

Review by [Dan Kidner, LuxOnline, October 2009.](#)

<http://www.lux.org.uk/blog/dan-kidners-round-recent-books-artists-film>

[Link expired]

A number of books have been published recently that seek, in one way or another, to shed light on what many of their authors see as the hidden, or under-theorised, history of moving image practice in the gallery.

The Irish academic Maeve Connolly's new book, [The Place of Artists' Cinema: Space, Site and Screen](#), looks at the presence of the moving image within the spaces and sites for contemporary art: museums, biennials, art fairs, commercial galleries etc. She pays particular attention to how social relations are structured within these spaces, and the relationship that moving images within the gallery have to notions of place and site.

The book draws on theories of site-specificity within the visual arts, and also from many of the essays in another book under discussion here, published not long before it: [Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader](#), edited by Tanya Leighton. One of the most interesting chapters in the book focuses critical attention on attempts to make film and video legible within the discourse of art and therefore legible to the market. However, an examination of the relationship of film cooperatives, distribution channels and networks to the contemporary art world, or how they 'assert the history of experimental filmmaking within the contemporary art context', is a subject probably worthy of its own study, and isn't fully explored.

Both Leighton's book for Tate in association with Afterall books, and the Tate's own, [Film and Video Art](#), edited by Tate curator of film, Stuart Comer, constitute attempts to bring certain areas of moving image practice within the gallery 'into the light' – the punning phrase used by Comer in his brisk and energetic introduction.

Each of *Film and Video Art's* eight chapters is written by a different author, apart from the two by A.L. Rees, and chapters are broadly arranged chronologically. Film curator Ian White provides the first chapter, which looks at pre-cinema projection technologies, whilst experimental film historian Rees immediately follows with a history of the 'movements in art' between 1912-1979. Michael Newman tackles artists' film and video from the 1990s, and Pip Laurenson, film conservationist at Tate, concludes the book with a look at the thorny issue of preserving for a museum context films that were more often than not made for a completely different one. In between there are essays on new media or 'digital art', and artists' film and video on television.

Where Comer's book is pitched very much as an introduction to the field, Leighton's hefty and well-researched reader is an attempt at a more critical dissection of what she calls the 'cinematic turn' in art. The book includes existing texts, some translated into English for the first time, and newly commissioned essays alongside 'unpublished' ones. It is split into three sections that in turn establish a number of histories of film and video, explore the specific relationship between video and broadcast media, and finally film and video's relation to cinema. The range of writers drawn on for the book reflects the disciplinary spread of the discourse, but reflection on to what extent might this diffuse disciplinary spread be constitutive in some way of film's continuing critical purchase is not followed up.

[*On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton*](#), edited by Bruce Jenkins, brings together 12 essays that originally appeared in the long out of print book *Circles of Confusion* published in 1983, and adds other bits of writing, correspondence and interviews.

Frampton's autodidactic writings utilise the same arcane language and eccentric modes of argumentation that characterised the essays of other artist-writers of the period such as Robert Smithson and Dan Graham, whilst the breadth of references and allusions, and the density of the prose, can be dizzying but can just as often be turgid. Jenkins has re-edited many of the texts, attempting, as he explains in the introduction to the volume, to re-assert something of the unique quality and 'timbre' of Frampton's voice – something that he felt was smoothed out in the original edits.

When it is possible to penetrate the opaqueness of Frampton's prose his writing on the 'camera arts' proves to be spectacularly out of step with the discourses on the 'spatial' qualities of film that hold together the other books under consideration here. He is much less concerned with the spatial conditions of display than with the moving image's formal and temporal relation to still photography, and to all images' indexical relation to reality.

This connection to traditional film theory, and his attention to the 'language' of film, but also his relation to minimal and post-minimal practices, makes these writings essential reading. In the other books under review here it would have been interesting to see Frampton's rigorous formalism critically examined from the point of view of, on the one hand, its connection to traditional film theory (to the writings of Siegfried Kracauer for example), and on the other, its relation to the discourses of site and the temporal/spatial interruptions of moving image in the gallery that structure much contemporary writing about film and video.

It is always possible to criticise anthologies of writing by pointing to areas of study that have been neglected, but in the case of the *Afterall* and *Tate* books, and also Connolly's study, thinking about what has been omitted is key to understanding the limitations of the discourses that structure the critical understanding of artists film and video now.

By focusing on what might broadly be understood as the phenomenological aspects of film and video in the gallery, or the 'politics of space', these books track cinematic syntax as it is ingested and re-functioned in a new context. But there is also traffic the other way.

Filmmakers as diverse as Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Chantal Akerman, Pedro Costa, Harun Farocki and Pere Portabella (although all have different relationships to museums and galleries – not all have made installations in the gallery) are all lauded and discussed within the art world, and their films are regularly screened within the auditoria of art museums and galleries around the world. But more often than not the identity and social politics that drove the production of films by these filmmakers, and what might be called their assault on cinematic conventions is reconfigured, or rather disfigured, in this new context. Their dream of another type of cinema culture, lost.

Similarly with politically minded film and video makers of the 1970s and 1980s who abandoned, or sidelined, the formal concerns of more 'structural' practices, and the poetic or surrealist tendencies of the earlier film avant-garde, in favour of an engaged, often feminist agenda, frequently reintroducing narrative or a critique of narrative into their films. This work by Yvonne Rainer, Sally

Potter, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, among others is hard to discuss in the context of, or absorb into the history of, artists' film and video, as long as the discourse is so tied to the gallery.

Also, only very briefly discussed is the utopian drive of some early video to empower people to use the new media to express discontent. With the implicit claim that all moving image practice is part of a single continuum, film in the gallery becomes all too easily seen as the logical end point for these practices and alternative possibilities become increasingly hard to imagine. Frampton offers one way, albeit predominantly formal, to rethink the relation of cinema to art, but there are many others.

Dan Kidner is a writer and curator, and the Director of [City Projects](#).

[Film and Video Art](#), eds Tanya Leighton, Charles Esche, Tate Publishing in association with Afterall, 2008, 496pp, illus, pb, £19.99, 978 1 8543762 5 1

[Film and Video Art](#), ed Stuart Comer, Tate Publishing, 2009, 169pp, illus, pb, ISBN £18.99, 978 1 854 37607 7

Connolly, Maeve, *The Place of Artists' Cinema: Space, Site and Screen*, Intellect, 2009, 240pp, pb, ISBN 978 1 841 50246 5

[On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton](#), ed Bruce Jenkins, MIT Press, 2009, 360pp, cloth, ISBN 978 0 262 06276 3