

Jonas Balsaitis

**SPACE TIME STRUCTURES**

Guest Curator : Carolyn Barnes

22 October - 21 November 1993



Australian Centre for Contemporary Art



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The animated films of Jonas Balsaitis evolved from a will to extend the conceptual and perceptual parameters of abstract painting. Balsaitis began experimenting with film in 1970, a time when the very validity of painting was under sustained attack both in Australia and overseas. Since the late 1960s Balsaitis had been making large, abstract paintings concerned with the perceptual reception of the physical world, particularly the related experience of time and space. He had a strong interest in the whole history of western metaphysics and representational science, and saw his painting as an extension of this lineage. The surfaces of these works were inscribed with complex, patterned grids, creating dynamic, spatial effects which undermined the physicality of the canvas. Increasingly, however, it occurred to Balsaitis that the inherent character of cinema, its intrinsic temporality and dependence on the action of light moving through space, represented a more potent arena for the exploration of relative principles of time and space.<sup>1</sup> Over the next eight years he all but stopped painting to work in animation, his engagement with cinema culminating in the completion in 1977 of his major work in film, *Space Time Structures*, a thirty-three minute magnum opus involving the production and photographing of 48,000 separate frames.<sup>2</sup>

Initially Balsaitis' investigations were largely confined to drawing as he explored ways of animating abstract imagery. He developed a system whereby small shifts in the position of certain elements of a pattern created a sense of oscillating movement in space, while more dynamic movement could be simulated by the contraction and expansion of simple geometric and organic shapes superimposed over these moving, patterned fields. In 1972 Balsaitis began work on his first film *Process/Processed* (1972-1975). Despite its highly resolved investigation of the dynamics of human history as perceived from a western viewpoint, this work was largely discounted by Balsaitis on the basis that it was too involved in film production and filmic processes. He built up this work from a complex assembly of found photographs and film excerpts gleaned from the vast body of mainstream documentary film and photography produced during the 1950s and 1960s. Balsaitis used *Process/Processed* to comment on the progressivist ethos of western industrial culture, highlighting its dreams of technological and consumer utopia whilst pointing to its blindness to the value of both the natural world and all other cultures and ways of life.

In *Space Time Structures* (1972-1977) Balsaitis strove to engage the inherent conditions of the medium in a more rigorous sense, aiming to create a film wholly focused on the psychological and physiological perception of time and space. To this end, abstraction was central to Balsaitis' project. Whilst not discounting film's representa-

tional capacity, Balsaitis largely rejected its ability to picture the world, embracing the medium's technological and physical reality as a metaphor for the perception of space in time. For Balsaitis the conditions according to which a film was projected represented the dynamic, if somewhat ironic, interaction of time and space. The film ran through the projector in time but fixed the filmic image in one place. He was driven by the belief that if the nature of the projected image was of a particular order, the collision of filmic time and a static sense of space and place would reveal something of the phenomenal reception of the physical world. Even so *Space Time Structures* is punctuated with brief segments of 'real world' filming. These sequences (which also begin and end the film) are largely shot in time lapse and feature images of a calm sea, a heavy shadow moving up the face of a high-rise apartment block, shreds of plastic flapping in the wind, and a strange, animated object made from an hour glass and a wildly oscillating set of scales. If these segments establish the central thematic concerns of the film, stressing its relationship to real world conditions, for Balsaitis the best way to investigate time and space lay with the development of an abstract visual language conceived in relation to the basic nature of film.

Balsaitis felt that in most films the intrinsic relationship of motion and stasis (which he saw as defining the cinematic experience) was masked by the effect of represented action and camera movement. Collapsing the concept of cinema with the existing paradigm of painting, he strove to make,

a motion picture, a film for the cinema,  
that would stay in the same screen space  
and was meant to be a painting...in  
movement and light.<sup>3</sup>

To achieve this there was to be no horizontal or vertical movement across the surface of the image. This would undermine the sense of formal closure, extending the parameters of the cinematic image beyond the circumscribed rectangle of coloured light projected on the screen. By contrast Balsaitis' animated, overlaid patterns created a sense of scintillated movement pulsing through the image yet contained within the defined edges of the film format.

Balsaitis' approach to animation was dependent on the formal components of painting - colour, space, and line - a set of elements highly privileged in contemporary critical debates concerning the nature of an advanced modernist practice during the late 1960s in Australia. Yet their translation to cinema and the medium of light created an image which did anything but signify late modernism's retreat into the formal essence of art as asserted by the integrity of the flat plane of the canvas. In *Space Time*



*Structures* the ever-shifting fields of line and shape created illusionistic depth which denied the planar surface of the movie screen. Here was a pocket of space floating in the dark of the cinema, energised by fragments of strobing, flickering light, organised as a multiplicity of coloured bands, shapes and veils. The film also referenced contemporary pop/cultural forms such as psychedelia, drawing into its fabric the marginalized realm of mass culture.

The production of *Space Time Structures* was a long-term project involving many elements and processes. Two discrete groups of drawings formed the basis of the film. One was a set of complex, perspectival patterns in line. The other a set of flat, black and white images that featured simple central shapes. The diverse combination of these two sets of images created all sense of depth and movement in the film. By step animation, that is photographing a frame at a time, Balsaitis could use these drawings to create various small sequences of film, that in turn could be repeated, reversed, combined and recombined. Furthermore, any one image could be photographed in sequence any number of times, appearing on the screen as a brief flicker or a more sustained image. From these possibilities the film was gradually built up over time. Colour was added once the animation was complete, in a continuous process in which the film was exposed on three separate occasions to the colours cyan, magenta and yellow, their interaction creating all other colours on the film.

Once the visual dimension of the film was finished, Balsaitis began work on the soundtrack. The 'music' was made in several impromptu sessions by Asher Bilu, Mike Brown and John Mathews, who used various instruments from the human voice, a didgeridoo, tuba, banjo, ukulele, and a set of drums, to a one-stringed instrument made by Bilu from an old phonograph horn and a stick, and played with a bow. The musicians had never played together before and the recording sessions were a matter of total improvisation. Balsaitis took the raw musical material and mixed it with everyday noises he had recorded which ranged from the sounds of frogs, crickets, trains, a chainsaw, a flushing toilet, and ocean waves, to the clatter of the film processing machine and a ticking clock, the latter reiterating the concept of time whenever it broke into the sound track. If the nature of sounds suggested the random and aleatory, Balsaitis matched them to the images in a highly structured way, the sound track becoming another field of pattern extending through the film.

In all Balsaitis spent three years making the drawings for *Space Time Structures*, two years animating and colouring them, and a further two years cutting and mixing the music. The film premiered at the Longford Cinema in Melbourne in 1977, to the general reaction that it consti-

tuted a visual and aural assault on the audience whose expectations were more in the area of narrative cinema. Such discomfort, however, was Balsaitis' explicit intention. By creating something simultaneously compelling and abrasive, he aimed to heighten the viewer's awareness of their own perceptual processes, highlighting perception's role in the subjective understanding of the phenomenal world. Balsaitis took the film to New York in 1979 where it was shown at Millennium, The Kitchen, Franklin Furnace and the Martha Graham Institute. By that time, however, he had already moved back to painting after re-acknowledging its value as a means of exploring the surface of the visible world, though in 1982 he went on to produce one further film, *Erratica*, a twenty minute montage of images which vaguely documents a journey undertaken by Balsaitis from Australia through the Americas to Easter Island.

While Balsaitis actually travelled to these places, *Erratica* is more concerned with the mythological role of pre-industrial societies and the natural world in western modernist culture. Like all of Balsaitis' films *Erratica* presents the viewer with a perplexing torrent of unidentified images which at the outset seem to defy interpretation. Yet patterns in their sequencing soon emerge to suggest the semblance of meaning. By juxtaposing shots of contemporary city skylines with images of ancient monuments and abstracted representations of water, Balsaitis develops an ambiguous commentary around ideas of nature and culture, civilisation and historical processes. It is only towards the end of the film, when fleeting representations of the 19th century painter Paul Gauguin and an unidentified European mariner/explorer are introduced into the flow of images, that Balsaitis suggests that the value of other cultures and places is largely displaced in western society except where they serve the material needs of the west and its fantasies of the primal, the eternal and the exotic.

In the course of his involvement with film, Jon Balsaitis has largely rejected the narrative potential of the medium in order to investigate its capacity to assemble vast sequences of images in rapid succession. While he would recognise *Process/Processed* and *Erratica* to be more closely allied to cinematic tradition in their evident linearity and representationalism, like *Space Time Structures* they depend for much of their meaning and effect on pure visual and aural impact. And despite their diverse form and content all three films revolve around the various means by which western society has sought to conceptualise and order the material world, using the inherent mechanisms and character of film as a sign for the impact of technology on those very structures and perceptions.

Carolyn Barnes  
August 1993

#### Notes

1. Balsaitis gained access to film technology when quite fortuitously the Melbourne Filmmaker's Co-op held its first meeting at Pinacotheca during Balsaitis' first solo show at the Gallery in 1970, and various Co-op members expressed interest in his painting. Fred Harden and Michael Lee, in particular, were helpful in getting Balsaitis access to film equipment, film processing and technical information before he acquired some equipment of his own on receipt of an experimental film grant from the Australian Film Commission in 1975 which also enabled him to complete *Space Time Structures*.

2. The film was also conceived to be shown at varying projection speeds, its running time ranging between 100, 50, 33, 17 and 13 minutes.

3. Interview between the author and Jon Balsaitis, 30-7-1993.

## JONAS BALSAITIS

Born: 1948 - Germany  
Lives in Melbourne  
Studied: Preston Institute of Technology  
Prahran Technical College  
National Gallery School of Art

### Filmography

1970 - Experiments with film animation - *The Hand and the Machine*  
1975 - *Processed Process*, 16mm, colour, 55 minutes  
1977 - *Space Time Structures*, 16 mm, colour, variable speeds, 100, 50, 33, 17 and 13 minutes  
1982 - *Erratica*, 16mm, colour 20 minutes

### Selected Individual Exhibitions

Pinacotheca Gallery, Melbourne  
Paintings - 1970, 1972, 1978, 1981, 1985, 1988, 1990 and 1992  
Drawings - 1976  
Etchings - 1989

### Selected Group Exhibitions

1973 - *Recent Australian Art* - Art Gallery of NSW  
1975 - *Artists' Artists*, National Gallery of Victoria  
1975 - *Project 9* (Documents, film, video) - Art Gallery of NSW  
1976 - Drawing; Some Definitions, Ewing and George Paton Galleries, Melbourne; Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane  
1982 - *Preston To Phillip*, Reconnaissance Gallery, Melbourne  
1982 - *5 Artists*, Victorian College of the Arts Gallery  
1986 - *Pinacotheca at Watters*, Watters Gallery, Sydney  
1986 - *The Source*, Centre for the Arts Gallery, University of Tasmania

### Selected Bibliography

*Recent Australian Art* (catalogue), Art Gallery of NSW, 1973.  
Bruce Adams, 'Impossible Art?', *Hemisphere*, May, 1974  
Jonas Balsaitis, 'Processed Process', *Cantrills Filmnotes*, Nos.23/24 Double Issue, July 1976, pp.47-53  
Jennifer Phipps, 'Films by Artists', *Art and Australia*, Vol.18, No.1, Spring 1980, pp.45-51  
*Australian Independent Film*, Australian Film Commission, 1982  
Arthur Cantrill, 'Erratica, the film by Jonas Balsaitis', *Cantrills Filmnotes*, Nos.45/46 Double Issue, October 1984, pp.6-9  
'Exhibition Commentary', *Art and Australia*, Vol.23, No.4, Winter, 1986, p.471

### Collections

National Gallery of Victoria  
Art Gallery of NSW  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra  
National Film Library, Canberra  
Australian Film Institute Vincent Library  
Australian Film Commission  
Parliament House, Canberra  
Private Collections in Australia and USA

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Front Cover: Still image from *Space Time Structures*, 1977