

## To Pour Milk Into a Glass: Film, Video and Conceptual Art in Britain 1964–1979

George Clark

### INFORMATION AND TIME

The complex, intertwined histories of artists' film and video, and the materialist definitions of their practice, more often than not stand in opposition to the emphasis on the 'dematerialisation of the art object'<sup>1</sup> in much contemporaneous writing on conceptual art. Yet it has also been argued that the ephemeral and time-based conditions of film and video (and the connected field of performance) have made them fundamental arenas for conceptual art. As Richard Cork reflected in 1972: 'It has been clear for some time now that more and more artists are turning to the resources of film as an alternative to physical objects on the one hand and written statements or photographs on the other', and further that, 'film appeals to artists because it helps to realise fundamentally conceptual activities.'<sup>2</sup>

Cork was discussing American video artist William Wegman and Argentinian artist David Lamelas. Lamelas, who studied at St Martin's School of Art on a sculpture scholarship, had come to attention in Europe with the installation *Office of Information about the Vietnam war on Three Levels: The Visual Image, Text and Audio*, realised at the Venice Biennale in 1968 and consisting of a desk, a chair and a telex machine that received constant updates on the Vietnam war. The ways in which information can be contained and communicated, interpreted and exchanged in visual, spatial and temporal configurations is central to his work, which has 'always functioned in relationship to time.'<sup>3</sup>

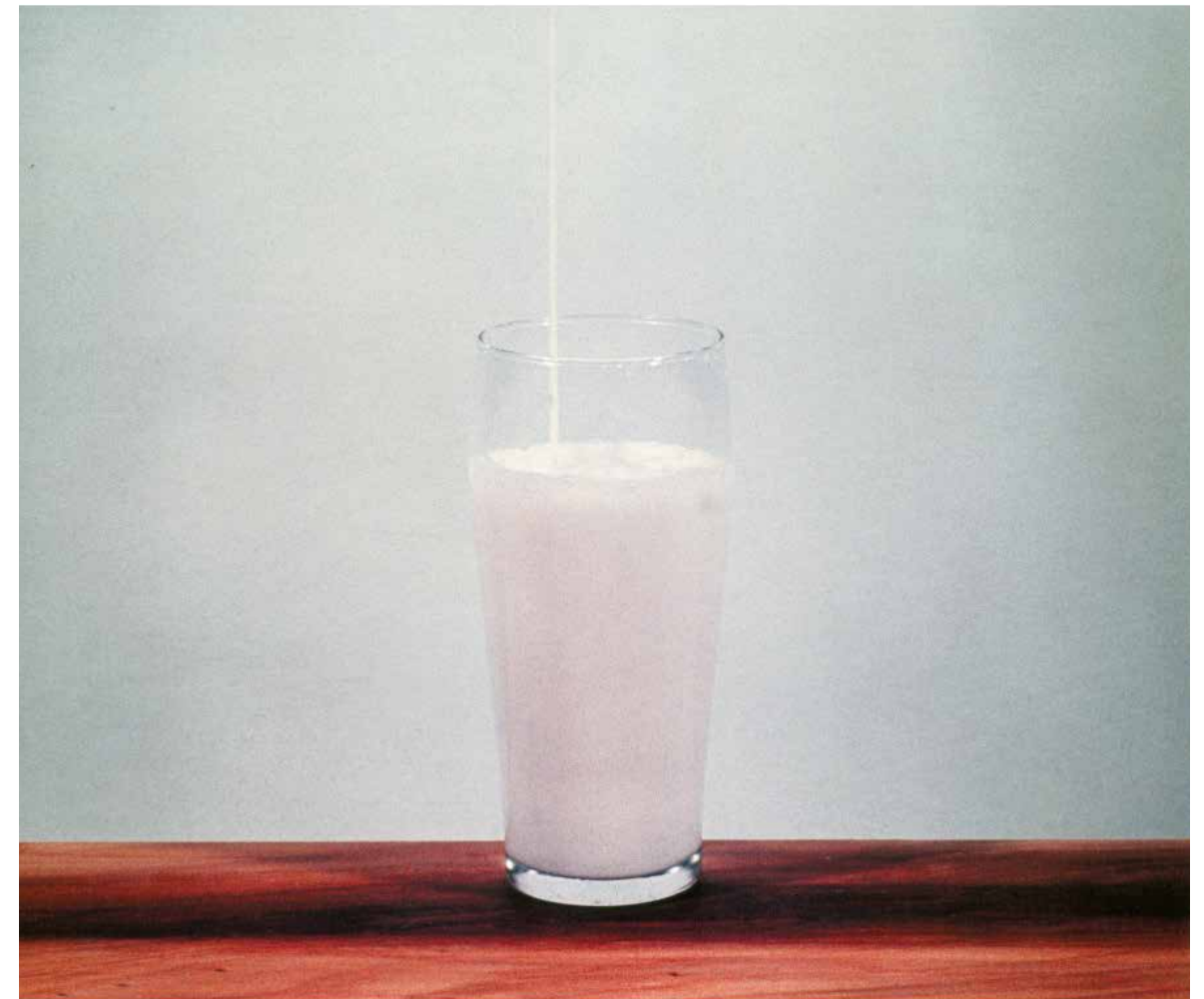
His first film, *A Study of the Relationship Between Inner and Outer Space* 1969, was produced for the Camden Art Centre 1969 exhibition *Environments Reversal*.<sup>4</sup> The film unpacks the constituent elements of the arts centre, cataloguing the dimensions and characteristics of the galleries, interviewing employees, from curator to caretaker, and exploring the geographical and social position of the gallery within London. The focus on

1 Lucy Lippard, *Six years: the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*, Oakland 1997.

2 Richard Cork, 'William Wegman and David Lamelas', 11 February 1972, republished in *Everything seemed Possible: Art in the 1970s*, New Haven 2003, p.46.

3 David Lamelas in John Roberts, 'Interview with David Lamelas', in *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual Art in Britain, 1966–76*, London 1997, p.137.

4 Camden Arts Centre, London, 26 June – 27 July 1969. Other artists participating included Ivor Abrahams, Keith Arnatt, Stuart Brisley, Marc Chaimowicz, Bill Culbert, Liz Harrison, Ed Herring and Sandra Wheeler.



David Lamelas  
*To Pour Milk into a Glass* 1972  
16 mm colour film, 8 min

information networks, such as transport systems and local and national newspapers, can be seen as archetypal of conceptual art in film, anticipating subsequent shifts to site-specificity and institutional critique.

In contrast, the installation *Film Script (Manipulation of Meaning)* 1972 presents a deconstruction of the components of a narrative film. First presented at Nigel Greenwood Inc., it consists of one 16mm film and three simultaneous slide projections made up of fragments of a script and actions. Lamelas was interested in 'the phenomenon of how narratives evolve in the viewer's mind'.<sup>5</sup> For *To Pour Milk Into A Glass* 1972 (p.00), one of his most eloquent films, he 'wanted to find symbols for "container" and "contents" – to represent how the camera frames ... I decided to use a glass and milk. The eight sequences end with ... the glass being shattered and the milk splattering all over the table, which implies that there is no way to contain information.'<sup>6</sup> Such structures permeate his work, from these films and installations to his ongoing series *Time As Activity*, begun in the late 1960s and which seeks to map time as explored in his performance piece *Time* 1970.<sup>7</sup> Broaching questions of representation and reproduction, these works sought to explore how art is generated by the viewer, as Lamelas famously stated: 'Time doesn't exist, our consciousness constructs it. Time is a fiction.'<sup>8</sup>

Through a sustained focus on what constitutes information and time, John Latham sought to distil his 'Time-Base Theorem' (see p.00), a cosmological system by which all phenomena could be understood in terms of 'time' and 'events.' He attempted to reconcile the infinite duration of linear time with the time of encountering art, reducing art to its barest elements. An interest in erasure and destruction was shared by contemporaries, which emanated from a 'European sense of disaster' as Rosetta Brooks has argued: 'If [Gustav] Metzger and Latham's art was dedicated to self-destruction, it was in order to

touch on realities traditionally beyond the sphere of self-representation in art'.<sup>9</sup>

Reduction and destruction of images, screens and films was a recurrent element of performances of the period, and works within the emerging field of expanded cinema. Metzger applied hydrochloric acid to nylon screens in his demonstrations of 'auto-destructive art',<sup>10</sup> and Jeff Keen regularly projected his collage films onto paper screens, which he would paint onto and eventually destroy, with the cry 'kill the word, don't let the word kill you' – an action paralleling William Burroughs's and also Latham's attacks on language. The light bulb suspended in the middle of the screen in Malcolm Le Grice's *Castle One* 1966 would be turned on at various points, in effect obliterating the projected image, and in Annabel Nicolson's *Reel Time* 1972–3, a film loop was threaded through a sewing machine, the needle destroying the image until it was impossible to project.

Latham's film *Speak* 1962 relates to his early assemblages and is an intense stop-motion collage, whereas his *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1970 allows the viewer to glimpse every page of the household tome. The 'adaptation' of the *Encyclopaedia*, stored on film, was performed as a processed-based work for Latham's first show at the Lisson Gallery in 1970, where the operators (gallery owner Nicholas Logsdail and musician, writer and curator David Toop) filmed each page frame by frame. The information is rendered beyond comprehension, but generates a central tension within Latham's work: between the structures that delimit time and the effect of these structures on our comprehension.<sup>11</sup>

While still at Saint Martin's School of Art, Latham had argued that 'the key to all the new art is that the students should understand time'.<sup>12</sup> In the film *Erth* 1971, issues of knowledge and time are expanded to cosmic

9 Rosetta Brooks, 'An Art of Refusal', from *Live in Your Head: Concept and Experiment in Britain 1965–75*, ed. Judith Nesbitt, exh. cat., Whitechapel Art Gallery, London 2000, p.32.

10 Interestingly, in 1963 Metzger attended a film course at the Slade School of Fine Art, where he met Peter Whitehead (two years later he assisted Whitehead in the filming of the International Poetry Incarnation at the Albert Hall). Metzger developed and theorised his notion of 'auto-destructive' art throughout the 1960s through a sequence of manifestos and demonstrations, and most especially in the *Destruction in Art Symposium*, which he co-organised in London through September 1966, featuring contributions from international artists, poets and scientists.

11 A similar process of 'adaptation' can be seen in his work *Still and Chew: Art and Culture* 1966–7.

12 Jakob Jakobsen, 'Interview with John Latham about the London Anti-University, his relation to knowledge, and what it means to chew a book.' *Flat Time House*, London, 2 June 2003.

5 Ian White, 'On the Road – Interview David Lamelas', *frieze*, no.100, June – August 2006.

6 David Lamelas – *A New Refutation of Time*, Munich & Rotterdam 1997.

7 *Time* was originally conceived by Lamelas for a seminar at Les Arcs in the French Alps in 1970. It has subsequently been performed based on instructions written by the artist. See 'David Lamelas', *Time* 1970, Instructions for the Performance', 1 April 2006, unpag., Tate Acquisition File, David Lamelas. *Time as activity (Düsseldorf)* 1969 consisted of a series long shots of the city, preceded by a title card announcing the location, date and length of the take, leaving the viewer to experience the images as a sample of 'real time' displaced both in time and space.

8 Quoted by Jacqueline Holt in the introduction to David Lamelas, *Time is a Fiction*, LUX touring Film Programme notes, 2006.

dimensions and placed in relation to the issue of work and labour, paralleling his activities with the Artist Placement Group. Made with funding from the National Coal Board, *Erth* presents a countdown from the cosmos to the material surface of the earth, revealing knowledge and consciousness as elements of a sedimentary history layered and compounded by time. As Latham later stated, his work has focused on the problem of finding 'a means of representation that can envision the whole, its occluded dimensionality, and the relatedness between its parts'.<sup>13</sup>

#### TELEVISION AND NEW ART

Some of the earliest works employing film or video by artists associated with conceptual art emerged in relation to television. As access to new technologies was limited, the German artist Gerry Schum, together with Ursula Wevers, proved instrumental in helping an international network of artists realise works as part of the influential project *Fernsehgalerie / Television Gallery*,<sup>14</sup> which comprised a short-lived gallery and two programmes, *Land Art* 1969 and *Identifications* 1970<sup>15</sup> broadcast on German television.

Richard Long, in a rare collaboration with a filmmaker, contributed *Walking a Straight 10 Mile Line Forward and Back Shooting Every Half Mile* 1969, produced during a walk across Dartmoor. Barry Flanagan, for *A Hole in the Sea* 1969, filmed from above a Perspex cylinder in the coast off Scheveningen, Holland, creating an optical illusion of a negative space. Keith Arnatt's *Self-Burial (Television Interference Project)* 1969 was presented as an intervention in scheduled broadcasts between 11 and 18 October 1969. Two consecutive images – depicting the artist being gradually buried upright in the ground – were shown, unannounced, for two seconds each day, enacting a slow,

13 John Latham, from 'Event Structure', Calgary 1981.

14 Various writers have been critical about the success of this project, including Eric de Bruyn, who stated: 'The "new" television art formed nothing else but the after-image of the "old" gallery art', in 'Land Art in the Mediascape: On the Politics of Counterpublicity in the Year 1969', in *Ready to Shoot: Fernsehgalerie Gerry Schum*, Dusseldorf 2004, p.146. Whereas Ian White addressed the complicated authorisation of these works in his essay 'Who is no the author? Gerry Schum and the established Order', in *Afterthought: New Writing on Conceptual Art*, ed. Mike Sperlinger, London 2005.

15 *Land Art* was broadcast 15 April 1969 on SFB, Sender Freies Berlin (Free Berlin Radio) and *Identifications* on 15 November 1970 on SWE, Sudwestfunk Baden-Baden.



Bolex camera and tripod set up for the making of John Latham's *Encyclopedia Britannica* 1971 during the exhibition *John Latham* at Lisson Gallery, 3 November – 6 December 1970



Cover of the catalogue of the 1975 exhibition, *The Video Show*, Serpentine Galleries, London

subliminal 'disappearance of the artist'.<sup>16</sup> Schum was also instrumental in helping to produce Gilbert and George's early video works, billed as 'sculptures on video tape'.<sup>17</sup>

In the UK, David Hall, a sculptor who turned to video, began debates that helped define what was seen as one of the central projects of video in the following decades. As A.L. Rees reflected, Hall argued that 'video art was integral to television and not just its technical by-product'.<sup>18</sup> As part of the Artist Placement Group, Hall realised his own series of *TV Interruptions* for broadcast, unannounced, on Scottish TV in the summer of 1971. The series of ten films (later reduced to seven when shown in different contexts and for installation)<sup>19</sup> are marked by their economical design and ingenious play with the illusionistic nature of moving images. Each reflected on their own conditions and the nature of television image and broadcasting – a preoccupation of Hall, as seen in other projects, like *This is a video monitor* 1973 and the installation with Tony Sinden *101 TV Sets* 1975 in *The Video Show* at the Serpentine Gallery 1 May 1975 to 26 May 1975.<sup>20</sup>

Hall played a key role in developing infrastructure and theory around video art in the UK. Together with fellow artists Roger Barnard, David Critchley, Tamara Krikorian, Brian Hoey, Pete Livingstone, Stuart Marshall, Stephen Partridge and John Turpie, Hall founded London Video Arts, and was instrumental in defining video art as an autonomous medium, emphasising its material parameters and distinguishing it from parallel social and

16 As Arnatt wrote at the time, the work was developed because 'The continual reference to the disappearance of the art object suggested to me the eventual disappearance of the artist himself'.  
 17 The first film they made together was *The Nature of Our Looking* for the programme *Identifications* (subsequently distributed in both 16mm and video formats). Following this, they created three 'Video Sculptures', supported by Gerry Schum for his short-lived Video Gallery in Dusseldorf. They included *Gordon's Makes us Drunk*, *Portrait of the Artists as Young Men* and *In the Bush* (all 1972). The three videos were acquired by Tate in 1972 and were among the earliest moving image works to enter the collection.  
 18 A.L. Rees, 'Monitoring Stephen Partridge', in *Stephen Partridge*, exh. cat., DCA, Centrespace, Dundee and CooperGallery, DJCAD, Dundee 1999. ??Confirm these details are correct  
 19 The work was reconfigured in 2006 as *TV Interruptions (7 TV Pieces): The Installation* 1971, remade 2006. In contrast to Gilbert and George's video work, David Hall – although one of the first artists to have dedicated screenings of his works at Tate Gallery in the 1970s, and Tate purchased one of his sculptural work *Nine* 1967 in 1970 – no moving image work was acquired until 2014.  
 20 *The Video Show*, 1–26 May 1975 at London's Serpentine Gallery was Britain's first major international exhibition of video art, including projects by Stuart Marshall, Ian Breakwell, David Critchley, Mike Dunford, David Hall, Susan Hiller, Tamara Krikorian, Mike Leggett, Paul Neagu, Lis Rhodes and Tony Sinden as well as numerous screenings and events.

political applications of video.<sup>21</sup>

By the early 1970s the context was shifting. Ian Breakwell, in his film *Nine Jokes* 1971, made for the exhibition *Prospect 71: Projection*,<sup>22</sup> set out to critique in a sequence of short films the potential dead-end posed by conceptual artists' use of film. Rees has argued that 1973 already marked 'perhaps the apex of this first phase of artists' film and video, with *Structures & Codes* at the Royal College of Art showing films by John Blake, Peter Gidal and David Lamelas alongside media art by John Stezaker, John Latham and Stephen Willats. [...] But this phase was soon over. Even though the influential journal *Studio International* devoted special issues to film (1975) and video (1976), many of the conceptualists, such as [John] Hilliard, had already abandoned film. By contrast, the artists grouped around the LFMCA had defined film as their principal medium. This led to a split and a redrawing of the borders around the use of film by artists. The consequences of which have been seen 'to last for the next thirty years.'<sup>23</sup>

WHOSE HISTORY?

'Why should all the interesting work be in film? Why can't you do that in an exhibition? Why couldn't I think about drawing the spectator into a diegetic space: the idea of real time or what you might call the picture in the expanded field. ... [T]hat's what I eventually got back to in *Post-Partum Document*.' Mary Kelly<sup>24</sup>

Theoretical discussions about film and its potential were formative of new approaches to art and its exhibition in the 1970s. Debates about different notions of practice and politics increasingly came to define film in the 1970s, within the London Filmmakers Co-op, for instance, and the journals *Screen* and *Studio International*. These tensions were explored in Peter Wollen's divisive essay 'The Two Avant-Gardes',<sup>25</sup> which outlined a separation

between the work of artist-run organisations such as film coops and that aligned with European political cinema of the period.

Through these debates and the introduction of new fields – continental philosophy, Brechtian theory, feminism and psychoanalysis – a critique of the limited horizons of conceptual art emerged, and artists began exploring issues of representation, labour and gender. Projects such as the Artist Placement Group had prefigured this shift, as had the work of Mary Kelly and her contemporaries, and that of the little-known RCA graduate Darcy Lange. In the 1970s Lange's singular body of work brought issues from conceptual art to film and video, but stood outside of the increasingly closed spheres defined by emerging theories of video art on the one hand, and structural/materialist film on the other. Lange's projects reflected on feedback, process and the constituent elements of installation practice. Projects ranged from *A Documentation of Bradford Working Life, UK* 1974,<sup>26</sup> and other studies of industrial labour, to the ambitious multi-part project exhibited at Museum of Modern Art Oxford, *Work Studies in Schools 1976–77*,<sup>27</sup> which sought to 'investigate teaching as work',<sup>28</sup> and was made with schools in Birmingham and Oxfordshire. Lange's critical practice was based on duration, the interrelationship of media and a desire to effect social change. As his colleague and contemporary Dan Graham recalled: 'he used video, not only as a documentary, but also as part of a learning process [...] Darcy sought to effect change in the people who were its subjects.'<sup>29</sup> Like other films Lange made in the industrial regions, or on agricultural subjects in his native New Zealand, *A Documentation of Bradford Working Life* is a systematic study of the rhythms of work. The work draws on different

Mulvey, as well as leading several of the debates on British film culture of the period, between 1974 and 1982 co-wrote and co-directed six films, including *Penthesilea: Queen of the Amazons* 1974 and *Riddles of the Sphinx* 1977.  
 26 *A Documentation of Bradford Working Life* comprised colour and black-and-white photographs, sound, 16mm film, video, running to 145 mins.  
 27 The exhibition *Work Studies in Schools*, at Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 22 March – 9 April 1977, featured the work *Studies of Teaching in Four Oxfordshire Schools* 1977 (video, black-and-white photographs, sound, approx. 6 hours) that built on the previous project *Study of Three Birmingham Schools* 1976 (video, black-and-white photographs, sound, approx. 6 hours).  
 28 Darcy Lange, 'To Effect a Truthful Study of Work in Schools,' in *Work Studies in Schools*, Oxford 1977, p.18.  
 29 Dan Graham, 'Darcy Lange: Great Artist and Friend', in *Darcy Lange: Study of an Artist at Work*, ed. Mercedes Vicente, New Plymouth 2008, p.183.





Darcy Lange  
*Study of Three Birmingham Schools (Paul Nagle, 'Roman Roads',  
 History Class, Ladywood Comprehensive School) 1976*

modes of representation – long takes on videotape, parallel sequences on 16mm film at the start and end of each take, and a series of photographs – and its recording systems are replicated in the display to create a complex network of information. Lange sought 'to prevent what I make, whether it be photograph or video, from becoming an end in itself – not dissimilar to the loved art object'.<sup>30</sup>

The interest in work and how it could be represented became a central issue, both in the turn to increasingly political concerns of many conceptual artists, but also in defining works by influential female artists dealing with issues of labour and representation. Figures such as Annabel Nicolson and Gill Eatherley both played roles in establishing the parameters of 'expanded cinema'

<sup>30</sup> Lange 1977, p.18

with colleagues such as David Dye, Malcom Le Grice and William Raban. Similarly, Rose Finn-Kelcey's *Variable, Light to Moderate* 1971<sup>31</sup> and Mary Kelly's *An Earth Work Performed* 1970 bridged concerns of Land Art and issues of process and performance as in Antony McCall's early works, such as *Landscape for Fire* 1972, made prior to his later 'solid light' works. These works emerged when the broader critique of early conceptual art was focussing on its perceived failure to engage with issues of subjectivity, as Mary Kelly has argued.<sup>32</sup> The lack of engagement

<sup>31</sup> Guy Brett argued that for artist such as Rose Finn-Kelcey, film or video was used to 'add further dimensions to her underlying concepts, rather than cultivated as media for their own sake'. Guy Brett, *Rose Finn-Kelcey, A Directory of British Film and Video Artists*, ed. David Curtis, London 1996, p.54.

<sup>32</sup> 'this unsolved question in terms of conceptual art ... The interrogation of interrogation, it had to include subjectivity': Mary

with concerns of power and, crucially, gender – many exhibitions featured only work by men in this period – encouraged artists to move beyond early conceptual strategies and engage with these issues.

Some artists began to realise works as part of groups or collectives.<sup>33</sup> Film groups such as Cinema Action (est. 1968) or the London Women's Film Group (est. 1972) sought to communicate political issues directly, leading to a split from filmmakers associated with the Filmmakers Coop, who held to an understanding of politics as a materialist issue, most powerfully argued by Peter Gidal in his writing of the period.<sup>34</sup> Yet works such as *Women Of The Rhondda* 1972 sought to develop approaches that were distinct from materialist discourse and agitprop works of the period. Made by Esther Ronay, Mary Capps, Humphrey Trevelyan, Margaret Dickinson, Brigid Seagrave and Susan Shapiro, the film focuses on interviews with four Rhondda women, recalling the Welsh miners' strike of the 1920s and 1930s, and emphasises how the unacknowledged roles of women in working class history and oppression often stems from a denial of their labour.

The investigation and indexing of labour became increasingly central to works in the mid-1970s, and fundamental to the large installation *Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry 1973–5*, first exhibited at the South London Art Gallery in 1975. Made by Margaret Harrison, Kay Hunt and Mary Kelly, the installation originally consisted of a two-screen 16mm film (transferred to video for later installations), time sheets, indexes, photographs and audio recordings, all mapping in detail women's work in a factory in Bermondsey. Similarly, *Nightcleaners: Part 1* 1972–5 by the Berwick Street Film Collective (Marc Karlin, Mary Kelly, James Scott and Humphrey Trevelyan) follows the campaign of the Cleaner's Action Group. The film explores the complexity of the campaign, and the issues inherent in representing such a disparate group of women working in isolation across the capital. Employing a range of self-referential techniques, the film produces varying degrees of subjectivity to acknowledge and implicate the filmmakers and audience in these processes that manifest

Kelly quoted in Battista 2012, p.43.

<sup>33</sup> For a recent study of British film collectives see Dan Kidner & Petra Bauer (eds.), *Working Together: Notes on British Film Collectives in the 1970s*, Southend-on-Sea 2013.

<sup>34</sup> See Peter Gidal's influential essay: 'Theory and Definition of Structural / Materialist Film' in *the Structural Film Anthology*, ed. Peter Gidal, British Film Institute, London, 1976 reprinted 1978

invisible workers and represent their unacknowledged labour.

The interest in information, networks and systems that defined early work increasingly had to answer to its ideological bias, especially as women's work became more visible throughout the decade. As Lis Rhodes stated, ideology 'predetermines information and its availability'.<sup>35</sup> Written in the context of the controversial exhibition *Film as Film: Formal Experiment in Film, 1910–1975*, at the Hayward Gallery in 1979,<sup>36</sup> Rhodes addressed the exhibition's problematic construction of history, its lack of work by women artists or proper participation by women in the research and selection process. In response to this situation, those women invited to participate chose to exhibit an empty gallery, calling attention to the gaps in the exhibition and its presumptions about film history. In an accompanying collective statement, signed by Annabel Nicolson, Felicity Sparrow, Jane Clarke, Janette Iljon, Lis Rhodes, Mary Pat Leece, Pat Murphy and Susan Stein, the group stated: 'We object to the idea of a closed art exhibition which presents its subject anonymously, defining its truth in Letraset and four foot display panels, denying the space within it to answer back, to add or disagree, denying the ideological implications inherent in the pursuit of an academic dream, the uncomplicated pattern where everything fits.'<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Lis Rhodes, 'Whose History', *Formal Experiment in Film, 1910–1975*, exh. cat., Hayward Gallery, London 1979 p.120.

<sup>36</sup> *Formal Experiment in Film, 1910–1975*, London SE1, 3 May – 17 June 1979.

<sup>37</sup> Statement signed by Annabel Nicolson, Felicity Sparrow, Jane Clarke, Janette Iljon, Lis Rhodes, Mary Pat Leece, Pat Murphy and Susan Stein, 'Woman and the Formal Film', *Formal Experiment in Film, 1910–1975*, 1979, p.118.