

Sound and Vision

What follows is an edited round table discussion that took place at Glasgow Film and Video Workshop between:

Brian Keeley, Aberdeen Video Access; **Iñigo Gerrido**, Cafe Flicker; **Lara Celini**, Edinburgh Video Access; **Paul Cameron**, Glasgow Film and Video Workshop; **Gillian Steel**, Castlemilk Video Workshop; chaired by **Martha McCulloch**, photographer and film maker; on video exhibition and distribution in Scotland.

Martha McCulloch: What may be worth bringing up is the partisan nature of the promotion of video work and what kind of work *doesn't* actually get covered. In terms of the different kinds and the importance of distribution mechanisms, one of the papers I've been looking at is from the 'Video Visions Forum' which was held at the Fruit Market Gallery, Edinburgh, 25 th July, 1997. Julia Knight spoke about the importance of distribution networks, what she said was: "One of the first things I discovered when I started working on video distribution is that distribution and exhibition work can play a pivotal role in shaping a moving image culture". We could start to open up the discussion asking why it should be that at that particular event there wasn't any representation of people in Scotland who are involved in curating exhibitions, promoting film and video work in all sorts of ways; who are actually encouraging the situation we have, in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, for instance, and also to some extent in more rural areas in Scotland.

Paul Cameron: I actually went along to it and I thought it was quite awful. In terms of distribution the only models they had were based around England, London specifically. Distribution facilities in Scotland are ten years behind. A lot of the distribution they talked about relies on MITES (Moving Image Touring Exhibitions Service) and we don't have anything like it here. I actually walked away from that day feeling angry, but we have so few of these discussions in Scotland that they are always loaded with expectations that they are going to sort out all the problems in one day.

Brian Keeley: What was the conclusion? Are you saying that we need a kind of Scottish variant of what's happening in England, such as MITES, or saying that should be UK wide.

Lara Celini: I attended as well and got the impression the discussion was about the video medium and the art gallery in general, rather than being practical solutions to distribution, which was a bit disappointing. There was a very large England-based presence there among the speakers and it's a shame there weren't more people from Scotland.

PC: As far as any problems of there being an English presence, I just think that in Scotland this sort of work is not supported to the same extent. One of the big problems here is that Scottish Screen ¹ seems to not want to touch independent artists' film/video work and the Scottish Arts Council (SAC) seems to be reluctant about picking up film/video work.

BK: I think a lot of the work falls between two stools, so it's not going to get any support from either of those sources.

PC: It doesn't seem to be very focused just in terms of ways of doing things, where you go for support.

BK: So we are talking basically about gallery-based work rather than 'sitting in a dark room with an audience' work or is it a bit of both?

M McC: In terms of the talk that was given by Julia Knight, she was not only talking about gallery-based

work, she was talking about the whole spectrum of single screen and installation work being promoted. She talked about how MITES is an agency that looks clearly towards the mainstream galleries and tries to shift film and video work into the centre stage. I suppose the implications of what she's saying is that they are actually UK wide and what I wonder is are they really? Obviously some artists from Scotland have their work distributed by those agents. But how wide is that? Is it really covered?

PC: I got the impression that even if work is distributed people have a lot of problems accessing resources to show the work. Artists based in Scotland are limited in what they can show because the practical support is not there. They can't get hold of a video projector or a computer, etc. or rather they can't get them at a cost they or the gallery can afford. That in turn can limit the type of work that artists in Scotland make. MITES have all these things but due to the way it is funded through the Arts Council of England it has no remit in Scotland.

BK: You'd imagine in this day and age most large mainstream galleries would have one area specifically set aside for audio visual work. Such facilities are usually installed for a specific exhibition and then stripped out again, or for some of the more museum based stuff, you get an area specifically for audio-visual display, but generally there isn't a lot of equipment for things like that.

PC: A lot of the time a gallery will just provide the space and it is the artist that is meeting the cost of showing the work. One of the problems we have is if someone wants video projectors, or whatever, for the duration of an exhibition it is beyond the budget of a lot of artists. So we need that facility there for people to hire things from at an affordable rate, and even to be able to provide support in making the work.

LC: I think we have a lot of catching up to do, but I do think—on a more positive note—that people are actually organising themselves as well, which I think is a good thing. The Edinburgh Film and Video Access Centre have been collaborating with the Collective Gallery in Edinburgh to show-case new film and video work, things that are a bit more experimental that might not find a comfortable home elsewhere. While all the negative things do have to be addressed, I think it is also important not to forget that there are exciting things happening.

Gillian Steel: I think people are being extremely resourceful with facilities, with very little support, as has already been said. Scottish Screen virtually ditched the workshops. SAC are finding it hard to categorise us and what is coming out of the workshops, so there's some but little support there and then mainly through the Lottery. It's hard in terms of getting somebody from that kind of organisation to understand what it is you're doing and the remit you're fulfilling.

LC: I think we have a lot of learning to do as well. In the way that we actually go about planning for funding. I think the problem with Scottish Screen is that a lot of things they fund have to be quite commercially driven and unless there is something feasible in an economic rather than an artistic sense, then they probably won't want to get involved. Where as with the SAC what you are up against is you actually have to prove to them that this is going to be important and valuable to people, that there is some sort of community involvement that is going to benefit—that's what we have to try and get across. Involving screenings in a social setting is quite important as well, to make it

something that people go to, not just for some form of mental stimulation or some artistic appreciation but just for pure enjoyment as well.

Iñigo Gerrido: Considering the low resources available, the money the work is produced on, the variety and quality of work shown at Cafe Flicker is impressive. What is lacking is some sort of acknowledgment from the administration, like Scottish Screen. They need to acknowledge the work done by organisations working from the heart of the industry, from the roots. I think it's a lack of understanding of what these kinds of organisations are doing. How can we beat that collectively, I think that's instrumental. To gain recognition and an understanding of the value of the organisations and what we all do, because the value is there and the quality is there. Basically how to move the people who could fund us.

M McC: What's quite worrying is that people are organising these things for nothing and what then happens is these things tend to fall apart and people forget they ever existed. There is no acknowledgment of that history. One of the questions that comes up is: How's the history written of the development of this particular part of visual art, or beyond the visual arts, actually chronicled? It's actually mis-chronicled most of the time, and this is part of it. If you look at some organisations like New Visions they are actually doing more challenging things than some of the more established institutions, but they shouldn't have to do it for nothing.

GS: I think there is a real short sightedness. It's the results of root activity that are really interesting and the culture of film and video really suffers for that short-sightedness. I see it as really embarrassing.

IG: It's a lack of communication or an understanding of the problem. I was speaking to the SAC and they said: 'Yes, fill out a Lottery application, we would very much welcome a Lottery application from Cafe Flicker'. And I said: 'Yes, but I need a grant to write an application because I don't have the time to spend 2 or 3 months working full time on an application'. No one at Cafe flicker has got the time to do so. It is very simply a lack of understanding how small organisations like ours are lacking resources.

GS: I don't actually know if they don't understand. I think they understand. I think they just expect that people like yourself and New Visions will continue to come up with amazing things from nothing. I don't think it's enough.

IG: 'Cafe Flicker has run for 7 years. If you have maintained yourself for 7 years why can't you maintain yourself a little longer,' maybe that is the attitude, but I'm not so sure. But maybe it is a lack of really understanding what the value of these organisations is. If you're saying: 'Who will recognise your work if you're working for free', that's an incredible attitude for the funders to take. I don't want to consider that to be the case. It is the value of organisations, the value of these resources...

BK: Is the emphasis more on funding individual artists/film makers to produce single pieces of work which then might be built into an initial big special screening, or whatever, and then after that it just sits on the shelf? There is then no support for that individual to get that film, video, installation work, shown?

M McC: Is it because they think that a distribution mechanism is already there in the gallery system and they don't understand that maybe in this particular field the work isn't always seen in galleries anyway?

BK: You talk about the gallery side, there is a big discrepancy between being able to produce work on a

fairly limited budget over a long time scale, then to actually try and present that work at a gallery that hasn't got the facilities. It will actually cost a lot of money, and a lot of technology, and a lot of setting up. Maybe that's what scares people off. You can't simply exhibit a screen-based work, it doesn't really exist in a concrete form, it has to have a projector, VCR, cabling, screen, or whatever, to be seen. I think that's just a cultural thing that funders and galleries and wherever just can't get their head round.

M McC: In the current climate of galleries having less funding for exhibitions, and the SAC having less funding to distribute to specific exhibitions/projects, it is likely to actually get worse than what it has been up to this point. Most medium-sized galleries are working within a limited budget for an exhibition and have no way of covering the costs of hiring expensive video equipment.

PC: In England MITES is specifically designed to support such kinds of work. One of the problems we have is that if someone is having an exhibition and they want video projectors, or whatever, over a period of months it is beyond the budget of a lot of artists. So we need that facility there for people to hire things from, and even be able to provide support in making the work.

LC: So what is the solution to that? Do we need organisations like MITES with a presence in Scotland?

PC: I think that's the type of thing we need to push for. One of the other problems that galleries face is that technological advances are quite rapid. It's not really practical for small organisations to carry the costs of buying new equipment. Whereas a National based organisation could carry those costs with both resources and technical back-up. Even if a gallery does buy bits of equipment it may not have the technical back up to be able to run it, hire it out and maintain it. People like Glasgow City Council do quite often have such equipment, but there is no central store and there's no way of finding out what they have.

M McC: The proposal is there to set up a sort of MITES type organisation in Scotland but again the success of that depends on Lottery funding and on ongoing funding for the project, because it would have to be subsidised in order that it would still be cheap enough for the galleries or whatever kind of venues to use.

BK: It'll take a lot of money because you talked about you'd have to have such a wide range of equipment and formats and all sorts of things.

PC: It's costing the SAC money anyway, because galleries are buying individual bits of equipment, so you have lots of bits of equipment scattered around and no central resource. Or they are forking out hire costs to commercial companies, which, because of the length of time galleries require facilities, it can often cost more than buying equipment.

BK: It doesn't seem the proper way of going about things, that if you create a piece of work and get funding from the SAC that most of that money goes into the commercial market. That doesn't seem like a useful way of putting money into the arts. It seems flawed.

M McC: But if there was a facility set up where you could hire it cheaply would you just hire it rather than buy something that was going to be obsolete in a few years or so.

GS: Especially if there was technical back-up if things go wrong, rather than having to get somebody else in to do it.

LC: The hours that I work are just enough to cover the day to day existence of the centre. There isn't

enough time to do all these funding applications and that's where I think maybe we have to pool resources, where we have some people with expertise that can help us all. That we actually network, that we can actually learn from each other rather than each individual sitting somewhere in the darkroom putting pen to paper.

IG: I think that's interesting and quite possible to do. How can we make the point so that there is an understanding of the work that we do, how can we make our position stronger and improve resources. We have to go forward and pooling resources maybe one way.

GS: I think it's a combination of what you were saying, firstly that we need to get better applications and yes *pool resources*. But we need the funders to be more responsive in the first place. The City Council don't have a broad concept of what cultural activity is, at best they want it to be educationally based; the SAC want projects to be artist led; and Scottish Screen focus on commerce. There has to be a way in for more resources and also of convincing Scottish Screen that they need to create a separate post for somebody to deal with the workshops and with what they're doing.

LC: The point is that Scottish Screen won't fund the sort of thing we're talking about today. I think we can forget it with the funding structure we've got at the moment.

IG: Unless we create some sort of umbrella of practitioners (video and film makers) and curators. We should have meetings like this that includes people from the City Council's performing arts department, the SAC and Scottish Screen, and then we can discuss what is missing. We need to make a statement of how we see it and invite them for a meeting and see what can happen after that.

M McC: The problem is that they don't acknowledge that these people here are doing stuff, that's the problem.

BK: How much have the SAC and Scottish Screen been pro-active in developing film making or video making in Scotland. How much are they purely administering funds? And how much are the smaller organisations—like those represented here and others throughout the country—promoting Scottish film and video work. There's a lot of people and organisations that are actively promoting Scottish film and video production, who are not Scottish Screen—and who don't have funds to administer.

IG: The point is the faults are virtually the same across Scotland. Glasgow benefits from Cafe Flicker, it's somewhere to see and talk about films. So it should be supported in those terms.

M McC: The fact is that funding has changed. It's something that's happened over the past 5 or 6 years. Yet you don't get a bean out of them without having to do so much work that you think: 'Well if I'm going to end up having to do all that extra work maybe I'm just as well off doing what I'm doing'.

BK: The exciting part of it is the spontaneity, the unexpected. You don't know what's going to happen, taking risks. The best work, no matter what medium, comes out of taking risks, people taking risks and putting money into something and they don't know what they're going to get.

M McC: That's the point, that in trying to get money out of the SAC or any institution you always have to pay the price of that. But the fact is that wasn't always the case and it doesn't have to be the case. It should be possible for them to give out grants to organisations like Cafe Flicker without all these strings attached when it's run by volunteers.

BK: You have people who are working in different areas like funding, running workshops or whatever and those people have demonstrated their commitment and ability. There has to be a change of attitude where funding bodies trust the judgment of the people who are working on the ground. You shouldn't need to have all the red tape to go through, obviously.

IG: The only thing Scottish Screen understand is an aggressive, commercial sort of pushing. Their whole procedure is straight forward commercial.

M McC: It's very short sighted as well. I think we're going to see that more and more, as more bad work is being given a grant rather than lots of small organisations.

BK: It's a whole cultural thing, it's not just film/video making, it goes across the arts in general.

M McC: What we talked about earlier, how there's a lack of acknowledgment, that you have to feed things like the film and video workshops in order that these things do exist. That's where the real research is being done I would say. Real researchers aren't funded but people who are 'stars' are. It's happening because they're only backing what they see to be the 'winners', whose work is often quite bad.

BK: It's taking the instant, immediate payback for funding. Everyone's got to have immediately recognisable—either financial or cultural—pay back. When funders fund small scale things, like Cafe Flicker or some of the Film and Video workshops around Scotland, there isn't really much immediate payback but the amount of people who go through that system, who if they hadn't, if those organisations hadn't been there, they might never had got round to deciding that film making or whatever is their bag. And then a couple of years later they might go to film school, or go to college, or make a film and get some funding, or they might get a job in broadcasting. But those things might never have happened had the grass roots organisations not been there to support the entry level work and people, you can't quantify that.

M McC: You can quantify it or you can choose not to quantify it, which is what happens. People choose to say: 'I'm going to chop off this piece of history', and say: 'Oh I started here. It didn't start back there it started here', because that's a bit embarrassing—to look at that early part of your career. The fact is that some of the 'big' names did come about because of the likes of New Visions. Is it a coincidence that Glasgow's got all these things going on and that a lot of people who are making video work come from here? It's the climate that created them.

LC: I think you're absolutely right about the vital role we all provide for people to learn and to flourish, as it were. And I think one of the problems that we have is actually being able to monitor what we provide and hard facts. We've actually got to work out a way of logging our achievements because it's the only way we're going to be able to persuade people how valuable we actually are.

M McC: I think you're right, some work can be done by the grass roots organisations to just use examples say, but I don't think we should have to sit in front of them and quote statistics.

BK: Sometimes when you try to do that it just doesn't feel right. You try and put those statistical things together and it just feels as if you're trying to control it at a grass roots level. That's when things start to get lost then you simply become an administrator.

LC: We need to get feed back and we do need to lobby.

M McC: Well maybe all we need to do is say that this kind of developmental and research type of work

is important and that it should be acknowledged as being important. You don't actually have to look too deeply, just look at what's come out of this environment we're sitting in now. The people who've come through here and what they're doing now. The funders don't have to look too far, curators don't have to look too far to see that's where the people come from. They can't see it as just something in the air. To some extent I think why should you be in here justifying what you're doing, if you're doing the work it's up to the people who are supposed to be noticing that and having their fingers on the pulse and on the purse strings, they should be noticing.

LC: I think the problem we've got is that the people who should be listening to us haven't got their finger on the pulse.

IG: Over one hundred films shown in Cafe Flicker in the last two and a half years, all this information, the full screenings list, is on our web site. The material to put under their noses is there.

GS: Again, it's small organisations with no funding doing all the distributing and pushing.

BK: I've screened films made through *First Reels* in Aberdeen but it isn't the people who administer First Reels who phone up the workshop and say 'give me a screening'. It is me who organises the venue and promotes the event. You'd think there'd be something other than simply a showcase screening at the Glasgow Film Theatre or whatever. The distribution doesn't seem to go anywhere beyond that. You'd think that if you administered that fund with the films that were made from the money you'd given them you'd try and distribute them more widely.

GS: But it's always been New Visions to my knowledge, in Glasgow anyway, who picked up films and actively put them about, taking them to cinemas or to festivals.

BK: It can be quite expensive and time-consuming

for an individual. If you've got a film that you've made, you've probably gone into serious debt. Then creating the chance to screen it and to show it in so many festivals. To actually get all the copies made, filling in all the applications and getting all the deadlines and sending it in the post, it really takes a lot of money. And sometimes you're really cleaned out by the time you've made the film, what you need is a bit of support to help with that.

GS: Typically the life span of single screen and gallery based work that's supported by these funders tends to be one or two years. After that festivals will consider the work too old to show, so they just sit on the shelf. Clearly that's a problem. So we need an archive not only of recent work but also of work that gives an historical context.

LC: I think the issue of an archive is a big one as well. Because all this work is being produced but is there a single place where I can actually go and have a look at what was created last year? It's all getting lost and I think that is the most tragic thing about it all, that the good work that is out there disappears to somewhere under the bed or in the wardrobe.

GS: This is not just a problem that's about work being created now though. I think we need an organisation that covers all that.

M McC: I suppose one thing we've touched on a little bit is the art market. Clearly that's an aspect of how work is distributed and shown and also remains in those museums to be seen. Are certain kinds of work never bought by museums for instance?

BK: Do any of the museums or galleries in Scotland have screening facilities where you can go and see an archive of films? Is there an archive of single screen work. There's nothing like that in any galleries and museums in Scotland?

Notes

¹ Scottish Screen — "A Government backed body encouraging film development and education in Scotland. Provides a wide range of information and support services. Runs the Scottish Film Archive, preserving Scotland's moving image heritage." Guardian Media Guide 1998

contacts

Aberdeen Video Access,

James Dun's House, Schoolhill, Aberdeen, AB10 1JT

Castlemilk Video Workshop,

17A Castlemilk Arcade, Castlemilk, G45 9AA

Edinburgh Film and Video Access Centre,

25a South West Thistle St. Lane, Edinburgh, EH2 1EW

Glasgow Film and Video Workshop

(GFVW), Third Floor, 34 Albion Street, Glasgow, G1

1LH

Café Flicker,

screenings the first Wednesday of every month at GFVW, <http://www.goma.glasgow.gov.uk/OaksBark/FlickerHomePage.htm>