, film was one medium amongst others through which they addressed the question of representation: from their own bodies to still photography and diagrams. Dye observes: 'film for me is a means to an end. I don't know whether I'll go on using it for ever, but it seems to be the most accessible thing at the moment.'^{Ref?} For artists working at the Co-op, on the other hand, representation was challenged through a thorough engagement – not

Commented [LR1]: Kim, this was a missing reference from way back - I was going to go to the study collection to check it in Dye's files, before all hell broke loose first with my mum's illness and then lockdown. I think it's probably best to leave the point out - as i don't know when I'll have a chance to check it now.

disengagement – with film’s materiality. However, as Nicolson’s reading of Graham suggests, whether conceptual ~~or~~ structural, artist filmmakers were examining the temporal spatial implications of film and its ability to mediate representation and instrumentalise perception. ~~It could also be argued that both had the same endgame and political goal, however different their approaches.~~ Through their profound and singular probing of film’s properties, Nicolson or Le Grice hoped to expose the fallacies of narrative cinema and unlock film’s unrealised potential, whereas their conceptual contemporaries saw in the medium another means of undermining the orthodoxies of art practices still bound to the conventions of traditional art media.

‘Artist as Filmmaker’ is insightful on the commonalities that remain unacknowledged in accounts of conceptual art in Britain, both historical and contemporary. ~~Nicolson recalls how she was ‘interested in what those artists did, but did not feel close to it’⁴⁵, and in her~~ ~~But the article also holds a valuable personal dimension for Nicolson. In the artist’s~~ close analysis of film’s role in the art practices of her 1970s contemporaries, the reader ~~can~~ ~~might~~ trace ~~her curiosity about how other artists outside her immediate circle were exploring film~~ ~~Nicolson’s implicit recognition of the conceptual elements at play in her own work.~~ Yet, for all the profound differences of ~~approach she identifies between them, it is possible in retrospect to trace shared fascinations with how film and its technical apparatus had the ability to mediate representations of time, space and the artist themselves. Like Graham’s *Two Correlated Rotations* and *Dye’s Confine, Precarious Vision* also explores information transference, and feedback and reciprocity through instruction and game play.~~ ‘Artist as Filmmaker’ suggests that the differences between conceptual artist and structural filmmaker ~~are less about their interests in film’s intrinsic qualities than~~ ~~lie not in their engagement with the medium of film, but~~ in their level of engagement with the discourses and contexts of reception and exhibition surrounding the film medium it.

Conceptual artists still sought validation and visibility from Britain’s established systems of publicly funded and commercial gallery spaces, whilst Nicolson and her peers found support and opportunity at the London Filmmakers’ Co-operative, and the circuits of co-operative film culture within which

it operated. Returning to her point about the 'disheartening' lack of 'cross-reference' between 'polarities of conceptual and perceptual emphasis', Nicolson's article suggests film might have been a possible bridge of common purpose, which – as history shows us – was not to be crossed.

NOTES

¹ Annabel Nicolson, 'Artist as Filmmaker', *Art and Artists*, December 1972, p. 20.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Nicolson, 'Artist as Filmmaker', p. 26.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ [Annabel Nicolson, in a letter to Lucy Reynolds, February 2nd, 2020.](#)

⁸ A good example of Graham's positioning within the movement is provided by Richard Cork's review of his solo exhibition at the Lisson gallery in March 1972. See Richard Cork, *Everything Seemed Possible: Art in the 1970s* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 50-3.

⁹ Anne Seymour, 'Introduction', in *The New Art* (London: Arts Council 1972), p. 6.

¹⁰ Richard Cork, *Everything Seemed Possible*, p. 10.

¹¹ Nicolson, 'Artist as Filmmaker', p. 20

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ronald Alley, *Catalogue of the Tate Gallery's Collection of Modern Art other than Works by British Artists* (London: Tate Gallery and Sotheby Parke-Bernet, 1981) pp. 330-2, reproduced online at

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/graham-two-correlated-rotations-t01737>

(accessed 10 November 2019)

¹⁴ Alley, *Catalogue of the Tate Gallery's Collection of Modern Art*.

¹⁵ In his contemporaneous review of Graham's 1972 exhibition Richard Cork describes the work thus: 'A woman focusing attention only on a television image of herself has to verbalise her consciousness, while a man observing her through the camera connected to the monitor screen focuses only outside himself and verbalises his perceptions as well' (Cork, *Everything Seemed Possible*, p. 53). It should be noted that this is based on a preview of the piece, not his experience of it. For further discussion of Graham's interest in reciprocity through performance and film, see Birgit Pelzer, 'Double Intersections: The Optics of Dan Graham' in Birgit Pelzer, Mark Francis and Beatriz Colomina (eds), *Dan Graham* (London, New York: Phaidon, 2001) pp. 45-9.

¹⁶ As Nicolson explains in more detail, 'I was already working with projected light in my studio at the Dairy (1971-9175) where I had a series of small paper screens suspended at different distances from a 16mm projector. The beam of light became larger, but also dimmer, the further it was from the projector. It was this invisible space between projector and screen which continued to fascinate me.' Letter to Lucy Reynolds, February 2nd 2020.

¹⁷ For a more detailed explanation of Wiener and his influence on art culture see Kristine Stiles, 'Art and Technology' in Kristine Stiles and Peter Seltz (eds), *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 384-96. For my own development of the argument for the influence of cybernetic thought on British structural film see Lucy Reynolds, 'Experiment, Cybernetics and the Formal Film in Britain', in *A Companion to Experimental Film* (London: Wiley/Blackwell, forthcoming).

¹⁸ Lucy Lippard, *6 Years, the Dematerialisation of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), p. 2.

¹⁹ Christian Rattemeyer, *Exhibiting the New Art 'Op Losse Schroeven' and 'When Attitudes Become Form' 1969* (Vienna, London, Eindhoven: Afterall Books in association with the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna and Van Abbemuseum, 2010), p. 195.

²⁰ Andrew Wilson, *Conceptual Art in Britain, 1964-1979* (London: Tate Publications, 2016), p. 9.

²¹ Nicolson, 'Artist as Filmmaker', p. 20.

²² Ibid.

²³ Malcolm Le Grice, 'Real SPACE/TIME', *Art and Artists*, December 1972.

²³ Nicolson, 'Artist as Filmmaker', p. 20.

²⁴ For a more detailed exploration of the relationship between the Arts Lab and structural film practices see Lucy Reynolds, "'Non-institution": finding expanded cinema in the *terrains vagues* of 1960s London,' in François Bovier and Adeena Mey (eds), *Cinema in the Expanded Field* (Zurich: JRP-Ringier, 2015).

²⁵ Zoller, Maxa, Interview with Malcolm Le Grice, *X Screen: Film Installations and Actions in the 1960s and 1970s* (Vienna: MUMOK, 2000) p. 143.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Andrea Tarsia, 'Introduction' in Clive Philpot and Andrea Tarsia (eds), *Live in Your Head: Concept and Experiment in Britain 1965-1975* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2000), p. 18.

²⁸ Tarsia, *Live in Your Head*, p. 18.

²⁹ Nicolson, 'Artist as Filmmaker', p. 23.

³⁰ Nicolson, 'Artist as Filmmaker', p. 26.

³¹ Nicolson, 'Artist as Filmmaker', p. 23.

³² With parallels to Graham's *Two Correlated Relations*, Nicolson quotes Hilliard's description of his installation: 'Cameraman A revolves filming cameraman B who is walking in a circle around him filming cameraman A. When the films are projected synchronously side by side, cameraman A is seen on one screen as what he is observing is simultaneously visible on the other screen. The only exception to these shooting rules is a short sequence where two cameramen film through a complete revolution of 360 back to back. Annabel Nicolson, 'Artist as Filmmaker', p. 23.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ David Curtis, "'In the bloody basement again": Three Observations about British conceptual and structural film,' *Moving Image Review and Art Journal*, Volume 6, Nos 1-2 (December 2017), p. 261 (author's emphasis).

³⁶ Nicolson, 'Artist as Filmmaker', p. 22.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Correspondence between Nicolson and the author, 2004.

³⁹ Richard Cork, *Evening Standard*, 1972.

⁴⁰ Field, Simon, 'David Dye: an interview with Simon Field', *Art and Artists*, December 1972, p. 16.

⁴¹ Curtis, "'In the bloody basement again", p. 262.

⁴² [Nicolson, letter to Reynolds](#)

⁴³ For further details see Lucy Reynolds, 'Filmaktion. New directions in Film-Art', *Centre of the Creative Universe*, Tate Liverpool Exhibition Catalogue (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007).

⁴⁴ Nicolson, 'Artist as Filmmaker', p. 20.

⁴⁵ [Nicolson, letter to Reynolds](#)