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Access to Moving Image Collections
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Assessing Access Policies and Effectiveness at Two New York Moving Image
Institutions: The Film-Makers Cooperative and Electronic Arts Intermix

In order to examine how different institutions provide access and information about their moving image collections, I visited the facilities and websites of two nonprofit arts organizations on the National Film Preservation Board list of Public Moving Image Archives and Research Centers: The Film-Makers Cooperative and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI). Together, these two institutions represent two of the most important sites for the collection, distribution, preservation, and exhibition of experimental film and video in New York City and in the United States. Both institutions developed to meet the pressing needs of New York City film and video makers and in both cases their organization, development, and policies reflect this background. Many of the differences between the two organizations, in terms of access, policies, and financial stability, I would argue, stem from the very different moments in film and video history during which each was founded, as well as differences in the primary medium each collects and distributes: Film-Makers emerged out of the experimental film movement of the early 1960s and long dealt primarily with film, while EAI developed in response to the rise of video art in the early 1970s and has always collected mainly video work.

The Film-Makers Cooperative was founded by a loose group of twenty experimental filmmakers, including Jonas Mekas, Shirley Clarke, Stan Brakhage, and Gregory Markopoulos, in 1962.¹ It was founded as a cooperative, in an attempt by these

¹ Jonas Mekas, "The Film-Makers Cooperative: A Brief History," *The Film-Makers Cooperative*, <http://film-makerscoop.com/about/history> (accessed September 30, 2013).

filmmakers to create their own distribution center, as few existing film distributors carried experimental work such as theirs at the time. Film-Makers continues to be run on this cooperative model and is still largely artist-run: its current director, MM Serra, and all the members of its board are practicing filmmakers. EAI came into being almost ten years later, in 1971, to meet the needs of video artists and curators, dealers, and collectors of video art at a time when few organizations devoted to this nascent art form yet existed. Importantly, however, unlike Film-Makers, it was not created as a cooperative and its founder, Howard Wise, was an art dealer and not an artist.² I would contend that this shift away from an artist-run cooperative model, along with fundamental differences in the video medium from that of film, would explain many of differences in funding as well as access policies and effectiveness between the two organizations.

Both institutions boast large collections of rare and historically important moving image works, but EAI is generally able to provide greater ease of access than Film-Makers. Film-Makers claims to hold the largest collection of experimental films in the world, with over 5,000 titles by 825 filmmakers. EAI holds more than 3,500 titles in their collection, over 1,300 of which have already been added to their “on demand” digital interface, with more continually being added as part of a large-scale digitization project, funded by the New York State Council on the Arts. For this reason, when I visited the Viewing Room at EAI, I had the ability to stream almost a third of their collection on my own without needing to request a specific title or ask for assistance. The other roughly two-thirds of the collection would need to be requested in advance, but as almost all are available on DVD, minimal assistance or advance set-up is required for

² “History,” *Electronic Arts Intermix*, <http://www.eai.org/webPage.htm?id=28> (accessed September 30, 2013).

viewing. EAI states on their website that viewing appointments may need to be scheduled three to four weeks in advance. When I called EAI to inquire about an appointment, however, I was able to schedule one for just two days from the date of my call and was informed that appointments rarely, if ever, needed to be made as far in advance as their website would suggest.

It proved more difficult to schedule a viewing appointment at Film-Makers, however. Unlike EAI, which has a staff of at least a dozen people, Film-Makers runs on a bare-bones staff of only three people, including Coop Director, MM Serra. In addition, although Film-Makers occasionally initiates digitization projects for select films, most of the titles in their collection are only on film and consequently must be projected in their projection room by a member of their three-person staff. Therefore, due both to its smaller staff and to the technical requirements of its film holdings, Film-Makers could not schedule a viewing appointment for the next two weeks and the options available, in terms of time and date, even two weeks in advance, were far more limited. (I have, however, made use of the Film-Makers screening room in the past and base some of my conclusions on this previous experience.) In addition, viewing appointments include a fee of \$35 per hour, unlike appointments at EAI which are free and can extend to as long as four hours per session. As Film-Makers is an artist-run cooperative and less well-funded than EAI and as viewings at Film-Makers typically require a staff member act as projectionist, this viewing fee is quite understandable, however.

Both EAI and Film-Makers present their collections, policies, and other relevant information quite effectively on their websites. The EAI website does have a cleaner, more intuitive design and offers a much greater wealth of material to its users (including

resource guides to Exhibiting, Collecting and Preserving Media Art and to HD Video, as well as very detailed information about their facilities, publications, past programs, and PDFs of many of their past print catalogs). Nevertheless, in spite of its strained financial condition and far smaller staff, Film-Makers is still able to offer a useful, informative website. One feature of the Film-Makers website that stands out is the inclusion of certain category search options. The search tools on the Film-Makers website allow users to search by format type (35mm, 16mm, Super8, and so forth) as well as by a number of common themes (such as, among many others, Dance, Erotic, Found Footage, Political/Social Activism, or Queer/Bi/Trans). This is a useful tool, which is oddly lacking from the otherwise exhaustive and well-designed EAI website. It would be of great help to users programming or researching films on some of these topics, common to experimental cinema, such as dance in film or queer filmmaking, for instance. One might search the EAI website using keywords like “dance” or “queer,” but a cursory search of these terms in the keyword field on the EAI website failed to include many relevant titles in their holdings, as it merely searched the synopses. One smaller, but helpful detail of the Film-Makers search tool is that it allows users to search by range of production dates (for example, to find all titles produced between 1970 and 1980) rather than merely by specific year, as on the EAI website.

The catalog entries for individual titles were far more consistent on the EAI website than on the Film-Makers website, however. (Both organizations have a long history of publishing print catalogs, although neither has published one in the past several years.) Entries include paragraph-long biographies of the artist, which can be expanded to longer several-paragraph-long biographies. Though artist-centered, the Film-Makers

web catalog lacks artist biographies of any kind. Many of the entries in the Film-Makers catalog are of great interest and importance, as they often offer information about extremely rare films and are sometimes the only information readily available online about certain titles. Overall, however, they are much shorter than the entries in the EAI catalog and the quality of the entries varies greatly (some far too brief or even confusing), unlike the more uniform EAI title descriptions. The EAI website also offers a far greater amount of video clips and still images to view for most of their titles, although Film-Makers is making a significant effort to include clips from its holdings on their YouTube page (these clips do not appear as links in relevant catalog entries, however). This lack of standardization and the slightly eccentric quality to some of the catalog entries most likely reflects the small, artist-led nature of Film-Makers.

Their artist-run cooperative model also affects differences in pricing at Film-Makers, in comparison to EAI: rental and purchase titles at EAI vary slightly, but tend to be uniform and related to format (the average DVD rental falling around \$75 for educational purposes, and between \$100 and \$125 for public exhibition, regardless of length). At Film-Makers certain titles may be as inexpensive as \$20 (the minimum fee per title according to their policy) while other range into a few hundred dollars per rental, the pricing agreed upon by the individual artists and the institution.

The collection at EAI is still growing annually to include many emerging, contemporary artists as well as new and newly rediscovered works, while the Film-Makers catalog includes very few acquisitions from the past several years. The Film-Makers Cooperative model went on to inspire a number of film cooperatives throughout the world, such as the London Film-Makers Cooperative and Canyon Cinema in San

Francisco. Yet it is now EAI that continues to grow and build its collection, being able offering greater ease of access and convenience to its users, while Film-Makers seems far more limited in its abilities to expand its collection and to offer more ease of access to its users. Both Film-Makers and EAI, however, remain important resources for experimental film and video in New York and throughout the world.

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