REMOTER VIEWING

c. Maria Walsh

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Picture this: a moving image enthusiast and art theorist spends more time traveling the length and breadth of London, and sometimes beyond, to access the sites where her 'profession' takes place than she does looking at the work screened or presented there. Enter COVID-19, lockdowns and remote working, and the viewing devices that were once a portal to moving image downtime, i.e., to streaming services such as Netflix and MUBI, not only become more intensely colonised by work duties and responsibilities but by the deluge of artists moving image works, as well as virtual tours of static work, wrought by art institutions as placeholders for cancelled exhibitions and programmes. With travelling time IRL freed up, said enthusiast could in theory access as much moving image content as she liked, when she liked, but, paradoxically, this constant availability produces a desire to withdraw from the clamorous routing of her attention here, there, and everywhere, or nowhere.

If the specific problem for my fictional moving image enthusiast was how to manage her attention to avoid the 'ennui and exhaustion' Morgan Quaintance alluded to in his review of the glut of online curatorial projects during lockdown, in a post-COVID era of 'blended' models of viewing, this condition is exacerbated by the proliferation of both IRL and URL access to

exhibitions, screenings, and public programmes being made available, albeit with slightly differing content depending on formats. This not so 'new normal' exacerbates the condition Boris Groys (2009) called a 'spectacle without spectators', whereby the immeasurable quantity of artistic production and its dissemination via media and platforms that occupy the same digital means of communication as networks like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram, to name but a few, feature 'photos, videos, and texts in a way that cannot be distinguished from any post-Conceptual artwork, including time-based artworks'. The tireless viewer who could watch all this stuff and single out one work from another could only, as Groys says, be 'God'. Not being such a deity, I homed in on curatorial programmes and screenings of moving image work that suggested a possible mitigation of the labour of viewing, both in terms of a revitalisation of the senses and a consideration of how platforms might enable the frisson of virtual gathering.

First up was Brighton CCA's Front Room Film Club, which was part of COMMUNAL, a public online programme responding to lockdown that ran from 24 March to 21 April 2020. Conceived in partnership with Cinenova, and as might be expected from an art space associated with a university, 24hr links to Adriana Monti's *Scuola Senza Fine* [School without End] (1976), Susan Stein's *Tracks* (1989) and Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983), were accompanied by some light contextual reading matter, both historical and contemporary. The careful pedagogical curation of these screening bundles made me want to commit to them and share them with

friends, the restricted time frame giving one a sense that like-minded others would also be remotely viewing them over this period. This imaginary community was further solidified by the films' contents addressing individual and group, feminist, and socialist struggles, the personal as political as more than a catchphrase. *Scuola Senza Fine* documents a group of women who, having completed the '150 Hour' adult education course, a pedagogical experiment implemented in Italy by a number of unions in the 1970s, decided to pursue a semi-autodidact form of continuing education, with journalist and feminist activist, Lea Melandri, acting as facilitator. Watching the group of women engaging in creative questioning around their kitchen tables from my desktop, it was as if our domestic spaces conjoined. The floating voiceovers in the second part of the film attesting to healing the sickness of female subjectivity under patriarchy, by dancing, walking, and writing, gave sustenance in lockdown conditions. *Tracks* is 16mm transferred to video and deploys animation as well as other techniques. One might have expected some loss of material quality, yet the intimate enunciation of the feminist voiceover, a teacher reflecting on pre-feminist times and feminist theories, mitigated the moments where Stein's use of composite layering appears flat, the compression of digital resolution adding colour saturation in recompense for luminosity. It goes without saying that less discursive film transfers would work less well online.

While the modality of online viewing is dependent on the variability of devices and a decent broadband signal, it also allows more people than are

able to visit galleries or art film theatres to access content as well as providing its own pleasures, not least of which stems from the sensory mode of what Gilles Deleuze calls 'the haptic eye', the moving image being a form of touch without touching. 'grounded: A Season of Screendance', capitalised on this hapticity. Comprised of five themed screenings of films from the noughties to the 2010s by artists working in different genres, some of which were dance performance but most not, and curated by Fiontán Moran and Claudia Kappenberg as part of Coastal Currents Arts Festival, the programme ran for two weeks from the end of July, each screening being available for 24hrs. While attention drifts between the works, what held my gaze was the curatorial selection and juxtapositioning of films such that the screen was activated as both an interface between and a surfacing of (e)motional bodies. The first screening, 'interior worlds/exterior lives', included: Ben Rivers, Harriet Middleton Baker, Holly Blakey, Jordan Baseman, Ursula Mayer, Adham Faramawy and Paul Maheke. Under the umbrella of 'screendance', Faramawy's *Skin Flick* (2019) became a synecdoche for the digital screen image as a layered sensory surface that belies its supposed flatness. Mayer's *CINESEXUAL* (2014), (16mm film transferred to video), although not created for viewing on a small device, also revitalised flatness by its use of screens within the screen, actors moving them to-and-fro in 3-dimensional space. In the context of the curatorial programming, both could be said to enact a post-medium condition which John Lechte characterises as 'a mode of making the imaged present' (2012), whereby the image becomes an affective force in-itself, rather than invoking an absent real.

One of the most unique online curatorial events in the year of living with lockdown was TRANSMISSIONS, an online platform commissioning artists and writers to share work within a classic DIY TV show format. Conceived by Anne Duffau, Hana Noorali and Tai Shani, and live streamed on Twitch TV, the first season aired in April 2020, hosted by invited artists and writers Sophie Jung, Tarek Lakhrissi, Johanna Hedva, Mykki Blanco, and CA Conrad, as well as the curatorial team. Since then, a further three seasons of the 'show' have been aired. Twitch TV, operated by Twitch Interactive, a subsidiary of Amazon.com, is not something that I would normally attend to. A cold look at the website frazzles my brain, but for the scheduled TRANSMISSIONS slot, it proved a relatively stable platform that enabled community-making, both maintaining pre-existent communities of artists, as evidenced in the chat function, but also generating a wider virtual community – total viewing figures averaging from over 1,000 for some episodes to a respectable 500-600 for others. The 'televisual' event structure harked back to analogue cathode-ray tv whereby if you missed a programme, you missed it, TRANSMISSIONS' live mid-week screening only being repeated once on the following Friday. My favourite episodes contained artists' films mixed in with archival YouTube clips from 1970s TV shows and other such vintage paraphernalia including extracts from cult or niche films. The meld worked well, alluding also to artists' DIY hosting of TV channels made possible in the early days of satellite TV in the US. As well as being were entertaining and thought-provoking, the compilations mirrored artistic

research methods of trawling through the internet, often guided purely by sensibility, a practice that often leads down rabbit holes or to opacity, but due to the immediacy of TRANSMISSIONS' format, the results had a pleasurable lightness which is not to say that they weren't also political. For example, Kat Anderson's episode in season two dealt with the same issues of police brutality and mental health that were addressed in her gallery exhibition at Block 336 in 2019, though the immediacy of the digital format paradoxically enabled staying with traumatic experiences.

For my fictional moving image enthusiast who had seen some of the TV archival footage first time round on analogue TV, another kind of media trauma emerged from re-viewing clips of Basil Brush or Tommy Cooper, their latent violence travelling through time like an undead disturbance that was not offset by their camp intrigue for digital natives who may never have watched TV at the kitchen table doing homework. However, there was a weird kind of poetry to the whole thing. In 'A Minoritarian Digital Poetics of YouTube' (2011), Eu Jin Chua discusses how YouTube, as a generic form of online viewing rather than simply the platform itself, ushers in a new of kind cinephilia in which 'eccentricity, peculiarity, interiority and preciousness' come to the fore in both artists' and amateur videos, some of which draw from film and television histories that have either been lived through and fondly uploaded or fondly found as ready-mades for uncanny forms of collective memory-work. His observation that in internet viewing practices, production, distribution, and spectatorship are not easily distinguishable is

also applicable to TRANSMISSIONS. While it is easy to see how boundaries between the first two blur, it might be less obvious to see how spectatorship fits, but, as Chua argues and I agree: 'To make something digitally may be to encourage a certain kind of viewing, but, conversely, to view something digitally is often, quite literally, to become involved in a certain kind of making'. This kind of 'making' is akin to how practitioners of the 1920s Surrealist movement slipped in and out of different movie theatres showing different films, the importance being the imaginary mashup that existed 'as a kind of disorienting sensory experience — dream-like, fragmentary, associationalist', a perfect description of my TRANSMISSIONS viewing.

As lockdowns ended, 'blended' or hybrid modes of curatorial transmission and distribution were ousted, though it should be noted that such models have precedence, but with less of the hard sell, for example curator Shama Khanna's *Flatness* ([http://flatness.eu](http://flatness.eu)), a long-running platform for artists' moving image and network culture importantly located online but also having some IRL screening iterations. Art Night, curated annually by Helen Nisbet, rather than being a one off IRL event located in a London inner or outer region, reconfigured its programme as a month-long festival that took place from 18 June to 18 July 2021 in locations from the Isle of Skye to London via Cambridge, as well as Abergavenny, and the West Midlands. Undoing the relation between centre and periphery, the multi-format, multi-location project also unsurprisingly included an online screening programme. The newly commissioned films were drip-fed with a 48hr

availability at intervals over the month, culminating in a one-night 'marathon' screening including Mark Leckey, Adham Faramawy, Alberta Whittle, Philomène Pirecki, Oona Doherty, Isabel Lewis, Sonya Dyer, and Imran Perretta & Paul Purgas. The 'marathon' has become a rather ubiquitous mode of distributing spectatorship during the past year and a half. While the marathons of *e-flux*'s curatorial programmes of artists' film and video are a feat of superhuman endurance, Art Night's duration was attractively feasible. But what equally intrigued was the event's marketing: 'We hope you'll join us through the night - with drinks and dinner; on a laptop in bed or with friends in a dark room with the volume up high; in Skye, Swansea, London, Kampala, or wherever you may be'. Strangely, this upbeat promotion sounded like it was an advertisement for the kind of distracted viewing that characterized the screening of films as environments in which people eat, chatted and/or imbibed various hallucinatory substances in 1960s New York. However, while Andy Warhol's *Empire* (1964) might be well suited to such viewing practices, artists' films these days are generally more demanding, but this does not make for good copy. Leckey's and Faramawy's works knowingly addressed the digital screen as a visual and sonic intensity, but most of the other films did not travel well into domestic space, seeming instead to cry out for the architectural framing of gallery or club space where spectators can be bystanders or wanderers or in a mirror, rather than a myopic, relation to bodies on-screen.

In the 1990s, there was a migration of film by artists to the gallery in multi-screen installations with the resolution, scale, and pictorial frame of cinema, while at the same time cinema was migrating to the home with the explosion of devices capable of reproducing cinematic resolution such as plasma TVs as well as streaming services. Film historian Francesco Casetti identifies this migration as introducing a different kind of spectatorship: it became 'a question of what to watch rather than how' (2011). He extends this notion to small devices such as phones and tablets where one can carve out an intimate viewing space anywhere and anytime. This phenomenon has increased with the development of these latter in terms of affordability, resolution, and ease of mobility, i.e., lightness, and it has accentuated in lockdown conditions. After a year of remote viewing, I physically experienced the theory that our devices change our perceptions to the extent that when I made a few cautious excursions to reopened galleries, I sometimes found myself longing for my small screen devices and home environment rather than enjoying the large-scale cinematic projection.

A case in point is my experience of the Jerwood Solo Presentations 2021. Of the three new commissions by Emii Alrai, Freya Dooley and Bryony Gillard on display at Jerwood Arts, London in July 2021, the latter two works, one a sound and arguably moving image installation, the other, a film 'installation', were made available for 24hrs, perhaps to encourage visitors as well as being simply promotional. I was captivated by Gillard's *I dreamed I called you on the telephone*, a short feature addressing illness and survival,

which I viewed on an old iPad. The film's voiceover assembles a number of different acoustic protagonists, the script being comprised of extracts from poetry, first-person accounts, e.g. Anne Boyer's work, as well as Gillard's writing. The mainly disjunctive image track moves between several situations from footage of a sewage works in the round like a carousel to footage of an NHS midwife, the artist's sister, the only 'character' who reads her script on-screen. But what enchanted me was the intensity of the interwoven sequences of a fox chewing on a wax hand, a film prop lit with a transparent luminosity that contrasted with the density of the animal's burnt umber hair. It was as if I were touching it. I was, via the haptic eye. As field research for this article, I visited the exhibition IRL to see how the gallery installation might contrast with my domestic viewing. While the speakers in the gallery environment created a sound bath that I could not replicate at home, I found myself being disappointed that the fox's fur did not glisten or bristle reddish-brown. Instead, the colour bled out into the white pixelated noise of large-scale video projection. Conversely, the theatricality of Dooley's installation, *Temporary Commons*, added another layer to the sound piece, the murkily hued marbled wallpaper and carpet somewhat echoing the dank environment, a decaying urban dwelling, the narrator describes herself inhabiting. My perception had become so entrained that I found myself imagining Mohamed Bourouissa's *Temps Mort* (2009) on my laptop while I was watching it IRL. Aside from its compelling content addressing marginalized communities, particularly in the Paris banlieues, Bourouissa's *HARa!!!!!!hAaaRAAAAA!!!!!hHAaA!!!* at Goldsmith's CCA was an exemplary lesson in how screening formats articulate space

from large-scale projections to photographic and sound installations. *Temps Mort*'s portrait format mirrored in large a mobile phone screen, the film documenting the image footage and texts exchanged between Bourouissa and a young man in a remand center. Viewing this film on a small device would, I thought, intensify the claustrophobia of the correspondence and the poignant contrasts between the footage, one bound by incarceration, exchanged between the two collaborators brought together via the screen interface.

Gallery and cinema spaces are public spaces, but they are also virtual, as every viewer is alone in front of the screen. A question that arises in many zoom art talks is whether and how online 'gatherings' might offset the double isolation of the virtual bubble or cell. An event I attended on zoom that was not a curatorial programme as such but organised to launch an issue of *The White Review* inadvertently created such a 'gathering'. The event, 'Figuring The Invisible: Anti-Blackness, Art & Testimony', consisted of a screening of Languid Hands' *Towards a Black Testimony: Prayer/Protest/Peace* (2019) followed by an in-conversation between the collective and Paul Pfeiffer who gave a PowerPoint presentation of his gallery-based installation work, including slides from his ongoing *Caryatid* series featuring manipulated footage of boxing matches displayed on custom-made chrome televisions in various sizes and forms. That the spectatorial ramifications of this work's dependence on gallery space, while Languid Hands' experimental documentary lost nothing by

being screened online, is not my concern here, but rather the emergence of a real-time screening experience due to bandwidth limitations. Attendees met in usual zoom cells and were given instructions to watch Languid Hands' film from a Vimeo link given in the chat, meeting back in zoom for Pfeiffer's presentation and the in-conversation. *Towards a Black Testimony: Prayer/Protest/Peace* digitally manipulates archival footage of black lives: spiritualist meetings, carnival, protest, and riots, all edited to an electronic soundtrack. As a radical expression of rage, it is not an easy watch, but I felt committed to viewing it in the imagined presence of all the other gazes giving their attention to this film at the same time. Having shared a real-time viewing experience online, everyone did return to zoom afterwards as if to commemorate the energy of that coming together apart.

Although I remotely attended screenings and viewed moving image work hosted or distributed by institutions in the US, Singapore, Ireland and Berlin, my reflections in this article arise from localised spaces I either visited or might, in theory, have visited but for COVID, or platforms hosting artists' work I'm already attuned to, though I encountered new work enroute. There is more to be said about how online viewing alters our sense of global spacetimes which was brought home to me by a recent online Chisenhale gallery event 'Curating Online: Sustaining Technological Optimism or Approximating Alternatives?'. Convened by Hang Li, Chisenhale's Asymmetry Curatorial Writing Fellow, it brought together Raqs Media Collective, Shama Khanna, and Donatella Della Ratta to discuss the

possibilities of online space to re-imagine notions of community trans-locally. Jeebesh Bagchi of Raqs suggested that the digital produces a 'new configuration of common time' in which 'micro-gatherings' outside of the recognized forms of festival or protest can be formed. Referring to 'Afterglow', the collective's curatorial exhibition for the Yokohama Triennale in 2020 which was structured as a series of *Episōdos*, he shared *Episōdo X* from an accretive online repository that was to continue beyond the timeframe of the exhibition. The repository consisted of very short approximately 3-minute performative videos, though the latest video, at least as I accessed it, was uploaded in September 2020, while the exhibition finished in October. However, the ethos, if not the actuality, of the project suggests the possibility of considering moving image in relation to other times and locations without simply subsuming them into 'a spectacle without spectators', an *Episōdo* being merely 'a scene that seizes the attention of a time'.

The screening bundle, the episodic 'attraction', the sensory revitalising of digital flatness, and the virtual dimension of imagined gazes in my more localised examples also seemed 'to seize the attention of a time', but perhaps not according to Raqs Media Collective's intentions to 'expand contemporary art's temporality beyond the time-bound limitations of events'. Common to my diverse examples was an event structure that engendered anticipation and commitment to specific time frames rather than the flow of surf time. I do not know if they qualify as instituting a new 'configuration of common

time', but in a year of living with lockdown, they re-imagined virtual screening as a mode of 'making the imaged present' rather than being a poor substitute for the real thing.

**Maria Walsh** is reader in artists' moving image at Chelsea College of Arts and author of *Therapeutic Aesthetics: Performative Encounters in Moving Image Artworks* (Bloomsbury, 2020).