**Experimental film and the subject/ive at the London Film-makers’ Co-op:**

**A series of conversations with women filmmakers by Nina Danino**

Introduction

Nina Danino

This project presents accounts of the relationship between experimental film and the subjective. Experimental film has offered women artists a flexible form and medium for self-representation, which some women were able to develop into highly individual forms of film language to construct subjective expression. The dialogues highlight the subjective in the work of artists, who each have developed experimental film language from this perspective.

Each conversation was initiated by myself, Nina Danino as part of which I spoke and corresponded with Barbara Meter, Jayne Parker, Sarah Pucill, Lis Rhodes and Anna Thew. I then undertook a later dialogue with curator Helen de Witt as a way to bring my own film practice into the frame. The filmmakers in this collection developed parts or their entire practices in experimental film in forms of narrative and subjective engagement with film through process, using the potential of film as an individual visual language.

**The London Film-makers’ Co-operative**

This collection focuses on women filmmakers who intersected with the London Film-makers’ Co-operative (LFMC) whose work contributes to discussion on the subject and visual language in the way that I am considering it – in connection to the structural and mechanical foundations of the London Film-makers’ Co-op. The conversations are wide ranging, discussing how some makers came to London from Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, examining the connections of the LFMC to other centres such as in Amsterdam, giving a picture of experimental film culture in this period in London and connected to other centres in Europe.

Whilst the artists’ practices may include other media such as installations, sculptural works, audio, working with archives or print, these discussions focus on each artist’s individual method of filmmaking. How they developed their own aesthetic and film language, producing constructions of the/a subject at the centre of the work. Discussions examine how film and film language are used to explore individual female subjectivity and self-representation including the role of performance in the work, how each engages with the camera and editing, each filmmaker’s investigation of the body, tracing each artist’s deconstruction and questioning of a unified self through the filmic apparatus and systems of representation that have enabled objectification. Another key subject of the dialogues considers how film is used as a means to express such subjective experiences as memory, desire, loss, mourning, ecstasy, resistance – which either are unnameable or don’t have a ready language or forms of representation.

Each discussion covers a number of topics. The relationship between biography and experimental film, filmmaking as a form of making and re-making of the self, as a form of presenting the self and how the self is staged or represented in film are broached. Also, the role of the performative, self-staging and self inscription and the visual language of the films through particular tools such as the rostrum, optical printer, camera and editing, which I was interested in investigating further through this framing of each artist. The second half of the discussions open out to broader themes to explore these practices in the contexts around the LFMC, experimental film culture in the UK and other centres in Europe.

**Timeframe**

The dialogues focus largely on practices that flourished in the 1980s. With some discussions looking at the late 1970s and structural approaches to film and the early 1990s, a period of diverse production by women filmmakers. This broad timeframe saw the founding of practices in women’s cinema in the context of feminist approaches to film as well as theories of the woman as subject. Some participants – Barbara Meter and Lis Rhodes – go back to the seventies, and others such as Sarah Pucill started practicing in the nineties, meaning that there is a bridge and not a break between decades.

The main focus on the eighties is largely tied to the fact that this was a decade during which the LFMC was very active. There was a fragmentation of earlier avant-garde movements and a diversification of artists’ film. Experimental film around the LFMC in the 1980s is lesser discussed. The magazine *Undercut* (run by an editorial collective of which I was part) was active throughout the decade. The later *Undercut* reader published in 2003 and a roundtable on ‘Women of the London Filmmakers’ Co-op’ convened in 2015, provide a background to this interview project.[[1]](#footnote-0) The history jumps from the well-documented period of structural film in the 1970s to 1990s onwards and to more recent artists’ moving image.[[2]](#footnote-1) Artists’ experimental film production in the decade of the eighties was diverse and there were arguably no dominant forms or positions associated with the LFMC as has been historicised in relation to the 1970s (structural film, etc). This diversity presented opportunities but is also probably why there are gaps in knowledge of the time.[[3]](#footnote-2)

Artists’ film practices in the UK and LFMC in the eighties reflected the explosion in representation in cultural identities, the gay and queer movements associated with post punk, including a Super 8 scene, which arguably was the most visible at the time. The discussions published here acknowledge this context but are framed by connections with structural film, which was influential into the decade. Super 8 filmmakers received attention and exposure through writing on the Super 8 scene. The films by Derek Jarman and others were key exponents and were written about by Michael O’Pray, as well as others. The discussions also acknowledge the broader contexts of the Black Workshop Movement (Black Audio Film Collective, Ceddo, Sankofa Film/Video), some of which were funded by the Channel 4 Workshop Declaration early in the decade, through which artists such as Isaac Julien and John Akomfrah began gallery and museum practices. The focus of this project, however, is the work by these women and it was only a few women who engaged with the subjective in the particular mode directly relevant to my examination of the subjective, which began with my essay ‘The Intense Subject’ (2003), focusing on the relationship between the subjective, structure and material.[[4]](#footnote-3) This is not to divide these artists from participation in other streams of practice, as there were many overlaps, but for the purposes of framing the particular perspective of a subjective thematic approach. It is important to emphasize that other parts of their practice might engage with other concerns and that they might not always think of themselves as working in this subject/ive mode.

The conversations engage with the influence of structural film and with feminist approaches to representation and show the contribution that subjective experimental filmmaking makes to women’s film and feminist representation in the wider field as well as to experimental film. This does not mean that individual practices did not have connections to different spheres and approaches nor that the subjective was not part of work being made by other artists at the LFMC. The discussions therefore range over how each artist engages/ed with film as a means of subjective representation as well as dealing with social and theoretical questions which contextualise their work.

The LFMC was founded through the workshop, cinema and distribution activities but also critical and theoretical engagement, all these are the means of production. In these discussions the question of engagement with film as a material is added, how each artist approaches the concept of material and materiality in aspects of their work. The LFMC therefore is conceptualised not just as facilities for ‘hands-on’ practice; it also involved a commitment through membership and to critical and theoretical underpinnings to practice. The discussions focus on the particular experience of engagement with the Co-op, as first discussed in the earlier roundtable on ‘Women of the London Filmmakers’ Co-op’.

The LFMC is conceived of as a matrix that is incorporative and founded on the modernist avant-garde legacy of structural/materialist film and includes relationships with the London Musicians’ Collective (based in the same building in Gloucester Avenue) and to expanded, performance-based practices. In the roundtable discussions in 2015, the LFMC is proposed as a feminist and even a nurturing structure, a ‘haven’ for some and as having an exclusionary aspect for others – there are different experiences. In the 1980s it included diverse practices. The LFMC also generated writing by artists, writings on their own work and on the work of other artists and this spirit of artist-centred critical writing is carried forward in this peer project via dialogues between those who intersected in this context in different ways. The discussions therefore also consider how each filmmaker experienced this context.

By the early 1990s the LFMC entered a protracted and contested period of transition. This history is well documented, and the discussions mention but do not go into the history of the various institutional and organisational wrangles that caused the LFMC to merge with London Electronic Arts (formerly London Video Arts/Access) and later, the transition that led to the foundation of the Lux Centre in 1997. The discussions also consider artists’ responses to these shifts and different exhibition situations in the gallery, which began in the late 1980s and 1990s. My essay, ‘The Intense Subject’, initiated my process of trying to write on experimental film and subjective forms as different to works made or shown in the white cube.[[5]](#footnote-4) The umbrella term artists’ moving image, which came into usage after the 1990s, gives rise to the question ‘what was/is experimental film?’ Was this the form that did not make it into the gallery or the museum and the art world? This is taken up in discussion with each filmmaker along with the question of what experimental film is as a form for self-representation. I am fascinated by the place of experimental film as both a historical concept and as an artists’ movement, as an individual artist’s place of practice and thinking through experimental film in a contextual time.

**The ‘Intense Subject’ and experimental film**

This project considers experimental film as a practice that flourished in very particular circumstances – in relationship to the avant-garde and the post avant-garde. Experimental film is a state prior to Artists’ Moving Image and is founded on a memory of analogue and on an artists’ movement. The shift in the 1990s to the gallery seemed to position experimental film in a different sphere of engagement. This shift left experimental film without a dedicated exhibition context but equally it was uncommodified and un co-opted into the art world. Thus, one of the questions is whether it can be argued that the form can be taken forward in new ways or whether it is a historic form. Is it possible to make experimental films without the presence of any avant-garde movement in the cultural field? Without an artist’s movement is it a style, a genre different to say short fiction films?

Film is a phenomenological, theoretical, aesthetic and material practice. Yet it is often only understood as a means of imparting content, even by scholars and critics of film. As individual artists’ accounts, these conversations can pass on knowledge and new perspectives and highlight these continuing questions for new artists thinking about new moving image practices. They could also be helpful when considering questions about the relationship between artists’ moving image and cinema, a debate that has preoccupied the art world but which remains unresolved.

‘The Intense Subject’ attempts to locate experimental film as a particular place of working that was/is unique and historically specific. The essay argues for a particular intensity, which can be called the subjective, achieved through experiments with film as a visual language to express the artist as woman, female and often trying to speak and express what is not exactly nameable in language. It is this place of working and the visual languages developed around it that the conversations are attempting to focus on. These conversations examine experimental film as a set of practices, a different place of engagement to film than artists’ moving image and practiced from a different set of co-ordinates. The later term artists’ moving image privileges content, whereas experimental film places emphasis equally on the camera and the edit, which is the work, and on the coming together of theory and practice, which is the legacy of structural film at the LFMC. This aspect of experimental film is more and more lost in the merger with artists’ moving image.

These dialogues explore authorship, a place of practice that enabled forms of intense engagement of the subjective need whether personal or also as part of the politics of representation of women in film, as practiced by some women filmmakers. This project makes a case for a particular type, a place of practice, framing the subjective or the self in some women’s experimental narrative film as a particular location/position in its self aware use of film as a carefully chosen visual language rather than as a recording medium or vehicle for content. This stems from the urgent need to speak and to self-represent through practices enabled by the theoretical context of material and structure. This language is rigorous and considered and thus different to aesthetic expressionism. To discuss it (theorise it) we must frame it. It is more than naming it as a category within the existing historical categories such as experimental film, avant-garde film, artists’ film, underground film, independent film and so on. It is a question of a place of practice – a place of meaning-making which had urgency with the subject at the centre. One question that is speculated upon is – in the way that it is framed here, which is in part, a place of historical intersections – whether it can be practiced today in a meaningful, that is, in a radical way, when there is no experimental film culture around it. These conversations frame subjective experimental film as a specific place-of-practice that was woman-centred as well as being materially written. This initiative considers how the structural film legacy of the LFMC was central to the subjective in women’s experimental film practices at that time, in the mode we are discussing. How it enabled the subjective to be interrogated through film as a self reflective visual language.

**Networks and biography**

The discussions describe the study networks that influenced each filmmaker’s works such as feminist conferences and the debates around women’s film. This extended to feminist film theory and debates on representation in film studies and the discoveries of the gaze, psychoanalysis as a critical tool and the influence of French feminist critical writing. The influence of experimental film practices as works of theory themselves needs to be acknowledged. Theory writing from practice is a method indebted to the LFMC.

The interviews aim to open each artist from a perspective in this context. This is different to how artists’ work is situated in a broad field of artists’ moving image, which as a term is incorporative but is historically de-contextualising. The works made by the artists interviewed here stem from a need for expression as an intense subject.

The discussions testify to the importance of art schools in nurturing each artist’s film practice. The importance of pedagogy and of viewing experimental films. Also discussed are the shifts and roles of often diminishing funding and opportunities for exhibition. The conversations consider these shifts in the exhibition of each artist’s work today and how some expanded works from the time now fit in well for projection in the white cube and how linear experimental film is still difficult for this context.

The conversations challenge the concept of experimental film as a marginal practice but as in fact connected to mainstream film and television and other film sectors. Some experimental filmmakers trained and worked as professionals in TV and independent film, in drama films, and documentaries for parts of their career alongside experimental film, as well as in pedagogy.

Many artists connected to the LFMC are mentioned in these conversations. Even though the diversity of experimental film culture and artists’ networks is acknowledged, very few women makers worked with the notion of the subjective as formed here, and thus an aspect which I could approach or discover in parts of their work. These discussions connect to my practice as a filmmaker and are about languages of experimental film which involve unfixing and destabilising any notion of identity or unified self and where the subject is always somewhat unlocatable.

These in-depth conversations, which reconstruct a number of interconnected filmmakers in a shared thematic exploration, are not intended to be an anthology or a representative history, nor can it represent the many artists who connected at the LFMC in the 1980s. For a fuller picture of this network of practices there are historians and writers on this field in growing anthologies. As mentioned, I wrote the ‘The Intense Subject’ and convened two roundtable initiatives on artists’ experimental film in the 1980s, the first was the ‘London Filmmakers’ Co-op: The Second Generation’ with Michael Mazière in 2015 and the second ‘Women of the London Filmmakers’ Co-op’ the following year. This project is a continuum of this research, aiming to go into some the themes raised in these earlier discussions in more depth, through the work of individual filmmakers, stemming from and linked to a notion of the subjective in experimental film as evidenced through the visual language discussed. The artists have engaged with concepts of the self in parts of their work or the entirety of their work to degrees of intensity and in sustained and developed bodies of work. The practices contextualise each other to an extent and could develop thematic and theoretical enquiry, approaching the work anew from the subjective perspective and avoiding filmographic accounts or interpretive writing on content. The approach aims to connect practices and theorise, differently to how a historian might approach it.

**Artists’ writing**

The series of conversations are also in keeping with the tradition of artists’ writing about each other’s work. In a sense, these are peer relationships between artist filmmakers. As mentioned earlier, I was part of the collective who edited *Undercut*, the magazine at the LFMC in the 1980s, which also published artists’ writing critically and theoretically about their own and others’ work. There already existed a practice of artists writing about each other’s work from the 1970s.[[6]](#footnote-5) This collection follows those foundations of artists’ writing. It was also artists who programmed the cinema and distributed their work, which changed after the shift to art writers, gallerists and curators in the 1990s. The culture of writing about film by artists was a hugely important context for women and it is equally important in enabling the exchanges in this collection. It is not a retrospective historiography in this sense; it is a re-engagement with the subjective in experimental film in the context of the 1980s around the LFMC, providing a platform for these works and artists.

This collection necessarily reflects a particular approach to experimental film – and the theoretical/practices that women’s engagement in this mode were founding, through engagement with the subjective in film as a visual language: how the visual languages of experimental film in each case enabled subjective inflections from the legacy of 1970s male structural film and objective practices.

Even though there are connections through a shared context of the LFMC and the broader London scene, the purpose of this collection is not to establish a coherent style or group identity and indeed the interviews incorporate perspectives that throw up differences in aesthetics and positions. The emphasis is on each artist, with differences in aesthetics and positions as well as correspondences and shared contexts, and these conversations show women’s pioneering role in developing experimental film in highly individual, technically skilled practices using visual languages, materiality and the subjective.

**Project**

The project is part funded by Research Support Awards for Art from Goldsmiths University London (2019/20) and (2024/25). I initiated the project at a time when I also started to make the films *Solitude* (2022) and MARIA (2023) and other projects. It generated manuscripts running up to over 100,000 words of in-depth materials and the task and responsibility at times felt onerous. My deepest thanks to Claire M. Holdsworth for her editorial and editing assistance and for periodically contacting me over the 4 years. I am deeply grateful for her professionalism and expertise in all matters to do with the publication. Thank you to the artists for their interest in the initiative and for agreeing to participate in this mammoth task and give themselves so totally to the encounter, whether in a recorded conversation in-person, on zoom or in written dialogue and for sharing their experiences and expertise as filmmakers. It has been hugely rewarding on a personal level to reconnect and to revisit the extraordinary and unique matrix of the LFMC and as a space that is newly interpretable from the perspective of now. Thank you to LUX for publishing the results of these encounters in conversation. I would also add that there are several artists who were invited, and I hope that they can be added later-on if they wish to be.

These conversations contribute to research on the experimental film culture of the time and speculate on what experimental film might be now. I hope that they have also generated insights about individual practices, enabled by the frame of the subjective in discussion. I feel honoured to have been given the trust of each individual artist and filmmaker via their knowledge along with their intensive and honest participation in revealing and engaging conversations.

**Nina Danino, January 2025**

1. Nina Danino, Jean Matthee, Ruth Novaczek, Sarah Pucill and Alia Sayed (2015) ‘Roundtable Discussion: The Women of the London Filmmaker’s Co-Op’, *Moving Image Review & Art Journal (MIRAJ),* 4(1): 164–79, <https://doi.org/10.1386/miraj.4.1-2.164_1>. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. As indicated and discussed at the event *Artists’ Moving Image Practice in Britain From 1990 to Today*, Whitechapel Gallery / Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Film (6–7 November 2015) as part of which Nina Danino gave a paper, ‘Experimental films as inscription and materiality in the context of the London Filmmakers’ Co-op’ (2015).See “Artists’ Moving Image Practice in Britain From 1990 to Today,” Paul Mellon Centre, accessed 26 Jan 2025. <https://www.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk/whats-on/past/artists-moving-image/year/2015>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. See Nina Danino, James Mackay, Michael Mazière, Vicky Smith and William Fowler (2014), ‘Roundtable Discussion: London Film-Makers’ Co-Op – the Second Generation’, *Moving Image Review & Art Journal (MIRAJ),* 3(2): 236–47, <https://doi.org/10.1386/miraj.3.2.236_7>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Nina Danino, “The Intense Subject.” In *The Undercut Reader: Critical Writings on Artists’ Film and Video,* 8–12 (Wallflower, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. As explored recently by a new generation of academics, researcher s and artists, including Claire M. Holdsworth (who worked as editorial assistant and researcher for this project), Kathryn Siegel, Karen Di Franco and Irene Revell. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)