



Parameters of Practice: Annabel Nicolson's 1970s Practice

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"Like a phantasmagorist she employs minimal means to conjure the marvellous, from the film-loops she manipulated so idiosyncratically in her earliest expanded-cinema pieces to the later performances using voice, recorded sounds and small precarious sources of light to create intimate scenarios which simultaneously make metaphorical reference to the 'seeing in the dark' magic of cinema and the ancient tradition of fireside storytelling."¹

Felicity Sparrow's description of Annabel Nicolson's film and performance-related work provides an insight into an artist's practice which is both diverse and distinctive. Nicolson regarded the spatial environment as an important part of the work and in this respect the experiential, for both artist and audience, played an important role in the reception of her work. Nicolson has mostly been recognised for her 1973 *Reel Time* and her films *Shapes* (1970), *Slides* (1971) and *Frames* (1973). Although these are certainly important works from the decade, I believe that her film and performance works would benefit from being contextualised within the broader framework of her practice. Therefore I will be considering less frequently cited works in this paper and looking at how diverse aspects of her practice came to inform a particular way of working: in this respect one which was decidedly ephemeral, transient and 'of the moment'.

A two-fold exploration of Nicolson's 1970s work will be made. Firstly, in relation to how the experiential, for both artist and viewer, plays a significant role in her performance and expanded cinema work. Secondly, in relation to the contrasting roles that planned structure and improvisation take within her creative process. In this respect, T.S. Eliot's 'shadow' as the space between the inception of a work and its materialization will be considered in relation to the following few lines from a 1925 poem:

"Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the shadow"²

In some of Nicolson's work film formed a key part of the event, as in her 1973 *Jaded Vision*, in others it was referenced through the intimation of space, light and time, as in her 1975

Matches. And in still others it was not evident at all except in its durational sense as an action passing through time like in her 1975 work, *Sweeping the Sea*. Before looking at specific works in greater depths I would like to consider Nicolson's work more generally in relation to film installation and performance, and how space, film, light and performance operate within this type of work. In his 2003 article on artists' filmmaking Jonathan Walley, uses the term 'paracinema' to describe work which is tangentially related to film, although it does not follow the conventional modes of production and screening practice. Walley said that:

"Paracinema identifies an array of phenomena that are considered "cinematic" but that are not embodied in the materials of film as traditionally defined. That is, the film works I am addressing recognize cinematic properties outside the standard film apparatus, and therefore rejects the medium-specific premise of most essentialist theory and practice that the art form of cinema is defined by the specific medium of film. Instead, paracinema is based on a different version of essentialism, which locates cinema's essence elsewhere."³

Walley refers to essays by André Bazin and Sergei Eisenstein, who both locate film within the imaginary sphere of culture prior to the invention of the cinema. Eisenstein through the concept of montage, which he suggested existed "everywhere outside film" and Bazin through the idea that film is not purely about the physical properties of film, but that it is a "conceptual phenomenon – a dream, a fantasy", and that it is a concept which has manifested itself temporarily in a particular physical form.⁴ These allusions to the pre-cinematic are also interesting in relation to Nicolson's practice, particularly with regard to works which don't take the conventional form of a film screening. In her performance piece, *Matches*, for instance, no film is screened. Rather it is referred to through the use of two screens, in front of which two volunteers from the audience stand, reading identical copies of the same text (on candle power and the fading of light). The only way the reading can progress is through light emitted from matches, which the readers repeatedly light, ensuring a slow and staggered progress and highlighting the presence of sound, light and shadow. Nicolson's *Matches* dealt with some very basic elements: light, shadow, time and space, which in the extended duration of the performance references film. Walley, in his article, cites examples by the filmmakers, Paul Sharits and Anthony McCall, which draw interesting parallels with some of Nicolson's works. Here he suggests how the film event takes on a different form:

"This initial gesture of disintegrating the medium, literally piece by piece, was the first step in a larger process of locating the cinematic outside of film."⁵

It is interesting to consider how some of Nicolson's works from the decade demonstrate close affiliations to Walley's "paracinema". In a review in *Time Out* in 1973, her work is described by Deke Dusinbere as follows:

"The notion of 'fixity of meaning' for a work, somehow held within it as an essence, is an illusion encouraged by our cultural habits of passive awareness'. Annabel Nicolson has followed through the logic of this 'immediate' cinema to the point where the film material itself is no longer the prime element of the film show. Nicolson has turned more and more to performance pieces involving a number of people whose attempts to deal with the event are made deliberately 'public' (and so part of the show). She is attempting to break away from the inevitable linearity of projected film (one frame of necessity following the other) to establish a number of simultaneous space-time events working with or against each other as part of a hopefully more complex situation."⁶

With regard to the audience or the spectator, there are some interesting observations to be made: for while a filmmaker may produce a piece of work with specific intent, an audience is generally required for its completion. The filmmaker and theorist, Malcolm Le Grice has written extensively about the role of the spectator with regard to artist's film. In his 1972 essay, *Real TIME/SPACE* he confirms the important role that an audience takes in consolidating a work:

"Much of the work that has been described has a degree of conscious awareness of the real TIME/SPACE of the projection event, is aware of some of the factors of audience behaviour in assimilating or structuring the film's information, and is influenced by this awareness at some level in the film's construction."⁷

With Nicolson's work the screening event took on this experiential form – so that there was not a separation between spectator and work in the way that there would be in a conventional screening event or theatre production. Nicolson's comment, in a 1978 interview with Max Eastley, about the role of the audience is tinged with ambivalence: the hesitancy of too-much audience interaction, yet also an acknowledgement of the necessity for a receptive audience for the making of the work. When asked by Max Eastley, what attitude she had towards the audience during the performance she said that:

"I wasn't concerned about them at all. My dialogue was with materials, the elements and listening for signs, letting those become apparent. I was anxious that there shouldn't be too many people because the ideas needed space round them and the sheer volume of a large number of people would have disturbed that balance. This idea of something being very sharply in focus and everything around being discounted – that doesn't interest me at all. It seems a very false view of the world."⁸

This disregard for the audience is not to be misconstrued as arrogant dismissal, but rather that the work exists in its entirety as an undivided experience between artist, viewer and materials. In a 1973 article David Miller discusses the approach taken in her work as religious and devotional:

“I take it there is a tendency in this approach, for the artist to disappear, and finally for the art to disappear – but in the right way. The ephemeral thing, by this compassionate attention, is given the aspect of timelessness which transcends mere nostalgia: the thing is seen “under the aspect of eternity”.⁹

With these words of Miller’s in mind, it may be interesting to reconsider Eliot’s few lines in relation to how Nicolson’s “devotional” or immersive stance is related to approaches within her creative practice:

“Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the shadow”¹⁰

It is in the shadow space between the inception of a work and the reality of its manifestation where an interesting delineation can occur. With some artists’ works, a methodical approach does not pose a great disjunction between the two. In for instance, some of the Systems painters’ works or with films where a frame by frame conception is realised in the making of the filming. Yet in work that sets great store upon chance occurrences and the organic process, as Nicolson’s does, the “reality” arrived at from the “idea” can differ significantly. Nicolson’s description of her working process is revealing in how, perhaps, the “idea” and “reality” are part of a more homogenous approach to the working process:

“Since 1973, I have been working away from film, towards more circumstantial situations. The aspects of projection which interest me have always been the transient, fragile qualities of light beaming through space. The accidental, the inadvertent light sources which crept into projection situations give me a point of departure. These performances change shape depending on who helps perform them. This inevitably creates a risk around the work. At the moment I am thinking about the difficulty of retaining a balance between formal work and improvised risk.”¹¹

I would like to now consider some of Nicolson’s 1970s works, with a particular focus given to the ephemeral and transient, to the overlooked and to chance encounters, which all form such

an integral part of her practice. *Sky for the Bird on the Roof of my Mind* was a 1973 work where film loops were projected onto the roof and walls of Nicolson's studio. The content of the film consisted of images of an apparent bird and was projected onto a dusty mirror onto which the word 'bird' was written. These images were then in turn projected onto the "original precarious bird" on the roof, illuminating it with light. Another loop was passed through a slide projector, which cast vertical images of film frames from roof to floor. An added element was created by random flashes of reflected light as film loops caught the light beams. Here Nicolson comments on the nature of this recurring image of the 'bird' and how trusting intuition and chance encounters was so integral to her working process:

"Someone said the other day that everything was contained in that image, the projected image of the tiny bird. In fact it wasn't a bird, it was a crack in a glass roof. It's from years ago and recurs and recurs. It's mainly to do with listening to signs and seeing them manifest."¹²

A related work of the same year, *Jaded Vision*, was presented either as a 2 or 3 screen film performance lasting 10 minutes, with huge floor to ceiling film loops, the shadow of a paper bird and a microphone which was swung around to pick up the sounds and which created "eerie sounds, evocative of a seabird" through feedback.¹³ The audience interaction was important in consolidating the work and ensured that her premise to work with the space, the audience and the integration of all elements concerning the work was abided by. In a 1978 application for funding, she clearly articulates her intentions with these live action works:

"Attention to phenomena, to which people bring their own realities, make it essential to allow for the work to develop in random circumstances. I am currently working on live action pieces with ability for determinism while maintaining inherent structure."¹⁴

In 1974 Nicolson carried out a walking tour of parts of Britain. Documentation of this 'project', in the form of local newspaper reports is available in her book, *escaping notice*.¹⁵ In *Redefining the Contours of Britain: Survey of Rural Circumstance* Nicolson spent a large part of the summer of 1974 walking around parts of southern England and the Midlands. This work was described in one of the local newspaper reports in the following way:

"It could be that she preferred to trace the coastline since much of her work takes the form of contour redefinition. Her survey on rural England, with particular reference to the circumstantial, is expected to be published early next year."¹⁶

Walking as art draws parallels with her contemporaries, Hamish Fulton and Richard Long whose Land or Earth Art projects took the form, in exhibition, of photographs, maps and other documentation. Parts of *Redefining the Contours of Britain* were shown in two exhibitions in 1978 and 1994 yet it was never shown in the same way as other Land Art in the decade and exists primarily as documentation in her artist's book.

Three works which could also be categorised within the realm of Land Art are her performances, *Sweeping the Sea* (1975) and *Combing the Fields* (1976) and her photographic piece, *Sleeping Like a Log* (1976). *Sweeping the Sea* was performed on a Southampton beach where Nicolson literally swept the sea. This description of the work, from *escaping notice*, shows the attention she gave to the immersive aspect of the work:

“Her sweeping was slow and careful. Her movement was with the brush, towards rather than against it. From time to time she would inspect the tideline, take a few steps in another direction and then resume sweeping. After a while one realised that she was less distinct, though not actually further away. Perhaps it was deliberate this trick of making herself part of the background of being just slightly out of focus.”¹⁷

Combing the Fields exists as a photographic record of the artist in a field at Sandford Orcas in Dorset. She is actively involved in ‘combing’ some knee-high plants with an enormous hand-made comb. In correspondence with the artist, she stated that as it was early morning and the fields were full of frost, there was a visible difference in the area combed. She also stated that this private performance was about caring for the land.

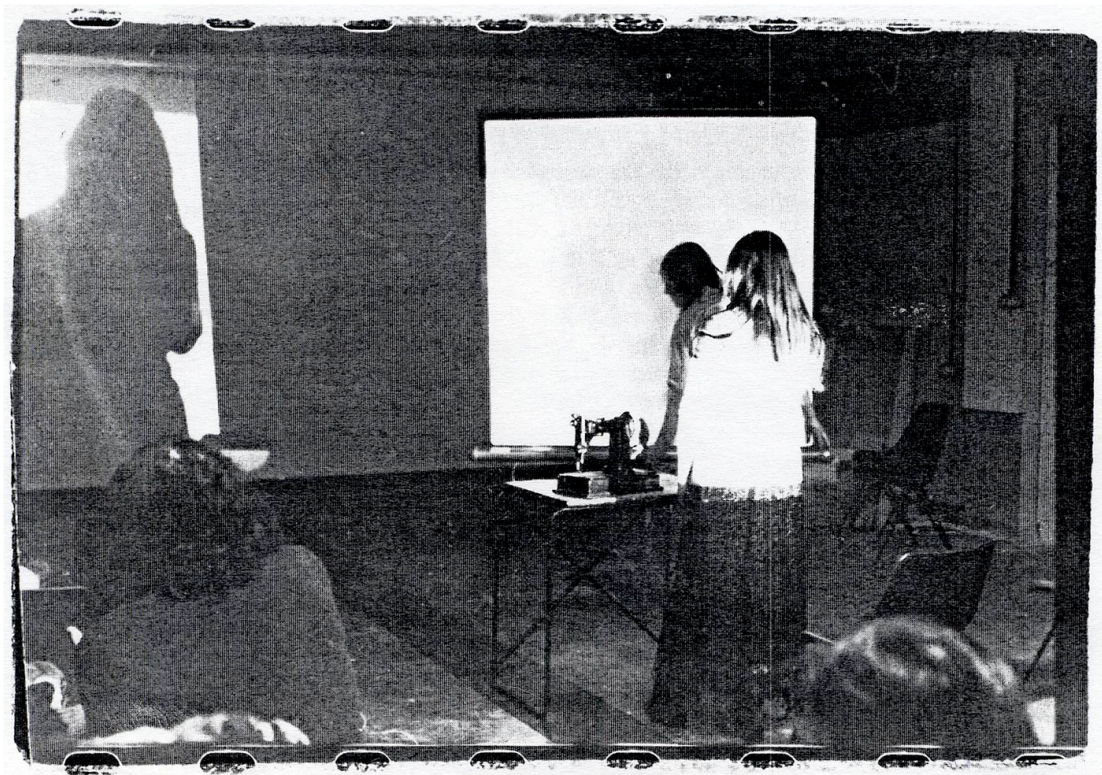
In her 1976 photographic work *Sleeping Like a Log*, six images depict the artist either lying in a field, with the semblance of a log of wood or lying on a tree trunk which is horizontally placed on the ground. Again, as in her two above-mentioned works, the ‘entering into the landscape’ as an elemental being who is deeply connected to it, is a significant factor. The works resonate with the performance and photographic works of the Cuban artist Ana Mendieta, although her relationship to the land was one related to loss and trauma through her personal displacement, whereas Nicolson's works instead display a kinship with the land.

In conclusion I will say that in considering the elusive nature of Nicolson's work: elusive because it cannot be pinned down to either a medium-specific or thematic practice - it is astute to recognise the diversity of her practice and situate this alongside her more recognised pieces.

In the 1994 survey of her work in *The Nowness of Everything* exhibition she has been described thus by curator, Sotiris Kyriakou:

“Refusing to be tied down by boundaries is characteristic of Annabel Nicolson’s work. Having worked with film, sculpture, painting and performance, she interweaves loosely predetermined structures with incidental detail, in order to [and here he is quoting her] “include disparate random, as well as formal elements, that make up an overall apprehension of a situation. Illumination should occur throughout a given occasion, should take account of and make room for the inadvertent as well as the prescribed”¹⁸

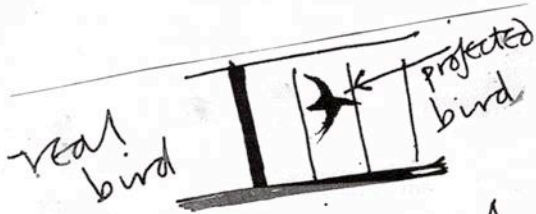
With this in mind I would like us to reconsider briefly Sparrow’s opening words, relating Nicolson to a modern-day phantasmagorist, and how the evocation of fleeting images, space, light and shadow, like ghosts in the machine, return us to the realm of pre-cinematic, experiential ritual. This analysis, together with a consideration of her works related to the land and particularly her approaches to her inter-disciplinary practice, confirms the need for a more comprehensive consideration of her work from the decade.



Reel Time, Annabel Nicolson, 1973



Jaded vision



Annabel Nicolson

performing: Tuesday 23rd March
2.15 pm. — 3.30 pm.
Lecture Theatre

Jaded Vision, Annabel Nicolson, 1973



Sweeping the Sea, Annabel Nicolson, 1975

¹ Felicity Sparrow Annabel Nicolson on luxonline

[www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/annabel_nicolson/essay\(5\).html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/annabel_nicolson/essay(5).html), accessed 02/03/2009

² T.S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men* in 'The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot', (London: Faber and Faber, 1973) p. 81

³ Jonathan Walley, *The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema: Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-garde Film*, October 103, 2003, pp. 15-30; p. 18.

⁴ Jonathan Walley, *The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema: Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-garde Film*, October 103, 2003, pp. 15-30; p. 22 and 23.

⁵ Jonathan Walley, *The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema: Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-garde Film*, October 103, 2003, pp. 15-30; p. 19.

⁶ Deke Dusinbere, review in *Time Out*, September 1973.

⁷ Malcolm Le Grice, *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age*, (London: BFI Publishing, 2001); pp159

⁸ Interview between the artist and Max Eastley, *(Per)formance and Performance with Dark Edges*, 1978. source unknown – given to me by the artist.

⁹ David Miller, *Paragraphs On Some Films by Annabel Nicolson Seen in March, 1973* from Study Collection files, pg 11.

¹⁰ T.S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men* in 'The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot', (London: Faber and Faber, 1973) p. 81

¹¹ Annabel Nicolson and Sylvia Paskin, *Films for Women*, (London: BFI Publishing, 1986).

¹² David Miller, *Paragraphs On Some Films by Annabel Nicolson Seen in March, 1973* from Study Collection files, pg 12.

¹³ Annabel Nicolson on luxonline website,

http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/annabel_nicolson/jaded_vision.html, accessed 26th March 2009

¹⁴ Study Collection - Annabel Nicolson file. Application for funding.

¹⁵ Annabel Nicolson, *escaping notice*, edition of 500 artists' books, (Yorkshire: Arc Press), 1977

¹⁶ *Hurst Castle* in the *Lymington Gazette*, 15th September 1974

¹⁷ Annabel Nicolson, *escaping notice*, edition of 500 artists' books, (Yorkshire: Arc Press), 1977

¹⁸ *The Nowness of Everything* The Minorities Gallery Nov 1994



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British Artists' Film & Video Study Collection