"433" continues to resonate with its audiences over 50 years after its making, when Fluxus and Minimalist fashions and philosophies have been superseded, perhaps the answer is this: good video art must possess a quality—conceptual, aesthetic, but even better both—that holds currency beyond its current time.

When good, ‘bad’ video can offer a pertinent reflection of our society’s home-grown aesthetic, it can exemplify the post-modern de-centralisation of identities, highlight our preoccupation with voyeurism and inversely performative self-promotion. But beyond a pertinence to the present, or even an attachment to the art historical past, artists such as Mansfield and Lamson are shaping the contemporary nature of the medium: an expansive relationship between the time-based and the timeless. With a sophisticated negotiation of the dual spaces of video, the site of performance and the pictorial plane of the screen, video art is both durational and enduring. 1, 2

1 Michael Fried, Art and Objecthood, 1967.
2 Mansfield, extract from artist’s biography, 2008.
3 Kelly Doley & Di Smith, curators of Performing for the Camera, iterate this point in the exhibition catalogue, 2008.
4 24 (2007) is an American action/drama series that takes place in real-time over 24 hour-long episodes.
5 William Mansfield, extract from an artist statement, 2008.

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In Audrey Lam’s Under Development (2007), two detectives investigating a murder seek answers in an ominous, half-built structure. Close attention to the lush, inky compositions reveals the frozen temporality of a Brisbane landmark: the film records the historic erection of the Gallery of Modern Art.

Like all time-based art, Lam’s film is linear—it unfolds over time. In the course of its unfolding, we see the razed land of Kurilpa in South Brisbane—once a special meeting ground for traditional owners, latterly a refuge for the homeless and dispossessed—as it accretes concrete, steel, pylons, glass: structure. The capture and preservation, in the film’s elliptical film noir narrative, of this key historical moment, means that there is also time folded into each of the film’s black-and-white 16mm film frames. Under Development’s simultaneous folding and unfolding of time recalls philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s way of seeing the world in terms of the infinite, organic, reciprocal notion of ‘folds’, an approach in which ‘(f)olding-unfolding no longer simply means tension-release, contraction-dilation, but enveloping, developing, involution-evolution’.

Deleuze’s ideas of multiplicity, becoming and time are even more developed in his second book on cinema, in which he furnishes us with the conception of the ‘crystal-image’. 2 Drawing on Bergson’s ideas of memory, Deleuze’s crystal-image forms the cornerstone of his thinking about moving image time. For Deleuze, cinema time is multiple and becoming, and its ‘flows’ can be ‘differentiated’ into ‘presents which pass, and that of pasts which are preserved’. 3 As Donato Totaro notes, Deleuze’s ‘crystal-image’ of film-time “fuses the pastness of the recorded event with the presentness of its viewing.” 4 Lam’s film is a perfect example of this ‘crystal image’: it both preserves pasts and is experienced as ‘presents which pass’.

It’s also a critical work emerging in a period when something thrilling is happening in Brisbane. Just as an involution of a prism unleashes a series of brilliant, leaping refractions, Deleuze’s crystal-image offers a kaleidoscopic array of possibilities for thinking about time-based art. If we look through the prism of ‘time’ at the figures weaving in and out of Brisbane’s creative undergrowth, what do we see?

The creative foment of the late 2000s in and around Brisbane has thrown up a particular body of work centrally concerned with articulating the poetics of time. Ross Manning’s handcrafted sonic machines are an unusual place to begin a discussion of time-based art practice, which customarily comprises video art, performance and experimental film. However, the young artist’s work – one of many ‘crystalline signs’ of the autonomous development of innovative local practice in this steaming, teeming subtropical town – is critically constituted in duration and temporality. A ‘typical’ Manning construct combines electronic circuits with custom-made mechanical devices derived from domestic and household objects. _Transfer_ I, the floor-to-ceiling assemblage included in the Institute of Modern Art’s _Fresh Cut_ show, for instance, involves the use of wind-activated switches which, when activated by a sail connected to a pendulum, strike tuned metal cups, creating continuous semi-random sonic compositions. A fitful, shivering, motorised being, _Transfer_ I’s spindly limbs and grinding motors exude both power and vulnerability. Manning’s work belongs in the tradition of kinetic sculpture, which in turn overlaps with centuries of human interest in synaesthesia and transensoriality – confusion or conflation of sensual pathways (‘seeing’ sound, ‘hearing’ colours, etc.).

Energy unfolds in his work, from swaying sails and wobbling wires, into resonant clunks, pulsing drones, and sudden stentorian blasts. Materially and aesthetically, however, Manning’s work transcends what might seem at first to be Kube Goldbergian mechanical theatrics, through a subtle critique of technology.

For some, the phrase 'experimental electrician' is only marginally less scary than 'home dentistry'. But in Manning's case, home-made-ness is absolutely central to the work, by day an electronics repairer, Manning moonlights as a creative electronic 'abuser'. One look at a Manning construct, all bristling wires, trembling coils and gaffer tape patches, and we know we are in the sphere of the artisanal and the aleatoric. The artist's DIY approach to sound and object creation focuses on 'the element of imperfection' which comes from 'butchering bits and pieces from household electronics'.

The principles of electronics are a rigid set of rules—controlling excited electrons into a stable form', Manning explains. 'The circuits I build still work, but are loose and at their most primitive. Unstable and always faulty. Switches sometimes make contact, and sometimes not.' While Manning is quick to admit that finances 'play a part' in his choice of materials, he is also interested in exploring the 'machine reliance' of contemporary life, particularly the idea of 'perfect' machines, 'impossible' and the divide between functional and faulty. This conjures up Martin Heidegger's notion of 'the broken tool': as the tool's nature is not to assert itself, but to foreground the project it is supposed to achieve, only certain actions can make it conspicuous, such as breakage, malfunction—or deliberate interference with an experimental agenda. 6

This attitude of renovation and curiosity towards technology—rather than an uncritical adoption of the latest and best—signals a key artistic evolution. Like many artists in the highly evolved world of experimental music, Manning's creative trajectory was via 'making music with a computer, sampling stuff and cutting up'. But 'after a few years of this method of music making I really wanted to make music with something more tangible—a sound-producing object that you could play, interact with live.'

A similar interest in the performative possibilities of technology characterises the work of Sally Golding and Joel Stern, who together perform as Abject Leader. Visual artist Golding prepares exquisite 16mm films, which are projected live in various 'expanded cinema' configurations, while sound artist Stern creates intricate, live electro-acoustic sonic landscapes. Abject Leader's work belongs squarely in one of the most vital traditions of avant-garde film, expanded cinema, which critically reimagines the moving image as an opportunity for live experimentation. One of the most heartening developments of underground art since 2000 is the international wave of interest in 'live cinema'—what Paul Arthur has noted as 'the rekindled vocabularies of film performance whose commitment is to an ethos of spontaneity, if not a site-specific ephemeralism, that ruptures the privatised and quietist dynamics of avant-garde presentation linking static spectators to a static screen'. 7

While Abject Leader's 'enlivening' of the cinema—the crafting of cinematic work for site-specific, ephemeral events—inevitably draws comparisons with Walter Benjamin's famous essay on technological reproducibility, another of the philosopher's lesser-known writings potentially offers an even more useful framework for the 'placement' of this contemporary work. Both members of Abject Leader work substantially with 'old' technology—Golding with 16mm celluloid film, projectors, lenses and filters, and Stern with amplified and alteredethnic, folk and toy instruments. In a 1929 essay on Surrealism, Benjamin praised the 'profane illumination' that the encounter with 'outmoded technologies' can offer. Much like the 'broken tool', Benjamin thought that the 'revolutionary energies that appear in the outmoded' could effect powerful forces on spectators accustomed to the relentless one-way drive of modern technological development. 8 In the era of near-complete digital hegemony, artists who choose to work with obsolete, analogue or simply low-tech devices are making not just an aesthetic decision, but a political one. It is a statement which speaks back to the power 'high-tech' wields over our collective imagination.

If some might see a devolution in Manning's creative journey—from the immaculate finish of cutting-edge computer sampling programs to the clanking, chancy determinations of rickety home-made machines—others may see in his contrapositions a connection between the problems of 'the tool' and a critical discourse about 'new' technologies. For Manning, 'electricity is interesting to me because I feel like it's the basis of 'technology'; and notes 'we are so techno-reliant, without it, totally everything in 'western' countries would collapse'.

Audrey Lam adopts a similarly critical stance to the dominance of 'new media' rhetoric, suggesting that 'it's disappointing...how quick some people are to label [film] nostalgic'. Lam's practice encompasses the use of digital photography and editing, but also photocovers, celluloid stills and motion picture film. 'It's film even really that old?' she asks. 'When if we think about other art media...I mean, people have been casting in bronze for hundreds of years'.

Golding and Stern's work similarly embraces some of the conveniences offered by digital technologies, while remaining rooted in an analogue media practice somewhere between 'folk' and 'fine' art traditions. Golding recently toured her self-processed celluloid films and homemade contraptions to Europe and the US, where even the most jaded of avant-garde film and media art audiences were captivated by her unique
conflation of film, performance and intervention. Meanwhile, Stern’s recent solo CD, *Objects Masks Props* (released on the Naturestrip label, 2008), critically engages with the idea of fidelity by re-recording pristine sonic material in outdoor environments using battery-operated amplifiers and radios, deliberately muddying the sterile perfection of the original studio sounds. In Stern’s sounds, Golding and Lam’s film work, and Manning’s machines, the intensity of the materials employed all express a poetic unity, crystallising in moments where pristine clarity nests in fuzzy, dirty ambiguities. For Stern, ‘we are searching for a kind of presence’ that we cannot find in digital work, and it won’t be found there (even though digital work has its own ‘present’ qualities).

Lam admits to feeling ‘deeply conflicted’ about her choices of technology:

> On the one hand I love what film does, how it looks... Particularly how it feels, its sculptural, tactile quality. I like how, when you edit on a Steenbeck [film editing machine], the film unavoidably gets scratched – I love the traces, the dust and pops and sparkles, they are an organic part of working with film... But on the other hand, working with film takes so long, it is so labour-intensive, and I find myself feeling guilty, feeling like I should be more productive!

Lam is currently completing a new work employing digital-photography (though, ironically, she reports that this has just made her desire to work with film again ‘more urgent’).

In today’s climate of new media supremacy, some media historians are asking questions about the effects of continuous technological upheaval, obsolence and, to quote Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey Pingree, the ‘causal plots of technological innovation’, 9 Carolyn Marvin reminds us that ‘media are not fixed natural objects’ but are in fact ‘constructed complexes of habits, beliefs and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication’. 10 Paul Duguid cautions against the ‘supersessionist trope’ in which each new technological type vanquishes or subsumes its predecessors, and insists that properly historical approaches are taken to inculcate against the pernicious effects of teleology. 11 English film artist and scholar Nicky Hamlyn is even blunter, arguing:

> (The democratisation of moving image technology is achieved at a high price: the idiot-proofing of all aspects of production, resulting in cameras which effortlessly, relentlessly generate perfectly focused, exposed and colour-balanced images, stands as a metaphor for the increasingly administered and conformist world in which we live, wherein harmless protest is encouraged but true dissenters are demonised or ridiculed. 12

By deploying bygone and superseded technologies which engage in a dialectic of the past with the present, Stern and Golding, Lam and Manning resist what Gitelman and Pingree call the ‘linear progress unthinkingly ascribed to modern technology’. 13 In the case of Golding and Stern, this engagement extends into the curatorial realm, through their work in OtherFilm, where they curate and exhibit moving image work from cinema’s hidden historical by-ways and forgotten back-alleys. 14

As Deleuze notes, the crystal-image shapes time as a constant, two-way mirror that splits ‘the present’ in two different directions, ‘one of which is launched towards the future while the other falls into the past.’ 15 In the work of these four contemporary Brisbane time-based artists we can see crystallised a generous, multiple approach to the question of ‘the medium’ in the encounter - not with the latest, shiniest or most advanced, but with its opposite: the small, the mutant and abused, the hand-crafted, the messy and ambiguous, and above all, the poetic and personal.

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3. ibid, pg8.
5. The work of one of the key proponents of twentieth-century kinetic sculpture, Jean Tingling, was recently exhibited at the recent Sydney Biennale: the A+J Gallery of New South Wales displayed mechanical sculptures and also showed films about Tingling’s work.
14. In this work takes the form of historical programming. retrospectives, re-examinations and re-stageings of historic expanded cinema.
15. The phrase ‘looking backward and looking forward’ was used to describe the special Visi-on-Sight film performance night at Brisbane’s IMA during 2007’s 1st OtherFilm Festival. See www.otherfilm.org

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