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 centre 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 befores 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.
In our space, we meet her on screen. Among the others, her life face confronts us in the middle of the room. No barrier protects against her advancing gaze. Compelled to survey the participants 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 her, and it is for her, 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 as an agent by doing. Solicited out-with their inhibitions, it is their reaction to the experiment, and consequences, that is documented. The subject, not because 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.

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 the exercise. Solicited out-with their inhibitions, it is their reaction to the experiment, and consequences, that is documented. The subject, not because 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.

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 themes in these titles include oppositional histories, post-colonial struggles, reproductive labour, representation of gender and sexuality and, importantly, the relationships 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

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

Logos, Cinema of Women, circa 1983
a direct influence on the films and videos that are seen, where they are seen and who sees them. Therefore, the women involved in the organisation put the relationships with funding at the heart of what they do, distribution is the political and conceptual framework for the organisation.

Initially formed as a grouping of artists and based on structures defined by its community of feminists and filmmakers, Cinenova has always aimed to provide a space 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. Cinerare has 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 further contributions 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, 7.30 pm, 21 June

Caroline Spry and Eileen McNulty. Our speculation on its origins is due, in part, to the lack of documentation 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 public and polemical approach.

COW distributed many social and political documentary works, educational films and videos and 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 into 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 for viewers so viewers could give feedback to the organisation and inform the kinds of work in the catalogue.

Films and videos 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, 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 views. We are 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 further contributions 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 want to design different structures within which we can work and invite others to contribute.

While 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 you are contributing to a discussion on gender and sexuality through new acquisitions based on what their customers were interested in or how well the work fitted into 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 for viewers so viewers could give feedback to the organisation and inform the kinds of work in the catalogue.

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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 views.