

## **‘Joined together there is power, sister’: Re-viewing feminist work from the London Film-makers’ Co-operative**

Sophie Mayer<sup>1</sup> and Selina Robertson<sup>2</sup>

“From Reel to Real: Women, Feminism and the London Filmmakers Co-operative” (London, Tate Modern, September 2016)

2016 marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the London Filmmakers’ Co-operative (LFMC), a ground-breaking organization that was committed, as a political project, to generating, distributing and exhibiting artists’ moving image in the UK. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s the LFMC fostered a vibrant filmmaking community that operated independently from the commercial film industry. Led by filmmakers whose initial aim was film production through an exploration of the structural and material properties of film, the LFMC eventually expanded to running workshops, weekly film programmes in the cinema and the establishment of an internationally-recognized distribution component. This unique environment made possible both a passionate material experimentation and a politics of refusal in relation to dominant Hollywood cinema’s ideological propaganda.

To mark the anniversary, LUX has been organising a series of events; “From Reel to Real: Women, Feminism and the London Filmmakers Co-operative” is the largest, and significantly the first comprehensive survey of women filmmakers from the LFMC. The weekend was held at Tate Modern’s Starr Auditorium as part of their “Counter-Histories” series. In association with LUX and Tate, Maud Jacquin developed the programme from her PhD thesis, which addressed the politics of narrative in women artists’ film and video with a focus on the British experimental film scene of the 1970s and 1980s.

The seven screenings –which included both single screen and expanded films –offered audiences a rare opportunity to see films made since the 1970s by women filmmakers who were members of the LFMC. Jacquin’s timely curation explored generational transmission and the evolving relationships to feminism over the decades. In the prologue screening at Tate Britain, “Weaving Time,” Anne Rees Mogg’s *Real Time* (1971-1974) was placed in conversation with Rees Mogg’s Chelsea School of Art’s student Anna Thew’s film *Hilda was a Good Looker* (1986), marking a moment of pedagogic and embodied

---

<sup>1</sup> Independent scholar.

<sup>2</sup> Birkbeck College, London WC1E 7HX, UK.

transmission. Real “personal” time becomes shared time through the reel spools of each 16mm print. Re-evaluating of more than forty films, by twenty-five filmmakers from across three different generations, pointed to the unique contribution and diverse experimental practice of the women filmmakers associated with LFMC, which had not been properly considered until now.



Image 1: *Hilda was a Good Looker* (Anna Thew, 1986) | © the artist and LUX

In 1978, the LFMC co-hosted a weeklong season “Feminism, Fiction and the Avant-garde” in collaboration with *Camera Obscura*, as Lis Rhodes and LFMC member Deke Dusinberre brought in work by VALIE EXPORT, Chantal Akerman, Babette Mangolte and Agnès Varda. For LFMC audiences and filmmakers, these films had significant impact because they demonstrated an expanded definition of feminist avant-garde cinema toward an engagement with the subjective within narrative and experimentation. The same year, some of the women filmmakers at the LFMC hosted their own consciousness raising group, including Annabel Nicholson, Rhodes, Felicity Sparrow and members of the nascent Cinema of the Women, the London-based women-only distribution collective. From this group came a growing impetus to explore reasons for a separate women-only/feminist space.

At the opening night programme of “From Reel to Real,” “Collapsing the Frame,” LFMC filmmaker Nina Danino described the LFMC’s feminist practice as existing not only at the LFMC, but also in other spaces such as conferences and informal locations, creating an interconnected, supported practice. The formation of Circles: Women’s Film and Video Distribution in late 1979-1980 came out of the LFMC feminist discussion group and London’s interconnected

feminist spaces. Rhodes, Sparrow and other filmmakers from the LFMC co-founded the group. For Sparrow, former distribution worker at the LFMC from 1976 to mid-1980, women's art practice was marginalized within the LFMC, but the emergent women's collective politics acted as a form of resistance and self-preservation (Deepwell 2014). Rhodes' key film from this transitional and transformational period was *Light Reading* (1978). At the Tate weekend, the film was placed within a programme entitled "Trapped in Language," and new and returning audiences for this film were reminded how its most radical feminist concern was a desire to create a new and embodied film language for a new feminist cinema in formation.

In her introduction to the "Filmic Bodies" programme, Jacquin cited the significance of cultural film theorists Vivian Sobchack (1992 and 2004) and Laura U. Marks (2000) to these continuing projects of feminism and film. This shift toward materiality drawn from these new haptic theories was reflected in films chosen by Jacquin for the programme, creating a corporeal exchange between the corpus of the films, filmmakers and viewers. The inclusion of second-generation LFMC filmmaker Sandra Lahire's films *Terminals* and *Edge* (1986) and Sarah Pucill's film *Milk and Glass* (1993) reflected filmic encounters with Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject, developed in her book *Powers of Horror* (1982). For Lahire and Pucill, the female body is abjected within a patriarchal heteronormative culture. *Milk and Glass* explores abjection through the materiality of 16mm film and the subject-object position and surface and interior of the female and celluloid body. The female body becomes a site of reflection, horror, fear and attraction as well as aesthetic composition.

Pucill and Lahire, together with Sarah Turner and Ruth Novacek, were radical feminist filmmakers, associated with this second generation of LFMC filmmakers, whose work drew not only on feminism, lesbian sexuality, psychoanalysis and post-structuralism but also music, painting, punk and Hollywood cinema. An image from Lahire's *Edge* was used for the key artwork for "From Reel to Real." It is an arresting, violent image of an unrecognizable woman's paper cut-out head, with hollow blue eyes and cracked red lipstick; a feeding tube carrying a clear fluid is placed in the side of the mouth. A memory of Lahire's embodied experience of hospitalization perhaps, as well as an image that holds a collective haptic memory of women's bodies as sites of torture, abjection and heteronormative patriarchal entrapment. The only logic of resistance is the concept of *jouissance* used in feminist sexual difference theory (for example, Cixous 1996), created within a practice of queer feminist/women's experimental cinema.

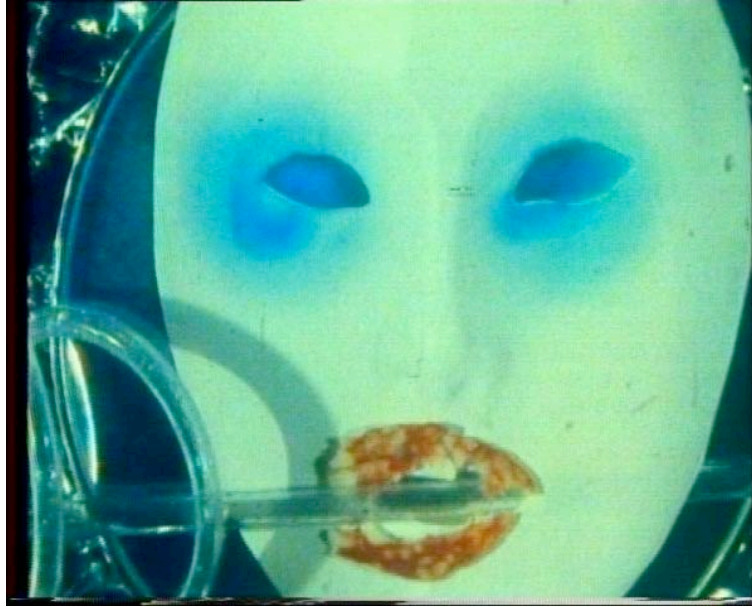


Image 2: *Edge* (Sandra Lahire, 1986) | © the artist and LUX

Sarah Turner's early short film *One and the Other Time* (1990) was also shown. The film portrays a woman's (fantasised) outburst of brutality towards her lover connected parallel ideas of internalized patriarchal oppression and affect. Similar to Lahire and Pucill's work she explores this intertextual space between abstraction and narration. Novacek's films were notable for their difference. *Tea Leaf* (1986/2016) was completed at what was then the film department of Central St Martins, alongside contemporaries such as Lahire and Isaac Julien. A film about psychic and social displacement in 1980s London, explored through a restless bricolage, queered punk aesthetic, Novacek's film was a reaction to the perceived elitism found within the LFMC inner circles.

The film was curated in the weekend's final programme "Woman Tiger, Woman Dove," which meditated on women's activism and revolt in 1980s Thatcherite Britain, which was followed by a discussion that drew on the programmed films' commitment to harnessing experimental film language for political purposes; specifically, several of the films referred to the Women's Peace Camp at Greenham Common and the wider anti-military, anti-nuclear and anti-heteronormative issues that arose there and elsewhere. Helen de Witt chaired a conversation between LFMC filmmakers Vanda Carter and Joanna Davis, and contemporary filmmaker Sarah Wood, who quoted Davis and Rhodes' *Hang on a Minute/Ironing to Greenham* (1983) in her 2012 film *Three Minute Warning*. The multi-generational conversation inevitably, and productively, related the programme of films from the 1980s, and the early 1980s Greenham Common protest to questions concerning contemporary feminist political formations, and particularly the relation between on-screen(s) formations and embodied activism.

That is present in Jayne Parker's film *K*, (1989) which Jacquín included in the "Inside Out" programme. *K*, like Parker's film *The Pool* (1991) (also included in "Inside Out"), employs an extremely rigorous fixed frame even as Parker subjects her body on-screen to repeated, absurdist and disturbing activities: vomiting up and knitting animal intestines, using her forearms as the needles in Part One; and diving repeatedly into a swimming pool in Part 2. *K* for Kafkaesque to highlight the absurdity and physicality of the ritual; but also not-OK, the juxtaposition between the camera's dispassionate gaze at *plan américain* and the painful performances of gender that are externalised and allegorised through the intestines and the diving. Perhaps also, conversely, *K* for the knitting together of self, and of self and other, through Parker's frank looks to camera that knit the (female-identified?) audience into her performance. If many of the films in "Inside Out" looked at the impossibility of heteronormative romantic and erotic relationships (including the repeated image of Parker lifted by a male presence in "The Pool"), the programme as a whole suggested the alternative possibilities of collaborative relationships between women.

Central to the representation of LFMC across the weekend was a sense, however fraught, of collaboration and rhizomatic networks as a feminist principle. Discussions of how this worked – or didn't – in practice, and how practice connected to both theoretical discussions and non-film activism, offered valuable and urgent information and inspiration. "Woman Tiger, Woman Dove," in particular, spoke to the necessity of interlinking the personal and political with moving image experiments as both process and pivot for activist organising. Several of the films drew on Eisensteinian activist film tactics such as agit-prop (in Keane's lively, loud *Hey Mack*, 1982) and bricolage (in the *Hang on a Minute* [1983] series and Carter's *Glory Boys*, 1983), which were often intermixed with second-wave feminist strategies including first-person filmmaking (Novaczek's *Tea Leaf*) and observational documentary, used differently in Annabel Nicolson's *Fire Film* (1981) and Lahire's *Serpent River* (1989).



Image 3: *Hey Mack* (Tina Keane, 1982) | © the artist and LUX

*Fire Film* is a ten-minute fragment of Super 8 footage, snatched one night early in the process of setting up what became the Women's Peace Camp at Greenham. *Serpent River* is the final part of a trilogy of anti-nuclear films, through which Lahire offers a blistering indictment not only of the potential impact of nuclear weapons, but of their already-realised quotidian impact on the environment and the human body, particularly on the bodies of women workers. Lahire's film bears relation to second-wave documentaries, but the reflexive positioning of both the frozen river and X-Ray lightboxes creates a medium-specific indictment of the way in which nuclear waste leaches into its surroundings: image-making is both tainted and, in the use of the plant's training films, complicit. *Fire Film* appears directly observational on the surface, as it captures a conversation between the first group of women who came to Greenham. It shares with Lahire's film a focus on vulnerable, courageous bodies, here pressed close to a single campfire that is surrounded by darkness. Women speak of their hope that the initial encampment at Greenham would provoke and inspire occupations at the many less-documented bases around the UK. This would come to pass, for example at Menwith Hill – renamed Womenwith Hill – in the north-west; but the media focused on Greenham.

Similarly, LFMC and Four Corners were not intended as exclusive sites, but nodes for a widespread network of feminist and radical filmmakers. The work that emerged from and surrounded the London Film-Makers' Co-operative is crucial both to the study of British cinema as a whole and of an international avant-garde centred on co-operatives and collectives, but also to the continuities and evo-

lution of feminist film practice and theory and their imbrication in political activism. "From Reel to Real" emphasises that political aesthetic: the *Hang on a Minute* banners and handkerchiefs made by Davis and Rhodes carried (Greenham) home to the heart of the art establishment, even if only for a night. One square banner carried a quote from Indian writer Arlene Zide, also read in *Hang on a Minute/Tiger Lily* (1983): "Joined together there is power, sister / No one hears the victim's sigh" (Zide 1979-1980, 11). Co-operative, collective and collaborative forms of feminist filmmaking and film curation have reasserted themselves in the UK during the last five years: "From Reel to Real" offered this movement both a glimpse of its own history, and valuable lessons for how to ensure our joined-together work can continue to be heard.

## REFERENCES

- Cixous, Hélène, and Catherine Clément. 1996. *The Newly Born Woman*. Trans. Betsy Wing. London: I.B. Tauris Publishers.
- Deepwell, Katy. 2014. "Felicity Sparrow: Forming Circles." *n.paradoxa: International Feminist Art Journal* 34: 86-95.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1982 [1980]. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Marks, Laura U. 2000. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.
- Tate Film. 2016. *From Reel to Real: Women, Feminism and the London Film-Makers' Co-operative*. 'Counter-Histories' booklet. London: Tate.
- Sobchack, Vivian. 1992. *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of the Film Experience*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- . 2004. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Zide, Arlene. 1980. "Delhi Street Song." *Manushi* 4: 11.

## FILMOGRAPHY

- Edge* [16mm, colour] Directed by Sandra Lahire. LFMC, UK, 1986. 8 min.
- Fire Film* [Super 8, colour] Directed by Annabel Nicolson. LFMC, UK, 1981. 10 min.

*Glory Boys* [Super 8, colour] Directed by Vanca Carter. LFMC, UK, 1983. 4 min.

*Hang on a Minute/Ironing to Greenham* [16mm, colour] Directed by Joanna Davis and Lis Rhodes. Channel 4, UK, 1983. 1 min.

*Hang on a Minute/Tiger Lily* [16mm, colour] Directed by Joanna Davis and Lis Rhodes. Channel 4, UK, 1983. 1 min.

*Hey Mack* [16mm, colour] Directed by Tina Keane. LFMC, UK, 1982. 13 min.

*Hilda was a Good Looker* [16mm, colour] Directed by Anna Thew. LFMC, UK, 1986. 60 min.

*K.* [16mm, b/w] Directed by Jayne Parker. LFMC, UK, 1989. 13 min.

*Light Reading* [16mm, b/w] Directed by Lis Rhodes. LFMC, UK, 1978. 20 min.

*Milk and Glass* [16mm, colour] Directed by Sarah Pucill. LFMC, UK, 1993. 10 min.

*One and the Other Time* [16mm, colour] Directed by Sarah Turner. LFMC, UK, 1990. 5 min.

*Pool, The* [16mm, b/w] Directed by Jayne Parker. LFMC, UK, 1991. 10 min.

*Real Time* [16mm, b/w] Directed by Anne Rees Moggs. LFMC, UK, 1971-1974. 32 min.

*Serpent River* [16mm, colour] Directed by Sandra Lahire. LFMC, UK, 1989. 31 min.

*Tea Leaf* [16mm, colour] Directed by Ruth Novaczek. LFMC, UK, 1986/2016. 20 min.

*Terminals* [16mm, colour] Directed by Sandra Lahire. LFMC, UK, 1986. 18 min.

*Three Minute Warning* [digital video, colour] Directed by Sarah Wood. Jacquie Davies Distribution, UK, 2012. 3 min.