

# Pomp and Circumstance

The Ever-Expanding Film Festival

by **Andréa Picard**

*"I do not claim to shed great light upon the obscurity in which we cross, but sometimes a gleam of a match is enough to make us understand that we are at the edge of a precipice."* —Antonio Tabucchi

The great novelist and essayist Antonio Tabucchi has recently released *Au pas de l'oie*, a mock game of snakes and ladders in which the author denounces and analyzes the political corruption which plagued his native Italy under the feudal, face-lifted, Armani-wearing Berlusconi. Tabucchi's *jeu de l'oie*, while employing a gameboard structure in order to elucidate false moves and opportunistic strategies, is characteristically and wryly elliptical. With a cue from Tabucchi, let's recount the fervent and now oft-repeated fears that have sounded from a number of international programming circles

about the dawning disappearance of film. Regrettably, much is at risk; some, but not all is financial or economic. (Funding problems, sadly, are a given and continue to worsen.) First, a related note: In 2005, Swiss-based artist Gianni Motti claimed to have sculpted a bar of soap from the congealed fat that had been extracted from Berlusconi during a liposuction procedure. The work, titled *Mani Pulite*, a *double entendre* of "manipulate" and "clean hands" in Italian, sold for \$18,000 on the art market. This wildly unpredictable and seemingly scandalously arbitrary high-end souk has become a source of fear for film programmers who see a natural progression for art cinema to abandon its festival and cinemathèque screenings—audiences for which are dwindling—to enter the acropolis of high art with its lure of money and libertine glamour. After all, festivals have their open-bar parties, but art fairs have Dita Von Teese.

A cistern of arguments exploring the art versus film equation, or the more common and obtusely traditional "white cube" versus "black box" dichotomy has been filled, tipped, and refilled countless times since the '60s. Today's cycle frames the debate thusly: How can we introduce cinematic landmarks to a new audience, one whose film literacy likely stems from the Criterion Collection and who may not be able to detect the differences between film and video? How can we attract people to cinemathèques for more adventurous work? While programmers from both sides of the ocean share a prescient concern, the solutions offered and often put into practice have created a danger that too few have ventured to voice. Perhaps this threat lurks in crevices so small that its detection has been overlooked. Or maybe it's just too damn obvious. Pessimistically, I think the danger we face is being irresponsibly curtailed in the name of audience expansion supposedly to save this dissolving artform that we all cherish so much. But at what cost?

At a recent panel discussion tackling the topic of "Expanding Film Festivals"—expanding implying the off-shoot of film and video installation—as part of the Forum Expanded section of this year's Berlinale, a longstanding and notable film programmer, who will, in the spirit of Tabucchi, go unnamed, suggested that film be removed from its "passive" cinema environment and be released into a more social and dynamic space, like that of a gallery or museum setting.



*A Voyage on the North Sea and other works by Marcel Broodthaers*

A strikingly similar view is mirrored in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue for “Beyond Cinema: The Art of Projection,” a sprawling and ambitious show of important film and video installation works which was on view at the Hamburger Bahnhof during the festival and to which this panel was appropriately tied. Cinema’s black box is described as “a setting which nullifies the social dimension of collective viewing.” Passivity and nullification, old myths that have long since been dispelled, are suddenly back in play, spreading infections of paranoia and undue alarm. Cries for a Scorpio Rising from a perceived ground zero; a call to arms against stagnation; a plural vow to rail against the morass of old-fashioned film curation, which has lost out to the advances of technology and to the increasing seduction of art’s glossy commercialization. Larger issues such as education, creative marketing, and cultural understanding were only cursorily mentioned.

As the panel discussion progressed, a mounting, and rather entertaining, opposition developed—one which admittedly lent legitimacy to the friction between art curation and film curation—but there seemed to be an overall impassioned consensus that festivals must contend with the growing trends in multi-media art production, and that drastic measures must be taken to save the so-called artist’s cinema. But where was the opposition to these false claims that watching films in a movie theatre is a simple act of reception, lacking in engagement, social, emotional, intellectual or otherwise? I mean, we are not talking about commercial schlock here. Ask Charles Burnett, who in Berlin emerged from the packed screenings of his restored *Killer of Sheep* (1977) glassy-eyed and overwhelmed by the resounding enthusiasm and high level of discourse initiated from members of the audience. The unanimous exhilaration with which the film was met speaks louder than any argument put forth at the panel. Such experiences rest in the realm of the ineffable: We’ve all been moved, knocked breathless, devastated, awakened to the beauty of form and poetry, energized by our experiences in the movie theatre—sometimes, the collective laugh or tears which confirm our sense of community saves us from losing faith.

The idea alone of a locked-up, passive experience just doesn’t stick in light of the cinephiles who continue to flock to films by Naruse or Visconti, and who, despite diminished numbers, almost fetishistically look forward to their next seated marathon, from *Satantango* (1994) to the newly available *Out 1*, a veritable back-breaker. While offering more possibilities and variations for projection, gallery spaces are rarely conducive to serious contemplation of moving image art. And if serious is objected to, one might as well give up. Stan Douglas, smartly and with the privilege afforded

his role as co-curator of the aforementioned “Beyond Cinema” show, eschewed the risk by insisting that his 16mm *Overture* be enclosed within a cinema-like space. The message was loud and clear. Projecting in a gallery is no easy feat, as any curator will attest. Unfortunately, rising to this vocational challenge seems less important than presenting as many works as possible. Quantity over quality appears as the prevailing edict in spaces where noise bleed and poor video projection do more harm than good by misrepresenting or poorly representing an artist’s work. Christoph Girardet’s latest installation *Nero*, shown at Berlin’s Büro Friedrich Gallery, looked intriguing but the sound was inaudible—the work could not be understood both in an aural and a deeper interpretive sense.

It’s time to demand curatorial responsibility from those who determine which works are worth presenting, whether it be inside or outside of the cinema theatre—and this includes working together to ensure film literacy and an appreciation of film and video’s unique properties and languages. When filmic works, some of utmost tactility, are being transferred from celluloid to DVD in order to be projected to what seems to be a larger audience or a more receptive and hipper space, questions not only of authenticity but of artistic intent must be acutely considered. The much discussed “Le mouvement des images” show at the Pompidou provided examples aplenty of experimental works from the ‘20s and onward that were projected on DVD, negating their unique qualities as hand-made works of art where intimacy with the medium reigns supreme. Stan Douglas identifies his filmic works as sculpture to ensure that galleries and museums do not transfer them to a lesser format for presentation purposes. But what about artists who are no longer with us, or those in the nascent stages of their careers who shy away from providing specific exhibition direction, fearful of jeopardizing their chance to be shown?

Slippages will occur. A 35mm film shown in Toronto, say, then in Berlin, remains the same work. There are obvious factors that will affect the two screenings, but generally speaking, the same work will be screened and those two audiences could hypothetically discuss the film outside of the conditions in which it was shown. Not so for moving image art, which is subjected to slippages of meaning that come about through the changes in their installation. Deirdre Logue’s *Why Always Instead of Just Sometimes*, a bittersweet, enigmatically mesmerizing video installation was first shown last April during the Images Festival at Toronto’s Paul Petro Gallery, extension cords dangling down the walls like wild wisteria, connecting the eight or so monitors which hung mid-way up the walls of the rectangular room. The battling sounds and monologues contributed to a heightened

sense of neurosis and chaos; an intentional confrontation of strange, catchy electronica with the artist's repetitive, obsessive questions emanating from the speakers. Transported overseas and handsomely mounted in the very Zen Marshall McLuhan room in the Canadian Embassy for Forum Expanded, *Why Always Instead of Just Sometimes* was completely transformed into an elegant, subdued, almost placid piece that could be comfortably viewed from the circular leather bench in the centre of the room. There were only four monitors, and one could not see them all from any given vantage point while seated. The sound—a wiry doodle—seemed to be for the vernissage. As I sat admiring the images, a woman seated to my left politely handed me a set of headphones attached to the hub of the bench behind us. When I put them on, I promptly heard the Canadian national anthem blaring in my ears—not, assuredly, part of the piece.

Other factors to consider, obvious and seemingly trifling but nevertheless significant, include whether or not a bench is placed before a film or video installation, whether the work screens on a loop, has stated screening times, displays its mechanisms—i.e., the projector—can properly be heard, has crisp definition in its image (if that is its intention), and so forth. The admirable objectives and expansive curatorial thinking behind “Le mouvement des images” should be acknowledged despite the numerous problems the exhibition raises and partakes in. Its thesis, which follows a Greenbergien line of trajectory, could function as a history lesson for both film and art curators depicting crossover, influence, and play between the two discursive terrains. The two fields have been intertwined since the birth of cinema; convergence is, frankly, old hat. Yet I’ve met far too many art curators working with multi-media who have never heard of Stan Brakhage.

Marcel Broodthaers, the Brussels-born *enfant terrible* who produced remarkably literate and perversely dense yet mischievous installation art, created a “cinéma d’artiste” which was considered “anti-cinéma-thèque.” He created his own museums—sometimes in his studio—where his films would be shown. Broodthaers’s charming film *La pluie*, as projected on DVD in the Pompidou show, looked unremarkable, flattened and faded. However, in Berlin, where the films were projected on 16mm in their own enclosed spaces, his two pieces *Une minute d’éternité* and *A Voyage on the North Sea* were standouts of the “Beyond Cinema” show (along with Tacita Dean’s *Disappearance at Sea*, a disguised Moholy-Nagy homage; Anthony McCall’s enchanting and spectral *Line Describing a Cone*, Warhol’s diptych *Outer and Inner Space* and Paul Sharits’ explosive, sculptural and abra-



*Why Always Instead of Just Sometimes*

sively intense *Epileptic Seizure Comparison*). The one-second *Une minute d’éternité* is a mere hand-drawn inscription of the artist’s initials (looking undeniably similar to Brakhage’s signature SB end scratches). It’s the most theoretically charged second committed to film, perfectly encapsulating film’s presence/absence dialectic and does so without a whiff of pretension.

An artist who embraced fissures, Broodthaers’s sophisticated genius lies in his ability to precede questions of urgency in art practice. A steadfast sense of curatorial accountability, as well as one of adventure and curiosity should replace the fear being expressed in certain filmic circles. Is it a dangerous thought to propose a dissolution of certain boundaries between film and art? Certainly so if quality is put at risk, but what of a mere transgression of genres? Some of the most revolutionary filmmakers/video artists working today are those engaging with narrative and distended time, not those who would traditionally be labelled avant-garde. Arthouse cinema production is thriving, and the “cinéma d’artiste” does not stop at James Benning or Robert Beavers, but should also include the likes of Pedro Costa and Apichatpong Weerasethakul. We find ourselves at a critical juncture, and perhaps renaming or redefining the avant-garde would counter the threat of extinction that looms when the demands of audience development permit costly concessions to be made. But if we do not protect the conditions (i.e., the ability and circumstance of film and video to be shown to an audience in a cinema setting, in its proper exhibition format), when the next Straub-Huillet come along—and they will—there will be no audience for this type of work, no place for it in film’s present discourse. We may not be at a ground zero, but “the edge of a precipice” is perilously near. ■