

Cinema Wants a Body or The Politics of the Red Carpet*

ESPERANZA COLLADO AND CHEVALIER VASSARD

Above all
E x p a n d e d c i n e m A
should, if at all possible,
e x p a n d the minds of the audience
as well as the mind of the E x p a n d e d c i n e a s T.
If we had hopes that it could expand the mind
of lecturers lecturing on expanded cinema,
the Tate Conference was the mother
of all expanded anticlimaxes.

Let us admit, to start with, that the most fascinating aspect of expanded cinema and the particular regime of more or less avant-gardist arts emerging in the 1960s and 70s, is the singularity of their inscription in the social construct by displacing art from its traditional cozy corner. The relationship between ways of production and forms of visibility determined a specific connection between politics and aesthetics, and one of the most significant consequences of this process is the resistance that such practices present in terms of market, collection, documentation and archiving in the context of art institutions.

The conference *Expanded Cinema: Activating the Space of Reception* that took place at Tate Modern last April was presented as an investigation into the expanded field of moving-images, including film, video, live projections, virtual reality, multimedia events, new media-technologies, and the ways such practices activate the space of reception by creating narratives and cultural communication. Among the artists, academics and historians present, thirty-five, an astonishingly large number, were invited to talk for 20 to 30 minutes each on different subjects related to the said title, a duration in which, as one might expect, almost no ideas were triggered whatsoever. To that effect, Tate Modern curator Stuart Comer assiduously waved his arms at the lectern in order to time and tame the potential development of dangerous perspectives.

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Much of the audience was visibly more interested in how expanded cinema is inherited in contemporary visual culture rather than a mere saccadic recreation of an invented history of this practice. The absence of VALIE EXPORT and Peter Weibel, which could have injected life into this funeral parlour, was unfortunate, to say the least. As a founder of ZKM, the Center for Art and Media Technology in Karlsruhe and co-curator of a recent show entitled *The Discreet Charm of Technology* (MEIAC, Spain), Peter Weibel could have interestingly contributed to an understanding of the inheritance of expanded cinema in contemporary culture. Moreover, as activists working at the turn of the decade, Weibel and EXPORT's commitment towards a redefinition of these art practices run contrary to the mechanics of representation and identification that the cinematographic medium entails. Their rejection was accompanied by what they called "audience activation", which consisted in dismantling the image of reality constructed and controlled by the media apparatus. Their public interventions - *Tapp und Tast Kino* (1968), *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969)- proclaimed a more tactile than visual cinematic perspective, and a discourse of the body that integrated new forms of experience into the quotidian, displacing radically the roles of both the artist and the audience. In *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969) EXPORT entered a darkened erotic cinema venue. Roaming up and down the aisles of the cinema with the crotch of her pants cut out, she shouted and challenged the public to grasp "the naked truth".

This type of cinematic experiences, taking the form of performances, installations and happenings, pronounced a very clear formula: cinema now wanted a body (Deleuze, 1986). Everything could be the screen, from the body of the performer to the bodies of the audience; and everything could replace the film, from the imagined film that occurs merely in the mind, as the Lettrists demonstrated, to the tactile films that we could even touch. Paul Sharits was a key artist in this regard. His name was constantly mentioned during the Tate conference, although his practice wasn't conceptualized with accuracy in the context of the discourse of the body and its significance in expanded cinema. Sharits' flicker films, often distributed in gallery spaces as multiple screen installations or 'locational films', as he called them, are exceptionally situated at the turning point of the previously mentioned request of cinema, the body. Flicker cinema's approach (Tony Conrad, Peter Kubelka, Paul Sharits) had led experimental filmmaking to a degree zero, at the doors of its total dematerialization. With its metrical montage, its absence of images, and its luminous impulses, cinema saw a decrease towards its own genetic material: the simplicity of a strip of celluloid running, imageless, through a projector's gate. Cinema was no longer happening within the limitations of its medium (screen, filmstrip, projector) inasmuch as in an intermittent flux of light that could marvelously alter the nervous system. Sharits' films explored these ideas, which are inevitably connected to the abolishment of uni-directional screenings common to expanded cinema. In 1978, *Film Culture* published a piece of his writings in which he describes the basic principles of a new kind of cinematic practice, cinema as situations or 'democratic cinema'. According to Sharits, cinema had to take place in open, public spaces of free

access, moving away from the classical presentations of directional and illusionist cinema venues. The spectator could come and go at will, since the film would not impose a predetermined time of contemplation. This would be achieved by presenting film works with an unmasked content, of a non-evolutive composition, discernible immediately.

At the conference, on the contrary, there was very little reflection on the "reception" part of its title, that is to say, there was no exploration of social repercussions. This, and other expectations, created certain frustrations that surfaced during the Q&A sessions, and were covered up at the end with self-satisfying conclusions. Among other nonsensical deliriums, the audience clamoured for more "radical film sections in museums" and institutionalized spaces for the exhibition of expanded cinema (!), since, as it was often stated, young curators are increasingly focusing nowadays on expanded cinema practices. The ultimate goal seems to be the popularization and institutionalization of avant-garde cinema. Applause! THE WORD EXISTS and IT SPEAKS VOLUMES : V U L G A R I Z A T I O N !

The most obvious discrepancy between the nature of expanded cinema practices and what seems the real interest of Tate Modern is incrustated in a voracious appetite for sell-outs and the perpetuation of self-importance.

Refreshments were served in the guise of Eugeni Bonet, who enlightened us all on the practice of José Val del Omar (1904-1982), the eccentric Spanish filmmaker who coined the acronym PLAT, standing for Picto-Luminic-Audio-Tactile art.

Thanks to Bonet, we went away not totally empty-headed.

Time to state and 'constate' that the comedy reaches its pitch, as is usually the case at this sort of event, when the term 'politics' comes into play...but the carpet, of course, is red.

Viva lo moderno!