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Putting the Cards Back on the Table: An Interview with Anna Abrahams and Erwin van't Hart

by Dirk de Bruyn

Dirk de Bruyn has been involved with personal film making as a practitioner, curator and writer in Melbourne and overseas for 30 years. He is currently teaching Digital Filmmaking at Deakin University.

Curators and organisers, Anna Abrahams and Erwin van't Hart, members of the Filmbank, were responsible, with a group of colleagues, for bringing together and making accessible the history of Dutch experimental film. Two of their recent projects appeared at the 2004 Rotterdam International Film Festival: the D-Light screening program and the book *MM2: Experimental Film in the Netherlands since 1960*.

The following is an interview that took place during the 2004 Rotterdam International Film Festival to discuss their projects and the context in which they were taking place. The interview was conducted partly in English and partly in Dutch and has been translated with the assistance of Barend Talmon.

– Dirk de Bruyn

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Dirk de Bruyn: Both of you were involved in putting together the D-Light screening program and the book *MM2: Experimental Film in the Netherlands since 1960*. These are important developments that contribute to the appreciation of the tradition of experimental film in Holland. How did such work begin? I suppose the book came first?

Anna Abrahams: No, actually the idea for the program came first. There was a lot of research involved. We had to really search for the films under the filmmakers' beds and we thought, what a pity it would be if after the program, everybody and everything disappeared again. So we wanted to make something that would last.

Dirk de Bruyn: Where did the idea of the program come from?

Anna Abrahams: There was something similar at Montevideo, a video co-op in Amsterdam, which has curated a program of video and new media art from the '70s till now. We wanted to make a side program to that but it grew a little bit out of hand.

Dirk de Bruyn: You all knew each other before you put the program together?

Erwin van't Hart: We had set up a new organisation over a year prior, called the Filmbank, which was dedicated to the promotion and distribution of Dutch experimental film. It focused primarily on contemporary work; yet it was important for us to provide a context for this work, and therefore we started working on the idea of a retrospective.

Dirk de Bruyn: I would like to ask a bit more about the Filmbank. Was there a need to show films?

Anna Abrahams: Peter van Hoof and I researched experimental film in the Netherlands. We knew that a lot of experimental films were being made but we didn't know where they went...
after production since there were no distributors ready to buy them. So we spoke to a lot of filmmakers, distributors, especially European distributors of experimental work, and it seemed there was a real need for a small organisation where filmmakers could bring their work and get support as to where to show their work. There was a significant need for one place where strength could consolidate. When we presented our research, such as the names of films, articles, addresses, reviews etc, about ten filmmakers, a few festival programmers and venue managers came together, and we said, OK let's start a new organisation. When everybody wants such an organisation, it just starts. From there, we needed a year just to make an inventory of what there was. We saw a lot of films.

DdB: They were all contemporary films?

AA: Yes. Not all brand new, let's say …

EvtH: … from the last decade.

AA: We were searching for money of course to be able to organise something. And after one year we started making programs of between four and eight films that would tour Holland.

DdB: Before the Filmbank could you say there was an experimental film or film community, or were people isolated from each other?

EvtH: No, there were small organisations in The Hague and Rotterdam. Apart from such examples, however, a lot of the time it is just one person, for example Karel Doing has a small studio, or often people will make films in a small laboratory. There are these small islands of activity.

DdB: How has the Filmbank changed that? By touring the work, has that brought some of the filmmakers closer together?

AA: We have only just started. You cannot think that within a year you can build a community among people who work in isolation and who produce very personal work. It is difficult to bring such people together quickly. But it is true that they have started to come out from their holes and attics and are now meeting each other and seeing each other's works, which does generate a feeling of community.

DdB: I sensed such a community feeling at the D-Light screenings, where there were a lot of filmmakers present, supported by friends, and it seemed that this was the first opportunity they had to present their work in this manner, in that context.

AA: We are pleased that so many filmmakers, friends and interested parties came. It means they must have a need to talk about it, present it.

EvtH: Some of these films have not been shown for many many years.

DdB: Do you have any interesting stories about some of the films and where you found them?

EvtH: When we started the project we worked closely with the Film Museum in Amsterdam who also wanted Dutch experimental film to be properly documented and archived. We researched the area together. We began in their archives by seeing what films were there and what records.

DdB: Why were the films in the Film Museum?

EvtH: For a number of reasons: some were made with Government grants, some were sent from a laboratory that went out of business, or some unknown reason. Sometimes you came across prints that the filmmakers did not know were there.

DdB: Any discoveries of filmmakers you've never heard of?

EvtH: Yes, of course. In the beginning, absolutely. There wasn't much published about...
the history of experimental film in Holland. In 1985, there was a program at the Stedelyk Museum, which was for us a starting point. There were filmographies. Then you think there must be more, you start looking, comparing all kinds of titles and articles and you get quite a bit done.

DdB: That is a lot of meticulous work.

AA: And you make contact with the creators of the works.

EvtH: You get the names and you try to find them. Mostly it works, with a bit of luck.

AA: You would talk about what else they have made and where it can be found.

EvtH: You visit them, find out what they're busy with now. The majority see a lot of value in bringing their work, which they have been preoccupied with for so many years, into the light of day.

DdB: Are there examples of such works in the program presented at the Rotterdam Film Festival?

EvtH: Well, yes. There is the strong work of Daniel Singelenberg. This is a name that has been documented for a long time and finally, a year or so ago, you come to hear, oh yes that's that person, he's also a journalist. You go to see him. It takes a bit of time, a bit of effort but he opens up, lets you see his work and it is beautiful. His work had not been screened for about 20 years. We showed Another Shot (1973, 5 minutes) in the Material Worlds program.

DdB: An optically printed film. He was also the one that talked about the Amsterdam Film Co-op at the screenings.

EvtH: He was very articulate and presented himself well.

DdB: Yes I wanted to talk to him. It was one of my regrets.

EvtH: He also gave us information about the Nederlands Film Co-op where he had contact with people like Barbara Meter, another important name in this history.

DdB: She and Mattijn Seip had contact with the Structuralist Film Movement in England didn't they? Peter Ruben also sounded like he was a critical person at that time.

EvtH: Yes. He was a filmmaker who was later involved in setting up the Holland Experimental Film group in 1976. He was prominent and important for filmmakers at that time. He was an ongoing guest of Hyeres [an Independent/Experimental Film Festival in France during the '70s and '80s that was an important and influential meeting point for European film artists at the time – DdB] where he presented numerous programs, and where he always brought with him a number of films by other Dutch filmmakers. That was an important transformational festival in Europe at that time.


AA: Did you meet him also at the program?

DdB: Yes, and I saw Tourniquette (1992, 15 minutes), which he made with Frederieke Jochems. At the beginning, I did not realise the sound of the metal scraping was the sound of the Tourniquette and it seemed out of place. That was interesting because originally I thought this sound was manufactured rather than live. Anyway, so you've established the
Living (Frans Zwartjes, 1970)

Filmbank. How did the idea of putting the D-Light program together for the Rotterdam International Film Festival eventuate?

EvtH: For us it was important. Rotterdam is a very important festival for Dutch filmmakers, an important platform to place their work.

DdB: So the program will tour after the Festival?

AA: Yes. But not everything because some of the prints are so fragile we cannot send them on tour. They will go to De Balie (a cinema in Amsterdam; the main venue for showing innovative and independent work in Holland on an ongoing basis – DdB) and the Film Museum and after that the program will be compressed so that five programs from the ten will tour the country.

DdB: As film?

AA: Yes.

DdB: How did you go through the process of putting the D-Light program together? How did you pick the films?

EvtH: (Laughter) A long bizarre process.

AA: We looked at all the films we could see. Always two people. Erwin saw everything and Peter was part of that. We would write things down, make notes. At one point, there was an enormous pile of films that we liked. If someone really liked a film it was in the pile. All the titles were written on cards and then, in a very old fashioned way, we would move these cards around until suddenly, and it was suddenly, the programs emerged.

DdB: You started with topics?

AA: We did not begin with themes.

EvtH: We began with a number of important films and built from there.

DdB: Frans Zwartjes seems critical. He seems like a central figure.

EvtH: Of course.

DdB: It seems that because of his teaching, everyone has been influenced by him in some way. You can also see it in the films.

AA: He is very important. He taught in Eindhoven, Haarlem, Amsterdam and of course in Den Haag (all different, large cities in Holland – DdB). Most filmmakers have at some point had something to do with him.

EvtH: He cannot be ignored.

DdB: Was he supportive of this project?

AA: There is passive support. He is older, he has been sick; he has let us know that he thinks it's a good project. And that's really good.

EvtH: He has let us know how important he thinks it is.

DdB: And it is, of course, especially at this point in time. It's interesting that this is happening now at a point of possible disappearance.

AA: Yes. We are a small organisation but as big as we can we will try and promote the case for Dutch experimental film. We have organised, exhibited and toured ten
programs, published a book with an attached documentary/DVD and from there we will go further with new work, installations, smaller projects, and so on.

DdB: So how did you know all this forgotten film work was there?

EvtH: I worked for a few years at the Cinema De Balie in Amsterdam where, over the last few years, we've sought to establish experimental cinema in the screening program and to give it a space. That has been working a bit. In this way, you start looking for work. We presented the work of Joost Rekveld. You can look further, people come to you. People come with ideas and help it grow.

DdB: What is the critical thing in developing an audience? In Australia such initiatives often fail, and when it does, sceptics will take it as some kind of proof.

EvtH: You have to keep going, work through it. It is important. One time you're successful and the other not.

DdB: What were some of the critical successes?

EvtH: We put together a series of programs of abstract cinema on film in 2001. It went for five days so you could familiarise yourself with it quietly, slowly. It was presented in such a way in order to introduce people to the work, to try and develop an audience for it. This worked, and then in February 2002, we curated a large edition in collaboration with the Sonic Acts Festival. Together with Joost Rekveld we put together a program of abstract films, which was a big success. We tried to attract a young public, the VJ culture.

DdB: The book came after the films?

AA: Really, it came more near the same time. Over nine months we made the program, the book and the documentary.

DdB: It's a lot of work. It happened so quickly after things have been lying dormant for so long. It reminds me of the Ken Jacobs film Star Spangled to Death from 1957–59 that's now re-emerged. What impact do you think this work will have on new artists?

AA: I hope it inspires them. But the older work, to me it does not look old. I have this idea that it is not so much bound to a certain time or place and that it belongs to an international genre which is not so easily outdated. It's an essential cinema.

DdB: The international connection. I could connect a lot of the work to that done in other places. Joost Rekveld connects clearly of course to abstract cinema and ideas of visual music that have been around for a long time. The hand scratched work, mixed with performance reminded me of Arf Arf in Australia. Not only are such practitioners isolated within countries but also on an international basis this isolation has an effect. There is this known history, this canon of mainly American and English experimental film familiar to me, yet there were and are parallel developments and work happening in Holland as well.

AA: It would be wonderful to make an international program but we went for a national program because this is what is nearby, what is immediate. It is something we can do.

DdB: Absolutely.

AA: It was important that we start on this work that was hardly known.

DdB: I don't think you should necessarily put an international program together; there are places where this happens already. The political need is to resurrect or maintain a more local focus so that the work can be nourished and continue.

EvtH: Abroad, the same techniques, the same relationships with the medium are being presented. There is always this connection.

DdB: There is a focus that can move between countries. I guess there is a
contextualisation happening in the Rotterdam International Film Festival, isn't there? Anna, you made a decision to make a documentary about a number of filmmakers?

AA: Five.

DdB: I found the runaway films by Lonnie van Brummelen interesting and connected that to the fall down films by Bas van Ader.

AA: Bas van Ader is someone like Zwartjes that all filmmakers know. He is a reference point. In terms of abstract film ...

EvtH: ... that we do not have in the Netherlands, internationally there is Brakhage and Fischinger that everyone knows about. They are the big names.

DdB: I can understand how Zwartjes kept on resurfacing because of the teaching but Bas van Ader?

AA: He has had a lot of exposure in exhibitions, in galleries. He died in 1975. There was a resurgence of his work five-ten years ago. It was shown then in the Stedelyk Museum.

EvtH: And before that as well.

DdB: What is the context of new work. How is work being made now?

EvtH: It's really happening independently, on its own, without any consideration of where or how it may be shown to the public. That shortcoming continues.

AA: There seems to be a need to make work rather than show it.

EvtH: Lonnie van Brummelen who made the runaway films – these films were made with the idea of placing them in gallery settings. We are now placing them in a new way in the cinema.

DdB: That's the kind of site that a lot of work is placed internationally, in the galleries.

AA: In the galleries but then they always show on video or DVD, even when it is film, which can be a pity and it is one of the reasons why we show them in film theatres.

DdB: I saw a retrospective of Valie Export's work at the Acadamie der Kunst in Berlin that was on video but also film. The film was shown as film using these very efficient looping systems. David Lester who works with materialist film apparently supplies such machines in England.

EvtH: Maryke van Warmedam is working only with films with film loops in her film installations, which emerged in the Venice Biennale in 1995.

DdB: Do you think this has an impact on the re-emergence of this film history, the fact that in this fine art area those practitioners, like Tacita Dean, are having such a high profile? I believe one of the reasons Mark Webber put Shoot, Shoot, Shoot! together was as a response to such developments. I have heard him say that he wanted to show that there was a history that such work could be referenced to.

AA: There is now a new group that is learning to watch experimental films but they are learning in the museum, in the galleries but not in the cinemas. In the '70s, you had this audience in the cinemas, now we find them in other places. We tried to merge these two worlds.

DdB: Are there indications that this is working?

AA: I don't know about D-Light but with the tour programs, with conversations with the audience, there are a lot of people who go to museums; regular museum visitors come to see the films.
DdB: In what kind of spaces do you show the films?

AA: In film theatres, but from September we want to broaden our scope.

DdB: The issue of distribution? Is DVD an option or is that out of the film area too much?

AA: We want to show the works on the media they were made for. If it is a film we want to show it as a film, if it is a video as a video. We are not planning a DVD compilation but who knows in a few years. Now it is not our strategy.

EvtH: We do want to have a bigger website with small clips, stills, things digital.

DdB: You have a website?

EvtH: Yes, it's presently still in development.

AA: It's in Dutch. We still have to make a translation but we place information on there about our projects. The URL is www.filmbank.nl.

DdB: The Vipers (Shinkichi Tajiri, 1955, 9 minutes), that was before 1960.

AA: It's the only one before 1960; you should always make exceptions (laughter).

DdB: It reminded me of some of Brakhage's early psychodramas, made around the same time. I thought about this parallel history, that certain things get documented in one place and not in another. Some pieces become part of this International History, others are marginalised. Vipers is maybe a piece of work that can stand in for the latter.

EvtH: Perhaps there is room to fine tune the canon, to create a clearer history.

DdB: I subscribe to this idea of a local internationalism. Work can come out of a specific place but also address international concerns.

AA: With the documentary part of the program, these films are more Dutch than say the Frans Zwartjes. For me the Frans Zwartjes films feel very much like the films made in New York at that time.

DdB: I was wondering if Frans Zwartjes had an influence on Gilbert and George. The positioning of the body in performance makes me wonder about a connection. I come with my own history of watching when I come to these films, of course.

EvtH: (laughter) That is interesting.

AA: Zwartjes was influenced by the New American Cinema – that was his starting point.

DdB: You also had a specific silent program but it had sound in it.

EvtH: Yes.

DdB: OK. I thought F.X. Messerschmidt (1989, 11 minutes) by Rene Hazenkamp from that program was powerful; the way the film had been cut from various sculptured expressions.

EvtH: He works with the choreography of the body in all his films. This is one of the two films that is not really a dance film. The way he works with the camera though, remains similar.
AA: Many of the filmmakers have a visual arts background and this is reflected in subjects and the way they present things to an audience.

DdB: Yes. Perhaps having made that connection back to the fine art world we will conclude the interview. Thank for your time and all the best in the future.