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THE  
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**CINEMA**  
SINCE 1978

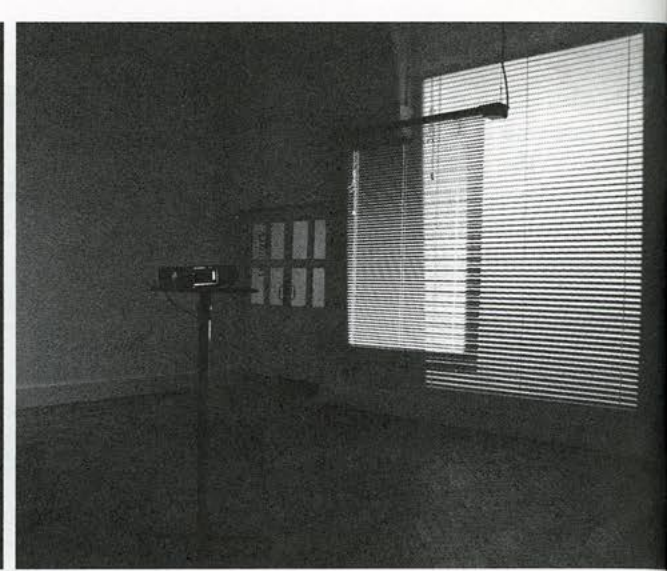


BRUCE JENKINS TALKS WITH **JAMES & SADIE BENNING**

**DAVID CURTIS'** IDEAL VIEWING CONDITIONS.

A NEW SOCIAL CINEMA BY **ERICA LEVIN**

**GENE YOUNGBLOOD'S** MEDIA ACTIVISM



# PHYSICAL OPTICS A RETURN TO THE REPPRESSED

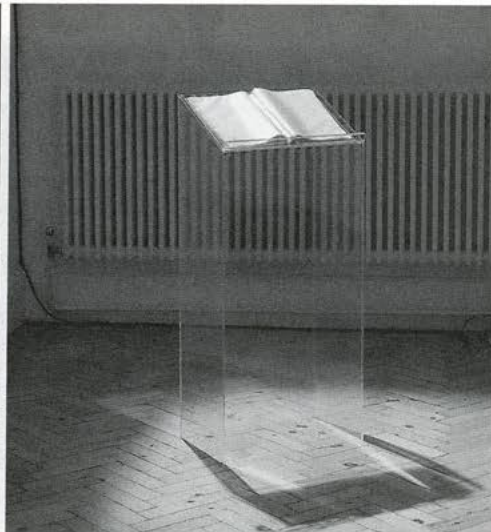
## IMAGES LEFT to RIGHT

**Simon Payne, *Window Piece*** (2012), looping video projection, installation view. *Film in Space* exhibition, Camden Arts Centre. Courtesy the artist.

**Emma Hart, *Blind*** (2006/2012), Installation view at Camden Arts Centre. Courtesy the artist.

***The Horse Hospital***, exterior view, photograph by Des Willie. Courtesy The Horse Hospital.

**Denise Hawrysis, *Score for Future Performance*** (1989/2012), installation view, *Film in Space* exhibition, Camden Arts Centre. Photo: Andy Keate © Camden Arts Centre.



## A.L. REES

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The UK is witnessing an extraordinary rise of interest in the experimental arts of the 1970s — not in a fetishized or imitative way — but rather complete with new artists, works, and programmers. It doesn't map directly on to the fatuous analog/digital divide — lots of the new wave use digital media, mobile phones and networks, while others persist in making 16mm and 8mm films and expanded cinema. These diverse tendencies are in a direct line of descent from the seventies, and from the experimental film movement in general.

In this respect, they contrast sharply with large-format gallery video, the dominant mode of the last twenty years, which largely eschewed or did not know about the avant-garde ancestors. As gallery projection wanes after its extraordinary and hegemonic rise in the art world, a less grandiose and more investigative film art emerges in its wake. Filmmakers have come back like revenants from their ousting by “artists who make films,” a coy phrase that, from the mid-1990s, legitimized film as an art form (at last) in the gallery context and its culture.

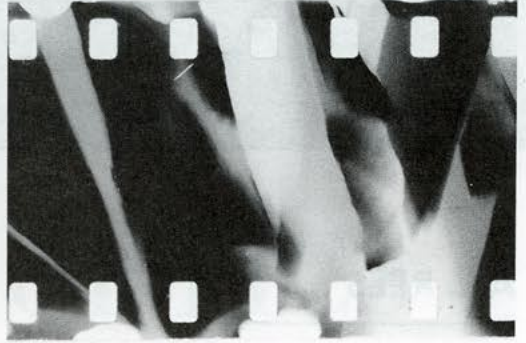
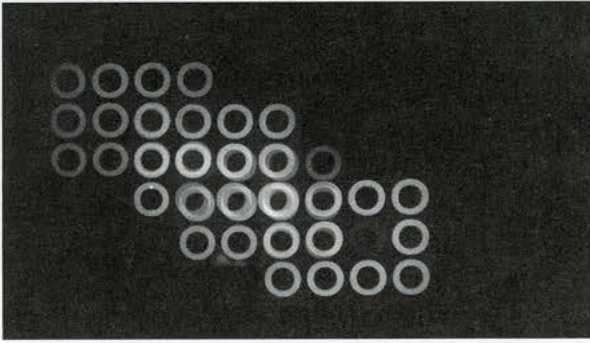
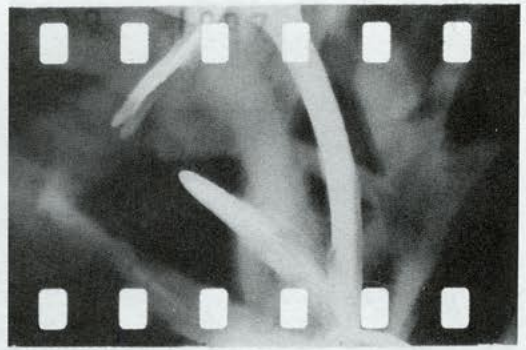
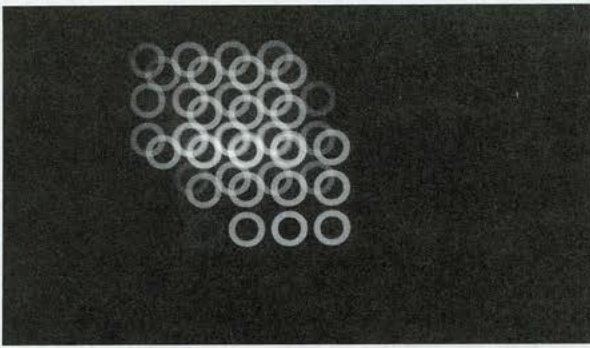
2013 saw an explosion of the new materialism in a variety of London and regional venues, with many crossover artists and ideas: an uncoordinated rolling festival of latterly repressed tendencies in artists' cinema. Overall, ‘physical optics’ is their major trope, in which flicker, abstraction, loops, direct light and projection in physical space are preferred to HD video, the fixed screen and the wandering spectator, which was the gallery's default mode of viewing. The presiding spirit was seen in Guy Sherwin's curated exhibition “Film in Space,” at the Camden Arts Centre (December to February 2012/13),

featuring classic 1970s expanded cinema by Malcolm Le Grice, Lis Rhodes, Annabel Nicolson and many others, alongside newly commissioned films, digital projections and intermedia art.<sup>1</sup>

Sherwin explored every way of showing films in galleries, except the clichéd row of empty chairs in front of a screen. Visible projectors and multi-screen projection characterized the overt physicality of the exhibition, challenging the hidden illusionism of cinema. But it was far from medium-specific in the narrow sense, by including paintings, prints and light projections or installations (as in an arched window filled with color flicker-frames by Simon Payne, Emma Hart's *Blind* for slide projector shutter and motorized venetian slats, or Denise Hawrysis's ineffable non-film, *Score for Future Performance*, in which folders of blank plastic sheets on a Perspex lectern are illuminated when passing viewers trigger a light-sensor, but which does not otherwise elicit their participation). Zero moments and reductions are often a sure sign of a new turn.

Camden Arts Centre is a ‘proper’ public gallery, a spacious Victorian building that shows modern and contemporary art. By contrast, most of the action in 2013 was in converted factories and club-style venues, as with many avant-gardes since — and long before — the seventies. The Horse Hospital in Holborn — its original gratings, ramps and drains are still there — hosted a night

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.camdenartscentre.org/whats-on/view/exh-25>.



of direct cinema early in the year, with the 4-projector *Rings* by Nicky Hamlyn, providentially reworked from a 1970's original; a live-feed video walk to the gallery by *collective-iz* artists Deniz Johns and Karolina Raczynski; and photogrammed rosemary bushes by Cathy Rogers that yield barbed flurries of traces and imprints, recalling Bazin's vision of photographic automatism ("Photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty").<sup>2</sup>

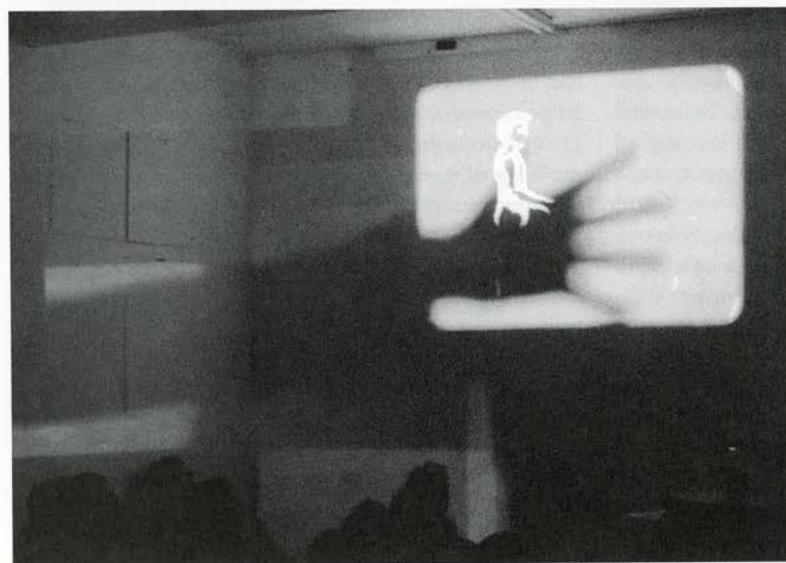
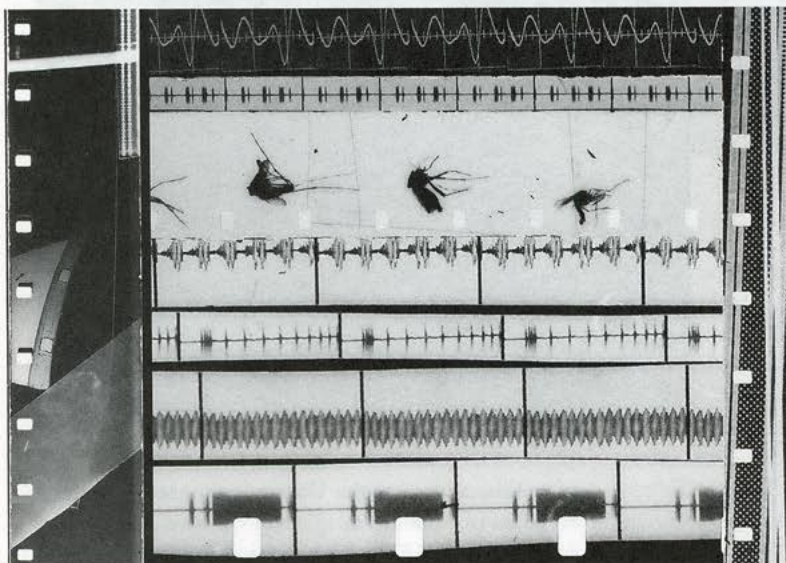
In the same show, Amy Dickson performed the paracinematic *Light Time*, in which rows of candles burn traces of light into heat-sensitive fabric sheets that act as a screen facing the audience. Dickson's lucid and terse statement echoes seventies' materialism without copying it: "Using a thermochromatic screen this piece explores the idea of light as the material substance of 'film': light's movement, flickering and informing time. Melting flickers out leaving trace-line marks — a temporal document to the action."<sup>3</sup> It was seen again at 'Nightworks' in April, the most extensive and experimental of these recent events. In the neo-Underground setting of a cavernous old dairy, converted to an art space, it featured time-lapse, pinhole and looped films, with digital video projections and live performances, notably Raczynski's *Signals* for hand mirrors and audience, linked by Skype to Berlin.

Dickson showed another version of her candlelight-work a week later at a very different and unexpected location — the National Portrait Gallery near Trafalgar Square. Here, freelance programmer Ben Pritchard

screened three sessions to accompany an exhibition of Man Ray's portraits.<sup>4</sup> The Man Ray connection was explored through 'direct cinema' and photograms in the spirit of his *Return to Reason* (1923), from dyed and handpainted films by Harry Smith and Len Lye to digital color abstraction, light-play and contemporary minimalism. Pritchard riskily showed new experimental work by younger artists — for some it was their first public screening — to an audience presumably attuned to classic dada and surrealism but not its latter-day wayward offspring. He chose process (i.e. direct cinema) over image as the guiding principle, mixing 16mm and digital projection, live performance and music.

The stylish cinema at the Portrait Gallery gave way a few days later to camp-chairs crammed into the Lo and Behold gallery in Brick Lane, for 'Analogue Recurring', with new 16mm work hosted by David Leister, whose enthusiastic DJ-style Kino Club injects much-needed humor into the experimental scene. Some of the films were hesitant first steps, but there were two outstanding pieces. One was Karel Doing's two-screen *Testse T*, also shown at the Portrait Gallery in digital format, is a two-screen abstract palindrome in black and white made from film scraps and waste, one screen in positive and the other in negative. The other was Sally Golding's eye-ripping color flicker film performance *Ghost-Loud+Strong*, with strobing and a distorted horror-film soundtrack, exemplifying her "physiological cinema of ghost-shows".

Doing and Golding are staffers at no.w.here in Bethnal Green, east London, the UK's centre for artists' 16mm and 8mm filmmaking. Karen Mirza and Brad



**TOP LEFT** Sally Golding, *Super Grottesquerie* (2010), live performance still, photograph by Bryan Spencer. Courtesy the artist.

**TOP RIGHT** Sally Golding, *Psycho-Sub-Tropo* (2011), live performance still, photograph by Collectif Jeune Cinema. Courtesy the artist.

**MIDDLE** Sally Golding, *Composted Memorial* (2009), film strip collage created from original footage from live performance. Courtesy the artist.

**BOTTOM** Still from Unconscious Archives live event, London (2011-2013). Dirk de Bruyn live at Unconscious Archives. Courtesy Sally Golding.

which moved centre stage in the mid-1990s with the large-scale multi-monitor installations of Bill Viola and Gary Hill. Gallery video expanded rapidly, increasingly shorn of any feedback to and from the experimental cinema, and more amenable to the art world ethos.

The new physical optics itself contains contradictory impulses. Often ruthlessly materialist, it also attracts the rhetoric of phantasmagoria and hauntology. It is largely digital, but explicitly rooted in frame-based and structural cinema. It visibly employs hard and soft technologies, devised for quite other purposes, to undermine the stability of viewing and promote an art of transience. But whether it turns to natural and landscape sources (which in fact dominate), or is generated by digital color or by found footage, it overwhelmingly asserts the non-persistence of vision, or the ineluctable flow and ungraspable substance of the screened image. Like all critical cinema, it carries the negative in its definition.

The kinds of work that I've associated with the seventies for the purpose of comparison to contemporary work — roughly, the video art and structural film of the era — wasn't the only model at the time, any more than its putative equivalents in today's overcrowded media arts scene. Political documentary, narrative experimentation and neo-Brechtian film drama all jostle for art and cinema space, and these had their exact counterparts in the late seventies when materialist film and video was similarly a minority trend, characterized in part by its claims to theoretical rigor.

Often denounced, this 'theoreticism' — since it offers a critical position — may have prompted its rediscovery by new filmmakers now that the boom years seem to be over for the ideological supplement of the moving image to the art world. Far from swamping alternative and contrarian experimentation, the Internet spreads its viral message by making available films and writings that were near-invisible for most of the period reviewed in this issue. The survival of *MFJ*, and its expanded field over that time, reveals a live tradition to which journals are still key, now including the first two UK artist-led print journals (*Sequence*, *MIRA*) since the lamented demise of *Undercut* (in 1990) and *Filmwaves* (in 2009).<sup>6</sup>

Books and publications — massively expanded since 1978 — fuel new trends but do not cause them. That comes from the perceived needs of filmmakers themselves. The web has buttressed rather than wiped out film's radical aspiration, by providing new kinds of film access and experience. It is more of a natural home for radical cinema than the art scene, since it is hard to imagine much of the new film work making sense as a limited edition or a signed copy. It exists in and through exhibition, preferably collective, and undermines any objecthood it might possess. This brings it closer to digital space. Without knowing that the interested reader can find them online

almost instantly, I would have been more nervous here about making so many fleeting references to new and faraway works.

Even so, I hope not to have painted too narrow a picture. The events outlined here are replicated elsewhere in the US, Europe and Asia (as seen daily on the invaluable Frameworks site, hosted by Pip Chodorov from Paris via Jonas Mekas in New York, and another live link in all senses). Many 'seventies' artists are still active, making new work and re-enacting or digitalizing seemingly lost projection/performances from thirty years back. Lux, no.w.here and a score of other groups and film clubs in Leeds, Manchester and Birmingham support courses, debates and screenings. Much of the flavor is international, as with Holcombe and Golding's 'Unconscious Archives' held at Apiary Studios and Café Oto, featuring intermedia film and sonic art from Canada, Australia, Korea, France and Japan that "transverses noise core and vision spectacle."<sup>7</sup>

When quizzed in later life about the problems faced by abstract film pioneers in the 1930s, veteran Polish filmmaker Stefan Themerson modestly made light of them, but in a 1945 letter to a friend, the director Aleksander Ford, he was not so sanguine:

When I think of our youthful years with film, I am reminded of the struggle for bits of film stock; for prediluvian cameras; for work benches cobbled together from odd sticks; for thousands of bits of paper from customs and the censor, which one had to get, come what may, just to see the avant-garde films from the West from which we had been isolated by a fortified wall.

He adds that he is "overwhelmed by feelings of friendly envy" for new avant-garde filmmakers to come, who will "find in their own hand the apparatus they need for this art."<sup>8</sup> That vision, at least, has come true.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.movingimagenetwork.co.uk/miraj/> (edited by Catherine Elwes); <http://www.no-w-here.org.uk/index.php?cat=9&subcat=main> (edited by Simon Payne).

<sup>7</sup> <http://sallygolding.com/unconscious-archives>.

<sup>8</sup> *PIX 1*, Winter 1993/4, London, p. 110. Also cited in "The Films of Stefan and Franciszka and Stefan Themerson," LUX DVD notes, p. 8, and in Tomasz Majewski, 'The Themersons: Kinetic Collages', *The Themersons and the Avant-Garde*, (Museum Sztuki, Lodz, 2013), p. 83.

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