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PHYSICAL CINEMA: PRACTITIONERS AND RECENT PRACTICE

Physical theatre, Live Art and Cinema have through performer and filmmaker established a vigorous practice in recent years, challenging the confines of more traditional artforms. Practitioners have come together with audiences to create between them a physical cinema converging as a series of spatial modes.This paper will outline some recent developments in this interdisciplinary field.

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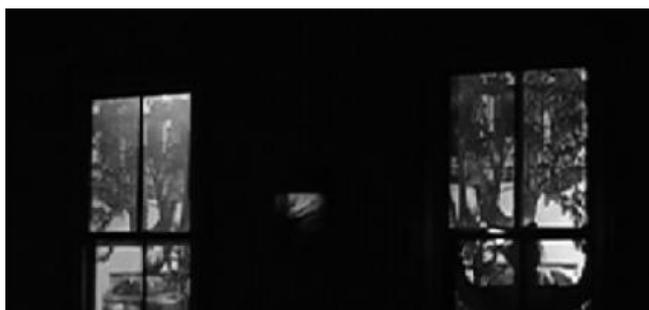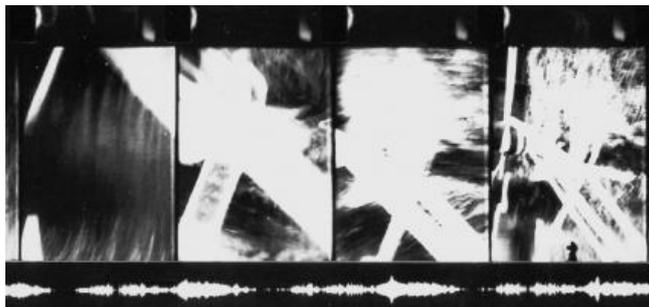
Physical theatre, Live Art and Cinema have through the processes of collaboration between performer and filmmaker, established a vigorous practice in recent years that challenges the confines of established artforms. Practitioners have come together with audiences to create between them, a physical cinema converging as a series of spatial modes. Place as much as practice determines the kind of experience a visitor, or participant, will encounter. Practitioners employ the phenomena of light and sound, darkness and silence, to propose courses of actions and ranges of responses for the individual participant to follow, or be provoked by. The participant becomes a performer, bringing the work into being through the realisation of a physical cinema. In performing the work, the participant echoes the practitioners own physical performance explored during the making of the moving image artwork.

Experiencing the phenomena of motion pictures in the past became associated with place – the building called the cinema – as certain conditions were required to enable the images to be seen and later, for them to be accompanied by sound. Technology expanded the requirements of place from darkened spaces in which light was reflected from a screen, to the semi–darkened space of the living room, with light emit-

ting from the screen. Home movies spread the making of motion pictures, on film and videotape, to a section of the cinema audience confident with manipulating tools; this included an ever increasing number of artists.

At the London Filmmakers Co–op in the 1970s, we became mechanics and chemists and set up printing and processing machines, adjacent to the cinema space and a distribution office; integrated practice was how we described what is now called interdisciplinary arts practice. Using the printer for instance, I was able to duplicate a fragment of 16mm time–lapse film many times over by simply looping the original film footage in the machine (Fig.1). A body of work emerged exploring these kinematic principles, the fundamentals of cinema, focussed on material presence and structuring processes. The experience for the viewing participant as part of the process was, and remains, attentive, self–reflexive and closely perceptual. [1]

Part of this practice expanded away from the convention of a projection box facing a screen with the seated audience in between, toward open gallery–type spaces, where the audience moved between projectors and screens. Performance, in effect, occurred in front of both the camera and the screen.

Eve Kalyva's consideration of what constitutes a performance is useful in this context. She has noted:

> "Surely there is the factor of threat and keeping it under check, for presumably ... one can interfere with a performance; or to put it another way, the whole point of a performance is this conditional interaction." [2]

Conditional interaction refers to the physical space between the audience and the performance. The invisible fourth wall in theatre or cinema is the membrane through which the product(ion) is delivered, regardless of the state, or frame of mind, of the audience. The agency of each member of an audience in conventional proscenium arch venues is restricted by custom, to removing oneself from the auditorium.

Such was the case in the Unword series of performances which commenced as a collaboration between myself, a filmmaker, and a visual artist; whilst a framing distance would be maintained by the physical delineation of the space, the rules for the audience kept them on the other side of the invisible membrane as spectators (of a spectacle) and not participants. The film (and later digital documentation), [3] as artworks in their own right, similarly maintain the distancing frame of the screen as a visible membrane. The conditions for response, reflexive rather than interactive, are reversed; with the liveness and the presence of the performer(s) removed, the condition of interaction changes the terms of individual agency. The screened image can now be approached and appropriated into the physical space of the viewer. [4] The modality of encounter switches from one tradition to another; from that of theatre and cinema, where agency is limited, to that of the gallery, where agency in the physical act of viewing is essential. As Kalyva has observed; "This act exposes the limits of social constructs such as subject and object, galleries and spectators, not at the level of the *effect*, but of the mechanisms that create, enable, and sustain such constructs." [5]

What is quickly understood is the relationship between the spatiality of the act of viewing – audience to performer(s), screen to viewer – and the hybrid spatiality of the images and sounds they observe.

Paul Dourish describes this as a "..social act of communication as participation and selection..",[6] and the performative occurs through both the advance of motion picture technologies – in this case, digital video and the video projector – and the willingness of the artists to experiment with the possibilities thereby afforded.

In tracking the morphology of the moving image in this way – from live performance to its record, a palpable presence when film is projected as performance, to many variations of encounter when video is projected – a physical cinema is located not in places but in attitudes and ideas.

My own practice included collaboration with playwrights, dancers, scientists, musicians, technicians, programmers and comedians in pursuit of expanding the boundaries of practice. A History of Airports [7] brought together all of these skills into a converted warehouse space through which the audience moved, encountering performers and screens during the 90–minutes of the show. Promenade theatre as it was known in Britain in the 1980s, brought together geographically local communities with professional artists. The restrictive and contained practice of theatre was replaced by a state of conditional interaction, that enabled spatial participation within the performance area whilst witnessing the work of the production through words, screens and physical presence.

In another similar collaboration, the convention of an audience facing a stage, like the audience facing a proscenium arch screen in the local cinema, was maintained.

The mechanics of film back projection was visible as a part of the action in the performance area concerned with the career of the British 19th Century engineer Brunel. The roll of film containing moving images of carriage through the countryside, was loaded on the first of a row of projectors and then through a series of supports threaded through each of the six projectors on the gantry (Fig. 2). This was an analogue solution to a synchronised multi–screen array and thus required constant adjustment by a small team of minders over the film's ten–minute duration.

In the 2010 Biennale of Sydney, Isaac Julien showed the multi–screen work Ten Thousand Waves. [8] The 50–minute cycle of the work references the Chinese film industry, the rural peasantry, the diaspora and as a part of the narrative, emergency services footage documents the atrocious drowning of twenty–three Chinese migrant workers on the mudflats of Morecambe Bay in the Uk during 2004. Visitors to the exhibit were able to promenade the 20 x 40 metre space, choosing where to stand or sit and in which direction to place their gaze. The sudden duplication of an image behind another encouraged the viewer to redirect their gaze to another alignment of screens, either by a turn of the head or a shift of position in the space. Interaction is conditional on engaging with the internationalist themes of the narrative, tightly controlled in the structuring of the work and, like Hollywood's product, imported into a suitably equipped venue. Using a hard disc array delivering perfectly synchronised sound and image across nine screens, the cinema system ran all day, every day for the three months of the Biennale; switching on at the beginning of the day, switching off at the end.

Physical cinema as promenade theatre is developed in my recent work with Alan Schacher at Critical Path, the choreographic research centre in Sydney. The interdisciplinary collaboration between a filmmaker and a Live Art artist and performer, a sound composer, other performers and an audience investigated 'the multiplication of space and presence to generate looped choreography–image systems". (Fig. 3) The location itself, a heritage building, is the place and substance of audience experience, augmented by projected and performed interventions into the buildings fabric and its human context.

In all of these collaborative interdisciplinary works there are moments where for the viewer, the moving image is tenuous and seemingly fragile. There is a breaking down in the moving image's connection with a visual world which we can comfortably recognise. Jesse Shapins affirms in a recent book; "The shift enabled by new media, in particular the internet, mobile devices and wireless technologies, is the ability to literally transform the lived experience of the city into an active read/write database ….today, the media artist can craft physical cinema that takes place on the streets of the city." [9] 'Taking place' means the act of participation, whether initiator or participant. For instance, the miniature works for mobile device made by the Sydney artist, Sam James are short poetic statements that like a book, can be opened at any moment in any place, to augment the passage of time. [10]

When the context is provided, as in Isaac Julien's work, the narrative of oppressed people plays out before us. Throughout 2011 we have become familiar with receiving moving images from the streets of the Arab world; moving in the sense that they were shot on mobile phones, but emphatically moving in the sense that we were encouraged to believe we were witnessing the transitioning of a group of nations into another stage of social and political development.

The use of mobile tools to both *organise* gatherings by mostly young people, and to *record* the events as they unfold have attracted much comment. The moving image recordings made and relayed to the world we experience only as observers of the media accounts, editorialised to encourage natural feelings of empathy and even admiration for their acts of defiance.

This is a physical cinematic practice based on the physicality of place and the dynamics of context, the tumble of events far from the planned situations encountered in the art gallery, festival and cinematheque.

To haul these images into another but related context, the performers and activities develop as a series of durational and movement elements, approaching Deleuze's discussions of Cinema and the terms movement–image and time–image. The first term is the series of actions which relay the intent of the narrative – gatherings of people in public places to express the opposition of the governed to the governors. The second term can be applied to the fragments of moving image recording the events with mobile phone; the brevity of the images, the indistinct appearance and the media who convey them locally and to the world repeatedly for each and every News update, even several times in each bulletin. Though these time–images are different from the kind Deleuze described as existing in art house cinema. For the protagonists, the *indexical* moment of confrontation is relived each time they are seen again in the present. For the watching world the images are *icons* to a state of revolt. These moving images grabbed and relayed by mobile phone move rapidly between function and use; as

Deleuze suggested, "A flickering brain, which re–links or creates loops – this is cinema." [11]

As expressions of faith in place and culture, these revolutionaries are the flux of change, an expression of a culture. This kind of mobility as an example of a physical cinema is the converse of the meanings fixed through representation in pictures and carvings say in Medieval and Renaissance churches, through which the audience move. The 'conditional interaction' requires that we remain quiet and contemplative as we move between the icons, in the same way as we regard the icons of celebrities performing on the screen in popular cinema today.

Conclusion

Developments in the interdisciplinary fields of art, science and technology have sought aesthetic change over the previous forty years, not only the last decade. From mobile screens and projectors that emphasis the cerebral experience of narrative encountered in the external settings of urban public spaces; to temporary projection surfaces and rigged light devices providing audience experience of the interior / exterior of place, activated through mobility within and around a specific locality. As a form of promenade theatre, new technologies have extended qualities and the range of audience experiences through touch screen and sensing systems. Accessing motion picture collections and augmenting performance as an extended practice, form the core of these experimental investigations.

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4. The more extreme form of agency, that of ownership, condones the legal if not the moral right of physical interaction to destroy the artwork.
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