

ROTTERDAMNED

DON'T SIT BACK, BUT ENJOY THE SHOW

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Emma Hart and Benedict Drew, *Untitled 1*, 2006, performance



ONE OF THE ONLY DUTCH CITIES bombed during the Second World War, Rotterdam was rebuilt in the modern vernacular: clean lines of buildings on a grid of straight roads. Arriving there from its antithesis, Amsterdam, is like the experience of breathing again after being choked by the wheels-within-wheels of that city's pretty canals.

If only that were also true of the International Film Festival Rotterdam. Of course, all festivals risk suffocating audiences with relentless screenings, but IFFR's vast schedule is a real challenge. This year I focused on screenings of experimental, artists' and short films – and the supposed jewel in the festival's curatorial crown, the Seatless Cinema. Understanding the cinema as an exhibition space is an ongoing project, while exploring alternatives to the standard experience of narrative feature films is an avant-garde staple. But removing all the seats in one small auditorium and replacing them with giant beanbags raised more questions than it provided solutions, and ultimately felt like an unnecessary, wilful impoverishment of the viewing experience.

By day three a rash of folding chairs had appeared in the Seatless Cinema. Climbing over and into the beanbags might have encouraged new friendships, but once you'd landed among their massive folds you were utterly immobilised: perversely viewers became the literal embodiment of passivity that much experimental film of the 1960s and 70s railed against, and that the remodelled auditorium was attempting partly to counter.

One day was given over to Amsterdam's cooperative-modelled underground experimental-film movement Electric Cinema (1969–74). Somewhat labouring their credentials, each programme began with the same bland film by Kurt Kren (the pioneering Austrian structuralist who made meticulously edited film-as-art, documenting Viennese Actionism), showing the Electric Cinema's interior. Its story echoes its London and New York counterparts, its repertoire now familiarly canonical: William Raban, Stephen Dwoskin, Barbara Meter (one of its founders), Carolee Schneeman.

This series and others bravely incorporated expanded cinema – multi-screen projections or performance-based film/video works. Three works by Malcolm Le Grice (an eminent founder member of the London Film-Makers' Co-op) included the seminal *Castle One* (1966; a lightbulb flashed randomly in front of the screen showing a radical, austere, incredibly elegant found-footage montage). The

disconcertingly authoritarian VALIE EXPORT performed some pioneering early works in which the artist or her viewers directly interact with the screen. After a member of the audience completed the public drawing that constitutes the film *Auf+Ab+An+Zu* (1968), EXPORT insisted on signing it herself, re-inscribing authorship at the very moment she seemed to be giving it away. Such contradiction echoed the problems of this too-literal general re-enactment, and was reflected in an insufferably dull, self-referential discussion panel between Le Grice, Meter et al.

The only real transcendence were the outstanding performances of British artists Emma Hart and Benedict Drew. In *Untitled 1* (2006) Drew stands in front of the screen holding an electric guitar while Hart monitors a 16mm projector placed near the audience. The filmstrip travels from the projector to the guitar, then around several of its strings, and back. As each splice passes through the guitar it plucks the strings, with Drew, revealed intermittently by the projected 'image' of alternate black leader and clear film, effecting only reverb. Technical aspects of the work were neither hidden nor visible, creating an effect that was stark and yet lyrical, limited yet expanding. The result was hypnotic, tense and utterly entrancing, at once magical and technically astute, a brilliantly restrained drama between a projector and a guitar, between a woman and a man.

Elsewhere the competition programmes of American work organised by Mark McElhatten were coherent both conceptually and in terms of content, continuing to evince good curatorship. Michael Robinson's films, emotionally weaving between formalism, politics and mystery, were exceptionally beautiful. Why this considered curatorial approach was reserved exclusively for American works is too imperialist to consider! Happily enough, a video essay on the Turkish construction of nationalism, *Bayrak (The Flag; 2007)*, by Köken Ergun, was one of three prizewinners – a surprise compounded by the artist's appearance on the front page of the Turkish newspaper *Milliyet*, which in the film festival context felt like the rare proof that there is at least some kind of life outside of these bizarre circuses.



Top left: Malcolm Le Grice, *Castle One*, 1966, film still. Below: VALIE EXPORT, *Auf+Ab+An+Zu*, 1968