
Thriving on the ‘Wrong Side of the Tracks’: Experimental Practices in Film/Video

Response to an email request from Andrew Blanchard of Filmink magazine
(see endpage for Blanchard’s original query)

It is interesting the overwhelming view is that the boundaries of film/cinema sit with what is termed “alternative/independent” (to quote you direct), while I and many others that produce and show experimental film and video only dabble in passing pleasure as viewer with those works that fall into the category that you write of. As such the questions and issues posed or highlighted in your correspondence, such as “how can alternative/experimental filmmakers find *new* [italics mine] ways to showcase their work” are not entirely relevant to those of us working in experimental film and video as we have been so far removed from mainstream cinema culture that we sit at the extreme border - if not over the edge, which would be reasonable to argue - of the alternative film work that venues such as Valhalla and the Academy Twin screened.

While indisputably locked in weave in the bosom of cinema culture yet grounded in an arts practice, experimental film/video tends to remove itself from theatrical embellished narrative unless of course it, the experimental work, is set to question the form. It is extremely rare that an experimental film/video will offer up a cavernous void into which the viewer can escape and, as a result, can often seem to be invasive in its demand for intellectual digestion. For this there should be no apology from the makers of experimental, as the exploration within the critical analysis is not far removed from any analysis of Dürer, Bosch, Warhol, Picasso, Beuys, Twombly, Orlan, Johns, Schneemann etc., and their works. This is the passion that so few have opportunity to experience as screenings of such are scarce and have largely depended upon individuals dedicating the time and personal finances to ensure the form, and its international community of followers and makers, continues to thrive. Here in Australia there exists nothing like Lux in London (an amalgamation of the London Filmmaker’s Coop and London Video Arts), Lightcone in Paris (initiated by Pip Chodorov), or Anthology Film in New York (a life-long project of Jonas Mekas), each of which have entailed decades of dedication to experimental film and video from a select few with minimal funding available. The closest we have had to these have been short lived and those that are current now are struggling to survive in their infant years in the hope of reaching a

fraction of the kudos of those stated above elsewhere in the world. Ever since Pat and Richard Larter, Corinne and Arthur Cantrill, and the Ubu group in Sydney began making experimental film on 16mm during the 1960s and 1970s, and subsequently the Sydney Filmmaker's Cooperative, experimental film has predominately been lurking in the shadows on the 'wrong side the tracks' of alternative screening venues, much like the Valhalla. With little support from commercial cinema spaces screenings of experimental film and video over the past decades have taken place in basement spaces, backyards, artists' collectives (The Yellow House as an early example), warehouse spaces and commercial lofts. In most recent years these out of the way screenings have been conducted by Other Film in what ever venue they can manage to obtain for their one-off screenings in Brisbane, and in Sydney, Teaching and Learning Cinema (originally Sydney Moving Image Coalition) in a variety of spaces for the few screenings they have conducted in addition to their other activities. In Melbourne cogcollective and suek-artist have been screening experimental programmes on a monthly basis (August to May) in The BAcK doOR - suek-artist also conducts the Australian International Experimental Film Festival as part of The BAcK doOR's calendar of events.

cogcollective emerged in London during 2006 out of a need to fill a vacuum left by a transitioning period that Lux was undergoing at the time. While this has been the most consistent of screening activities that I have conducted, it was far from the first with curatorial roles in programming experimental screenings starting in 2002 and taking place in both London and Western Australia. After twelve months of continuous monthly screenings in London with the almost inexhaustible commitment by Steven Ball, cogcollective followed my return to Australia with screening programmes falling under its name in Victoria since early 2008. The majority of these have been the regular screenings under the dual banner of cogcollective and suek-artist in The BAcK doOR -- a venue established by myself in an effort to find a permanent home for screening experimental film and video in Australia. In establishing The BAcK doOR there no longer is the need to find venues sympathetic to the



sue.k. introducing *Documenting the World, Life and Death*
2010 Australian International Experimental Film Festival

genre (there is no guarantee that the Valhalla would have been such a venue when in operation in the eighties and nineties), nor the need to find funds to cover the cost of venue hire each month. While I mourn the loss of so many independent cinemas and regret that little opportunity outside of festival screenings will exist to see exceptional auteurship, the closure of venues like the Valhalla and the Academy Twin will/do not alter the way in which experimental film/video screenings are conducted excepting that, perhaps, as time passes the unique environment that grows from the intimacy of the experimental screening event may be exactly that that the alternative film viewers, of those now closed screening venues, may find beguiling and will lead them to explore the wonders of experimental film and video.

© sue.k. 18th May 2011

Andrew Blanchard:

“I am a journalist with FILMINK and I am working on a feature about how venues for alternative/independent films are closing up such as Valhalla and the academy twin and how the filmmakers/distributors are finding new ways to bring these films to an audience of film lovers who want a cinema culture that is different to the mainstream commercial cinemas.”