

<b>Institution:</b> University of Stirling
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> D36 Communication, Cultural and Media Studies
<b>Title of case study:</b> Uncovering and celebrating the work of Margaret Tait
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>Sarah Neely's research has played the central role in bringing under-represented and undiscovered work of Orcadian filmmaker and poet Margaret Tait to public attention. Neely's research has brought a greatly increased awareness of Tait's work, uncovering new material by Tait, including poetry and other writings, audio recordings, and films previously thought to be missing. Neely has (1) successfully championed Tait's artistic and cultural significance, widely publicizing her work nationally and internationally, directly through her role as curator, involving the screening and presenting of her work, as well as publication: and (2) substantially helped to develop holdings at the Scottish Screen Archive, also of artists' moving image agency LUX; as well as The Orkney Archive, The Pier Arts Centre (Orkney) and The Scottish Poetry Library.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>Margaret Tait's main body of work consists largely of short experimental films and one feature, <i>Blue Black Permanent</i> (1993). Tait was a truly independent filmmaker who established her own film company and self-financed most of her productions. Her work stretches across an impressive range of styles (eg hand-painted animations, film poetry or observational portraits of her immediate surroundings). Part of the explanation of the oversight of this major pioneer of UK experimental film is associated with the challenging working methods presented by her films, but it is also because of Tait's own reluctance to secure her work within archival collections. She also produced various writings, including poetry, the latter chiefly unpublished until Neely's engagement with her work.</p> <p>The research for the project began in 2005, when Neely organized an event on Tait at the Glasgow Film Theatre with <i>The Drout</i> magazine and Ian Goode (Glasgow University). Neely's research into Tait then developed with the support of two research grants from the Carnegie Foundation: Carnegie Small Research Grant (£2000, for research on Margaret Tait), June 2009 (a previous Small Research Grant of £2000 in 2006 began the process). This enabled Neely to make initial visits to Orkney to examine the extensive holdings of Tait's collection at the Orkney Archive. After Neely joined the University of Stirling in 2007, this research was developed further and in 2010, an AHRC Early Career Fellowship enabled Neely to deepen her research on Tait (2010, £50,187, for the creation of a book-length study of the filmmaker and an edited collection of Tait's poetry and writings).</p> <p>Although the bulk of Tait's short work was deposited with Scottish Screen Archive after her death in 1999, Neely's project found a great number of films to be in urgent need of attention. Several films that had been identified as 'missing' following the initial restoration project of her work (conducted by Peter Todd, Scottish Screen Archive and LUX) were recovered as part of Neely's research. These include <i>A Pleasant Place</i> (1969), Tait's only known narrative short, <i>Palindrome</i>, (1964), a rare film starring Stella Cartwright, also known as <i>The Muse of Rose St</i> and <i>My Room</i> (date unknown), a very early observational portrait of Tait's, shot in her room on Via Ancona (for which her company, Ancona Films, was named) where she lived while studying film in Rome. The collection continues to grow as new materials are identified by friends and family in Orkney.</p> <p>Neely's project also investigated Tait's writings and poetry, some of which had been self-published in the late 1950s, but also the vast collection of unpublished poems in Tait's archive. The project ensured the publication of a collection of Tait's poems, stories and other writings (Carcanet 2012). A number of recordings of Tait reading her poems were discovered, digitized and organized into a collection for a new database of Tait's work on the Scottish Poetry Library website. The project has also involved the preservation of additional papers and ephemera relating to Tait's life and work.</p>

### 3. References to the research

- ‘*Margaret Tait: Poetry, Writings, Stories*, edited and with Introduction by Sarah Neely and foreword by Ali Smith (Manchester: Carcanet, 2012), ISBN-10: 1847771599, ISBN-13: 978-1847771599
- Co-author with Alan Riach, ‘Demons in the Machine: cinema and modernism in twentieth-century Scotland’, in Jonny Murray, Fidelma Farley and Rod Stoneman (eds.), *Scottish Cinema Now* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009), pp. 1-19, ISBN 13: 978-1-4438-0331-1 ISBN: 1-4438-0331-6.
- “Ploughing a lonely furrow”: Margaret Tait and ‘professional’ filmmaking practices in 1950s Scotland’, in Ian Craven (ed), *Movies on Home Ground: Explorations in Amateur Cinema* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009), pp. 301-326, ISBN (10): 1-4438-1344-3, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-1344-0.
- ‘Stalking the image: Margaret Tait and Intimate Filmmaking Practices’, *Screen*, 49/2, Summer 2008, pp. 216-221, ISSN 0036-9543.
- ‘Contemporary Scottish Cinema’, in Neil Blain and David Hutchison (eds.) *The Media in Scotland* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2008), pp. 151-165, ISBN-10: 0748627995, ISBN-13: 978-0748627998.

### 4. Details of the impact

The impact of Neely’s work on Tait has occurred within the arts world and cultural life more broadly, and in education; also in policy making, through investment in the preservation of Tait’s work.

As a direct consequence of Neely’s championing of Tait, her work is now receiving the recognition it deserves. The establishment of a major annual award, in Tait’s name (with Glasgow Film Festival/Creative Scotland/LUX, for which Neely is a jury member) in 2009 serves as evidence of the growing profile of Tait’s work. In 2013 Neely is delivering a guest lecture on Tait at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Neely has also substantially helped to develop archive holdings at the Scottish Screen Archive, The Orkney Archive, The Pier Arts Centre (Stromness, Orkney) and The Scottish Poetry Library, also of artists’ moving image agency LUX.

In addition to prioritizing the preservation of Tait’s work, Neely’s project has also been concerned with ensuring that Tait’s work is seen. Tait generally made films in 16mm, the format in which she intended them to be exhibited. It has been a priority to show Tait’s films in this format wherever possible. This has been the case at a number of screenings and events including two screenings in the US (Ragtag Cinema, Missouri and The University of Iowa) and several festivals and screenings in the UK (Edinburgh International Film Festival, Glasgow Film Festival, Orkney Science Festival, Dunoon Film Festival, Whitechapel Gallery, The Big Sheep Symposium – see a wider range of events, below).

However, it was also seen as necessary to make the material more widely available through digital modes. Some of the newly recovered films are now available on Scottish Screen Archive’s website and a new DVD box set will also be released (closely involving Neely, in collaboration with LUX). This will include new films as well as films omitted from the original DVD produced by LUX. It will also include the first DVD of Tait’s feature film, *Blue Black Permanent*. An accompanying booklet edited by Neely will bring together archival material with interviews and essays from filmmakers and academics engaged in Tait’s work.

The preservation and circulation of her films, the publication of Tait’s poetry and writings, the establishment of an award in her name, have ensured Tait’s work is receiving the audience it deserved, and was long overdue. Not only have the newly discovered and rediscovered films

**Impact case study (REF3b)**

offered further material for analysis to challenge earlier understandings of Tait's work, but also, more widely, readings of Scottish film culture. Likewise, Tait's work as a poet was little known before Neely's research, thereby ensuring a broadening of the scope of studies of Scottish poetry.

Finally, the wide reach of this research outside the academic world has also had particular relevance for the growing number of artists researching and working with 16mm film. Tait is now cited by a number of contemporary artists and filmmakers as an inspiration for their work.

**Neely: curation and event organization (examples, 2008 - )**

'Film/Poetry' event and 16mm screening (Reel Cinema Scheme) at the Scottish Poetry Library, November 1, 2012.

Tait film screening and poetry reading, Scottish Poetry Library, 20 September, 2012.

London book launch for Carcanet book on Margaret Tait, with readings from Ali Smith and 16mm screenings from LUX at the London Review Bookshop, September 2012.

Glasgow book launch for Carcanet book on Margaret Tait, CCA, with readings from Allison Miller, hosted by Glasgow Women's library, 4 August 2012.

Edinburgh book launch for Carcanet book on Margaret Tait, Word Power bookshop, with readings from Gerda Stevenson, Edinburgh, June 13, 2012.

Curator, 'Margaret Tait's Films for Children', Glasgow Short Film Festival, with talk by artist filmmaker, Peter Todd, 12 Feb, 2012, Centre for Contemporary Art.

Curator, 'Margaret Tait's Edinburgh Shorts', Previously...Scotland's History Festival, 3 December 2011, Edinburgh Filmhouse.

Co-curator, 'I Crave the Wave Beating: Margaret Tait – poetry, film and science', Orkney International Science Festival, 3-4 September, with Morag MacInnes, Howie Firth and Rose Pipes.

Curator, 'Margaret Tait's Edinburgh Shorts', Edinburgh International Film Festival, 26 June 2011, Edinburgh Film House, 12.45 pm and 8pm.

Co-curator (with Sarah Smith and Maeve Connolly), 'Citing Cinema in Artists' Films' special screening at the Glasgow Film Theatre in association with Glasgow International, 17 April, 2010.

Co-organiser (with Sarah Smith and Maeve Connolly) 'The Discursive Space of Artists Films', special strand of the Association of Art Historians conference, 15-17 April, 2010.

Co-delivered short course (with Sarah Smith) on the films of Margaret Tait and Vivienne Dick at the GFT (in association with LUX), March-April, 2010.

Gothic Film Festival, Macrobert Cinema Stirling, October 2008, assistant coordinator with Glennis Byron, Global Gothic Network.

**Invited talks:**

Talk and 16 mm screening, Margaret Tait's Film Poems, Dunoon Film Festival, 15 June 2013

Margaret Tait (screening and talk), Dunvegan Film Club, Skye, 8 June 2013.

Key speaker for the George Mackay Brown Memorial lecture, Pier Arts Centre, 12 April, 2013.

Margaret Tait's *Splashing*, talk for The Big Sheep Symposium, organised by Oliver Mezger, Artist-in-Residence, Timespan, October 20, 2012.

Q&A with Gerda Stevenson for screening of *Blue Black Permanent* at Edinburgh International Film Festival, June 2012.

Uncovering new material: Margaret Tait', *Enter the Archive*, symposium for Glasgow Short Film Festival, 10 February 2012.

'If you really look': Margaret Tait and the ekphrastic in poetry and the moving image' for study day on experimental film, Stills Gallery, Edinburgh, 19 March 2010.

Introduction to special screening of work by Margaret Tait for the announcement of the Margaret Tait award for experimental filmmakers, Glasgow Film Theatre, 8 March 2010.

'Margaret Tait: Poet, Filmmaker, Beachcomber Artist' Lecture at the National Gallery, Edinburgh, for exhibition: *Running Time: Artists Films in Scotland*, 17 November 2009.

These activities have taken place overall in the presence of a very wide range of cultural producers and gatekeepers; artists, including film and literary practitioners; curatorial, museum and conservation professionals; and members of the public.

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- i. LUX, the main archive and distributor of artists' films in the UK, were instrumental in the retrospective of Tait's work in 2002 and are key collaborators with Neely for the planned box set of Tait's work. LUX also helped to organise a London book launch for the Tait book (with Ali Smith), held at the London Review Bookshop in 2012, [http://www.lrbshop.co.uk/poems-stories-and-writings\\_55844.html](http://www.lrbshop.co.uk/poems-stories-and-writings_55844.html)
- ii. The Pier Arts Centre in Orkney is a key supporter of Tait's work and Neely's work has helped to add a number of film prints to the Pier's collection. The Pier have also supported a number of screenings of Tait's work, including one for the annual George Mackay Brown Lecture, delivered by Neely (on Tait) in 2012, <http://www.gmbfellowship.org.uk/news>
- iii. Glasgow Women's Library have supported various activities, including a launch for the Tait book published by Carcanet. Neely also advised GWL on their film production, *Margaret Tait, Film Poet* (2012) <http://womenslibrary.org.uk/2012/07/09/margaret-tait-poetry-and-film/>
- iv. Scottish Poetry Library invited Neely to organise a series of screenings/events related to Tait and the film poem. They are also the host for a new online database of recordings of Tait's poetry, developed by Neely. See <http://www.spl.org.uk/poetry/poets/margaret-tait> and <http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/connect/events/margaret-tait-sarah-neely-discusses-taits-poems-stories-and-writing>
- v. The research on Tait has also proven of interest to a number of contemporary artists who have organised various screenings and events which have provided the opportunity to present Tait's work and the research on Tait. See for instance, The Big Sheep Symposium (<http://northings.com/2012/10/05/the-big-sheep-symposium-20-october-2012-helmsdale/>) and Places of Work at Whitechapel Gallery [http://www.whitechapelgallery.org/shop/product/category\\_id/1/product\\_id/1635?session\\_id=1371](http://www.whitechapelgallery.org/shop/product/category_id/1/product_id/1635?session_id=1371), The Modern Edinburgh Film School, <http://www.list.co.uk/event/344385-modern-edinburgh-film-school/> and 'A Dialogue/Conversation', Mills College Art Museum, CA, USA, <http://mcam.mills.edu/>
- vi. Neely has presented Tait's work at a number of festivals including, The Edinburgh International Film Festival, The Glasgow Film Festival, The Orkney Science Festival, Previously...Scotland's History Festival, Dunoon Film Festival <http://www.edinburghfestivals.co.uk/events/margaret-taits-edinburgh-shorts>, [http://www.glasgowfilm.org/festival/information/festivals\\_within\\_the\\_festivals/gdff/enter\\_the\\_archive](http://www.glasgowfilm.org/festival/information/festivals_within_the_festivals/gdff/enter_the_archive)