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Artists' Film Biennial, ICA 2014

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Artists' Film Biennial, ICA 2014

Over the last two decades a resurgence of interest in the cinematic has marked certain areas of the contemporary art world in what has come to be known as its 'cinematic turn'.¹ Art institutions continue to reflect a growing interest in the moving image in its many forms, whether through the presence of moving image installations or through the programming of artists' film within both the 'black box' setting of the cinema and the contemporary gallery.² The proliferation of moving images has become an almost ubiquitous feature of the modern exhibition-going experience, giving rise to a number of discourses concerning the nature and role of film curation and cinematic spectatorship, including an ontological concern with the medium of film. Framed against a series of debates that focused on the role of the curator within this climate, the inaugural Artists' Film Biennial was held over four days in early July 2014 at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in London.³

Though the ICA has a long tradition of programming festivals of experimental and independent film this was the first showcase of the biennial in its current incarnation.⁴ The event drew clearly on its exhibition lineage, particularly in extending the structural framework of the last biennial held there, 2012's LUX/ICA Biennial of Moving Images. Both spanned four days and combined theatrically-presented single screen works alongside numerous opportunities for discussion. Crucially, both events also upheld a curator-centred model, revealing the continuing dominance of the curator's role within the landscape of contemporary art.⁵ This review will focus on the structural framework of the biennial before going on to examine the curatorial direction behind several of its programmes.

The Artists' Film Biennial positions itself as a celebration of 'artists' film and moving image, a wide-ranging (and yet still the favoured) term for surveys such as this one. As Erika Balsom has noted, the term *artist's cinema* is impossible to reduce to a single proposition and rather encompasses 'single-channel works alongside multiscreen projection, film as well as video, looped exhibition and scheduled screening times, an interest in the virtuality of a represented world or in the phenomenology of spectatorship, an espousal or a rejection of narrative, and works made expressly for a gallery context and those made for traditional cinematic exhibition but now transported into the white cube'.⁶ Works screened at the Artists' Film Biennial reveal a slightly narrower interpretation of the term than the previous description allows, and were mostly limited to single screen film and video works both projected and discussed within the 'black box' of the ICA cinema.

Whereas the previous biennial showcased a revival of Mark Webber's club night *Little Stabs at Happiness* alongside nightly expanded cinema performances organised by Bridget Crone and Plenty Projects, the Artists' Film Biennial limited its live performance commissions to two works by artists Sam Smith and Hannah Sawtell. The online video platform Vdrome selected Smith to perform *Notes on the Apparatus* (2013-present), a live video essay that took the form of a stream of collaged audio-visual clips, while Sawtell presented a live performance of a piece of online video collaging software named after the artist and her collaborator, programmer Avi Flombaum. All were screened in either of the two auditoriums that form the ICA cinema, a space that opened in 1968 when the gallery relocated to its current location on the Mall. ICA regularly screens film and video works in both the gallery space and the traditional cinematic context, so the choice of the latter identifies the popularity of the 'black box' setting for the exhibition of artists' film and moving image works.

The curator-centred model nevertheless presided over various facets of the event, from the contents of the various discussions to how the film programmes were coordinated. Of the eleven screenings, seven were selected by invited curators, with one of those selected through an open call⁷ (the framework of inviting curators presided over the last event and looks set to continue in its 2016 iteration). Due to LUX's involvement in a big relocation project around the time of this event, a lack of resources left them unable to collaborate with ICA again.⁸ As a result, this event drew more heavily on curatorial decisions made through the Artists' Film Club, a monthly programme of screenings and Q&A sessions launched at the ICA in 2007. The selection process for both the biennial and the film strand is coordinated by Steven Cairns, Associate Curator of Artists' Film and Moving Image at ICA. As Cairns notes, the content of the biennial has 'a close relationship to that of Artists' Film Club and its existing and growing audience.'⁹

The professional profiles of the invited curators varied greatly, providing ample opportunity to reflect on the curatorial role from different angles. Guest curators were predominantly international and emerged from both gallery-based and traditional cinematic backgrounds.¹⁰ The Australian-born, Amsterdam-based curator Vivian Zihel works mostly within the gallery context, and Sebastian Cichocki is deputy director at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. The online video platform Vdrome, represented by artist and co-curator Filipa Ramos, was a notable exception, its presence highlighting the shifts in curatorial practices that have been brought about through the ubiquity of hyperlinked social networks.

The rise of the artist as meta-curator was reflected in the number of artist-selected programmes that featured in the biennial. Artist selectors were more prominent here than at the last event, in which two out of the eight curators represented were artists (Ben Rivers and Rosa Barba). There were four artist-selected programmes: American-

born and Berlin-based artist Ken Okiishi, German artist Nina Könnemann, and British artist Hannah Sawtell (Moroccan artist Yto Barrada's programme was unfortunately cancelled). Könnemann's programme, titled *Anti-Junkie Light*, took on the rather broad proposal of examining the use of coloured light in public spaces and experimental film. The programme was particularly appealing in how it alternated in scope, moving at once between the cosmological and luminous to the decidedly scatological. From a documentation of Thomas Wilfred's flickering recorded lumina composition to Jordan Belson's and Stephen Beck's *Cycles* (1974), the programme fell back down to earth with more bodily matters – the dirty spaces of public urinals. Hans Scheugl's expanded cinema work *Sugar Daddies* (1968) provided an interesting counterpoint to Eva and Nina Könnemann's video *Anti-Junkie-Licht* (2014), a work which captures the harsh blue lighting placed in nightclub toilet cubicles to discourage intravenous drug use. In his history of neon, Christopher Ribbat identifies the 'disconcerting' quality of neon as playing a large part in its potency as a metaphor for social urban decay.¹¹ A screening of found footage showing the famous Blackpool illuminations, shot in the late 1990s, emphasised the potency as well as the sadness of flickering neon light. The glowing embers of a rave finally smouldered in Jessie Stead's *The Night I Became Ambient* (2012), continuing a thematic strand that highlighted the alienation brought on by neon light in public spaces.

Alongside the presence of shared aesthetic motifs, a number of these works were also linked through common geography via two regions also known for their developments in expanded cinema practice: Austria and the West Coast of the United States. Austrian filmmaker Dietmar Brehm's *Black Death Filter* (2003) filled the screen with solid black for ten whole minutes, reversing the ontological process of film as a projection of coloured light, as well as, to quote the artist, allowing 'the viewer to explore the blackness of the cinema with his own eyes'.¹² If the black box setting was the dominant context for exhibiting artist's film at this event, then Brehm's film could not have indirectly dramatised this more succinctly. Although Könnemann's theme brought out numerous relations between the various works, the tone was ultimately a little too one-dimensional, reiterating the same tropes without really developing the chosen topic.

The majority of the programmes followed a similar pattern to Könnemann's by grouping together works according to the curator's principal vision. This model, often referred to as 'creative' or 'propositional' curating, continues to exert a strong pull on contemporary moving image festivals such as this one. As Balsom observes in her review of the previous LUX/ICA event,

[I]f the danger of propositional curating is to reduce individual works to mere illustrations of a curatorial concern, the advantage of this model is that it can allow for the formulation of transversal connections. It can illuminate rela-

tionships between works that would never appear alongside one another in more traditional exhibition frameworks, such as the monographic show.¹³

Illuminating and intersecting connections were particularly evident in Vivien Zierl's *Dance Transmissions*, a programme that emerged from the curator's ongoing research into the role of performance in contemporary art.¹⁴ *Dance Transmissions* examined the interaction between dance and film by focusing on how the gestures of one might translate to the other. The programme was bookended by two new works based on adaptations of significant dance pieces. Visual artist Karthik Pandian's and choreographer Andros Zins-Browne's *Atlas/Inserts* (2014) followed the clusters of movement of professional film camels in Morocco's Atlas Film Studios in Ouarzazate. The seventeen-minute video represents an attempt to reinterpret Merce Cunningham's and Charles Atlas' 1982 dance film *Channels/Inserts* through the camels as they move amongst the pan-Eastern juxtaposition of different film sets. Both *Atlas/Inserts* and Shahryar Nashat's exuberant dance film *Parade* (2014) disrupted the fixed location of the stage, with the latter film engaging with it as an infinitely mobile structure in its own right. Named after Jean Cocteau's famous avant-garde ballet of 1917, Nashat's film captures the virtuosity of choreographer Adam Linder's ballet adaptation, a dynamic choreography that brings the work resolutely into the 21st century. Nashat worked closely with Linder in adapting the dance to the screen as well as designing the set, which includes a number of his own hexagonal sculptures. The Parisian street scenes originally created by Pablo Picasso are here replaced with the sleek minimalism of the branded waiting room. For example, the brand logo 'PARADE', constantly visible on the stage backdrop, parodies the ubiquitous nature of artistic self-promotion in the digital age (even the dramatically-sculptured costumes, which were originally created by Pablo Picasso, are rip-offs of Dolce and Gabbana's S/S 2013 collection). Nashat's film rarely shows its audience the corners of the stage, preferring instead to pay close attention to the sculptural forms of bodies in movement.



Parade (Shahryar Nashat, 2014)

Screened between the two premieres was Charles Atlas' joyous *Mrs. Peanut Visits New York* (1999), which follows the legendary performance artist and dancer Leigh Bowery as he saunters around Manhattan's meatpacking district. Atlas' camera moves with Bowery's body, encased in an extravagant DIY costume based on 'Mr. Peanut', the Planters mascot. Although tonally and thematically very different to the other two works, *Mrs. Peanuts* shares a similar production context as the product of a collaborative process between filmmaker, dancer, and/or choreographer.

The only programme to maintain the canonical model of the monographic presentation was a retrospective of the work of the German multimedia artist Christian Jankowski. Curated by Cairns, the programme gathered together work made by the artist over the last twenty years, although it still did so with a certain degree of propositional framing. The programme was structured according to themes that identified distinctive elements of the artist's practice. The first programme, titled *Reframed*, focused on the absurdity that emerges when certain contexts are realigned or juxtaposed, while the second programme, *Learning the Absurd*, looked at the incongruity that appears when adult and children social roles are reversed. The highlight of the latter programme was a screening of *The Matrix Effect* (2000). The product of a commission by the Wadsworth Atheneum, Jankowski's work focused on the art institution's Matrix program, where 141 contributing artists were exhibited during the curatorial reign of Andrea Miller-Keller from 1975 to 1998. Jankowski playfully subverts the audience's expectations of a cultural documentary by letting his own interviews with many of the artists be spoken by young children. Without rehearsals, the untrained children (aged between 7 and 10) attempted to pronounce 'complicated' art vocabulary like 'curator' and 'critic', thus casting the so-called international language of art into strangeness.

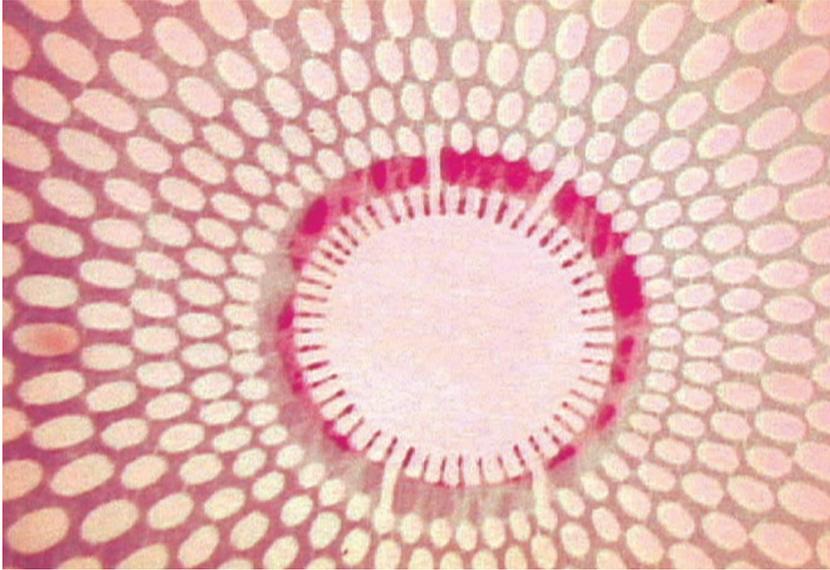
As the winning entry of a curatorial open call, *Avant-Noir* offered a number of distinct aesthetic approaches that included the innovative treatment of found and documentary footage, popular music and field recordings, and an attention to the materiality of artisanal production.¹⁵ The programme proposed to celebrate 'the presence of artists who are often excluded from elite institutions and the dominant discourses on the medium' through films and videos that engaged with Africa and the African diaspora.¹⁶ In doing so, *Avant-Noir* deftly implicated the racial politics behind the production and spectatorship of moving image festivals while never letting its curatorial stance overwhelm the film and video works on display.



Reckless Eyeballing (Christopher Harris, 2004)

The use of treated or repurposed archival material was one of several dominant threads running through the programme. One of the stand-out films in this respect was Christopher Harris' *Reckless Eyeballing* (2004), an optically-printed and hand-processed short that examines the racial implications of film spectatorship through the chemical treatment of black-and-white film stock. The film takes its title from the pre-Civil Rights era phrase to describe a black man's supposedly 'lustful' glance towards white women. Through an attention to the formal and material properties of film, Harris' work takes on the racial dimensions that were controversially omitted from Laura Mulvey's seminal 1975 theorisation of the male gaze.¹⁷ This interrogation of racial identity and the politics of looking is enacted through a disruption of eyeline matches and sight lines, two approaches typical of the classical technique of continuity editing. Specifically, Harris combines footage of Pam Grier in *Foxy Brown* (Jack Hill, 1974) and Walter Long (playing the outlaw Gus in blackface) in *Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1914) in order to highlight how film and media have traditionally conflated visual representations of African-Americans with sexuality and danger. By submitting the light-sensitive emulsion on the black-and-white stock to the process of solarisation, Harris reverses and destabilises the racial context of these bodies. In the context of the programme, *Reckless Eyeballing* also shares a key formal strategy with several other works, such as Mónica Savirón's *Broken Tongue* (2013). This includes the use of a looping and discontinuous soundtrack. Looped phrases such as 'she will never look' and 'don't

look at her, you will turn to stone!’ can be heard alongside the dramatic strains of a classical film soundtrack in Harris’ work. Redolent with danger, the soundtrack exposes the disruptive power of Foxy Brown’s gaze.



Intermittent Delight (Akosua Adoma Owusu, 2007)

The political implications of manual labour conditions were also accorded due attention in both Karimah Ashadu’s virtuosic *Lagos Sand Merchants* (2013) and Akosua Adoma Owusu’s *Intermittent Delight* (2007). *Intermittent Delight* combines documentary and found footage material (including a Westinghouse commercial from the 1960s) with abstracted close-ups of colourful West African batik textiles to create a vivid portrait of working womanhood. The filmmaker’s bricolage approach to the different types of footage is echoed in the haunting audio textures. With a soundtrack assembled from a combination of field recordings of textile factory production alongside joyous snatches of 1960s Afrobeat and traditional Asante Adwoa music, the final effect conjures the relentless driving rhythms of life on the factory line. Within the hauntological soundscape of the film, white bodies plucked from the archive are seen jiving to the music in a concluding suggestion about the legacy of cultural appropriation. Finally, Kevin Jerome Everson’s *Century* (2012) provided a bold and destructive final note to the programme. As mentor to a number of the filmmakers included in the programme (such as Owusu), it was only fitting that Everson’s film should end *Avant-Noir*. In the 16mm short, a General Motors car is repeatedly smashed to pieces in a dusty scrapyard in Charlottesville, Virginia. The title refers to the car model – a brown Buick Century

– but the final suggestion is infinitely more powerful. Smashed irrevocably to smithereens, *Century* envisages the end of an era to allow for the beginning of another, a scrap heap from which something totally new might emerge.



Intermittent Delight (Akosua Adoma Owusu, 2007)

The excitement one feels at being introduced to new artists and new work is one of several attractions of attending moving image surveys such as this one. In this sense, both Avant-Noir and Cichocki's view of the 2013 Polish art scene (titled *The Day After Everyday*) particularly satisfy such criteria. As a survey of recent developments, the Artists' Film Biennial identified a number of distinct practices that included an engagement with the politics of archival memory, intermediality, and the implications of our hyperconnected media world, so aptly highlighted through the process of livestreaming, for example. Framed by several curatorial points of view, events like this one have the clear potential to offer productive creative and working avenues for curators, practitioners, and audience members alike.

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Notes

1. The cinematic turn has been widely theorised from numerous perspectives. For an overview of the pertinent discussions see Leighton 2008, Jacobs 2011, and Rossaak 2011.
2. The recent popularity of artist's feature films is one example of this.
3. <https://www.ica.org.uk/whats-on/seasons/artists-film-biennial-2014>.
4. Earlier examples include the numerous Biennials of Independent Film & Video, the Pandemonium Festival of Moving Image (co-organised by ICA and London Electronic Arts, an institution that preceded LUX), and the LUX/ICA Biennial of Moving Images in 2012.
5. For more on the role of the curator in the LUX/ICA Biennial of Moving Images see Balsom 2013b.
6. See Balsom 2013a, p. 12.
7. The other four consisted of a three-part retrospective of the work of Christian Jankowski and an associated screening of Matthew Noel-Tod's and Benedict Seymour's *Can Dialectics Break Gravity?* (2014), followed by Laure Prouvost's *after after* (2014).
8. LUX is currently collaborating with the British Film Institute (BFI) on Experimenta, the artists' film strand of the London Film Festival.
9. Email interview with Steven Cairns, 15 July 2015.
10. For more on the transnational environment of large-scale exhibitions and biennials see O'Neill 2007, p. 16.
11. See Ribbat 2013, p. 20.
12. See Sixpack catalogue, p. 27 (own translation).
13. See Balsom 2013a, p. 276.
14. One of Zihler's projects involves curating *If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want to Be Part Of*

Your Revolution, which is dedicated to exploring performance and performativity in contemporary art.

15. Avant-Noir was curated by Greg de Cuir Jr.
16. See the programme notes: <https://www.ica.org.uk/whats-on/artists-film-biennial-2014-avant-noir-selected-greg-de-cuir-jr-qa> (accessed on 10 August 2014).
17. See Mulvey 1975.

