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Shared Viewing:

Moving Images in the Cinema and Museum

At the outset of an essay reflecting upon his *Kinomuseum* program, curated for the 2007 International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, Ian White proposes that "a particular kind of cinema" might also be a "unique kind of museum."[1] This museum, he suggests, would be "based upon the principles of impermanence, immediacy, the temporal and the temporary, manifest in the minds of an audience who experience it in the space and time of the auditorium that is the museum's permutating exhibition, and who are its active, defining agent."[2] Significantly, in White's account, the audience is conceived as a gathering of bodies as well as minds, and the cinema that he imagines as a museum derives its particularity from the interplay of cognitive and physical dimensions. His essay closes with an account of "Fallout," a section of the Oberhausen program that was guest-curated by artist Mary Kelly, in which three works from three different decades were shown in the three auditoria of the Lichtburg cinema.[3] Rather than being looped in the manner of a gallery installation, these works were shown sequentially and as each screening ended the audience proceeded physically from one auditorium to the next, so that "the perambulatory space of the gallery collapsed into the organizing architecture and institution of cinema."[4]

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[1] Ian White, "Kinomuseum" in Mike Sperlinger and Ian White (ed), *Kinomuseum: Towards an Artists' Cinema*, (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Konig, 2008)13.

[2] White, 14.

[3] This program, curated and presented by Mary Kelly (on May 5, 2007) was called "Fallout" and consisted of *Disaster* by Sherry Milner & Ernie Larson (1976), *Fast Trip, Long Drop* by Gregg Bordowitz (1993) and *not a matter of if but when* (Julia Meltzer, David Thorne) (2006).

[4] White, 26.

If White presents the relationship between cinema and museum as potentially open to reconfiguration, then other accounts of this relationship have tended to more strongly emphasize the differences, even oppositions, between the two institutions and their characteristic modes of spectatorship and sociality. Rather than attempt to summarize a complex and ever-expanding area of scholarship here, I will focus on just two texts (by Laura Marks and Hito Steyerl) that allude both to the appeal and the limitations of the gallery as an alternative to the movie theater . Informed by the positions developed in these two texts, I examine disparate practices and models of spectatorship developed within art and film cultures.

In a recent contribution to *Millennium Film Journal*, Laura Marks examines differences between the gallery and theater as viewing environments for single channel works, identifying a tension between critical positions that espouse either spatiality (framed as social, even if distracted) or temporality (aligned with immersion, and an engagement with duration). She suggests that while theatrical exhibition creates the conditions for immersive viewing, gallery installation tends to elicit a more "cognitive" response, because gallery-goers engage only with the idea of duration. Instead of viewing the work in its entirety, she suggests that gallery visitors often stay with a work "just long enough to get an idea of it"[5], giving rise to a form of "cognitive consumerism."[6] To illustrate this point, Marks cites a comment made by Chrissies Iles in relation to *Documenta 11* (2002), an exhibition that included a substantial film program as well as an extensive array of (often lengthy) moving image installations. Iles states:

> No one knew Jonas Mekas was in Documenta because his work was only in the film
> program. But the art world was discovering people like Ulrike Ottinger because she had

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[5] Laura Marks, "Immersed in the Single Channel: Experimental Media From Theater to Gallery," *Millennium Film Journal* 55, (2012) 21.
[6] Marks, 14.

an eight-hour film in the gallery. The fact that people only saw ten minutes or half an hour of it was offset by the fact that many more thousands of people now know that she exists.[7]

Marks, however, questions the value of this mode of spectatorship. She suggests that it is premised upon a "fiction of *virtual time*"[8] particular to the information age, in which the full viewing of film and video works encountered in the gallery is constantly postponed to a later moment. She ends her discussion of *Documenta 11* with an image of "insomniac artgoers finally getting around to seeing the movie on YouTube because they can't sleep [...] watching Ulrike Ottinger in their pajamas at 3 in the morning."

Hito Steyerl, theorizing the museum as a kind of "factory" organized around the work of cultural consumption, also develops her argument through reference to the inclusion of lengthy film and video works in *Documenta 11*. Although Steyerl is also responding to the fact that certain forms of filmmaking have been pushed away from the theater and toward the gallery, her principal aim is theorize the *labor* of moving image consumption. Describing the art museum generally as the site of a crowd that is "dispersed in time and space [...] immersed and atomized,"[9] she frames it as the successor to the factory and as an emblematic site of the post-Fordist economy of consumption. In her analysis, *Documenta 11* is significant primarily because its form and reception actually underscored the impossibility of a particular mode of spectatorship, which is premised upon the notion of "the spectator-as-sovereign."[10] Steyerl coins this term to describe a spectator who is motivated by the need to "master the show [...] to pronounce a verdict, and to assign value"[11] and categorizes this desire for mastery as an "attempt to assume the compromised

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[7] Chrissie Iles, cited by Marks, 21.
[8] Marks, 21. Italics in original.
[9] Hito Steyerl, "Is a Museum a Factory," *e-flux Journal* 7, (2009): 5. [Accessed June 1, 2013] http://www.e-flux.com/journal/is-a-museum-a-factory/
[10] Steyerl, 8.
[11] Steyerl, 8.

sovereignty of the traditional bourgeois subject."[12] She argues that the presence of cinema (or works of cinematic duration) in exhibitions such as *Documenta 11* makes the adoption of this idealized vantage point impossible, underscoring the museum's limitations as a public sphere. Steyerl's analysis also suggests that while the museum can no longer claim to operate as a site for the exercise of judgment and attribution of value, it nonetheless retains an important symbolic function. This is because exhibitions such as *Documenta 11* have the capacity to "conserve the absence of the public sphere" and display, through this absence, "the *desire* for something to be realized in its place."[13]

Steyerl's analysis of the museum as factory is not a defense of moving image installation, and it is clearly not premised upon the "Marxist and psychoanalytic critique of suture," which Marks identifies as prevalent in theories of installation.[14] In fact Steyerl's discussion of labor actually resonates to some extent with Marks's critique of cognitive consumerism, not least because of the fact that it too incorporates an invented scenario of moving image consumption. Instead of a scene of late-night YouTube viewing, however, Steyerl imagines a situation which all of the night guards and visitors at *Documenta 11* might somehow have worked together in order to view, discuss and make sense of the exhibition in its entirety. This is not a situation of imagined co-presence in time and space, in which the guards and spectators are envisaged as an enormous group moving through the exhibition, crowding into the cinema to view the screening programs together, and subsequently gathering for a discussion. Rather, Steyerl describes a scenario in which the labor of viewing is shared only in the sense of being *divided*. The labor of this (fictional) audience is also organized in a manner that owes little to the traditional worker's

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[12] Steyerl does not specify when this "traditional" bourgeois subject was formed, but she is clearly interested in the persistence and decline of the bourgeois public sphere in contemporary society, citing as a reference Thomas Elsaesser's paper "The Cinema in the Museum: Our Last Bourgeois Public Sphere," presented at the International Film Studies conference, "Perspectives on the Public Sphere: Cinematic Configurations of 'I' and 'We'," Berlin, April 23-25, 2009.

[13] Steyerl, 8. [Emphasis in original].

[14] Marks, 20.

movement. This is because the "multitude" that figures in Steyerl's account is not a new social class imbued with the power to challenge the supranational economic and political order that has replaced sovereign nation states (the model proposed in Michael Hardt and Antoni Negri's *Empire*). Instead, Steyerl draws upon Paolo Virno's more ambivalent vision of the multitude as a force that has no class-consciousness – since it is not a class – but is rather defined by its potential to produce *itself*.[15]

As already noted, Marks develops a critique of cognitive consumption, tacitly alluding to an economy in which the "idea" of the work is more valuable, and perhaps exchangeable, than the work itself. Interestingly, however, she does not consider how such "ideas" might acquire value, by considering the discursive specificities of cinema and museum cultures. Perhaps because she frames sociality as integral to the (human) body, noting that "the body, memory and perception are already social,"[16] Marks is also dismissive of some attempts to materialize the social in moving image installation, suggesting that these works assume an "idiotic spectator who isn't able to remember that other people and a society exist unless she is forcibly reminded that the image is constructed in space – by tripping over a bench in the dark, for example."[17] Some "reminders" of the social in contemporary art, however, go well beyond the placement of a bench in an installation. In fact I would argue that the social is sometimes signified by artists precisely through conceptual or literal reference to the movie theater.

Elsewhere, I have theorized a fascination with self-consciously cinematic sociality contemporary art, through reference to a number of public art projects that take the form of temporary cinemas, such as Jesse Jones's *12 Angry Films* in Dublin (2006), Tobias Putrih's *Venetian,*

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[15] For a discussion of Virno's position in relation to that of Hardt and Negri, see Sylvère Lotringer, "Foreword: We, the multitude," in Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, (New York and Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 7-21.
[16] Marks, 20.
[17] Marks, 20.

Atmospheric in Venice (2007) and Phil Collins's *Auto-Kino!* in Berlin (2010).[18] Significantly, these artists do not appropriate the form of the contemporary commercial multiplex, instead making reference to older forms of theatrical exhibition, such as the drive-in (Jones and Collins) or to the ornate 'atmospheric cinemas' designed by John Eberson[19] in the 1920s and 30s (Putrih). These projects also develop a far more complex engagement with cinematic spatiality and sociality than that suggested in Marks's account of installation, since Collins, Jones and Putrih draw upon histories of film exhibition to explore the role of cinema in the imagining of the social body. My research also encompasses public art projects in which artists collaborated with local film clubs or festival organizations on the realization or programming of cinema structures.[20] For example, *Sunset Cinema* (2007) by Apolonija Šušteršič and Bik Van der Pol was a temporary cinema constructed in a public square in Luxembourg, program by the artists and also by several local film clubs, which *Sun Cinema* (2010) by Clemens von Wedemeyer is a permanent structure on the outskirts of the city of Mardin in Turkey, devised partly for use by the organizers of a local film festival.

How do these temporary movie theaters and collaborations between artists and film programmers relate to the theories and practices of spectatorship discussed by Marks and Steyerl? From one perspective, the emergence of the temporary cinema as a public art form might seem to signal an embrace of theatrical immersion and cinematic duration on the part of artists, curators and art institutions. At the same time, however, artists such as Jones, Apolonija Šušteršič and Bik Van der Pol (and to a lesser extent, Collins, Putrih and von Wedemeyer) are clearly drawn toward cinema in part because they are interested in the desire, highlighted by

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[18] See Maeve Connolly, 'Temporality, Sociality, Publicness: Cinema as Art Project', *Afterall* 29 (2012): 4-15.

[19] See also Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso, 2002) 48-49.

[20] Connolly, 13-15.

Steyerl, for something that might take the place of the public sphere.[21] So cinema occupies a strongly symbolic function within these works, perhaps even operating as "idea" rather than "experience" in the sense advocated by Marks. In my view, however, these disparate understandings of cinema (as idea and experience) are not opposed, but rather intertwined, as evidenced by a brief glance at the exhibition practices of organizations such as Millennium Film Workshop and Anthology Film Archives.

Independent Thinking and Shared Viewing

The 20th anniversary edition of *Millennium Film Journal* (published in 1986) includes a number of illuminating interviews with several figures integral to the founding and history of the Millennium Film Workshop, including Howard Guttenplan, Flo Jacobs and Ken Jacobs. Reflecting upon the initial aims of the organization, Guttenplan notes that "the idea was to create a communal cooperative atmosphere, where everybody would contribute."[22] He also suggests that while screenings, which generally favored new work, often incorporated discussion, audiences were often "less vocal" in their criticisms than might be typical in European avant-garde film contexts.[23] In the same anniversary issue, however, Flo Jacobs strongly emphasizes the value of "confrontational" modes of post-screening discussion, describing the screening as "a scientific testing ground" to support "film thinking," rather than to promote career advancement.[24] Describing the workshop as "a little space of socialism,"[25] Ken Jacobs frames the practice of independent filmmaking in overtly political terms, stating: "I had thought this

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[21] My discussion of the public sphere is also informed by Simon Sheikh's research. See Simon Sheikh, 'In the Place of the Public Sphere? Or, the World in Fragments', *Republicart.net* June 2004, [Accessed June 2013] http://republicart.net/disc/publicum/sheikh03_en.htm

[22] Howard Guttenplan, in Scott MacDonald, "The Millennium after Twenty Years: An Interview with Howard Guttenplan," *Millennium Film Journal* 16/17/18 (1986): 11.

[23] Guttenplan, 15.

[24] Flo Jacobs, in Lindley Hanlon and Tony Pipolo, "Interview with Ken and Flo Jacobs," *Millennium Film Journal* 16/17/18 (1986): 31-32.

[25] Ken Jacobs, in Hanlon and Pipolo, 32.

independent thing was a kind of democratic urge, that idiosyncratic cinema would break Hollywood's mind control."[26] He also argues that the culture of "independent thinking" operated in tension with promotional discourses around some films, which attracted audiences who were less likely to engage in critique. So it seems that, for Ken and Flo Jacobs at least, the Millennium theater was valuable because it could function (at least ideally) as a space in which autonomous critical positions could be established and publicly articulated. Although anti-consensual and determinedly oppositional with regard to commercial cinema, this model of reception also seems to resonate with Steyerl's account of the "sovereign" spectator of the bourgeois public sphere, who seeks to "pronounce a verdict, and to assign value."[27]

A somewhat different model of reception informed the design and realization of the Invisible Cinema, as evidenced by the oral histories and published accounts gathered by Sky Sitney[28], yet it is still possible to identify an emphasis on cinema as ideal. Designed by Peter Kubelka, constructed by Giorgio Cavaglieri and funded by the art patron Jerome Hill, the Invisible Cinema operated from 1970 to 1974, at Anthology Film Archives, then located at Joseph Papp's Public Theater on Lafayette Street in New York City. Sitney demonstrates that this theater was intended to offer the ideal conditions for the viewing of experimental work, by eliminating distractions such as light spillage and the sounds of cinema-goers. Audience members were physically separated from each other and seated in small individual booths, which were fitted with an overhanging "shell-like"[29] structure in order to reduce noise, ostensibly enabling greater concentration on the film. In some respects, the Invisible Cinema functioned as the logical extension of a modernist ideology espoused by Kubelka, who specifically sought to differentiate the film auditorium from the theater. Yet it was not actually intended to isolate audience

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[26] Ken Jacobs, in Hanlon and Pipolo, 49.
[27] Steyerl, 8.
[28] Sky Sitney, "The Search for the Invisible Cinema," *Grey Room* 19 (2005): 102-113.
[29] Peter Kubelka, in Sitney, 107.

members from each other. Instead, as Sitney's research indicates, Kubelka was motivated by the desire to create an ideal community:

> You knew that there were many people in the room, you could feel their presence, and you would also hear them a bit, but in a very subdued way, so they would not disturb your contact with the film. A sympathetic community was created, a community in which people liked each other. In the average cinema where the heads of other people are in the screen, where I hear them crunching their popcorn, where the latecomers force themselves through the rows and where I have to hear their talk which takes me out of the cinematic reality which I have come to participate in, I start to dislike the others. Architecture has to provide a structure in which one is in a community that is not disturbing to others.[30]

Recalling Steyerl's imaginary scenario of collective moving image consumption, the Invisible Cinema was also designed to enable an experience of viewing that was both shared and divided. But while Steyerl describes a situation in which the labor time of the audience is divided across the installations and screenings of *Documenta 11*, the Invisible Cinema physically divided the space of the auditorium to enable a communal experience of time.

Critical Forums and Living Archives

In the decades that have passed since the Invisible Cinema's closure, many of the organizations established to support the distribution and exhibition of experimental film and video have changed significantly, but structures for the shared viewing and discussion of moving image works remain important in art and film cultures. The London-based arts agency LUX, founded in 2002, absorbed many of the activities of the moving image-focused organizations that

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[30] Kubelka, in Sitney, 111.

preceded it, such as The London Filmmakers Co-operative, London Video Arts and The Lux Centre. In addition to commissioning and distributing moving image works, LUX provides professional development and research resources for artists, and since 2011 has supported the establishment of three Critical Forums, located in the UK (Glasgow and London) and also in Ireland (Dublin). These Forums are monthly discussion groups for artists working with the moving image to talk about their ideas and practices in a "mutually supportive environment."[31] Benjamin Cook, director of LUX, describes the Critical Forum initiative as "our contemporary interpretation of our own historical roots as an artists' co-operative and the original ideas of the coop as an artist-centered convergent space for making-showing-discussion."[32] Framing it as a response to artists seeking "a space for critical discussion outside of the academic environment,"Cook emphasizes that the group structure is peer-based and non-hierarchical, offering a counterpoint to the "academic models that people are programmed into" in art school.

The membership of each Critical Forum is assembled through an open call, but limited to those who can make a commitment to participate for six months, and who are no longer in education. Group meetings take place in private; LUX staff attend the first session and subsequently only participate by invitation. In the case of the Dublin-based Critical Forum (established in 2012), discussion generally focuses on material that is not produced by group members, and sessions are generally structured around discussion rather than viewing.[33] While screenings might form part of a meeting, more often members view works in advance, sometimes watching them online. Since the participants do not engage with each other as an audience, they do not possess the potential agency highlighted by Ian White. Nor could they be conceived as a "sympathetic

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[31] For more information see the LUX website (accessed June 2013) http://lux.org.uk/education/lux-critical-forum
[32] Benjamin Cook, email correspondence, April 15, 2013.
[33] Jenny Brady (member of the Dublin-based Critical Forum), email correspondence, May 6, 2013.

community" in the sense suggested by Kubelka's account of the Invisible Cinema. But perhaps by consciously rejecting the academic model of critique these groups are signaling a resistance to the cognitive economy of contemporary art lamented by Marks, within which works are often reduced to "ideas."

My final example is a work realized within the context of an ambitious and expansive project, *Living Archive – Archive Work as a Contemporary Artistic and Curatorial Practice*, initiated in 2011 by Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art in Berlin. Thirty curators, filmmakers, artists and researchers were invited to develop projects in relation to the archive holdings of the Arsenal film and video collection, which has been in existence since 1963. Regular meetings, public screenings, discussions, performances and other events were organized over a period of two years at various Berlin venues, culminating in several weeks of intensive programming activity at Arsenal and at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in June 2013. Rather than attempting to engage with the *Living Archive* project as a whole, I want to discuss a single element; *Trauerspiel 1* by Ian White, presented on March 13, 2012 in HAU 1 of the Hebbel am Ufer Theater. This work incorporated screenings of five films selected from the Arsenal collection, and the screenings were interspersed with five 'dances,' performed on stage by White, utilizing a variety of costumes, props, punctuated by the opening and closing of curtains. Another male performer remained seated on the stage throughout, naked and silent but for the amplified clicking sounds emanating from a pair of knitting needles that he held, used in the steady production of what appeared to be a red woolen scarf.

Trauerspiel 1 engaged with ideas drawn from Walter Benjamin's book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*), which theorizes the German late Baroque dramatic form of the Trauerspiel, or 'mourning play' as distinct from the Aristotelian tragedy. Summarizing aspects of Benjamin's complex argument, White notes that while the tribulations of

the Aristotelian Tragic Hero give rise, for the audience, to "a catharsis that reinscribes civic obedience," the mourning play is characterized by a more allegorical model. In this latter mode, time passes "more regularly (albeit in an abstract space)" and "meaning is demonstration-like, a staged act of speaking and reading rather than the effect of emotional peaks and troughs, mimesis, persuasion or expression as such."[34] In *Trauerspiel 1*, certain formal qualities of the mourning play, which is brought to life in Benjamin's book through a mosaic of quotations, were suggested by the demonstration-like qualities of the movements and actions performed on stage.

Within the context of my discussion of shared viewing, however, White's project is perhaps most interesting because it turned HAU 1 of the Hebbel am Ufer theater into a "kind of cinema" that was also a "kind of museum" where cinematic duration was preserved. Rather than choreographing the movement of an audience through the physical spaces of this particular "cinema," White instead deployed the formal, architectural and institutional resources of the theater (such as the performing body, props, lighting, dramaturgy, and the architecture of stage and auditorium) to engage the seated audience in an exploration of actual and imagined spatio-temporal boundaries between auditorium, stage and screen. Instead of staging a dissolution of boundaries, *Trauerspiel 1* instead structured a more deliberate movement across these physical and conceptual divisions. Consequently, through its transformation of a theater into a cinema-museum, White's project offered yet another way of conceptualizing moving image consumption as an activity that involves, necessarily and sometimes productively, both the sharing and division of space and time.

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[34] Ian White, *Trauerspiel 1*, program notes, March 13, 2012.