

AT THE LAST VENICE BIENNALE, people wishing to see Steve McQueen's commission for the British Pavilion, *Giardini* (2009), had to sign up for screenings, arrive promptly at the allotted time and find a seat in a hushed auditorium. The move drew some complaints but also sighs of relief: viewers could submit to the film in its entirety rather than endure the sorts of fractured narratives produced when one stumbles into a piece of film or video three quarters of the way through.

For decades, artists – from Salvador Dalí to Andy Warhol and beyond – have been attracted to celluloid. But for an artist's film to be screened in such a clearly cinematic setting is symptomatic: it underlines the ambition and sense of scale shared by certain artists currently working with the medium. In the last year alone, cinema audiences have been offered Sam Taylor-Wood's film *Nowhere Boy* (2009), about the life of the young John Lennon, and Shirin Neshat's masterful *Women Without Men* (2009), which was awarded the Silver Lion in Venice in 2009. Turner Prize-winner Gillian Wearing, who has worked for years with the documentary format, is screening a feature film entitled *Self Made* in Manchester this month for Abandon Normal Devices, a festival of new cinema and digital culture. Fiction and documentary overlap in Wearing's film, which features a group of people taking part in method-acting workshops who have been given the chance to create, and ultimately become, their own new characters.

Much has been made of the shift from gallery to cinema. Before the announcement that it was to be axed as part of governmental austerity measures, the UK Film Council – which supported Wearing's film – had stated its plans to invest more heavily in artist-made films, particularly following the success

CALLING THE SHOTS

Are the video artists of the 1990s leading the way in experimental cinema?

of features such as McQueen's Cannes *Caméra d'Or*-winning *Hunger* (2008), perhaps the most pivotal recent instance of an artist successfully making a feature film. All this activity raises questions: why is it that artists are taking on the task of producing a feature, and choosing to present their work to a very different audience than the one they are used to? And what does it mean for video art?

The traffic hasn't been entirely one-way: some filmmakers, such as Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul, British director Duane Hopkins and French New Wave director Agnès Varda, are showing interest in the gallery platform, but it is the move from gallery to cinema that has been most pronounced. The kinds of cinematic films created by artists,



this and facing page: Gillian Wearing on the set of *Self Made*, 2010, with (facing page) director of photography Roger Chapman. Photos: Paul Cox

however, are diverse, operating within different genres. Some, such as *Nowhere Boy*, are conventional linear narratives told over three acts. (Indeed, though the film received warm reviews from the film press, art critics were flummoxed by its lack of artistic flourish). Others, *Hunger* and *Women Without Men* among them, retain more of their makers' signature concerns.

Still, they are films rather than pieces of art largely on the basis of intent: their creators set out to make a feature film rather than an extended piece of video art. *Women Without Men* was fantastical in its subject matter and structure, as well as being decidedly cinematic in its sweep and scale. And while the structure of *Hunger* was radical (moving from a horror film in the first act, to a staggeringly intense 17-minute single take of a piece of dialogue and finally onto its protagonist's martyrdom), it too was understandable as a piece of cinema. The films of Julian Schnabel are categorised as film rather than artwork, while some artists whose practices take inspiration from cinema produce their own paeans to the medium's genres. Cindy Sherman's riotous 1997 film *Office Killer*, for instance, was the sort of B movie schlock-fest referenced in some of her best photography.

Though heterogeneous, artist-made films, as opposed to art films – Matthew Barney's *Drawing Restraint 9* (2005) and Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno's *Zidane* (2006) come to mind as recent examples of the latter – are perhaps better defined as films through their attitudes towards narrative. What they bring to the medium is a daring approach to structure and photography. Neshat points out that "each artist's attraction and degree of indulging in the cinematic language is unique. Some remain more artistic, and their films appear more or less

as an extended video installation, where others go directly after making a conventional narrative."

Gillian Wearing echoes this: "I don't stop being an artist when I make a film. People have done that. You could do things in a very traditional way, but, you know, I think there are so many good filmmakers out there who already do that." On the judging panel for this month's Jarman Award, which was inaugurated in the UK only two years ago, celebrating artists working in film and awarding them a prime-time spot on Channel 4 to screen their work, Wearing is keen for the medium to be pushed. "I never really sat down and studied any guidebook about how to make a film", she says. "Everything I was doing was exploration, and I never really wanted to make something that was generic."

When artists are asked why they choose to make films, the issue of democratic access often surfaces. "I suppose mainly I wanted to see if I could cross boundaries and reach a new audience", Neshat says. "I feel that there is a democracy in filmmaking. The viewer could see a film by paying for a ticket, but as video installations they become collectable items and not possible to distribute, therefore they remain mainly as commodities. Another interesting factor is that to see a film one does not need an education in film history, whereas I cannot imagine going to a gallery and museum to understand any work of contemporary art without needing some general knowledge and education in art."

Tracey Emin, after making the autobiographical feature film *Top Spot* in 2004, about a young girl growing up in Margate, told *The Guardian* at the time: "It was just a sweet thing. The idea of an art film going to a mainstream space.

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That's all; I liked the idea of it being on in Liverpool for three nights, or Manchester for three nights; of people going and paying their three quid and not feeling like they'd thrown themselves into the arena of contemporary art.'

Not all film and video artists wish to make the transition, however. Lithuanian artist Deimantas Narkevicius, who contributed a short for the UK's LUX/Independent Cinema Office Artists Cinema Programme earlier this year and has screened work at the British Film Institute, says: "Of course, the differences are kind of disappearing. Now video artists are introducing successful feature-filmmaking practices into their video practice, and vice versa. There's not much difference any more between a filmmaker and a video artist. The difference is in scale and about engagement and budget. It's a bigger challenge and, in a way, a risk." It is this that leaves him reluctant to abandon video art for feature filmmaking. "I like the autonomy that visual artists have, circulating within galleries and museums. I think this is very important. The film scene is far less experimental. It's more about a model for success. I know it's fascinating for artists to make films, but I would prefer that the video art scene maintain its autonomy."

Filmmaking is an expensive venture, and the realms of art and film are very different: it's surely no accident that they are demarcated respectively as a world and as an industry. Yet even in these financially straitened times, and even with the coming demise of the UK Film Council, artists are willing to take on the risky business of producing feature films. McQueen is currently developing a film about the musician Fela Kuti and Neshat is also reportedly at work on a new feature. Wearing

compared the rise in artist-made films to that of video art in the early 1990s: "When that first started, people thought it would have a very short shelf-life. And it's great that it's carried on and that it's not going to go away."

Crucially, what artists bring to film – a medium primarily concerned with seeing – are fresh ways of viewing the world. "To me, the most important thing in filmmaking is that there is always experimenting going on", says Wearing. "It happens all the time in art."

Gillian Wearing's feature film, Self Made, will have its UK premiere on 2 October at this year's Abandon Normal Devices festival in Manchester (1-7 October). The winner of the 2010 Jarman Award, selected from a shortlist of Spartacus Chetwynd, Ben Rivers, Zineb Sedira and Emily Wardill, will be announced at a special event on 5 October at the Whitechapel Gallery, London. The gallery will also host a day of screenings on 2 October