

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID CURTIS: 16 JULY 2014

David Curtis has had a pivotal role in experimental film culture since the 1960s, sometimes called the 'underground', the 'avant-garde' etc., although his favoured description now is 'artists' film'. He did so first of all by his programming work at the two Arts Labs, which introduced my generation to an utterly different way of making films from the commercial or mainstream cinema. Secondly, he was Film Officer at the Arts Council of Great Britain from 1977 to 2000 during which time he was able to ensure that artists' film received state support, with very positive results in terms of creating different film practices outside the conventions of the film industry. Finally, with the creation of an archive at Central St Martins he has ensured that this period is available for proper study and reappraisal. The story is a strand of Britain's cultural history in the latter half of the twentieth century and opening of the twenty-first.

Nor is it a dry official history. David talks about the Slade and Thorold Dickinson, countercultural London in the sixties with Bob Cobbing, Jim Haynes, Jack Moore, Peter Whitehead, Robert Fraser and many other figures in this landscape. Plus Better Books, International Times, the Arts Labs, the London Film-makers' Co-op. John Lennon and Yoko Ono make a guest appearance too.

Then there are the film-makers: Kenneth Anger, Gregory Markopoulos, Malcolm Le Grice, Peter Gidal, Lis Rhodes, Guy Sherwin, Annabel Nicolson among a number of others.

In the seventies onwards, there is the work and politics of a state institution, the changing cultural scene, the importance of Channel 4 in the eighties and nineties, the role of Tate Modern, the Central St Martins archive, all the exhibitions David has been involved in mounting (especially 'A Century of Artists' Film in Britain'), and his two books, 'Experimental Cinema' and a 'A History of Artists' film and video in Britain' (2007) referred to in the interview as the 'History'.

I talked to him one afternoon in July 2014 about his life and career, and this is an edited transcription of our conversation, 15,000 words long, about 28 pages of a Word document.

Table of contents

[Note: if you wish, use 'Ctrl + Click' to go straight to a section heading]

1	ORIGINS: SCOTLAND
2	THE SLADE: AN EDUCATION IN PAINTING
3	THE SLADE: AN EDUCATION IN FILM
4	EXPERIMENTAL/COUNTERCULTURAL LONDON: THE FIRST ARTS LAB
5	THE NEW ARTS LAB
6	THE MID-SEVENTIES
7	THE ARTS COUNCIL OF GREAT BRITAIN
8	ACHIEVEMENTS
9	THE TATE RETROSPECTIVE
10	TWO BOOKS
11	CSM ARCHIVE, OTHER EXHIBITIONS
12	ENDNOTE: ANIMATION

1 ORIGINS: SCOTLAND

TC: David, you were born in Scotland in 1942. Whereabouts?

David: Elgin, Morayshire.

TC: Were your parents Scottish?

David: My father was Scottish, a Church of Scotland minister of the little parish of Urquhart, which is a short distance from Elgin. My mother was English. She had met him in Edinburgh. She was pretty much an orphan, and was looked after by her uncle, Donald Francis Tovey, the professor of Music in Edinburgh. My father's dad was Professor of Old Testament in Edinburgh.

TC: I suppose they had both been brought up in the Bible-based Presbyterian tradition.

David: My father was, but not my mother, who was very English.

TC: You don't speak with a Scottish accent.

David: No. If I go north of the border it comes back. I went to school in Scotland quite a lot. After I was born, my father got a job in Birmingham. So I was brought up in Birmingham for a little while, but I was repeatedly ill and my father's parents, my grandparents, had got themselves a house in Nethybridge, near Aviemore. My parents had a holiday house nearby and during the late 1940s, my mum, my elder brother and I lived there for my health reasons, including during the winter of 1947, which was the hardest winter. Everything froze, and I remember going to my primary school in snow higher either side of the road than I was. At that time I had a Scottish accent for sure at school because it was very Scottish. Later on we moved to Melrose near the border, and again my grandparents moved there to be near my parents, with my father still commuting from Birmingham on an intermittent basis. So I went to Galashiels Academy, and had a very Scottish accent then. I suspect I had two accents, one for the home, one for work and play.

TC: Did you like the school?

David: I don't know. I never took root anywhere particularly. Then I was sent to boarding school, also in Scotland, but there the Scots were outnumbered by the English so I think my accent was permanently modified then. I have to confess that when I started working at the Arts Council there were so many posh people, I think my accent got modified a little bit again. As I say if I go north of the border I can hear the twang coming back.

TC: And if you were in Scotland now, what would you vote on 18 September?

David: All my ambivalence about Scotland would come back. I would vote to stay in, thinking that actually it is terribly important for Scottish people to be able to leave and enter the wider world.

TC: It's one of the oddities of the referendum that Scots living south of the border don't get a vote.

David: I know, I find that outrageous.

TC: What A-levels did you do?

David: English, History and Art.

TC: So you were into art by then?

David: I was good at art.

TC: Drawing and painting? Or good at art history?

David: Oh, drawing and painting. It was all figurative stuff. By the time I left school, I was fairly determined to go to art school. I applied to go to the Slade which peculiarly was taking – in the year I applied – people straight from school, rather than people from art schools. Normally it was post-graduate. We were an experimental year, but after two years of the experiment they thought it was a bad idea. When I applied initially, they said, 'Yes, but we're full up. We'll have a place for you next year.' So I got a job. I worked first in a factory making cardboard boxes, and I was about to take up a job in a bookshop when I got a call telling me to come to the Slade. That's how I got in.

TC: The fees were all paid by the state?

David: Yes, and I got a grant. Astonishing. I despair for the young now, particularly in the arts and music. No employment afterwards, and therefore very little guarantee of income.

TC: So when did you leave Scotland?

David: My parents' home base was Birmingham but when I was at school, school holidays would happen in Scotland.

2 THE SLADE: AN EDUCATION IN PAINTING

TC: So what year did you start in the Slade?

David: Autumn 1961. I was 19 just.

TC: The Slade was a pretty good place to have got into. You must have been quite good at painting and drawing?

David: If Bidy [Peppin, David's partner then and now] was here, she would leap in about the iniquity in the way the Slade and dear old Bill Coldstream worked. [William Coldstream was Principal of the Slade School of Fine Art from 1949 to 1975.] My parents had asked Dr Mary Woodall, who ran the Barber Institute in Birmingham, for advice about art schools in London, and she said, 'Oh, the Slade is the place to go to. I'll have a word with Bill.'

TC: Was the objection on the grounds that it tended to be all male-run?

David: Male-run, and based on whom you knew. Our contemporaries included Corinna MacNeice (Louis's daughter), Maro Gorky (Ashile's daughter) and her partner, Matthew Spender (Stephen's son) etc. And there was a woman who ran the art department of some school in North London whose pupils always got into the Slade. She was another of Bill's chums.

TC: So you went there to paint and draw?

David: Paint and do etching.

TC: Was there a theoretical or art-historical part to it?

David: Yes, both. We arrived at the end of one regime when the last gasps of the Euston Road School, everything done by measurement, were still in force. [The Euston Road School had brought together Claude Rogers, Victor Pasmore, Coldstream and others in the late 1930s. It had dispersed as a 'school' by 1949.] In the first year we had a joint course with the Bartlett School of Architecture for quite a lot of the time. We also did life drawing, sitting on donkeys drawing the life models and somebody coming up and drawing little sketches at the side of your sheet, telling you how the skeleton worked and all the rest of it. So there are vestiges of the old-fashioned method with a particular Euston Road bias. Patrick George had us drawing random marks on the wall, accidental things. For a week we sat drawing – measuring measuring measuring. Then there were lumps of coal, things like that, we had to draw.

TC: Did you resent that, or just accept it?

David: I just accepted it. I was never very good at life drawing so it certainly didn't give one a sense of empowerment or anything. It wasn't encouraging one to be creative and to think one's own ideas. Then in the second year maybe, one could go and work with somebody in a studio. I worked with Frank Auerbach for example and Andrew Forge.

TC: And that was hard work?

David: It was mystificatory, total immersion.

TC: But you engaged with it? Or is there a picture of the college, especially with teenagers there, of them doing a bit of painting or drawing, then dropping out, then coming back? Or were you pretty much engaged all the time?

David: Pretty much engaged. There were art-history lectures, a course on anatomy where they passed around bits of dead people. There were guest lectures, and I remember Buckminster Fuller coming.

TC: With an emphasis on figurative painting?

David: At that initial stage but in the third year – it was a four-year course – Harold Cohen arrived at the same time as new American art of all sorts was arriving. [Cohen was Lecturer in Painting at the Slade 1961-5.]

TC: Abstract Expressionism and afterwards, Pop Art even?

David: Pop I suppose was happening elsewhere, rather than the Slade. But Kasmin opened his gallery at that time, and the Whitechapel under Brian Robertson had a Rauschenberg show and a Jasper Johns show, which were kind of first major shows for them in the UK. There was a big show of new American painting which had all the Abstract Expressionists, Colour Field painters etc. I remember being particularly taken with Morris Louis who appeared at Kasmin's, his wonderful veil paintings.

When Harold Cohen first came in he said, 'What is it you're trying to do with all this figurative drawing? Making art is about ideas, making art is about this that and the other.' I rather didn't take to him. I think Biddy found him quite liberating though she would say how appallingly male the entire course was and that all the student heroes were male. I never saw it as about fostering genius in the male. I remember there was just one woman on the staff called Marina Betts, the art

historian. We all had to do seminar presentations for her. I did something, which for me was a great revelation, about Matisse being a *fauve*. In a way that was a sort of epiphany for me about taking a leap in the dark, doing something radical, and seeing what happens rather than calculating it all from the beginning. I had done some interesting figurative painting, but in my last year I did veil paintings, pouring paint, but also I did a lot of systems-based things, based on circles, painting as a procedure.

This painting here [David points to a painting on the wall] is from shortly after that, 1966. For the year after we left the Slade, Bidy and I had a studio in Whitechapel, in Hanbury Street, one of the weavers' lofts in old Spitalfields. We sublet it from a guy called Brian Ingham who was a St Ives-type painter who had gone off on a Rome scholarship. He left his studio rather full of things which during the year we either threw out or burnt because it was so cold. That painting was done on the floor in his studio. It's a scatter painting: hand-mixed pigments. If you bought pigments from Cornelissen's pigments shop, you were supposed to grind your own paint with oil, but we mixed them with polymers, thanks to Malcolm Le Grice, who was a year ahead of us. I didn't have a lot of contact with him; he already had a family and was working his way through the Slade but he would go off and get polymer as a medium to mix one's colours with. Before acrylic paints had really taken off, this was do-it-yourself acrylic paint. So the polymer is thanks to Malcolm. One of the ingredients in this painting is Lux soap flakes which again date it because they do not exist now. I wanted a sort of scattering of them on the surface but most of them have come off.

TC: Yes, there's one.

David: Where they were saturated by paint they stuck, but the others have just mouldered off. The ecstatic splatterings at the edge I thought of as being like pie-crust at the time. I'm still very fond of the picture!

TC: Are there many canvases surviving of yours?

David: Quite a few. Bidy unfortunately has hung quite a few of them in our house in Somerset. There is very little from the Slade days, but some of the stained-canvas ones survive. I did several in Hanbury Street because the fruit market was nearby. Bidy was doing things with some kind of crate packaging. I used a sort of wooden structure like a wicket gate which was the edge of an orange crate, using it as a stencil, and did a series of things where the paint soaked through the canvas and through this stencil so you got ghostly shapes, really quite big, 6 by 8 foot.

TC: What year had Bidy come to the Slade? Same year as you?

David: Yes. She had been going to the Ruskin [School of Drawing and Fine Art] in Oxford before that in her last years at school. When she applied to the Slade they wouldn't have her, but she had a scholarship of some sort which allowed her to go either to University College London or to Newcastle. Her parents wouldn't let her go to Newcastle so she went to UCL to do history. During her first year she went over to the Slade quite often – before I was there – and said, 'Do you mind if I sit in on the life-drawing classes?' In other words she made herself known and after a year, they let her transfer, so she gave up history and started the same year as me, autumn 1961.

3 THE SLADE: AN EDUCATION IN FILM

TC: Your 'History' seemed to indicate a consciousness of the film-maker Thorold Dickinson, who was teaching at the Slade when you were there.

David: Er, yes. In terms of my later career, the painting education at the Slade was incidental in that Dickinson had set up a film studies course there. It's worth saying first of all that in all my years of growing up before reaching London, I saw films very seldom. When we lived in Nethybridge, I remember a bloke turning up with a projector and screening *Annie Get Your Gun* in the village hall. That is possibly film experience number one. In Edinburgh (near Melrose) there was a newsreel cinema in Princes Street that ran newsreels and cartoons and things like that. That was film experience number two.

TC: Cartoons . . .

David: In Melrose there was a converted church that was a cinema, and I remember a Disneyfied *Jungle Book*. Although I can't believe it, I was allowed to go on my own to it when I must have been about 7 or 8, only to be utterly traumatised by the scene with the forest fires sweeping through the jungle and terrified by what happened to the poor animals.

TC: I had the same experience with the whale in *Pinocchio*! Did your parents have any views on the cinema?

David: No. I'm sure my father would have thought it as evil. At my public school there was a film society. I did the posters for them which was a way of getting in free. They showed the sort of films that keep turning up on lunchtime TV and More4: *Cockleshell Heroes*, *Colditz Story*, wartime heroics.

TC: But not *The Seven Samurai*?

David: Not yet, no. When I came to London in the early 60s London was a cinephiles' city in an extraordinary way. If one were to look now for a cinema that regularly showed sub-titled films, there's hardly one, but then there were probably 13 or 14 cinemas in central London that regularly showed sub-titled films. As art students everyone went to the cinema several times a week. The Hampstead Everyman was having a Bergman retrospective, complete, and Bidy and I did a lot of our courting pre- and post-Bergman at the Everyman. Wandering around Hampstead Heath on a summer evening, reflecting on his heroines. Then the Academy Cinema was showing Satyajit Ray and people like that. A new Antonioni film would open regularly and a new Godard, a new Truffaut, Fellini, Resnais, Varda etc.

TC: Quite a golden age.

David: In terms of European arthouse cinema. They were all reviewed at length in the Sunday papers. So because of my strong interest, I gravitated towards Dickinson's screenings at the Slade which were very conveniently timed. Because there were probably people leading a Birkbeck-like existence [Birkbeck is a college of London University designed for people currently in employment, so it holds its classes in the evening] they were timed to start at 5.30 in the evening. That was when the light went from the studios, particularly in the winter time, so you had to stop work. I simply went to his screenings once or twice a week. So I would see all the things not in current presentation in the West End. Italian neorealism, for example.

TC: So he went back into film history.

David: Absolutely. Very much led by Lutz Becker, who was a student there at the time. Screenings would be introduced by somebody. Sometimes somebody produced notes printed on translucent paper so you could read them by film-light, an innovation of Thorold's from 1920s Film Society days. Sometimes there would be discussion afterwards. I didn't always stay for that. Ray Durnat was a student there, and I remember him introducing some Sam Fuller films for example.

TC: Durnat had an extraordinarily catholic taste.

David: Yes, wonderfully. Other people who were there at the time included Peter Whitehead and Don Levy. There were interesting characters around in abundance. Although it was a film studies course, people like Whitehead and Levy were making films. Dickinson had some sort of relationship with one of the big sponsored film units, I can't remember which, and would be able to borrow their film-making equipment. I think even Ray Durnat was making a film, though he would later deny it. There was a real sense of making as well as passively studying. One could see the most wonderful things. Certainly I saw Vertov and Eisenstein, Italian neorealism, fascist films. I saw some Ruttmanns, propaganda films, things like that.

TC: And is it in your 'History' that you mention that Dickinson would analyse sequences, or have I made that up?

David: That was part of what happened. I experienced this more when bizarrely I did sort of rejoin the course later on when a second generation went through.

TC: In the 1970s?

David: Yes. Thorold was no longer there, and James Leahy was running it. Rod Stoneman, Simon Field, and Deke Dusingberre were among the various people who went on to do interesting things. I enrolled to do a Ph.D. on animation, but never got past stage one, so to speak. I did go to some study sessions then which they probably inherited from Thorold's days. In the basement they had an editing machine like a movieola which allowed you to project a small image. You could run films back and forth, you could single-frame them, but onto a little projected screen. There was certainly a great deal of study of sequences at that point.

TC: Is that something you did?

David: I didn't do it, but I sat in on it in the 1970s. I am sure it did happen in the 60s, since it was the Thorold technique. He was more than intimate with the Steenbeck, having made his own films, but more than that he had edited all the films for the Film Society and indeed had been responsible for their subtitling because they edited and re-subtitled films that came to the Film Society in the 1920s and 30s.

TC: Did you have any impressions of him as a person? Was he charismatic at all?

David: He was quite lofty. I am sure that Lutz who got quite close to him would completely disagree, but from my point of view he seemed very distant and, as I say, lofty. But he obviously empowered people to speak and he didn't dominate the introductions to screenings. I remember him introducing a Renoir film, and because he was a chum of Renoir's he was able to ask him to send over his own personal copy of *The Golden Coach* which was not in distribution anywhere at the time.

I certainly got the feeling that he was not a friend of the avant-garde as such. There wasn't ever any discussion of that, and I don't think for example that I saw *Ballet Mécanique* or Man Ray films at that time. I probably did see *Entr'acte* there, but I'm not sure.

TC: He would have been sympathetic to the British documentary movement.

David: Oh yes.

TC: What about Free Cinema? Would he have rated that?

David: I don't know. I met recently Lorenza Mazetti who told some very sweet stories about the Slade, pre-Thorold. Coldstream [who had worked at the GPO Film Unit from 1935 to 1937] of course had his relationship with the British documentary movement. She came shortly after the war to the Slade, a rather shattered person since her parents had been shot by the Nazis in Italy. She got interested in making films, and Coldstream supported her. Have you seen *Together* [1955] made with Michael Andrews and Eduardo Paolozzi as the main cast and shot in the East End? Andrews was at the Slade, Paolozzi at the Royal College. She saw Paolozzi in a gallery, approached him and asked whether he would be in a film. They played deaf mutes who befriend each other. It's a most wonderful portrait of the East End of London after the war. Full of bomb sites and the rest of it. These two characters live very marginally, get tormented by some children, and there's a sad accident – one of them falls into a canal and because the other one can't hear, he doesn't know his friend has gone and can't rescue him. It's almost silent except for the kids making a racket. It's a good link with neorealism.

4 EXPERIMENTAL/COUNTERCULTURAL LONDON: THE FIRST ARTS LAB

TC: You left the Slade in 1965, by which time the counterculture was beginning to get into full swing. I was trying to remember the details of your involvement with the 14-hour Technicolor Dream.

David: That was April 1967. I think I showed films there. Also Biddy and I were named on the poster with our phone number as a source for tickets, but we were hopeless and managed to lose track of thousands of them! (Our phone was tapped for months afterwards). There was also some film shot (by Tutte Lemko) which was supposed to make money for IT, but it was hopelessly done. I was later given some of the footage and bleached and hand-painted it and made it into a psychedelic wonder.

TC: What's the transition between the Slade and that?

David: I got a job teaching painting in Birmingham College of Art, commuting up and down. And Biddy was teaching at the Gloucester College of Art. Both of us were doing two days a week and it was about that time that I drifted into Bob Cobbing's screenings at Better Books. Biddy remembers me coming back one day saying I had met this extraordinary character Jim Haynes. Through him we both got involved with the International Times that he was one of the editors of, and was just starting up. The launch party was in 1966 at the Roundhouse, the first event to happen there, I think. I remember Bob Cobbing screening stuff at the IT launch party, and that's possibly when I realised that Bob was the person behind the projector in Better Books. I then got involved in showing films at the UFO Club, which was John Hopkins's underground club on Friday nights in a basement Irish club in Tottenham Court Road.

TC: That was Hoppy?

David: Yes. It was this underground club where Soft Machine, Pink Floyd and The Crazy World of Arthur Brown, all that lot, appeared plus things like mime with Lindsay Kemp and the Exploding Galaxy. Mark Boyle was doing his light shows, and I shared a platform with him and Joan Hills and projected films alongside them.

TC: Your own films?

David: No, no. Anything vaguely underground-ish. If nothing was available, I did things like run *Birth of a Nation* backwards. Part of the mêlée basically. Things crystallised a bit more with meeting Jim Haynes and getting involved in the Arts Lab. Jim, being the accommodating character he was, said, 'Biddy, why don't you and Pam Zoline (with whom we had been at the Slade), run the gallery?' I ran the cinema, Jack Moore ran the theatre. [Moore died in April 2014, and Haynes wrote an obituary for the Guardian newspaper: <http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2014/apr/23/jack-henry-moore-obituary>.] Jim was general impresario. So that began in September 1967. Very little in the way of experimental film work was then available. There was historic stuff in the BFI library. There were a couple of early Brakhages available from Contemporary Films. People like Hillary Harris, Shirley Clarke and so on had work in distribution. I discovered later on that most of them had come into European distribution through the Knokke-le-Zoute festivals that had occurred right back to 1949. People like Charles and Kitty Cooper from Contemporary Films would go to Knokke-le-Zoute and choose some things they thought worthy of being put into distribution, show them in their own cinemas, and then they would just go back into distribution through their associated operations. Connoisseur Films ran several of the London cinemas, Contemporary Films ran the Paris Pullman, and there were others. So linkages existed there.

TC: And those films you mentioned, were they the type of things Cobbing was screening at Better Books?

David: Yes. And the Whitney brothers, Jeff Keen, Kurt Kren. I then began programming at the Drury Lane Arts Lab. The Filmmakers' Co-op had been founded in 1966 with a launch screening at the Jeannetta Cochrane Theatre. This launch was the Spontaneous Underground Film Festival which Bob Cobbing organised, partly in league with Jim Haynes. The programmes of those seven days of screening represented everything that was in distribution in Britain at that time, so it's an interesting map of how *little* was available in England. Certainly other than Steve Dwoskin, who had recently arrived from America, it was almost all foreign. Anyway, that was also what was in repertory at the Arts Lab. We also ran a lot of commercial feature films and camp classics because we did all-night screenings. New things were beginning to arrive. Kenneth Anger was living in London and put his work into distribution through Jimmy Vaughan, so we did a little Kenneth Anger retrospective in the Arts Lab.

TC: Did he come along and talk?

David: No, he didn't. I was probably too scared to ask him. I worked through Robert Fraser who was his gallerist at the time. Markopoulos showed. I met Markopoulos at Knokke at the 1967/8 EXPRMNTL Festival. We showed *Twice a Man* and *Gammelion*, the one where we see these flash frames going up to a castle in Italy, one hour long. And we showed the second reel first, and the first reel second. He was swanning around outside so he wasn't there to correct this. But he didn't mind.

The Knokke-le-Zoute festivals were important in all this. Besides Markopoulos, I had met Paul Sharits and Birgit Hein there.

TC: Did Jonas Mekas appear periodically?

David: He was there, and Shirley Clarke. Mike Snow was there, Joyce Wieland, Stan Vanderbeek. All sorts of others. There was an eye-opening Markopoulos retrospective, which was rather cruelly programmed after midnight. It was a kind of series which ran for five or six days of the festival, so it was watched by a very select crowd. It was in a kind of smoke-filled casino.

TC: I remember Markopoulos going on about the green exit lights beside the screen at the NFT as an absolute abomination. It wasn't a mild criticism. These were 'green-eyed monsters'.

David: That's right. At the Drury Lane Arts Lab he insisted too on having the entire proceeds of screenings, which is fair enough. We did that from time to time. Carolee Schneeman showed *Fuses* there, and again we did it as a benefit for her.

TC: I'm surprised! It's odd that people like Anger and Markopoulos were in London, wasn't it? Except I suppose they were both a bit drawn to Europe.

David: Markopoulos was only passing through. My impression was that he and Robert Beavers were moving from hotel to hotel across Europe. Mike Snow came through, Carolee Schneemann was in town, Vanderbeek came several times. Then P Adams Sitney arrived with a package of American underground films.

TC: He showed them in Oxford in May 1968, when he did his tour of universities.

David: He and/or Jonas Mekas also came in 1964 and did a series at the ICA. I don't think anyone came in between, but Sitney had certainly been in Europe for a while because I met him at Knokke-le-Zoute in December 67/January 68. Simon Hartog and I organised the Sitney tour, following its screenings at the NFT. At the Arts Lab we had endless battles with the Federation of Film Societies because we were breaking their rules by charging at the door – you had to be a membership club only. We were forever being told we were *persona non grata*, but somehow we got round it. The great breakthrough that kept the Arts Lab going as long as it did was that Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* arrived. Derek Hill had shown it as a single-screen cut-down version at the New Cinema Club, and we persuaded Jimmy Vaughan to let us have the full two-screen version, and we showed that in four 4-day bursts, around August to October 1968, which filled the coffers for a brief time because nothing else did. The Theatre made a little bit at the time, but it was obviously dark for a lot of the time between shows.

TC: Say something about Jim Haynes as a person.

David: He was characteristic of a lot of Americans who were around at the time. Some were draft-dodgers, some were entrepreneurial, some had a yearning for European connections or whatever. I am thinking of Charles Marowitz at the Open Theatre. Simon Hartog was another. But Jim was at the same time unique in his personality. He just absolutely loved people in a very embracing way. Everybody was his best friend, and he had a complete lack of inhibition or prejudice. For instance, he was a good chum of Jenny Lee, Minister of the Arts. He had a dinner with Jenny Lee, and she sort of promised him a mews building (that became the British Council building) in the Mall as an Arts Lab building. That fell through! Kenneth Tynan – he knew people like that – would turn up at the Arts

Lab to see productions that were going on. On one occasion, Jack Moore, who ran the Theatre, and I projected *Flaming Creatures* for Tynan. All because of Jim's extraordinary friendship with people like that.

T: Was he a bit older than you?

David: Yes, by about 9 years. [See www.Jim-Haynes.com for more information on him.] He did his US military service in Edinburgh and ended up running a poetry bookshop while he was there, that drifted into being the Traverse Theatre. He met up with Ricky Demarco, another very fascinating character, a Scot, entrepreneurial, uninhibited. Ricky ran the gallery in the Traverse Theatre, while Jim ran the Theatre and the bookshop and so on. Anyway he then came to London and wanted to set up a Traverse there. I think there was some disagreement with his Traverse board, and slightly in a huff he came south. He used the Jeannetta Cochrane Theatre briefly, but I think it was too expensive (although that's how the Spontaneous Festival of Underground Film happened), and he had done a production there. He came with Jack Moore, another American. Jim was aggressively heterosexual, Jack was aggressively gay, yet they were devoted to each other in an extraordinary way, and according to Jim Jack did amazing theatre productions in Edinburgh. Jack got taken over by the idea that he wanted to set up a 'Living Theatre' group of his own, since the actual Living Theatre was briefly in London, passing through on an extended European tour, so he set up the 'Human Family' as his version. Jim bought him a bus with Arts Lab money and off they set around Europe with adventures we don't want to hear about, but they're relevant in the sense only of the subsequent bust-up. The reason why a whole lot of us left the Arts Lab in November 1968 was because Jack came back, having exhausted his money, and wanted to take over the running of the Arts Lab as though it was entirely a Human Family vehicle. The rest of us had been desperately trying to make it work financially. We were just about managing to keep it afloat. Jack's plan to take it over and run it as a completely open, hippyish sort of place ran against that, so we all marched off. I think Jim realised what he'd lost after he'd lost us all.

TC: Did Jim tend to take Jack's side?

David: He did. That's why we all marched off! After we left they did do a Jane Arden production, 'Vagina Rex and the Gas Oven', which ran very popularly, got good reviews, and made them some money in the theatre. But at the same time the Hell's Angels moved in. Jack did a big fund-raising event at the Albert Hall which didn't raise funds. Alex Trocchi moved in and hosted a drug party there, and the whole thing crumbled to bits finally.

TC: You mentioned Soft Machine and Pink Floyd earlier. I was going to ask, if only to put it on one side, whether you got into rock music at all?

David: Not really!

TC: What about experimental music, if that's the right word?

David: I have never had a gramophone so I wasn't in touch. I went to a John Cage concert at the Shaftesbury Theatre, but he was in one of his particularly unhelpful moods. He delivered a text with a microphone round his neck and slowly he turned something on so that his voice became more and more distorted. I think I left after fifty minutes. It wasn't great. I listen to the radio a lot now, but not then.

TC: You get people who like film, painting, theatre, literature, they like the lot, and others who really are just into a single art form, plus maybe one other. I get the impression you were really getting into film, without necessarily giving up on painting and sculpture.

David: Painting and sculpture I always kept up with – and architecture bizarrely. If you'd asked me when I was at school what I was going to be, I might have said an architect. This is back in Galashiels days. My parents had friends who were twins, women architects, and they passed me 'The Architects Journal' on a regular basis and I loved it. The BBC's circular doughnut building in West London was being planned and all the plans came out. I was absolutely fascinated by this kind of fold-out. And before that, my grandparents in Melrose had 'The Illustrated London News' delivered to them and I remember that for the Festival of Britain in 1951 it went into colour for the first time. It had drawings by Hugh Casson of the Festival site, and I thought it was absolutely wonderful. So I could have been an architect in another life. I still spend a lot of time going to look at buildings.

TC: So you and Bidy left the Arts Lab in November '68.

David: Yes. I went for a year doing other things while working on setting up the Robert Street Arts Lab. I worked for Derek Hill at the New Cinema Club, and for Jimmy Vaughan (Warhol and Anger's distributor) writing his film sales catalogue.

TC: That wasn't a wasted year because you learnt about distribution, the difficulties of it, and the possibilities of it.

5 THE NEW ARTS LAB

David: The programming I'm most proud of is the New Arts Lab programme, which opened in September/October 1969.

TC: Was this New Arts Lab (NAL) the Institute for Research into Arts and Technology (IRAT)?

David: They're the same: IRAT a.k.a. NAL a.k.a. the Robert Street Arts Lab. Why it had that grandiose name was because of the range of workshops it contained. It had the Film Co-op with a film laboratory set up by Malcolm Le Grice, using processing machines that Victor Herbert, the American publisher who financed the Living Theatre, had paid for. Hoppy was there with the beginning of TV-X, the first kind of open-video lab, mostly doing guerilla television rather than artworks – though he now calls them artworks. John Collins had been part of Bob Cobbing's entourage at Better Books. He was an accountant but an utter film buff with an aspiration to write his own equivalent of 'Time Out', and in order to do this he worked out that he needed to have a printing press, so he set up a printing workshop in the Lab to bring down the unit costs of the magazine. The magazine never happened but the workshop was set up and the curiously printed Arts Lab programmes were all printed on his machines. We managed to live very cheaply there. The theatre was run by Pam Zoline's partner, John Lifton, who was into cybernetics at the time.

TC: Pam Zoline?

David: She was a painter and novelist, who had been at the Slade with us, and she ran the gallery at Drury Lane with Bidy and gave John and Yoko their first show. One of the shows at the NAL through Pam's friendships was the Atrocity Exhibition, featuring JG Ballard's crashed cars. There's a

wonderful photograph of Sally Potter, who was a young thing at the time entering film circles, sitting in one of the crashed cars.

TC: You used the words 'arts and technology'. Film isn't in the title.

David: No. It's an Arts Lab. Film is implicit in that, and the Film Co-op has its own identity. The New Arts Lab was in a cold building, far too far off the beaten track. It was the ultimate pilgrimage site north of the Euston Road, out towards Camden Town.

TC: I remember the police making a raid, I think in 1971.

David: What for?

TC: They were searching for drugs. They just arrived out of the blue. The other thing I remember was you programmed *L'Age d'or* and someone turned up at the door saying he'd been trying to see the film for twenty years. I thought that was a tribute to you.

David: My film programming there was pretty interesting! A five days a week programme; numerous multi-part histories of 'experiment' in film, surveys of the Knokke festivals, one-person shows and reviews of new English work – since there was some new English work to review, at last. By contrast at the Drury Lane Arts Lab we had to show an awful lot of stuff like camp classics, even during weekdays.

TC: Camp classics?

David: Classic films, musicals. Roger Corman in Cinemascope.

TC: American musicals?

David: *Top Hat*, *Flying Down to Rio*. I remember showing *Gilda*, the Rita Hayworth film, and the 'Put the blame on Mame' song had been snipped out of it by someone who'd shown it previously. Howls in the audience. The only redeeming feature of that dreadful film, and it was missing.

TC: These films were put in to give a stable income?

David: Yes, absolutely. It's worth saying that neither of the Arts Labs had a penny of public subsidy. By then I was also cynical enough to put on a triple bill of *Chant d'amour*, which we had an illegal print of, Carolee's *Fuses* and *Ai-love* by Taki Iimura with soundtrack by Yoko Ono, as a sort of dirty avant-garde triple bill, and that would pack them in. But again my working with Jimmy Vaughan meant we were able to show other Warhol films as they arrived. For *Bike Boy* Bidy did a lovely poster, also for the rather dreadful *I a Man*, and we showed *Chelsea Girls* again. They made us money from time to time, but the New Arts Lab was just located too far out, it just didn't work. So in a way my wonderful programming I think was wasted.

TC: I wouldn't agree with that because when I went, there was always a select number. I thought about the underground audience, if I may call it that, that it was not great quantity but it was very high quality.

David: The story of the artists' film – as I now grandly call it – is that it is at last finding its public through repertory in galleries, which is far from ideal, and through DVDs and the internet. People are

discovering it, and it's not this completely obscure thing anymore. New technologies are allowing that proper relationship with film as one would have with books, with images of paintings, whatever.

TC: How long did the NAL run for?

David: 1969, just into 1971. The lease is up, and we are exhausted. We just buggered off basically.

TC: Did you get any money from it?

David: No, no.

6 THE MID-SEVENTIES

TC: How were you staying alive?

David: I was doing stuff. Bidy was doing some work. We were living in Covent Garden very cheaply. I suppose I got an advance for 'Experimental Cinema'.

TC: An advance for a book! It would keep you going for about two weeks!

David: Not in those days. I can't remember what I got.

TC: For 1971 to 1977 I've got a blank for you. You mentioned you thought of doing a Ph.D. at the Slade.

David: That's true, that must have been late in that period. We had kids. I worked on the Underground Festival in 1973, and Daniel, our eldest, was just learning to walk at that time.

TC: So born in 1972?

David: Yes. He appears in Jonas's film, *Birth of a Nation* (1997), his portraits of people who are involved in filmy stuff. There's me and Bidy sitting on the ground outside at the NFT at the '73 Festival by the river front, and Daniel's toddling along in the background. Just one shot of a few seconds. It was delightful really. At the Jonas Mekas exhibition [at Serpentine Gallery in Dec. 2012 to Jan. 2013] I stood in front of the wretched monitor for forty minutes until that shot came on again.

I taught at Croydon School of Art, and at the John Cass School of Art. I was teaching a kind of London architecture appreciation course for Americans: Americans on a six-month programme were seconded to the John Cass School, bizarrely. I took them on architectural walks and things like that. Bidy was working part-time for the first two to three years of Daniel's life. Rob arrived four years after Dan, in 1976. What did I do then? I don't know. I wrote little bits, I reviewed for Time Out and Studio International. My diary for Studio International was in 1975.

TC: You'd done journalism for the International Times.

David: Way back. There's another thing: I wrote for a newspaper called Ink, which was another underground newspaper. I reviewed all sorts for them. And I have correspondence with John Lennon from then. I wrote a review of the Stones concert at Altamont in California. [*Gimme Shelter* (1970), made by the Maysles Brothers and Charlotte Zwerin. Notoriously the concert ended in a death.] John Lennon was very critical of it. He sent me a postcard with a very peculiar thing, the stub of a cigarette, a kind of cigarette filter sellotaped on, and I wondered if this was acid which I was

supposed to take to enlighten myself. The envelope is covered with rubber stamp impressions and inside there's a card: on one side is a funny image of John & Yoko, he as a monkey playing Pan's pipes, she semi-naked reclining in a tree, and on the reverse the following:

"Dear Dave Curtis

Everyone seems to be asking 'Why' about Altamont.

The answer seems to be 'Why not'.

I mean there was [sic] enough people there to be quite a large city. In any large city there's at least one murder a night (probably). Anyway someone said this in the States - and I think they're probably right.

love

John & Yoko"

Anyway, getting back to the main story, I was doing bits of reviewing and stuff like that. But afterwards I felt I had had a sabbatical from film for a while. I probably started my head-shrinking at the time, after Rob was born, so again that's in the same period because that slightly overlaps with the Arts Council. When I got my job with them, I didn't tell them that I would be disappearing off for an hour each day to meet my shrink!

TC: Were you depressive? Or is that too strong a word?

David: I'm not sure. Our elder son Dan was one of twins; he survived but the other was stillborn. That was quite a trauma. But I didn't start head-shrinking until quite a lot later.

TC: That's no surprise. You didn't know what had hit you. Part of getting out of it is trying to untangle all that.

David: Exactly.

TC: Now, the film diary for Studio International. That's quite a prestigious journal, I would say.

David: There was a famous film issue, which Richard Cork edited. It has pieces by Annabel Nicolson, Malcolm Le Grice and lots of others.

TC: A film diary makes me think of you writing a piece every month.

David: No, no. It was completely fabricated. I did a chronology in the first person, a diary of someone writing about the early days, and so on, up until the present which was 1975. There were some special screenings then and there was an Expanded Cinema Festival in 1976, by which time I was sort of engaged with film again. Actually in 1975, Lis Rhodes was programming the Film Co-op's cinema at the Piano Factory and I was very much involved. The Co-op cinema had started in the Dairy in 1971 which was the first home of the Co-op after the Robert Street Arts Lab, programmed first by Peter Gidal and then Annabel [Nicolson]. She had a studio there, David Larcher ditto, while the Film Co-op had workshops and its distribution base. The cinema was back to mattresses on the floor. Then that building was repossessed and in 1975 the Co-op moved to the Piano Factory. That's Camden taking over and rehousing the Co-op as a client. Lis programmed there in 1975/76, something like that, and Malcolm would write reviews for Time Out for her, for the contemporary programmes, while I started doing an avant-garde history programme. We did two shows a night,

one night a week, Wednesday or Thursday. I would do a 6.30 historical programme and after it Lis would do a contemporary one. I was doing repertory again which is in a way what I've always done. When I did the show for the Tate in 2003 [A Century of Artists' Film in Britain – see below] I was back doing chronologies again, histories.

7 THE ARTS COUNCIL OF GREAT BRITAIN

TC: You were film officer at the Arts Council 1977 to 2000.

David: That's right. I started in the dark ages, as you've described them, that mid-70s gap, since from 1973 I was on the film committee of the Arts Council before I joined as an officer. Now here's the animation bit coming in again. The Arts Council had set up a thing called the Film Tour which was three little men in three little vans going round Britain showing documentaries on the arts.

TC: Those documentaries were the big thing, were they not?

David: Yes, Rodney Wilson who was the officer in charge of that had innovated the idea that artists' films could be part of it. They'd started funding one of two things, David Hall's *Vertical*, for example, borderline documentary and borderline artists' own work. Rodney shared my enthusiasm for experimental animation, and he asked me to put together some programmes which we first of all showed at the ICA in 1974. We had early stuff like the Richter and Eggeling films, and Ruttmann, then Harry Smith, Len Lye of course, Douglas Crockwell who was an obscure American abstract person, Robert Breer and, although not abstract, the extraordinary animations by Alexeieff and Parker.

TC: Bartosch?

David: Bartosch, *voilà*, all that lot, which astonishingly weren't in distribution. They weren't in the BFI library. If they had been there wouldn't have been any case for doing this programme at all. That little season at the ICA must have been when I was on the committee because that must have been how I got to know Rodney. So I bought these films for the Arts Council and then put them into distribution via the film tour. There was also the first Festival of British Independent Cinema at Bristol in 1976 which I reviewed for the arts council. So I was beginning to do committee-ish work like that.

TC: The job you took was advertised, was it?

David: Yes. The job of my predecessor, Jonathan Harris, Rodney's assistant, was to write up the blurbs for the documentaries as they were made, and to create publicity cards. In a way it sounded a bit like what I'd been doing for Jimmy Vaughan, and I was known to be a safe pair of hands for that. One of my first things when I took the job was to produce the Council's catalogue of its documentaries on the arts, the one with the Tom Phillips cover, but obviously my interest in artists' film was known, so Rodney encouraged me to work on some of the things in this area. I started throwing in ideas about this and that. Things like Filmmakers on Tour came out either before or fairly soon after I'd started; I certainly worked on it and wrote the catalogues.

TC: And it produces for the first time ever a steady income?

David: Absolutely.

TC: Did it give you a new lease of interest in life?

David: I was very aware of the downside of it: the 9 to 5 job. That was a hell of a shock. And with teaching I had had an unpaid summer holiday of 2½ months. Wow!

TC: But you didn't have it at the Arts Council.

David: At the Arts Council it was 4½ weeks of paid leave, taken at different times, when your children were home, not at school.

TC: The Council was in Piccadilly then?

David: Yes.

TC: You are now in an institution with its own rules and everything. Did you find that irritating, or did you make your way around it?

David: I had a wonderful buffer zone in Rodney. My history of being at the Arts Council was at first we were in the art department, then we were in a separate film department, then I was back in the art department. In the art department we were sometimes fully integrated, and sometimes a separate unit. Our budget was up and down like a yo-yo. Amidst these inconstancies, Rodney was a constant in the sense he was a buffer between us and the really heavy institutional stuff, even though it came down on all of us in a way. I remember the awful government reviews, e.g. the Wilding Review where an accountant was sent in and told to work out how much it costs to give an individual artist an award. We were making awards of £300, £500, £700, and we were told grandly that to administer this was costing £500 per award. 'How dare you do this?' My response then and on several other occasions, when the same issue came up, was, 'Give me a cheque book and a ledger and I will account for everything. What real difference is there between that simplistic way of giving out money and what you are proposing? I am the only person who can tell you whether this money has been well spent, or my committee, but certainly none of you guys up there know anything about it.'

TC: £500 per award? Cheap at the price is what you say.

David: I know. It was always distorted by the Opera House which undoubtedly cost them hundreds of thousands of pounds to administer. It's no better now.

TC: You make an interesting point in the 'History', without exploring it further: "State involvement in the arts can be a mixed blessing." And you ruefully mention someone like Jeff Keen or Margaret Tait who work at the margins and seem to exist without funding. What do you think?

David: I do think that artists working with the moving image would have happened, subsidy or no subsidy, and certainly there are countries where there is little state patronage of any sort at all. In others, e.g. the former Soviet Union, if you happen to sing the right song, you were made for life, so to speak. In the UK state intervention on behalf of artists was doing two modest things: it was an intervention into a market, saying we are prepared to buy your work a little space in the gallery in the hope that an audience will come to it, and it's also giving artists a little bit of space to do things that they might not otherwise have been able to do. It's not doing more than that. That said, I also think that funding for archives is important. I despair at the lack of investment in keeping the best things from the past.

TC: Compare ourselves with France where I think of the French as very keen on state intervention in the arts. But there isn't the idea of artists' film in France much, is there?

David: I don't know about now. There wasn't then. I remember Rose Lowder as somebody who was very clear that the French state was mean in its support. She eventually did get some support for her archive in Avignon, and I think Light Cone has had some support, but individual artists have had real difficulty.

TC: I wanted to say . . .

David: . . . that my entire career was worthless.

TC: Quite the opposite! Your entire career becomes worthwhile because what the Council was doing was enabling very interesting work to be created, which isn't happening in France. A striking part of this story is having you with your background and your encyclopaedic knowledge helping you to be very open to proposals coming in.

David: I hope that was the case. There are a lot of people out there who would say the opposite, I think. One of the definite perceived downsides of my long tenure at the Arts Council was that a certain kind of film was privileged while others fell by the wayside. The most vociferous critic of that sort was Duncan Reekie of Exploding Cinema in the late 80s, early 90s. In my view a lot of the artists involved in Exploding Cinema were kind of amateur and independent filmmakers most of whom were in love with Hollywood. The interesting part of his constituency was the punk element, which we did occasionally fund.

TC: Did you find him patronage from anywhere else?

David: No, and that was the problem. A lot of his criticism was that we and all state funders were a self-perpetuating bunch of elitists.

TC: Yet it's probably true of all patrons in history that they had certain tastes.

David: There was a lot of work we funded I didn't like particularly, and actually in my defence I would also say that one of the things I did successfully was to recognise that there was a new generation of curators coming up, and to whom we could delegate funds to commission work. Commissioning is another form of patronage, and although it's sometimes more limiting, it doesn't have to be. A lot of the commissions were very open, so from early on we were giving bursaries in partnership with polytechnics when they were the places that had equipment. As a result they would be empowered (probably with someone from our committee on board to see that work was within our guidelines). Later on, more interestingly I think, there were people in little galleries round the country who were beginning to do interesting programmes of moving-image work partly as a result of our giving them money to commission work. So in a sense the decision-making process was spread more widely, and quite often my committee members would say, 'Why are we giving it to X, Y and Z? What they do is crap!' But I felt it was a really positive thing: when you gave money to a third party, on the whole they would feel a real investment in promoting the work and seeing it live in some way. And it promotes diversity.

TC: One thing that strikes me about your 'History' is the way you keep going. The buffer-ish point of view would be that the Film Co-op was great and pure, black and white structural film of the

mid-70s was its apogee, and after that nothing else that followed could match it. But there's no sense of that in your book.

David: I'm glad you say that because others have associated me with a narrow Co-op view. Very consciously with that book I set out to say actually this is a much broader, more interesting, more diverse field than that.

TC: After all you were there up to 2000. Take the 1990s where the cultural landscape of Britain has shifted hugely from the 1970s. Are you still using Council funds to fund work which you thought was radical and quite different from what had been going on in the 70s? Would you defend it on those grounds?

David: I think there are two answers to that. I think there was a particular feel in the 1970s of radicality, that what was being done was without precedent, which is not true but it felt that way. In terms of recent history it was certainly the case. It was part of a sense that a lot of the people in the other arts had as well. It wasn't unique to film. But later it would be difficult for anything to have quite that feel. In the 90s, I got accused of signing up with the devil in working with television. I had no compunction about that at all, since I thought it was very important work to do. Not everybody's work was suited to that context. We got angry protests. For example, Peter Gidal said Channel 4 should commission him to make a two-hour film. 'Well, actually, Peter, that is possibly not your most fruitful way of meeting an audience.' Rod Stoneman, who was mercifully at Channel 4 for a long time and so we were able to develop good things with him, was very clear that this work was made for television. It was all about developing audiences.

TC: By the 80s you're beginning to get women's films, and by the 90s what you call identity film-making is to the fore with people coming forward – correct me if I'm wrong – who do not have any regard for the history of underground/avant-garde film. Instead they just want to be raising new issues on film, and yet you are finding ways to support them.

David: Absolutely, yes. The 70s sense of ownership over that entire field actually was as repressive in many ways as Hollywood's over the moving image before. Then again, I find it quite funny that you go to a gallery these days and see the projector sitting there chewing away, installed by someone who knows nothing about the 1970s fetishisation of the filmstrip and all the rest of it. And yet it has become a modish way of presenting things, and the artist feels very sincerely about the integrity of the work. So I can understand the 70s people who look askance at that.

TC: The other thing that's happening is that video is taking over from celluloid, and digital from video. And you had to adapt to that as well. Did you find that easy?

David: I think I did in the sense that I loved VHS when it came along as a recording medium. I still have a terrific collection of operas that I recorded in the early days from Channel 4 on Sunday afternoons, all on VHS. So, secondary media I was very comfortable with. I think I saw the salvation of the artists' film the moment that VHS and domestic recording came along, and obviously it's got better and better, yet in some senses worse and worse.

TC: I remember in 1968 when Sitney brought his package of American underground films, he said what we need was a way whereby we could see these films privately over and over again. I agree that when video came along, you saw the possibilities. And then it was much better with

digital because I think the quality is so much better. Even then I'm not unsympathetic to people who say that it is not the same experience.

David: No of course it's not the same experience.

TC: But it is an experience.

David: I have so often been so grateful to YouTube and Ubuweb for a glimpse of something I have read about over fifty years but not been able to watch, and at last I could see all the descriptions were utterly inadequate, the film was nothing like that.

TC: Did it mean keeping up with all the technical developments?

David: Rodney, as producer of the Arts Council documentaries, was in on every editing session for those films, so when Final Cut Pro came along it meant something to him. It doesn't mean anything to me. I would go to the second-to-last rough-cut screening of works, whatever form they were in, and would be perfectly happy to comment on it, whether it was over a hot Steenbeck or a DVD sent to me.

TC: What about the process of applying to the Arts Council? Would the artists write a proposal for you?

David: Yes.

TC: For you in the first instance, because you're preparing it to go to a panel?

David: No. We were much more brutal in a way. We'd just print and circulate what they sent in. Sometimes, not very often, someone would say to me, 'Look, I'm thinking of doing something like this. Is there any way that would be acceptable?' It might be to do with the fact that it was perceived that the committee was only funding short films or long ones with nothing in-between. So I'd give guidance. But on the whole we announced deadlines, and we'd send out guidelines for applicants, and things would come bundling in. I would read them all, and all the applications would go to committee, and the committee would devote a whole day to discussing them.

TC: Did you appreciate the discussions in the film panels, or did you sometimes get exasperated?

David: Both. Sometimes they were very revealing. We did try to rotate the panel membership. Some old lags came back and back simply because they were the ones you saw at the Film Co-op screenings and elsewhere on a regular basis. An awful lot of people who professed interest actually never went and saw anything. And artist filmmakers, it has to be said, apart from their very closest friends, often wouldn't go and see anyone else's films at all. That shocked me. Equally there were very frustrating moments where one wondered why one was spending time discussing something. It very largely depended on whether you had a good chairman or not. A lot of people outside the system would find it difficult to believe, but a good chairman could get you through difficulties very quickly and a bad chairman would let you wallow bloody hours in an unproductive discussion.

TC: I've been in that situation often. I can very well imagine it at the Arts Council.

David: When it's a matter of artistic judgement, of course it's difficult. There were moments when we had to take a vote on whether we were going to go on discussing something or not, just to cut through it.

TC: Summarising a discussion can move things on. 'We've reached this point and we've got to get to that point.'

David: I was never very good at it myself, but I deeply appreciated it in others. Malcolm Le Grice for example was wonderful, Al Rees was pretty good, although not as good as Malcolm who never got rattled, while Al – bless him – could get intense about things, just as I would have in the same position. Malcolm would rise above things.

TC: I used to get the impression of his being a very mature person in this world.

David: Yes, you never felt he was against you, even though he was telling you to shut up in polite words. You never begrudged it because actually he did it very carefully, without any sort of malice. He was terrific, but he was rare.

TC: How long did the chairman take their role for?

David: About three years.

TC: So between 1977 and 2000 you must have had quite a series of them?

David: Loads. When we did things for television we had a separate committee for that drawn partly from our own committee and partly from people that Rod Stoneman wanted. They were fine.

8 ACHIEVEMENTS

TC: Looking back, what are the things you're most glad to have achieved?

David: That's very difficult. One thing: 'Midnight Underground', which is nothing to do with the Arts Council.

TC: That was the Channel 4 slot.

David: It most immediately addressed my desire to share the stuff that I loved via television. After the series went out, I remember Rod Stoneman ringing up and telling me he'd just had a letter from someone in the Outer Hebrides, saying, 'I've just seen this extraordinary stuff on Channel 4. I never knew it existed, it opened my eyes etc.' And a young lad in Sheffield, Mark Webber, ditto. 'Midnight Underground' had opened his eyes. It was wonderful. It is a tragedy when some wonderful new film by somebody you had just funded would be screened at the ICA or the Co-op, or the NFT even, to an audience primarily of the artist and the artists' friends, twenty random others, maybe fifteen if you're not so lucky, and that is its only outing, the only time that film would be seen until somebody – perhaps – dug it up again decades later. 'Midnight Underground' had audiences of possibly 350,000.

TC: Were those programmes in the late 80s?

David: No, they were as late as 1992, 1993. Eight programmes, then Rod brought the series back with things he'd commissioned, partly things that came through our joint Arts Council Channel 4 commissions.

TC: It had a presenter.

David: Benjamin Woolley. I wrote the words, he mouthed them. I sometimes flinched . . .

TC: Did Simon Field do one of those programmes?

David: He was the producer on it. It was done by Illuminations, and Simon was already working there. He did another one that I worked on as a researcher, but not much more than that, which was 'New York Framed' (1986).

TC: That's the one I'm thinking of. I've still got it on VHS.

David: Wonderful, again.

TC: It took me by surprise that these films were on television.

David: 'New York Framed' was only clips, but nonetheless.

So, 'Midnight Underground' in a way was one highlight.

TC: Another thing you and I did was a 'Frame by frame' package of films. It wasn't reaching 350,000 people, but it was going to obscure places where people would come along, and ask interesting questions. I thought that was well worth having done.

David: When I was interviewed for the Arts Council job, my interviewing team was Rodney Wilson, Joanna Drew, head of art at the time, and one other. One of my pitches was that I really wanted to develop the exhibition side, because I thought this stuff could be exhibited. It took a while before we started putting together these exhibition programmes. Organising touring exhibitions was a big part of the Arts Council's role at the time. It is interesting to me that in lots of people's research about avant-garde, independent film and so on, the Arts Council's intervention as exhibitor alongside the Co-op, Circles, London Video Arts etc. was seen as distorting the market on the grounds that we were putting in a subsidised product. There was a big bust-up when we started doing Filmmakers on Tour. People at the Film Co-op said we were doing them out of rentals. What we instituted then, almost immediately I think, was that the artist could rent the work from the Co-op, at the Co-op rate.

TC: So they got a slice.

David: The filmmakers got their slice, the Co-op got its slice but the venue still got the film at a subsidised rate. In fact, the subsidy was fairly hefty. Incidentally there is another point here about labour-intensiveness in the finance department. We just had a form that went to them, and if I had signed it, the finance department paid it out, so the system wasn't administratively heavy. While the subsidy element was big, nonetheless it was a lightweight way of doing things.

TC: It couldn't be done now. A very convoluted process would be involved.

David: That's an aside. Going back to your question of what I was most proud of, I think it was the development of that exhibition strand. I perceived the Co-op and London Video Arts as being primarily terrifically good at promoting their own active members, but not very good at distributing the work of their old lags. It was partly constitutionally not possible for them because they were not supposed to be privileging one artist over another. Its energy was always around the current cohort, which was entirely healthy, but they weren't addressing the broader public that could be introduced to this material. The Film and Video Umbrella was a huge bone of contention with the Co-op: 'Why were we supporting something that was in competition with them?'

TC: There's a lot of arts politics involved. Did that get you down?

David: From time to time steam would come out of my ears when I'd get some wretched letter objecting to this or that. On the other hand one knew enough of the positive feedback from some of the places we were sending things to; in some ways the mission was working. That was good. I always believed the audience was bigger than the twenty people at a Co-op screening, wherever it was.

TC: I know you currently wish there was a way of providing a text to enthuse the reader with pleasure in the image. In pessimistic moments I think all this has failed. We've had a cinema for 110 years, yet we've still got to enthuse people about the image in itself, of itself, by itself, and the language of images butted one against the other.

David: I think the invisibility of the moving image, even of classic mainstream cinema these days, is the problem. Books are nothing like as invisible, nor paintings, and so on. All films just come and go, and while they're never completely invisible, film has been particularly burdened by its 'natural state' of invisibility. Yet I remain an utter optimist. Globally, the people who are aware of it and love it are increasing, and will increase exponentially. I'm sure we will look back at YouTube and things like that as being so utterly primitive, and so partial.

TC: But they make pleasure in the image possible.

David: They make it possible, and the audience is growing, I'm convinced of it. I think there is maybe a generational gap: one constant is that people in senior positions in our great museums are wonderfully knowledgeable about visual arts in the 20th century, yet they know nothing about the moving image. Well, there's a younger generation who do. The only difficulty is that they haven't had access to the past. They've had access to the present, so they are *au fait* with what is going on and are unprejudiced about it, they are very happy to do mixed shows, which I think is wonderful. I trust them to struggle with the technology and to make the moving image fit better into the gallery situation because it's still not perfect. But they don't know about the past, so in a way it is a bigger struggle in a funny way to make sure the past does not disappear down the plughole before it is rediscovered by another generation.

9 THE TATE RETROSPECTIVE

TC: That brings us to Tate Britain's 'A Century of Artists' Film in Britain' in 2003/4. Whose idea was that? Yours?

David: Yes, mine.

TC: You approached Tate Britain to do it?

David: I had been doing stuff with John Wyver of Illuminations television. He had done 'Midnight Underground'. I hadn't been in touch with him for a while but when I left the Council I produced some DVDs for the BFI – the Raban one and the Welsby one in the series British Artists' Films – and John was involved in those. So I was in touch with him and we talked about doing a big show of moving image for one of the Tates or wherever. Gregor Muir had recently been appointed as curator of the moving image at Tate Modern with responsibility for moving image across all the Tates. Gregor sounded quite sympathetic to doing something, and asked us to come up with an idea. In discussion with John I was always very clear that I wanted it to be in the gallery not in the cinema, not a performance thing. I said it's got to be a permanent presence.

TC: At Tate Britain, in one of the galleries?

David: Yes. John was very keen on compressed digitised imagery, and always very whizzy about all that stuff. He said we could project films that could run throughout the day, slotting in filmed insertions so that artists introduced their own films. The display would occupy a gallery and just run and run. Eventually we came up with a format that we would do four day-long sequences, each of which would run for three months, with no repeats in the day.

TC: For a year?

David: For twelve months, starting at 10.30 in the morning, stopping at 5 in the evening. It ended up that the entire three-month programme was up there in the box above the projector, compressed, and the box turned the projector on in the morning and turned it off at the end of the day.

TC: And the gallery was dark?

David: A black box, basically, with a walk-in point, and a big panel outside saying what was running that day, including times. There was a website – all part of the plan – so that people could look up when a particular film was on and so on. The website is still there by the way. I did a lot of work on it. [Details can be found on <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/century-artists-film-britain>.] You got a still image of each film, and the little text that scrolled before the film, and as I say we filmed one or two artists to introduce their particular pieces. Controversially we did multi-screen things composited onto one screen electronically so that, for example, William Raban's *Thames Barrier* (1977) – not my favourite film of his – made for three screens was projected like that. My choice – and I persuaded Malcolm to do it – was *After Manet* (1975), an hour-long film with Annabel, William, Gill Eatherley and Malcolm himself in it, which goes through the history of cinematic process up to that moment, on four screens: colour, black-and-white, negative and positive. We transferred that to DVD – it'd never been transferred before – and composited it. I think that exhibition was my biggest achievement after the Arts Council.

TC: Did you do a catalogue for the exhibition?

David: No, but I wish we had. In a sense it went with my book.

10 TWO BOOKS

TC: So, your 'History of Artists' Film and Video' comes out of that?

David: Yes, because I started the book before the exhibition. I then segued into completing it afterwards.

TC: Had you started in 2001, just after you'd left the Arts Council?

David: The exhibition was 2003/4. And so I must have started the book in 2002, something like that.

TC: When it's published in 2007, you found the publication process had been long-winded. Correct?

David: Worse than that. It was awful. My editor at BFI Books, who had commissioned Al Rees's book ['A History of Experimental Film and Video (1999)], then Nicky Hamlyn's ['Film Art Phenomena' (2003)], and then mine, departed before he could work on my book, and I was left stranded. Now it was probably my fault for not delivering when I said I would, but it was important and useful for me to do it properly, and to do the Tate exhibition *en route*: it made me revise a lot of things, but when I came to deliver, nothing! No feed-back. The new regime when it was eventually put in place had no real interest, so it wasn't edited and when published it wasn't noticed at all. It had no external reviews basically. Biddy edited it in terms of telling me my sentences were much too long, and pointing out repetitive bits.

TC: It came out well-edited and proof-read. I couldn't find misprints.

David: Well, thank you for saying that. I still flinch from time to time, but I do get pleasure occasionally from reading it and thinking, 'That's not badly expressed.'

TC: It's quite an achievement really. Although I haven't counted exactly, I reckon there are over 1000 films referred to, if you look at the index.

David: The index! They charged me for the index. The reason I still don't make any money from the book is I'm still sent bills saying I owe them £300. Outrageous. I did win a prize with it, thank God.

TC: What was that?

David: The Krasner-Krauss award. £5000. It was a fantastic award. So that's the only money I made out of it.

TC: Over 1000 films and you've seen them all?

David: True.

TC: That's amazing. You are the only person who could have written it. If there is a criticism, it's a breathless parade of names and films, but you wanted to make it encyclopaedic – and that's not a pejorative word. You wanted to get the full history.

David: I know. 'Experimental Cinema' has the same problem, even worse in a sense. I remember a cruel Australian reviewer said it reads like a laundry list. That is true.

TC: Both books are very useful works of reference. I have been looking at 'Experimental Cinema' again, forty years on, and thinking well of it. It's got sharp little perceptions and you pick things up at first hand from talking to people. When that was written, what are the standard histories? There's Sheldon Renan's 'Underground Film', but that only covers America. And you've got this European angle which Sitney's 'Visionary Film' (1974) did not have regard to.

David: Absolutely not, no.

TC: Did it ever annoy you that while there were plenty of independent American filmmakers you were keen on, the Americans could not take more interest in what was happening in Europe?

David: Absolutely. I found a quote from Peter Kubelka [Film Culture no. 44 Spring 1967]. Jonas Mekas asked him what was going on in Europe, and Kubelka replied that he was not prepared to talk about it, and that there was nothing of any interest in terms of moving image at all. He's talking in the 1970s when he was next door neighbours with Kurt Kren. Is he not worth a mention? And one or two others?

TC: And that reinforced a prejudice, in effect.

David: Absolutely. I later discovered what it was all about. There's a later quote from Kubelka, when he was interviewed much more recently, saying that he was completely a fish out of water in Austria. Actually he wasn't: there were Kren and others who were quite good chums with him. But he still said that he couldn't get support in Austria. 'It wasn't until I went to America and Brakhage saw my work and persuaded some lab to deal with it, that I was able to complete my films.' I suppose the size of the American academic community is so large that it doesn't really dawn on them there's another world somewhere else.

TC: Americans are wonderful in general, but they can be inward-looking.

David: It's a shame.

TC: I'm delighted to hear your 'History' got a prize. Were you pleased in the interest shown in 'Experimental Cinema' forty years ago?

David: It did get picked up but nothing like Al Rees's book. And Gidal's book ['Materialist Film' (1989)], which has a European perspective on avant-garde cinema and is an accepted textbook these days, has had Japanese, Chinese editions etc. It is very European in my view, but going back to my 'History', my second book, we sent review copies to all sorts of people in America, but nothing, we didn't get any reviews at all. I suppose it's doomed because it's so obviously about British stuff although I thought it would have some interest.

TC: What about Millennium Film Journal? Did they pay it any attention?

David: True. They did get Lucy Reynolds [who is British] to review it.

11 CSM ARCHIVE, OTHER EXHIBITIONS

TC: Are you pleased with the British Artists' Film & Video Study Collection at Central St Martins?

David: I'm very grateful to St Martins for giving it space, and the prominence it has. I wish they would resource it with permanent staff, but I'm hopeful that if Steven Ball and I leave it in a sufficiently coherent format then the museum staff, since it is housed within the museum, will be able to administer access to it. It would be lovely to think that they would have paid film scholars permanently attached, and in a sense by having some people doing research in the orbit of it that may happen. But obviously if I'm run over by a bus, and if Steven, as he will do, eventually goes off somewhere else, there won't be anyone there who knows the contents. However they are at least preserved in pretty good circumstances. And if anyone is enterprising and persistent, they will find what they want, I hope.

TC: You are already, are you not, building up an archive of tapes and DVDs?

David: Yes, we have 6-7000.

TC: To have a place to go and look at things in decent conditions seems to me important.

David: We have a lot of things that are not in distribution via Lux, for example. A strength of the collection, both in terms of its paper documentation, and in terms of the moving image, are the 70s and 80s which are very poorly represented elsewhere. The BFI archive doesn't have much of that period. The Arts Council had started saving copies of what it had funded, but not much else, and certainly the BFI doesn't have the paper documentation. So we have rare magazines, some artist statements. Some of the most intriguing things are the artists' applications to the Arts Council. Projects, whether funded or rejected, are there. Some artists who were very reluctant to speak or write about themselves were forced to do so by the application process and it's interesting to see what they said.

TC: You've half hinted it in our conversation, but do you think Tate Modern should be doing a lot more?

David: Yes. It annoys me intensely when I see a moving-image work there that they've recently bought from X, Y or Z, flitting away on the screen, and it strikes me that that's quite pleasant, but I know more interesting stuff than that. Certainly if you look at its picture store, at the way it has documented British art in the 1890s, 1900s, 1920s, whatever, stuff we would now probably consider to be utter dross, which critics at the time presumably thought was the bees' knees, is sitting there archived and documented. They ought to be doing the same for the moving image now. If somebody has said there are interesting moving-image artists of the 70s, whether they are or not – there should be some obligation to document what British artists did. But that commitment is still absent. They have bought Guy Sherwin's *At the Academy*, a favourite film, they have bought Lis Rhodes's *Light Music*, which is not typical of her strongest work at all, but it's there simply because we put it into an Expanded Cinema programme at our conference ['Expanded Cinema – Activating the Space of Reception', Tate Modern, April 2009] where it was shoved under their nose and they bought it. In terms of video artists, they've no David Hall, Tony Sinden, Tamara Krikorian, no David Critchley, no Margaret Warwick, no Steve Partridge. All these people I think are significant, none of them are there. They haven't got Malcolm Le Grice, Peter Gidal, Annabel Nicolson, Gill Eatherley, who by any measure are significant artists.

TC: I am sure you know the phrase, 'The best is the enemy of the good.' The best would be to have everything but that's impractical, so if not the best, at least a good thing would be to have a

selection of artists' film and video, even though someone not on the list may be aggrieved that they aren't on.

David: Accepted. I gave them a lot of things on a plate when I did my show at Tate Britain. They could have sat there with a notebook and made a list. They would have caught quite a lot of things that way.

TC: Say more about the 'Film as Film' exhibition.

David: It was based on an exhibition that Birgit Hein and Wolf Hertzogenrath had done in Cologne. I went and saw that with Richard Francis who was in the art department at the Arts Council. We'd put forward the idea that we might do a version of this, so Richard and I went to have a look at it and see whether one could build on it, as well as talk to Birgit about it. In calling it 'Film as Film: formal experiment in film 1910 to 1975' we drew on the German title. It was 'formal experiment' and that's what got up the noses of the women artists more than anything else, although we did have Maya Deren and people like that. They weren't in the Cologne version, which was a much more structuralist view of history, but it wasn't enough.

The wonderful thing about 'Film as Film' in 1979 – actually another thing I'm quite proud of – was its very innovative way of showing film, e.g. we used loops in the Hayward Gallery. I think we had the greatest collection of loop absorbers ever put together, certainly in that decade. It was a forward-looking exhibition in many ways although two members of the selection committee withdrew because we were not prepared to follow their advice about the inclusion of women. One of the things they wanted was a section where a whole lot of women could have their own space to do their own thing, and write their own history, which wouldn't be anything to do with 'Film as Film', but to do with women's history in film. When we said no, they withdrew and wrote a statement about this excluded history. Out of all that came Circles Cinema for the distribution of women's film and performance, which is entirely a positive thing, and also a package that we funded later on, 'Her image fades as her voice rises', put together by Felicity Sparrow and Lis Rhodes on behalf of Circles. That falling out was as much about the artworld being still very male at that time. There had been rows at the Serpentine Gallery, at the Hayward Annuals and elsewhere, over the fact that there had been some shows where all these selectors were male. A few years later there was an all-women's Hayward Annual.

TC: You were responsible, were you not, for a show at the Serpentine, which I participated in? Jeff Keen did too. You invited filmmakers to provide artwork that had been used to create the finished film. It was about the process of creating a film. [This was 'Charting Time: artists' drawings for film and video' held at the Serpentine in August 1986.]

David: Yes, it was things created preparatory to film. I remember it was the first time Derek Jarman's script-books had been shown. We had Patrick Keiller's scrolls of still images with text underneath as a scenario for his film, before he actually shot them with a camera, Jayne Parker's drawings for *I Cat*, Lis Rhodes' artwork for *Light Music*; I can't remember what else. It was in a way what Ian Christie did later with Chrissy Iles at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford ['The Director's Eye' (1996)] in which they displayed drawings by Eisenstein, Oskar Fischinger's artwork for his *Circles* and so on.

TC: That Serpentine show was your brainchild?

David: Absolutely my brainchild.

TC: So, there are quite a number of exhibitions in which you had an important hand.

David: Yes. A Fischinger one at Cambridge Darkroom in Cambridge (1985). Recently 'Moving Portraits' curated with Jane Won for the De La Warr Pavilion at Bexhill (2011). A wonderful Len Lye one at the Watershed in Bristol (1987).

TC: That's the occasion you went to New Zealand to look at Lye's archive?

David: Yes. I worked too on a Len Lye film *Doodlin' - Impressions of Len Lye* (1987), a wonderful film that Keith Griffith did. I also did an interview with Robert Breer for a Channel 4 documentary which showcased some of his films, again with Keith Griffith.

TC: I recall seeing it at the time.

David: It was all right, just about.

TC: It was fine. Then you interviewed Robert Breer at the Aurora Festival in Norwich in 2007 . . .

David: . . . which revealed the fact that my interviewing had not been very effective.

TC: Not your fault at all. He was deaf, poor bloke. You would ask a question, and he wasn't going to say, 'I didn't hear that', he just talked about something else. You were both entertaining, and you yourself were very patient with him.

12 ENDNOTE: ANIMATION

Perhaps that's an appropriate way to bring things to a close because we end up with animation, for which I've always felt you've got a soft spot.

David: I have. I don't know why. I am contemptuous of a vast amount of animation.

TC: Of course. But even with Ub Iwerks, for example, you have the notion you are working frame by frame. Does this particularly appeal to you?

David: It does. I have a shelf of animation books thinking that I might do something on animation. It's possible that my current book will have enough animation in it to cover what I want. My Ph.D. that I signed up for at the Slade in the mid-70s was going to be about animation, a formalist reading of it, the formal concerns that one can just detect in early animation by people like Iwerks. In fact, there is a crisis in animation even before sound comes along. Just take one of animation's pioneers, Windsor McKay, and look at his *Gertie the Dinosaur* series – the earliest films are drawn frame by frame with a sheet of paper for each frame of film and there's an energy in the animation that comes from that one-to-one relationship. But the poor sod, by the time he gets to *Sinking of the Lusitania*, he's devised a way of creating the waves in the foreground on a cycle so that he doesn't have to do all that repetition, and the image freezes. That's the story of the downfall of animation. Pat Sullivan with *Felix the Cat* is the same. There are wonderful sequences where everything in the image is redrawn in its totality, and then he learns you can do stuff on cells and puts things in the background so that the background suddenly locks on, while the cells continue to work. Later on, with Max Fleischer, there are sequences in *Betty Boop* where every frame is in total motion. Then

suddenly there's a cut to the next sequence where the background is frozen or there's a cycle of repeated frames. Sometimes the background is on a cycle, the trees will be whipping across. There's fun, there's dynamics in that in itself, but in the next shot everything is frozen except for the characters. The history of animation is the struggle with that. Disney employs all sorts of funny ways of increasing the amount of motion in the image, and then wonderfully, Japanese manga does it in the long-winded way. They painted it all – labour is perhaps cheaper, or whatever – and it's wonderful again. Obviously in the computer age, early computer stuff is boring but they manage in later work to enrich it again, and it runs back into full motion, so one should rejoice.

© Tim Cawkwell 2014