Re-Enacting Expanded Cinema: Three Case Studies

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ABSTRACT

Since 2003, the practice of Sydney's Teaching and Learning Cinema has involved the re-enactment of Expanded Cinema performances from the 1960s and 70s. As artists, we have discovered that direct access to the work of our aesthetic precursors is essential for understanding, and building upon the work of the past. However, since many Expanded Cinema events were ephemeral and situated in time and place, they do not easily lend themselves to documentation and archiving. As a result, the works are poorly represented in art history. Re-creating them in our own 'here and now' is a creative pedagogical process, in which the works become available once again for first-hand experience.

Clearly, these re-creations are not 'authentic' or 'correct' - rather, the very concept of authenticity and the integrity of the bounded art event are brought into question by this unique form of practice-based research. In this paper, we touch on three three Expanded Cinema works we have re-created - William Raban's 2'45" (1973); and Anthony McCall's 'Long Film for Ambient Light' (1975) and Guy Sherwin's 'Man with Mirror' (1976).

We discuss the dilemmas that emerge from such a process. Geographical distance, cultural context and technological developments all make significant demands on the resourcefulness and wit of the re-enactors. Emerging from this process, our re-enactments generate an organic living history, in which the works are 'kept alive' through the practice of passing them from one generation to the next.

KEYWORDS **expanded cinema, re-enactment, pedagogy, performance, inter-generational exchange**

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Expanded Cinema

The term "Expanded Cinema", which came into use in the 1960s and 70s, refers to an expansion beyond the rectangular projection screen, so that the "frame" of the artwork might also incorporate the screening event itself. The scope of such works was not limited to their "content", but also foregrounded the context in which the work was presented, including the architectural space of the cinema, and the social transaction between filmmaker and audience. Artists working with expanded cinema often created physical interventions in the cinema or gallery, such as flashing light bulbs

which illuminated the whole room, the release of smoke which lit up the "cone of light" from the projector, or the intervention of a performing body in combination with the projected moving image.[i] In part, such works emerged from a history of material and structural filmmaking, as well as minimalism, conceptualism and performance art (Curham 2004).

Experience and Re-Enactment

Since 2000, there has been a resurgence of interest in the expanded cinema of the 1960s and 70s.[ii] However, expanded cinema, in common with other works of live art from this period, presents a dilemma for art history. How can we really "know" what they were like? We believe that re-enactment allows access to something that eludes traditional research methods. It enables us to physically explore the context of the work - the social interactions that surround it, and the architectural situation it works within. There is an inherently *experiential* aspect to Expanded Cinema events which re-enactment is able to reach.

The basic archival elements from which we begin include information about the work left in archives: notes by the artists, survey publications, reviews, photographs; and - as some of the artists have themselves taken up working with these pieces again - recent documentation of their own re-inventions. Such archival strands can be pieced together to become tentative "scores" for our own re-enactments. Re-enactment allows us to "put the archive to work". In this sense it also has the potential to allow us to contribute to an ongoing discussion about how ephemeral art might be meaningfully documented, so that it can continue to be activated for future audiences.

A background to Teaching and Learning Cinema

Teaching and Learning Cinema (TLC) is an artists' collective based in Sydney, Australia which pursues a programme of action-research around the histories of experimental cinema. Since 2003, we have been exploring Expanded Cinema re-enactments. Initially, we were drawn to these works due to their philosophical connection to 1970s performance art and Fluxus. We were also interested in their potential as precursors to much "new-media" art which has been emerging in recent years. As we began our research, we noticed a certain cultural amnesia. Contemporary media artists didn't know about, or hadn't thought to explore, the interactive strategies of these analogue pioneers. And yet, the ambitions of new media art were often quite similar to those of the early expanded cinema works. These ambitions include the desire to directly address the audience, and the spatialised presentation of the moving image beyond the rectangular projection screen (Ihlein 2005). Because of their original focus on a live and embodied interaction with an audience in a physical space, we felt that to understand these historical precursors usefully, we needed to actually work through the

decisions involved in re-making or re-enacting them.

The first re-enactments we worked with were not well-produced. Hastily prepared without consultation with the original artists, we drew upon the most basic, public-domain secondary sources. These re-enactment "sketches" were our fumbling attempts at grasping the vague shape of the original work, to discover a sense of how these pieces play with cinema and live performance. Our early re-enactments included William Raban's *2'45"*, Takehisa Kosugi's "film purification" works *Film* and *Film #4*, Annabel Nicholson's *Reel Time*, and Valie Export's *Ping Pong* (Curham and Ihlein 2004).

Since 2005, however, we have sought to create deeper communicative relationships with the artists whose works we re-enact. Such relationships allow us to acknowledge that our re-activation of these works is absolutely linked to the original creative works (rather than being simply an appropriation, parody, cover-version or "mash-up"). In their simplest form, our conversations with the originating artists offer us the chance to check details and discuss the dilemmas presented by re-enactment. In some cases, a strong inter-generational relationship develops – akin to the careful passing down of practical knowledge via oral-history.

We now turn to the approach the Teaching and Learning Cinema takes in re-enacting Expanded Cinema, via three case studies: Guy Sherwin's *Man With* Mirror (re-enacted as *(Wo)man With Mirror*) in 2009; Anthony McCall's *Long Film for Ambient Light (*1976), re-enacted in 2007; and William Raban's *2'45"*, re-enacted from 2004-7.

The Three Works and the TLC's Re-enactments

William Raban's *2'45"*

Originally presented in London in 1973, the title *2'45"* (or two minutes and forty five seconds) refers to the duration of the piece. Like John Cage's *4'33"* (of which this work is, in a sense, a cinematic reprise) *2'45"* foregrounds the present experience of the audience itself. A 16mm projector, not loaded with film, projects white light onto the screen, for the amount of time specified in the title. The artist announces the title and location of the piece from the front of the room, whilst a film camera next to the projector shoots the entire event, framing the screen and the audience, and capturing ambient sound in the cinema. The following evening this process is repeated. The film shot the previous night (which has since been rapidly developed) is projected, and so on for several iterations. Every time *2'45"* is projected and re-filmed, the new iteration contains a record of all the

previous showings.

Image 1: Teaching and Learning Cinema, *Six Minutes* (after William Raban), 2007, Performance Space residency at Carriageworks, Sydney. Still from digital video.

TLC Re-enactment: *Six Minutes* (2007)

2'45'' presented considerable challenges for re-enactment. While Raban's original timeframe of the work was determined by the standard length of commercially available 16mm film, we decided to re-make the work using digital video. Why? Reasoning that 16mm film was a widely available commercial format in 1973, we figured that digital video was today's equivalent. To return to 16mm celluloid would be to give the work a "nostalgic feel" which the 16mm film did not possess at that time. However, the decision to work in digital video, while certainly an accessible contemporary technology, created a problem for us. How long should our version of the work endure? Given that mini-DV video tapes have a duration of an hour or more, should we force our audience to sit still for this extended period of time?

In our early experiments, we simply adopted Raban's *2'45''* timespan for our digital video version. In later versions, however, we expanded the duration to six minutes (and re-titled the work accordingly) – noticing that this slightly longer period of time afforded the audience a better opportunity to settle and become self-consciously reflective about the screening event itself. It was this "experiential essence" (rather than the originally-determined time-frame and celluloid medium) which we deemed to be a key to unlocking Raban's *2'45''*.

Anthony McCall's *Long Film for Ambient Light* (1975)

Part of McCall's set of "minimalist" expanded cinema works, *Long Film for Ambient Light* reduces cinema to its most basic elements: light, time, space, screen, and audience. Originally presented at New York's Ideas Warehouse, this "film" consists of a room, empty except for a single bare lightbulb hanging at eye-level. The windows are covered with translucent paper, and on the wall are hung two paper documents: a statement entitled "Notes in Duration", and a chart showing the fluctuations in light levels in the room over a period of time. The audience can come and go as they wish during the 24 hour period of the work's public showing. As McCall points out in his "Notes in Duration", this work demonstrates that our ability to perceive or experience change is clearly a function of the quality of attention we are able to pay – and this, in turn, is affected by the amount of time which frames any "event".

Image 2: Teaching and Learning Cinema, *Long Film For Ambient Light* (after Anthony McCall), 2007, Performance Space residency at Carriageworks, Sydney. Photograph by Lucas Ihlein.

TLC re-enactment: *Re-creating the Conditions for Long Film for Ambient Light* (2007)

Since *Long Film for Ambient Light* involves the careful installation of a set of elements within a room, each time it is presented the preparation process will be different. In our version, we worked at Sydney's Performance Space, in a cavernous post-industrial studio with large north-facing windows. We set the duration of the work to begin at noon on Friday, and end at noon on Saturday, with the room available to visitors at any time within this timeframe. One of the motivations for our

re-enactment of this piece was the fact that in 1975, no documentation about how the work was experienced by its audience had been left behind. To counter this lack of archival material, we took extensive notes about our own experience of the work, as well as working with audience-experience expert Lizzie Muller to generate a series of in-depth audio interviews with invited visitors to the work.[iii]

Guy Sherwin's *Man with Mirror* (1976-present)

In *Man with Mirror*, Sherwin filmed himself in a London park manipulating (tilting, panning, rotating) a white-backed mirror. The proportions of the mirror exactly match the 4:3 ratio of the super 8 film frame, and Sherwin's movements consciously play with the fixed frame of the camera. In performance, the film is projected into a darkened space in which Sherwin again manipulates the same mirror/screen, sometimes revealing the projection, and sometimes using the mirror to re-project the image around the room. The result is a confusing and beguiling visual experience. As the years pass, the "real" Guy Sherwin ages, whereas the 1976 "filmed" Sherwin stays forever in his late 20s. Thus the audience's experience of the work continually changes over time, and the work becomes a poetic reflection on change and mortality.

Image 3: Guy Sherwin demonstrates for Teaching and Learning Cinema the performance choreography of *Man With Mirror*, using his son Kai's high-chair table as a stand-in for the mirror/screen, IMA Brisbane 2008. Guy was a guest of the OtherFilm Festival 2008 (OtherFilm 2008). Photograph by Lucas Ihlein and Guy Sherwin.

TLC re-enactment: *(Wo)man with Mirror* **(2009)**

Given that *Man with Mirror* involves a performer working with film footage of himself, re-enacting this piece necessarily involved shooting a new film. However, since there were two of us working on this re-enactment, we decided to *each* produce a new version of the work (hence the name of our re-enactment, *(Wo)man with Mirror)*. One of the developments we made, in altering the work from its original version, was the decision for the two of us to perform *simultaneously*. In *(Wo)man with Mirror*, two performers face each other across the room - in a sense mirroring each other's movements. Part of our motivation for embarking on this re-enactment was the knowledge that Guy Sherwin could not carry on performing *Man with Mirror* forever. By the time Sherwin becomes too old to perform, we hope that our own versions of the work will have matured, and we will be able to carry on and extend the tradition. Furthermore, in an attempt to enable others to produce new versions of the work, we decided to share the knowledge we discovered in the production of the re-enactment. To this end, we published *(Wo)man with Mirror: A User's Manual* – a brochure detailing the practical considerations involved in re-enacting the piece.

Some aspects of the TLC's Practical Philosophy of Re-Enactment

Pedagogy+Hospitality

In taking a "teaching and learning" approach to the creation of public events, TLC attempts to generate an "open-source" atmosphere, rather than being protective custodians of special knowledge. We seek to make any information we have unearthed available to all. For instance, in 2007, when we worked with Anthony McCall's *Long Film for Ambient Light* (1975), we assumed that our audience knew little of the original work. To give visitors a way into this work, we produced a "zine" style reader of all the key source material we had amassed, including our notes about the decisions we had made in mounting this particular enactment of *Long Film for Ambient Light*. These notes, along with original articles and archival material bound in a large folder, were laid out for visitors to the event to access. Similarly, the *(Wo)man with Mirror: A User's Manual* brochure lays bare the processes carried out by TLC in the re-making of the work. This is produced not just "for information's sake", but also so that others might take up the practical challenge of producing their own version of the work, thus ensuring its survival through proliferation.

Our goal in informing our audience in these ways is to engage in an ethic of disclosure. Employing transparency in our presentation, which also emphasises our doubts and admits our own limitations,

we seek to allow our audience access to the "authority" of the original work, while simultaneously enjoying the "riff" of our re-enactment. By foregrounding where our decisions might have diverged from the original, our intention is to provide our audience with enough knowledge to understand, and indeed to critique for themselves, the work's shift to re-enactment. The opportunity for such analysis adds depth to the work, bringing it to the audience's consciousness as a dual entity – a way of experiencing the "original", while at the same time, self-consciously reflecting on the mediating forces which allow such an experience. In this manner, both the original and the re-enactment can momentarily hover in the same physical and psychic space.

In planning for re-enactments, we spend time questioning how our audience might experience the works. We make sure our events are "hospitable" - not only, as mentioned above, by providing enough information to allow the audience to access the piece in a wider context, but also, hospitable in a literal sense – including the offering of food, drink, and concessions to comfort. In *Long Film for Ambient Light*, hospitality took on a formal presence in the space: given that the work endures for 24 hours, we decided to include gym mats for visitors to sit and lay upon.

TLC's philosophy of hospitality reflects our ambition to re-stage the work so that we, and our audience, have the best possible chance to be receptive to it. This acknowledges the exchange-relationship which is intrinsic in the teaching and learning model, as well as the model of reciprocal exchange embedded within expanded cinema's desire to make direct contact with the audience.

A Practice-Based Research Approach
As artists, we also acknowledge limits to the preparation we are able undertake in putting these re-enactments together. We research as thoroughly as we can but we make no claim that our findings are definitive. Our purpose is pragmatic rather than exhaustive – endeavouring to assemble a "working score" of each piece, in the process uncovering the creative decisions which are necessary in making it again.

Published sources - reviews, journal articles, survey books, at best offer a descriptive sketch of the work. As "scores", they are far from precise, leaving many choices open to us. This led us early on to recognise the work of re-enacting as a *creative practice* in itself, one appropriate for us *as artists* to undertake - rather than attempting to position ourselves in the deferential, less interventionist role of conservators or curators.

In re-enactment, the creative work is located in both thinking through, and experiencing for ourselves, decisions analogous to those which might have been made by the original filmmakers. By literally re-assembling or re-making the works, we start to understand from the inside what material circumstances a work demands. In the 2000s, these circumstances nearly always differ substantially from the original context. We have therefore developed the practice of careful observation of our points of divergence from the original. While we endeavour to follow the "score" of the work as precisely as possible, we are looking specifically for what is *unavoidably unique to us* in re-staging the work. We start to see what transformations are inevitable, given the temporal, cultural and geographic shifts in context. In this way, our variations usefully, self-reflexively, highlight these unavoidable shifts in context.

An "Experiential Essence"?

While we acknowledge that there can be no precise "getting it right", we have become more and more interested in working as closely as possible to the information we have about earlier versions of the works. We have found that they often possess what might be described as an "experiential essence". If we move too far from this essence, the original work fails to become "activated". We draw this conclusion based on re-enactments which we sense have outright "failed" - in that we have not been able to bring them to life in the present.

For instance, our early attempt at re-enacting William Raban's *2'45"* (2003-6) used digital video. Shooting and re-taping, the image and sound disintegrated very quickly, showing us that the change of medium had a substantial impact on the work. However, we do not believe that this was the main reason why the work failed. Rather, we had made our iterations irregularly, over a number of months, rather than on consecutive days. (In Raban's work, the iterations had occurred on consecutive days in the same venue, often with a repeat audience.) In this way, our version failed to generate the kind of charged, self-conscious atmosphere which we imagined was the "essence" of the original. Our later attempt at re-enacting this work (also using digital video) recognised this need to tightly focus: not only by using better technology, and more carefully controlling the physical constraints of the screening room, but also by shaping the social circumstances framing the event itself. For works like *2'45"*, identifying the essence of the work is something we can discover only by trial and error. The repetition of several iterations of the work, in the same venue, to the same audience, turns out to be an key element to activating the work – a fact which seems obvious to us now, but which did not emerge until some time after we had begun our re-enactment process.

Having lived through these challenges in trying to present re-enactments which embody the

"experiential essence" of various expanded cinema pieces, we now acknowledge that this process involves decisions that can be meaningfully guided by the original, but cannot be definitively set by it. Slippages, when carefully observed, are an inevitable and useful part of our re-enactments. However, the reason why these particular pieces by Raban, Sherwin and McCall can withstand the "slippages of re-enactment" is that the original impulses within their works are strong enough to be intelligible within our recent versions, even as a new context is laid on top of the old.

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Biographical Notes

Louise Curham is a film artist and audiovisual archivist. Well known for curating innovative expanded cinema events in non-traditional exhibition spaces, Curham is highly regarded in the experimental film world for her work using 'obsolete media'. She is involved with Teaching and Learning Cinema, a filmmakers and film lovers group with a focus on re-presenting moving image works from previous generations in events that encourage discussion and break down the passivity of looking at images. <http://teachingandlearningcinema.org>

Lucas Ihlein is an artist who works with communication and social exchange. Since 2005, he has been working on a series of blog-as-art projects about particular locations: a small country town in Western Australia <www.kellerberrin.com> and his own suburb, Petersham, in Sydney <www.thesham.info>. Lucas also works with the Teaching and Learning Cinema on re-enactments of key works of Expanded Cinema from the 1970s. He recently completed a practice-based PhD in creative arts at Deakin University.

i	Examples include Malcolm Le Grice's *Castle 1*, 1966, which involved the combination of flashing lightbulb and projected film; Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone*, 1973, the first of McCall's so-called "solid light films"; and Annabel Nicholson's *Reel Time*, 1973, involving the artist working at a sewing machine punching holes in a long loop of projected film.

ii	Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* (1973) has been widely shown since its inclusion in the 2001-2 Whitney exhibition *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964 – 1977.* Besides TLC's "unofficial" re-enactment in 2007, McCall has "exhumed" and exhibited *Long Film for Ambient Light* in various galleries in Europe during the past five years. Guy Sherwin's *Man With Mirror* (1976), was not publically screened at all in the 1990s, whereas Sherwin has performed to the work many times since 2000. William Raban's *2'45"* was re-created by the artist himself in London in 2009 (this time, on 35mm film, with the work renamed *4'22"*).

iii	An in-depth account of this version of *Long Film For Ambient Light* is forthcoming as Ihlein, L. "Attending to Anthony McCall's Long Film for Ambient Light", in Jones, A. & Heathfield, A. (eds), *Perform Repeat Record – an Anthology of Live Art in History*, Routledge.