I attended the 2016 Artists’ Moving Image Festival (AMIF) as a spectator used to watching films either at movie theatres, when time allows, or much more often on her laptop, trying desperately to abstract herself from her own living room and replicate that blessed isolation of the darkened hall. This is where I come from—what gave my experience at AMIF the character of the ‘encounter’ surprising and overwhelming, as first encounters often are.

I left a (for once) sunny Glasgow behind and entered the crepuscular darkness of Tramway, the gallery-cum-theatre-cum-garden opened in 1988 on the premises of the former Coplawhill Tramcar Works. In the theatre, I met a rather familiar disposition—rows of seats overlooking a big screen—only to later find myself welcomed by an unexpected acted performance, opening the festival. The performers exchanged multiple personalities—they were three different versions of Jérôme Bel and then Suzanna Linke—and commenced a strange dance in which one of the performers’ body was now revealed now hidden behind a hand-held screen: Making People Up the first programme curated by Sarah Tripp was about to start.

From my seat on the far right of the balcony overlooking the stage I could peep at much larger portions of the performer’s hidden body than the rest of the audience. Was I intended to? Was it supposed to be so? My eagerness to grasp was just confronted with a show that seemed to defy that reassuring self-containedness of the distributed film text—I was evidently partaking in the performance with my own situated perceptions and idiosyncratic questions. That prologue was an invitation to give up my ‘aims to (re)master the show, to tame the unruly multiplicity of its meanings, to pronounce a verdict, and to assign value.’ I was part of the creative labour, which has converged into this article.

The mise-en-scène of Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz’s Opaque set the action within an old public swimming pool, ironically doubling our own viewing situation, itself situated in a formerly abandoned public building. At first, a
curtain of pink smoke screened off our gaze; then another curtain of pink velvet fabric opened, revealing a performer mimetically dressed in a striped pink chenille suit à la Kenzo x H&M. The film seemed to ask whether, while granting a certain ‘right to opacity’ these overlapping screens (projection screen, smokescreen, curtain and garment) were not by the same token disguising also our ‘enemies’, making them less recognisable. With Jean Genet, one of the performers concluded: ‘it takes an act of love to overcome this barrier’—both the dividing barrier between friend and enemy and, we might speculate, the projection screen.  

Aniara Oman’s multiple cover versions of Roxy Music’s song More Than This skilfully played with the idea of the Greek chorus—with its masked performers rehearsing the programme’s main emotions and moods—bringing us back to the romantic melancholic atmosphere of Lost in Translation (2003), at least until the hard core version kicked in. The following screening, Jérôme Bel’s The Last Performance, came at first as a revelation—we finally discovered who Jérôme Bel and Suzanna Linke really were—only to become convoluted again with a new interplay and dispersion of identities, now including that of Andre Agasi, Hamlet (of course) and Calvin Klein.

I entered the theatre a few minutes after the start of the afternoon act, which turned out to be my personal highlight from the festival. At first, the new disposition of Tramway 1, whose seats had now been drawn much closer to the screen, left me quite perplexed, as I was sure the programme I had just consulted promised three performances and only one screening. But where was the performance supposed to take place, now that the audience was occupying the proscenium? Moreover, all I could see from my latecomer’s seat were only projected images.

The vertical frame of Katrina Palmer’s The Great Idea of the Higher Horsemanship, shot with a mobile phone camera, showed us a succession of title cards, scribbled down at the same time as the narrator’s voice introduced us to a time travelling circus and the somewhat mysterious events surrounding the death of Susannah Darby, caused by the collapse of her husband Pablo Fanque’s Circus in 1847. Palmer’s film traced back that night’s tragic events, reimagining the Leeds University Library dome as the big top. Various sheets and several written accounts superimposed one upon the other, while multiple temporalities begun vertiginously layering up, unfolding alternative deadly scenarios. Then, as if through a space-time rewind, each layer, each trace, each handwritten title card and picture disappeared one by one, leaving us exactly where we started.

The return to the horizontal 16:9 frame of Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s Vapour came as a brief relief, before I once again begun chasing characters’ identities (were they revolutionaries?), unravelling images and longing for origins—where did all that vapour originate? Sarah Forrest’s In One Moment She Wrote Me As Headless came as a visual ode to rhythm—syncopated like a Nike advertisement, hypnotising like Germaine Dulac’s pure abstract films. White titles quickly flicked on the screen, word by word: there was a hole on the living room wall and I was about to enter it. To this day, I cannot say whether I entered it or not, nor what happened next, as I became entranced in the close-up of the curtain’s heavy fabric, folding and unfolding, in its wavy, serpentine
movement, synchronised with the metal score accompanying the images—I was headless.

I finally managed to sit a little closer to the screen, amidst the audience. The following encounter was an intimate one, with Kate Briggs’ spoken-essay, *thinner, thicker, mixeder, smoother*, and with the character of Kate Gray from Iris Murdoch’s *The Nice and the Good*—‘a character with her soft furry shoulders and touchable yellow hair, who is clearly not’ Briggs, but with whom she shares the sound of her name. Siting at a desk between the screen and the audience, her shoulders huddled, Briggs shared her guilty pleasure, that ‘small hot charge of recognition, or a provisional agitated complicity, that is seduction of early friendship’ with a character.

I must admit I left the auditorium still wondering why Palmer and Forrest’s works had been presented as performances and not just as screenings. I asked around and discovered that Palmer had performed and shot the whole video live in the theatre and that Forrest’s film was silent with music playing live and that I had missed it all from the far spot where I was sitting. That was a revelation. What struck me the most, however, was that I had for the whole duration of *The Great Idea of the Higher Horsemanship* inhabited a diegetic world I thought had been well orchestrated beforehand, removed from this here and now—its narration was for me secured in a temporality belonging to the past. Those images, Palmer’s writing, the audience and I had instead shared the very same time and space for the whole time. (It might just as well have been the case that I had always been headless, just without knowing).

The final act started off with a new music performance by Aniara Oman, followed by Holly Antrum’s film, *Catalogue*, on artist Jennifer Pike’s concrete poetry. Day one concluded with *Assumptions*, a performance by Siân Robinson Davies and a member of the public. The two, allegedly unknown to each other prior to the performance, began by exchanging mutual assumptions—they could have virtually said anything—revealing their own (pre) assumptions about the other. That suspended unpredictability in the seconds before they decided what to say filled me with anticipation. That intriguing game of (pre) assumptions, however, soon turned out to be a lot ‘safer’ than I was expecting (and would have perhaps desired), as the two were exchanging now speculations about the other’s cat and tasteful shoes. Not only did that game of assumptions stage the participants’ act of mutual recognition and de-codification; it reflected also a truth about its audience: we were mostly white and middle class—there seemed to be no immediate contradiction nor reason for conflict to burst amongst us—or was it there?

On Sunday, clouds of smoke and a screen with a quote from underground filmmaker George Kuchar welcomed us to day two. As a kid, Kuchar would escape from his classmates, ‘urban urchins who belched up egg-creams and clouds of nicotine’ by finding shelter in the local movie theatre, only to be later confronted with a new violent imagery catered to an adult (male) audience: images of ‘Indian squaws eaten alive by fire ants, debauched pagans coughing up blood as the temples of God crashed down on their intestines, and naked monstrosities made from rubber that lumbered out of radiation-poisoned waters to claw the flesh off women who had just lost their virginity.’ Ed Webb-Ingall’s programme, *Between You and the Screen* took it exactly from where we had
left off the day before, exploring the shared social and political space between the screen and the audience—a space that “belongs to both an ‘I’ and a ‘we.’”

Webb-Ingall (de)structured the programme in three parts, according to a politics of “interruptions, disruptions and interventions.”6 Feminist film distributor Cinenova and designer Kaisa Lassinaro curated the first part, Whatever Women Do Interests Me, Tremendously. Even If It’s God-awful followed by Q&A. It was partially inspired by their own upcoming publication, Interviews from the Video Data Bank Volume 1, a transmedial translation of eight video interviews with feminist artists into printed media. What we saw were some of the ‘raw’ materials—the now digitised video footage—that inspired the project. In A Spy in the House That Ruth Built, Vanalyne Green infiltrated the all-male world of baseball, reading it as a gendered space and a metaphor of a desired return to the mother’s womb—an analogy reminiscent of feminist psychological theories of men’s vagina envy complex. The slightly yellowed tones of Green’s video-essay, its grains and fades gave these images the look of something peculiarly historical—part of a feminist video history in the making.

The filmmaking collective Digital Desperados curated the afternoon programme, offering a kaleidoscope of images at the margins of the social and media sphere, at the borders of visibility. Thick stripes of colour, manually applied on Super 8 film, obscured the view of urban landscapes in Thiriza Cuthand’s Sight. The film drew the filmmaker’s own experience of temporary blindness and bipolar disorder close to her cousin’s schizophrenia and tragically self-induced blindness, claiming that “anyone of our moral abilities could be gone at any moment, like sight or sanity, or both.” What was precluded from view, instead, in Nabeela Vega’s films Migration - Farez and Migration - Nilofar were the very subjects of her stories. A sleek golden veil covered Farez and Nilofar—the same stereotypical veil Western media circulate as universal signifier for “Muslim.” As several point-of-view shots showed us the world through Farez’s and Nilofar’s eyes, while we learned about their arrival in the US days before 9/11 and its impact on their lives as Muslim migrants, something of their individual selves remained irremediably precluded to us.

With Alice Brook and Beatrice Loft Schulz’s film and performance Domestic Melodrama, Tramway 1 became the scene of the two friends’ repeated attempts to kill each other. With a mixture of live sound (of thudding bodies, screaming voices, mumbling and chewing) and post-produced soundtrack, the gloomy, claustrophobic atmosphere of their domestic fights trespassed the screen, infecting the space between us, around us, on our right, everywhere.

AMIF closing performance, Jamie Crewe’s Potash Lesson, combined the lecture format with a projected desktop performance. The infamous catalogue of French psychiatrist Jean-Martin Charcot’s patients, Iconographie photographique de la Salpetriere (1876-80), provided one of Crewe’s points of departure. As the lecture illustrated, Salpetriere was built in 1656 on the site of a former gunpowder (saltpetre) factory as a hospital for women—psychiatric patients, criminals, epileptics, as well as prostitutes and the poor. Crewe’s projected desktop displayed images of women, whom Charcot would often coerce into re-enacting pathological behaviours before the camera, with the help of electric, erotic and chemical stimulation, forcing them to inhale ether, tobacco smoke and amyl nitrate. In one of his earlier works, Saltpetre
Portraits—of which Crewe showed snippets, piled up on the desktop—he subversively appropriated Charcot’s role of metteur en scène, asking a gay model to inhale amyl nitrate (poppers) and then strike a pose from the Salpetriere’s catalogue. The model, however, now identified herself as trans—a change that disparaged the relevancy and legitimacy of Crewe’s portraits, questioning his ownership rights over the recorded images. Rather than resolve those contradictions, Crewe’s opened them up, placing himself centre-stage in place of the model and acting at the same time as metteur en scène and doped object of display, repeatedly sniffing poppers during his lecture. Potash Lesson interrogated the ethics and politics of the recorded image—a medium that in the nineteenth century immortalised Salpetriere patients’ every symptom, spasm and posture, endowing them with a coerced, outlived visibility, now available on our desktop at the reach of a click.

Media and art scholars have addressed moving images’ institutional promiscuity within and without the movie theatre, on web platforms, urban screens, desktops and the art gallery. AMIF featured more than one institutional model, encouraging hybrid forms of spectatorship. Like the movie theatre it comprised a concentrated time of viewing, a defined temporality, severed from our everyday life. Unlike cinema, however, artists’ moving images “trespassed” the two-dimensionality of the screen (to the point of deserting it), appropriated the stage, engulfed it and incorporated the audience, foregrounding a multi-focal space. It is precisely within this transmedial space in-between that the “flux of images,” flowing from the viewer to the performers, and from the screen back to the spectator, turned into what Alexander Kluge called “the film in the spectator’s head,” bringing into being a new, imaginative creation.

1 Hito Steyerl, Is a Museum a Factory?, e-flux 7 (June-August 2009), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/07/61390/is-a-museum-a-factory/
2 AMIF 2016 Catalogue, 5-6 November 2016, Glasgow, UK.
3 Kate Briggs, thinner, thicker, mixeder, smoother: a list of books referred to, AMIF 2016.
6 AMIF 2016 Catalogue.