

# ULEMHAS

Birkbeck Continuing Education History of Art Society

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## *Review Two*

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**In order to update news and supply fresh information, we are again publishing this supplement to the main issue of the *Review*, which goes out with the mailing in August**

### **The First Emperor: China's Terracotta Army British Museum until 6<sup>th</sup> April 2008**

For one who has seen the terracotta warriors line up in their thousands at the tomb site of the Emperor Qin Shihaungdi, first Emperor of the Qin dynasty, who unified China in 221 BC, this exhibition can be no more than a nostalgic memory of an overwhelming experience. Nevertheless, it can offer the opportunity to see these remarkable figures close up and in detail, and it is a unique opportunity to see and study these wonderful creations.

Beneath the majestic dome of the Reading Room, the exhibition is divided into two halves – one could call it this world and the next. This world reflects the Emperor's temporal achievements – his successful struggle with the Warring States, his building, – there is a model of one of his palaces, built almost entirely of wood and now so perished – and artefacts of sumptuously decorated bronze including a stunningly beautiful crow with painted feathers and a worm in its beak. Blown up photographic images set the scene for this gigantic project that lasted the whole of Emperor Qin's reign and employed a work force of hundreds of thousands, many of whom died on the task.



In the second half, eleven of the warriors are ranged: infantrymen, charioteers, a strong man, belly bulging, calves like tree trunks, lithe dancers, keen-eyed archers, unarmoured civil officials, wearing elaborate hats that are tied under the chin. They are all life size but not all the same height. Generals – well represented – are the tallest and show signs of embonpoint. They can be distinguished by the “pheasant cap”, so called because of its resemblance to double wings. Tied under the chin, it does not conceal the plaited and pinned up hair beneath. Armoured generals have long coats covered with a pointed flap of armour decorated with ribbons front and back. Vestiges of pigment suggest that these long coats were green, the inner coat white with sleeves of padded cotton, the folds of this garment portrayed with special realism. Cavalry was a vital element of Qin warfare. There are cavalry horses with terracotta saddles and one of the most beautiful exhibits is the bronze half-life-size chariot (actually a replica, the original being too fragile to travel) that was designed for for the Emperor's use touring his empire in the after life.

Most surprising perhaps is the infinite variety of these figures, the more so because their creation was by a process of mass production. Limbs, bodies, heads, feet, even the plates of the armour were cast separately and assembled in endless permutations, only the heads and so strikingly individualised features being carved by hand. Faint traces of pigment can be detected on some of the figures and it is universally accepted that the warriors, both faces and bodies, were brightly painted. The whole effect must have been very different from the array of sober and monumental figures that so profoundly impress us today.

**Elizabeth Lowry-Corry**

### **Dr. Kay's legacy**

Members will probably recall that the late Dr. Phyllis Kay left ULEMHAS a legacy. The committee took the view that this should be used for a specific purpose, rather than simply going into our general fund. Dr. Kay and her sister, Dr. Marguerite Kay, were both very keen to help people and so it appeared appropriate that the legacy should be used to assist Birkbeck students. In consultation with the School of History of Art, Film and Visual Media, the committee made financial awards to four PhD students. Brief summaries of their theses are set out below.

### **The Venice Biennale and developments of technology in art**

My research focuses on digital technology and digital art from a new angle. It explores new media art historically but also ethnographically (that is, focusing on contemporary period) in the context of new conceptualisations of museum space and the politics of art. My case in point is the Venice Biennale, and particularly the impact of its 1968 exhibition as a key moment in the history of technology, politics and art. I explore how the Venice Biennale as an art institution engaged in rethinking the notion of art.

Digital art has been understood largely in the context of museum space. However, this perspective overlooks that these artists view themselves as engaged in a political project – i.e. 'democratisation of art'. In my PhD dissertation I ask, firstly, what digital artists understood by politics and political aesthetics, and, secondly, what the implications of these art forms for the museum space have been given that many of these artists understood space as political space — or, at least, built their artistic reputations by politicisation of

exhibition space. I am interested in the analysis of the Venice Biennale as a miniature reflection of the broader changes that happened in the art world in response to developments in technology and new media art.

My PhD dissertation investigates the way new media art and politics affected the Venice Biennale in the late 60s. In particular it analyses how the developments of technology in art amplified the critical situation the Venice Biennale was facing at that time and how the art institution responded to this crisis. The Venice Biennale, the oldest International festival of contemporary art in the world, has gone through several crises - political, cultural and institutional – since its very beginning in 1895. One pivotal node in the history of this institution is the year 1968, when Categories and First Prizes were abolished by the Biennale's Statute. Responsible for such a change was not only the cultural revolution against bourgeois society and capitalism that shook Europe in the late 60s, but also the parallel revolution that computer art and experiments in art and technology brought to the art world during the same time. By looking at the Venice Biennale as a microcosm of the changes that happened in the broad art world in response to technology my thesis tackles critical questions around the identity crisis that affected the Venice Biennale in 1968. What kind of consequences did this crisis introduce to the Biennale? How did new media art affect the art institution? How did the Venice Biennale come to terms with the concept of democratisation of art?

In the future, I plan to develop these themes further by exploring the notion of democracy in art, and will use once again the Venice Biennale as research site. In particular, I will analyse the 1968 student revolt in

connection and in contrast with contemporary activism.

The questions I am going to address are the following: how to interpret social radicalism and the arts in the Italian context, particularly after 1968? In the light of the relationships between the social radicalism of artists and their work of art, how are the beliefs of artists related to their social environment? In what ways and why have they sought to change society? What is the role of activism and what are the reasons behind its following co modification? What are the effects on society brought by radical artists and their political activities?

By looking for the answers to such problems by making direct reference to specific artists, the nature and the role of art affected by mass society will be studied in a highly concrete way and connected to contemporary social history.

**Francesca Franco**



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### **Films Bring Art to the People?: The Origins and Developments of the Film on Art in Post-War Britain (1940-1980)**

Films on art are conventionally pigeonholed as educational visual aids. Canonical film histories have marginalized or virtually ignored this non-fiction sub genre. Similarly, histories of British art rarely take into account films about the arts. Despite their proliferation, particularly through the mass medium of television in the 1950s and 1960s, the role of films on

art as sources and constitutive agents in the formation of the role of art and the artist in post-war Britain has been largely overlooked.

This thesis looks at the origins and developments of the film on art in post-war Britain, from *Henry Moore* (John Read, 1951) to *Chance History Art* (James Scott, 1980) It examines and historicizes key moments of innovation in the development of the genre, in relation to the cultural policies of the institutions which supported their production, like the Arts Council, the British Film Institute and the BBC. The thesis follows a cultural history approach and contextualises the films in terms of concurrent cultural developments on a national and international level. It is punctuated with case studies, which analyse how works of fine art and the figure of the artist at work are mediated and explored by key films. The structure of the thesis revolves around a typology of films on art and artists: the pictorial film on art, the documentary film on contemporary artists at work, films made by art critics and the reflexive art film. A core argument is that films on art were more than mere reiterations of national discourses about art. Due to the internationalism of film as a medium and the importation of films on art from the US and Europe, the film on art in Britain cultivated the reception of new ideas and concepts about art in society.

**Katerina Loukopoulou**

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### **Places of Projection: Re-contextualising the European Experimental Film Canon**

My Ph.D. thesis re-examines the European experimental film canon by investigating its original contexts of presentation. The study seeks to unearth the un-recognised places of experimental film projection, its relationship to mainstream cinema in the 1920s, its

significance in the amateur and underground scene and its connection to video art and 'institutional critique' in the 1960s, and finally its canonisation in the modern art museum of the 1970s and 1990s. The thesis will show that there is a constant dialogue between institutional context, mode of presentation and film text, in brief, between projection, space and form. It seeks to question the classical avant-garde film canon, which confines experimental film to the rigid parameters of Greenbergian Modernism, formalism and medium specificity. Quite literally, it looks at where and how experimental film projection was presented. It aims to disclose the relationship between technology and the body in order to subsequently locate experimental film within its wider cultural frame. Hence, I re-interpret the artwork as a product of its contextual circumstances, rather than the autonomous 'brainchild' of an individual filmmaker. In the light an ever-expanding art system and a profound re-reading of Western Modernism in favour of dispersed and global Modernisms, a re-writing of experimental film history is overdue. Film's flexible format and its cultural origin, not in the fine arts, but in popular entertainment, calls for a questioning of its definition as an autonomous modernist art form. My thesis thus seeks to challenge the modernist paradigm and offers a re-reading of experimental film as a symptom of cultural transformations.

**Maximiliane Zoller**

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**A Space for the Imagination: Depicting Woman Readers in the Nineteenth-Century City**

My paper examines the idea that the depiction of solitary, silent reading in nineteenth-century French painting may be interpreted as the representation of individuals exercising a right to privacy in public. I argue that the intellectual and imaginative isolation characteristic of the act of reading constitutes a key element in our conception of modern, liberal individuals undertaking activities for their own pleasure outside the domestic sphere.

Focusing on works by Édouard Manet and Edgar Degas from the 1870s and 1880s, I consider how depictions of the act of reading disturb notions of 'public' and 'private' based on concepts of separate physical spaces. I suggest that the image of reading is emblematic of a portable privacy the exercise of which changes our perceptions of how individuals negotiated public and social spaces during the nineteenth century. I focus on depictions of female rather than male readers. Given that nineteenth-century social conventions did not readily admit the idea of single women negotiating public spaces on their own, depictions of female readers outside the domestic realm were capable of raising pointed questions concerning the relationship between women and the city, the spaces that women should or should not inhabit and the different relationships women had to the changing shape of the metropolis. I argue that reading is an act of agency on the part of the female reader and that during the act of solitary, silent reading, the individual places herself temporarily beyond the boundaries of ordinary communication and from sociability in general. By depicting reading as an assertion of privacy, reading is represented as an activity that disrupts women's conventional role in the domestic and social order.

**Kathryn Brown**

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