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**RESEARCH**

# After All This Time, Isn't It Still 'About Time'? Artist's Work in Slide-Tape in the UK Since the 1970s

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This article will address the use of slide-tape by artists during the 1970s and 1980s in the United Kingdom. Slide-tape is seen now as a form that was abandoned and barely worthy of mention by critics and historians, and so has been largely elided in the literature. However, it is significant in the UK for being used by a number of key and emerging artists during the period, where it became a distinctive approach to using image and sound. The aesthetic qualities of slide-tape and the physical presence of media apparatus were exploited in both its performance and installation by a range of artists who are associated with experimental approaches to time-based media. It was also developed as a critical tool by women artists and black artists, and this too is overlooked and that moment forgotten. Overall, artists work in this form has been ignored. I speculate on the reasons why this has happened, having recounted some key points in its development and make an argument for its contribution to artists' moving image media, whose histories are still being written.

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**Keywords:** Slide-tape; Time-based media; Artists' moving image; Women artists; Black British artists

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## Introduction

The beginnings of slide-tape are ignoble and its trajectory complicated. As a form, slide-tape was a series of projected 35mm transparency slides synchronised with a tape soundtrack and used by artists in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Slide-tape synchronised two (or more) projectors with a pulse command on a tape soundtrack, allowing images to fade between one projector and the other, and synchronise with the sound.

In the late 1970s slide-tape was relieved of its conventional use as an educational and presentational tool and used to make experimental art works. This became a moment when avant-garde artists in the United Kingdom, in particular, found a different technology with which to explore images and sound. During the 1960s and early 1970s artists had developed a range of art practices in time-based media, including film, video, expanded cinema, performance and installation. These practices attest to the development of media forms that were in clear opposition to the history and traditions of painting and sculpture, where artists developed experimental practices to address the contemporary social and political landscape. It was in this context that the use of slide-tape by artists emerged in the UK. Artists who worked in film, installation and performance used slide-tape during this short period, which had ended by 1990 when it was superseded by video technologies. There was no comparable body of work made in the United States in the same form, although Chrissie Iles and Darsie Alexander have identified a major body of screen-based and projected works (Iles 2001; Alexander 2005). Whilst this work emerged both prior to and in the same period as that in the UK it was based on a different set of formal concerns. These works were less concerned with social and political issues and were made in response to the crisis in representation that had been brought about by the end of minimalism (Iles 2001). Distinctly these works, with very few exceptions, although projected did not use a sound (or tape) element as in the slide-tape work made in the UK.

The, now familiar, histories of time-based media and artists' film in the UK during the period are increasingly well documented by writers, curators and critics. David Curtis and A.L Rees, as well as others, have made a significant contribution to this however, slide-tape is not included in this relatively recent literature (Curtis 2006; Rees 1999). An absence of any significant literature is a key factor here where records of these works are fleeting and scattered across a number of archives. Slide-tape is accounted for in a number of exhibition catalogues and referred to in the publications noted here but this amounts to a scant offering. Likewise, slide-tape works in archives are few in number, and others that exist are in private collections.

Given this, and the scale of the task of retrieving this aspect of history, I highlight some key historical stages by relying on secondary sources around which to articulate the linked problems of both its absence in the literature and its exclusion from current definitions of the development of artists' moving image. Later in the essay, I am also able to draw on primary sources where recent exhibitions have allowed a reprise of some historical works.

Referring to some of the few existing commentaries on slide-tape, none of which are extensive, can highlight the problems with definition. Slide-tape rarely offers its viewers an experience of immersion as the constant presence of the slide projector in the performance of the work continues to act as a critical reminder of its technical source. This kind of rupture, similar to one that Tanya Leighton has described in artists' work that recovers the use of otherwise outmoded technologies, can only contribute to a disruption in modes of viewing (Leighton 2008). The participation of the technology in the viewing of the work amplifies this, not only as a performative element but as one that reminds us of its temporality. The contingent factor of time becomes manifest in slide-tape work and it is used as a primary material. When Peter Wollen notes that the differences between film and video are of little significance he is drawing attention to the use of time in both media and this can also be applied to slide-tape (Wollen 2000). The use of time in slide-tape work has a relationship to similar media, and in particular film, so that it can be seen that works in slide-tape, if not providing a clear legacy to moving image media, are both related to it and, arguably, a part of it. Slide-tape used time as a material in the same way as film or video and had the ability to animate time in much the same way as the medium of film. Jean Fisher, in her commentary on Black Audio Film Collective's *Expeditions One: Signs of Empire* (1983), discusses how slide-tape had become a 'decelerated film sequence' in this work where the photographs are animated by sound (Fisher 2007: 19). Fisher's analysis of this work points to how slide-tape treated time, where the images benefit from their momentary pause between one slide and the next.

Artists' moving image is still being defined and its practices developing; its objects are shifting and by definition, variable. Why slide-tape is excluded from this

recounted history remains an open question. A recent article by Matthew Noel-Tod (2017), reminds us that artists' moving image continues to have something of an identity crisis. This, for Noel-Tod has many disadvantages, not least the identification of artists' moving image only with the experimental approaches of the past. Those categories can be difficult to conceptualise in the current climate, but as the category still omits forms such as slide-tape, surely a crisis of identity is to be encouraged. I hope that here, following these speculations, a convincing assertion can be made that slide-tape has made a contribution to both historical and contemporary artists' moving image.

### **Key Stages**

The period during which slide-tape work circulated in galleries in the UK is marked by two key exhibitions. At the high point of its use slide-tape was included in 'About Time: Video, Performance and Installation by 21 Women Artists' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London in 1980, and in 1990 the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford staged 'Signs of the Times: A decade of video, film and slide-tape installation in Britain, 1980–1990', which although not entirely retrospective signalled the end of slide-tape's useful life as an art form. After this, with few exceptions, slide-tape no longer existed as a form seen in exhibitions and galleries.

The use of slide-tape by avant-garde artists came with early support from the London Film Makers Co-op and later a newer organisation, London Video Arts, in the late 1970s and 1980s. For artists, slide-tape was a relatively cheap way to produce work that could be made without the need for external funding. As Chrissie Iles pointed out in retrospect, it was a 'self supporting practice' and slide-tape resources were housed in educational institutions, which could be accessed by artists and filmmakers to make their work (Iles 1990: 20).

The London Film Makers Co-op is rightly seen to occupy a central place in the history of British avant-garde film during the period. When the Co-op held a Summer Show in 1980 it included slide-tape as an area related to film alongside video, expanded cinema and photography, all of which were activities that the Co-op's filmmakers had embraced since the 1960s (Cheetham 1980). Amongst the varying

work on show were Judith Higginbottom's *Sea Dreams* (1980), Tina Keane's *Clapping Songs* (1980) and Cordelia Swann and Jim Divers *Kiev Code* (1980) which were all described as either slide/tape or tape/slide pieces and/or installations. Slides, tape, and performers were used in a work by Simon Thorne, *A Human Document* (1980), which was described as a film for live performance and in E. E. Vonna-Micell and Lawrence Upton's *P W Square (0-7)* (1980) slides and audio tape were seen with a Super 8 film (London Filmmakers Co-op, 1980). These works conform to the 'elastic' nature of expanded cinema events that A.L. Rees describes, a form that could include multiple projections, live action and film environments in any one event (Rees 2011: 12). Expanded cinema had regarded the projector as a sculptural and performative object, as well as one that fulfilled the function of projecting images. The wide range of experimental work that took place at the Co-op in this vibrant period was one in which slide-tape forms were included and whilst emerging out of its experimental aesthetic did not reside there.

Whilst the Co-op provided a resource where artists could make films without funding there were internal political problems that had an impact on the work that its members produced. There was a gendered division of labour at the Co-op where men dominated the workshops leaving the office tasks to its women members, and this led to the marginalization of those feminist filmmakers. The filmmakers Tina Keane, Lis Rhodes and Annabel Nicolson formed a group, initially took part in and then resigned from the 'Film as Film' exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, London in 1979 (Rhodes 1979). This was an objection on the grounds of their token inclusion and their withdrawal left dramatically empty spaces in the exhibition. This event took place in the context of a growing women's movement and increasing activity amongst feminist artists and filmmakers.

The following year, a group of women initiated the exhibition 'Women's Images of Men' (1980) at the ICA, London and this led to the exhibition 'About Time: Video, Performance and Installation by 21 Women Artists' later in 1980. About Time made an important contribution to a gender-based critique and engaged this analysis in an area of practice where male artists had been seen to dominate much

of its development. This was an area that was seen to emerge from the intersection of expanded cinema and performance work at the London Filmmakers Co-op (MacRitchie 1980).

About Time included slide-tape work by Judith Higginbottom, Pat Whiteread, Tina Keane and Roberta Graham. Judith Higginbottom exhibited *Water into Wine* (1980), a slide-tape work using two projectors. The work was made at the same time as *Sea Dreams*, both works using different ways to approach similar subject matter. *Sea Dreams* was based on Higginbottom's menstrual dreams and used the sequential possibilities of the slide projector to present four sequences or cycles that approximated to the menstrual calendar, accompanied by a soundtrack of waves breaking on a pebble beach. *Water into Wine* collated the details of twenty-seven women talking about their menstrual cycle; the soundtrack recording their thoughts and feelings accompanied by slide images of red flowers and the sea.

Amongst the other twenty-one artists in About Time, Roberta Graham exhibited *Short Cuts to Sharp Looks* (1979), a slide-tape work that mounted a critique against cosmetic surgery. *Short Cuts* was described as a directly critical work by its reviewer, Sarah Kent, the work projecting images of sharp metal knives and human flesh accompanied by a 'hideously graphic soundtrack' (Kent 1980: 224). Pat Whiteread's work *Journey of Human Error* was also directly critical and was concerned with ecology, materialism and technology. Whiteread had been a member of the organizing group that had initiated the previous Institute of Contemporary Art exhibition, Women's Images of Men. Her work in About Time at the ICA was exhibited as a slide-tape work and transferred to video for the exhibition's tour to Bristol, Liverpool, Birmingham and Dublin that followed; this probably due to the temperamental nature of the slide-tape medium and its lack of suitability for extended gallery programming. Tina Keane's *See Saw* (1980), a slide-tape work about the mother-daughter relationship was similar in its concerns to the children's playground games in *Clapping Songs* (1979), a slide-tape work that had been seen at the Riverside Studios, London in 1979 (Fisher 2004). *Clapping Songs* documented young girls singing a street song and the work was later developed into the video, performance and installation

work *Demolition/Escape*, exhibited in 1983 at the AIR Gallery, London. About Time included other slide-tape works by Belinda Williams, *The Way We Are* (1980) and Sharon Morris, *Family Portrait* (1980), both addressing the domestic and gendered space of the home and the family.

The About Time exhibition was important in establishing feminist art practices and in showing a diverse range of time-based media at a key moment in those developing histories. Lynn MacRitchie's (1980) catalogue introduction describes and is testament to the momentum that had gathered in women's film, installation and performance work in the previous decade. Work by women artists had found alternative platforms to mainstream practices where forms, alongside content, could explore less traditional approaches in what was a political project. These works by women artists in slide-tape were made possible by the access to the form. As before, work could be made without funding or hiring a great deal of equipment, at least in its initial stages. It was a form that could be worked on with the aid of a light box in the domestic space. However work produced in slide-tape should not be seen as an engagement with a basic technology. The sequencing of images in a timeline forced an analytic approach to considering the affect of one image to another, and to this was added the projector fade and layering sequences, which were linked to a pulsed soundtrack in the presentation of the work. Slide-tape, for all its apparent direct qualities had also forced an approach that made it a kind of cinema.

During the same period Black Audio Film Collective were also producing slide-tape work. Their first project as a collective group used slide-tape forms, prior to their well-known film work of the period, *Handsworth Songs* (1986). *Expeditions One: Signs of Empire* and *Expeditions Two: Images of Nationality* (1982–84) explored 'colonialism, empire, hybridity, exile' and sourced historical archival imagery with which to explore this legacy and establish an 'archaeology of colonial subjectivity' (Enwezor 2007: 117). In the first part of this project, *Signs of Empire*, slides of archival imagery juxtaposed with text and a soundtrack of political speeches and musique concrete combined to form an insistent and powerful work. The original work was shown at a number of venues including the Institute of Contemporary Art, London;

Watershed Arts Centre, Bristol and Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff. Okwui Enwezor in his article to accompany the re-staging of this work in the retrospective exhibition 'The Ghosts of Songs: The Film Art of The Black Audio Film Collective 1982-1998' at FACT, Liverpool in 2007, describes an intertextuality in the work in which image, text and sound were animated, 'each sliding across the space of the other' (Enwezor 2007: 117). Further to this, Enwezor described Black Audio Film Collective's work in slide-tape as a 'proto-cinematic' form in his commentary (Enwezor 2007: 117). For Enwezor, this work was less to do with moving image culture than a textualising practice, one that was continued in later film work. This textuality and use of archival imagery formed a larger part of Black Audio Film Collective's project. However, this is a textual practice that is continually embedded in a visual practice, one that is akin to the essay film and a form that is used later in *Handsworth Songs*, *Signs of Empire* and *Images of Nationality* had established both the tone and the framework for Black Audio Film Collective's later work, one that raided the archive to form critical projects that articulated black British subjectivity.

By the time Chrissie Iles came to curate 'Signs of the Times: A decade of video, film and slide tape installation in Britain, 1980–1990' at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford in 1990 she was able to present the idea that time-based media had clearly developed from these earlier practices in slide-tape (Iles, 1990). Iles considered that work in slide-tape had by that time become less a set of critical tools than a series of illusionistic devices. In *Signs of the Times* Antony Wilson's work considered desire as a function of the advertising industry in *Achievers-Strivers-Strugglers-Survivors* (1990), where a soundtrack from a Disney film accompanied the projection. Holly Warburton's work *Viridus* (1990), the other slide-tape projection in the exhibition, was concerned with baroque imagery, and given Iles commentary, had a place in music, fashion and new romantic pop culture. Both works used sophisticated dissolve techniques, which by that time had become available and were being used in marketing technologies. Iles acknowledged that slide-tape was amongst the precedents that in earlier politicized work had 'overturned' contemporary art practice; her statements were also clearly signalling an ending of those projects (Iles 1990:

20). After a decade, those radical interventions in which Iles included slide-tape had resulted in new forms of practice and in new modes of address. Signs of the Times had offered a summary show at a point when the technologies that artists were using had changed significantly, as had the social and political landscape in the UK.

Very few, if any, artists have used slide-tape with any consistency throughout their practice. It could be seen that slide-tape was used as an interim form on the way towards another related medium, one that was usually film. An exception to this is James Coleman who has made work in slide-tape since 1973 and continued to do so as recently as 1999. An Irish artist well known in both Europe and America, he stands apart from any of the groupings or individuals previously mentioned. Coleman has worked in a range of media forms; film, video, installation and performance, but it is his work in slide-tape that distinguishes his approach. Simply put, Coleman's slide-tape works are of a different order. So much so that Rosalind Krauss suggests that his continued work with the medium of slide-tape constitutes an example of inventing it. Coleman has consistently made slide-tape work with high production values, from the conceptual and documentary *Slide Piece* (1973), to the highly staged and constructed work, *INITIALS* (1993–4). The fact that Coleman titles the medium of his work 'projected slide images with synchronized audio narration' is accurate and at a clear remove from its usual term, 'slide-tape'. Krauss, whilst not disavowing work made by other artists suggests that slide-tape has no aesthetic lineage to call upon and to adopt it as a medium, in the way that Coleman has, can only be a singular undertaking (Krauss 1997).

Whilst, for Krauss this may be the case, slide-tape had produced a distinct aesthetic presence; one where images and sound could explore new narrative forms and involve the materiality and the physical presence of the projection apparatus itself. The medium is part of the performance of the work producing a distinctive and evocative presence; one where there is no escape from the sound of the carousel of slides reversing and reloading to repeat its sequence. Given that slide-tape had both distinctive aesthetic and formal qualities this can now lead to a speculative account of its demise and omission.

## Speculation

It is clear that the complex performative aspect of slide-tape and its archival and access requirements may account, in part, for its absence in holdings, at least in the UK. The original slide-tape projector units in working order that were used to present works are redundant and, if any do exist, are rare pieces of equipment. Although there have been recent efforts by the Tate to add a number of slide-tape works to their collection, the unreliability of slide-tape formats meant that many artists quickly transferred works to video; once these formats became more widely available, the original format was no longer used. Slide-tape had been cheap and accessible; initially this was to its advantage, but subsequently became one of the reasons why slide-tape work was taken less seriously as it was perceived as a crude form in comparison to video or film. The subject matter of some works, which was often political and critical, and made relatively swiftly in response to issues that were current, may also account for its disappearance.

There can be no argument that artists' work in slide-tape has been overlooked, its use so brief that it seems it is hardly worth mentioning. It was a form that was accessible to women artists, black artists and artists on the margins of the mainstream gallery system, and when this factor is taken into consideration, the reasons behind slide-tape's absence may start to become clear. (Although this is no longer true of the work of Black Audio Film Collective, since both their slide-tape works were acquired by the Tate in 2009.) However, other examples such as Keith Piper's *The Trophies of Empire* (1985), where slide-tape was part of a mixed media installation, and slide-tape work by Lorraine Luke and Ogu Nnachi such as *Family Excursion* (1986), shown in the 'Black Women In View' exhibition held at Battersea Arts Centre in 1986, still remain in the artists' own possession. Whilst the formal concerns in these works have frequently been overlooked in favour of accounting for the work through its general address to representation and identity it is clear that the subject matter of a number of slide-tape works did engage a critical practice, one that was peculiar to the UK. This can be derived from the issue-based work that was made in the critical context of feminist art and black art groupings. The accessibility of the form had allowed

immediate responses to current issues to be made but this cannot be separated from their formal interventions; both being part of that aesthetic response.

Slide-tape has clearly been difficult to categorise, as it is neither solely projection, nor expanded cinema or installation; it is at the nexus of these forms and seems to have fallen by the wayside in all their accounts. Tamara Trodd goes so far as to regret the exclusion of slide-tape from her recent book while acknowledging that that-slide tape was not simply about the projected image (Trodd 2011). It is clear that the majority of artists who used slide-tape formats either used film and moving image concurrently or went on to do so; Ian Breakwell, Mona Hatoum, Patrick Keiller, Susan Hiller and Marion Urch to name but a few. It would be reasonable to speculate that for these artists and filmmakers slide-tape offered a form of cinematic language whose codes could be challenged and interventions made albeit in a different but, as I have argued here, related form.

## Reprise

Given the current status of slide-tape as a form that is both forgotten and overlooked, re-staging of such work is a rare event. One such work by Nina Danino was included in the exhibition 'From Floor to Sky: British Sculpture and the Studio Experience' in 2010 at Ambika P3, London. The exhibition was curated by and celebrated the teaching career of Peter Kardia and the generation of artists who had passed through St Martins School of Art and the Royal College of Art during the 1960s and 1970s. Danino restaged *First Memory* (1980), a slide-tape work first seen at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. *First Memory* is projected on two screens with a spoken soundtrack. A woman's voice describes a child's view in retrospect and pieces together a narrative that is gradually constructed through picturing a series of objects and rooms in a house. The labour intensive process of reconstructing the original piece of work, transferred and programmed using digital technologies, and its subterranean exhibition setting, combined in this contemporary context to add to the works' presence and poetic dimensions. In 2010 a slide-tape work by Cordelia Swann, *Mysteries of Berlin* (1979–82) was restaged at Raven Row, London in the exhibition, 'Polytechnic'. The exhibition collected a number of experimental works

in video, film and installation from the late 1970s. Swann represented Berlin through a series of ever-closer stills of the city, its people and spaces accompanied by a music soundtrack that is by turns both militaristic and jazzy. The images suggest a tale of espionage that is a 'Berlin' of the imagination, sourced as they were from found imagery to reconstruct a Berlin behind the wall.

Both these works were included in the exhibition 'Slide Tape' held at Vivid Projects, Birmingham and Loughborough University Arts (2013) that brought together a number of works with the aim of appraising these for a contemporary audience.<sup>1</sup> There has been a renewed interest in the legacy of these works to a younger generation no longer familiar with the technologies it engaged. The interest comes not least from those artists re-engaging these forms and technologies in their contemporary work. Amongst these are Corin Sworn and Tris Vonna-Michell; Sworn's work *Endless Renovation* (2010) and Vonna-Michell's works *A Watermark: Capitol Complex* (2013) and *Postscript II (Berlin)* (2013). These artists use of slide-tape continues to further the formal aspects of its legacy to contemporary practice aligning them as they do, in these works, with recollection, memory and narrative.

The contemporary use of slide-tape suggests that it has proved to be more resilient than previously thought and the form persists in providing artists with an available aesthetic language, one amongst many in the current visual field. This, although not continuous use of the form, does suggest that it occupies a place in both historical and contemporary practices. Whilst slide-tape is still seen to be resistant to categorisation and is not claimed by either artists' film or moving image cultures it reverts to being a singular practice. Much of the work described above, has suggested that a heterogeneous view of artists' moving image media and the historical moments that produced it can only be offered when slide-tape is included in

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<sup>1</sup> The exhibition and events series Slide Tape, co-curated by Yasmeen Baig-Clifford (Director, Vivid Projects) and Mo White (aka Dr Mary C White, Loughborough University) included works by Black Audio Film Collective, *Expeditions One: Signs of Empire* (1984); Nina Danino, *First Memory* (1980); William Furlong, *Audio Arts Supplement – 9 Works for Tape Slide* (1978); Sunil Gupta, *Heaven* (1980); Tina Keane, *Clapping Songs* (1981); Cordelia Swann, *Mysteries of Berlin* (1979–82) and Ian Breakwell, *BC/AD* (2005–2007).

its present narratives. It is clear that the range of artists who had worked in slide-tape forms and technologies during this earlier period did further establish themselves making this an approach that had a clear relationship to film and the broader field of installation. Moving image installations have become familiar to visitors to galleries and museums for at least the past five decades and the publication of the histories of artists' film and moving image are becoming ever more frequent but slide-tape is rarely, if ever, mentioned in these accounts. Given the range of works that have been discussed, the distinct aesthetic that these works produced and the status of the artists and filmmakers who made them, slide-tape can be seen to have made a contribution to the development of artists' moving image media and the form should be acknowledged in future accounts. After all, isn't it about time?

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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