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Intro to MIAP  
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12/10/14

**MIX NYC:  
Archiving and Preserving Queer Experimental Film**

**Introduction**

The logistical aspects of archiving and presentation are often the most pressing. Finding funding, personnel, and space is a constant struggle for even high profile archives. Therefore, the challenges facing the works of marginalized communities can be seen as even more complicated. The lack of attention given to art outside of the mainstream begets the lack of efforts to preserve and archive them for posterity. A quote from the website of The Film Foundation provides a humbling reality for those wishing to take on the task:

The complexity and cost of a restoration varies widely according to the condition of the film, its length, and the unique technical specifications of the film. Generally, the cost of a black and white feature film with sound ranges from \$50,000-\$100,000. For a color feature with sound, the costs can range from \$80,000-\$150,000 to restore using traditional photochemical process, to several hundred thousand dollars for a 2K or 4K digital restoration. In both instances, whether photochemical or digital, new film elements are created and archived to serve as the long-term preservation element.

In this paper I will be looking into MIX NYC, a New York based non-profit dedicated to the exhibition and preservation of queer experimental film. The goals of MIX and the ways in which it finds the funds to achieve those goals provide an excellent insight into the world of providing access to marginalized films. As both a queer and experimental festival, the films face adversity on two fronts. I will explain the challenges in archiving and preserving both experimental and LGBT moving images and in an effort to provide context for MIX festival, I will be providing a short history of the politics of film festival culture

My goal is to provide a better understanding of the challenges facing the preservation of motion images often overlooked by society and hopefully shed light on ways in which to tackle these challenges. Though the paper primarily deals with queer and experimental films, these issues may be seen in a more universal light regarding marginalized film.

### **Background on Film Festivals**

In his article “Supporting Art Cinema At a Time of Commercialization”, Marijke de Valck explains the ideologies of the first film festivals:

Emanating – among other reasons – from the wish to improve the visibility of European cinemas, festivals were conceived against Hollywood. The first festival in Venice, in 1932, was organized under the auspices of the Arts Biennale in a clear attempt to change connotations of cinema as being merely a popular art. At a time when European films were losing out to Hollywood in terms of popular appeal and box office success,

festivals emerged as an acclaimed international arena wherein films were not measured in terms of audience numbers and revenues, but rather appreciated for their artistic merits<sup>2</sup>.

This ideology that emerged early on in film history has become much more complicated. After a “reformation in the festival circuit” in the 1960's and 1970's, a new era of what de Valck calls the “age of programmers” was ushered in<sup>3</sup>. This era essentially led to a festival culture of auteurism that has become so powerful as to instill in a work of art a *fetish* by producing the belief in the creative power of the artist<sup>4</sup>. There may also be a negative affect on other cinemas of the world that have a hard time finding funding when forced to compete with the popularity of Eurocentric cosmopolitan art films promulgated by these large festivals<sup>5</sup>.

The growing influence and popularity of film festivals has been further complicated by the strong ties of major festivals with Hollywood creating what Mark Peranson has called “business festivals”, where the definition of art film is obfuscated by so called “independent” companies that are in reality subsidiaries of major studios<sup>6</sup>. In this environment we can see the subversion of de Valck's apt description of art film: “displaying a high level of symbolic capital (e.g., prestige) and a low level of economic capital”<sup>7</sup>.

Growing commercial interest's influence on art films and festivals create more of a need for small festivals that specialize in experimental, avant-garde and the preservation of films. The UCLA Festival of Preservation and the MoMA International Festival of Preservation are two such festivals that encourage work with these types of

materials, removed from the miasma of commercial interference. UCLA also has a queer specific festival called Outfest which is one of the biggest LGBT festivals in the world. Since the first LGBT festivals didn't show up until roughly forty years after the first festivals in history (and a decade after the first experimental fests) is perhaps why they have somehow avoided the affects of commercialization.

### **Issues with Archiving LGBT Moving Images**

The most basic thing to understanding the issues facing archiving LGBT moving images is that because of the marginalization of the LGBT community from mainstream cinema, most media concerning LGBT is independent or amateur which denies them access to the archiving and preservation resources of the mainstream<sup>8</sup>. Due to lack of funding, many LGBT archives don't have adequate space, proper cold storage for materials or properly trained archivists<sup>9</sup>.

Non-LGBT archives can be advantageous in that they can offer wide access to the material that otherwise might be overlooked and place them in the context of a larger society<sup>10</sup>. The Fales Library's Downtown Collection for example holds some paper records and festival submission tapes for MIX festival<sup>11</sup>. But though many LGBT materials are stored in non-specific archives certain issues can arise. Though there are over 400 LGBT related Library of Congress subject headings, the issue of identity is important in the queer community<sup>12</sup>. An archivist unfamiliar with appropriate terminologies may have difficulty cataloging certain items, especially with reference to an artists self identity.

The best case scenario for storing queer moving images is a properly funded and

staffed LGBT specific archive. One of the biggest advantages of archives with a specific collections is the placement of the moving images in context with other media related to the topic. A person doing research on a film in the archive, will also have access to plenty of other queer materials like print articles and photographs that another archive might not<sup>13</sup>.

Another thing to consider is the comfort level of a queer specific archive. Since, there is still plenty of hostility in the world towards the LGBT community, having an environment to do research without fear of judgement is beneficial. This idea of comfort and trust can also be applied to donors to the archive. A individual with a large collection of queer materials might be concerned in turning them over to archives that might not appreciate the importance of anonymity, specifically in relation to sexual orientation<sup>14</sup>. This of course isn't to say that regular archives don't practice these ethics, it's simply a matter of comfort within a given community.

One of the most largest LGBT specific archives is the Legacy Collection which has made over three thousand festival submission tapes to Outfest publicly accessible<sup>15</sup>. The collection along with the Legacy Project for LGBT Film Preservation is “stored in climate controlled vaults [and] cared for by moving image professionals”, offers all of the benefits of a large archive with a dedicated budget<sup>16</sup>.

### **Issues with Archiving Experimental Moving Images**

Experimental film, regardless of it's subject matter, faces it's own unique challenges. As a medium it is also marginalized but it draws much of it's strength from being on the outskirts of traditional film forms. The archivists at Germany's Kinematek

Museum define experimental film as: “film that makes the cinematic process reveal itself to challenge, alienate, and question hitherto accepted and unquestioned patterns of perception”<sup>17</sup>. With that in mind, the similarities in experimental and queer film seem clear. But, whereas queer film might face challenges because of content, experimental film often finds it's challenges in format.

Since experimental film often works with the manipulation of media, the standard industry preservation of 35mm and 16mm is seldom enough to capture the artists original intentions. One example is a film by Wilhelm and Birgit Hein titled *Rohfilm* (1968). The filmmakers stuck several different rolls of 16mm and 8mm together and printed them together with an optical printer capturing dirt on the frames in the process that became a part of the film. Even if a preservationist had access to all of the original rolls of film, the dirt and other “impurities” that occurred at the time would be impossible to reproduce<sup>18</sup>. In a situation where a preservationist does have access to original negatives of a work, the process that the artists took to reach their final print is rarely documented and keeping records of these processes is paramount in the experimental preservation community.

The difficulties don't lie merely in preserving the materials either. Experimental films can use complex, nontraditional means to display their works as well. Certain artists used cheaper, nonprofessional projectors to display their films which would be hard to simulate on a professional projector often employed by larger venues<sup>19</sup>. Some works might incorporate several projectors or separate audio tracks from a variety of media played on different devices.

A unique phenomenon that exhausts the problems of preservation are those films

that deal with the degradation of film over time. The whole point of the work is to show the deterioration of the film over time and every screening is a unique experience. To preserve this occurrence in its original form is all but impossible, not to mention counter to the ideas of the artist.

At the Kinematek, the most important factor in preserving experimental films is to “establish a trustful personal relationship with the filmmakers” and to “adopt a proactive attitude because these films will not typically come by chance”<sup>20</sup>. Their priorities right now are in the digitization of these works. In following the trends seen in all marginalized films, access is the most important means for experimental film.

## **MIX NYC**

MIX NYC was started in 1987 by Sarah Schulman and Jim Hubbard. Since then it has grown substantially and has had numerous changes in leadership. A statement from the MIX website lays out the foundations of the organization:

MIX NYC is a community of artists and organizers joined together to explore, share, and create queer experimental media through an ever-changing constellation of means. We make art for ourselves and our community, not for markets or museums. In addition to the annual festival, we host community screenings in the five boroughs throughout the year, continue collecting the stories of HIV/AIDS activism with our ACT UP Oral

History Project, promote visual literacy amongst at-risk queer youth with our A Different Take media training program, and preserve the filmic works of pioneer LGBT filmmakers with our Memorizing MIX

efforts. As always, we are proud to present the latest in queer experimental film and previously unseen works from legendary lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other queer-identified figures in avant-garde cinema<sup>21</sup>.

Stephen Kent Jusick has been the executive director since 2005. He explained the ongoing process of funding the non-profit organization by various means. A substantial part of MIX's budget comes from New York State and New York City governments. Since 1988, the New York State Council on the Arts has granted roughly twenty thousand dollars a year and since 1996, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs has provided around twenty-five thousand. These numbers fluctuate from year to year based on the municipal budget, resulting in a need to find significantly greater funds from other sources. Aside from the festival, private donations and fund raising events also add to yearly totals. Private grants are difficult to achieve for an ongoing organization. MIX does receive them however, for its individual projects such as the Andy Warhol Grant for 2012 to 2013<sup>22</sup>.

In 2013, MIX held the Naked Eye Celebrity Camera auction on eBay which consisted of disposable cameras exposed by over 150 celebrity artists including B.D. Wong and Gus Van Sant. The signed cameras were sold without knowledge of who was getting which camera. The event took in forty thousand dollars for MIX<sup>23</sup>.

### **MIX Festival**

The annual, week-long festival provides the single greatest source of income for MIX. It serves the dual purpose of financing much of MIX NYC's activities as well as being the most visible aspect of the organization. Money from ticket sales, merchandise,



and donations all contribute to MIX's annual revenue, but even though the festival is mostly volunteer staffed and runs on a shoe-string budget, it requires much of that income itself<sup>24</sup>.

The festival has evolved greatly from its origins. The screening room for the most recent festival, the twenty-seventh in 2014, had one hundred and fifty seats as well as extra space with cushions on the floor. Today, aside from the films being screened, the festival space includes multimedia art installations from guest artists, a practice that initiated in 1993 but became a regular feature of the festival in 2003. Another key feature are the nightly parties, with performances by queer artists and DJ sets that continue through the night. Guests are invited to stay as long as they wish, provided with numerous spaces to rest in the space. This communal aspect represents the cooperative credo of MIX, providing its volunteers (or anyone) with a place to stay and meals throughout the day.

Curation is done on an open call basis. Submitted films are reviewed by a committee of MIX members and the chosen films are formed into programs, a tall order seeing as 2014 saw over five hundred films submitted<sup>25</sup>. Every year since 1992, MIX has made a call for guest curators who submit ideas for programs or work samples. The guest curators are very beneficial to the festival in that they open up access to work that MIX might otherwise not have access to. Though the festival sticks to a queer/experimental structure, a few films that may seem to follow more conventional can be found in the programming. Stephen Kent Jusick explains that rigid definitions of “experimental” can be limiting and that experimental may also be found in content, not

just structure<sup>26</sup>.

In a time when projecting actual film is becoming more and more rare, MIX still screens a number of films, mostly in 8mm and 16mm. MIX doesn't particularly seek out film, but isn't a matter of cost for MIX as one might think, rather the desire to not limit possible contributors. Jusick offers, "Film means a lot to me but that's not where the world is going", though he does like to encourage it, "I have a fantasy of only accepting film one year"<sup>27</sup>.

### **Marguerite Paris Preservation**

MIX's biggest preservation efforts are the works of experimental filmmaker Marguerite Paris. The project was started in 2005 but unfortunately Paris passed in 2007 before her specific methods could be documented. Most of her work consists of still images put to film, like "Haitian Initiation" which was shot on a 35mm still camera and then transferred to 16mm digital film. In 1970, she recorded New York's first ever Gay Pride March on 8mm and blew it up to 16mm. MIX has this original footage which is one of the only remaining moving image documents of the march.

A more complex work of hers offers several challenges to preservation. "WTC: A View" (1992) was shot on 8mm film and then transferred to video. The video was projected on one screen and on another still images were projected from a slide projector while music was played from a separate audio cassette tape. The film was only screened two or three times ever and little documentation exists save Jusick's own attendance. Another aspect of the screenings that causes issue for preservation is that there were more slides in the projector than were screened at one individual screening, resulting in a

different experience every time<sup>28</sup>.

The plan is for new prints to be made of her work to be given to The Filmmakers Cooperative, the UCLA Archives, BFI, and MoMA. Access to the films remains a question. If and when the films are digitalized, how they are to be distributed remains an important issue. If her work is uploaded to a streaming site such as YouTube, then everyone in the world would be able to access it. But as Jusick puts it, “YouTube is great. But terrible for money”<sup>29</sup>. Money that could be used for further and future restorations.

### **Act Up Oral History Project**

An important on-going project for MIX is the Act Up Oral History Project. Started by Schulman and Hubbard of MIX in 2003 “to present comprehensive, complex, human, collective, and individual pictures of the people who have made up ACT UP/New York”<sup>30</sup>. The website consists of 168 interviews (including transcripts) on the organization that has been advocating on behalf of AIDS victims since the 1987. The project is funded by the MIX NYC budget as well as donations and grants specifically endowed to it including a major grant from the Ford Foundation.

The New York Public Library houses much of the paper and video archives of ACT UP. In her doctoral dissertation for NYU Cinema Studies, Ragan Rhyne proposes a question in regards to this: what might it mean for the history of “anti-nonprofit” ACT UP to be archived within a multimillion dollar 501(c)(3) organization like the New York Public Library, particularly insofar as its own political agenda has been defined precisely *outside* of these kinds of administrative structures?<sup>31</sup>

While the definition of “anti-nonprofit” remains unclear and certainly complicates ACT UP's relationship with MIX NYC, the important thing to note is the idea of political agendas being relevant to where and how certain materials are stored. Should ACT UP's complicated relationship with the New York City government discourage the use of NYPL's resources? Certainly it's up to each individual and organization to decide, but a very important consideration for archivists.

### **Conclusion**

All moving images are a part of our culture and should be preserved for posterity. It is even more important that we make sure the materials of marginalized groups are accounted for as they tend to exist outside of large commercial organizations that can handle their own materials. But it isn't only money that raises questions but how an institution, whether public private can best suite the needs of certain materials and the researchers trying to access them. Fortunately, we are seeing a much bigger acknowledgment of these needs in recent times such as the “Out of the Closet and, Into the Vaults” symposium, which gathered archivist, students and filmmakers and programers in 2006 to discuss issues in preserving queer moving images<sup>32</sup>.

As the major festivals become more influenced by commercial interests, the need for truly independent venues grows. The strength of MIX lies in it's ties to the community it supports rather than an industry using it for profit. Because of it's strong volunteer core and hard working members, it is able to run as a non-profit, free from outside influence. The government arts programs it relies on for much of it's funding are paramount and without them might not be able to function and important work would go undone. The

model of MIX festival can easily be applied to any artist group that doesn't receive the proper attention from the mainstream and hopefully can serve as a model for future organizations.