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2013

(Wo)man with Mirror - a user's manual

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Publication Details

L. Curham & L. M. Ihlein 2013 (Wo)man with Mirror - a user's manual Big Fag Press Sydney

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(Wo)man with Mirror - a user's manual

Abstract

Between 1966 and 1976, some independent filmmakers began to make works which questioned the mechanics of cinema. Expanded Cinema went beyond mere projection. This was the event of cinema -the space, the audience and the projection. The artists employed physical interventions in the cinema space, such as flashing light bulbs which illuminated the whole room, clouds of smoke which lit up the cone of light from the projector, and even the creation of mini-cinemas where the sense of touch, rather than sight, was utilised.*

Keywords

mirror, wo, user, man, manual

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

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(WO)MAN WITH MIRROR

a user's manual

Louise Curham and Lucas Ihlein
Teaching and Learning Cinema

RE-ENACTING EXPANDED CINEMA

Between 1966 and 1976, some independent filmmakers began to make works which questioned the mechanics of cinema. Expanded Cinema went beyond mere projection. This was the *event* of cinema - the space, the audience and the projection. The artists employed physical interventions in the cinema space, such as flashing light bulbs which illuminated the whole room, clouds of smoke which lit up the cone of light from the projector, and even the creation of mini-cinemas where the sense of touch, rather than sight, was utilised.*

Following the notion popularised by Fluxus that each artwork is defined by a set of conditions or score, and is reproducible by anyone following those conditions, we have embarked on a series of re-enactments of some Expanded Cinema events as part of our art practice.

In re-enacting these ephemeral events, the original film strip is a tangible remnant but in no way the totality of the work in itself. It is much closer to a traditional archival record, wherein artefact must be combined with context to make meaning.

Expanded Cinema events, much like the Fluxus performances which preceded them, present a unique dilemma for the archivist. Few reliable documents remain beyond written accounts (often in the form of notes by the artist), the film fragments utilised by the artist, and sometimes a black and white photo of the action. How can we really know what they were like?

Re-enactment grapples with something that traditional methods cannot grasp: the cultural and architectural situations in which the original works were inextricably embedded.

Expanded Cinema is a little known precursor for new media art. Both utilise site specific, real-time events incorporating the moving image. In re-enacting Expanded Cinema (in one sense analogue new media works) we come face-to-face with the material and intellectual problems of what's required to keep these artworks alive.

* Some well-known examples include Malcolm Le Grice's *Castle 1*, 1966; Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone*, 1973; and VALIE EXPORT's *Tapp- und Tastkino*, 1968.

②

AN ICONOCLASTIC CINEMA



I have considered the situation of the audience politically and ethically, and have reacted strongly against the passive subjectivity to a prestructured substitute and illusory reality which is the normal situation for the audience of the commercial film. The language structures developed in this aspect of cinema have conditioned film makers' and audience expectancy, in such a way that even the 'realist' documentary, the politically and socially conscious film and much of the alternative cinema of the underground, operates in the same ethos of audience passivity. In this situation, there can be no credible relationship between the current presentation, the events which it purports to be 'about', and the method by which these events are selected and structured by the film's process. In other words, the techniques of film have been primarily developed to 'manipulate' a recorded (picture and sound) 'reality', into structures and events which never happened in anything like the terms which the language tells us they happened, whilst presenting the result as a 'representation' of reality ...

③

Theo Van Doesburg, in 1929, already anticipated many of the ideas of Expanded Cinema, realised decades later:

'The spectator space will become part of the film space. The separation of 'projection surface' is abolished. The spectator will no longer observe the film, like a theatrical presentation, but will participate in it optically and acoustically.'

Film still from Dziga Vertov,
Man with a Movie Camera, 1929

From Malcolm Le Grice's article
'Real TIME/SPACE', *Art and Artists* magazine,
December 1972.

- Theo Van Doesburg in 1929, as quoted by Peter Wollen,
in 'The two avant-gardes', *Studio International*,
vol. 190, no. 978, p. 172, 1975

Teaching and Learning Cinema re-enacts Expanded Cinema performances from the 1960s and 70s. As artists, we have discovered that direct access to the work of our aesthetic precursors is essential for understanding and building upon the work of the past.

However, since many Expanded Cinema events were ephemeral and specific to their own time and place, they do not easily lend themselves to documentation and archiving. As a result, the works are poorly represented in art history. Re-creating them in our own here-and-now is a creative pedagogical process, in which the works become available once again for first-hand experience.

These re-creations are not authentic or correct. Rather, the very concept of authenticity and the integrity of the autonomous art object are brought into question by this unique form of art-action-research. We thrive on the dilemmas that emerge from such a process.

Geographical distance, cultural context and technological developments all make significant demands on the resourcefulness and wit of the re-enactors. Emerging from this process is a kind of oral history - the works are kept alive through the practice of passing them from one generation to the next.

We have printed this poster/brochure to provide an insight into our process of re-enacting Guy Sherwin's *Man with Mirror*. Originally presented in London in 1976, Sherwin continues to perform the work. However, there will come a time when he can no longer do so. Our new versions will extend the tradition, and we hope that this poster/brochure might be of use to others who wish to make their own *(Wo)man with Mirror*. This document, along with a greater body of information about the piece, are available via our website.

Louise Curham and Lucas Ihlein
(Wo)man with Mirror: A User's Manual
First Edition, July 2009
Second Edition, June 2013
Printed at Big Fag Press, Sydney



Louise from TLC
splicing together our
version of *(Wo)man*
with *Mirror*



Some notes from Guy Sherwin's Biography

What particularly interested me about film were the possibilities for exploring an image in time. Film seemed to have at its heart (in its claw?) some doubt, or secret, about how we actually see, and, in particular, how we perceive the world in motion.

At that time, film also had the attraction of being a new and powerful medium in fine art, with unrealised potential. The work being made at the London Film-Makers' Co-operative was important here in its radical opposition both to mainstream film practice and to the compromised world of the commercial gallery.

I learnt (and was soon teaching) film techniques such as contact printing, optical printing, developing and processing. By this time my film practice was wide-ranging, and included silent observational camera rolls (*Short Film Series* 1975-1998); complex layered printing (*At the Academy* 1974); live performative interaction with projected film (*Man with Mirror* 1976); double projector films (*Interval* 1974); and hand-made or photographed experiments in optical sound (*Cycles* 1972-77, *Railings* 1977).

Changes in the cultural climate, the birth of my first child, teaching imperatives, all had a bearing on my practice through the 80s and 90s. The films I made during this period were for single screen, and more personal and lyrical in character.

With my recent works (since 2000) I am returning to the ideas of the 70s, but with an emphasis now on live performance and multi-projection. 16mm film projectors are cheap, having been abandoned in favour of digital technologies, and this has increased possibilities for film projection as a live event. The mass migration into digital media has benefited artists working with film who have been able to consolidate their equipment resources and/or work co-operatively, as in the early days of the London Film-Makers' Co-operative.

A longer version of this text is printed in Guy's 2007 publication *Optical Sound Films 1971-2007*, published by LUX, London



Guy Sherwin at the IMA in Brisbane in August 2008. In this photograph, the great structuralist film-maker demonstrates the choreography of *Man with Mirror* using the baby-blue plastic table from the high-chair of his young son, Kai.

Lucas first met Guy in late 2003, on a study trip to London to rummage through the archives at LUX and Central St Martin's College. We had heard rumours of Guy's punchy black and white experimental cinema, which folded back the apparatus of filmmaking as the subject of the work itself.

Since then, we have been in irregular contact via email, and on a second visit to London in 2007, we proposed to Guy the idea of the Teaching and Learning Cinema's re-enactment of *Man with Mirror*. Guy showed great interest in this idea, especially our notion of an 'oral history' of the work - wherein it gets passed down from generation to generation.

In late 2008, with Lynne Loo and baby Kai, Guy visited Brisbane for a screening of his work. It was there that Louise and Lucas received a 'tutorial' about *Man with Mirror* from Guy. At this point, the possibility of re-making the work became more concrete.

Guy suggested that some time in the future, we might also consider teaching *Man with Mirror* to his young son, Kai - thus keeping the tradition alive...

ABOUT GUY SHERWIN'S MAN WITH MIRROR (1976-)

MAN WITH MIRROR 1976 / 2000 10 mins.
Performance using super 8 film, mirrored screen, and performer.
To be performed in a cinema or gallery space, or outdoors after dark.

The film is projected onto a small hand-held screen, white one side and mirrored the other. This screen is used by the artist / performer to either 'catch' the projected image, or deflect it around the cinema space. The image on film is of the same activity **taking place** in a sunlit landscape. Visual echoes are set up between the live event and the recorded one.

The performance can incorporate directional sound aimed at the screen, the movements of which bounce the sound around the space.

Some notes about *Man with Mirror*, written by Guy Sherwin in 1977, and re-edited in 2000. From the archives at the British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection, London

Some exquisite works, sadly, will go to the grave with the artist, and cannot be re-enacted by other artists or archivists. For me, one of the more poignant works in this category is *Man with Mirror* by Guy Sherwin. In this piece the artist, standing in the beam of a Super 8 projector, holds and tilts a rectangular mirror painted white on the reverse. The mirror/screen reflects back into the room, or catches and reveals the Super 8 footage shot in 1976 showing Sherwin tilting an identical mirror/screen outdoors. As the film is projected, the live performer attempts to 'mirror' his own earlier movements, with confounding results. Which is the real Guy Sherwin, which is the projected image? Each time Sherwin attempts to re-enact his own movements from 1976 the passage of time is further marked by his ageing body.

From Lucas Ihlein, 'Pre-digital new media art',
Realtime 66, April-May 2005,
<http://www.realtimearts.net/article.php?id=7779>



Guy's original film canister...

Guy Sherwin still performs *Man with Mirror*.

In fact, as the years go on, and the real Guy gets older, the gulf between film and man becomes more and more interesting.

Actually, the above assessment of the situation was a little hasty - we now know that *Man with Mirror* CAN be re-enacted by others. What needs to happen is that a **new** work has to be re-constructed from scratch. Since the subject of Sherwin's film is himself in 1976, a new version of *Man with Mirror* must therefore involve shooting new films, with ourselves as the subject. Louise and Lucas have decided to produce one version each - hence *(Wo)man with Mirror*.

(WO)MAN WITH MIRROR - A USER'S MANUAL

part 1 - preparations

Things you will need:

- mirrors cut to size
- white matt paint, roller and tray
- a super 8 film camera
- batteries etc.
- a tripod
- a super 8 film projector
- a projector stand
- a tape measure
- an open space for shooting
- an open dark space for performing
- a friendly audience

Extra things which might prove useful:

- a digital video camera
- an extra tripod
- a friend to lend a hand
- a stopwatch

BUYING FILM

Buy some colour super 8 film. We used Kodak Ektachrome 64T - which is now unavailable - but any equivalent colour positive film will do. For each person who will be making a version of *Man with Mirror*, you will need 3 rolls of film. We suggest you get one extra just in case...



We found Lucas' backyard in the Sydney Suburb of Petersham to be a comfortable working environment...

MAKING YOUR MIRROR

The mirror needs to be cut to a rectangle whose dimensions follow a 4:3 ratio. This is the same ratio as super 8 film. Guy works with a mirror of dimensions 24X32 inches (61X81.3cm). However, he is a tall man. If you are shorter than this, you might need a smaller mirror.

Working from the basis that Lucas is roughly the same height as Guy, and would therefore use the same size mirror, we measured Lucas' wingspan and found it to be 188cm. Louise's was only 163cm. By doing some high-school maths, we therefore calculated that Louise's mirror should measure 70X52.5cm

HINT:

get your local glass-cutter to make you up a mirror to size. Ask for 4mm thick mirror, and get the edges bevelled so you don't cut your hands...

FUN FACT!

This poster/brochure you are holding in your hands right now is exactly the same size as Louise's mirror...

PAINTING YOUR MIRROR-BACK

Once you've got your mirror cut, use the matt paint and roller to paint the back of it white. We found 2-3 coats works best - make it nice and smooth.



7

...a cameo appearance by Peter Shaw!

(WO)MAN WITH MIRROR - A USER'S MANUAL

part 2 - shooting your films

Shooting the film is perhaps the trickiest part of the whole process. Remember, you'll be performing with this particular roll of film for the next 40-odd years, so a little preparation and practice will help you get it right the first time.

Basically, what you're going to be doing is holding the mirror/screen at about shoulder height, front-on to the camera, and moving it around during the shooting of the film. Before starting, you need to set up the camera so that it exactly frames the position of the mirror.

The mirror/screen should be held so its top edge is about 2 inches above your head.

You will need a tripod for your super 8 camera. The camera should be positioned at the centre of the height of the mirror, so that it sits level. Different cameras have different lenses, so the distance from camera to mirror/screen will vary. You need to move the camera's position so that the edge of the frame matches the edge of the mirror/screen. (DANGER!! watch out for "parallax error" - an easy mistake for young players. For more on the pitfalls of parallax see the TLC website).

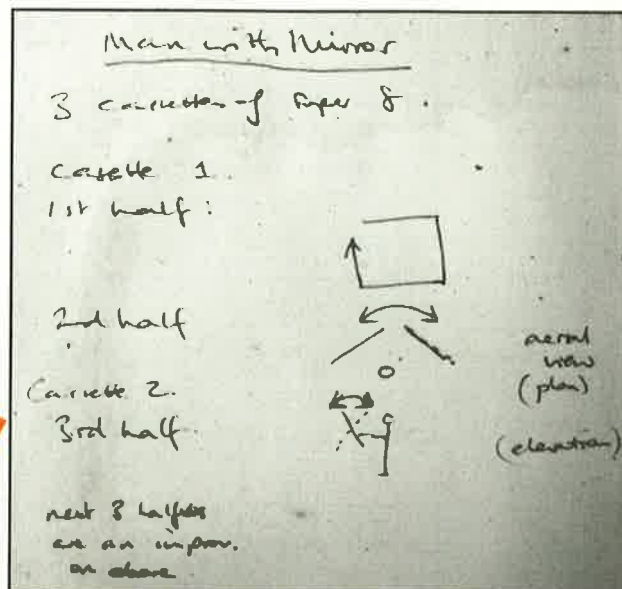
OK - now you've got your camera and mirror/screen matched up, you're going to want to practice a bit before you shoot your precious super 8 film.

Here's the choreography. You are going to shoot 3 films. Each film runs for about 3 mins and 10 seconds at 18 frames per second. So you have 9 minutes to perform, deducting the extra seconds for errors and overlaps.

Guy drew this diagram for us showing how he made the film. We have followed his model, more or less. (There's no reason you couldn't invent new moves!)

Oh, one final point - shoot your film outdoors, on a sunny day. Super 8 colour film is happiest in these conditions...

Finally, send your film off for processing, and when it comes back, splice together the three rolls.



Guy's instructions in a nutshell:

phase one ["flat plane moving"]

0:00 -- begin shooting roll 1: hold screen level for 5 seconds with screen side facing out.

0:05 -- slowly begin moving mirror in a flat plane up down left right etc.

1:30 -- bring mirror back to centre. Pause briefly...

phase two ["rotating"]

1:33 -- begin rotating mirror left and right, twisting your body around, increasing movements as time goes on.

3:00 -- come back to front and hold screen side out in centre position.

3:10 -- first roll of film runs out
pause to change rolls of film...

phase three ["tilting"]

3:10 -- begin shooting roll 2 -- as before, hold screen level for 5 seconds with screen side facing out.

3:15 -- tilt mirror up and down, slowly increasing this movement over time. You can begin to "spin" the mirror too.

4:30 -- come back to "centre position" briefly again.

phase four ["improvising"]

4:35 -- this phase is an improvisational phase. You make up your own moves based on combinations and variations on the three basic moves described above.

6:00 -- bring mirror back to centre position

6:10 -- roll 2 runs out of film

pause to change films

6:10 -- begin again - continuation of phase four until the end of the third roll of film.

(WO)MAN WITH MIRROR - A USER'S MANUAL

part 3 - performing your film



Louise Curham performs
(Wo)man with Mirror in 2009
photograph by Anneke Jaspers

The general principle for performing is to replicate the set up of its shooting. However, instead of standing in front of a super 8 camera, you now stand in front of a projector. And instead of being outdoors in the sunlight, you perform indoors in the dark.

So - set up your projector on a stable stand at the correct height. Hold the mirror/screen with its top edge about 2 inches above the top of your head, and match the projection to this position. Get your zoom and focus right. Before you start the performance, set up the film ready to go. It might help to discreetly place a mark on the floor where you have to stand.

You want as dark a room as is humanly possible. Those pesky bright EXIT signs in art galleries are not your friend. Hang a woolen coat over them if you can get away with such a breach of the work safety code.

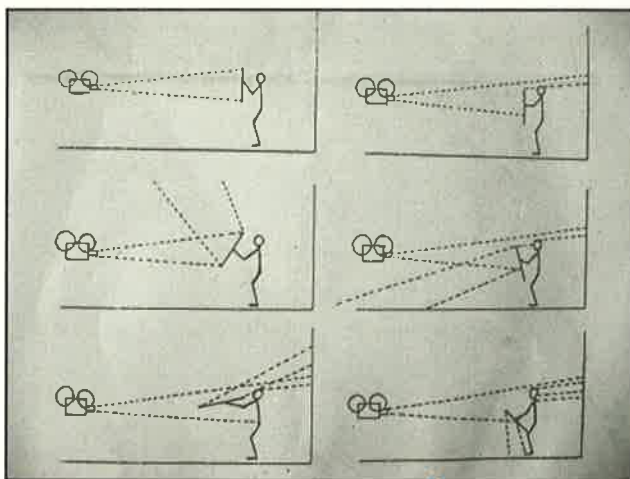
To begin - turn off all the lights and ensure your audience is settled and happy. Now, walk to your starting position. Breathe for a moment. Performing with a heavy mirror for 9 minutes is tiring. (Some warm-up exercises are recommended, especially in the shoulders and upper-arms). Now, walk to the super 8 projector and switch it on. Now return to your starting position, and lift up your mirror/screen.

As with the filming, start with the mirror side facing you. You will be able to judge if you are in the right position by the spill on the back wall. You can see this spill in the mirror. Shift forward/backward/left/right to match as best you can.

For the rest of the performance, the basic principle is this - replicate what the film-you is doing, as closely as possible, but out of phase.

Towards the end, you will see your filmed-self walking towards the camera with the mirror side facing out. Now's your cue to do the same. Walk towards the projector with the screen-side facing towards the beam of light. The beam will diminish in size. Hold the screen there while you reach around and switch off the projector.

Now, take a bow and accept the accolades of the assembled crowd.



1976 diagram by
Guy Sherwin, showing the
performer bouncing light
around the room...

...psst... one final point about filming - when you are coming to the end of your third reel (your friend with the stopwatch will let you know when this is) you should walk slowly towards the camera with the mirror side facing out. (The film thus ends with a shaky mirrored image of the camera lens itself.)

(WO)MAN WITH MIRROR - A USER'S MANUAL

part 4 - ideas for advanced players

IDEA 1:

Why not try performing with two people at once? The performers could stand opposite each other, "mirroring" each other's moves. This could have the extra effect of destabilising the frontal view which is standard for audience/performer situations.

IDEA 2:

One of the interesting things about *(Wo)man with Mirror* is that as you get older, the gap between the film-you and the real-you stretches, and the audience concretely understands the time-lapse effect of this work. But what if you get your father/mother to shoot a version of the film. You could then perform with their film, and as the years go on, the performer would get closer in age to the filmed-parent, until eventually they match.

Louise practicing with her mum, Val



HINT!

If you get tired - don't worry! The audience will sympathise with you. And besides, chances are the filmed-you is looking tired at this point anyway, so it's all good.

IDEA 3:

Make a time-line which shows the history of *Man with Mirror* - you could include Guy's date of birth, your own birthdates, the year Guy first shot and performed the film, and your present activities with the work. You could also indicate on the time-line the future, when you plan to pass on your knowledge to the next generation of *(Wo)men with Mirrors...*

HINT!

Don't just mechanically perform. Have fun out there! Use your screen to catch the image, use the mirror to project it around the room. You're in charge!



Lucas practicing with his dad, Owen