

## British Artists' Film & Video Study Collection

By Sandra Gibson

### **About the Study Collection**

Established in 2000, the British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection is a research project led by Senior Research Fellow David Curtis and Research Fellow Steven Ball concentrating on the history of artists' film and video in Britain. The Study Collection is a unique resource and consists of an extensive range of reference materials including video copies of artists' works, still images, historical posters and publicity materials, paper documentation and a publications library. The Study Collection welcomes post-graduate researchers, curators, programmers, artists, and anyone interested in the academic study of British Artists' Film and Video.

Aside from its own online catalogue of its entire holdings, the Study Collection includes an extensive database called British Artists' Moving Image Database. This serviceable map of moving image history provides details of more than 7,000 works, 1,200 artists and 90 collections and distributions nation-wide. The database can be accessed through the Study Collection's website: [www.studycollection.org.uk](http://www.studycollection.org.uk). Original to the website the Study Collection offers a revolving series of specially curated "online exhibitions" drawing on material exclusively from the collection. One such exhibition, titled *Aural History* (curated by Maxa Zoller) is an audio documentary of the early years of the London Filmmaker's Coop (1966-1968) from original cassette tapes. Another online

exhibition *British Avant-Garde Film Graphic Art 1966-85* (curated by Darren Green), presents an array of colorful poster announcements and programs. The Study Collection also organizes film exhibitions and conferences, as in the recent three-day conference *Expanded Cinema: Activating the Space of Reception* held at the Tate Modern. Academics, curators, and artists at the conference included: Chrissie Iles, Anthony McCall, Chris Welsby, Cindy Keefer, Malcolm LeGrice, and Liz Kotz (to name a few).

### **Study Collection: Onsite and Online**

The Study Collection is housed at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in London. The entire Collection is onsite, distributed across three adjacent rooms: office space with three work stations and book/video library, cabinet file room with one work station for paper archive, and video viewing space with 2-3 viewing areas. Due to the specialized nature of the Collection, the researcher must make an appointment one-week in advance. The Study Center does not charge a fee for accessing their Collection. An estimated 40% of the visitors are international. Access policy is stated on the website and is somewhat strict: “The Study Collection is accessible to scholars, curators, postgraduate students and others pursuing original research.” (We will address this emphasis on “original research” in a separate section below.) In order to pull items from the Collection, the researcher is referred to the online database catalogue which contains granular descriptions of the entire Collection. No materials may leave the premises. Most paper documents may be photocopied, subject to usual copyright restrictions and some individual embargoes. Members from the Study Collection Research Team – composed of film historians David Curtis and Duncan White, and film/videomakers

Steven Ball and Malcolm LeGrice – can be requested to assist in the research process in order to facilitate in locating material, suggestions/recommendations, interpreting/identifying documents, etc.

### **Pursuing “Original Research” at the Study Center**

Access policy, as we have already indicated, is clearly stated on the website and reiterated in the Study Collection’s introductory/overview pamphlet: “accessible to scholars, curators, postgraduate students and others pursuing original research.”

The policy of “original research” is in tune with the Study Collection’s emphasis on “artists” practice. In other words, the Study Collection fosters alternative and cutting-edge research projects that shed new light on the critical legacy of “British Artists’ Film & Video”. This is not the Study Collection’s explicit “mission statement” but is reflected in some of the online research papers, the most notable being a statement by Research Fellow and co-founder of the Collection David Curtis: “Which moving images should we expect to see in our national collections?” This statement appears in Mr. Curtis’ 2001 Tate International Council Conference paper, titled “Which History” located under the website’s menu-bar “Projects”/“Research Papers” in which he sets out to articulate “the history we need.” Basically, Mr. Curtis’ concern is to preserve and consolidate a nationalistic framework for “British Artists’ Film & Video” by securing the canonical value of British-made time-based media by way of their entry into prestigious national museum collections such as the Tate. This national tendency was confirmed by Malcolm LeGrice during his presentation at the *Expanded Cinema* conference (which I attended) in which he articulated a certain overshadowing of British avant-garde film in the late 60’s

by world-wide attention of the so-called New American Cinema Group (i.e., Andy Warhol, Jonas Mekas, Shirley Clark, Owen Land, Michael Snow, Joyce Wieland, Hollis Frampton, etc.). The Study Collection, I would argue, is in a sense part of an overall institutional strategy (via an archival practice and discourse) which addresses its position within a set of socio-historical, cultural, aesthetic, and political debates so as to come to terms with the suppression of “marginalized” national histories.

### **Tour and Demonstration of the Facilities with Research Fellow David Curtis**

I had the fortunate opportunity to travel to London to participate in the *Expanded Cinema* conference and get a first-hand tour of the Study Collection with Research Fellow David Curtis. According to Mr. Curtis, the Study Collection is currently negotiating its relocation and expansion within the College’s Art and Design Museum for the year 2011. This will mean more visibility for the Study Collection which is not easy to find as it is tucked away deep within a maze-like architecture of corridors within the main campus. It is not wheelchair accessible. Due to the planning of the conference at the Tate, the Study Collection was closed. They normally open during weekdays and have limited hours only for scheduled visitors (no walk-ins) depending on the nature of the projects. Undergraduate students do not generally have access to the Study Collection, but special exceptions (i.e., “original research) are not entirely ruled out.

In conversation, Mr. Curtis stresses that the Study Collection is not a museum or archive per se but aspires to be recognized as an “institutional archive collection” (i.e., a “collections archive” rather than a “producing archive”). The inaugural material for the

collection began with Mr. Curtis' personal book and paper collection which he had accumulated over the years, beginning in the early 1960's as a key participant in the emerging underground film scene. (Mr. Curtis wrote the classic textbook: *Experimental Cinema: A Fifty Year Evolution* in 1971 and most recently *A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain*, BFI 2007.) It is interesting to note here that it was a graduate student's interest in the history of British artists' film and video that encouraged Mr. Curtis to make his personal collection available to scholars in the field. Over the years, work has been (and continuous to be) donated by artists who brought material to the Study Collection's attention.

There are over 450 artist files containing paper documentation and stills (photographs), including writings by the artists' such as books, articles, letters, unpublished scripts, drawings and diagrams; and writings about the artists' including books, reviews, newspaper clippings, promotional cards, etc. The online catalogue organizes these items under the following headings: "Artists' Still Image Collection", "Artists' Paper Documentation Collection", "All Artists' Collections", "Programme Schedules", "Publications", "Organizations and Events". Searching a specific artist under "Artists' Paper Documentation Collection" gives a complete listing of articles, reviews, programs, flyers, funding applications, etc.

In the file room, Mr. Curtis pulled a file at random (or what seemed to be random at first) that showed one of the earliest manifestations of a British Artists' showcase not at a traditional film theater but at a bookstore, called Better Books – a small yearly film

festival run by British poet Bob Cobbing in the early 1960's. Because there was a miniscule output of British-made Artists' films at the time, the program was supplemented by mostly American avant-garde films (i.e., Kenneth Anger, Stan Bakhage, Gregory Markopoulos). The newspaper-size program note (interspersed with interviews by filmmakers), carefully folded in an archival plastic sleeve, was handled with the utmost care and reverence by Mr. Curtis. A sort of "birth certificate" to the inauguration of British Artists' moving-image history seemed to be at hand in this by no means random demonstration of the historical potential stored in the collection.

The Study Collection has over 2,500 works on video, again many of them donated by artists. Other sources from which video works were donated include: Arts Council England's Reference Collection of funded works; the former ICA (Institute for Contemporary Art) Videotheque collection; exhibition compilations from Film & Video Umbrella, the former LEA and other organizations and off-air recordings. Also included are video and sound interviews with artists, documentation of expanded cinema events and installations. The online catalogue lists each film by title, artist's name, duration, source (i.e., whether it is a stand-alone or part of a compilation video), and year. The bulk of the video collection lines the walls of the main office space on wooden bookshelves. The Study Collection does not collect actual films or film projection equipment. Their main study formats are: VHS and DVD. Mr. Curtis explained that there was a project to migrate the VHS and earlier video formats such as 3/4" to DVD but this did not achieve satisfactory results. Currently they are seriously entertaining the prospect of putting the entire collection onto a server.

## **The Future of the Study Center Artists' Moving Image Collection**

During the *Expanded Cinema* conference, the Study Center hosted the collection of a new organization called *Expanded Cinema Study Collection*, comprising of 69 separate works on a server with three desk-top computer viewing stations in a gallery space at the Tate. Artists represented are international in scope: Tony Conrad, Valie Export, Werner Nekes, Paul Sharits, Lis Rhodes, Guy Sherwin, and Carolee Schneemann (to name but a few). This collection captures high-quality professional video documentation from two recent expanded cinema survey events – at Hartware MedienKunstVerein in Dortmund (2004) and Württembergischer Kunstverein in Stuttgart (2006) – and is an attempt to confront the precarious nature of documenting non-conventional cinematic “performative” forms, primarily “projection performance”. During the conference this collection was referred to as “Expanded Cinema Archive Video Library”. The Study Center assisted the curator of the collection Mark Webber with the process of migrating the original MiniDV tapes onto a server. The success of the project in terms of accessibility (i.e., easy-to-use) and the high-quality standard of the video was a major breakthrough for the Study Center and one they will undoubtedly be emulating in the near future.

### **In Conclusion: On the Study Collection's Definition of “Artists' Film / Video”**

In conclusion, the Study Collection functions as a research center for the academic study of British Artists' Film and Video. As we have alluded, the Study Collection's underlying socio-historical and cultural ethos is in the realization of an institutional center and database whose goal is to compile, archive, and thus consolidate the dispersed

national collection of British artists' moving image ephemera. The term "British Artist's" covers experimental and avant-garde film, video art, artists' television, gallery-based installations and other works that use moving image and audio-visual multimedia technologies, made by British and British-based artists. Regarding the definition of a film/video "artist", Mr. Curtis, in his in-depth study *A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain* writes in his introduction: "It [referring to Curtis' book] is a history of artists' engagement with the moving image in all its forms. The term 'artist' in this context [...] identifies people who have worked with the moving image with a particular freedom and intensity, often in defiance of commercial logic, and knowingly risking the incomprehension of their public."<sup>1</sup> Mr. Curtis adds: "Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *all* these terms – plain 'artists', 'film-artists', 'video-artists', and 'film-makers' – have currency."<sup>2</sup> The Study Center works towards the institutionalization of precisely this *artistic currency* in the realm of its national moving image culture. Perhaps its very existence functions as a living and breathing "document" which incessantly testifies to the veracity of its identity: British Artists' Film and Video. To turn Mr. Curtis' words back on themselves, we will end by suggesting that the Study Collection defies commercial logic, and knowingly risks the incomprehension of its public. That, we may add, is the very essence of *original research*.

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<sup>1</sup> Curtis, David, *A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain*, British Film Institute, London, 2007; 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.