

**What good
is sitting,
alone in your
room?**

What good is sitting, alone in your room? Black box, white cube, and the grey zone of artists' moving image

Marcus Jack

Against the backdrop of the collapsing Eastern Bloc, its socialist foundation replaced by a heady cocktail of globalist philosophy and capitalist economics, a not dissimilar liberation – or dissolution – was occurring in the microcosms of experimental film and video art. 1989 marks an historic nexus for the progenitors of artists' moving image. Following the sudden expansion of the internet, a new technological imaginary announced radical possibilities in the international circulation of media concurrent with the advent of affordable digital projection.¹ A new philosophical paradigm – with proponents in Félix Guattari and Rosalind Krauss – called for revised articulations of media and image, eviscerating the old structuralist view of medium specificity and ushering in the *cinematic turn*.² Finally, a new acceptance of film and video into the global art market marked the end of a hermetic media art culture unscathed by capital interests.³

These interrelated shifts catalysed a period of *convergence* with ongoing and manifold implications for encounters with artists' moving image today.⁴ Firstly, the once-disparate camps of film and video practice – whose communities were assembled around separate technologies, distribution and development agencies, and exhibition spaces – began to crossover, assisted by the remediation of their respective medias as homogenous, data-based binary code exhibited popularly as large-scale digital projection. Secondly, the exhibition architectures of the two forms began to mix in new and interesting configurations. Experimental or avant-garde film had traditionally inhabited the theatre space, the black box which favours linear sequencing and viewer 'absorption,' whilst video art aligned with the history of installation, residing within the white cube of the gallery as a non-linear, spatialised experience whose primary affect in the viewer was 'self-consciousness.'⁵ Post-1989 these binarised spaces interweave with increasing frequency, forming black boxes within white cubes, white cubes within black boxes, and a number of hybrid shades between.

A convergent 'grey zone' has recently been articulated in the writing of art historian Claire Bishop, who argues for the emerging *dance exhibition* as its paradigmatic contemporary form, with exemplary practitioners in artist-choreographers Anne Imhof, Pablo Bronstein or Tino Sehgal.⁶ The black box and white cube, Bishop argues, share a foundation of 'long-established, unspoken behavioural conventions' and are frames which 'steer and hierarchize attention.'⁷ Conversely, this grey zone of the dance exhibition, 'by returning us to a model of spectatorship as sociability, reminds us that attention and distraction have always been intrinsically intertwined.'⁸ An apparatus in which 'behavioural conventions are not yet established and up for negotiation,'⁹ the grey zone represents a less authoritarian, less codified space. It embraces the interruptive quality of sociable behaviour: movement, noise, smartphone use; and it democratises spectatorship – there is no ideal perspective or objective encounter. Extracting these features, this essay will begin to contemplate and identify an equivalent exhibitionary grey zone for artists' moving image.

The moving image shares many formal characteristics with performance – time-based, ephemeral, dematerialised. They intersect in the expanded cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, in the use of actors popularised after the cinematic turn, or in the newer phenomena of the performance lecture and live stream. Art historian Andrew V. Uroskie specifically pinpoints postwar expanded cinema, that capacious and slippery hybrid of film or video and performative elements, as the movement which eventually severs the moving image from its contingency on the black box exhibitionary model. Performance, then, has some hand in generating what he describes as 'a new and provocative condition of homelessness for the moving image.'¹⁰

However, homelessness presents a double implication: it is a state of *dispossession* and *liberation*.

The former has become evident in the historical abdication of custodial responsibility from both disciplines of art and film in terms of financing, resourcing, collecting, preserving, and studying artists' moving image. Erika Balsom has already argued that 'practices residing in the interstitial space between the black box and the white cube pose something of a disciplinary conundrum that has too often led to their marginalization in scholarly studies of both art and media.'¹¹ Elsewhere, film programmer and writer David Curtis has condemned the curatorial separatism of institutions as another instrument of dispossession. He cites the example of two simultaneous but markedly unintegrated exhibitions at Tate Britain – the ambitious, paid-entry show *Conceptual Art in Britain 1964–1979* (2016) and, in the basement, *Shoot Shoot Shoot: The London Filmmaker's Co-operative 1966–1976* (2016) – as evidence of this.¹²

Alternatively, the moving image community can be configured as the agent of its own homelessness, understood as emancipated rather than excluded from the disciplinary boundaries of art and film. Here, its interzonal quality offers opportunity for invention free from precedence. It is notable that the moving image's canonical critical and historical texts have until recently been written by practitioners firmly embedded within the formative developments they describe. In the UK, bespoke support organisations have also developed from artist-led origins, with various remits in the commissioning, collecting, distributing and preserving of work. Significantly this DIY attitude, whether born of a politics of adversity or liberation, has produced an exhibitionary history – or pluralised, subjective *histories* – largely outside of institutional authentication, and with that also outside of the codified spaces of black box and white cube. Employing a necessarily selective overview of the UK's recent past, this essay will now propose two possible grey zone morphologies, each responsive to the particular conditions of homelessness outlined above: *the domicile* and *the cabaret*.

Video exhibited in the home before the gallery.

In 1971, seven artists belonging to the London-based Artist Placement Group were invited by the Scottish Arts Council's Alistair Mackintosh to take part in *Locations Edinburgh*, a series of environmental interventions during the Edinburgh Festival. David Hall's response was *TV Interruptions* (1971), a suite of ten short works filmed on 16mm that broadcast unannounced on Scottish Television

in between scheduled programming. The most successful works elegantly referred to the television monitor and broadcast technology itself, including the *trompe l'oeil* style *Tap Piece* in which the screen appears to fill with water, its effect contingent on the visual transformation of television to tank. Hall's interruption was layered: it was a coup in the virtual space of broadcast but had also forced entry into the domestic and other recreational spaces. In a gentleman's club, Hall remembers watching the last piece, *Two Figures*, a work which doubtlessly lacks the conceptual precision of others. He recalls it inciting so much frustration amongst the clientele that by the end of it he had to leave through a back door.¹³

This kind of exhibition-by-infiltration continued in a number of iterative projects, particularly accelerated by the launch of Channel 4 and its fringe remit. These included the magazine show *The Eleventh Hour* (1982–1988) and *19:4:90 Television Interventions* (1990), a derivative suite of works commissioned on the occasion of Glasgow's European Capital of Culture nomination. Whilst broadcast stages the home as an exhibition space, it does so necessarily without attention to the specificity of each environment, without consensus or concern for a referent space. The domestic space is made particular, fixed and communal through other strategies, of *replication* and *invitation*.

After 1989,¹⁴ domestic replication features increasingly as a display mode which encourages contextualisation within the social and political world beyond the institution, interrupting the reverential hierarchies deployed by white cube and black box. Glasgow's New Visions Film and Video Festival (1992–1996) was a biennial showcase of mostly single-screen tapes of contemporary work in experimental video, film, animation and digital imaging. In its second edition (1994) the festival occupied a space at the Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow, with a commissioned 'Virtual Living Room' environment by artist and activist Euan Sutherland. With a TV monitor as its focal point, the space functioned to exhibit longer works with a documentary or campaigning theme.¹⁵ The domicile here functions to incite connection with contemporary lived experience, though it can also forge historical links.



Installation view of Lis Rhodes, *Dissident Lines*, 2019. Nottingham Contemporary. Photograph by Stuart Whipps.

In artist and filmmaker Lis Rhodes' major retrospective, *Dissident Lines* (2019) at Nottingham Contemporary, the domestic replica is used to conjure a particular cultural moment. Amongst a number of large digital

projections, two 1980s armchairs face two cube monitors, separated by a standard lamp replete with fringed shot silk lampshade, trimmed in velvet, all zoned by a circular rug. The works displayed on-screen are from *Hang On A Minute* (1983–1985), a series of thirteen one-minute works produced for Channel 4 on subjects including the women's peace camp at RAF Greenham Common and illegal uranium mining in Namibia. Originally smuggled into mainstream broadcasting like Hall's *TV Interruptions* before them, Rhodes' works are here given a nostalgic exhibitionary treatment that prompts reflection on the specific socio-political context of their production.

The reverse of the replication – *the gallery-as-home* – might be the invitation, or the *home-as-gallery*. Exhibition-making in the home does not begin with the moving image, but the transformation of domicile into public space has unique consequences for encounters with such material.

In May 2000, Glasgow-based artist and then videomaker Scott Myles staged *Film Club* in his flat at 78 Roslea Drive. The last in a series of domestic exhibitions and events organised since 1999, *Film Club* presented the debut screening of three-minute works by artist groups including Elizabeth Go (Victoria Morton, Hayley Tompkins, Sue Tompkins, Sarah Tripp and Cathy Wilkes), The Cocktail Party (Glasgow-based Danish artists Fred Pedersen and Thomas Seest) and Punish (Robert Johnston and Ewan Imrie). With beanbags loaned from Habitat and the cinematic turn's poster child, Douglas Gordon, the show promised 'half preview, half party and a low-key pleasant evening.'¹⁶ Interviewed some years later, Myles recalls that 'about 100 people came and we had to do two showings because it was so packed.'¹⁷ The invitation which converts private-domestic to public-exhibitionary space also emancipates the audience from institutional, coded behaviour; it anticipates a sense of happy chaos embedded within the experience of the artwork.

Happy chaos might also be the foundation of this essay's second grey zone morphology: *the cabaret*. A melange of artforms organised in sequence – typically of an underground nature – the cabaret is often itinerant or at least ambivalent towards venue: pub, nightclub, artists' studio. Whilst discernible throughout expanded cinema practices, the cabaret model finds new potential in the era of digital projection once affordability radically democratises the technology in the 2000s. Like the domestic exhibition, it circumvents institutional sluggishness or inattention in providing a temporary, low-cost space for sharing work.

Running from 2001 to 2003, Flourish Nights was an event series founded by artists Lucy McKenzie and Sophie Macpherson which featured the moving image alongside music and performance. They occupied a shared studio on Robertson Street, Glasgow, and after acquiring a second-hand projector, a screen, and about thirty seats, initiated a series of evening events which played with forms of sharing, including a catwalk presentation and a women-only audience.¹⁸ Abandoning hierarchies of attention in its conscious invitation of sociability, verging on revelry, the studio environment does much to deregulate behaviours. Art historian Sarah Lowndes recalls one particular evening ending in disarray 'when one of the guests started an unscheduled fire in a sink in a corner.'¹⁹

Born out of frustration at the 'lack of spaces to showcase artists' video,' artists Karen Cunningham and Leonora Hennessy curated The Open Eye Club from 2005 to 2008.²⁰ Firstly in the Project Room, then CCA and latterly Tramway, Glasgow, the itinerant series of 'hit-and-run social events' occupied the interstices of larger programmes to forge space for the moving image.²¹ Reanimating elements of expanded cinema, digital projection would combine with live performance and sculptural intervention, employing a constellation-like approach to exhibition that actively muddies the black-white binary. Like so many of its predecessors, the Open Eye Club survived with no core funding. Whilst in 2005 the Scottish Arts Council in partnership with Scottish Screen launched its Artists' Film and Video Fund, awarding financial support of £50,000 total to five artists, this included no provision for exhibitionary work.²² Responding to the context of the mid-2000s, scholar Neil Mulholland observed that 'despite the wealth of exhibitions in Scotland, there are, relatively speaking, few that offer a de-facto time-based opportunity.'²³ Flourish Nights and The Open Eye Club were part of a cluster of cabaret-inflected happenings rooted firmly in the interdisciplinary moment that emerged to address this. If the cabaret model was reared by artists, it would eventually be adopted by institutions.



Installation view of Patrick Staff, *The Prince of Homburg*, 2019. Dundee Contemporary Arts. Photograph by Ruth Clark.

Patrick Staff's exhibition at Dundee Contemporary Arts, *The Prince of Homburg* (2019), features a striking installation of the eponymous moving image work – an interpretation of German writer Heinrich von Kleist's play of the same name (1810) that imagines its central sleepwalking figure as a contemporary political dissident. A large single screen pulls focus in the gallery's largest space, walls painted deep red, LED signage and UV rope light draped over security fencing – the sense is of a seductive, subterranean space where conspirators might gather. Cross-back bistro chairs are provided, some toppled, grouped around tables in an approximation of the cabaret; I'm told this is a direct citation of the set for Pina Bausch's *Café Müller*.²⁴ Like Lis Rhodes's 1980s living room, the stage-like recreation sidesteps white cube reverence to forge links with spaces which invite sociability, interruption, gesturing towards misbehaviour. *The Prince of Homburg* follows an installation of Staff's work *Bathing* (2018) at Charlie's Nightclub for Berwick Film and Media Arts Festival 2018. In this presentation a projection hovered over the dancefloor, seemingly sticky from sugary drinks spilled the night before, air heavy and

air-con piping dormant, whilst on-screen a solo performer writhes – intoxicated, almost abhuman – in a shallow basin of water.

The occupation – or manufacture, once co-opted by the institution – of these speculative grey zones can enhance the conceptual motivations of moving image art. These spaces may serve to reconnect the work with socio-political contexts otherwise estranged in the timeless, neutralised white cube and black box. With the removal of the behavioural codes and hierarchies of attention that galleries and theatres perpetuate, we might also find that audiences can configure new and productive relationships with artwork, enhanced, not compromised, by subjective, embodied experience and with that, the interruptions of life.

A response to 'Black Box/White Cube: Viewing contexts for Artists' Moving Image' Panel Discussion at CCA Glasgow, 31 July 2019, presented by LUX Scotland in association with the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London and the Art & Screen Network, with Art Fund support.

Endnotes

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9. *Ibid.*, 38.
10. Andrew V. Uroskie, 'The Homelessness of the Moving Image', in *Moving Image*, ed. Omar Kholeif (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2015), 54.
11. Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, 23.

12. David Curtis, "'In the Bloody Basement Again' – Three Observations about British Conceptual and Structural Film', *The Moving Image Review & Art Journal (MIRAJ)* 6, no. 1 (1 December 2017): 260–65, https://doi.org/10.1386/miraj.6.1-2.260_5.
13. David Hall quoted in Stephen Partridge, 'Artists' Television: Interruptions – Interventions', in *REWIND: British Artists' Video in the 1970s & 1980s*, ed. Sean Cubitt and Stephen Partridge (Eastleigh: John Libbey, 2012), 78.
14. Susan Hiller's *Belshazzar's Feast, the Writing on Your Wall* (1983–1984) was the first video installation acquired by Tate, in 1984. Its materials include a sofa, armchairs, tables, pillows, lamps, artificial plants, rug, twelve works on paper, wallpaper and a television monitor which plays telecined Super 8mm footage of a bonfire. Hiller's work is a replica of a living room, reconfigurable but always centred around the TV as a contemporary hearth. The installation likens tales of nocturnal visions emanating from shapes and images perceived in fires to the hallucinatory non-broadcast hours following scheduled television programming. The work's physical presentation, however, is conceptually integrated into the work itself; it implicates the viewer as an actor, less an audience member, and in this sense, departs from the purely exhibitionary.
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Marcus Jack is a curator and writer based in Glasgow. He is founder of Transit Arts, an organisation for the exhibition of artists' moving image, a Research Associate at LUX Scotland, coordinator of the Margaret Tait 100, and is currently undertaking an AHRC-funded PhD looking at the history of artists' moving image in Scotland.

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