Title
The Past and Future of Alternative Moving-Image Exhibition in Los Angeles

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Publication Date
2021

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

The Past and Future of Alternative Moving-Image Exhibition in Los Angeles

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree Master of Library

and Information Science

by

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2021

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Past and Future of

Alternative Moving-Image Exhibition

in Los Angeles

by

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Master of Library and Information Science

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

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Despite the city's reputation as a culture dominated by the commercial entertainment industry, Los Angeles has had a long tradition of alternative and independent moving-image exhibition, developed explicitly in opposition to (or in tandem with) its Hollywood forebears. This thesis examines the history of alternative moving-image exhibition and provides two case studies of current non-profit media arts organizations, examining their respective approaches to curation, outreach, marketing, and governance, as a way of identifying sustainable approaches to alternative moving-image exhibition in Los Angeles. For each venue, unstructured interview sessions were held with executives and curators, identifying the organization's mission, stakeholders and the communities that the institutions serve. I explore the way curatorial

decisions are made, marketing strategies for programming, and the role of the board in each organization's programming and operations. Finally, I argue that these venues represent a new model of exhibition that emphasizes a highly contextual yet inclusive approach to curation distinct from the dominant arthouse film culture.

The thesis of Micah Isaiah Gottlieb is approved.

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Leah A. Lievrouw, Committee Chair

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2021

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"Fueled by the conviction that the index of a culture's health and vibrancy lies largely in its margins, in those works of art that are created outside the commercial mainstream, Anthology strives to advance the cause and protect the heritage of a kind of cinema that is in particular danger of being lost, overlooked, or ignored."

-Anthology Film Archives, mission statement

(www.anthologyfilmarchives.org)

"We are probably trying to provide an opportunity for our patrons to become informed and aware—attuned—to what is going on in the world. So that's an opportunity to create that cultural space. If you're just playing Hollywood films ultimately you're kind of numbing your audience a little bit, so by combining some of the more interesting films from Hollywood and the American independent films and documentaries, foreign language films…there's an opportunity for someone to say, I'm really able to acquire a lot of information about what's going on in the world, elevated through the arts, entertained, and be mentally alert because of that. And [to] share that experience with others, both [with] people I don't know...but also people you know. How often do you see neighbors seeing each other at the movie theater...It's those kinds of structured and unstructured interactions that really define the space."

-Greg Laemmle, CEO of Laemmle Theatres

(Renov et al., 2017)

Introduction

Despite the city's reputation as a culture dominated by the commercial entertainment industry and its properties, Los Angeles has had a long history of alternative and independent moving-image exhibition, developed explicitly in opposition to (or in tandem with) its Hollywood forebears. These efforts were borne mainly from the likes of enthusiastic, crafty, predominantly (but not exclusively) white male entrepreneurs and event producers who sought to collapse the strata of perceived high and lowbrow art forms, often in makeshift screening spaces around the city. From the 1950s on through the 2000s, there were many distinctive and ultimately unsustainable attempts at exhibiting avant-garde, independent and repertory cinema in Los Angeles—and while certain institutions endure to the present-day, each has experienced unique struggles in maintaining a high level of attendance and economic independence.

Today, moviegoing in Los Angeles is as disjointed and heterogeneous as it's ever been. In the current landscape, the enduring repertory and independent film institutions largely stay within dominant traditions in the canon and larger culture, while one finds a plethora of "more or less ephemeral, more or less virtual, and more or less reclusive micro-cinemas that emanate primarily from three ancillary cultural spheres: the art world, the music world, and the film industry itself, which indeed substantially shapes the other two" (James, 2009, p. 63). Alternative venues and events are routinely stratified by geographic and cultural distances, as well as inconsistent marketing strategies, with the sense that everything worth seeing on the big screen is happening under the radar.

With the industry-wide changeover from analog film to digital projection that occurred in the late 2000s, nation-wide access to archival film prints has become increasingly scarce. Studios

cut costs and decreased their collections management staff, resulting in “a critical loss of institutional knowledge and knowledge of the collection” (HaDuong, 2008, p.150). Programmers, who often spend years developing relationships with studio representatives, consistently cited changing studio contacts as a barrier to securing film prints. As studios have been well underway in converting their film libraries to digital assets, programmers have had to rely on archives and private collectors “more and more, while the studios slowly and sluggishly reevaluate their collections and what they will transfer,” with often inconsistent results (HaDuong, 2008, p.154). A commitment to educating audiences about the differences between film prints and digital projection has rested on the shoulders of specific venues (New Beverly Cinema, UCLA Film & Television Archive); in spite of being located in a state with many studio and regional archives, many major repertory film retrospectives that open in New York, and travel to midwestern city centers like Chicago, do not make it to Los Angeles venues.

Moreover, in March 2020, nearly all public gatherings in the United States including theatrical exhibition were completely suspended as part of the COVID-19 epidemic, creating an economic crisis as well as several ongoing radical shifts in the cultural sector. The entertainment industry began signaling a shift of resources away from theatrical exhibition and toward streaming initiatives (Smith, 2020), as major film studios begin releasing high-budget films on-demand and in theaters at the same time—a “day-and-date” practice heretofore more common in independent film distribution—or foregoing a planned theatrical release entirely. The arrival of Quibi, Peacock and HBOMax brought new scrutiny to subscription streaming platforms, which continue to produce increasing amounts of new and legacy video “content” for those staying at home. News of more direct concern for exhibitors came in August when the U.S. Department of Justice announced their decision to officially end the Paramount Consent Decrees,

doing away with once-strict studio antitrust laws, and allowing the freedom of corporate monopolization of movie theater chains unprecedented since the 1940s (Gardner, 2020). Facing an increasingly uncertain future, independent cinemas across the country ushered in stopgap virtual cinema initiatives, with new releases sold in a pay-per-view model that splits revenue with film distributors; while non-profit organizations hosted free live streaming events to maintain programming output and audience outreach. While vaccines are now available and the stay-at-home mandate is lifted at the time of this writing, it is still a grave concern on the part of exhibitors that as these creative measures receive diminishing returns, the entertainment industry may increasingly divorce itself from theatrical exhibition, and that the independent film economy will cease to exist in its current form.

Before attending UCLA's library and information science program, I worked in independent film distribution and exhibition in New York, often developing specific marketing strategies to reach theater owners and audiences across the U.S., and providing context to a variety of contemporary, classic and independent cinematic works. My interest in attending the UCLA program was to learn more about the practical aspects of media archiving and preservation, but also to develop new ways to advocate for work by underrepresented artists in L.A., a city that is dominated by the Hollywood entertainment film industry. I attempted to do this by joining the Association of Moving Image Archivists UCLA Student Chapter, where I served as vice chair and co-chair. I started an archival film repertory program as part of the Graduate Student Association screening series Melnitz Movies in 2019 to 2020, where I highlighted 35mm and 16mm print holdings from the UCLA Film & Television Archive, and brought in guests from various artistic disciplines to present and/or introduce the screenings. As I

began to read about the history of Melnitz, which was then in its 40th year, I uncovered a rich precedent of alternative film programs at UCLA as well as across the city. It became clear to me that archival work and alternative film culture had a lot of overlap, and that it is often those in underground community spaces who help keep film history and its archival heritage alive in a new context for modern audiences. For me, cinema is inherently communal and interdisciplinary, which were ideals that were constantly reified during my education at UCLA. I decided that it would behoove me to understand the past and current landscape of alternative exhibition in LA and how it could remain sustainable.

This study assesses the present of moving-image exhibition in Los Angeles and how it can build on its storied, adventurous past into something more in tandem with the contemporary moment. Given that the height of the pandemic sidelined the world of theatrical exhibition completely, it seems an especially vital time to consider current and potential avenues for curation, funding and management of the film exhibition space, as audiences take stock of what is available to them at home. Indeed, the idea of cinema as an art form over the last half-century has greatly expanded to include not just feature films, but experimental film and video, viral internet memes, multimedia installations and other works that can be grouped roughly within the rubric of "time-based media"—forms that are usually relegated to the museum or gallery sphere, but deserve to be in conversation with their predecessors. The rationale for this project is to trace the histories of dynamic and inclusive space for narrative and non-narrative moving-image work; to help keep film history and its archival heritage alive in a new context for modern audiences; and to make a case for promoting relevant and vital contemporary cinema in a city dominated by the entertainment industry and commercially-oriented endeavors around film exhibition.

In order to assess the question of exhibition, this thesis spans three chapters. The first section focuses on a broad cultural history of arthouse and independent cinema exhibition in Los Angeles. I investigate the major developments that led to the first institutions that exhibited independent, foreign, narrative, documentary and/or experimental films in the city, and how those developments led to characteristics and challenges in the current landscape. I also look at the broader historiography of the curation of film as an art form through the efforts of the MoMA in New York and how that may have translated to L.A. institutions.

The second chapter looks at recent press around contemporary alternative moving-image exhibition in Los Angeles and the way the landscape is portrayed in local media, often ignoring non-profits and microcinemas in favor of traditional or long-running independent film organizations. I address the notion that L.A. is somehow lacking in resources for arthouse and independent cinema, and the issues that are commonly stated around the arthouse model that has existed for decades. I also discuss the contemporary phenomenon of the microcinema, an exhibition model that provides a home for independent, non-narrative and experimental cinema that may not otherwise find support in the city.

The third chapter focuses on two case studies of current non-profit moving-image institutions in Los Angeles, Echo Park Film Center and Coaxial Arts Foundation, in order to assess the kind of work that is regularly being exhibited or ignored in community-run spaces, and how they are sustained despite changes in the landscape. For each venue, I requested an unstructured interview session with the executive director and/or lead curator of the institution, and asked for their consent to publish their remarks. The process involved a series of general questions focusing on identifying the organization's mission, stakeholders and the communities that the institution serves. I asked about the way curatorial decisions are made, how exhibition

copies are sourced, the daily makeup of staff, and marketing strategies for programming. I also asked about the role of the board in each organization's programming and operations. This helped me assess the kind of moving-image work that is regularly being exhibited or neglected, the market audience for these venues, and the dependence of L.A. moving-image organizations on regular attendance as well as philanthropy. Ultimately, these sessions helped me assess the landscape of contemporary moving-image exhibition in Los Angeles.

I note the specific qualities and scope of each of these venues, both from a programming and business framework, drawing from media coverage throughout their existence as well as first-hand accounts from current or former executives and programmers. I investigate to what extent these existing venues are invested in an adventurous, diverse and contemporary entry-point to film culture as part of their mission. To what extent are they establishing working relationships with local filmmakers, artists and cultural figures, as well as archives, distributors and curators across the U.S. and abroad? How have they, over the last decade, kept up with or addressed the notion of time-based media and its documentation, which have become a significant concern in the gallery and museum world? Implicitly, I am interested in comparing both non-profit and for-profit models of film exhibition, incorporating both community-based and traditional institutional modes.

Finally, the fourth chapter identifies and analyzes common themes and trends between both venues, and how this underground moving-image culture contrasts with the auteur-driven, highly professionalized arthouse model that dominates the independent film landscape of L.A. Overall, this thesis draws a history of alternative cinema in Los Angeles as a narrative of independent cinema's marginalization, increasing popularity and eventual commodification into the larger model of arthouse and festival film culture, to which these venues represent both a

reaction and sustainable alternative. The future of alternative moving-image exhibition in L.A. lies in the tension between these two models.

Chapter 1: Alternative Cinema in Los Angeles:

A Definition and a Brief History

Alternative cinema has long been an ambiguous and flexible concept. My use of the term "alternative" includes but is not limited to non-commercial, non-industrial, arthouse, independent, avant-garde and classic cinema, each of which is generally exhibited outside the bounds of traditional channels of commercial theater chains and multiplexes. But it is worth pointing out that, despite this desire for difference, cinema remains a conduit for and a product of mass culture. Barbara Wilinsky critiques an adage by Raymond Williams, that alternative culture is "that of someone who simply finds a different way to live and wishes to be left alone with it":

> When profits rely on attracting as many people as possible, can an industry afford to remain alternative, or does it feel the need to become part of the mainstream in order to maximize profits? […] Operating within the capitalist commercial film industry, art cinema is in constant negotiation with the mainstream cinema, a process that has ultimately shaped both cultures…Since at least the 1940s, art cinema has balanced its desire for difference and its desire for maximum profits. (Wilinsky, 2001, p.4-5)

Cinema needs an audience to exist, no matter how small. While there are examples of film venues today that screen both commercial and independent fare, there has long been a fluid distinction between Hollywood cinema and its nominally more artistic counterpart, a notion which led to the establishment of the first non-profit film institutions in the early 20th century.

Haidee Wasson describes the economic and cultural conditions that led to the development of the Museum of Modern Art Film Library in New York, which to this day remains a standard-bearer for film curation in the United States. When it opened in 1935, "public

sentiment against the industry was at its height. The proliferation of film writing provided an increasingly dynamic tapestry of alternatives to the industry's commercial and self-regulated model. Specialized formations of film culture were continuing to emerge. In addition to the more familiar idea that films might be *made* outside of the commercial industry, there was a concomitant call to recognize films might be *watched* in conditions removed from the confining imperatives of commercial theaters." By institutionalizing the first notion of cinema as an art form, MoMA sought to "coordinate resources, circulate select films, and advocate for distinct modes of interpretation" (Wasson, 2005, p.15), in effect advocating for and defining cinema as a space for cultural exchange of ideas.

Wilinsky points out that art cinema, as an alternative to mainstream fare, allowed art film watchers to distinguish themselves from "ordinary" moviegoers—and that attached to this image were "notions of high culture, art and prestige" (Wilinsky, 2001, p.3). By the time MoMA's Film Library had opened, the idea of cinema as an object with artistic, historical and educational value had a strong philanthropic base, was "supported (at least publicly) by the film industry, and actively solicited by social reform groups as well as other hegemonic institutions: universities, colleges, museums, and schools" (Wasson, 2005, p.16). This was in line with other institutions that were concerned with making what were perceived as leisure activities more productive, aligning them with middle-class ideals of "proper behavior and civic betterment, redefining cinema away from the ostensibly lurid and toward the so-called learned." (Wasson, 2005, p.15) Wasson argues that by collecting, lending and exhibiting (primarily American) films, and making them available, the Film Library inflected old films with "some of the most basic ideals of bourgeois cultural respectability." By transforming film exhibition from commercial theaters into the "comparatively elite spaces of museums, universities and civic organizations", MoMA

became an authority on the art of cinema. “At its foundation, the Film Library enacted the well-worn assumption that leisure was a crucial site for engendering proper conduct, moral development, and studied contemplation, taking a popular cultural form and submitting it to rituals of serious attention, polite discussion, and tasteful, cosmopolitan encounters.” (Wasson, 2005, p.16). It is also worth mentioning MoMA’s hand in the postwar revival of non-narrative film appreciation and production due to their repository of documentary and training films produced during the war (James, 2005, pp. 215-216).

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, one of the first institutions to sustain arthouse and independent cinema in the city was taking hold, as brothers Max and Kurt Laemmle—cousins of Universal Pictures studio founder Carl Laemmle—were starting to enter the film exhibition business. The two brothers left Germany to escape Nazi persecution and, respectively, settled in France and Indiana, where Max worked in film distribution in Paris, and Kurt ran a neighborhood theater in Lowell. A desire to bring European films to America—and to court better business—led the two to decide to move to Los Angeles and join forces, opening two movie theaters in Highland Park in 1938. This began the Laemmle Theaters chain, which has become synonymous with first-run arthouse and independent cinema in Los Angeles, and still exists to this day. According to Greg Laemmle, the current owner and the third-generation member of the family to run the chain, Max and Kurt primarily showed Hollywood films in its first incarnation, with double bills and children’s matinees on the weekend. “But always in the mix were the occasional films from Europe. Any of the pre-war works of Jean Renoir, Fritz Lang or Sergei Eisenstein could well represent this period of time…my grandfather’s favorite was [Marcel Carné’s] *Children of Paradise (Les enfants du paradis)*” (see laemmle.com). By the end of WWII, the chain had grown to six theaters, but then shrank into a single venue in Los Feliz—a

dip in revenue that Laemmle attributes to the post-war introduction of television. By that time Kurt had left the business to Max, which is when the programming became increasingly focused on arthouse and foreign films. Success dovetailed with the world cinema boom of the 1950s, when films by directors like Akira Kurosawa, Jean Cocteau, Ingmar Bergman, Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica were widely seen by filmgoers. By this period, arthouse cinema was becoming its own marketable brand, codified with a set of formal and thematic consistencies, as well as fueled by the idea of the filmmaker as a film's sole auteur. The Laemmle chain still exists today, run by a third successive generation of Laemmles, with six theaters spread across the county (Claremont, Santa Monica, Pasadena, West L.A., Encino and North Hollywood), even though reports still circulate about the chain's impending sale (Wallenstein, 2020).

However, there were films being made and exhibited during (and in advance of) this period that were not so easily categorized, and which did not always receive the same exposure through increasingly robust distribution channels, independent or otherwise. In David James's history of alternative—or "minor"—cinemas in Los Angeles (James, 2005), he writes about the avant-garde filmmakers who were working directly in opposition to Hollywood, as "people outside the studios—and sometimes in them—began to make films on contrary aesthetic and political principles; some understood their activities as art rather than commerce, some were politically inspired, and some made films for recreation and the sheer pleasure of the exercise of their faculties" (James, 2005, p. 3). This so-called "minor" history of nonindustrial filmmaking in Los Angeles is unsurprisingly elided from broader histories of the city's film culture, but James reveals that there has always been a diversity of cinematic expression being made, shared

and exploited in various corners of the city—and it was often screened in conversation with more widely accepted notions of film art.

One of the first significant arthouses in Los Angeles demonstrated this commitment to heterogeneous programming. The Filmarte Theater initially opened in 1928 under the guidance of Miss Regge Doran, known for her "extensive managerial experience" (James, 2005, p. 215). The theater was dedicated to showing "the exceptional, the artistic, the experimental in celluloid as well as the revolving films of yesteryear"—a combination of revival and contemporary art cinema—but the effort was dead on arrival. However, the theater reopened the following year with Carl Dreyer's groundbreaking silent *The Passion of Joan of Arc* in 1929, along with importing selections from the Soviet avant-garde and "other European talkies". Though the main attractions were Hollywood features, the Filmarte continued to show experimental and art films through the '30s. It also hosted the Southern California Film Society for early silents—but as the Depression worsened, only the Soviet films sustained any real audience; mostly "playing to L.A. Radicals and White Russian emigrés" (James, 2005, p. 215). Yet the theater survived as an arthouse until 1956, and is an example of one of the Depression-era venues James describes as having sustained themselves and thrived during the post-war art film boom, which saw a major revival of public theaters specializing in classic or foreign art films that continued through the 1960s, some even lasting into the exploitation and underground film era (James, 2005, p. 221).

However, in the early 1940s, there was a "burst" of film societies in Los Angeles, mostly run by amateur (non-industrial) filmmakers, which mainly took place "in private premises and often required memberships that placed them outside the Production Code" (James, 2005, p. 214). It was these "domestic and para-domestic screenings for friends and fellow artists [that] have been the city's essential form of minor cinema" (James, 2005, p. 213). The first significant

L.A. film society took place at the American Contemporary Gallery, opened by Clara Grossman in the center of Hollywood, and which was organized and frequented by Hollywood Communists (James, 2005, p.216). Home to a workers' education initiative, the People's Education Center, the gallery's progressive activities overlapped with a regular series of Russian, French and American classic and avant-garde films. Many of the prints that were screened came from the MoMA Film Library, which by then had "become the staple of then hundreds of new American film societies, similar to those that had been common in Europe since the early 1920s [and] eclectically screening historical, scientific, politic, and experimental films" (James, 2005, p. 216). After the gallery was bought by Barbara Cecil in 1946, the screenings continued with regular Friday night programs of rare films from MoMA and were announced in the local progressive journal *Arts and Architecture.* Even an investigation by the Tenney Committee into the PEC's subversive activities did not end the run of shows; by this point, regular guests at the gallery included Hollywood directors like D.W. Griffith who would mingle with local filmmakers Man Ray, John and James Whitney, Kenneth Anger and Curtis Harrington. Until it moved to La Cienega Boulevard in 1948, according to David James, the ACG was "the hub of artistic modernism in Los Angeles, and its screenings a remarkable survival of the mid-1930s intersection of aesthetic and political vanguards that was soon to be destroyed by the Hollywood Inquisition" of radical political activities and sentiments (James, 2005, p. 217).

Meanwhile, a more auteur-driven brand of cinephilia was being bred in the film societies of Los Angeles. In September 1947, the intrepid programmer, film collector and onetime Buster Keaton business partner Raymond Rohauer founded the Society of Cinema Arts, which Rohauer described as "a non-profit organization entirely philanthropic in its purpose, devoted to preserving and presenting fine motion pictures of the past"—and which had "a profound impact

on a generation of filmmakers and scholars living in the Los Angeles area during the 1950's" (Lanza, 2015, p. 17). While this was not the first film society to develop in Los Angeles, Rohauer's efforts are distinctive in their explicit emphasis on film as a heterogenous art form. Sometime between 1950 and the beginning of 1951, his daily programming began in earnest at the Coronet Theater, which Rohauer specifically stated was not a theatre; he instead dubbed it "The Coronet-Louvre Museum of Arts and Sciences," bringing "genuine art and experimental film to the discriminating film devotee" (Kozberg, 134). According to historian Alison Kozberg, filmmaker Lawrence Jordan "described the influence of the Coronet as 'substantial', saying that he and Brakhage went there because it was really the only place they knew of on the West Coast that showed the films they were interested in seeing" (Kozberg, 2015, p. 137).

Rohauer's iconoclasm helped to define a particular blend of showmanship and expertise that would define the enduring archetype of the film programmer, and his insistence on building and screening from his own personal archive of prints was both unprecedented and illegal. David James writes:

> Nothing comparable to [Rohauer's] one-man cinematheque was available in New York or indeed anywhere else in the United States until the much less eclectic Anthology Film Archives opened in New York twenty years later, and nothing else like it has since existed in Los Angeles. In the wasteland of blacklist Hollywood, purged of all radical difference, the Coronet was a unique oasis where Rohauer educated the generations of cineastes who came to their maturity in the next decades. (James, 2005, p. 218)

Amid the likes of films by Jean Renoir and Fritz Lang—who even attended screenings in person—Rohauer also screened the works of such avant-garde luminaries as Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, Curtis Harrington, Gregory Markopoulos and others, many of which he kept in his

collection, generating distribution contracts that were later disputed by several of those same filmmakers (Lanza, p. 138).

It is worth noting the various overlapping independent distribution networks being set up during this period. Harrington and Anger started Creative Film Associates in 1948, a collection of avant-garde, student, and Hollywood film prints that screened at the Coronet and other venues around the city, and which later became the Creative Film Society under the leadership of Robert Pike in 1957. The CFS distributed experimental films on a regular basis, and "[played] a major role in publicizing experimental film and in bringing the Los Angeles avant-garde film communities together" (James, 2005, p. 221). This predated the better-known Canyon Cinema in San Francisco, which was founded in 1961 and began distributing films in 1967; as well as the Filmmakers Co-Operative in New York, founded in 1962—though all were likely under the influence of Amos Vogel's New York-based Cinema 16 film society and distribution arm in the late 1940s (James, 2005, p.220). But unlike Canyon Cinema, the Coronet's role in the development of a local community was also the basis of its financial success. Thus, alternative screening events became social hubs for artists and acolytes in the city during this period.

By the early 1960s, there were a growing number of film societies in Los Angeles that screened experimental cinema, but these programs were eventually integrated with the new arthouses that thrived with the arrival of the post-war European new waves, and also with "the exploitation market, from which these were never entirely distinct" (James, 2005, p. 214). Only until the late 1960s did an alternative cinema "of any significant public energy" become a distinct underground film movement (James, 2005, p. 214), and it did so in order to take advantage of the booming, increasingly commodified counterculture. Alison Kozberg describes a period of "unprecedented growth and collaboration" in the realm of underground film

programming in the city, which to some extent taught audiences "how to engage with and appreciate non-narrative, abstract, and artisanal cinema" (Kozberg, 2015, p. 141). The word "underground" at this point became synonymous with alternative artistic and political culture because it described "the blending of formal and social radicalism, and the subordination of individual films to innovative, interactive presentations and experiences" (Kozberg, 2015, p. 142).

The prime force of "cross-genre, extra-filmic programming in Los Angeles" was poet and bookseller John Fles, whose itinerant film series Trak Film Group—later to morph into the "Movies Round Midnight" program at the Cinema Theater in 1963—proposed pairings such as a double feature of Bruce Conner's *A MOVIE* (1958) and the "Early American Dada" film *Duck Soup* (McCarey, 1933), revealing the "common anarchism" of both works (Kozberg, 2015, p. 143). Fles believed that commercial Hollywood films contained "counter-cultural impulses" which could be "made visible to savvy viewers", which signaled his ongoing effort to "clarify and create cinematic meaning through programming" (143). This resulted in midnight screenings of works of the New American Cinema filmmakers to Los Angeles (Jonas Mekas, Jack Smith) and works by the Japanese experimental production company Art Theater Guild being brought to Los Angeles in the late '60s at the Cinema Theater, which would screen international critical sensations by Ingmar Bergman, Jean Renoir, and Satyajit Ray during the week (Friend, 2021).

While L.A. film programmers of the 1960s were able to play fast and loose with the notion of "art cinema" to bring in audiences, by the 1970s the underground cinema boom had waned, and there arrived new non-profit exhibitors who "abandoned crowd-pleasing, transgressive revelry in favor of encouraging intellectual engagement" (Kozberg, 2015, p. 151). The two major institutions curating revival film screenings in Los Angeles during this time—the

Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and the UCLA Film and Television Archive—both arrived due to several factors: increased federal arts funding, the rise of film studies as an academic discipline, and a rise in arts philanthropy in the U.S. Kozberg writes:

> Underpinning both Federal funding and philanthropy was the shared objective of social betterment, articulated in the National Endowment for the Arts's authorizing legislation as a commitment to 'high standards and increased opportunities ... in the best interest of the nation's cultural progress'. Though broadly stated, this objective, and its privately funded equivalents, tended to favor arts initiatives that demonstrated American cultural excellence, served a pedagogical function such as providing historical knowledge or nurturing arts appreciation, and engaged with predetermined standards for determining artistic quality. (Kozberg, 2015, p. 151)

Indeed, while smaller itinerant organizations emerged like L.A. Filmforum and the Los Angeles Independent Film Oasis which focused on experimental cinema, the active institutional programming in Los Angeles centered around legacy Hollywood features and cartoons.

The long-running film program at LACMA's Bing Theater was established by Ron Haver, who ran it from 1973 until his death in 1993, and is the closest analogue L.A. has had to the film program at Museum of Modern Art. These screenings were consistently well-attended by an older audience of cineastes who "would fill the seats for weekend screenings", according to Michael Friend, a programmer at UCLA from 1977 to 1978 (Friend, 2021). The programs were known for well-curated shows of "Golden Era" Hollywood productions, mainstream features from the beginning of sound through the 1950s and '60s, often with creative talent as guests. Haver later became known for motivating the reconstruction of *A Star Is Born* (1954), which "created a kind of frenzy in the community" (Friend, 2021). Around this time, Tom

Cooper ran the independent Vagabond Theater, which "competed directly with LACMA and drew a similar audience" (Friend), but was also a venue where a younger audience of students and film artists were in attendance. One of the more illustrious patrons was David Packard, an enthusiastic supporter of mainstream Hollywood in the Golden Age, and who became the benefactor of the current location of the UCLA Film and Television Archive in Santa Clarita.

The UCLA archive's role as an exhibitor was largely made possible by its founder Bob Epstein, the son of a Hollywood agent who had "a network of industry friends and connections" (Friend, 2021). When studios began to move nitrate prints off their lots in the late 1960s and early 70s, most of the original negatives went to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.; color separations from MGM went to the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York; and the nitrate studio prints of Paramount, Columbia and Warner Brothers came to UCLA. The result was that UCLA began showing nitrate prints regularly in a theater located in 1409 Melnitz Hall, which was designed by Filmex co-founder Gary Essert and is now known as the James Bridges Theater. UCLA's occasional exhibition—which was not well publicized—became *the* place to see black-and-white studio prints: "[They were] usually very high quality [prints], since they were the first generation [from] the original negative, and had usually never been run by the studios." (Friend, 2021). The most famous of these may have been Josef von Sternberg's Paramount films, of which the Archive has "better material than any other institution," that often were not seen at LACMA or The Vagabond. Additionally, UCLA film professors regularly ran these prints in conjunction with classes, and those screenings "were known to the most dedicated cinephiles," who often attended these screenings. Since UCLA's archive would regularly loan these prints to other FIAF-certified archives for their screenings, this gave the archive the ability to access prints and traveling programs from European archives on a priority basis, which led to

UCLA's ascendancy as an exhibition venue. Often, Melnitz Movies would program larger events at Royce Hall, including restored silent films with organ accompaniment by Gaylord Carter. "Unlike LACMA and the Vagabond, UCLA's programs were very diverse" (Friend, 2021).

While connoisseurs of Hollywood film history were being bred at LACMA and UCLA, certain intrepid curators of more outré moving-image work were able to utilize the resources of these larger institutions. By the 1970s, most of Los Angeles's regular experimental film exhibitors were smaller itinerant non-profits, and many were staffed by former students or teachers from local art and film schools. Consequently, many of the decade's programmers "were highly aware of curatorship's pedagogical functions, and concerned about equitable exhibition and scholarly responsibility" (Kozberg, 2015, p. 151). This was an opportunity for Los Angeles's film curators to "clarify film history and eventually to interrogate value, precedent, and homogeneity" (Kozberg, 2015, p. 151). According to David James, until the late 1990s, the "only significant deviation from a company line" of Hollywood retrospectives at LACMA occurred in fall 1977 when William Moritz curated 'The Poetic Eye',' a four-part program of American independent film from 1923 to 1977." (James, 2005, p. 486). Moritz felt that retrospectives were "too exclusionary" and focused on single-artist shows (Kozberg, 2015, p. 152). He was "keenly aware of the scope of experimental film production in California" and rebelled against the canonization of New American Cinema filmmakers popularized by P. Adams Sitney to the exclusion of other voices. He "subsequently embraced single-artist shows as a suitable corrective to these sweeping master narratives," believing that they "encouraged deeper engagement with fewer works, and contributed to a canon that could grow continuously" (Kozberg, 2015, p. 152). By that point, Moritz had been programming at the Theatre Vanguard, an avant-garde arts non-profit in West Hollywood, which had "offered weekly revisions to the

experimental film canon and highlighted the achievements of individual film- makers" (Kozberg, 2015, p. 152).

One programmer to follow in the wake of Moritz was Douglas Edwards, who shared with Fles and Moritz an "emphasis on cultural subversion…[treating] experimental film as essential to art history, film studies, and commercial film production. He believed that techniques honed in experimental films drove innovation in features and commercials...[and were] worthy of recognition by the arts establishment". Edwards' program at UCLA's Melnitz Hall, Encounter Cinema, exhibited new independent films that would not otherwise show in Los Angeles, and it ran until 1985. Per his obituary in the L.A. Times: "Asked why he worked so hard to exhibit films that so few people attended, Edwards told the Los Angeles Times pragmatically: 'If I don't show them, I'm going to have a hard time seeing them'" (Oliver, 1993). Edwards also served as a special events administrator for the Academy and a programmer and coordinator for the Los Angeles International Film Exposition (Filmex), which became a major proponent of independent cinema in the city. Moreover, Edwards' mission was "clarity….[an] ongoing effort to make experimental film widely accessible and appealing, goals he tirelessly pursued through outreach to the *Los Angeles Times*, coordination with other venues, and participation in film events like [FilmEx]...By 1977, Theatre Vanguard was the hub of a vibrant, collaborative experimental film community." According to Michael Friend, "Doug often brought in programming no one else could afford, and although he never had the support he should have received from the Academy, he was an important part of the avant-garde scene" (Friend, 2021).

Eventually, from 1986 to 1990, Geoff Gilmore took over the programming of Melnitz Hall and in addition to repertory screenings, he made UCLA "the premier venue in Los Angeles for contemporary independent film" (Friend, 2021)—the kind of work which would initially be

the core of the Sundance Film Festival and then Tribeca Film Festival, both organizations that Gilmore went on to work for after his UCLA tenure. When I spoke to Gilmore, who brought films by Jean-Luc Godard, Chantal Akerman and Raul Ruiz to Los Angeles as well as regular avant-garde programs in collaboration with the Pacific Film Archive, he stated that "experimental cinema has always been marginalized in L.A" due to a lack of press and "a [general] attitude, an elitism" (Gilmore, 2021). He described to me that when he started Encounter Cinema, they showed a program called "Sex and the Avant-Garde" and there was a "big article in the L.A. Times. 300 people came, but in the first half-hour, 50% of the audience walked out." In Gilmore's experience, with experimental cinema in L.A, "people say they're going to come but they don't...you really had to build a community to make it work." He also said that in New York, "the critical establishment helps so much in making those connections" (Gilmore, 2021). Thus UCLA was "a vast engine of programming that lasted until Gilmore departed to become the programmer at Sundance" (Friend, 2021).

Another important movement during this period was the rise of film festival culture in Los Angeles, thanks to the dynamic partnership of Gary Essert and Gary Abrahams, known colloquially as "the Garys" (Friend, 2021). Essert, who designed the UCLA Melnitz theater, co-founded Filmex with Abrahams, a massive international film festival in 1971 whose sole purpose was to exhibit "a lot of different kinds of films in a large number of theaters" (Friend, 2021), and whose central hub was the Mann's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood. The festival became known for events that were "outrageously big and often outrageously expensive", such as "a circus-like opening night with a tightrope walker...and an elephant greeting the guests" to recreating the Emerald City in the center of Century City for *The Wiz* in 1978. In addition to local premieres of arthouse filmmakers who were gaining prestige at international film festivals,

Filmex would produce such heady events as a 24-hour movie marathon at the El Rey Theatre, tributes to living Golden Age stars Myrna Loy and Olivia de Havilland, the world premiere of David Lynch's unclassifiable *Eraserhead*, a program of films by avant-garde filmmaker Gregory Markopoulos, and in 1974, the entirety of Semaine de la Critique, which, according to Robert Koehler, was the only time a full Cannes Film Festival program was brought in its entirety to the city (Koehler, 2020). According to Gary McVey, an executive at the festival, Essert "certainly knew his movies, and had his favorites on the world scene, but he worked through programmers, panels of other film experts who chose the films, choosing instead to focus on the grandeur and sense of [the] moment in an event" (McVey, n.d.). In other words, Essert was less a film scholar than he was "an imperious impresario of high culture, a master Hollywood showman without a camera." McVey explained that the early years of Filmex were "financially shaky", and the festival was only made possible by "indulgent 'loans' from wealthy friends, as well as a studied indifference to stiffing creditors and paying staff salaries on time." But by the '70s, "fundraising and box office rose to healthy levels… International film was never more popular, before or since." (McVey, n.d.). According to Friend, there was "always controversy about the quality of the festival, although the more trenchant criticisms had to do with organization, ticket sales and presentation ('hey, that Thai film I went to didn't have subtitles'). This festival was always in economic crisis, but for a few good years it brought the best of contemporary (and some repertory) cinema to Los Angeles" (Friend, 2021).

The end of Filmex in 1987 signaled a shift in the landscape that still governs alternative film programming in Los Angeles today. The Garys left the festival and started the non-profit American Cinematheque "in order to have a permanent venue for their shows" (Friend, 2021), an organization that still exists today—spread between the Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood (recently

bought and being renovated by Netflix), the Aero Theatre in Santa Monica, and the Los Feliz 3. Filmex then became the annual AFI Fest, which remains the city's only major platform for contemporary international cinema. Other annual festivals like Noir City, TCM Fest, and Beyond Fest have emerged to take on the more fragmented, genre- and audience-specific programs.

However, Friend also points out that Doug Edwards, Bob Epstein, Ron Haver, Gary Essert, and Gary Abrahams all passed between 1992 and 1995 from AIDS, and that their loss was a "massive and brutal transition" for the local programming scene:

> Every one of these individuals was a scholar of cinema, and they all had extensive networks for knowing about films at the studios, archives, and in private collector's hands (i.e. 'Who has an IB Technicolor [print of] *Spartacus*?'). This was the end of the era of programming that rode in on a wave of nostalgia for older film, as well as a new generation's interest in the continuity of the cinema. The enthusiasm of 1960s audiences was combined with an emerging feeling that these screenings were key to the broader recognition of cinema as an art form—the desire to combine the still-vital new productions (Nouvelle Vague, New German Cinema, Pasolini, Bertolucci, new and classical Japanese cinema, Makavejev, Tarkovsky, a lot of new Brits, etc.) with its archives and its exhibition venues in order to have a more enduring provision for all these works. That spirit disappeared without these individuals to orchestrate it, and we now have a very different scene (Friend, 2021).

The iconoclastic L.A. film programmers that arose during the 1960s and whose work was made visible by some of its largest arts institutions came to a sudden halt just as American independent cinema was becoming a full-fledged industry on its own.

David James points out that compared to other major cities in the U.S., L.A. film culture has always been unique for its lack of support from civic institutions. Without public institutional support, "independent film [in L.A.] has either been relatively more dependent on commercial theaters or taken place in isolated pockets, often essentially domestic, unconnected with and unknown to each other" (James, 2005, p. 213). He singles out LACMA and the Academy Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, "private bodies...which might be expected to include noncommercial film among the arts they sponsor, have almost without exception ignored it and have instead been fronts for the industry" (James, 2005, p. 213). This argument is not strictly true, given AMPAS' continued support of avant-garde film preservation through the efforts of Mark Toscano, and Adam Piron's 2018-2020 tenure at LACMA Film curating avant-garde work by contemporary and indigenous filmmakers. But while LACMA continued to showcase international arthouse films under the tenure of Ian Birnie from 1999 to 2013, the output has been sporadic, and since become overshadowed by Art+Film gala events. When word spread that the museum was putting an end to its weekend screening program in 2009, Martin Scorsese penned an open letter in the L.A. Times calling it a "disservice to cinema" (Scorsese, 2009). He was later honored at their 2013 gala; today, with the Bing Theater demolished in 2020 and the museum undergoing a major restoration, LACMA has not signaled a plan to continue its film program.

In spite of this perceived lack of civic support for independent cinema in Los Angeles, new venues and institutions have continued to arrive in different corners of the city and have become hubs for marginal, independent and non-narrative moving-image work. In the next chapter, I shift to the present-day and examine recent press around alternative moving-image institutions in L.A. in wake of the dominant arthouse cinema model. I also examine the more

recent model of the microcinema, which has built upon and transformed the exhibition methods of some of the earliest alternative institutions in the city.

Chapter 2: Contemporary Microcinemas and Non-Profits

When it comes to the current landscape of alternative and independent moviegoing in Los Angeles, adventurous filmgoers often complain about what's on offer, comparing the city's perceived lack of options to cultural centers like New York—but it's worth noting how local media has contributed to this narrative. In a 2008 article entitled "L.A.'s Hipster Cinema", David E. James writes of the "ignorance of, and disdain for, any form of non- Hollywood cinema that is widespread in the city's established institutions... In a special feature on REDCAT on its fifth anniversary in November 2008, the *Los Angeles Times* sent its ace theater, music, and art critics to evaluate the record— but completely omitted any reference to the film and video programming" (James, 2008, p. 62). Over the last decade, the free alternative newspaper L.A. Weekly—plagued by financial and staff cuts before and after changing hands to new owners—has directly addressed the question of L.A.'s "arthouse film desert" on three separate occasions, with a primary focus on the city's lack of resources around first-run independent films. In 2011, reporter Karina Longworth wrote that "dedicated cinephiles, who communicate with their counterparts in other cities via blogs and Twitter, feel that Los Angeles is being shafted, as many of the hip foreign films that dominate the online conversation are unseen or barely seen locally." The city lacks "year-round, nonprofit venues quite like New York's Anthology Film Archives and Film Forum, while the closest analogues like the American Cinematheque and the now-defunct Cinefamily "are only just starting to dip their toes into first-run exhibition" (Longworth, 2011). While the Arclight and Landmark theater chains would show films by mini-major distributors with the allure of luxe seating and gourmet concessions, Laemmle struggled at certain locations like the Beverly Hills-based Music Hall (which was

bought out in 2019 former employees and rebranded as the Lumiere Cinema), and the Sunset 5, which became part of the Sundance Cinemas chain in 2012 and was taken over by AMC Theaters in 2019. At that time, “art-first indie distributors admit they evaluate New York box office before making a firm commitment to L.A.” (Longworth, 2011).

Her sources suggest that Hollywood itself is the problem, as “the industry's dominance here actually stymies attempts to develop a rich and varied film culture. As Magnolia [Pictures’ Tom] Quinn puts it, ‘L.A. is a company town…[where] company films consume consumers' attention’” (Longworth, 2011). But while traditional arthouse cinemas struggled, “adventurous” filmgoers turned their attention to L.A.'s revival theaters, including the American Cinematheque's Aero Theatre in Santa Monica, the Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood, Cinefamily at the Silent Movie Theatre on Fairfax Boulevard and the New Beverly Cinema on Beverly Boulevard—each of which excelled at turning screenings into special events, whether by putting a premium on 35mm projection or all-night movie marathons. But often these venues have to genuflect toward the industry to sell tickets, by inviting celebrities to guest-program, or offering tribute screenings and retrospectives for living legends.

In 2015, a follow-up opinion piece by Michael Nordine surveyed local exhibitors, who blamed small audiences on worsening traffic and, per Arena Cinelounge’s Christian Meoli, the lack of knowledge on the part of NY-based distributors about the scope of the L.A. film scene (Nordine, 2015). The Cinelounge is a theater that engages in the process of “four-walling” independent releases, rather than curated programming—a business strategy that privileges any willing buyer who can afford theater rental fees while leaving marketing and publicity up to the client. While Meoli’s cinema is mentioned in many of these pieces and benefits from steady viral

marketing tactics, the theater's lineup is a wildly divergent array of third-party rental events, and as such has always felt isolated from the arthouse circuit it claims to be an integral part of.

A more compelling aspect of Nordine's argument is the sheer number of independent film festivals in Los Angeles and how they affect traditional theatrical exhibition. He quotes Dennis Bartok, a board member of the American Cinematheque and co-founder of distributor Arbelos Films, that such festivals have "elbowed much of the art house theatrical circuit out of the way" (Nordine, 2015). An event like the annual AFI Fest, which showcases a curated selection of international arthouse and independent cinema cherry-picked from other festivals, will screen a film to a packed house, but that same audience may not turn up to see it again when it finally hits L.A. theaters. "Casual moviegoers, for their part, don't have much interest in assuming the role of duty-bound patrons; they'd rather be part of something fun…To stimulate demand and start a virtuous cycle of brisk ticket sales that lead to more interest from distributors, theaters may have to improve their atmosphere" (Nordine, 2015). Since the sunset of Cinefamily in 2017 due to mismanagement of funds and accusations of sexual harassment, a pall has remained over the L.A. alternative film scene, without a venue to provide the same combination of nightlife activity and quality programming.

Missing from this larger conversation, however, are the community organizations and itinerant programs that have stepped in to fill the niche of a vibrant and diverse film culture in L.A. Los Angeles Filmforum, now in its 46th year, continues to showcase experimental film work at venues across the city, including at the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles and recently established a new home at the 2220 Arts space in Historic Filipinotown (formerly the Bootleg Theater). Until the coronavirus pandemic, Now Instant Image Hall, a 50-seat venue in Highland Park established in 2019, showcased a mixture of contemporary artist's cinema and

international arthouse classics behind a chic storefront that also sold a curated selection of art books; they will be opening a new space in Chinatown in 2022. In October 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic left cinemas shuttered, the L.A. Weekly ran a "State of the Arthouse" cover story which attempted to assess the future by focusing on long-running brick-and-mortar institutions—but again strangely neglected the many itinerant programs and community organizations. David James addressed the scope of L.A.'s wandering film culture at the time, even if many of the organizations were no longer active. As major film studios conglomerate and commercial cinema becomes increasingly codified, the arthouse risks following suit, as awards-season offerings and celebrity-driven features dominate what gets marketed and put on screen. Must the traditional notion of an "arthouse" always have to be the framework for alternative film programming in the city?

In a history of North American underground cinema of the 1990s, media historian and critic Ed Halter reviews the origins of the microcinema, a term originally coined by San Francisco filmmakers Rebecca Barten and David Sherman. The couple started a venue called the "Total Mobile Home microCINEMA" in 1994, a 25-seat exhibition space run from their basement that ran a variety of "low-budget movie events," from 16mm repertory screenings of Hans-Jurgen Syberberg's cult epic *Our Hitler* to showcases of local artist's cinema (Halter, 2013, p. 23). "We both saw intimacy as inherent to our medium and hoped that by creating a very specific environment, a variety of challenging works could be seen in a non-institutional, yet informed context," they wrote in 1996 (Barten & Sherman, 2013, p. 35):

> Our audiences are culled multi-generationally from very young people who are used to basement spaces to very old, established (i.e. 92 yr. old Sidney Peterson who was pleased to have a 'salon'). This drive to seek out and experience an alternative results in groups

> of people who (usually) do not want to be blindly entertained. This is not to say that 'if you show it they will come' – we all assume the occasional TOTAL failure. (Barten & Sherman, 2013, p. 23)

As Halter points out, despite the new terminology, the practice of "self-run cine-salons [is] as old as the artist-made film itself," with precursors like San Francisco-based Craig Baldwin's still-extant Other Cinema beginning in the 1980s. Baldwin's DIY screening series "[incorporates] media activist works, archival films and ephemeral videos, performance elements and cult films, as well as shows featuring old and new artists", and stood in contrast to the San Francisco Cinematheque's privileging of more established filmmakers (Halter, 2013, p. 24).

More recently, the Criterion Collection's blog by film critic Nicolas Rapold provides a post-COVID lens into the phenomenon of the microcinema in the U.S., which often fills in the work neglected by traditional institutions while adapting to a lack of brick-and-mortar support. "The word has always had too clinical a ring for such spaces and their cozy, communal, handmade, *human* feel….like crowding into someone's living room to watch something together" (Rapold, 2021). During the upheaval of the COVID-19 shutdowns, Rapold points out that microcinemas "have been better positioned than larger venues for navigating [the situation]…through a variety of means: streaming, special projects such as publications, and drive-in screenings." The model of microcinemas is not always tied to a single physical location—they tend to be more flexible, "less beholden to the strictures and budgetary scale expected of traditional institutions, and, sometimes, inherently transitory. These endeavors grow and flourish on the margins and between the cracks" (Rapold, 2021).

Notably, Rapold does not focus on any L.A. venues, but does mention Acropolis Cinema, an itinerant L.A. screening series started by critic Jordan Cronk in 2017 that focuses on

international arthouse and experimental film programs. “Acropolis has brought in significant contemporary titles and filmmakers for their West Coast premieres, filling in a valuable niche for the region (shared in some ways by Los Angeles Filmforum).” The organization brings selections from the Locarno Film Festival, “acting as a kind of pipeline of cutting-edge cinema to the West Coast” (Rapold, 2021). Acropolis curates one-off or weekend runs of the more austere end of arthouse cinema—often working with New York-based distributors like Grasshopper Film, Cinema Guild and KimStim—which might get a week theatrical run in New York and a Critic’s Pick in the *New York Times*, but which may not receive more than a capsule review in the *Los Angeles Times*.

Given the disjuncture between media coverage of L.A.’s alternative film scene and the work being highlighted by independent venues, perhaps the official story is not the one worth telling. In February 2021, as a response to the impact of COVID-19 on arts institutions, the Mike Kelley Foundation announced $400,000 in grants to 18 “midsize organizations with annual operating budgets of less than $5 million” (Vankin, 2021). According to the executive director, Mary Clare Stevens, each of these venues “embrace experimental practices, critical thinking, risk taking and provocation”. Among these beneficiaries were the Echo Park Film Center and Coaxial Arts Foundation, two non-profit media arts organizations with regular public programs that are characterized by a spirit of collaboration and experimentation. Both of these venues are able to showcase work that is overlooked or ignored by larger film and media arts institutions, including work by a diverse group of new local or emerging artists. The next chapter examines these two institutions in depth to paint a broader picture of recent trends in the landscape of moving-image exhibition in Los Angeles.

Chapter 3: Case Studies

Echo Park Film Center and Coaxial Arts are rarely mentioned in recent press around L.A. film culture, but have nevertheless remained a vibrant part of their respective communities. In these studies I have examined each venue and their respective approaches to programming, outreach, marketing, and governance, as a way of observing sustainable approaches to alternative moving-image exhibition in Los Angeles. While it was my intention to perform in-person site visits and gain a physical sense of each space, these studies were done entirely remotely, and as such are primarily based on first-hand interviews, documents, and primary sources available online.

In order to gain detailed perspectives of current venues dedicated to alternative moving-image programming in Los Angeles, I performed two case studies, each of which primarily consisted of a series of unstructured interview sessions. While there were many venues to choose from, I ultimately identified two nonprofit spaces as my focus: the Echo Park Film Center and Coaxial Arts Foundation. These venues were chosen for several reasons: their dedication to non-commercial, radically alternative moving-image programming; their identifiably grassroots organizational practices; their recent COVID-19 assistance grants from the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts; as well as my own previous relationship to both venues and the accessibility this afforded me. As an independent film programmer and frequent attendee of alternative film screenings in L.A., I had already met several of the principals at EPFC and Coaxial prior to undertaking this study and also had many mutual friends in common. This allowed me a greater intimacy as well as expediency in reaching them and conducting unstructured interview sessions. (I had conversations with principals that did not make it into the

study, such as Madison Brookshire, a board member of L.A. Filmforum and programmer of a bi-monthly experimental film and video series at the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles; and Hedi El Kholti, a writer and artist who organized “Deleuze: From A to Z” film series at the Mandrake bar in Culver City. Both of these conversations, while not directly quoted, provided additional context to the alternative moving-image landscape in the 2000s and 2010s, respectively.)

To prepare for these interviews, I began by performing background documentary research on each venue, collecting any media accounts and web materials, trade publications, pre-existing interviews and business documents around the organization—all of which were publicly available. This allowed me to retain the wider scope of the public-facing aspects of the venue during the interview process, while pursuing further lines of questioning around programming, marketing, outreach and governance. Through the research, I identified key players including curators, executives, employees, filmmakers, archivists, volunteers and collaborators who had working relationships with these venues. For each subject, I attempted contact via e-mail and/or social media to request an unstructured hour-long interview session that would be recorded over Zoom video communications. I offered an information sheet outlining their rights, requesting the ability to publish their name and occupation as part of the study. Upon consent, I arranged a time to set a Zoom interview session at the subject's convenience, with additional interviews requested if follow-ups were necessary.

There were a total of 12 interviews conducted for this study. Each Zoom interview lasted no longer than one hour and was performed in an unstructured manner directly between the investigator and the subject. Initial questions were asked from a pre-written set of interview questions that ranged from topics including the establishment of the organization, its community

and stakeholders, its relationship to the city of Los Angeles, programming, operations, and its plans for future engagement as an organization post-COVID-19, with specific follow-up questions tailored for the particular subject. Following each interview, it was my intention to request an on-site walkthrough, if possible under the COVID-19 stay-at-home ordinance, accompanied by one of the interview subjects, but unfortunately this was not possible under the circumstances. All interviews were transcribed using free Zoom and Temi transcription services and stored on a non-networked hard drive that was only accessible by me. Finally, I went through each of the interviews and highlighted important or useful quotes, identifying themes and trends that I would use for my analysis.

Echo Park Film Center

Founded in 2001, the Echo Park Film Center (EPFC) is a non-profit media arts organization located in Echo Park, occupying a storefront at the corner of Sunset and Alvarado. As one enters the space, one notices several rows of theater seats and couches, shelves with dozens of 16mm print cans stacked, a stream of Bell & Howell projector [parts] on top, and a library of hundreds of DVDs of the kinds of documentary and experimental films belying the space's primary focus. The walls are covered with framed photographs and ephemera from artists and events past; the overall impression is one of an analog-enthusiast uncle's decked-out living room. This is where EPFC hosts a robust calendar of events including 16mm film and video workshops open to the public, film programs by local and visiting artists, lectures, and other events that are sometimes unclassifiable, but always oriented around community filmmaking practices. In November 2020, a "beer-making workshop for filmmakers" was advertised on Facebook, that would result in a "seasonal beer that can either be consumed or used as an

alternative film processing solution"; such creative and sustainable activities are encouraged at the space.

More than just a microcinema or an equipment rental house, EPFC is a space that promotes a convivial spirit of fluidity between moving-image art forms, as well as an openness and transparency in its efforts to educate and build community around them. The experience of watching a screening at EPFC was evidence of what David James described in 2009 as "a demotic populism, bringing art back to the practice of everyday life by repurposing the detritus of industrial culture in an informal social ritual, one where hermeneutics is hardly an issue" (James, date, p. 57). James describes a program of Scopitone shorts in 2009 where "people milled around greeting each other, drinking coffee or beer in paper bags, while a woman kept chasing in after her dog." Thom Andersen memorably referred to it as "the default showcase for hobo filmmakers passing through town" (Andersen, 2012, p. 53). Everyone is welcome here. The stylized home environment and cluttered atmosphere belies EPFC's overall sentiment of domesticity; though the metaphor of an "extended family" is often expressed by its participants, walking into EPFC feels like home.

There is a significant amount of existing scholarship on EPFC compared to other Los Angeles non-profit moving-image institutions. Jasmine Nadua Trice makes a case for EPFC as the quintessential L.A. microcinema, examining it through the lens of cultural production and urban space. She describes how microcinemas are often "intimately connected to the geography of the city— invested in local arts communities, while also welcoming translocal flows of artists, work, organizations, and audiences" (Trice, 2018). EPFC's longevity is unusual given that microcinema spaces are "characterized by their brief lifespans and peripheral status in the city," but Trice also explains that EPFC's survival has allowed it to observe "processes of urban

transition" that it is both participating in and working against. One way in which EPFC does this is through itinerant events, including the EPFC Filmmobile, a van with 16mm projection equipment that Davanzo and Marr have driven across California and elsewhere in the U.S., setting up shop for outdoor viewing events within local communities. This roving quality of the organization meant that it was well-suited to the pandemic-era dismantling of brick-and-mortar institutions, and the amount of virtual programming conceived during the pandemic has hardly waned from their usual output.

However, EPFC distinguishes itself as an alternative moving-image institution through several means: a radical openness to change and adapt within the organization's structure; an embrace of the amateur or non-industrial figure in filmmaking; and its ability to embed itself within various communities to continue its mission. While the manifold programs at EPFC no doubt leave a lasting impression on itinerant curators, students and audience members who come through the space, it is this built-in ephemeral approach that has allowed the organization to survive as long as it has.

I spoke to Echo Park Film Center co-founders Paolo Davanzo and Lisa Marr over Zoom from Vancouver, where they have set up a new satellite initiative dubbed EPFC North. Sponsored by the Vancouver Park Board, the two run socially distanced workshops in a community garden and surrounding area that allows them to support "eco-friendly, plant-based art and animation" (Echo Park Film Center, n.d.). The Los Angeles venue, closed to the public since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, was still in good hands; regular workshops and programs were continuing to be programmed weekly through their online platform. "We're breaking apart the centralized model," Davanzo said. "We do a [documentary filmmaking class] and we have people Zooming in from Italy, Japan, someone in Mexico, and everyone's making

films together suddenly in this weird way. So it continues to evolve." The ephemerality of EPFC's organizational structure was well suited for a year of social distancing, and the duo's restless creativity showed no signs of abating.

An Italian-born American, Davanzo is a filmmaker and educator who wanted to bring a European cultural and communal sensibility to Los Angeles:

> Traveling through Europe with my films was so exciting, because there were these DIY spaces. Oftentimes people take over a building and they squat and they have a kitchen and a bar and they have people live there and they have organic gardens… It's just all the dreams I'd ever had growing up together in one place. In the United States, there are microcinemas and education classes and there's radical food culture, but it's rare that all those things are together. [In Europe] you would spend the night, and they would feed you, and the next day, you would show films. It was unpretentious—there'd be the 80-year old grandfather with a cane, the young hipster mother, maybe nursing a child. I love that cross-pollination of humanity…For me, experimental cinema sometimes becomes elitist and too precious and I hate all that. (Davanzo & Marr, 2021)

In establishing EPFC, Davanzo wanted to work against the highly institutionalized structures of avant-garde filmmaking in the U.S., but also film culture at large. "It really should be for the people, of the people—so I was just inspired by that European tradition that I saw and experienced" (Davanzo & Marr, 2021).

A focus on documentary and experimental filmmaking in particular belied Davanzo's interest in handmade and community-based art forms, which he sees as highly approachable (and affordable). "For me it was like combining all those things that I love. I never liked Hollywood films. I mean, I love *Star Wars*, I love certain things everyone loves, but I never bought into the

myth of [Hollywood] narrative filmmaking. To me, experimental cinema was always novel and exciting, and documentary was also fresh and raw. You didn't need a big budget or a big crew, you could just do it, with $10, $5, get a Super-8 camera. So I entered through the back door." For Davanzo, this creates a low barrier of entry that has remained a central tenet of EPFC's philosophy toward filmmaking. "I didn't enter through like, a formal education of experimental cinema. I just enter through…how you can make a film and scratch on it and dip it in dye and bleach it, and you're a filmmaker." (Davanzo & Marr, 2021).

Both the programming and educational initiatives at EPFC have an overwhelmingly analog focus, even though digital has become an increasing part of the curriculum, and films are often digitized before they're screened. "We're not saying analog is better, we're just saying we love analog for the magic that it brings," Marr explained. "People of all ages are entranced by it, and there's nothing better than a [tangle] of spaghetti film in the bucket and like, oh my gosh, I made something. There's still that 'eureka' moment. So that's what we're trying to get at all the time, the eureka moment, not like, 'I'm going to be a professional cinematographer.' There's organizations in L.A. that do that better than we ever could" (Davanzo & Marr, 2021) In the early days of EPFC, they didn't have a working video projector, so Davanzo had to borrow one every night from a junior college where he taught classes.

> It was too expensive [to show digital at that time], so we showed things mostly on Super-8 and 16mm because I was a hoarder [of found footage and projection equipment]…. Today, maybe 20 or 30% of our programs are shown on film. We have all the gear, so we're probably projecting more film than almost anyone else, and we definitely teach more workshops that are film based…. There are tons of places you can

> take a digital class in L.A. but there's not really that many places where you can still learn analog film. (Davanzo & Marr, 2021)

To develop this highly democratic ideal into a full-fledged media arts organization, Davanzo partnered up with Lisa Marr, a musician, whom he met the opening day of EPFC in 2001 after having moved to LA from Vancouver:

> The one thing that L.A. didn't have [at the time] was an experimental, kind of punk-rock cinema space. Vancouver had one of those called The Blinding Light. And that was a very influential space…Paolo had actually been there on a tour years prior before we met. So, [we were] interested in the same things—how does community come together around these kinds of spaces, where anything can happen and everybody's welcome? People have sometimes said about us, oh, Lisa and Paolo, they're not really *filmmakers*, they're just people who make films, with [other] people—and, yes, guilty as charged. In fact we embrace that. I would hardly even call myself a filmmaker. (Davanzo & Marr, 2021)

In this sense, EPFC bucks the notion of Los Angeles as a highly exclusive, obscure environment for artistic pursuits, whether for arthouse cinema, Hollywood, or even the moneyed arts organizations and galleries that propel young artists to the forefront. Instead, it is a space that encourages experimentation, collaboration, and redefining what it means to make movies. "The point is that everybody should have access, everybody should have a way in, to see if they love this or what they think about it, telling their own stories, and that's what excites us. […] You could be baking a cake, you could be making a handmade film, making a collage—it's all really the same thing to us" (Davanzo & Marr, 2021).

To draw out these distinctions, Marr made a comparison between their organization and the Los Angeles Independent Film Oasis, another cooperative that was formed by artists to

screen artists' cinema from 1976 to 1981. “We love all those people, they are dear friends and we were inspired by them, but it's a very different aesthetic as to why it was formed and how it’s continued” (Davanzo & Marr, 2021). The Oasis was primarily a hub for screening experimental cinema—then given renewed aesthetic and political interest following the rise of structural film in the late 1960s. The programming often included work by its founding members, who rarely collaborated on film projects. Oasis’ primary goal was not “individual personal expressivity nor social change but rather the recapitulation of the high modernist project of medium self-definition and self-criticism” (James, 2005, p. 234). While the Oasis placed itself within a larger continuum of what was becoming a highly codified and institutionalized experimental filmmaking, by contrast, EPFC has a much more democratic and fluid in its relationship to experimental cinema, bringing its members and visitors into the process. Davanzo and Marr describe EPFC as a “people’s film center” in a “humble, playful, generous sort of way”. Similar to EPFC’s board members, many Oasis members worked on the periphery of Hollywood, including Pat O’Neill, who contributed special effects for *Star Wars* and other major productions (James, 2005, p. 235). Yet the Oasis saw inconsistent ticket sales that led to financial hardship, and it closed in 1981.

Even in the early days of the Center, Davanzo made efforts to build relationships in the immediate Echo Park community, creating an ethos of mutual aid and support. The L.A.-based organization Freewaves, a nonprofit for independent media art, was a neighbor at the time while situated at OnRamp Arts, a digital arts organization that worked with local youth on collaborative new media projects, and which closed in 2004. “They said, wow, you're going to open a film place, how cool! And they lent me one of the first computers. I didn’t even have a

computer [at the time].” He began as a teacher at Logan Mayberry Elementary School and became familiar with locals:

> I would bring in my guitar and sing songs, and bring funny cameras and show the kids how they worked. The local Methodist church has been an activist church for years. I'm not a religious person, but Methodists are some of the cooler religious people…they're doing a lot of social justice work. So the pastor there was a friend of mine and I was like, do you think the people would be into this? He [said], ‘I know kids across the street, that would love to take a film class.’ (Davanzo & Marr, 2021)

Davanzo made a distinction between networking and community-building:

> “[It’s about] being aware and sensitive to your place in a community. Not just dropping in to say, ‘I'm a privileged artist and I'm going to teach you how to do things.’ We just kind of provided opportunities so people can educate themselves and with some mentorship and some love. […] It’s not to say some people didn't see us as gentrifiers, or that we weren't part of a wave of neighborhoods changing. To understand that, to be aware of it and to know that is part of our story. But the hope is that, by being there, we have been a part of a good thing in the neighborhood...We are there to serve, we're not there to take, but these are larger conversations that we all need to be part of and accountable for. (Davanzo & Marr, 2021)

In 2005, the organization officially became a nonprofit, and while the scope of their programming immediately began to grow, Davanzo and Marr resisted a traditional leadership structure. “We learned about grant funding and what that looks like,” Marr said. “We started doing more classes, which began as free classes for youth, then added classes for elders. Paid classes for adults, [artist] residencies, the Filmmobile...we started getting to be more well

known." But as Davanzo and Marr began to handle the development of EPFC, they took pains to ensure that the bureaucratic aspects of running a business didn't get in the way of their philosophy. "These terms [like "director of development"] kind of fence you in," Davanzo said. "We want everyone to kind of hustle and encourage and promote and get people excited, so we're all doing things all the time….Everybody should be washing the dishes." Marr admitted that "some funders have sort of chastised us that we should be more in the development realm, like that [Paolo and I] should not be teaching or programming," she said. "And our answer to that is: if we're not teaching and programming work, why would we do this? Because writing grants is not that exciting. Ultimately it's a skill, it's a job, it's a necessity—but it's not what gets us up in the morning" (Davanzo & Marr, 2021).

More than a traditional arts organization, EPFC functions as an extended family of trusted collaborators and friends, which Davanzo and Marr began to build into the organizational structure. By 2014, EPFC officially became a co-op, and by that point, the youth programs were starting to become known internationally. "People would ask, 'can I come by, show a film and stay overnight, maybe give a workshop?'" Lisa said. "Every time the lease came up there were discussions about moving on, but the community [we'd built] said no. It was determined that more people had to come in and take on leadership roles in the space." Davanzo explained that the agenda has always been that anyone who is interested in a specific part of the process can take the lead on it:

> Everybody who comes out of the co-op is perfectly equipped to run their own space. Many have run educational programs, or an arts after-school thing. They can program, they curate, they budget. Everybody can do it, and some people gravitate to it more than others…[but] if there's 20 members, there could be 20 different iterations of what EPFC

could look like. Because it's a state of mind, not a physical space, ultimately. […] Everyone who comes through the door becomes part of the extended family, and can take that message and that love and spirit out into the world and do what they will. (Davanzo & Marr, 2021)

When I asked them about how the initial crop of co-op members were brought into this familial structure, Marr explained that many of them "[came] from the youth themselves… Once they aged out, they became the instructor, so there were always lots of people around. But it was never really formalized in that way. So we thought, let's write love letters to 30 people that seem to be really involved with the Center because they believe in the mission and they spent time here and they get it and they love it, and just to see if they're interested in committing a bit more stewardship and a bit more time." The current makeup of the EPFC board is one-third former students, with many others who have jobs in the film industry, academia, or are independent artists. "Some people are parents, some people came out of CalArts or are completely self-taught, like me, so it's a real mix," Marr said. "I'm the oldest—I'll be 55 next month. The youngest is 19 or 20, so it's a real range. All different backgrounds, ethnicities, gender identities. It's a real…reflection of what experimental and documentary cinema can be." Davanzo explained that because "a lot of the board is on the co-op, it was just very organic. When you have an idea, propose it. If you can organize it, then do it" (Davanzo & Marr, 2021).

When Davanzo introduces a film, he sees himself as the "circus barker," welcoming the audience to the film center, and always asking the same question: who's here for the first time? "Every single time, half of the audience raises their hands, and that warms my heart. I kind of get angry in a pretend way, saying, well, how come? You better come back!" With over 200 events a

year, the diversity of programming and collaborators at EPFC allows a consistently fresh pool of filmgoers. Though the venue hosts more targeted events like Mark Toscano's "Remains to be Streamed"—wherein the Academy Film Archive preservationist brings in mystery 16mm prints of avant-garde cinema for a devoted cinephile audience—EPFC programs are notoriously inclusive, and show a wide range of documentary and experimental film work by local artists and curators. Every year, the "L.A. Air" initiative (financed by the National Endowment for the Arts) invites a small group of local artists to use EPFC's equipment and other resources to create and premiere "new, experimental, documentary, and personal work over a two-month period", as well as teach a youth filmmaking class to local residents. Another one-night program each month, "Film Friends", invites an established or emerging experimental filmmaker to screen and discuss their work with an audience. "The tradition of experimental cinema has been occupied largely by white men, and I think everyone is cognizant of that. The events oftentimes dictate who's there," Davanzo explained. "These are some profound, beautiful films, but they're not [always] in the circuit of REDCAT and L.A. Filmforum. [All of these venues] coexist for a reason."

To get a sense of how the diversity of programming at the center is borne out and to learn more about the individuals who volunteer their time to be there, I spoke to Nerve Macaspac, a co-op member who also serves as secretary of the EPFC board, and is currently an assistant professor of geography at CUNY. Though he lives in New York and no longer actively participates in events programming at the Center, Macaspac's tenure as a curator and educator at EPFC resulted in a particularly distinctive and influential series of events curated at the organization. Born in Manila, Macaspac became interested in social justice around labor unions, indigenous land rights and self-determination. A self-taught documentary filmmaker, he helped

establish a film collective, Cinepatriotico, from 2005-2007, which he described as part of an "emerging movement" of radical activist filmmaking in the Philippines. "This [concept] was not new, but we were among the first initiatives [there] to actually take on the camera and…think through radical social change and image-making" (Macaspac, 2021).

To learn more about political filmmaking, Macaspac enrolled in graduate school at UC Berkeley, where he studied under Jeffery Skoller, a scholar of avant-garde film and documentary media. "Cinema verité was the tradition in the Philippines, and the idea of avant-garde was kind of *bougie* and liberal, if not humanistic. But being in a seminar and being mentored by [Skoller] really exposed me to the world of political avant-garde filmmaking." Under Skoller's guidance, Macaspac got involved with Paper Tiger, a Brooklyn-based non-profit video collective that "works to challenge and expose the corporate control of mainstream media" (see Paper Tiger, https://papertiger.org). He also interned with WITNESS, an NGO that works with activists to help document human rights abuses, where he helped develop community initiatives to train non-fiction filmmakers in grassroots organizations in Cambodia. As he was becoming exposed to more radical forms of documentary, Macaspac kept in mind philosopher Jacques Ranciere's idea of the "emancipation of the spectator," thinking about working against the kind of social justice filmmaking "that tends to spoon-feed audiences, how you should feel and how you should react—even adding links, for next steps, on screen at the end" (Macaspac, 2021).

When Macaspac moved to the Silverlake neighborhood of Los Angeles in 2014 for his Ph.D at UCLA, he was actively looking for a film community of like-minded people, and saw an advertisement on Facebook for a weekly Super-8 workshop at the Film Center. He had never shot Super-8 before, but it was clear that the center attracted a combination of "practitioners, newbies and enthusiasts," where "art students, Hollywood people and people from an activist

background like me" would form a cohort. He quickly met Davanzo and Marr and started to develop a film project tracing the radical queer history of L.A., based on his interest in the Mattachine Society and other organizations over the course of the 20th century. He began to attend screenings, and by 2016, he was asked to join the co-op. For Macaspac, the best part of EPFC is its ability to "being very experimental in its approach. We're not so fixed with power dynamics, governance, screening and curators" like other venues in Los Angeles (Macaspac, 2021).

One of Macaspac's enduring contributions to EPFC was curating a 2017 series called "ACTION! Cinema as Sanctuary", which invited activist filmmakers to introduce screenings of their work and to run filmmaking workshops in tandem—all of which were free and open to the public. A number of these filmmakers were friends of Macaspac's from his days with Red Channels, a film collective that he helped form in New York and folded into the Occupy Wall Street movement. As the Trump administration carried out deportations at the U.S.-Mexico border and immigration-rights activism was at its peak, Macaspac wanted to get people to "think about film as a political space and cinema sanctuary". His academic research focuses on "the phenomenon of community-led demilitarized geographic areas, popularly known as peace zones" (www.nervemacaspac.com), and he wanted to tie in his background in radical political filmmaking with his scholarship. He also wanted to "start conversations between filmmakers and aspiring filmmakers of color". Events included a screening of *The Native and the Refugee*, a documentary on the similarities between Palestinian refugee camps and Native American reservations; a workshop by those same filmmakers called "What is a Political Film?"; and a workshop on social justice music videos by filmmaker Emily Hong, who also screened a documentary she co-directed, *Nobel Not Dah*, about Burmese women refugees in Thailand.

To finance this series—which flew in artists from out of town, hosted them and paid them an honorarium for teaching—Marr and Macaspac worked together on writing a grant from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Foundation. Surprisingly, the grant was approved—a rare embrace of radical film work from the most visible film institution in the country. Jasmine Nadua Trice writes that "the EPFC discovered it had a devoted ally at the Academy when they realized that their contact for this particular grant had been donating to the Center individually for some time". Macaspac also felt that this was serendipitous given that "this was also during the time of #OscarsSoWhite, which may have been a factor," he explained. "We provided the opportunity for the industry to support us." In this sense, EPFC is working to provide cultural programming that is absent from other L.A. institutions and in this case, is recognized as such by one of its leading public organizations.

How does a no-frills venue like EPFC stay afloat for two decades and counting? Though much of the organization is maintained through volunteer work, Davanzo and Marr make it a point to compensate artists and teachers who collaborate with them. EPFC's annual budget is "close to $200,000", with the majority from government grants and family foundations, but during pre-pandemic times, the EPFC was able to stay afloat, and routinely split the door sales with artists. In a 2013 interview with *Other Cinema*, Davanzo explained: "We take in revenue from equipment and venue rentals, telecine transfers, cinema admission, membership, and tuition from our film and video workshops for adults, providing a steady stream of unrestricted income when things get tight." (Davanzo, 2013). This provides money that they can "be more creative with" (Davanzo, 2021), and in terms of financial compensation, "this model invites our community to be an ongoing support team for EPFC programs and services rather than occasional supporters at overpriced, overblown fundraising events" (2013). The Mike Kelley

Foundation for the Arts has provided grants to the organization which allowed them "to pay every co-op member $1600" for their participation. One of the few fundraisers EPFC ran was to "redo the website", which Marr has always run herself; but in a sense, "every day is a fundraiser", when someone pays the $5 admission fee. "Come to the cinema four or five times a year and you've given given us $20. If you want to take a class and you're an adult, it's $15 per class hour or $10 per class or on Zoom. It's affordable, and if you can't pay, no one's going to turn you away" (Davanzo & Marr, 2021).

Though social media has become an increasingly important method of outreach for smaller organizations, EPFC takes a very hands-off approach. Marr runs the Facebook account to post regular updates about programming, while co-op members take over the Instagram account, which has gotten more attention during the pandemic. (The Twitter account has remained inactive since June 2019.) Given the amount of different organizations they partner with in different areas of the city, Davanzo and Marr make it a point to "reach out to those constituents…but as far as hard numbers, we don't do a weekly event email like we used to," Davanzo said. "I was getting discouraged that only around 20% of the people opened it, or maybe 400 people out of 2000. We weren't spam, we didn't buy these [email] lists, so I got a little disillusioned with that [method]." Pointedly, Davanzo isn't on social media because he feels that "people just beat you on the head with information. So I feel like if people want to find us, they'll find us. Maybe it's not the most shrewd marketing, but I feel that people always come organically" (Davanzo & Marr, 2021).

Echo Park Film Center's radically inclusive, shape-shifting approach to programming is perhaps what has kept them from attaining wider recognition as part of the city's art and film

scene. Articles about L.A.'s arthouse cinema circuit tend to focus on chains and venues that screen new releases or Hollywood films, keeping consistent with the overwhelming shadow of the commercial film industry on cultural reporting. The Center has received major press attention in the past, notably in a 2015 *Los Angeles Times* "City Beat" piece that documents the show-and-tell "Open Screen" series where anyone can show and tell, but it concludes with a telling characterization: the Center is "close to Hollywood only in miles" (Lelyveld, 2015). Though they have been absent from subsequent Times pieces on the landscape of moving-image exhibition, Davanzo and Marr seem unconcerned with publicity or fitting into preconceived notions of art and cinema, and are as confident as anyone else that their long-running institution is proof that an alternative film culture is alive and well in the city.

Given that an ethics of care, mutual aid and acceptance have been inherent in its aims from the start, Echo Park Film Center has created a familial and enduring alternative model to the commercial and arthouse film industry in Los Angeles. Before each screening, the EPFC hosts take a photograph of the attendees, "a ritual that allows the EPFC to create an image archive of its audience" (Trice)—and indeed, the organization is concerned above all with putting people above product. Though its leadership structure is fluid and non-traditional, the EPFC has succeeded by embedding itself in various communities on their respective terms, creating an intensely bonded network among other non-profit organizations in Los Angeles. By embracing non-industrial filmmakers and enthusiasts and allowing them to create their own space within the organization—whether as leaders or participants—the EPFC has managed to stand on its own and withstand endless changes in the cultural landscape of the city.

Coaxial Arts Foundation

In the decades after EPFC cemented itself in the arts landscape of Los Angeles, other non-profit venues have emerged that also serve as platforms for moving-image work neglected by traditional institutions in Los Angeles, and which cultivate their own distinctive culture of artistic practice within a diverse, autonomous and community-oriented framework. Some of these were born from specific underground subcultures, which took their own spin on traditional notions of arthouse cinema as part of a larger, more exploratory understanding of moving-image exhibition. Established in 2015, Coaxial Arts is an artist-run non-profit based in downtown Los Angeles that is "dedicated to experimental video, sound and performance art". The space, located at 1815 S. Main St, serves as an incubator for local artists to exhibit, create and collaborate on audiovisual projects that defy categorization, with an ever-expanding roster of residencies and core selection of monthly series. However, what distinguishes Coaxial is this particular bridge between the worlds of experimental music and video art, signified by the stack of CRT television sets in the front window that display a changing roster of video installations. Its origins lie in public-access broadcast of experimental events, and Coaxial's founders and many of its curators work as audiovisual professionals, while having the "keys" to use the space for cross-disciplinary programming.

Because of this cross-platform ethos, Coaxial has been remarkably adept at weathering the recent blows to the arts landscape. A report on grants given by the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts during the COVID-19 pandemic notes that the Coaxial space "depended heavily on ticket sales prior to the pandemic", but that during the COVID era, it has been "live-streaming free performances and video art instead. And it continues to commission new projects — something its $20,000 grant will go toward." (Vankin, 2021). Indeed, much like EPFC, Coaxial

Arts seemed to thrive during the pandemic, with regular free virtual programs and workshops on Twitch featuring local performance artists, culminating in a month-long Media Arts Festival in March 2021 that featured drive-in screenings and concerts. It also coincided with a publication celebrating their 5-year anniversary, a glossy book that features event photographs and testimonials from dozens of artists and curators whose work has been exhibited at the space.

Coaxial was started in recognition of a lack of multimedia arts organizations in Los Angeles, and a desire to serve artist's projects first and foremost. Such projects could range from "anything from poetry reading to noise performance to a workshop to a video screening," explained Coaxial founder and director Eva Aguila during an extended Zoom interview. "One of the challenges that I was having as an artist was that I could never get enough attention from organizations in order to do the work that I wanted to do," she said. "And I felt like other people in the same category that I was in were having the same problem. L.A. is not enough…there's 10 million people here and we need more spaces like Coaxial to exist" (Aguila, 2021). The majority of Coaxial's constituents are working professionals who need an outlet for artistic practice and experimentation, and Aguila set out to provide a shared, modular space for a trusted cohort.

Indeed, Coaxial was born from avant-garde and punk sensibilities rather than following in the path of traditional moving-image cultural institutions. Aguila came from the "punk DIY scene" while taking free theater classes in high school, where she learned how to build sets, set up lighting and sound for live performances. "It was there that I first learned about grassroots organizing," she writes in her introduction. "I remember being 16 years old and stepping foot for the first time into The Smell"—a beloved all-ages DIY music venue in downtown L.A.—"and feeling a world of possibilities." It was this DIY mentality that inspired her to attend the California Institute of the Arts as an undergraduate, but she "felt a little lost as an artist….I felt

like I didn't really fit in the art world so much…[and] lacked the connections due to my socioeconomic status." She began to perform noise music in underground spaces around the world and, after moving to Portland, felt inspired to start a space there, a collaboration with a record shop, that didn't pan out: "The business [element] kind of took over the venue portion of the space" (Aguila, 2021).

While in Portland, Aguila and her partner, Brock Fansler, developed an interest in broadcast technology, and in 2010 they began to produce a public-access television show called *Experimental Half-Hour*, which regularly exhibited the work of local performance artists and musicians. The couple would encourage these artists to collaborate with each other using a mixture of analog and digital broadcast technology and a variety of homemade "glitch" video effects, and the resulting recording out would "provide a record of the contemporary performing arts and video culture" in their community (see https://evaaguila.com/Experimental-Half-Hour). After moving back to L.A., Aguila tried to establish a fiscal sponsorship model for the show, but it "didn't really work, because most large grants don't accept fiscal sponsorship" (Aguila, 2021). Nevertheless, she brought *Experimental Half-Hour* to the city and started letting artists come in and collaborate on performances and videos, which resulted in the establishment of Coaxial downtown in 2015 after a year of looking for a dedicated commercial space.

From their project's inception, Aguila and Fansler's focus on digital and broadcast technologies has allowed for both a wider range of experimentation and accessibility, which is not strictly limited to moving-image practice. Much of the work exhibited at Coaxial is in the realm of DIY experimental art, which runs the gamut from audiovisual to performance pieces:

> A lot of the time, bigger art institutions don't want to show that kind of work unless it's already established. Mike Kelley, for instance—he's someone that would show at Coaxial

> if he was still alive and not famous. There are a lot of people like that…I'm basically giving space to that kind of work because…that's where innovation comes [from]. Having the ability to create work without feeling like it needs to be polished or complete…it's an experiment, so maybe it might fail, but maybe that's OK, maybe that's part of the process. (Aguila, 2021)

Aguila brought up the example of Michaela Tobin, a performance artist who had a residency at Coaxial in May 2020 and did a series of three live streams; she went on to perform an opera at REDCAT in May 2021. While Aguila didn't claim a direct through-line, she conceded that spaces like Coaxial often provide a platform for cross-disciplinary workshops that eventually lead to "more elevated work like that. Not to say that what we do isn't elevated," she said. "But having [that] experimentation, I think, is really important. And there just aren't enough organizations like us that do that kind of work" (Aguila, 2021).

Much as Coaxial's space and aesthetic modulates depending on the artists and curators, the venue's governing structure is also fluid. In some ways, Coaxial functions as a standard non-profit organization, whose board and staff happens to be entirely comprised of artists. Besides Aguila, Fansler serves as treasurer and "helps with the legal stuff"; there is an operations director and a [programming outreach coordinator] who was hired in 2021. The organization also has a steady influx of volunteers to help run the door, take photos to document events, and run camera for live streams. "When something [is] over my head, I reach out to [and hire] consultants." Before turning in any grants, Aguila "has another pair of eyes look at it…a lot of these grants are like 10 pages, 30 pages long, government stuff…just very tedious." However, Aguila's goal is to "eliminate [the traditional] hierarchy" of non-profit governance. "I feel like that's what really puts barriers between artists and the patrons…Certain artists have a hard time

grasping how to get to that level. So we're trying to eliminate that by offering these services to artists that maybe don't have a fancy website, or a CV, or didn't go to art school because they couldn't afford it, or they don't have legal status here." In this way, Coaxial is focused on directly serving its artists, trusting that their respective communities will follow the platform. "It's [often] a combination of reasons why people fall into these underground scenes. So we're essentially working to elevate all of these people" (Aguila, 2021).

Coaxial hosts 150 events a year, which averages to about 3-5 events per week, with audiences of age range 20-40. When I asked Aguila about how they work to build their audience, she responded that often the artist determines who shows up—i.e. a trans woman artist will bring an audience of trans women, Pacific Islanders, etc. "I've been at Coaxial three times in one week, and every time I go there, [we have] completely different people than the night before, because it's completely different content….I don't want it to become a clubhouse where it's just like, you know, me and my best friends…Of course, we can never be perfect and support every single type of community in LA, but we really do strive to be as inclusive as possible and show the different types of art and forms that exist here." Coaxial is also very active on Instagram. "I personally hate social media, but I recognize the importance of it as an entity…It's just another way to get the word out on what you're doing and promoting artists, so I take it really seriously." One of Coaxial's board members works at a marketing company and advises them on effective branding, such as "the best times to post because that's when most people are online...there are all these strategies that you have to do." Coaxial uses newsletters, social media and their website because "you need to have these different outlets in order to get the word out…[otherwise] you're going to lose one side of your audience. I've never really been good at finding journalists or getting press-type stuff…I wish I was better at that." But at the same time, they try not to bombard

people with information about events. “There's no reason to put that pressure on ourselves if it's not necessary…[and] that's what the other institutions are doing, but we're not like other institutions, so we don't have to do those things” (Aguila, 2021).

Besides the core board of eight directors, Coaxial has a larger group of “key holders”, about 20 people who have access to the space and who are allowed to curate one-off events. Though their programming is overwhelmingly focused on new experimental video and performance art, Coaxial also features regular monthly programs of independent, exploitation and avant-garde cinema, but with a typically artist-based focus. Two regular programs, Shadow Kitchen LA and Cathode Cinema, share a revival bent; the latter, a “a monthly curatorial screening which showcases contemporary archival and experimental film and animation” (Coaxial, 2021, p. 152), has since spun off from Coaxial during the pandemic into a popular online Twitch stream of repertory cinema offerings. To get a better sense of how Coaxial’s “key holders” interact with the venue, and to get a sense of how Coaxial’s mission intersects with more traditional arthouse film programming, I spoke with Alex Brown, a board member, video artist and curator of Shadow Kitchen L.A. Run together with Matthew Anderson and Trevor Byrne, Shadow Kitchen is loosely described as “a gathering of filmmakers engaging in the art and practice of film and video making, meeting monthly” (Deyoe et al., 2021, p. 170) at the venue—but it broadly serves as a screening and talkback series with local independent filmmakers, some of whom have exhibited widely at festivals and had domestic distribution.

Brown straddles the “VJ world” and the “filmmaking world” which “almost never meet”, and imagines her practice as finding that crossroads. When I spoke to her, she was working on a music video that she shot at Coaxial using a green-screen, then re-filmed it using visual feedback with virtual and/or synthesizer effects—her own form of production design. Though Brown’s

work is primarily in experimental shorts, she's "working on a more narrative, sort of existential, sci-fi lucid-dreaming short." Brown got involved with Coaxial through Aguila and Fansler, who she knew from the L.A. electronic music scene. After working in publishing and being laid off during the 2008 recession, she worked as a photographer and moved to L.A., where she "got roped into helping people on music videos—being a camera assistant basically." Her college friends were part of rave crews, throwing "illegal warehouse parties", and she folded into that community, which was a blend of musicians and filmmakers (Brown, 2021).

Though Coaxial's community primarily comes from the experimental music scene of L.A., Brown saw Shadow Kitchen as "a bridge toward the film community". After they became friends, Aguila invited Brown to do a residency, which resulted in her getting "keys" to the space. They taught her how to use Raspberry Pi hardware to broadcast color signals to the CRT TVs, where Brown regularly showcases her experimental work. "They gave me the space [and the] resources—it was kind of a big deal for me." Brown was part of a "crit group" of other video artists, including Anderson and Byrne, who would meet monthly to workshop each other's work, and who were part of another collective that fell apart. "We brought over some wine and we all just sat there and we're like, okay...what do we actually want? What is the thing that we're needing?" The group wanted to build a space to meet other artists who were like-minded and willing to work on each other's projects, and to make it a "regular thing where people show up...like a magic trick"—a mentality Brown took from rave culture. In the Coaxial book, Brown writes about the idea of wanting "a way to connect with other people through cinema. We wanted support for ourselves as artists (to "get off the island" we called it)…[so] we created a sort of moving-image salon—a scared space for screening, performance, critical discussion, and collaboration" (Deyoe et al., 2021, p. 170) .

The programming ethos for Shadow Kitchen primarily revolves around "interesting people that we know", which could range from an evening of short films by friends of the collective (i.e. artist and filmmaker Courtney Stephens) or the feature film *Viva* by acclaimed feminist genre director Anna Biller (2007, 120m, digital). "There weirdly aren't a lot of places to go [watch short films in L.A.] outside of festivals—even though that's the medium that everyone works in when they're a working filmmaker." Brown explained that while other venues would have charged money to do events there, Coaxial's special "key holder" agreement allows curators to get to use the space for free. "[It] allowed us to take risks without worrying about filling seats—truly a blessing in these dark capitalist times." (170) A screening of *Viva* came together after Brown had shot Biller for a portrait session for L.A. Record, a now-defunct free music publication, and watched and loved the film. "We were very interested in demystifying certain processes, like having people come out and talk about…how they got their money, to kind of bring things down. So we're all on the [same] level" (Brown, 2021).

To what extent does Coaxial see itself as part of the larger network of L.A. non-profit spaces? Aguila told me that in addition to collaborating with other organizations, Coaxial's leaders are in regular conversation with other venues. "There aren't that many people doing the same thing. If there's an issue or something big is happening, like a global pandemic, I'm talking to other people that run art spaces and asking how they're doing it… Even though it seems like we operate independently, we really don't, because we all know each other in some capacity" (Aguila, 2021). Coaxial collaborated with Echo Park Film Center for "Comida a Mano", a Mexican cooking and screening event, and was part of the curatorial committee for the L.A. queer film festival Dirty Looks: On Location in 2018. Aguila mentioned collaborating regularly

with Navel, a downtown non-profit gallery, and Common Field, a national network for visual arts organizations.

Ultimately, Coaxial Arts's cross-disciplinary, multimedia approach to curation gives it a fresh voice in the landscape of moving-image exhibition. By bringing the communal ethos of L.A.'s underground music scene into a moving-image context—and using their funds to keep a low financial overhead—they provide an open canvas for professionals to create and experiment within a range of artistic practices, and provide carte blanche to a trusted group of curatorial voices. The venue's focus on broadcast technology, combined with its strong aesthetic sensibility and savvy use of social media, makes their curation accessible and appealing to a new generation of working artists.

Chapter 4: Analysis and Themes

While Echo Park Film Center and Coaxial Arts are only two of the many independent moving-image organizations in Los Angeles, I found them useful to compare and contrast as smaller non-profit venues dedicated to regular alternative moving-image programming, each with identifiably grassroots marketing and outreach practices, as well as distinct approaches to collective governance. After concluding my case studies, I felt that these similarities and differences between the venues were relevant and help point to broader trends in the contemporary alternative exhibition landscape.

Both EPFC and Coaxial are iconoclastic, artist-focused underground organizations that were founded by L.A. transplants—artists who moved to the city and immediately recognized a need for greater resources for independent and avant-garde filmmakers. EPFC was started by an Italian-American and Canadian couple who wanted to bring an "unpretentious" cultural and communal sensibility and consciously work against a perceived elitism in the experimental film community. Their focus on documentary filmmaking and affordable education provides a low-risk entry for new filmmakers and hobbyists alike. Coaxial Arts was also started by an artist couple from Portland who perceived a cultural gatekeeping at institutions in L.A., and were interested in providing an alternative platform for other semi-professional mixed-media artists—many of whom are personal friends or acquaintances—who would benefit from an outlet for experimentation that were not being served by established organizations. As such, there is a tension between non-industrial artistic practices and their professionalization that exists at both venues. This tension is also borne out in the range of programming.

To some extent, each venue is defined by their *embrace of the amateur or non-industrial* figure in art and filmmaking, in spite of their proximity to the commercial art and film industries. Within its domestic, living-room atmosphere, EPFC hosts regular filmmaking workshops for both children and adults, and encourages experimentation and expression with analog and digital film equipment. Coaxial's embrace of broadcast technology provides a platform for mixed-media and performance art by artists who do not otherwise have a professional network in L.A., are uninterested in seeking a path through the traditional film and art industries, or are just starting to gain their footing within them. Many of the participants at EPFC and Coaxial are students, hobbyists, or artists with other professional duties who use these spaces as a safe testing ground for their work. Workshopping is an important aspect of each institution, whether through board discussions around potential programs, or dedicated show-and-tell nights; some artists use their experience at these venues as a stepping stone to opportunities in the commercial art and film world. In general, this embrace of transience helps each venue resist the codification and academicization of experimental film and art that defines other long-running film and art institutions in Los Angeles. Both are more interested in innovative presentations and experiences than promoting individual works. As such, the majority of their programming does not seem particularly influenced by the broader arts culture—with exceptions being Coaxial's Cathode Cinema program, which focuses on cult and genre films that might also receive play at a revival theater, and Shadow Kitchen, which has invited local independent film luminaries for talkbacks. Community members and friends of the founders are encouraged to use the spaces, and programs and collaborations tend to develop whenever interest is expressed. This mix of both structured and unstructured methods results in each venue remaining mostly under the radar of mainstream

press around Los Angeles independent film culture, while ensuring a consistently fresh slate of participants.

In terms of their programming models, these venues differ in small but significant ways. EPFC's programs are primarily tied to their educational initiatives, with regular show-and-tell events for participants, and artists-in-residence who show their films in dedicated programs as well as teach public workshops. (If you make a film at EPFC, it will get screened there.) While there are occasional programs of avant-garde films by canonical artists, these are usually presented by outside curators (i.e. Mark Toscano's "Remains to be Streamed" series) and are supplemental to the venue's larger mission of aiding and exhibiting new work. These events are united in their emphasis on analog film formats and their "handmade" qualities. By contrast, Coaxial, with its roots in live broadcasting and experimental music, is more concerned with performance art and related digital audiovisual projects, often taking a mixed-media approach as it engages with both virtual and in-person programming. These events are commissioned by the space's curators for specific artists and can take up the entire space for weeks at a time, as resident artists shift the layout and storefront windows according to their needs, which continuously changes the character of the space. These "happening"-type events are well-documented and are as integral to the space as the film screenings, which showcase the work of local filmmakers and involve talkbacks with participants.

Overall, both EPFC and Coaxial function as prime examples of the *microcinema*: modular, community-run spaces that exhibit a wide range of analog and digital moving-image work, and which, per Barten & Sherman's definition, create a "very specific environment" where "challenging works could be seen in a non-institutional, yet informed context" (Barten & Sherman, 1996, p. 35). Both engage in a wide variety of curatorial practices, educational

initiatives and partnerships as part of their broader mission and inclusive framework, whether or not it is strictly tied to moving-image exhibition. Both venues have cultivated an audience that is open or sympathetic to non-narrative forms of artistic expression. Perhaps most remarkably, both have been able to expand their programs into other mediums, neighborhoods and communities outside of their original brick-and-mortar establishments.

In terms of their marketing and outreach to these audiences, both organizations are primarily defined by their *embeddedness in a particular community*, and use this as a focal point for building an audience. As a mainstay of the neighborhood of Echo Park, EPFC has defined itself as a friendly local venue for education and exhibition, making public programs, classes and equipment rentals affordable and accessible for any interested adults and children, and hosting regular show-and-tell events for participants to exhibit their work. The space itself resembles a cluttered living room, and an ethics of care and love dominates the language used by the institution's leaders; all of this serves to provide a distinctly domestic experience. By contrast, Coaxial was founded by members of the downtown L.A. experimental music and arts scene, and much of their programming serves this particular community, with residencies that focus on live performance, mixed-media events and workshops where local artists receive feedback on their work. Both venues provide a space for non-industrial or semi-professional artists both within and outside the gallery world to exhibit and test their work at low risk. These practices generate a sense of authenticity and trust at both venues between members and visitors. As well, it creates a sense of accountability for shared resources and leadership, and allows space to be held for a wide variety of artists. Both EPFC and Coaxial put a strong focus on BIPOC leadership and curation and often collaborate with local activist organizations; there is a sense that a very specific and appropriate audience will always show up.

With that said, it was interesting to note the differences in social media usage at both venues, given that this tends to be the primary form of marketing and outreach for most alternative moving-image institutions. The founders of both venues expressed a general distaste or disinterest in social media, but acknowledged it as a necessary burden. EPFC primarily uses their website, Facebook and e-newsletter to get the word out about screenings and classes, with occasional Instagram posts and live streaming events; but they acknowledged that the e-newsletter engagement is dwindling, and their Twitter page is all but inactive. While the founders spoke about wanting to update their website to a more engaging interface, it is clearly not a main priority, and they do not see it as an existential issue. Coaxial is much more consistent in their outreach practices, using dynamic, colorful and highly designed Instagram posts for each of their programs, regular newsletter blasts and continuing to build an online audience through Twitch live stream programs. In some ways, this speaks to Coaxial as a younger and more digitally literate organization, whereas EPFC's long-running grassroots practices has allowed them to easily maintain visibility in their direct community and intended audience—for now. In general it seems that digital literacy will be integral to the survival of both institutions in order to successfully communicate and develop their respective missions.

In terms of governance and staffing, each venue is highly strategic in their embrace of *ephemerality* in both curation and governance at the venues. While I was not able to learn what each co-operative member was responsible for, it was clear that both EPFC and Coaxial have a fluid governing structure and resist being pigeonholed into traditional non-profit organizational hierarchies. The leadership at Coaxial is so adaptable that its co-founders were able to continue to run the venue virtually from their new residence in New York during COVID-19 pandemic until a new programming coordinator was hired. Each organization has a board of directors that

meets semi-regularly, but they function primarily as a co-operative, where members wear multiple hats as needed, and some are even allowed "keys" to open and close the space. My impression from interviewing participants at both venues is that EPFC tends to be more open to newcomers joining the co-operative, while Coaxial is more firmly divided between its artistic leaders and volunteers—but this may also be a reflection of EPFC's long history of students becoming teachers, while Coaxial is still relatively new as a functioning organization. It was unclear to me how Coaxial's founding board members were chosen, but my impression is that many of these positions were borne from personal and collaborative relationships predating the venue's existence. Though the leaders I spoke to at both venues express a distaste for grant-writing and marketing, they agree it is a necessary part of the job, and seek assistance from other community members in developing grant proposals and social media strategy.

Ultimately, venues like EPFC and Coaxial represent an underground moving-image culture that stands in sharp contrast to the auteur-driven, highly professionalized arthouse model that dominates the independent film landscape of L.A. In Chapter 2, I drew a history of alternative cinema in Los Angeles as a narrative of avant-garde cinema's marginalization, increasing popularity and eventual commodification into the larger model of arthouse and festival film culture, to which these venues represent both a reaction and sustainable alternative. The auteur arthouse tradition, defined by world cinema's increasing commercialization, is a model at the whim of an ever-changing market; festivals and distributors often determine the commercial viability of a film or filmmaker, and it is up to distributors whether they are willing and able to establish relationships with specific venues. Venues like EPFC and Coaxial provide a home for filmmakers who are less established or uninterested in the strictures of the broader film industry. They also provide a direct pipeline from experimentation and education to exhibition,

and their loose but stable non-profit structure allows them to do so without the expectation of recouping financial investment. In a sense, what David James described as the "domestic and para-domestic screenings for friends and fellow artists [that] have been the city's essential form of minor cinema" (James, 2005, p. 213) has since migrated downtown and eastward, to venues that embrace the unclassifiable as well as the familial. While many Los Angeles independent film venues are defined by trends imposed by a dense, exclusive culture, EPFC and Coaxial are built up from within, and as such have developed idiosyncratic and highly personal alternatives to the dominant film culture.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

On December 3, 2021, the Echo Park Film Center announced that they were giving up the Alvarado St. space that they had occupied for 20 years at the end of the month, with "no official plans to move the current Alvarado storefront to a new location". While they stated that they would continue to partner with other organizations to offer free classes and "spread the cinematic gospel" through traveling programs, residencies, commissions and international projects, the leaders decided that "it is time for us to pivot, adapt and recalibrate in response to times we are living in" (Echo Park Film Center, 2021). Though I was shocked and saddened upon reading this news—no doubt a major loss to the organization's immediate community—it also seemed a natural progression for an organization that had always embraced ephemerality as part of its mission, and which had sustained itself during a global pandemic with flying colors.

It would be a tall order to explore each of the varied independent moving-image organizations that have developed in the decades since the heyday of L.A. film programming and their respective intricacies. Instead, through these case studies, I have sought to identify general trends within independent moving-image organizations that have developed in the decades since the heyday of L.A. alternative film programming, which is now spread out between long-running community non-profits, museums, for-profit theaters and itinerant screening series.

Each of these has been influenced to some degree by the model of *auteur* arthouse cinema, which emphasizes an *intensiveness* and *exclusivity* within moving-image culture, where individual (and predominantly white male) filmmakers are feted with critical appraisals and awards, with audiences invited to pack art houses and develop a connoisseurship of a newly canonized art form. As the industry continued to celebrate itself and independent cinema became

its own familiarized, marketable brand over time, marginal films and filmmakers have had to seek out various creative and remote venues for exhibition across Los Angeles, which have therein become their own distinct kind of model. The digital changeover of the 2000s allowed and necessitated a more democratic method of production, distribution and exhibition of moving-image art free from traditional institutional boundaries, which has resulted in a new model that instead emphasizes *extensiveness* and *inclusivity* and is separate from the dominant film culture.

If one relies on local press and the dearth of alternative weekly coverage, one might imagine the history of L.A. alternative moving-exhibition as a story of decline, with once-thriving arthouse and underground institutions no longer holding the attention of the public in the era of streaming. Rather than a decline, however, there has been a shift in the landscape that has given way to heterogeneous and underground exhibition methods all but uninterested in traditional arthouse or Hollywood cultures. Venues like Echo Park Film Center and Coaxial Arts demonstrate an embrace of fluidity, a focus on supporting artists and non-industrial filmmakers, allowing for cross-disciplinary approaches to what is already a hybrid medium. These venues attract highly diverse audiences from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, providing educational resources to a constituency not typically supported or recognized by the broader film industry.

The existence of these venues also points to a tension between permanence and ephemerality in the landscape of L.A. moving-image exhibition. Larger media arts organizations like LACMA and UCLA are highly structured, with clear staff titles and responsibilities, funding sources and documentation. Their public programs are driven by a curatorial culture that is meant to insure the *permanence* of the works they show through knowledge-building and

documentation. Because arthouse cinema culture is based on this kind of permanence and to some degree elite knowledge claims of film history, it generates a different sensibility than that which might come from a model that embraces risk and experimentation. EPFC and Coaxial are both venues that cultivate spaces for visitors to express and experiment without fear of economic risk; not only have they sustained this notion over time, but they have expanded their programs into other mediums, neighborhoods and communities. In some sense, this ephemerality has worked to their favor as platforms for alternative moving-image work.

I believe that the future of alternative exhibition will depend on the interrogation of this binary of permanence and ephemerality, as well as more thoughtful curation of brick-and-mortar exhibition in tandem with virtual programming, and vice versa. Just as streaming services like The Criterion Channel and MUBI are making canonical and contemporary arthouse cinema widely available, exhibitors should focus on screening films that are unavailable on home video or streaming, or work to place better-known films into new contexts through collaboration with local organizations and partners from other disciplines. How can movie theaters and microcinemas continue to engage an audience overwhelmed by streaming options at home? How can online platforms best support marginalized films and filmmakers without dumping them into a digital void?

For my part, I am currently working on an intervention in the landscape of alternative moving-image exhibition through my own curatorial practice. In 2022, I will be launching a monthly itinerant screening series called Mezzanine, focused on underseen and underexposed independent films. Each screening will be presented in collaboration with a guest from a specific discipline (writers, artists, filmmakers, curators, etc.) in order to create a compelling new context for the work, and to expand L.A. film culture into conversation with other art forms and

communities. This is something I feel qualified to do given my past experience with navigating networks of independent film distribution, presenting independent films publicly to audiences in an engaging way, and seeking out copies of obscure titles that have not been made widely available and deserve to be seen.

Moving-image archives are also an essential part of this equation, and I am working on an initiative to promote FIAF archival certification and accessibility for theaters that can run 35mm and 16mm projection in L.A.. This will allow more frequent distribution of archival prints from the city's many impressive film archives, which preserve a significant amount of important films that are otherwise undistributed or unavailable. I am also looking to raise funds for a centralized online hub for alternative film listings in L.A. and related publications, based on New York's Screen Slate (www.screenslate.com), which will go a long way toward building a virtual community for the city's many archives, venues and exhibitors.

The city of L.A. is rife with alternative visions of moving-image culture, traditional or otherwise, and which only continue to take on new forms. Within the next two years, an impressive array of venues are opening that will bring a new wave of attention to L.A.'s alternative film scene. Aside from the American Cinematheque's recent takeover of the Los Feliz 3 as a revival movie house, the Academy Museum opens in September 2021 and will prove to be a test case in city-wide interest in repertory moviegoing; Brain Dead Studios opened at the former Silent Movie Theatre space on Fairfax and continues to show a mixture of American, European and Asian cult classics; the new Secret Movie Club space in the Arts District is committed to 35mm projection; the Vista Theatre in Los Feliz was purchased by Quentin Tarantino and is set to reopen in December; the Bootleg Theater in Historic Filipinotown is reopening as the non-profit arts and cinema space 2220 Arts + Archives; the two-screen Vidiots

is set to open in Eagle Rock in Spring 2022; the list goes on. While many of these venues will no doubt be forced into tension with the demands of the commercial film market, the hope is that they will continue to show more adventurous choices besides canonical Hollywood and independent films, and be willing to host itinerant and heterogeneous events that reflect the true breadth and depth of the city's alternative film culture.

The tension between institutional and itinerant exhibition will continue to play out as a new generation of exhibitors attempt to build an alternative film culture in Los Angeles. Steve Anker, the longtime film curator at REDCAT who retired in 2020, writes about the enduring legacy of microcinemas and alternative film programming in the INCITE Exhibition Guide:

> In every case idealistic groups helped accomplish something in resistance to prevailing cultures by creating or reviving what could be thought of as a kind of institution. Individuals getting together, driven by their passion for experimental film, can work within institutional settings (with or without financial support) if there is the possibility for individuality, risk-taking and growth within each organization, and when the purposes of everyone involved is aligned. Good art making and creative programming always hinge on the drive and independence of individuals and in the end working alone and without organizational structure remains a necessary and often preferable option. But we should never dismiss the potential value of vital institutions that remain, or are created, to be truly at the service of the art. (Anker, 2013)

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