

On “Artists’ Cinema” and “Moving-Image Art”¹

by Roger Beebe

I was asked to write about the present and future of “artists’ cinema” and “moving-image art.” This language conflates two traditions that I still have a stake in separating: experimental film and (gallery/museum) video art. It’s a move that I’ve seen frequently enough these last years that I’m tempted to say that conflation is what characterizes the current state of the field.

Institutionally, as of January I find myself in a position that confuses these worlds as well, as a newly minted “moving-image artist” in the Department of Art at the Ohio State University. I teach a sequence of classes called Video Art I and Video Art II. While all the finalists for the position were people who self-identify as experimental filmmakers, my colleagues in the department are all studio artists who exhibit primarily in galleries and museums. A big part of the challenge of the job is explaining to my colleagues the difference between these two modes of making and exhibiting, and the different demands (technological, temporal, aesthetic) made by each.

I’m still interested (and I think I’m not alone in this) in experimental film (its histories, techniques, mode of exhibition, etc.), and I have some objection to this relabeling of my practice under an art world rubric. I get that some in experimental film want to claim the prestige of art for our practice, but I am more inclined to reject that kind of prestige. Some of us have chosen experimental film for precisely the ways it resists some of the worst tendencies of the art world. Experimental film is decentered: Iowa City or Ann Arbor can be as important as New York (and it’s a lot cheaper to live and make work in Iowa or Michigan). Experimental film is poor, so its motives are (relatively) pure: there is (almost) no culture of superstars, and the gap between established and emergent makers is relatively small. What gatekeepers do exist are more or less interchangeable—there’s no Whitney

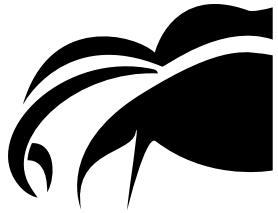
Biennial (for example) to make or break your career; there’s not even really a “career” to break or make.

But further, experimental film has created a mode of exhibition that serves the work. Installation does work well for some film and video, but not for most. Dwell times in museums and galleries are notoriously short—I once heard 45 seconds as an average, but that still sounds long. Is a time-based medium well served by that? (Is any medium well served by that? Painting? Sculpture?) Bright rooms with small monitors and headphones for audio and people entering and exiting the work at random points can’t possibly be what most makers have in mind when crafting their films and videos. For that reason, seeking to circulate work exclusively in an environment that is designed to deliver audiences willing to sit through a film or a program of films from start to finish seems like something worth fighting for, and experimental film festivals, microcinemas, and other (non-art) venues are still fighting that fight.

I’m not naïve about the limitations of festivals either. Audiences can be small. Projection can be bad. Programming can be disappointing. Most work drops out of circulation after a run of a few years. Nor am I naïve about the problem of having to pay the bills by some means other than one’s filmmaking. (There’s an element of bad faith for those of us who teach experimental film for a paycheck. It keeps me up at night. It really does.) But given the alternatives, I’d at least say that for myself, I’ll throw my weight behind the future of “artists’ cinema”—or the future I’d like to see at least—being one that maintains a separate space (literal and figurative) for the creation and exhibition of works of experimental film and video.

There’s something more to be said here about film vs. video, especially as it’s mobilized in the traditional

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names for these things—experimental *film* versus-*video* art. I do think that the medium specificity that these designations imply is largely a thing of the past with even many of the older generation of experimental filmmakers making the transition to video and with 16mm film making considerable inroads in the gallery/museum world. So perhaps

this move beyond medium specificity is also one of the things that characterizes the present state of affairs, although we've seen this coming (at least the increasing importance of video for experimental filmmakers) for decades.