

THE FRUIT OF THEIR ACTIONS

Laura Edbrook
engages in the psychology
of a recent work by artist duo
Smith / Stewart

Their pattern of engagement:

Six people gather under stark flood lights, forming an anxious love polygon. Standing two or three feet apart, they shuffle awkwardly on the stage. Their glassy eyes, fixed on the distance, dart as they struggle to maintain a fixed gaze; their throats twitch. From above, the blazing light beam centres the narrator.

It illuminates her posture. It isolates her as an individual. A woman who ...

Her

She holds the air in her lungs as she watches them. The smouldering feeling inside her spreads under her skin. Her chest burns. With taciturn control, she withholds thought. Her glazed eyes listened, watching by looking away. She communicates with a few discreet and wholly involuntary responses to her swelling war of nerves.

What have we done?

Only a few moments ago she was alone, but her slanted vision now follows the movement of a hand, reaching to grasp their other. Performed as the driest of routines, it's now better with a little passion. As an intimate observer, she witnesses the mechanics of their encounter, the microscopic details of their affair. Seep – Lick – Suck – Gasp – Gulp. Red lips blossom and

glisten with saliva. Here, there is no such thing as love, lovely love, just experimentation and fantasy. No actions can be mistaken for genuine tenderness; no touch, no contact or romantic involvement, desire or intimacy. It is only a physical act, a kiss. Lips apart, eyes closed, together their heads pulsate hypnotically back and forth. The physical rhythm binds the group. It is a gentle humming waltz, and with every turn another partner. She waits, her mouth turns dry and her lips begin to crack. It will soon be her turn. Then ... borrowed fluids moisten her parched lips. It's a convenient arrangement; husbands cannot always be lovers. In their relationship, he is the man and she is the woman; in their relationship, she is the prize and he is the lover; in their relationship, he is the stag and she is the hen.

As their waltz turns they all dance to the same tune. And now, another lover makes his bow.

In their relationship, she is male and he is female. In their relationship, he is the receiver and she is the giver. In their relationship, she is the gaze and he is the object.

Her role among them was never clearly defined. Their relations had developed from an abstract prompt earlier in the day. Having now fostered a mutual dependency there is a complicit bond of trust between them, negotiated on the strength of small hints or gestures, and the most inscrutable expressions or evasions. As an active partner in the events, her role has implications; her collaboration is essential; she wants her conduct to be exemplary.

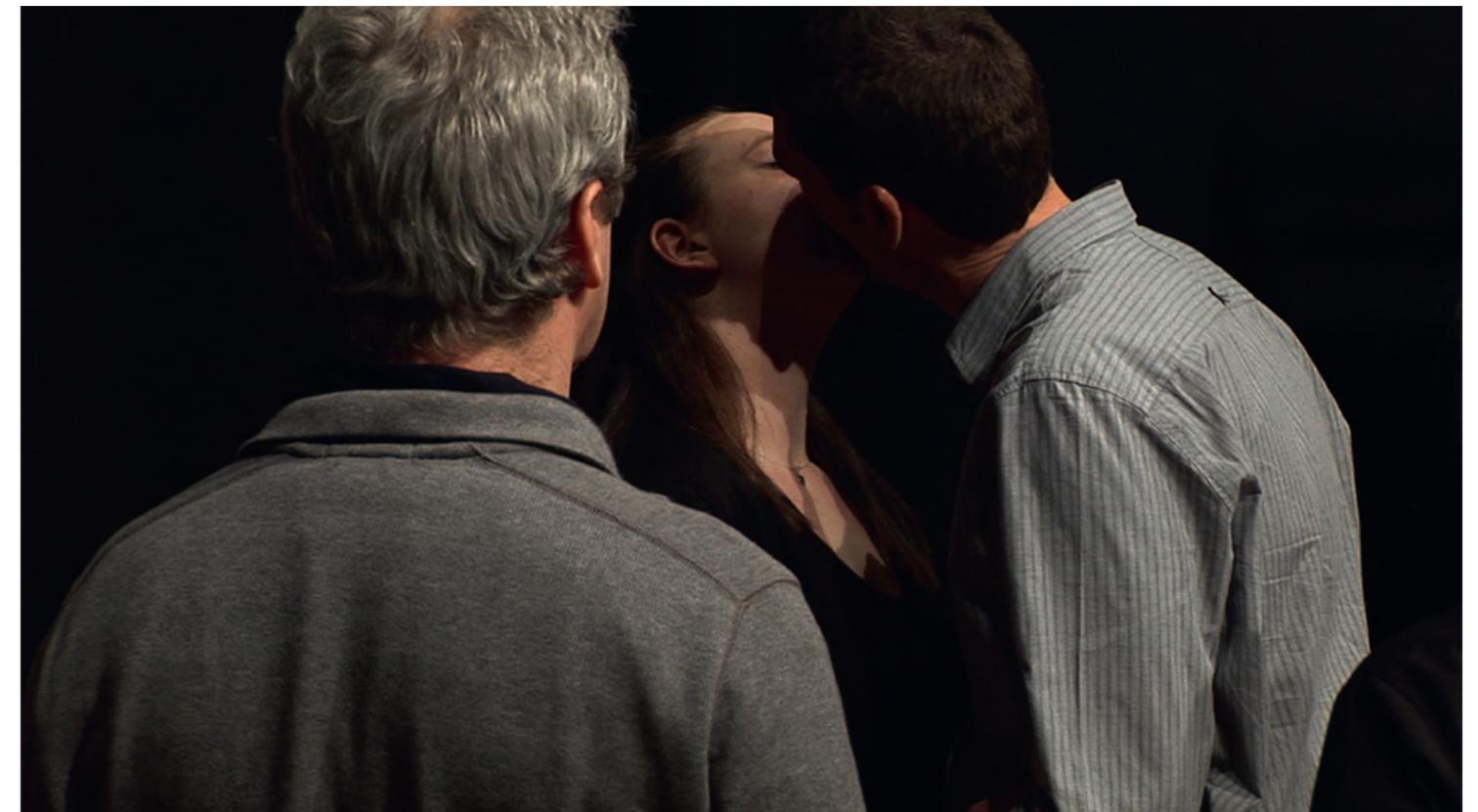
She chooses to treat this exercise with utter professionalism, it is now her show, after all. Eyes glazed; she feels uncommon emotions as she knows the others are watching her.

Privately she hesitates with the dilemma of what she will do if they reject her. How would this pause be accounted for? She then tries to recount a time from her past when she felt desired. Inside, thinking about the before and afters, her head spews it's own micro-drama. Or so the story went.

The onlooker

Give me your hand.
Come closer.
We can do it together, in this space.

Courtesy the artists



In our space, we meet her on screen. Among the others, her lit face confronts us in the middle of the room. No barrier protects against her advancing gaze. Compelled to survey the participant's performance to camera, as sections of the polygon fall off-screen, the onlooking audience tentatively step into their structure of sensory communication. Their nearness can be felt.

Tell me your name.

What would that change?

We already know things of her. We have found a mirror in her mind; she could now be a construct playing only for us; with her history fictionalised by us. In this scenario, she is a survivor, and it is because of this that we can identify with her. Her sentiments are the echo of ours as we suffer her vulnerability. In our space, we watch the others do the same, and they, in return, watch us.

Each subject is a participant.
Each viewer is a subject.
Each subject is a viewer.

What have we done?

The performance requires the camera to perform, not merely as a recording device, but stage and audience simultaneously. The stark, unsettling *mise-en-scène*, the improvised uniform pattern of repeated movement; the task-based choreography, and proceeding exposing documentary footage sets spontaneous, intimate and realistic components against the contrived and theatrical.

The relationship between performer and character, fact and fiction, real and performance, rehearsal and rehearsed. Unsure of the existence of any rules of engagement, we are ignorant to how these people came to be in their situation, informed of the story only by their physical behaviour.

What made them act this way?

What we look at is a representation of a point in time when the work existed. The 'everybodies' (and not 'performers') we see are 'neutral doers'; they perform their act in a non-virtuosic fashion, appraising relations between the spectacle and the spectator, and implicate the onlooker.

As a present subject, we become constituents of a past incident. As a spectator in the gallery, one feels the same excitement and reverence as the exercise's participants.

What is intimacy?

In one exercise, participants act by agreeing to enter the artists' engendered, intimate space, it is the fruit of their actions that culminate in the work. Unspecified instructions act as a trigger, and there is no higher order or purpose structuring the action on screen.

We learn that this is not theatre; subjects do not know their manners in advance. Solicited out-with their inhibitions, it is their reaction to the experiment, and consequences, that is documented. The subjects are 'revealed' as they engage in their activity *because* they engage in their activity. The results present a loaded circumstance; a concentrated ceremonial presentation of the dynamics of social relations, attitudes and beliefs, of the widespread collectivity of social intimacy.

Necessitating subjects in a work has potent social implications. The contributing strangers have now left a mark on each other's internal history. Bidding their goodbyes and resuming their previous disassociation with one another they will remain bound by this event, mutually sustaining their juncture of shared history.

Why goodbye?

Because there is no love without goodbye.

Laura Edbrook is the recipient of the New Work Scotland Project 2010 MAP residency

REPRODUCTIVE LABOUR: CINENOVA

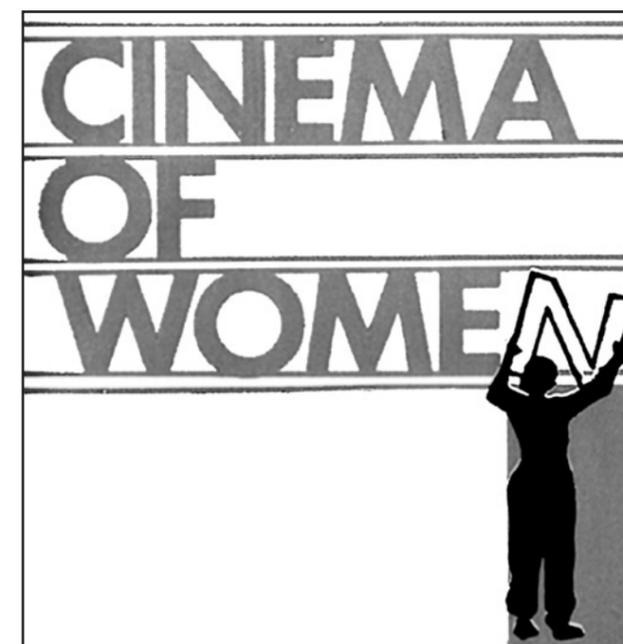
A reflection on the
recent activities of the
organisation by the Cinenova
Working Group

Cinenova is a volunteer-run organisation dedicated to preserving and distributing the work of women and feminist film and video makers based in London. The Working Group, those of us who volunteer for the organisation, came together in 2008 with the intention of making public and urgent Cinenova's continued, practical ability to preserve, promote and distribute the work in the collection. The intention and activity of the Working Group is not separate or competing with the daily practical and organisational work of running Cinenova; both practices are inextricably linked. It did, however, feel necessary to form a discursive practice that would support the practical work we were doing, and why we are doing it. This is how the Working Group is implied.

Recently, Cinenova completed an exhibition project at The Showroom in London, entitled *Reproductive Labour*. The title refers to the different kinds of labour involved in the project, and acknowledges the 'reproductive' labour or maintenance work we do. We've considered maintenance of the organisation in relation to the free reproductive work performed by women and as part of ourselves, which is often invisible and unpaid labour. The term also refers (with humour) to the mechanical reproduction of the film and video materials themselves, which constitutes a significant part of our work and time.

Reproductive Labour was less a display and more a way of offering different ways of engaging with Cinenova and its moving image materials. It was possible for visitors to research films, videos and ephemera that includes photographs, posters and articles pertaining to the films and videos and their makers. Invited selectors nominated a work from the collection that was featured daily, while the digitisation and cataloguing of the Cinenova collection simultaneously took place in the exhibition space. Events were organised over the six-week period, initiated by the Working Group and also by Showroom visitors who took it upon themselves to organise screenings and discussions in the space.

Cinenova distributes over 500 titles that include experimental film, narrative feature films, artists' moving image, documentary and educational videos made from the 1920s to the present. The thematics in these titles include oppositional histories, post-colonial struggles, reproductive labour, representation of gender and sexuality and, importantly, the relations and alliances between these different struggles. Cinenova currently uses the model of *distributor*, rather than archive, because it foregrounds social relations between the producer and the viewer of film and video works. The distributor: mediates the desire of the maker to have their film or video shown and the desire of the viewer to see the film or video; creates a job for herself and an organisation, culture or community around this labour; has



Logo, Cinema of Women, circa 1983

a direct influence on the films and videos that are seen, where they are seen and who sees them. The distributor also monetises these relations. The money from sales and rental of works to cinemas, television and external organisations is split 50/50 between the maker and the organisation. Significantly, however, the independent non-commercial sector has yet to achieve financial survival from this income alone, which is why organisations like LUX or the British Film Institute have been subsidised by state funding since their inception. Cinenova is often approached to make curatorial decisions for institutions about what they should show, and to provide contextualising materials or introductions for screening events. While this is part of the work that we do, distribution is the political and conceptual framework for the organisation.

Initially self-organised and based on structures defined by its community of feminists and filmmakers, Cinenova has always aimed to provide the means to support the production and distribution of women's work, and has played critical roles in the creation of independent and radical media. But to understand how the organisation is constituted, it is important to recognise both its history as well as its process of reassessment now. Cinenova was established in 1991 following the merger of two feminist film and video distributors, Circles and Cinema of Women, which were both founded in the early 1980s.

Circles started following the 1979 Arts Council touring exhibition *Film As Film*, in which Annabel Nicolson, Felicity Sparrow, Jane Clarke, Jeanette Ijlon, Lis Rhodes, Mary Pat Leece, Pat Murphy and Susan Stein co-authored the essay 'Woman And The Formal Film', published in the exhibition catalogue in place of presenting works in the exhibition. They wrote:

"We made the decision not to carry on, not to continue working in a situation that was hostile and ultimately fruitless for the individual women involved. It is better that the historical research be published elsewhere and the work of contemporary women filmmakers, artists and critics be presented in a context where they are valued."

The first films distributed were also those made by the women who started Circles, as well as the women they had researched for the exhibition, namely Germaine Dulac, Alice Guy and Maya Deren. Later acquisitions expanded and shifted from this basis as the core group running Circles began to change. Circles focused largely on film and video made by

artists, although not exclusively, since these categories were part of the film and video culture that Circles was seeking to transform, or do away with. As Lis Rhodes wrote in her essay 'Whose History?', which also appeared in the *Film As Film* catalogue.

At the present time we need to show in a polemical but positive way the destructive and creative aspects of working as women in film, and examine these phenomena as products of our society, and the particular society of film/art. Women filmmakers may or may not have made 'formalist' films, but is the term in itself valid as a means of reconstructing history?

Cinema of Women (COW) started at roughly the same time as Circles. We think it was founded by Jane Root, Jenny Shabbaz Wallace,

CIRCLES Aims & Objectives

Circles is a feminist distribution network, set up by and for women, to distribute women's film and video, and to promote women's work in other related media such as tape-slide presentations and performance art. Circles also encourages research into the history of women's work in these areas. In addition to distributing films and videotapes, Circles organises women-only screenings with the opportunity for discussion afterwards. In this way Circles hopes to encourage more women to make and show their work on their own terms.

1) Structure/membership

Every woman who has a film or video distributed by Circles is a 'member' of Circles and has a say in our policy-making. Circles is a company limited by guarantee (without share capital); it is non-profit-making and its legal constitution has been drawn up to comply with requirements for registering as a charity. At its Annual General Meetings, Circles' members delegate responsibility for day-to-day running to an Executive Committee which meets on a monthly basis. This Committee (sometimes in consultation with specialist women's groups) is also ultimately responsible for the viewing and selection of new work to be included in the Circles' catalogue. The film/video-maker's decision to place work with Circles reflects her commitment to the principles of feminist distribution.

2) Research

Women have been making films for the past 80 years, but much of this work has been hidden, or overlooked by 'historians'. As well as promoting current productions, Circles is also concerned to bring back into distribution women's work which has been previously unknown in this country, or which has been unavailable for a long time. It is important that earlier films are presented alongside contemporary material so that women can see that they have a history in film-making, and can begin to discover the threads which run through and link much of the work. Circles wishes to encourage more research by women for women, and is slowly building up a collection of reference materials which are available for consultation on its premises.

3) Women-only screenings

Circles organises regular women-only screenings at 113 Roman Road and elsewhere. Programmes are usually around a particular theme or issue (e.g. woman and mental health, childbirth, sexual politics) followed by discussions with the film/video-makers. Sometimes guest speakers, perhaps women from specialist groups, are invited to

co-ordinate discussion. It is important that the barriers between film-maker and audience are broken down, and that there is inter-action and feedback between the two. We also feel it is important to create a public space for discussion and for all women to participate in the making and showing of their work.

4) Programming and education

Because of the continuing male domination of education, there is still a tendency to ignore women's work. It is, therefore, important to get this work included in the curricula of more schools and colleges, as well as to ensure its availability generally. Programme information is sent, not only to mainstream educational institutions, but also to women's, trade union and community groups around the country. Groups who cannot (or who do not wish to) attend Circles' screenings are encouraged to hire these programmes to stimulate their own discussions. Circles' films, videotapes and programming advice are available to individuals and to organisations which may have mixed audiences, but, as we wish to promote the idea of women-only screenings, reduced hire fees are offered to women's (and some educational) groups.

5) Working Practice

Circles sees the making, showing and distribution of films and videotapes as part of a unified practice whereby film/video-makers can retain control of their work. This is particularly important for women who must also have the opportunity to question dominant modes of representation. It is important, too, that women's work is not misappropriated, and that contexts for that work are created both in Circles' catalogues and in the women-only screenings and discussions that are organised. It is equally important that women receive proper financial recognition for their work. For this reason, more than 50% (and usually 60-75%) of all rentals and sales is paid to the film-maker; any profits go back into Circles to enable it to continue its activities.

Aims and Objectives, Circles, circa 1983, Cinenova catalogue

Caroline Spry and Eileen McNulty. Our speculation on its origins is due, in part, to the lack of records of COW and contact with those who started the organisation; it seemed to operate more anonymously and discreetly than Circles, the latter of which emphasised a more curatorial approach.

COW distributed many social and political documentary works, educational films and videos as well as feature-length fiction films. According to Abina Manning, who worked for COW towards the end of its existence, people would send in their work for potential acquisition, and the organisers of COW would go to festivals and look for material. A committee of women from the organisation and women from the field would review possible new acquisitions based on what their customers were interested in or how well the work fitted with the existing catalogue. Records show that many small groups of women formed specifically to watch and discuss films from COW, and there were often questionnaires available at screenings so viewers could give feedback to the organisation and inform the kinds of work in the catalogue.

Film and video from both Circles and COW form the existing Cinenova distribution catalogue. Since all funding for Cinenova was cut in 2001, there has been a suspension of gathering new contributions due to the organisation's precarious financial situation. Since 2001, Cinenova has been run by volunteers dedicated to the constellation of films, histories and politics that make up Cinenova. We believe in the necessity of keeping the collection together and autonomous, rather than dispersed into larger and more general archives. The case of Cinenova reflects on the desires and problems that arise through collective cultural work, along with the practicalities and labour involved in maintaining such an organisation. To act as an organisation today means to preserve the material. The structure Cinenova is still based on a network of people built up over time, and who support each other and share their experiences. We have close relations to feminist organisations like the Lambeth's Women Project, the Bildwechsel Archive in Hamburg and to other film distributors.

We are currently discussing: what could the invitation of new films and videos into the collection mean; who may have difficulties accessing the contemporary distribution system; which issues are currently marginalised; and to what extent is there a need for a women-

only organisation? We also see the necessity to open up even more towards a diversity of cultural contexts and visual languages. The fact that we use the term 'women' provokes discussion in the Working Group, as well as reactions from outside. Some filmmakers in the collection wanted their work to be distributed by Cinenova because it was founded as a women-only distributor, whereas for others this became a reason not to work with the organisation. We understand that we are contributing to a discussion on gender and sexuality through continuing to use the term 'women'. There are many productions by queer and transgender persons in the collection. Already by posing the question in a different way, that is if filmmakers had identified themselves as women when they shot the film, but now identify as men, the term 'women' is challenged. Yet we also want to value what was historically important for women and the influence of feminism on all aspects of life.

Since *Reproductive Labour* ended, we have been working on the practical manoeuvres key to setting the organisation on a firmer financial basis: we started a supporters campaign, we are applying for funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and are currently accepting invitations to speak, write and present this project, in exchange for funds that we return to the organisation. In this way we are thinking about alternatives to applying for state funding directly, or only.

While we have an affinity with this material we do not want to possess it; Cinenova does not hold exclusive rights to any of the work it distributes. We are thinking about how to protect a history, but also how to let it be, and distribute it in the present with others. We don't have an object that we want to make, but we do want to design different structures within which we can work and invite others to contribute.

Selected works from the Cinenova archive will be presented by Emma Hedditch, a member of the Working Group, at Tramway, Glasgow, 7.30pm, 21 June