



**An Alternative Archive:  
Vivienne Dick, Artists' Film and Irish Cinema**

**Maeve Connolly**

A retrospective exhibition is a significant moment in the career of any artist or film-maker, and this is particularly true when it brings together works that have evolved and circulated within many different contexts. Although retrospectives are ostensibly concerned with the past, offering the possibility to look backwards, they also have the potential to generate new perspectives, for their subjects and for others. The experience of looking back at Vivienne's work has already been highly productive for me. I first became aware of her early Super-8 work in 1997, when it was announced that, with support from the Museum of Modern Art in New York, her films were to be preserved in the Irish Film Archive. I attended a screening organised by the Archive at the Irish Film Institute to mark the occasion and this experience radically and irrevocably altered my perception of Irish cinema.

Even though most of Vivienne's early films were set and shot in New York or London in the 1970s and 1980s – and wholly responsive to these cities – they still touched upon many of the issues explored by film-makers who had remained in Ireland during that time. Vivienne's work seemed remarkable precisely because it articulated the experience of being in, but also *between*, several places. Not long after the IFI screening, I began to research Vivienne's practice in earnest, with the aim of situating it in relation to the wider context of feminist, migrant and oppositional film cultures and I became aware of her emerging interest in multi-screen installation. Her practice offered an alternative, and distinct, perspective on the relationship between 'national cinema', experimental film and artists' cinema, both in Ireland and elsewhere.

In 2002, I visited Vivienne's three-screen installation *Excluded by the Nature of Things* at Limerick City Gallery of Art and was struck by the ways in which it both echoed and refracted aspects of Irish cinema. Writing about these issues in an article for CIRCA magazine, I noted the differences between Vivienne's trajectory and the route followed by her most interesting contemporaries in Irish cinema. During the 1990s, while a new generation of visual artists began working with film and video

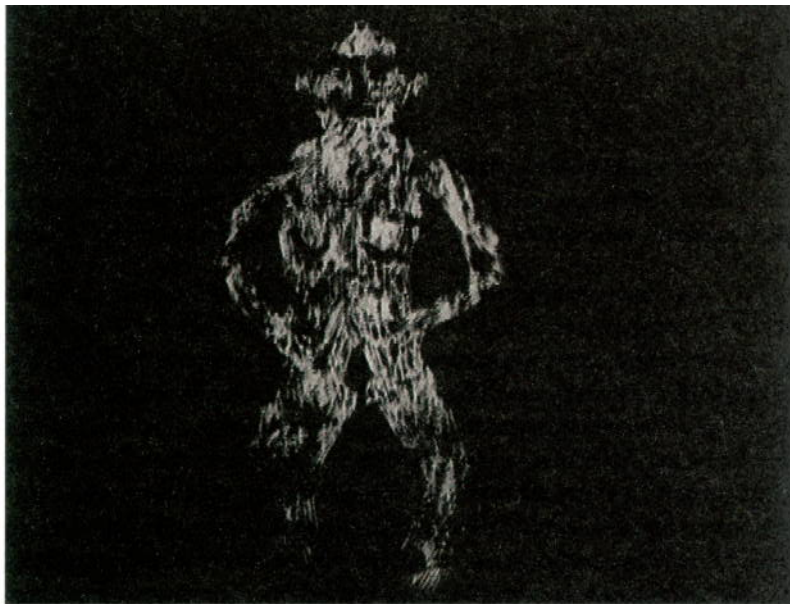
Previous page: Mrs. Margaret Mary Dunne, singer in  
*Visibility Moderate* (Photographer unknown)  
This page: Still from *Excluded by The Nature of Things*, 2002



installation, film-makers such as Cathal Black, Thaddeus O'Sullivan and Pat Murphy all directed feature length period dramas. I suggested, however, that Vivienne's multi-screen work – featuring a Gothic female presence in nineteenth century dress – might offer a possible link between these otherwise distinct currents.

Although she has received relatively little critical attention within the context of Irish cinema studies, Vivienne Dick has explored many of the same issues as Joe Comerford, Thaddeus O'Sullivan and Pat Murphy, through Super-8, 16mm film and video (for festivals, film clubs and broadcast contexts) and more recently, multi-screen gallery installation. Her early work is characterised by a retro-aesthetic, in terms of costuming, design and music, and it articulates a fascination with all forms of Americana. But, despite her fondness for overtly American settings and themes, Dick's work can actually be seen to explore some of the same issues as her Irish contemporaries. Most notably, she explores incest, abuse and familial violence in *Beauty Becomes the Beast*, in parallel with Irish works such as *Our Boys* (Cathal Black, 1981) and *Traveller* (Joe Comerford, 1981). Dick also began to represent





Irish experience directly, through images of Catholicism and the Irish landscape in *Liberty's Booty* and *Visibility Moderate: A Tourist Film*. The latter film, in particular, features scenes of the Ring of Kerry that recall both Hollywood fantasy and aspects of Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *On A Paving Stone Mounted* (1978), an atmospheric exploration of memory and place, loosely structured around the experiences and recollections of a group of young Irish men living in London.

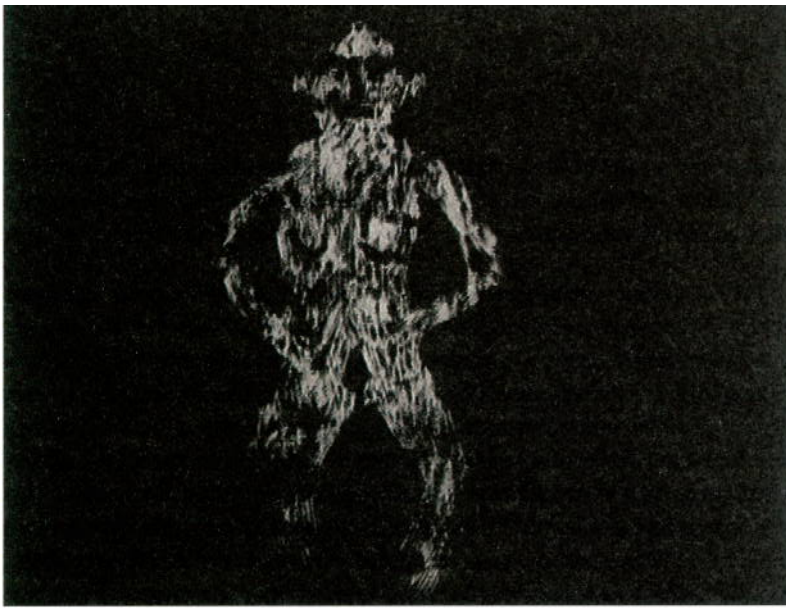
Vivienne Dick left New York for Ireland in the early 1980s, in order to continue her film practice. But, although she was actively involved in the establishment of a film production course at Rathmines College, and showed her films in contexts such as the Ha'penny Film Club in Dublin, she was unable to secure funding for her work. She points out that, during this period, the newly established Irish Film Board simply did not recognise Super-8 as a medium for film production. She soon relocated to London, where she became a member of the London Film-maker's Co-op [later amalgamated into LUX]. There she continued to explore explicitly Irish themes, often with the support of British funding agencies, most notably in *Rothach* (1985), *Trailer* (1986) and *Images/Ireland* (1988)

and gradually achieved recognition as an Irish practitioner. She has now moved into gallery installation and *Excluded by the Nature of Things* was funded by Bord Scannán na hÉireann and the Arts Council of Ireland.

In terms of its imagery, *Excluded by the Nature of Things* seems to reference an expanded history of film and art practices. It features images of pilgrims on Croagh Patrick and at holy wells, fragments of animation (like Joe Comerford's *Traveller*) and fleeting close-ups of Sheela-na-gigs and pre-modern sculpture. It could be read as a feminist corrective to O'Sullivan's *On a Paving Stone Mounted*, as Dick shifts attention away from vision and towards *other* senses (smell, touch, hearing) through close-up images of gorse, bracken and cattle, and sounds of driving rain on the lens and the windowpanes. She also disrupts the pictorial quality of the cinematography through animated sequences and a series of rapid camera movements, suggesting both motion and broadcast 'static'. The soundtrack is presented on six speakers and suggests a complex layering of predominantly natural sound, with fragments of conversation overheard at sites of pilgrimage.

The feminist critique that runs through much of Dick's work finds expression in the interplay between the three screens. In addition to a Gothic female presence, *Excluded by the Nature of Things* incorporates two contemporary figures: a man and a woman. In the course of the narrative, they appear on the left and right screens, each approaches the camera and retreats, approaches again and then jumps off to the side. The central screen remains empty throughout and these gestures seem to articulate a desire for a space *between* genders, emphasising the importance of multi-screen projection as a setting for this inquiry into space. Multiple screen installations, often diptychs, have been relatively commonplace within galleries since the mid-1990s and the staging of an explicitly cinematic narrative across several screens is often presented as a means of interrogating conventions of cinema spectatorship. The double screen works of Stan Douglas and Willie Doherty, for example, borrow and sometimes exaggerate aspects of film





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and television language – such as the shot/reverse shot structure used to generate narrative tension or to situate a character within time and space. Significantly, Dick's exploration of spatial dynamics in *Excluded By the Nature of Things* also recalls aspects of feminist film-making, post-colonial critique and Third Cinema, linking the gallery with broader traditions of film practice.<sup>1</sup>

Returning to 2009, the current retrospective takes place at an interesting moment in the relationship between cinema and artists' film and video. The past decade has witnessed a renewed interest on the part of artists in the modes of production and exhibition once traditionally associated with cinema. This gravitation towards cinema takes many different forms<sup>2</sup> and might include Steve McQueen's *Hunger* (2008), an artist-directed feature made for a theatrical context, or the various moving image installations by Willie Doherty (including *Ghost Story*, 2007 and *Buried*, 2009) that have been shot by Seamus McGarvey, a prominent and acclaimed cinematographer. Just as her use of Super-8 once differentiated her from contemporaries in the emerging Irish film industry, Vivienne's exploration of the moving image cannot be easily subsumed within this recent 'cinematic turn' in art practice. Instead, she continues to chart her own route as always, and in the process continues to raise questions about the limits, and the possibilities, of artists' film and Irish cinema.

Next pages:  
78/79: Photo of Pat Place, 1978 (Photo: V. Dick)  
80/81: Film still from *Like Down to Dust*, 1983  
82/83: Film still from *Liberty's Booty*, 1980

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Paragraphs 4-7 excerpted from 'Excluded by the Nature of Things? Irish Cinema and Artists' Film', 2003; Revised 2009. For the full article with references, see Maeve Connolly, 'Excluded by the Nature of Things? Irish Cinema and Artists' Film', *CIRCA* 106, Winter 2003, p. 33-39, or [www.maeveconnolly.net](http://www.maeveconnolly.net)

<sup>2</sup> Many different examples are discussed in Maeve Connolly, *The Place of Artists' Cinema: Space, Site and Screen*, Bristol and Chicago, Intellect and Chicago University Press, 2009.

Still from *The True Centre is Always New*, 2007

















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#### Slipcase:

Front: film still from *Like Dawn to  
Dust*, 1983

Back: film still of Anya Philips from  
*Guérillère Talks*, 1978

#### Book cover:

Front: film still of Trixi Salke  
from *Liberty's Booty*, 1980

Back: film still from *Beauty Becomes  
The Beast*, 1979

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#### DVD cover:

Front: film still of Lydia Lunch from  
*Beauty Becomes The Beast*, 1979

Back: film still from *A Skinny Little Man  
Attacked Daddy*, 1994

#### Inside covers of book and DVD:

Left: sound notes from *Liberty's Booty*

Right: sound notes from *Beauty Becomes  
The Beast*

 **Crawford Art Gallery Cork**  
Ailéar Crawford Chorcaigh

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Ealaíon, Spóirt agus Turasóireachta

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**LUX**

pgm 17 " play with brains like pinball" x 2 CU L on bed 19.41

pgm 18 Lydia by sea hood up .." My fingers twitch but my  
eyes can't move" 10.19.31  
+ 19.57

pgm 20 just after "let's keep it a secret .."There's no  
place to hide!". ( last take) 20.10.

pgm 21 "my skin is metal and ~~my eyes can't move~~"

pgm 22 "Woman's urge ... lady scarface." — Also 22 sec  
comes in just after L appears in the shot. IN from 20.30

CHECK FOR CUE

pgm 23 "drop like a lump of iron ( over) 12.16 T1  
( also pgm 20 T2)

pgm 24 ventures ironing track - 54 seconds in from start  
of song. 21.25.

pgm 25 PINBALL SOUND IN TWO PARTS  
counting from start of pgm 45 sec in we have part  
one which starts \_\_\_\_\_  
part 2 is pgm 33 as is. 37.59 24.43. APPMT

pgm 26 ventures tk starts after intro as is. 25.40

pgm 41/ psychedelic shack MATCH TO original  
from start of pgm count 016 in ..problem this 47.06  
sound might be different speed!

pgm 27 "staircase" start absolute beginning - where it  
is relatively quiet. 27.33  
CHECK CUE

pgm 28 " gloomy sunday" as is. 28.58.  
with few sound

LIBERTY'S BOOTY;

pgm 29 B Gas Rickshaw ..clip ver start of song.. 31.34.  
as is,

pgm 40 Ventures twilight Zone../23 sec in from start 45.09  
to approx 104.

T2 pgm 15 "we're visiting different apartments.. 18.00  
T2 pgm 16 "Janet's not home ...Trixies as is 18.24

Your talk were before 17.