

**MEDIA ARTS CENTERS AS ALTERNATIVE ARCHIVAL SPACES: INVESTIGATING
THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARCHIVAL PRACTICES IN NON-PROFIT MEDIA
ORGANIZATIONS**

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PREVIEW

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Lindsay Kistler Mattock, MLIS, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2014

In the United States, archival institutions have prioritized the preservation of commercial and Hollywood cinema overlooking small-scale media production by non-professionals and independent media artists. Media arts centers, however, have played a pivotal role in the continued access, use, and preservation of materials produced by the communities that they serve. These non-profit media collectives were imagined as a distributed network of organizations supporting the production, exhibition and study of media; serving as information centers about media resources; and supporting regional preservation efforts. However, media arts centers have remained over-looked and unexplored by the archival field. This dissertation seeks to shift this balance, including these artist-run organizations as part of the network of archives and collecting institutions preserving independent media.

Using case study methodologies this study investigated the practices at three media arts centers, Pittsburgh Filmmakers, Paper Tiger Television, and the Termite Television Collective, seeking to understand the role of these organizations in the collection and preservation of independent media and the development of archival practices in non-profit media organizations. The study places each of these organizations in the wider history of media arts center movement in the United States and looks broadly at the development of archives and archival practices within these organizations. Framing media arts centers as maker-spaces and archival spaces, this

dissertation argues for a critique of professional archival practices and a redefinition of the standards for preservation of audiovisual materials.

PREVIEW

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PREFACE

This dissertation grew from what was a much smaller question regarding the preservation of a single collection I was charged with caring for during my Master's studies at the University of Pittsburgh School of Information Sciences. I thank Janet Ceja, Richard J. Cox, and Bernadette Callery for seeing the potential in a little project about a film collection at Pittsburgh Filmmakers. I would also like to thank filmmaker George Semsel for inspiring the larger questions that became the dissertation project, and John Cantine and Jessica Futrell for encouraging me to explore my interest in archives during my internship at the Pittsburgh Filmmakers Library.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the growing availability of 16mm film and video technology spurred production from amateur, independent, and underground filmmakers, and a variety of other non-professional media creators. This growing sector of independent media production worked in opposition to Hollywood, the dominant force of media creation. Amateurs have had access to media technology from the advent of cinema, but the availability of a wider variety of formats and the growing number of venues supporting the exhibition of non-commercial and non-professional work grew exponentially during this decade.

This burst of media production influenced the establishment of a network of media arts centers across the country. These centers began as small, non-profit, artists-run organizations, supporting the production of small-scale independent media. The media arts center movement has been generally recognized from those writing from within the movement, but has not been the subject of wider academic study. This dissertation investigates the history and development of several media arts centers focusing on the various services and practices provided by these institutions. In doing so, this dissertation identifies ways in which archival practice may benefit from understanding the relationship of independent media creators to their media products and moving image technology.

1.1 THE PRESERVATION OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA

The challenges of preserving independent media in the United States have been identified in a series of reports published by the National Film Preservation Board and Hollywood's major lobbying arm, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. These reports, published decades apart, illustrate many of the challenges that the motion picture industry and moving image archivists share in preserving and providing continual access to audiovisual records.

The Library of Congress published the results of their initial investigation into moving image preservation in 1993. *Film Preservation 1993: A Study of the Current State of Film Preservation* surveyed the growing field of moving image preservation in order to develop a plan for preserving the nation's film heritage. The second report, *Television and Video Preservation 1997* further identified the issues specific to the preservation of videotape formats expanding the preservation plan to include all analog formats of audiovisual media.¹

More recently, in response to the retooling of the motion picture industry from film to digital video, the Science and Technology Council of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences published their survey of practices at major motion picture studios in 2007, titled *The Digital Dilemma*. This initial report was followed by a second study published in 2012, *The Digital Dilemma 2: Perspectives from Independent Filmmakers, Documentarians, and Nonprofit Audiovisual Archives*, a publication that further investigates the issues specific to media

¹ Annette Melville and Scott Simmon, *Film Preservation 1993: A Study of the Current State of Film Preservation* (Washington D.C.: National Film Preservation Board, 1993), <http://www.loc.gov/film/study.html>; William Thomas Murphy, *Television and Video Preservation 1997: A Report on the Current State of American Television and Video Preservation* (Washington D.C.: National Film Preservation Board, 1997), <http://www.loc.gov/film/pdfs/tvstudy.pdf>. Reports accessed December 1, 2012.

producers and preservers outside of the major Hollywood studios.² Both sets of reports address the preservation of independent media on some scale. However, while these reports suggest that independent media is not being adequately preserved for a variety of reasons, they offer few solutions.

1.1.1 Film Preservation 1993 and Television and Video Preservation 1997

The National Film Preservation Act of 1988 established The National Film Preservation Board, an advisory board for the Librarian of Congress that is charged with developing and implementing the national film preservation plan and selecting “culturally, historically or aesthetically significant films” each year for the National Film Registry.³ The 1993 and 1997 reports published by the Board coincide with the renewal of the National Film Preservation Act in 1992 and 1996 and were drafted at a moment when moving image archiving was gaining recognition, stimulating more research in the areas of film and video preservation.⁴

Early film preservation efforts were directed toward the collection and preservation of nitrate film, a chemically unstable film stock first used in the production of motion pictures. The volatility of nitrate film and the spotty preservation efforts by film studios shaped early

² Science & Technology Council, *The Digital Dilemma: Strategic Issues in Archiving and Accessing Digital Motion Picture Materials* (Beverly Hills, CA: Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2007), <http://www.oscars.org/science-technology/council/projects/digitaldilemma/>; Science & Technology Council, *The Digital Dilemma 2: Perspectives from Independent Filmmakers, Documentarians, and Nonprofit Audiovisual Archives* (Beverly Hills, CA: Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2012), <http://www.oscars.org/science-technology/council/projects/digitaldilemma2/index.html>. Reports accessed December 1, 2012.

³ The National Film Preservation Foundation, the funding arm of the National Film Preservation Board was created with the 1996 renewal of the National Film Preservation Act. National Film Preservation Board, “About the Board,” last modified August 31, 2011, <http://www.loc.gov/film/filmabou.html>.

⁴ AMIA, the Association of Moving Image Archivists, officially incorporated as the first professional society for moving image archivists in 1991. See also, Ray Edmondson, *Audiovisual Archiving: Philosophy and Principles* (Paris: UNESCO, 2004). (Originally published in 1998).

preservation policies that prioritized the recovery of lost titles from the silent era.⁵ Beginning in 1909, acetate based film stock, or “safety film,” was manufactured as an alternative for nitrate film, but nitrate would continue to be used through the early 1950s. “Safety film” became the standard for preservation of nitrate film; older titles were reformatted to new film stock in an attempt to provide continued access to the work.

Similar to nitrate decay, acetate film suffers from “vinegar syndrome,” a progressive deterioration of the film base. Over time, the film stock begins to shrink and warp, eventually inhibiting playback of the medium. Color film also fades over time, leading to additional preservation concerns. After decades of transferring nitrate-based film to acetate stock, by the mid-1990s these preservation issues with acetate film were becoming evident to studios and archives concerned with the preservation of moving images.

Film Preservation 1993 was a direct response to this new threat to the preservation of motion picture media. Recognizing the disproportionate attention of the preservation community on early cinema, the report suggests, “traditional preservation efforts directed largely toward the Hollywood feature seem shortsighted,” and calls attention to the larger variety of motion pictures deserving of preservation, such as “newsreels, documentaries, experimental or avant-garde films,

⁵ The most frequently cited statistic suggests that some 80% of cinema produced prior to 1928 has been lost. Others estimate that 75% of all silent era footage has been lost along with approximately 50% of all films produced before 1950. See, Anthony Slide, *Nitrate Won't Wait: A History of Film Preservation in the United States* (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland Classics, 2000), 9.

anthropological and regional films, advertising and corporate shorts, dance documentation, and even amateur home movies, especially of ethnic groups invisible in mainstream media.”⁶

Film Preservation 1993 also demonstrated the disproportionate allocation of funding among the country’s major film archives. UCLA’s Film and Television Archive, the George Eastman House, and the Museum of Modern Art received 86% of the funds available from the federal government through the American Film Institute and the National Endowment for the Arts from 1979 through 1992.⁷ The majority of institutions surveyed for this study were large archival institutions specializing in the preservation of moving image media; however, the report does include a few significant moving image collections held in a number of museums and historical societies across the country.⁸

Independent filmmaking, including avant-garde and documentary film, is recognized as an “at-risk” category of film production in this initial study. While Hollywood studios were beginning to take responsibility for the management of their own moving image assets through the establishment of in-house archives and film libraries, the 1993 report acknowledges the lack of preservation resources among independent producers working outside of these major Hollywood studios. The lack of storage resources for independent filmmakers and the limited distribution of independent productions are both listed as risks to the survival of these works

⁶ Melville and Simmon, *Film Preservation 1993*, chap. 1. This list reflects the types of moving images named by the “orphans” movement. See chapter 2 of this proposal for further discussion. The chart “What Types of Films Are Preserved with AFI-NEA Grants?” demonstrates the disproportionate nature of the funding for film preservation. 53% of funds available through the American Film Institute and National Endowment for the Arts from 1979-1992, funded the preservation of silent era cinema (nitrate titles released before 1929). Independent features received 2% of the available funds with 7% of funding supporting the preservation of avant-garde works. Documentary films received a larger proportion of the funding at 16%, however, it is unclear how films were placed in these categories. Melville and Simmon, *Film Preservation 1993*, fig. 7.

⁷ Grants provided through the American Film Institute and the National Endowment for the Arts were the single largest funding source for film preservation at this time. Melville and Simmon, *Film Preservation 1993*, fig. 6.

⁸ The National Air & Space Museum, Nebraska Historical Society, Oregon Historical Society, and Bishop Museum Archives in Hawaii were a few of the public respondents reporting collections with over 1,000 moving images. See, Melville and Simmon, *Film Preservation 1993*, fig. 5.

without active intervention by archival institutions.⁹ Studio and stock footage libraries, museums and archival institutions, and private collectors are suggested among the disparate sites of preservation for moving image media. However, “independent producers and distributors” becomes a catch-all category, representing a variety of organizations and individuals producing and collecting media.¹⁰ Interestingly, media arts centers are specifically named along with other artist-run organizations as sites for collection and distribution of media, but are not pursued further as possible preservers of moving image collections. Film and the major sites of moving image preservation are the central focus of this initial study.

Recognizing the limited focus of the 1993 report, *Preservation 1997* establishes a preservation plan for moving image assets recorded on videotape, including a more extensive discussion related to the preservation of independent media. The report includes all of the “major dimensions” of videotape production, including, “entertainment, nonfiction, news and public affairs, public television, local television news, video art, and independent video.”¹¹ Videotape and television media are described separately from film-based media due to the preservation concerns specific to magnetic media. Like film-based media, videotape requires specific environmental storage to ensure the long-term preservation of the material. These

⁹ Melville and Simmon, *Film Preservation 1993*, chap. 1.

¹⁰ The definition of “independent” includes everything from large studios working independently of Hollywood studios to individual artists producing and distributing their own work.

¹¹ Murphy, *Television and Video Preservation 1997*, chap. 1.

moving image formats also degrade over time, resulting in data loss and inhibiting playback.¹² With the larger number of video formats available, issues of obsolescence also put videotape assets at greater risk.¹³

Much like *Film Preservation 1993*, large network studios and archives are described as major preservers of video while media arts centers are mentioned as possible sites of collection, but not included in the larger study. However, unlike *Film Preservation 1993*, independent video and video art are awarded their own chapter in the 1997 report. Again recognizing independent media as an at-risk category, the limited resources of independent media producers are described as the most significant challenge to preserving independent productions. While a few archival institutions are listed among collectors of independent media, non-profit distributors, media arts centers, libraries, community organizations, production units, college audiovisual departments, as well as garages, attics, and closets, are also listed as places where video collections may be found.¹⁴

Preservation 1997 shifts the focus beyond preservation also arguing that access to media has inhibited research in this area as “no comprehensive effort has been made to list, catalog or document, let alone preserve this remarkable record of American history and culture.” The report warns, “many media arts groups are unfamiliar with professional cataloging practices and

¹² The Image Permanence Institute recommends a minimum storage temperature of 54° F at 30-50% relative humidity. See, Jim Wheeler, *Videotape Preservation Handbook* (Jim Wheeler, 2002), <http://www.amianet.org/resources/guides/WheelerVideo.pdf>; Peter Z. Adelstein, *IPI Media Storage Quick Reference*, 2nd ed. (Rochester, NY: Image Permanence Institute, 2009).

¹³ Jim Wheeler provides a chart listing threatened, endangered, and obsolescent videotape formats. On a list of twenty-three common formats, only two are listed as being in current use, VHS and S-VHS. Note, this list was published over eight years ago. These once common formats are now being quickly replaced by digital video formats. Wheeler, *Videotape Preservation Handbook*, 22-23.

¹⁴ Murphy, *Television and Video Preservation 1997*, chap. 1, and chap. 5.

lack computers and training facilities, making the development of shared data fairly difficult.”¹⁵ Access becomes central to the conversation of preservation, as the failure to catalog these materials has allowed such collections to remain unrecognized by the preservation community. Funding for the media arts is allocated for the production of media, but few of these small non-profit media organizations have the resources to catalog and preserve their work.¹⁶ Preservation funding is limited to archival institutions, such as the larger moving image repositories cited in the 1993 report, however few of these organizations had prioritized the collection and preservation of video.

Both reports helped to increase awareness of moving image media preservation issues in the United States and shift the preservation focus from nitrate collections to a wider variety of media, including video productions and independent media. In the intervening years, this shift can be traced through the ‘orphan film movement,’ which advocates for the preservation of all forms of media, from art house cinema to home movies.¹⁷ However, as digital production technologies begin to replace the analog, the preservation community has voiced a new set of concerns regarding the preservation of digital media.

1.1.2 The Digital Dilemma: 2007 and 2012

The first *Digital Dilemma* report, published in 2007, focuses on the digital asset management issues of major Hollywood studios as they transition from analog to digital

¹⁵ Murphy, *Television and Video Preservation 1997*, chap. 5.

¹⁶ The 1997 report cites a Media Alliance grant application seeking funds to catalog video art that was twice rejected by the National Endowment for the Arts. The report also suggests that *none* of the media arts organizations have funding to preserve the media they create. Murphy, *Television and Video Preservation 1997*, chap. 5.

¹⁷ Further discussion of orphan films may be found in Chapter 2.

production. The retooling of the motion picture industry poses a number of challenges for studios managing their moving image assets. As *Film Preservation 1993* illustrated, by the mid-1990s studios had developed internal archives programs to manage the media they produced; the retooling of the production process for new digital media formats also suggests a retooling for these preservation programs.

No longer bound by the cost of celluloid film, the low cost of memory and storage space affords media producers with opportunities to capture more moving image material during production than analog counterparts.¹⁸ Along with this increase in the amount of data produced, the entire production workflow shifts as the digital files, rather than analog film, are manipulated, transferred, and stored on a number of servers and machines. Digital formats have now matched, and in some instances surpassed, the pictorial quality of film, but do not produce a physical element – the standard on which moving image preservation has been defined.

While production and distribution are streamlined, eliminating the need to strike multiple analog prints of each film, preservation and long-term storage now present a greater financial liability for studios. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences estimates an annual cost of \$1,059 to store an analog archival master of a single title. The management and storage of a 4K digital master (the digital equivalent of an analog print) is estimated at \$12,514 per year.¹⁹ Unlike physical film elements that can be passively housed in cold storage for centuries, digital files require active management to ensure preservation into the future.

The Digital Dilemma compares the information produced in the major motion picture industry to the “big data” issues challenging the medical, earth science, government, corporate

¹⁸ For further discussion of the transition from analog to digital and the impact on archival practice, see Giovanna Fossati, *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009).

¹⁹ Science & Technology Council. *The Digital Dilemma*, 1-2.

business, and supercomputing sectors. The report recognizes that every sector is encountering the same digital preservation challenges and that there is no single cost-effective, long-term, digital preservation strategy that can be universally adopted in all situations.²⁰

Concerned with the assets of the larger motion picture industry, this report focuses on the efforts of the corporate realm to preserve their assets, surveying the digital asset management systems of large oil companies and large sectors of the United States government such as the National Archives and Department of Defense. While the conclusions regarding digital storage requirements and preservation strategies are universal to all types of digital management, the reports fail to address the smaller scale solutions for organizations that do not have the resources for this large-scale digital management. Like *Film Preservation 1993*, the concerns of the commercial film industry for the long-term management of commercial moving image assets are prioritized in this report. This study upholds the unequal balance between the concerns of the larger motion picture industry and small-scale production, seeking large scale solutions rather than looking towards smaller institutions for possible insight.

These shortcomings were addressed in a second report, *The Digital Dilemma 2: Perspective from Independent Filmmakers, Documentarians and Nonprofit Audiovisual Archives*, published in early 2012. Partnering with the Library of Congress's National Digital Information Infrastructure and Preservation Program (NDIIPP), the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences conducted a survey of independent filmmakers, producers, and distributors

²⁰ Science & Technology Council, *The Digital Dilemma*, 1.

between 2008 and 2011 to examine the preservation practices and concerns of both independent media producers and non-profit archives.²¹

The report suggests that of the 550 public moving image archives in the United States and 310 moving image archives world-wide, none of these archives were cited as final repositories for the independent media, with two exceptions: the UCLA Film and Television Archive which works in partnership with the Sundance Institute and Outfest, two large exhibition spaces for independent cinema.²² Instead, other non-profit audiovisual archives are listed as repositories of last resort, that is, if the work of independent filmmakers' survives to donation.

Most independent filmmakers in this study reported that their major concerns were distribution of their work and managing upcoming projects; preservation was thought to be a concern for producers, production companies, and distributors, rather than the individual filmmakers.²³ About half of those interviewed reported that they "sometimes" think about long-term preservation, and 8% reported they do not even consider the short-term preservation of their work.²⁴ While the technological challenges to the preservation of independent media are the same as they are for larger commercial productions, these media creators do not operate in the same networks and have the same resources available to them.

²¹ The full list of participants is not yet available but will be published on the AMPAS website at sometime in the future. The case studies developed from the report include a number of archives including the Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University, The Film and Media Archive at Washington University, the Walter J. Brown Media Archives and Peabody Awards Collection at the University of Georgia, and one non-archival non-profit media institution, Franklin Furnace in Brooklyn, New York.

²² The Science and Technology Council, *The Digital Dilemma 2*, 36.

Much like *Film Preservation 1993*, "independent" in this report suggests "indie" films as defined by the indie film movement in the 1990s. "Indie" films produced outside of the major Hollywood studios, but still represent large productions. *No Country for Old Men*, *Crash*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, *The Hurt Locker*, and *The King's Speech* are all cited as "indie" productions recently recognized by the Academy Awards. *Preservation 1997* remains the unique outlier among these reports, specifically mentioning "community media" and other smaller independent media productions.

²³ The Science and Technology Council, *The Digital Dilemma 2*, 16.

²⁴ Long-term was defined as longer than 20 years.