



Temporality, Sociality, Publicness: Cinema as Art Project

– Maeve Connolly

Introduction: Cinema as Art Project

The cinematic turn evident in contemporary art over the past two decades has been widely theorised from a variety of perspectives.¹ But relatively little attention has been paid to one of the more literal manifestations of ‘artists’ cinema’, artworks that take the form of film theatres.² This article discusses five recent public art projects by artists, all devised as functioning cinemas: *12 Angry Films* (2006), by Jesse Jones; *Sunset Cinema* (2007), by Apolonija Šušteršič and Bik Van der Pol; *Venetian, Atmospheric* (2007), by Tobias Putrih; *Auto-Kino!* (2010), by Phil Collins (programmed in collaboration with Siniša Mitrović); and Clemens von Wedemeyer’s *Sun Cinema* (2010), the only one of these works devised as a permanent structure.

While diverse, these five projects share a focus on cinema as a social form, rather than an ontological concern with the medium of film. All evoke specific modes of reception that belong to the collective memory of cinema, such as the drive-in (in the case of *12 Angry Films* and *Auto-Kino!*), and so engage with the social temporalities of cinema-going. It is possible to identify parallels with the open-air screening programmes that are sometimes organised in urban parks, as public amenities or tourist attractions, and many of these projects were presented as part of wider public events programmes. While some required cinema-goers to book in advance, all the screenings were free. But, while they borrow from known forms of cinematic reception, the selections are characterised by distinctive strategies of curation, design and mediation and by self-reflexive approaches to publicness and its production.

These projects were realised within disparate contexts, with resources derived from an array of civic, national, international and supranational agencies.³ *Venetian, Atmospheric* was funded as part of the Slovenian national representation at the Venice

Maeve Connolly identifies artists’ cinemas as a new form of contemporary public art, demonstrating how artists make explicit the importance of desire, fantasy and projection in the ongoing production of the public sphere.

Biennale in 2007, while *12 Angry Films* and *Auto-Kino!* both involved the participation of artist-focused organisations and also formed part of city-funded public art programmes linked to (very different) urban redevelopment initiatives. *Sunset Cinema* was one of several projects realised during Luxembourg’s year as European Capital of Culture (2007), with funding from national, European and corporate

sources, and *Sun Cinema* was one of five site-specific projects commissioned for Turkish cities as part of the ‘My City’ initiative. But rather than closely examining the motivations, or strategies, of specific funding and organising agencies, this article aims to account more generally for the prevalence of the cinema as a social form within recent public

1 For an overview of this field see Tanya Leighton, ‘Introduction’, in T. Leighton (ed.), *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, London: Tate Publishing in association with Afterall, 2008, pp.7–40.

2 Chrissie Iles offers a brief overview of artists’ cinemas in Ian White, ‘Does the Museum Fail? Podium Discussion at the 53rd International Short Film Festival Oberhausen’, in Mike Sperlinger and I. White (ed.), *Kinomuseum: Towards an Artists’ Cinema*, Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2008, pp.115–55. See also Maeve Connolly, *The Place of Artists’ Cinema: Space, Site and Screen*, Bristol and Chicago: Intellect and University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp.170–91, and ‘Apperception, Duration and Temporalities of Reception’, *Moving Image Review & Art Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, forthcoming 2012, pp.53–57.

3 ‘My City’ was developed by the British Council in collaboration with Anadolu Kültür and Platform Garanti, and with funding from the EU Cultural Bridges programme. The commissioned projects included Mark Wallinger’s *Sinema Amnesia* (2010), a small temporary cinema located at the seaport of Çanakkale on the Dardanelles strait, overlooking the World War I graves of Gallipoli, and devised to screen non-stop footage of that patch of the strait with a 24-hour time delay.

art.⁴ It considers how the complex temporalities of artists' cinemas might inform an understanding of 'publicness' in contemporary art discourse, distinguishing between those projects that aim to constitute a new public through strategies of display and programming and those that involve the participation of already existing collectives such as film clubs.

Theorising Sociality in Contemporary Art

Cinema is just one amongst many popular cultural forms to be referenced and explicitly staged by artists as part of an exploration of social relations since the early 1990s. Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, for example, references various projects that explore the temporal and spatial forms of cinema and television, sometimes through the production of architectonic installations.⁵ Some of the artists cited by Bourriaud (Jorge Pardo and Angela Bulloch) were, for example, involved in designing viewing spaces as part of the 1997 exhibition 'Rooms with a View', at the Guggenheim Museum SoHo. But this interest in the staging of viewing situations should not necessarily be interpreted as a critique of social formations,⁶ and, as John Kelsey points out in relation to 'theanyspacewhatever' (an exhibition staged at the uptown Guggenheim twelve years later, again featuring Bulloch and Pardo), few of the artists originally championed by Bourriaud actually claimed a position of oppositionality.

Kelsey further proposes that while the seating provided in 'theanyspacewhatever' (a mix of benches, beanbag chairs and pillows in carpeted areas) might imply conviviality, the exhibition did not aim to produce a sense of community. Instead he concludes that these artists are resigned to the fact that it is simply not possible to posit a form of sociality outside the 'experience economy' of the museum. Although he is specifically concerned with the problems presented by the museum context, Kelsey notes that the concept of 'any-space-whatever' invokes a cinematic image of urban space, which is derived from Gilles Deleuze's *The Movement Image* (1983).⁷ As Kelsey writes,

*the cinematic image of undone space that, however shattered or blurred it may be, is also a space of pure potential ... could be a wasted urban void or a shaky zoom into the luminous screen of a Macintosh. It is a post-War feeling of lost coordinates, a certain anonymous emptiness. It is a space that could be 'extracted' from the familiar state of things embodied in a place like the Guggenheim Museum in New York, leaving us even more floating and detached than before in the great rotunda. It is both ruined and fresh.*⁸

This image of the (distinctly European) post-War ruin, which remains somehow 'fresh' and imbued with potential, is compelling and likely relevant to the emergence of the temporary cinema as public art project. Perhaps cinema itself, particularly when understood through reference to specific historical forms, such as the drive-in or the 'second run' theatre, now also constitutes a ruin that is open to reinvention. The works in 'theanyspacewhatever' did not, however, demonstrate a specific engagement with the social history of cinema.

Ina Blom has developed an expansive account of sociality in contemporary art discourse, through reference to many of the 'anyspacewhatever' artists (most notably Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick). She is particularly interested in mimicry — the ways in which certain artworks style themselves 'as "social" by miming institutions such as shops, bureaux, archives or museums'.⁹ These forms of mimicry are, she argues, important

4 Another example is *The Floating Cinema* (2011) by Studio Weave (architects) and Nina Pope and Karen Guthrie (working collaboratively as Somewhere). Taking the form of a mobile cinema moving along the waterways of East London, it was commissioned by The Olympic Delivery Authority as part of their Arts and Cultural Strategy, and funded by Arts Council England as part of the Portavilion programme. See <http://www.portavilion.com> (last accessed on 19 October 2011).

5 See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (1998; trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods), Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002.

6 Roberta Smith references the Situationists in 'A Channel-Surfing Experience with Beanbag Chairs and Gym', *The New York Times*, 25 April 1997, <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/04/25/arts/a-channel-surfing-experience-with-beanbag-chairs-and-gym.html> (last accessed on 23 November 2011).

7 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1983; trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

8 John Kelsey, "'theanyspacewhatever': Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York", *Artforum*, vol. XLVII, no. 7, March 2009, p. 236.

9 Ina Blom, *On the Style Site: Art, Sociality and Media Culture*, Berlin and New York: Sternberg Press, 2007, p. 131. Blom's concept of mimicry is specifically informed by Craig J. Saper's notion of the artwork as 'sociopoetic'. See C. J. Saper, *Networked Art*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001, pp. 151–52.

because they highlight the tension between art as ‘separate’ and art as ‘democratic’ by virtue of its utilitarian design. Focusing on the way in which the social is *styled*, Blom argues for a differentiated analysis of the forms of sociality produced in artistic activity – instead of what she sees as ‘essentialist’ notions of both the social and the artistic.

In addition to citing Bruno Latour’s critique of sociology, Blom draws upon Miwon Kwon’s analysis of locational identity in art practice, particularly her theorisation of sites as ‘mediatic [...] produced through the global information networks of contemporary capitalism’.¹⁰ But while Kwon is specifically interested in site-specific art and the contested realm of the public, Blom focuses instead on artworks developed for museum contexts. She does, however, cite at least one work that is pertinent to my analysis of the temporary cinema as art project. Tobias Rehberger’s *JP 005 (Model for a Film)*, first shown in 1998 at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, took the form of a ‘one-man cinema’. According to Blom, it was ‘a cinema fitted to one body only – a body that would not only be engulfed by the screen image, but that would also practically be wearing the cinema space itself as a second skin, as if the viewer and his or her world had “become” film’.¹¹ So, rather than staging cinema as a social space characterised by collectivity and publicness, Rehberger (somewhat playfully) envisages the spectator as atomised individual, overpowered by the screen image. This work seems to invoke a model of spectatorship specific to the 1970s; informed by psychoanalytic theory, this model was highly influential in art and film practice during that decade, and is often associated with the journal *Screen*.¹² But by the late 80s theorisations of the spectator had been largely supplanted, or at least supplemented, by cultural histories of reception.

Tom Gunning’s work on the early ‘cinema of attractions’ is particularly important in this respect, because it considers the social dimension of early film exhibition, linking the cinema to the fairground and other spaces of entertainment.¹³ Miriam Hansen’s account of early film is also significant for its focus on the ‘publicness’ of cinema in the early twentieth century. Informed by the work of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, among others, Hansen highlights the presence of women, migrants and other marginalised groups present within the same physical space of the cinema, temporarily creating the conditions in which an alternative ‘public sphere’ might form.¹⁴ As both Gunning and Hansen note, however, this moment was fairly short-lived, and by the late 1910s, cinema was increasingly oriented towards an audience that was (or aspired to be) middle class.

While Hansen is specifically interested in the sociality of early cinema prior to its ‘gentrification’, it is precisely the middle class or bourgeois public sphere that Habermas formulated as capable of identifying itself as public. Habermas’s critics (including Negt and Kluge) have further developed and modified this sense of a public sphere, but have yet to replace it, and it remains useful as an important point of connection between film history and art practice, particularly when understood in terms of a projection or fantasy, rather than as an actually existing formation. Writing about public art in 2002, Kwon states:

*in the face of Balkanised identity politics [...] it might be useful not to throw out Habermas’s vision of the bourgeois public sphere so readily. The fantasy of a public sphere, where one might bracket, temporarily, one’s private, personal interests to imagine a collective identification, a different sort of intimacy — not for affirmation, consensus or unification (not a self-same identification) — seems more important than ever.*¹⁵

Kwon is just one of a number of theorists to engage with the public sphere as a wilful act of collective identification. Michael Warner also emphasises the ‘projective’ quality of public discourse, which finds expression in an orientation towards the future and in the

10 I. Blom, *On the Style Site*, op. cit., p.14.

11 *Ibid.*, p.109.

12 As T.J. Demos has recently noted, this model was also characterised by occlusion (particularly in relation to television), prompting artists such as Dara Birnbaum to develop new critical approaches. See T.J. Demos, *Dara Birnbaum: Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, London: Afterall Books, 2010, pp.10–11.

13 Tom Gunning, ‘The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde’, in Thomas Elsaesser with Adam Barker (ed.), *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, London: BFI, 1990, pp.56–62.

14 See Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1991.

15 Miwon Kwon, ‘Public Art as Publicity’, 2002, http://www.republicart.net/disc/publicum/kwon01_en.htm (last accessed on 19 October 2011).



production of counter-publics, through a transformative process of ‘social mutation’,¹⁶ a phrase that suggests forms of social change that might be both unpredictable and inevitable.

Simon Sheikh also acknowledges that Habermas’s ideal might never have been anything more than a projection.¹⁷ Nonetheless, he emphasises that the ‘public’ is still routinely imagined to be located inside a model of the social that is intrinsically bound up with the modern nation-state, and founded upon discourses of exclusion, interiority and exteriority. He further argues that the erosion of this model has given rise to a ‘post-public’ situation, in which publicness can no longer be localised, necessitating a radical rethinking that goes beyond ‘a nostalgic return to outmoded notions of the public and its spaces’.¹⁸ While Sheikh draws attention to the limits of contemporary imaginings of the public — the difficulty of localisation, which gives rise to nostalgia — Kwon and Warner seem more optimistic. Both acknowledge, and in fact emphasise, the importance of imagining or projecting a public sphere, which is located in the future rather than the past.

This introduces the possibility of a form of sociality produced, or constituted, in an (imaginative) orientation towards the future, rather than through the evocation of a lost ideal. Yet, the ‘post-public’ situation theorised by Sheikh cannot be ignored, not least because anxieties around localisation routinely shape and inform public art commissioning processes. These issues inform some of the most pressing questions about the temporary cinema as art project: does the staging of a version of an obviously ‘outmoded’ cultural form (such as the drive-in) appeal to a nostalgic desire for a form of ‘publicness’ imagined to exist at an earlier moment? Or might these forms of mimicry actually prove useful in understanding the processes, both historical and contemporary, through which fantasies of publicness are produced?

Cinematic Socialities and Temporalities: Recovered, Remembered and Imagined

Commissioned by the Dublin Docklands Development Authority and Fire Station Artists’ Studios, Jesse Jones’s *12 Angry Films* was devised as a site-specific installation presented over three days in November 2006.¹⁹ A huge outdoor screen was installed at the Pigeon

16 Michael Warner, ‘Publics and Counterpublics’, *Public Culture*, vol.14, no.1, 2002, p.81.

17 Simon Sheikh, ‘Publics and Post-Publics: The Production of the Social’, *Open 14: Art as a Public Issue*, 2008, p.34.

18 *Ibid.*, p.28.



Above and left:
Jesse Jones,
12 Angry Films, 2006.
Installation view,
Pigeon House, Dublin.
Photograph: Hugh
McElveen. Courtesy
the artist

House, a disused power station located in a former industrial site close to Dublin Port, which at the time (prior to the property market crash) was scheduled for redevelopment. The project was presented and mediated as a drive-in cinema, which could only be accessed and experienced by car. Significantly, rather than emphasising the architectural features of the site, the project drew attention to infrastructural networks and flows linking (and separating) the port from the rest of the city. So rather than presenting cinema as an

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indisputably ‘public’ alternative to, for example, the privatised spaces of the car, television or the shopping mall, Jones’s project situated cinema in relation to the economy of ‘mobile privatisation’.²⁰ The films and broadcasts could only be fully experienced from inside a car with its radio tuned to a specific frequency, so that each car effectively functioned as a miniature screening environment. Many were

crammed with passengers, due to limited space in the parking lot, and people tended to stay inside due to the cold weather, apart from occasional trips to a fast-food stand. But even though circulation within the space of the drive-in was limited, a sense of shared experience was palpable, with drivers beeping their horns as a form of applause after screenings.

The screening programme, curated by Jones in collaboration with a group that she describes as ‘an elective community of approximately thirty participants’, focused on films exploring social justice and labour issues, partly shaped by the experiences of migrants.²¹ It included blacklisted features, such as *Salt of the Earth* (1954), directed by Herbert J. Biberman, together with video works made by Jones and her collaborators. The screenings were interspersed with radio broadcasts of panel discussions exploring issues and themes

19 The project was documented in ‘Imaginary Spaces, Activist Practices’, in Liz Burns, Jesse Jones et al., *12 Angry Films*, Dublin: Fire Station Artists’ Studios, 2007, pp.17–23. <http://www.firestation.ie/content/files/12-angry-films.pdf> (last accessed on 19 October 2011).

20 For a useful exploration of Raymond Williams’s concept of mobile privatisation see Margaret Morse, ‘An Ontology of Everyday Distraction: The Freeway, the Mall, and Television’, *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998, pp.99–124.

21 J. Jones cited in an online directory of public art in Ireland: <http://www.publicart.ie/en/main/public-art-directory/directory/view/12-angry-films/b7f3093b7f/> (last accessed on 21 November 2011).

relating to the films. If the drive-in setting suggested an alternative history of movie-going, then the radio talk shows (although pre-recorded) created the illusion of liveness or simultaneity. These shows also offered a ideal model of reception, presenting a fantasy version of Irish radio, in which an art project was discussed at length by an informed and engaged commentator.

Taking the form of an indoor drive-in, with second-hand cars provided for visitors as seats, *Auto-Kino!* was much larger in scale than *12 Angry Films*, running daily from 2pm until 9pm, from 2 February to 14 March 2010. It was produced, with the support of DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Programme, as part of a public art programme devised for the Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin, located at the site of the former Palast der Republik, on Schlossplatz.²² The screenings, selected by Phil Collins and Siniša Mitrović (who together run Shady Lane Productions), included more than one hundred films, and the stated aim of the programme was to ‘invite the audience to look again at the relationship between the idea of national community, and the articulation of its social and political body in the light of cinematic representation’. Several films were drawn from the 1930s and 40s, from classics such as *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse* (*The Crimes of Dr Mabuse*, 1933), by Fritz Lang, to *Zu neuen Ufern* (*To New Shores*, 1937), Douglas Sirk’s last film at UFA (made as Detlef Sierck), to examples of National Socialist propaganda, such as Rolf Hansen’s *Die Große Liebe* (*The Great Love*, 1942). The programme also incorporated various films from the 1970s, 80s and 90s with obvious Berlin connections, by Marcel Broodthaers, Yvonne Rainer, Ulrike Ottinger, Christoph Schlingensief and others.

This overt focus on the city and nation was perhaps to be expected, given the charged historical and social context of the site itself, but *Auto-Kino!* also featured many films celebrating the car as scene and object of erotic desire (kicking off with Kenneth Anger’s *Kustom Kar Kommandos*, from 1965). It seems significant that, in their introduction to a publication accompanying the project, Collins and Mitrović address the reader/viewer as a ‘fellow film freak’, assuming a familiarity with the car and cinema as linked sites of sexual experimentation, discovery and (self-)exploitation.²³ In practice, *Auto-Kino!* may have offered an experience of cinematic sociality broadly similar to that found in *12 Angry Films*, in which most cars were occupied by groups of friends rather than total strangers. But at least some visitors to the Temporäre Kunsthalle reported a heightened sense of intimacy and expectation,²⁴ and it is possible that different modes and patterns of viewing coexisted, particularly during a ten-day period when *Auto-Kino!* provided screening space for ‘Forum Expanded’, the section of the Berlin Film Festival dedicated to experimental work.

Both *12 Angry Films* and *Auto-Kino!* clearly envisaged the drive-in as a space within which to project (and so constitute) a counter-public. This projective quality was articulated not by the perfect mimicry of an earlier moment, but rather through the conjunction of disparate temporalities, through a collision of films from different eras. The drive-in setting also drew attention to cinema’s own continual transformation as a cultural form, known primarily through its representation in popular culture, whether as a site of youthful rebellion (in *Rebel Without a Cause*, 1955) or a nostalgic emblem of Americana (in *American Graffiti*, 1973). But while Jones’s project focused on the history of the labour movement, *Auto-Kino!* was much more directly concerned with the production of a social body through desire.

While the drive-in has been widely represented within the domain of popular culture, Tobias Putrih’s project draws attention to less well-known form of cinema-going, associated with the 1920s and 30s. Designed in collaboration with architect Luka Melon, *Venetian, Atmospheric* (2007) is both a sculpture and functioning screening space,

22 During the show, a solo exhibition by Phil Collins was also on view at the same time at daadgalerie, Berlin (<http://www.berliner-kuenstlerprogramm.de>); the press release and programme for *Auto-Kino!* are available at <http://www.kunsthalle-berlin.com/en/exhibitions/AutoKino> (both last accessed on 24 November 2011).

23 It is interesting to note that a more recent project by Collins, *This Unfortunate Thing Between Us* (2011), which formed part of the programme ‘Testing Stage: A Window to Performa New York’ at the Hebbel am Ufer theatre in Berlin (September–October 2011), explores similar issues. Like *Auto-Kino!* it emphasises the role of desire in the production of a social and political body. It initially seems to bypass cinema entirely, but as a live broadcast from a theatre it actually resembles a form of programming that has become quite commonplace within commercial and art-house cinemas.

24 See Tyler Coburn’s brief account in ‘First View’, *Art Review*, 28 April 2010, <http://www.artreview.com/forum/topics/berlin-part-i> (last accessed on 20 November 2011).



Auto-Kinol, 2010, programmed by Phil Collins and Siniša Mitrović. Installation view, Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin. Pictured film: Bruce LaBruce, *The Raspberry Reich*, 2004. Photograph: Jens Ziehe. Courtesy Shady Lane Productions

and was partly inspired by the work of John Eberson, a Romanian-born US designer who popularised the ‘atmospheric’ cinema. Eberson’s cinemas were intended to suggest the experience of being outdoors in an exotic location, so the Avalon Theater (1927) in Chicago was modelled on a Persian palace while the Tampa Theatre (1929) in Florida, which still operates as a cinema, was designed to evoke an Andalusian village.²⁵ Rather than being isolated in a dark space, wholly in thrall to the on-screen image, the audience in an atmospheric cinema would have been conscious of – and perhaps distracted by – their surroundings. Even the ceilings were intended to accentuate this illusion, designed

25 The interior of the Tampa Theatre in Florida is discussed, without specific reference to Eberson, in Janna Jones, ‘Finding a Place at the Downtown Picture Palace: The Tampa Theater, Florida’, in Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (ed.), *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001, pp.122–33.



(according to the curator of Putrih's project, Francesco Manacorda) to 'give the impression of infinite space, complete with small twinkling lights that evoke stars'.²⁶

Putrih had previously worked with Melon on a small cinema structure for the exhibition 'A Certain Tendency in Representation' (2005) at Thomas Dane Gallery in London, which was also curated by Manacorda. Described in the gallery press release as a 'film festival' and 'cineclub', it provided the setting for a programme featuring numerous artists' films, including Clemens von Wedemeyer's *Otjesd (Leaving)* (2005). For the Venice project, Putrih retained many of the same formal elements but placed much greater emphasis on the boundaries between interior and exterior space, and on Eberson's evocation of a Venetian campo in the Paradise Theatre (1929), located in the Bronx. Putrih's structure was located in a grassy area surrounded by trees, on Isola San Servolo, one of the smaller islands in the Lagoon, and its construction aimed to mirror this setting through the creation of a 'forest of scaffolding'. The 'walls' consisted of wooden slats with curved edges, suspended like vertical blinds and ritualistically opened and closed by ushers during the intervals between each programme. Through this choreographed action, Putrih drew attention to the physical world immediately outside the cinema and the materiality of the structure, and also the passage of time.

The films screened in *Venetian, Atmospheric* explored the interplay between physical and virtual cinematic spaces, and included a series of works by John Smith; a selection titled 'Future in the Past', dealing with science fiction and re-enactment; and one titled 'Cinematic Surfaces', exploring the theme of reflections. The programme did not specifically address the relationship between cinema and the production of a public sphere or a national community. Nonetheless, by exploring a form of cinema-going that came to prominence during a period of rapid social change and economic uncertainty, Putrih's project provides insight into the role of fantasy in the production of space as social and public. It is difficult to know exactly what a Venetian campo might have represented for an audience in the Bronx in the late 1920s — as a well-known tourist destination, Venice might simply have been synonymous with leisure and luxury. But Eberson's allusions to far-away town squares may also have played upon an imagined or remembered sense of stability, authenticity and ethnic homogeneity. By locating an experimental version of

Tobias Putrih
and Luka Melon,
Venetian, Atmospheric,
2007, plywood,
OSB plates,
scaffolding, PVC
curtain, 16mm and
digital projectors,
13 × 8 × 5.5m.
Installation view,
San Servolo for
the 52nd Venice
Biennale, Slovenian
Pavillon. Courtesy
the artist and
Galerija Gregor
Podnar, Berlin/
Ljubljana

26 Francesco Manacorda, 'Cinematic Psycho-Functionalism', *Tobias Putrih, Venetian, Atmospheric*, 52nd International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia (exh. cat.), Ljubljana: Slovenian Pavilion, 2007, p.13.

an atmospheric cinema within precisely the type of ‘exotic location’ that Eberson’s designs sought to mimic, Putrih makes it possible to examine how fantasies of social space were mobilised in the atmospheric cinema.

Sunset Cinema and Sun Cinema

A more explicit focus on the contemporary role of the movie theatre within urban public space is apparent in *Sunset Cinema*, a project developed by Apolonija Šušteršič and Bik Van der Pol for ‘Trans(ient) City’, curated by Hou Hanru in Luxembourg during its year as European Capital of Culture. The cinema was run by (and also programmed in collaboration with) the local film club Filmreakter, from 28 September to 1 December 2007, with screenings beginning at sunset. Informed by Robert Smithson’s 1971 proposal for a ‘Cinema Cavern’, the project was devised in response to an assigned site, a public square in the neighbourhood of Bonnevoie. The cinema itself consisted of a screen, a podium and a projection box. The existing wall of a neighbouring building was used as a screening surface, and the entire structure was designed so that people seated in the square could watch films without necessarily entering. The projection box, which functioned as a meeting area, also incorporated space for a bar, and the project seems to have been devised specifically in order to animate the public square.

*The film programme starts from sunset onwards; hence its name. When there is no screening, Sunset Cinema will create — by its presence — an urban space ‘infested with promise and expectation’. The square around Sunset Cinema allows the already existing space to come alive, as it can function as an open-air terrace.*²⁷

So, instead of aligning cinema with night-time, Šušteršič and Van der Pol focus on a period of transition between day and night, when the rhythms of city life change. Through their emphasis on the temporality of the ‘sunset’ they perhaps allude (albeit obliquely) to the ways in which the city, and specifically the public square, is produced as an image to be consumed within the discourses of tourism and urban planning. But to what extent does the project actually contest these discourses?

Sven Lütticken has critiqued a tendency for some artists to ‘present their “social” practice as an alternative for an art world that is complicit with the culture industry’, while at the same time using the media of art ‘to create images of social participation’.²⁸ It is likely that the semi-open structure of *Sunset Cinema* would have made the cinema audience at least partially visible to those outside, creating a recognisable image of social participation. At the same time, these cinema-goers would also have been quite aware of their own visibility. This ‘discomforting display of users’, a recurring feature of Van der Pol’s work according to Lütticken, might work against the production of a simplistic image of the social.

Sunset Cinema also modelled a very particular notion of cinematic sociality through the prominent involvement of a film club (Filmreakter), an already existing self-organised community. A specific aim of the project was to create an opportunity for Filmreakter and their public to make new connections with film programmers from elsewhere. So Šušteršič and Van der Pol presented their own selection of films and also invited contributions from programmers and artists that included Florian Wüst, Julieta Aranda and Anton Vidokle (from e-flux video rental) and organisations such as the contemporary art centre TENT and the artist-run space Het Wilde Weten (both located in Rotterdam).²⁹ Filmreakter took responsibility for all logistics and for the rest of the programming, and invited input from many others, including the Luxembourg film groups Pyrrhus and FEIERBLUMM. The *Sunset Cinema* programme also opened with a presentation of ‘Open Screen’, a Luxembourg underground festival that encourages participation with a ‘bring your own movies’ motto, promising that all films submitted (up to 25 minutes) would be shown.

In many respects, *Sunset Cinema* functioned to amplify and promote the work already being undertaken by Filmreakter and by film clubs elsewhere. Noncommercial societies for film appreciation and education have been in existence since the early decades

27 This text is available at Bik Van der Pol’s website: <http://www.bikvanderpol.net/?book=1&page=315> (last accessed on 18 October 2011).

28 Sven Lütticken, ‘Bik Van der Pol’s Repetitions’, *Secret Publicity: Essays on Contemporary Art*, Rotterdam and Amsterdam: Nai Publishers and Fonds BKVB, 2005, pp.155–56.

29 Email from Liesbeth Bik, 8 November 2011. Full details of the programme can be found at <http://www.filmreakter.lu/film-luxembourg/sunset-cinema/> (last accessed on 21 November 2011).

of cinema, but in recent years a more explicitly ‘social’ and less obviously hierarchical model of organisation and programming seems to have emerged. The organisers of the Cube in Bristol (established in 1998), for example, are interested both in a diversity of film-making and in the social fabric of cinema as contexts in which many different forms of cultural production might be possible.³⁰ While some film clubs receive public funding, others rely heavily on the unpaid labour of members, deriving income from membership fees, ticket sales, drinks and food. In some instances, clubs will restrict curatorial or programming rights to those who have assisted with other tasks, such as administration, renovation or maintenance.³¹

This interest in social organisation is sometimes paralleled by a focus on the physical setting and environment of the viewing space, which may at times recall an earlier era of film exhibition. The Cube cinema, for example, is fitted out with raked rows of red plush seating. Šušteršič and Van der Pol pointedly did not seek to replicate the look of the ‘classical’ movie theatre in *Sunset Cinema*, and instead created a raked viewing space through wooden bench-like steps, with loose cushions rather than upholstered seats. As already noted, the structure was designed to be viewed from the outside, as well as experienced from within, and so it was marked by a public visibility not typical for a film-club viewing space. It is interesting to note that attempts were made to retain this physical structure as a working cinema, after the programme had ended. The artists and the Luxembourg 2007 production team discussed moving it to another location in the city where it could be used on a permanent basis, and staff at the architecture department of the University of Metz also expressed interest in providing a permanent site. Ultimately, however, this proved impossible, primarily because of the ongoing resources needed for maintenance and programming.

Clemens von Wedemeyer’s *Sun Cinema* was also devised in collaboration with a film society, but characterised by a different temporality. While Šušteršič and Van der Pol emphasised everyday rhythms of city life and cinema-going, von Wedemeyer apparently embraced a much more ‘cosmological’ model of cinematic space and time. Located on the outskirts of the city of Mardin, in southeastern Turkey, and designed in collaboration with an Istanbul architect, Gürden Gür, the project was devised as a permanent structure consisting of an open-air amphitheatre, a free-standing screen and a triangular base for a projector. It is located close to the old town (about a kilometre away), but positioned at a height so that the amphitheatre overlooks the open landscape of the Mesopotamian plain, visible directly behind the screen. As the sun sets it casts shadows forward onto the screen, producing a play of images. The mirroring on the reverse of the screen is also intended to catch and reflect light during the day, so that the structure is visible from a distance.

The project is partly informed by an interest in histories of light and optics — according to the press release, both *Sun Cinema* and von Wedemeyer’s film *Light and Space* (2010, another part of the same project) refer to studies of light and the human eye, developed in the Arab world prior to the widespread use of perspective in the West.³² But *Sun Cinema* also attempts to engage with the contemporary experience of social life in Mardin, which has been a site of Kurdish-Turkish conflict. As noted in the press materials accompanying the ‘My City’ programme, Mardin is home to

*a mixed population of Kurds, Turks, Syriacs and Arabs, as well as a small community of Armenians [...] Houses are built of honey-coloured stone and high walls offer protection against the sun but also indicate an enclosed and traditional way of life. Ancient customs and identities influence many aspects of life in the region, from the day-to-day to wider political and social issues.*³³

30 Graeme Hogg, Chiz Williams and Ben Slater in conversation with Adam Pugh, ‘Reclaiming the Cinema Space: The Cube a “Social Cinema”’, in A. Pugh (ed.), *Common Ground*, Norwich: AURORA, 2009, p.144. David E. James also provides a valuable account of micro-cinemas and film clubs in ‘L.A.’s Hipster Cinema’, *Film Quarterly*, vol.63, no.1, Fall 2009, pp.56–67.

31 This is the strategy employed by the Star and Shadow Cinema in Newcastle. See <http://www.starandshadow.org.uk/> (last accessed on 21 November 2011).

32 For background information on this research process see the press release accompanying von Wedemeyer’s exhibition ‘Sun Cinema’ at Galerie Jocelyn Wolff, Paris, 29 April – 2 July 2011, available at http://www.galeriewolff.com/content/us_exhibitions/CvW_Sun_Cinema_English_lr.pdf (last accessed on 19 October 2011).

33 The press release is available at the British Council’s website: http://www.britishcouncil.org/my_city_press.pdf (last accessed on 12 November 2011).



Apolonija Šušteršič
and Bik Van der Pol,
Sunset Cinema, 2007.
Installation view,
'Trans(ient) City',
Bonnevoüe,
Luxembourg.
Photograph:
JN van der Pol.
Courtesy the artists

So, although not explicitly stated, the project was devised for a context where social gathering is difficult. Von Wedemeyer's structure is designed to operate as a screening space, developed in consultation with a local film association, which will programme and use *Sun Cinema* as the main venue for their annual festival. It is conceivable that, in addition to providing a platform for the film club and serving as a landmark, von Wedemeyer's project might intervene in the social organisation of the city – simply by offering a gathering space at a slight distance from the public squares of the old town.

Projecting Publicness

Despite their differences, these projects share an engagement with cinema as a cultural form that has contributed to the production, and reorganisation, of urban time and space, but which is subject to change. Far from simply mimicking cinema as an already existing social form, these temporary cinemas draw attention to contradictory aspects of cinematic sociality: the tension between intimacy and collectivity, between privacy and publicness. Also, in each instance spectatorship is understood to coexist and overlap with other forms of looking, whether associated with tourism and urban *flânerie*, erotic desire, the everyday rhythms of neighbourhood activity or the sublime experience of the natural world.

Ultimately, the pervasiveness of the temporary cinema in recent public art might well be linked to the fact that it appears to offer a localisable form of publicness – potentially generating scenes of social participation that are attractive to commissioners and funders. But although these projects clearly draw upon images, memories and experiences of cinema as a cultural form with a long history, they do not necessarily constitute a nostalgic evocation of a lost and idealised sociality. Instead they make explicit the importance of desire, fantasy and projection in the ongoing production of the public sphere. By invoking shared memories and knowledges of cinema, these projects create a heightened awareness of the collective experience of time and space. This experience is intensified through the mobilisation of material, acoustic and architectural properties of viewing environments (whether cars, sculptural structures or scenic outdoor sites); through the alignment with temporal rhythms and routines associated with city life or the natural world; or by making visible existing forms of social gathering, such as the film club. Ultimately, these projects stake a common claim on cinema not as an ideal model of the 'social', or of the public sphere, but rather as a highly mutable form through which it may be possible to collectively explore – and potentially intervene in – the historical processes through which publics are constituted.