



Printing Cinema? Printed Matter, Exhibition, and Film in Rosa Barba's Work

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Following the increasing inclusion of 'cinema' in the field of contemporary art since the late 1990s—a phenomenon evidenced by the profusion of terms such as 'post-cinema' (Pantenburg 2008: 4–5), 'cinema of exhibition' (Royoux 2000: 36–41),¹ or the omnipresence of 'artists' film and moving image'—a spectrum of contemporary art practices has been echoing series of experiments related to the various forms of the expansion of the arts, as it was already synthesized by Fluxus artist and impresario George Maciunas in his 1966 Expanded Arts Diagram. The strategies unfolding in some of these contemporary art practices, although they do not explicitly claim to be part of this heritage, reconduct, extend, and re-orient these historical modalities of deconstruction or analysis of the classical film apparatus or of the film material itself.²

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Without a doubt, one of the most prominent contemporary artists whose work engages with the possibilities of reconfiguring the film apparatus is Rosa Barba. Indeed, Barba's practice operates at the intersection of experimental film, sculpture, and installation, using the different components of the apparatus—16 mm projectors, the reel, light, sound—as the minimal units of a language that she re-composes, thereby creating a tension between materiality, image, and text. Her work is based, in part, on the transposition and translation of elements traditionally associated with the sphere of film within the space of a gallery or museum. Since 2004, in parallel to her installation and exhibition projects, Barba has been developing a series of artists' publications entitled *Printed Cinema*. Each issue, published on the occasion of a particular exhibition, brings together views from her own installations with texts, photographs, and other material. As Barba further elaborates

Alongside my film installations, sculptures, and text-based wall works, these publications further my inquiries into the ambiguous nature of reality, memory, and landscape while probing the precarious relationships between historical record, personal anecdote, and fictional narrative. The publication series records my continuous engagement with the material and sociopolitical conditions of the cinematic apparatus in a contemporary environment dominated by visual information. By means of translation, layering, and fragmentation, the publications reveal structuring principles of how visual information and the moving image specifically become a means of knowledge production, organizing the social and geographical dimensions of the spaces we inhabit. Drawing on a conception of space and language that is equally shaped by cultural, scientific, geological, and geographical transformations, *Printed Cinema* expands those dimensions that project the possibility of activating a collective subconscious—an artistic method of mine—to release and reach into the oscillating environments of the works they accompany.³

Critic and theorist Marina Vishmidt has characterized Barba as a kind of “romantic structuralist” (Vishmidt 2009) (referencing North American Structural Film). However, it seems to us that it is with other modes of reassembling the apparatus or of referencing film as a paradigm for the other arts that Barba's practice shares a kin, namely those gathered under the label of ‘paracinema’. Stemming from the tradition of Expanded Cinema, which refers to a constellation of experiments that dislodge the event of projection from its conventional mono-screen manifestation, by

resorting to the multiplication of screens and to performance (James 2005), paracinema, for its part, designates a set of productions that, through processes of dissection of the apparatus, highlight its material, technical, or even phenomenological components: the projector, the film, the projected light, and time. More precisely, for experimental film historian Jonathan Walley, “paracinema identifies an array of phenomena that are considered ‘cinematic’ but that are not embodied in the materials of film as traditionally defined. That is, the film works [Walley] address[es] recognize cinematic properties outside the standard film apparatus, and therefore reject the medium-specific premise of most essentialist theory and practice that the art form of cinema is defined by the specific medium of film.”⁴ Walley makes a distinction between cinema as an idea and its “materials” (and therefore its materiality and physical existence), enabling him to bring what he names paracinema close to conceptual art, in that—following Lucy Lippard’s formula of a “dematerialization of the art object” (Lippard and Chandler 1968)—it ‘dematerializes’ cinema from its medium (that is, in the case of cinema, its traditional apparatus). However, the paracinematic strategies described by Walley, which take part in the spectrum of intermedia practices and of the expansion of the arts, consist more in a process of re-materialization than dematerialization, a set of movements through which ‘cinema’ unfolds in the form of multiple materialities, as they appear in Pavle Levi’s analysis of a Cinema by Other Means.⁵ ‘Cinema by Other Means’ relates to “the practice of positing cinema as a *system of relations* directly inspired by the workings of the film apparatus, but evoked through the material and technological properties of the originally nonfilmic media” (Levi 2012: 27). In a similar vein, and also discussing Levi’s framework, filmmaker and theorist Erik Bullot has suggested that exiled from its ‘technical and ideological base’, film might also be embodied in printed matter. He thus claims that “one could also point to ‘paper film’: that is, the written document as film, be it screenplay, outline or ‘score’ for photograms” (Bullot 2014: 48).

The fact that both Barba and Bullot chose the printed matter as their vehicle for paracinematic re-materialization is no simple coincidence. The use of printed matter as an alternative system of artistic representation dates back to the late 1960s, when conceptual art was being proposed as a new direction of contemporary art. In 1968, Seth Siegelaub, the art dealer, independent curator, and author, began making catalogues that “functionally exceeded the accompanying materials published on the occasion of exhibitions until then” as a signal to the age of conceptual

practices (Cella et al. 2015: 177). Siegelau viewed these catalogues as metaphorical spaces that can provide “primary information” (Harrison 1969: 62–63) for art and remain not supplementary but parallel to exhibitions in their embodiment of art residing in abstract means. He asserted that if “art concerns itself with things not germane to physical presence, its intrinsic (communicative) value is not altered by its presentation in printed media” (Harrison 1969: 62–63), hinting at the immense potential of art that departs from its original medium specificities. Artists who followed Siegelau’s beacon continued to expand the realm of printed matter as an art medium, eventually arriving at the conceptual artist Ulises Carrión’s trendsetting manifesto, *The New Art of Making Books* (1975). Here, Carrión emphasizes the physical presence of the book, which should be held, encountered, and experienced by the viewer. Artists no longer “write texts” but “make books,” hence utilizing the “agency and intentionality of [the book] form, objecthood, and materiality” (Romberger et al. 2021: 31). Adding onto Siegelau’s phenomenological notion of the printed matter as a metaphorical site, Carrión reclaimed the media as a pragmatic apparatus for any artist seeking means to re-materialize art, which triggered the “Big Bang” of autonomous artist publications in the late 1970s and 1980s.

Barba’s *Printed Cinema* proposes an interesting case that lies at the juncture of the evolution of printed media and paracinematic experimentation. Deconstructing her film installations and re-materializing them into a series of publications, Barba shows how the printed matter facilitates the translation of art between mediums or *intermediation* (Striphas 2009: 15). Barba’s process involves a particular *system of relations* that is accompanied by a collapse of dimensions—the four-dimensional videos are contained in the three-dimensional installations, which would then be dismantled and compressed into the two-dimensional film stills, texts, and documentation. The work at this point may seem permanently alienated from its original materiality. However, its filmic identity is rebuilt when a viewer picks up a copy of the publication and starts flipping through, re-activating the flow of time and entering the virtual space between pages that evokes the impression of watching projections on blank walls. As the visual theorist and cultural critic Johanna Drucker describes, this “capacity to surround a ‘reader’ with sensation” (Drucker 1997) is a unique feature of artists’ books that allows *Printed Cinema* to embody the cinematic experience and an inherent mode of spatializing temporal conditions.

Furthermore, *Printed Cinema* translates ephemeral exhibitions into more enduring means. Some may think this is only natural, as books are often the primary mode and tool of archiving. At least until now, however, Barba has always distributed copies of a new issue during the exhibition it refers to, which implies that the publications do not necessarily represent the exhibitions as documentary materials. For Barba, *Printed Cinema* is an extension and interpretation of her audio-visual work as a “personal reflection on the essence of the cinematographic.”⁶ She continues: “Gaps, ellipses, dialectics between images—essentially modernist notions—are essential in that respect. In *Printed Cinema*, this is expressed in the editing principle, as well as in the oppositions between film and printing, between text and image. The specific distribution method, of course, extends the project into a wide range of cultural and social contexts ... Mechanisms proper to the film medium find their translation in a different context.”⁷

This translation occurs when the visitors decide to take a copy of *Printed Cinema* with them, which is also when the parallel relationship between the publication and the exhibition is disturbed, and each medium is pushed into its own “asynchronous realm”(Borthwick and Gronlund 2010). Allowing the visitors to take the copies that were previously part of the installation, Barba is “feed[ing] our desire to grasp onto things”(Borthwick and Gronlund 2010) by providing ‘souvenirs’ to take back as tokens of experience at the exhibition. *Printed Cinema #15 Blind Volumes* is a prime illustration of this concept of a token. The string-bound volume comes with a thick paper sleeve, which is a large—A1 size—poster when unfolded into its full scale. This “poster” has film stills printed on both sides, which triggers the impression that it resembles a projection “screen,” making it a synecdochic reference to the site of installation. With this capacity to outlive exhibitions but still remain connected to them, *Printed Cinema* serves the purpose of relics and becomes “artifacts”(Bury 2001: 33)⁸ of practice.

This attempt to read Barba’s work in relation to the contemporary history of the artist’s book as a conceptual practice also echoes media theorist Matthew Fuller’s proposal of the “book as a diagram” (Fuller 2017). Fuller suggests that today’s book medium is pushing its limits of materiality and form once again and becoming a focal point of cultural mediation. Continually interacting with other media systems, books are “internally differentiated” and become “generative,” fragmenting into new ideas (Fuller 2017). This chaotic momentum does not weaken the *system of relations* that supports the galaxy of books; rather, it interweaves books into

“corpuses” of forms, a “schematization of parts,” and eventually a “diagram” that functions as a “meta-medium” (Fuller 2017). From such a standpoint, Barba’s *Printed Cinema*, which is already a constellation of publications on its own, should be considered an original diagram.

Printed Cinema as a diagram not only represents the recurring production of paper film but also refers to Barba’s artistic process as a whole. In her oeuvre, genealogies of works branching out from a common body of creativity co-articulate and translate one another, generating intermedia connectivity and interdependency. Each film, installation, publication, and any reiteration of Barba’s practice, serves as a symbol on an eclectic diagram, which requires its relational coordinates among other works to be comprehended. This could also mean that understanding Barba’s art would always fall short of being complete since every piece would have its blind spot. Barba fills in such lacuna with *Printed Cinema*. Instead of focusing solely on the exact, one-to-one translation of her films into the artist’s books, she chooses to include sources that were left out in previous versions of her work. In addition to visual materials that represent scenes from the film, Barba embeds “research material and unused filmic fragments” to form a “‘supplementary literature’ that guides the viewer behind the scenes of her cinema” (Schroeder 2021). Being a “container for a system of ideas expressed outside the book itself” (Morgan 1985: 207), *Printed Cinema* as a diagrammatic network of artists’ books proves to be the ultimate vessel for the conceptual practice.

Moreover, this vessel is still growing. Like a library expanding its collection, *Printed Cinema* is an ongoing process of addition; recurring on the occasions of major exhibitions, the series will continue adding to its number as long as Barba continues with her current practice. This sense of infinity, the concrete potential of forthcoming expansion, is also expressed by the physical publications themselves. For instance, none of *Printed Cinema* is paginated—not only the editions that are formatted as single sheets of poster folded in fourths but also the ones with thicker volume and the more traditional distinction between pages. Without the most essential tool to navigate through books, the viewers are less conscious of the sequence, easily lost and forgetful, but more immersed in what is immediately in front of them on each page. Long roads, empty racetracks, train tracks, arid landscapes covered in sand, vacant fields, empty warehouses, abandoned seashores, and bare spines of mountains—the viewers are taken on a spatial journey to vast locations. Similar to how cinemas do not install clocks next to their movie screens, Barba does not want the

viewers to be tracking the actual passage of time during these journeys. Rather, she wants us to let go of realistic parameters and pay attention to the spatiotemporal growth into what Barba may refer to as “anarchic spaces,” where she “create[s] a new form of auditorium, one that allows for an expansion of our thinking” (Barba 2018: 9–10), perhaps into the imagery of unoccupied territories that are free to be interpreted. To conclude with Barba’s own words:

By reconfiguring the physical terms of cinematic space in the exhibition space (can be outside architecture as well), my aim is to also expand and destabilise the conceptual terms of cinematic space, so that the formal terms by which we understand that space are extended to engage with and incorporate spaces that are not conventionally associated with cinema. This could occur, for example, by expanding the works into public spaces or landscapes. The goal is to explore the implications of how those terms coincide with the terms of disciplines and areas of enquiry that exist beyond the scope of what we conceive of as cinema but that share some of its foundational components and terms. The same thoughts apply to the space of a publication.⁹

NOTES

1. The term was coined by the French critic Jean-Christophe Royoux (2000: 36–41).
2. The concept of ‘film apparatus’ was first theorized by Jean-Louis Baudry (1974). For an anthology of these debates in film studies, see Rosen (1986).
3. Rosa Barba, interview by Adeena Mey and Hyunjoo Cho, February 16, 2023.
4. Walley’s definition borrows from Ken Jacobs, who coined the term ‘paracinema’ to describe his performative pieces known as Shadow Play and Nervous Magic Lantern, which use no celluloid or involve multiple projections (Walley 2003). See also Hanlon (1979).
5. Levi’s argument is set out using as case studies a range of little-known Yugoslavian avant-garde works, such as the “written films” of the Hypnist and Zenitist movements active in the 1920s, or 1970s experiments with the physicality of film (Nikola Djuric’s Remembrance from 1978; Tomislav Gotovac’s It’s all a movie as documented in a photography by Ivan Posavec in 1979). See Levi (2012).
6. Rosa Barba, interview by Adeena Mey and Hyunjoo Cho, February 16, 2023.
7. Ibid.

8. Here, Bury notes that in the 1990s, under the influence of Neo-conceptualism, interest in the creation of artifacts rose greatly and the boundaries between artists' books, exhibition documentations, and artists' multiples were blurred.
9. Rosa Barba, interview by Adeena Mey and Hyunjoo Cho, February 16, 2023.

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