

PROJECT PROFILE

Maya Deren, *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, 1946James Benning, *RR*, 2007Sharon Lockhart, *Khalil, Shaun, A Woman under the Influence*, 1994

Reopening Experience

ALICE BUTLER PROFILES THE EXPERIMENTAL FILM CLUB, WHICH IS HOSTED MONTHLY BY THE IFI, DUBLIN.

THE Experimental Film Club (EFC) is a curatorial committee that programmes screenings of what can broadly be described as artist and experimental film at the Irish Film Institute, Dublin, where it first took up residence in 2010. The original EFC group was formed in 2008, shortly after the Dublin Film Festival brought co-founder of Anthology Film Archives and independent filmmaker Jonas Mekas over to Ireland. Alongside a screening programme of his films, Mekas was also invited to participate in a public discussion, which, in keeping with his request for an informal setting, took place at the Ha'penny Inn pub in Temple Bar. A busy crowd gathered to hear Mekas speak to Maeve Connolly, Aoife Desmond, Moira Tierney and Pip Chodorov about experimental film traditions and film collectives, which prompted the idea that this kind of work should be screened more regularly in Dublin.

In March 2008 visual artist and filmmaker Aoife Desmond approached filmmakers Alan Lambert, Esperanza Collado and Katie Lincoln (who was only involved for a short time) to form EFC. Collado, the only member with experience as a film curator at that stage, then invited Donal Foreman, also a filmmaker, to join them. For a long time, it was this core group of four people who organised regular screenings of work by seminal experimental filmmakers and contemporary visual artists – both Irish and international – in an effort to open up a dialogue between these different practices and explore the possible trajectories and qualities that connect them.

For the first year after its inception EFC events took place at the Ha'penny Inn pub. This was a natural choice after the success of the Mekas event, but there was also a precedent for the venue to play host to avant-garde screenings. The pub had done so once before for the Ha'penny Film Club, which was based there from October 1983 onwards and showed works such as Bob Quinn's *Cloch* (1978), Joe Comerford's *Emtigon* (1972) and the Belfast Film Workshop's *Acceptable Levels* (1983), as well as films by Vivienne Dick, Stan Brakhage and Hollis Frampton.¹

Lambert saw that the EFC was picking up in spirit from the Ha'penny Film Club, which itself was a kind of follow up to the formidable Project Cinema Club (1976 – 1980) led by Kevin Rockett at the Project Arts Centre. This club, as Maeve Connolly recounts, “introduced Irish audiences to structural-materialist work and European avant-garde traditions, screening films by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Jean-Luc Godard, as well as Peter Gidal, Malcolm le Grice and Michael Snow”.²

As Desmond explains, there was no professional business plan when EFC started out. The group shared the equipment they needed between them and they used Collado's own 16mm projector to screen prints. The original committee was simply driven to show this rare kind of work in Dublin. “In those venues, it survived hand to mouth, so to speak, literally on what came in at the door,” Lambert states. “I have very fond memories of those incarnations of the club as they were very personal and immediate – and very much in the tradition of informal artist gatherings”. From early on, some of the EFC screenings also incorporated live acts: John Porter gave a Super8 performance at the Ha'penny, Desmond invited The Forms to do a live accompaniment to

her ‘City Symphonies’ programme and Lambert asked zepkano to perform a soundtrack for an innovative and silent re-edit of *Tron*.

Despite an atmosphere of informality, a covenant that EFC adhered to – following Maeve Connolly's advice – was to ensure that artists were paid screening fees. Ticket sales went toward covering this cost. But in advance of this, the curators had to pay the artists' fees from their own pocket, in the hope that they would make it back on the night. While the cost to rent films was just about manageable, the real expense came from shipping prints over from international distributors by courier. The group often devised ways for the films to be picked up by friends in Paris or New York, packed in a suitcase and then brought over to Dublin by someone returning home for a visit. This kind of resourcefulness and the EFC organisers' access to a far-reaching network of artists and filmmakers ensured that the screenings continued to happen regularly.

In May 2009 Peter Kennedy from the Odessa Club approached Desmond to ask if EFC would consider presenting their screenings there. The set up at the Odessa was much more suited to screenings than the Ha'penny, as they had better equipment and technical facilities. EFC moved and ran events there up until June 2010, at which point Sarah Glennie, then Director at the IFI, invited the group to curate regular programmes of experimental film for what was at that time the cinema's brand new third screen. By this stage both Foreman and Collado had moved away from Ireland and consequently Desmond and Lambert opened EFC up to film curator and academic Daniel Fitzpatrick, whose first programme ‘The Train, The Cinema’ was screened to a packed house and featured a rare 16mm print of James Benning's extraordinary *RR* (2007).

Desmond stresses that running EFC would not have been sustainable had Sarah Glennie not invited the group to curate programmes for the IFI, thereby providing them with a professional cinema set-up, a wider platform for publicity and a budget for fees and transport. EFC was beginning to wind down, she claims, until Fitzpatrick joined the group and articulated how important it was to keep the screenings going. It was also at this point that I became involved with EFC, facilitating their events as part of my role in the programming department at the IFI. I attended every monthly screening and found that I always left feeling exhilarated and I happily joined the curatorial committee in the summer of 2014.

‘White Noise’ was one of the earlier programmes I saw that really stood out. It was an event guest curated by Florian Wüst, which brilliantly drew out interconnected themes and ideas expressed by a range of filmmakers including Wilhelm and Birgit Hein, Wolf Vostell and Sharon Lockhart. This was one of many examples that underlined the particular skill it takes to successfully bring discrete films together to form a programme that will work in a cinema setting rather than a gallery space. Another recent highlight was a programme of Nathaniel Dorsky films, curated by Collado and Lumière Magazine, which provided audiences with the unique opportunity to see works that are only available on 16mm prints and have to be screened at the slow, meditative rate of 18, rather than the standard 24 frames per second.

Critical engagement has always been an integral part of EFC events. From the beginning, the idea was to bring filmmakers over. If this isn't possible, programmes have been introduced either by the curator or a guest speaker. Laurie Uprichard, then Director of Dublin Dance Festival, introduced Desmond's ‘Dance Play Ritual’ programme, which included films by Maya Deren, Yvonne Rainer and John Porter. Hugh Campbell, Professor of Architecture at UCD, introduced ‘Street Films’ and Tony Hill, Pip Chodorov and Ed Atkins have all recently presented their work at EFC screenings, the last of which came about as a result of a partnership with Temple Bar Gallery + Studios.

Printed essays on the films are often handed out to the audience to provide them with as much context as possible and to promote the validity of work that, in terms of scale and means of production, is much smaller than what most audiences are accustomed to. EFC maintain a website that records every screening, uploads the poster designed for each event and includes any texts written about the programmes. In this way, EFC is both a curatorial and educational endeavour, filling the gap that exists in film education in Ireland on material that is perceived as being too ‘experimental’ and often slighted.

EFC's approach to what constitutes experimental film is, as Fitzpatrick puts it, “quite expansive”. It is closely aligned to esteemed film critic and programmer Nicole Brenez's thesis that, while a more conventional cinema “standardises emotions, sensation, perception and belief”, experimental cinema “re-opens the entire field of experience ... exploring all possible conceptions, which don't pre-exist the exploration itself.”³ This is something that is examined and brought to light in ‘Absences and (Im)possibilities: Traces of an Avant-Garde Cinema in Ireland’, an international touring programme of Irish experimental film works commissioned by IFI International and curated by Collado, Desmond, Foreman and Lambert.

The intention with EFC is to consider what this cinema has to offer both formally and conceptually, rather than force it to conform to some preconceived notion of what experimental film should look or sound like. The objective is also to excite discussion amongst what is typically a very cross-disciplinary audience made up of filmmakers, painters, musicians, dancers, curators, writers and designers in order to develop a degree of criticality about films that are complex and sometimes unapologetically oblique.

In April 2015, EFC will present its fiftieth projection. Plans for the next series of programmes at the IFI include screenings of work by Swedish filmmaker Gunvor Nelson, video artist George Barber and an exciting collaboration with the Project Arts Centre. It is a considerable achievement for a group who all work to curate and manage EFC voluntarily. This is something that the group is looking to redress, so that EFC can actively develop its contribution by continuing to show examples of cinema that risk being neglected and film work “of resistance and formal invention, explicitly opposed to the medium's dominant, industry-centric narrative”.⁴

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Notes

1. Maeve Connolly, ‘Sighting an Irish Avant Garde’, maeveconnolly.net

2. *Ibid.*

3. Nicole Brenez, quoted in Donal Foreman ‘Experimental Conversations: Ourselves Connected?’, estudiosirlandeses.org, 2006

4. Donal Foreman, ‘L'art Le Plus Politique’, brooklynrail.org, 2012