

# Elizabeth McAlpine

Chris Townsend

PROFILE >

ELIZABETH McALPINE'S WORK WITH FILM READILY DISTINGUISHES HER FROM THE BROAD DEVELOPMENTS OF MEDIA PRACTICE, in both video and film in the last quarter of a century, of borrowing mass-cultural tropes and forms as 'ready-mades' for gallery exhibition.

There is a reference point for McAlpine's practice within the tradition of the 'expanded cinema' of the 70s, and the last days of 'structural film' when material events intervened in the otherwise intangible relationship between spectator and screen. However, there is a second and far older point of triangulation between her work and the modernist Avant Garde in its notions of kinesis and 'plasticity'.

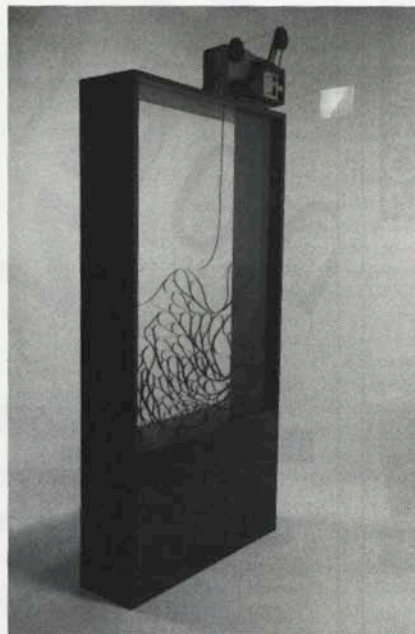
McAlpine has a very deep affinity with the tradition of structural film of the 60s and 70s that is only now starting to be legitimised within the institutions of the visual arts. There is an immediate point of reference in the physical movement of film in *Campanile*, 2005, for instance, with the manner in which structural filmmakers

took the material properties of film to be their subjects within the 'rhetorical' limits constructed by those properties. There are obvious examples of this concern with the ontic properties of the medium: Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale*, 1970, and *Back and Forth*, 1969. McAlpine's use of a prolonged tilt shot in *Campanile* (where the filmstrip is as long as the height of the tower it records) and her extraction and repetition of particularly 'cinematic' tropes (in her *Light Reading*, 2005, for example, where she assembled into one minute 1,500 frames of pure light from explosions in narrative films) would seem to occupy much the same terrain of rhetorical analysis. Indeed, she might also have been seen to share it with pioneers of televisual critique such as Dara Birnbaum in the 70s, whose video *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 1976, is an explicit hatchet-job on the eponymous American TV serial, and an artist of the subsequent generation, Silvia Kolbowski, who in *Like Looking Away*, 2002, put together a damning analysis of the US's entertainment through violence in the midst of a critique of consumption and the gaze.

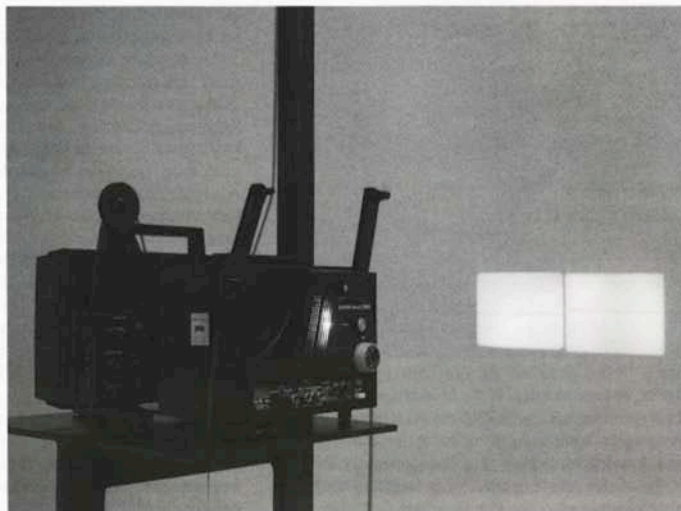
However, *Light Reading* moves beyond this critical terrain of aesthetics and politics. Along with *Light Reading: Californian Sunset*, 2006-09, where she is still assembling flash frames from trailers into a colour spectrum, it shares something of structural film's address to the regulation of the intangible that itself defines photography's (and cinematography's) unique character as a medium. We find this in the concern with light as the essence of language in the final part of Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma*, 1970, or Ken Jacobs' *Soft Rain*, 1968, and with temporality in Snow's *One Second in Montreal*, 1969. However, in its concern with the way in which time is literally embodied by the filmstrip – the way in which film uniquely renders time within spatial and material properties – McAlpine's work resonates with those 60s filmmakers who intervened directly on the filmstrip, for example Louis Brigante's *Burning Loops*, 1965, where the film was periodically stopped in the projector and allowed to melt, and Dieter Roth's *Dot* films of 1956-62 where he punched holes in the leader, or George Landow's masterpiece, *Film in Which There Appear Sprocket Holes, Edge Lettering, Dirt Particles etc.*, 1965-66, in which he emphasised the material property of film as image.

McAlpine's project engages with the more physical, dimensional experiments of both Expanded Cinema and of high modernism, a central condition of which is, as the American scholar George Baker put it, that 'film accedes to the condition of sculpture'. Even as she insists on the line of film in space as 'a form of drawing' (as *Campanile* makes clear), McAlpine repeatedly returns us to the physicality of the cinematic apparatus, whether in 2:30 (*The Fly*), 2003, where she made a column out of two and a half minutes' worth of frames of *The Fly*, 1986, or the assemblies of projectors using single filmstrips for her show 'Flatland' at Laura Bartlett Gallery. There, for example, we have a work in which a stack of six projectors runs a 12m filmstrip that contains just six frames of pure red. While the projection solicits an impossible gaze we become

Elizabeth McAlpine  
98m (the height of the  
*Campanile*, San Marco,  
Venice in Super 8mm film)  
2005



Elizabeth McAlpine  
*Pan (in 2 Parts)* 2009



acutely aware of the physical presence in space of the apparatus and of our embodied relationship to it as a condition of time. It is this insistence on both the temporality and spatiality of the filmic – rather than its disembodied projection of narration – that makes McAlpine's work so distinctive, especially at a time when many video and film artists (Douglas Gordon and Steve McQueen, for example, whose early work actively critiqued mainstream narrative cinema) are veering towards participation in its banal spectacle. Further, it should be noted that there is a political import to this insistence on the revelation of films' ontology. McAlpine makes it clear that it is not enough to 'tell stories', however good, however politically 'significant': the spectator has to understand that their place in the world and their relation to the work is neither static nor obvious – as narrative film implies. Making this clear is the work of the artist; telling 'good' stories is the work of the entertainer.

McAlpine's emphasis on the cinematic apparatus recalls the emergence of 'Apparatus theory' in the 60s. This was a materialist reading of the imbrication of the spectator in the cinematic process, and it still haunts much mainstream film theory. However, much that is developed in the theory is already intuited in the 'kinematic'. This was the use of projection, not simply film, in intermedial, performative environments between 1914 and the early 20s. It also emerges in the art historian Elie Faure's theory of the cineplastics. Published in 1922, Faure's ideas reflected a decade or more of modernist concern with the way in which temporality could be spatialised not simply as projection, but as event. A politicised version of this concern with the relationship between the spectator and the screen is at the heart of Expanded Cinema – at once a move away from subjectively disabling narrative spectacle, but also a revival of a non-linear notion of time and space that informs modernist thought before 1914. What we might call 'kinema', in sharp contrast to cinema, is not simply an unrolling of space on screen but a traversal of space by the embodied spectator as an event: it is haptic where the dominant convention has evolved around a principle of intangibility, of both image and ideology. McAlpine's project revives the older critical concept, asking interesting and awkward questions about our

expectations of the appropriate space for the exchange between spectator and the film, and the historical implications of those spaces and their spectacle. ■

**Elizabeth McAlpine** is at Laura Bartlett Gallery, London March 21 to May 2.

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Elizabeth McAlpine  
*Tilt (in 6 Parts)* 2009

