

*Following are notes from a talk I presented at the Association of Moving Image Archivists meeting held at Hotel Vancouver in Vancouver, British Columbia from November 18-22, 2003. The panel discussion was entitled "Access Issues in Avant-Garde Film", and other speakers included Cindy Keefer, Mona Nagai, Susan Oxtoby, and Simon Lund.*

I am a programmer and filmmaker working out of Vancouver. I founded and curated both the Edison Electric and the Blinding Light, two storefront microcinemas which operated here in Vancouver over a total of eight years and specialized in avant-garde, underground and contemporary independent film and video screenings. My educational background is in film theory and cultural studies and I have written for a number of film-related publications and cultural tabloids over the years. Aside from full time programming I have curated avant-garde works for numerous festivals and showcases in North America and sat on many juries at festivals as well as for arts funders. I've presented my own expanded cinema performances and films across Canada, the United States and Europe over the past decade, and had the good fortune of receiving a number of Canada Council arts and travel grants along the way. I am currently working on a new expanded cinema piece, a touring show of curated works for European venues in the Spring of 2004, and am co-editing a book on contemporary media practice on Canada's West Coast. I should also mention that I have a private collection of about 2000 16mm films salvaged from deleted educational libraries which I am in the process of cataloguing (very slowly). In contrast to the pursuits of the archive, much of my own film works addresses the purposeful deterioration and eventual failure and demise of the image, and I have an overriding interest in the truly ephemeral - that thing that is unable to be preserved by its very nature. These presentations are constantly in flux and re-modelled on every occasion they are presented and sometimes are only ever presented once with no preservable remains.

My curatorial bent and interests typically seat me outside of the institutional realm and I would describe myself as a seat-of-my-pants, minimal funds programmer. With this in mind, economics have always played a greater role than I wish them to, though I imagine this to be the case for most programmers, institutionally-based or otherwise.

So, I just wanted to introduce some thoughts and concerns around access issues I have usually dealt with in the past. My programming tendency has been to screen new and unknown works, typically acquired through the filmmakers themselves. These are films that would currently be on an experimental festival circuit, or sit outside that circuit. This curatorial bent has sprung out of an interest in broadening the scope of works screened and in an attempt to create a more established currency in the new, as oppose to the canonical or tried and true makers. That said, this programming effort is in tandem with screenings of classic works of the avant-garde as each feeds into the other.

From an economic perspective, and speaking specifically of works on 16mm or 8mm, it has always been more affordable to screen new work directly from the filmmakers than it is to screen work from coops and distributors. The filmmakers tend to stand on similar economic ground to myself as a curator, and so there is a mutual understanding that without funding of any kind to support the screening, a cut of the door or a minimum guarantee is the typical arrangement. In this way the filmmakers' personal investment in the screening becomes central to the exchange and exhibition.

With distributors, the cost of shipping, insuring and screening experimental works on film is very high, and usually not feasible. So, works of this nature tend to have a greater life within the institution, where screening space and time is inevitably more competitive and standardized.

My experience with artists working on tape and digital is always simplified by their medium—tapes are cheap and simple to reproduce meaning artists often don't even need them returned, and they are able to screen works simultaneously at many venues with no concern for loss, wear, or damage. On the rare occasion that I screen a 16mm print on video, it is usually due to cross-bookings, unavailability, or the filmmaker's choice to make their work available in this format.

The relative economic ease of programming works on tape is seductive for its simplicity. In my experience, most audiences actually prefer the video projection of pristine, digitally cleaned and corrected

archival works with noise reduction over hissy, scratched, jumping in the gate 16mm prints. But, more surprising is audience perception: most audiences rarely know the difference between a projected Super 8 film and a video projection of the same, and if they do, it is rarely an issue for them.

With the slow re-release on DVD of a thin slice of classic avant garde works, the possibility of a much broader accessibility of this work—to say nothing of raising the legitimacy or significance of the work through a profile release—means an audience gained but at the cost of quality, presentation and filmmaker intent.

Currently, many avant-garde works are seeing renewed life on the gallery circuit, which raises similar questions about the appropriateness and dynamics of the screening environment, the transfer of work and the compromise which does, though, create a larger audience. For example, when I saw the Yoko Ono retrospective, the quality of the video projection was poor, the rooms were noisy, and the audience came and went as they circulated through the gallery. Still, the opportunity to see this work is rare enough that these compromises seemed acceptable.

I wanted to speak a bit about the availability, durability, wear, new print costs and old print quality in 16mm, Super 8, Regular 8. The state of virtually every 16mm and 8mm print I have ordered from any distributor has been compromised. Ageing, fading, failing audio and scratches have become par for the course and for my purposes, inherent to the screening of older films—an inevitable result of their years on the shelf and the inability to afford new prints—if the elements are even available.

Again, audience perception here is interesting, as many take it as inevitable and a part of the experience of seeing older work that it should be old looking!

The method of delivery obviously needs to be considered here, and in my experience, equipment standards in 16mm and video projection at alternative and underground venues I have visited are typically thrown together for the event, while it is also rare that institutions are properly equipped for Super 8 or Regular 8 shows, or non-standard speed screenings on 16mm. This would seem to be a reflection of the number of shows of this kind that are screening—meaning, if they were regular enough, there would be a demand for the proper equipment. But the sad truth is that these works are being screened less and less, and have become a rarified event. As much as 16mm venues are fewer and fewer as digital takes over, spaces that are not exclusively devoted to film and video screenings quite often have to rent out either 16mm equipment, video projection, or both. On a recent trek through Europe, the challenges presented by both film and video presentation seemed on par for me, and borrowing, renting, or owning of either of these formats seemed equally difficult for small venues.

Many media artists I know who are touring with their work arrive with the equipment they will need, hauling a DV cam and video projector, or 16mm projector and mixer with them. Given the broad range of venues screening the work on the underground circuit—record stores, people's homes, galleries, multi-use spaces, bars, etc—this becomes a necessity as opposed to a luxury. As for availability of venues and equipment, Alain Letourneau and Pam Minty at Lighthouse cinema in Portland specialize in the screening of 16mm works, and feature both new and classic experimental and documentary works. Alain is currently researching 16mm exhibition and distribution in the United States. Of available spaces for screening works on 16mm, he currently estimates about 40 venues in the United States which are well publicized and maybe another 30 that are on the margins and perhaps only known to local audiences or have 16mm but rarely present the format. That is not a lot of projectors.

I wanted to quickly say something about the storage and care of the working materials and final prints created by media artists. A & B rolls, negatives and sound elements that I have observed among my peers are very typically forgotten or mismanaged and kept in the backs of cupboards. Many filmmakers I know are on to their next thing and don't think about the care of their past works, while others obsess over past works with an eye to constantly improving and altering them.

There is a tendency in the digital realm to readjust and rework media more readily and frequently as the alteration of existing completed works is much simpler and cheaper than reworking a 16mm film and

striking a new print. This raises interesting questions about the integrity of a work of art, and concern for the artist's interests versus the interests of the preservationist. The changes in film prints made by the artist will range from subtle to brutally unforgiving, and so the question becomes, who should have final say in these matters?

My experience with seeking out rare works has generally been good—I have found most anything I have wanted to screen from the known canon through CFMDC here in Canada, Canyon Cinema, NY Filmmakers Co-op or the actual filmmakers (Bruce Baillie, Alfred Leslie, etc) but the biggest hurdle has been the financial one. If I want to screen these works, the public perception and interest is so low that the shows are rarely feasible. rental costs are a reflection of the costs of running a film distribution organization and insurance, shipping, a demand for fast turnarounds are all overwhelming, especially when the print you receive to screen has sprocket damage, scratching, and poor sound due to aging and wear. All of these are serious issues, but more crucial is their demand and the massive reduction in education within this area that has impacted upon a lack of interest in these materials—and so, if we deem it wise and fruitful to save these works, then we should be allotting at least as much time and energy into educating people about them and why we see them as so crucial. most film students today are the exception if they can tell me for example, who Paul Sharits or Maria Menken are. This strikes me as a very big problem if we want this material to exist at all outside of a tall thin ivory tower.

It seems to me that the further we move away from 16mm and smaller gauges as a tool of the image-maker, the more likely and fruitful it is for these mediums to be effectively used by a certain contingency of the avant-garde. Contemporary filmmakers such as Luis Recoder, David Gatten, and Lee Krist could not make work on anything but film if they are to maintain their current conceptual and tactile interests. I think we are only now moving into a time where these mechanical devices and film gauges will be rebuilt and repurposed for the avant-garde more and more in the future. Their disappearance on a consumer level will permit their renewed respect as an artist's tool.

*notes:*

*Performative works - philosophical implications of preservation in this case - do these artists want their work preserved this way? Is legacy important here? Harry Smith as a sloppy maintenance man, and his care-less attitude contributes to his potency and validity as an artist, and speaks to economies behind preservation—history as a specimen completely outside the realm of the actual event and content of the given evening.*

*I actually look forward to decay, and see it as a natural part of life. I also have a grave fear and discomfort with institutions of any kind, as they often drain the life out of things that I love and inhabit a zone rife with compromise and ulterior motives.*