

## Modes of Curatorial Practice: Moving between art, cinema and performance

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Let's start with a couple of questions: What does it mean to curate the cinematic? How do we deal with different levels of reception when we navigate between film and art? What does it mean to show cinematic works differently? How can we create an open and lively process?

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For his performance *Reforming the Past*, James Benning turned towards his own film *North on Evers*, shot in 1991. After seeing Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests* again, Benning re-filmed all of the 59 portraits that occur in *North on Evers* with his HD camera, reframed them and slowed them down 8 times. *Reforming the Past* is an autobiographical road movie. Benning followed the silent, hour-long film with a live reading of the original text from *North on Evers*, a first-person account of a cross-country odyssey with a large supporting cast of old and new friends, lovers, and family members. The portraits are first encountered without context, and only later do we hear the string of events and names that goes with them. He separates text and image with the result that his memory piece becomes one for the viewer-listener as well, just on another level. Dennis Lim calls it "a film to complete in your head".<sup>1</sup>

Benning's work first appeared in cinema, and was reconfigured in February 2010 as a performance for the 2010 Forum Expanded. This change in his practice is emblematic of the way moving images have changed. It was made possible by technical advances like HD technology and the change goes along with an expanding view on the possibilities how film and art can interconnect.

I would like to call it the "in-between" of working with moving images. The term "in-between" comes from my fellow curator and head of the Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art and Forum Expanded Stefanie Schulte Strathaus, who in 2004 stated: "Each "in-between" is a result of a confrontation, or friction; it marks a movement and assumes at least two points of departure."<sup>2</sup> There is a third space to discover, in which new forms appear that shed light on art and film alike. The "in-between" is an exciting sphere and experiencing the products of this "in-between" between art and film means to submit to a series of subtle displacements.

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Lim, "Beyond Reason", in: *artforum*, 2/2010, [www.artforum.com/film/archive=201002](http://www.artforum.com/film/archive=201002)

<sup>2</sup> Stefanie Schulte Strathaus, "Showing different films differently: Cinema as a result of cinematic thinking", in: *Moving Images*, Vol. 4, Number 1, Spring 2004, p.2.

The traditional distinction between art and cinema is one that is increasingly difficult to maintain, and this condition of increasing mutability informs every aspect of this lecture. In the 1960s and 1970s, experimental film work gave way to video art, once the introduction of video cameras and the technology of moving-image reproduction became economically accessible to more than just a few artists and filmmakers. The mutual fascination between art and cinema has had a great influence on contemporary culture. For the past fifty years, the love/hate affair between the two has triggered vital aesthetic, social and political responses that constantly renew the way we understand our age. It is all about the post-war movement/time rupture so central to Deleuze's book on cinema<sup>3</sup>. The moving image in contemporary art encompasses a wide range of practices including film, film installations, video, video installations, images on monitors and screens and performances. The fundamental elements that constitute the cinematic experience - space, time, light, sound and motion - are now infinitely malleable and endlessly reconfigurable. The economy of images is called into question; one can crack them open, compare, complete, transform, exhaust and convert them. This leads to a huge variety of cinematic works and the curator's task is to find a way to show each work in such a way that allows the viewer to experience its specificities.

While museums have embraced cinematic works in their collections and exhibitions, more and more film festivals also test the boundaries of the cinematic medium, for example Sundance started its "New Frontier" section, the CPH:DOX has its "New Vision Award" or the Kassel Documentary Film and Video festival extends the borders of what we think of as documentary in art and film. They all explore the interaction between different media and cultural traditions emphasizing the constant evolution of the genre by creating a space for inspiration and dialogue between different creative forms with art exhibitions and performances, music projects, live acts and the latest concepts of expanded cinema. Festival programmer Mark Peranson made the following observation:

"These works are traditionally uncategorizable in an international film festival context, the type that confront the audience to seeing cinema in another way that they are accustomed. In a world that has become undeniably more conservative, formal invention perhaps is the new acceptable means by which to mount a political challenge. I can only point to an exchange at last year's Forum Expanded following the premiere of Sharon Lockhart's *Lunch Break* with a number of questions amidst a curious discussion serving as variations on 'why did you waste my time making this film and can I have the last 90

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<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Minneapolis 1989

minutes of my life back.’ This is the avenue through which a younger, more complacent viewership can be forced to confront changing means of spectatorship.”<sup>4</sup>

But still, this kind of artist’s film and video, what curator Ian White calls quite aptly “a differentiated cinema”<sup>5</sup>, is still looking for its proper place. Such works don’t really fit into the generic model of an industrialized cinema, nor in the likewise generic model of a museum. For curating moving images, it is essential to understand the technical development of the media, the various genealogies that attend the moving images, and the broader context in which the work arises. Neither the cinema nor the museum seems to be adequate at the moment, as both are two different kinds of social and ideological apparatuses. In a way, these productions detach themselves in a playful way from these hegemonic economies by undermining their specific rules. A lot has been talked about a “Third Space”, a space of in-between practice. Some try to find it in film museums or in alternative art spaces, I don’t know where this space will be located in the future, but for me, at this very moment, it is located in the frame of a film festival.

A film festival with its series of events in a concentrated time, with flexible spaces, its multitude of opportunities and open frame, allows some kind of experimentation. It can expand its form continuously since it is defined by showing the latest trends in cinematic development. There is no given space since we from year to year have to find them anew. That can be annoying but on the other hand we always are able to find spaces that suit the demands of the works on display. This can be still a cinema, a white cube but also spaces in the public sphere like a drive-in, a theatre or a conference hall. We’re talking about building up a social space. That makes finding the proper space so important. In a festival, people come together for a short time span and normally they stay in order to discuss. The audience participates in shaping the program by questioning it. And this is an immediate experience that one rarely finds in criticism or reviews. A festival is a much more discursive space than a gallery. In Berlin, lots of these conversations take place in an actual cinema, which is a good starting point for talking about the expanded cinema. Chrissie Illes makes clear, that it is not so much about the spaces itself but about “the materiality of film and the materiality of the physical appearance and texture of film” in different contexts.<sup>6</sup> Curating moving images in a context of a festival is a very self-reflexive way of curating, since it is still in the becoming. Many artists avoid being subsumed by the *dispositif* of cinema and therefore present their works explicitly in a discursive art field, which takes other criteria external to film as their referential framework. What we do, and what I mean with the “Third Space”, is to create an

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Peranson, “Some thoughts on the Past, Present and Future of the Forum”, in: *Dialogues with Films – 4 Decades of the Forum*, ed. by Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art, Berlin 2010, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Ian White, “Does the Museum Fail?: Podium Discussion at the 53<sup>rd</sup> International Short Film Festival Oberhausen”, in: *Kinomuseum – Towards an Artists’ Cinema*, ed. by Mike Sperlinger/Ian White, Cologne 2008, p. 118.

<sup>6</sup> Chrissie Illes, ‘Does the Museum Fail?: Podium Discussion at the 53<sup>rd</sup> International Short Film Festival Oberhausen’, in: *Kinomuseum – Towards an Artists’ Cinema*, ed. by Mike Sperlinger/Ian White, Cologne 2008, p. 132.

atmosphere in which both is possible – having an art related discourse without leaving the cinematic discourse behind. Our intent at the festival, with its specific programming structure, is to find a curatorial practice “that connects past and presence, different countries, societies, genres, and/or aesthetic forms”.<sup>7</sup>

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Forum Expanded is a section of the Berlin International Film Festival run by Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art. It forges a link between the classical format of a film festival and the cinematic practices in the context of art and other fields. The artistic practices range from drawing, photography, installation art and video to architecture and experimental films. Forum Expanded is dedicated to developing a cross-disciplinary program with projects at the intersection between film and art, in collaboration with artists, filmmakers, critics, art historians, and curators.

The relationship between Black Box and White Cube has been widely discussed in recent years: the position of the viewer in the room, his mobility, or immobility, the time he spends in front of a work, the difference between collective and individual perceptions. It is somehow a visual investigation into the structure of the image and of language, into the different clefs and short-circuits between collective and individual spaces. In general, the discussion is about the presentation of contemporary film works in art exhibitions but it is also about the presentation of classical experimental film works in different contexts. What kind of translation is needed to translate historical, experimental and underground films?

Since its first edition in 2006, Forum Expanded has asked these questions within the framework of the Berlinale. Representatives of the Structural Film and Expanded Cinema movements of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Michael Snow, Morgan Fisher, Ken Jacobs, Stephen Dwoskin, or Birgit Hein, have presented - against the backdrop of their history - new works together with young artists and filmmakers. With the exhibition program, as well as in discussions with curators and scholars from the fields of film and visual arts, the festival has always tried to approach the self-reflexive question: what is the difference between a present in which a film festival opens up itself to exhibition spaces, and a past in which the expanded cinema let the immediate exhibition / projection of the material become the content? Therefore, we have included historical works in the program of the Berlinale, which normally only allows for new productions.

Forum Expanded, still on the way to finding its own expression, became a significant structural change to the experimental branch of the Berlin Film Festival. It reaches beyond the enshrined

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<sup>7</sup> Stefanie Schulte Strathaus, 'Showing different films differently: Cinema as a result of cinematic thinking', in: *Moving Images*, Vol. 4, Number 1, Spring 2004, p.4

views of what a festival is and in this sense opens up the mind of what something like art house cinema can be nowadays. Because not only art exhibitions are under question but also the way film will develop in the next years.

I would like to present some of the projects of last Forum Expanded in 2010, the one that in its outcome meant a step further to what we would like to achieve. In this presentation, I focus on the more experimental works and leave the cinema screening sessions out although they are an integral part of the program. We don't want to abandon the cinema; we just want to open it towards new forms of expression.

I will start with an installation that in my view is symptomatic for the direction we followed in 2010. The 35mm installation of Christian Giroux and Daniel Young investigates the production of space through the study of light fixtures and the quality of light they produce. *50 Light Fixtures from Home Depot* concentrates on the empty semblance of commercial lighting arrangements that in their exclusivity allow the structural logic of objects and spaces to reappear while referring to the cinematic use of light. The mass produced light fixtures, which are filmed sequentially turning on and off in a bare room represent a broad sample of the available stock from a major North American chain store. What struck me about this piece is that the viewing arrangement was intended to engage the spectator performatively in building up a space where physical movement constructs a visual discourse that is intertextual and simultaneous in time. The quality of light changes constantly and had a huge impact on the body in the space. It manifested, in a quiet and contemplative way, the cinematic effect of light. The space of this installation becomes an extension of the film's atmosphere. The installation stages film experiences in spaces, where the viewer is offered perceptual experiences that constitute passages in time and space, with the film as a point of reference. Moving-image installations cause the spectator to be within a closed diegetic illusionary universe that goes beyond the single vantage perspective of classical cinema. Such works mobilize them through the exhibition space, undercutting the 'false absolutisation of time in which cinema is prone'.<sup>8</sup> What happens is a reconfiguration of time, space, and social interaction that can be related to performativity.

The notion of performativity in connection to the moving image has determined our thinking in this year's edition of Forum Expanded. This approach is based on several considerations. First, the notion of performativity acknowledges the shift from the sculptural priorities of multi-screen-clusters of monitors in the 1980s to those approaches that draw upon and highlight the language, qualities and values of the single, large-scale projected image in space. This move away from an emphasis on the three-dimensional object and an essentially theatrical use of the physical

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Osborne, 'Distracted Reception: Time, Art and Technology', in: *Time Zones: Recent Film and Video*, London 2004, p. 72.

environment, towards an illusionistic dissolution of the boundary between the viewing subject and the projection screen opens up a new psychological space for a more inclusive sensory involvement. The experimental character of many video installations by a younger generation of artists comes close to the realms of performance art. “The sense of immediacy achieved by the correlation between stage directions and space recalls the performative practices of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which focused mainly on the body and the mind, while social and media conditions were explored through film and video”, as theoretician Ursula Frohne stated in 2008.<sup>9</sup>

Second, since Deleuze, we are aware of the interconnection between time and image. A “time-image” creates a moment in which we, the spectator, are forced to go into our own memories to construct meaning for ourselves. In his *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989), Deleuze devotes part of a chapter to the cinema of the body.<sup>10</sup> His interest lies in the capacity of bodily surfaces to make us think of the unthought. Cinema is a privileged medium for the exhibition of bodies, since whatever happens to the body becomes instantly available to perception.<sup>11</sup> The central shift remains from a cinema that defined itself primarily through motion to one that concerned itself more directly with time. The time-image moved beyond motion by freeing itself of the sensory-motor link to a pure optical and sound image.

The third point of reference was the idea that we live in an environment of greater participation. All guests, all audience bring their own kind of thoughts and belief systems into the cinematic space. The discussions with the participants and the audience built a living environment that leads us to go further, to maybe change our own opinions and to make us aware that we are part of an ongoing process of working with the space “in-between”.

This way of thinking allowed us to further expand the notion of cinema and experiment with “in-between” of film and performance. We invited several artists, artist groups and one curator to develop a range of performances that in their variety and their use of different parts of the cinematic threw a glimpse of what is really possible in this area. The program started with a film of Austrian artist Constanze Ruhm, shown in a theatre built in the 1950s. *Crash Site/My\_Never\_Ending\_Burial\_Plot* revolves around the attempt to update the identities of iconic female film characters. An interdisciplinary project, it investigates distinct forms of female identities in the context of contemporary art practices, while at the same time focuses on the history of cinematic and theatrical forms in conjunction with the role of new media in the present day. The narrative is as follows: A new version of Hari of Andrej Tarkovsky’s *Solaris*

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<sup>9</sup> Ursula Frohne, ‘Dissolution of the Frame: Immersion and Participation in Video Installations’, in: *Art and the Moving Image*, ed. by Tanya Leighton, London 2008, p. 361.

<sup>10</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, ‘Chapter 8 - Cinema, body and brain, thought’, in: *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, ed. by Gilles Deleuze, Minneapolis 1989, p. 189ff.

<sup>11</sup> del Rio, Elena, *Deleuze and the cinemas of performance: powers of affection*, Edinburgh 2008, p. 10.

encounters two other undead from film history: Jean Luc Godard's *Nana* and Michelangelo Antonioni's *Giuliana* who, following a sex change, has now become Julian. Lost in an abandoned forest clearing, the three characters attempt to have done with their past: to "find their end", to "bury history", to kill themselves, to beat each other to death. The plot is organized around a burial that never comes to a close and so becomes an endless burial loop. The three characters are captured again and again in a present that repeats in variations. Although it was shown conventionally on a single big screen with an audience in front of it, the content met with the presentation. Like in a theatre, there was a huge space between the audience and the screen, an "in-between" symbolizing theatricality and offering a different view of the piece itself. I would like to call that curatorial idea a re-contextualization of the work, bringing narrative and cinematic context together. Moreover, this form of presentation reveals the fact that film has been enhanced through the art of installation or the medium of video, and that the enhancement is inherent to the medium itself. Ruhm works with the digital simulation of filmic space, constructing a virtualized space that produces thresholds, which can be trespassed creating transmissions that allow us to look through the image directly into the projection space.

The choreographer and performer Antonia Baehr and the filmmaker and performer Isabell Spengler analysed the spatial and temporal interlacing of cinema and stage situations in their work *Two Friends and More Than Four Walls*. They called it a lecture held in the main cinema of the Arsenal. What is referred to here is not the classic expanded cinema but the blending of moving image and stage performance.

The cinema becomes a stage; the stage turns into a cinema event. Using an overhead projector, they chart diagrams of events and effects in the space between the audience and the stage or the audience and the film respectively. The term "fourth wall", which was introduced by Denis Diderot and spread in 19<sup>th</sup> century theatre with the advent of theatrical realism, refers to the imaginary boundary between any fictional work and its audience. When this boundary is "broken", for example by an actor onstage speaking to the audience directly, or doing the same through the camera in a film or television program, it is called "breaking the fourth wall."

In the cinematic event *Testing nothing in a little room is the way to use the room and nothing is then lost and that is such a correction*, the artists Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri performed alone in the small cinema, a performance that was directly broadcast into the main cinema adjacent. The audience didn't know this was a performance nor that the artists were just five metres away from them. They performed a script for a possible film emerging out of various lines of inquiry and influences ranging from situationist experiments to the concepts of *cinéma vérité* as developed during the 1960s. This is an attempt at a non-repeatable cinema, one open to chance, accidents,

and traces of a lived experience.

*Kopietheater* was an experiment in radical cinema and the culmination of a research project by curator and artist Ian White. It explores the ways in which context and the act of reading can become the material content of our experience in the auditorium. In the *Kopietheater* film, video, still images, sound, text and performance are radically juxtaposed into unique, simultaneous presentations – a theatre of reproducible units proposed as fundamental cinema.

*Kopietheater* follows a series of exploratory screenings and events in March 2009 at Kino Arsenal and other venues under the title (borrowed from the 1970 Rosa von Praunheim film) *It's Not the Homosexual Who Is Perverse, But the Situation In Which He Lives*. The title event from that series is re-presented here: a simultaneous screening of von Praunheim's film – widely regarded as instigating the gay rights movement in Germany that is as incisive, hysterical and challenging an indictment of homogenized gay culture today as it was when it was made - alongside a series of photographs by the American artist Emily Roysdon. Affiliations, conflicts and questions flicker between the two.

The screening was supported by a program of work specially conceived for the event by artists, writers and theorists all of whom attended the original screenings in March, who were invited to propose two things that we would see, hear or read at the same time as each other for up to five minutes. As such they take the form of responses, critiques and new explorations. A new kind of cinema without a moving image: *Kopietheater*.

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Regarding the importance of cinema today for the visual arts, Jacques Rancière said that we are confronted with the situation that cinema has become schizophrenic, yet we want cinema to become again a kind of bachelor machine. The only way we can dream of cinema as a kind of utopian language is by reinventing cinema, which is indeed like a bachelor machine. The term *bachelor machine* was first used by Marcel Duchamp in connection with pieces of work that would later be assembled in the *Large Glass*. The *Large Glass* consists of two distinct realms, the realm of the bride above, and the realm of the bachelors below, both desiring and imagining one another without any possibility of mutual comprehension. The *bachelor machine*, according to Deleuze has multiple connections to the social field and allows the bachelor to exist in an intense state of desire.<sup>12</sup> This little metaphor explains quite well the situation between art and cinema. Only to give one example (there are many): whereas film critics focus on each film as a singular event, an art curator focuses on several works together, and thinks about how to combine them without neglecting the worth of the single piece. How can we make them talk to each other, each

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<sup>12</sup> Parr, Adrian, *The Deleuze Dictionary*, Edinburgh 2005, p. 135.

enlightening each other?

James Benning might be a good example of what it means to merge film and art installation. I knew that Benning did installation work in the early 1980s and that he calls his films “installations for the cinema”, but I was also aware that he then decided not to participate in art circles. I attended the premiere of his latest film *Ruhr* in Duisburg, Germany. First, it is a film about image-making itself and second, a close encounter of today’s Ruhr valley. Abandoning 35mm and working on HD, Benning entered unexplored territory that heads towards a more painterly expression. The day after, Benning talked about his next project, a series of shots of Californian streets, each about 14min long. By then, he had filmed about 20 of these streets and incidentally started talking about making an installation of parts of his material. Since he started working with HD, it makes it much easier for him to think again about installations.

The three-channel *Tulare Road* was shown in our group show at the Academy of Arts exhibition space. The piece offers three fixed views, in three different seasons, of a stretch of asphalt in California’s Central Valley, the two-lane highway extending diagonally from the bottom-left corner toward a vanishing point. The installation becomes the structuralist representation of the United States of America, and the American landscape in particular. Benning works with a fixed camera. He combines the structural analysis of image, sound and story with autobiographical impulses and with an almost painterly interest in perspective, composition, color, light and landscape. In rigorously framed settings, he develops a narrative form in which each image can claim autonomy and associative richness. He lets what’s on screen tell the story, while longing for a pure, not distracted looking that commands attention and encourages contemplation. *Tulare Road* is landscape cinema directed at some kind of new consciousness, where the viewer can approach a single image as one would in a gallery or museum, or stand back and admire the whole panorama.

Film on the big screen is all about the film, film in an installation is about the viewer and his free scheduling of time and space. This can be quite difficult when it comes to the time-consuming, slow works of Benning. There is a need to view this piece from the beginning to the end since it unfolds over time. The length of the three films is different and the various connections between the images need to be experienced by watching all of it. The openness and sometimes casualness of art spectators are diametrically opposed to the diligence of the film audience. Mark Peranson describes the buzz about the Steve McQueen installation in Venice 2009: the most anticipated and discussed work was the British pavilion, where newly minted cineaste Steve McQueen re-entered the art world to divisive reactions. For every critic who claimed he “phoned it in,” others proclaimed his piece the single best work in the entire Biennale. Perhaps the reactions stem from the source—the former being a cranky *New York Times* art critic, the latter coming from a major North American film festival programmer. McQueen's work more than ever seems to straddle

these porous boundaries. During the opening days of the Biennale one had to reserve an advance booking, then sit for over half an hour (!) in a makeshift theater (!), no late entries or exits allowed. (This led more than one observer to call the British a bunch of fascists.)<sup>13</sup>

We are presenting cinema and video in a museum and we accept the incompleteness of the reception. I realized that, looking at the way people go through the exhibitions – consuming them, or whatever you want to call it – that it is important to organize things well. And at the academy, it worked well. All the pieces had lots of space (we showed five big and spacious installations) connected in form and content. People stayed, especially for the most complex piece of this exhibition, the installation *Assemblages* by artists Angela Melitopoulos and philosopher and sociologist Maurizio Lazzarato. *Assemblages* is an audiovisual research project about Félix Guattari and his revolutionary psychiatric practice, his political activism as well as his ideas concerning ecosophy and his interest in animism especially in the Brazilian and Japanese context.

The installation presents excerpts from documentaries, essay-films, radio interviews, conversations with friends and colleagues of Guattari, and material on the clinic La Borde in France and institutional psychotherapy including films by Fernand Deligny, Renaud Victor, François Pain and others, as well as new material produced in Brazil in the course of the research.

Presented as a triptych of differently sized screens, the installation refers to ideas of movement and gravity eminent in the cartographies of animistic art as well as to concepts of the immaterial in Asiatic art. Each screen intensifies a modality of the senses: seeing, hearing, reading. The montage of the archival material is conceived as a mirror to Guattari's concept of the 'assemblage', which is also a main topic throughout the installation.

Besides raising the awareness of the complexity of the cinematic, the installation also touches another point that is important for us: the archive. The Arsenal is also a living archive. It works with the active forces and fugacity of cinema images and thus understands each screening as a singular event in that the gaze, gestures and languages of its public co-determine the archive. One important aspect of curating in the frame of this organization and in the frame of the festival is to connect the history with the present time, to re-contextualize historical work and look at it anew by confronting it with discourses and practices in both theory and practice that lie outside the institution of cinema. This has been the big mistake by art institutions removing film and video from their historical and social contexts. Therefore, Forum Expanded always includes

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<sup>13</sup> Mark Peranson, 'Garden Party – Film and video highlights at the 2009 Venice Biennial', posted July 7<sup>th</sup> 2009, [www.movingimagesource.us/articles/garden-party-20090707](http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/garden-party-20090707)

one retrospective, in order to offer new approaches to a seemingly known work or to re-discover works, that are long forgotten but that are relevant for today's practice.

At the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin, we showed an installation of filmmaker Heinz Emigholz "*The Formative Years*", consisting of seven films from the years 1972–77. The films, shot on 16mm, were digitalized in 2009, once again making them publicly accessible. The installation offers the first chance to get an overview of the relations among these self-contained works that show, like the title says, his beginnings in filmmaking. Emigholz installed the films in an installation that had a sculptural quality and therefore, besides the synchronicity of the works being seen together for the first time, constructs a clever and insightful whole that bridges the gap between art and cinema and between the new era of the digital and the experimental film movement of the 1970s.

I would like to end my lecture with a quote by Chris Dercon: "We said that the old question of Bazin 'What is cinema?' is not relevant anymore because the main question is 'Where is cinema?' But, (evidently) we cannot disconnect the question 'Where is cinema?' from the question 'What is cinema?'"<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Jan van Eyck Video Weekend - From black box to white cube — round table with Pedro Costa, Catherine David, Chris Dercon (moderator), Saturday 26 May 2007, published in Dutch in *De Witte Raaf* (September 2007)