

Radical Light – alternative film and video in the San Francisco Bay Area 1945-2000.

Steve Anker, Kathy Geritz, Steve Seid (eds)

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'A haven for radical art and experimental film and video' is how the port city of San Francisco is described. Certainly its reputation as a multicultural centre for adventurers, entrepreneurs and other individualists is well evidenced in this kaleidoscopic work of documentation and appraisal. Some seventy contributors: curators, critics, managers, artists and filmmakers themselves, are wrangled into a compendium that more than adequately describes the scene. As an artist filmmaker myself who screened work in North America during a tour in the mid-1970s, the vigour of activity in San Francisco left vivid memories. The Reminiscences recorded here by the selected artists provide personal accounts of their work but for the reader seeking the broader context several essays capture the bigger picture: the pioneering work of the Englishmen, photographer Muybridge and filmmaker Chaplin; the age of electricity, and a light show manifestation called the Scintillator (1915); and television experiments in the 1920s. The post-War period establishes a milieu with a distinct role and practice. Film appreciation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and film-making at the Arts Institute created an early community of activists and proto surrealists engaged for the most part in what P. Adams Sitney wryly described as "allegories of artistic vision and creation". Baillie, Belson and Brackage later moved toward "spaces of the mind" with abstracted film form, developing "expressionist and individual traditions" with which the San Francisco scene became most

closely associated. The Vortex concerts of the late 50s picked up where the Scintillator had left off (and continue today around the world as countless VJs manipulate the myriad laptop applications for mixing image, light and sound).

The six sections in the book divide the narrative in time periods identified by the editors as reflecting the shifts in practice, determined largely by technological and institutional change. The essay form is interspersed; with Focus pieces on particular artworks, Artist Page artworks, Cutaways of ephemera and an Addendum on page 64! As an ensemble of material that took some eight years to assemble, the book is an extraordinary source for anyone curious about the flow of moving image artists' initiatives in San Francisco throughout the last part of the previous century. Like several other volumes internationally about artists working with film and video, the publications' indicate a general shift away from the 'magic of Fine Art' and the expert critic toward a wider range of voices in discourse employing broader reflection in the evaluation of creative enterprise. The pitfall is a lack of editorial resolve - too often, contributors here repeat what has already been established in other writers' references and histories and the repetition is liable to take a toll on the reader's patience.

There are less historical sections: Dialogue in Lyric, a concluding essay by Konrad Steiner, introduces recent ideas and forms, crossovers between media and cultures; Japanese *renga* (linked verse) and ekphrastic cinema, forms which are "both description and expression at an interface of language and image". Whilst such thoughts appear to move towards contemporary computer-based interactive artworks, the dialogue instead turns back toward precursors in literature and artists' film. Likewise in Margaret Morse's contribution, the microprocessor becomes a re-render device for video art in installation, the viewer able to view but, as with the movies, unable to touch. It seems the editors were resolute at least in avoiding linkage with contemporary artists' ideas for expanding cinema practice.

A lavishly illustrated and well-designed coffee table sized book, with a full Index (though no Bibliography), it is a complementary source to the online Centre for Visual Music, one of the hubs in California for continuing the work of many of the pioneers documented in this volume.

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