



*Dorothy Carson*

## THE FRAGILE EMULSION

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The title of my talk, "The Fragile Emulsion", aptly underscores the status of independent films and their makers both in the cinematographic culture as well as in film archives. This is an international crisis which, if not confronted today, will mean that an entire aspect of film history will be threatened with extinction, even though many of these films have been made only during the last thirty years. My talk pertains primarily to my own experiences working on the acquisition, preservation, cataloguing, and research into the works of American independent filmmakers (including the Andy Warhol Film Collection). Yet, my experiences with the situation in the United States appears to parallel those in such countries as Germany, France, Italy, Portugal, Great Britain, and Japan. My goal in this paper is to provide a context for defining the problem, to offer some practical solutions from a FIAF perspective, and to highlight some works of several creative independent filmmakers who underscore just how fragile the film emulsion is.

A FIAF priority historically has been to address the preservation of nitrate films, those materials thought to be most vulnerable to physical deterioration. Only recently has attention turned to the preservation of color films and safety materials. Since much of the experimental and independent film tradition to which I am referring has been produced during the last thirty years (through the work of Stan Brakhage, Bruce Conner, Maya Deren, Jonas Mekas,

and others), this material falls squarely in the safety film era. Moreover, most of this film heritage has been shot on 16mm and 8mm stocks, and therefore have become even more marginalized when compared against the dominant 35mm format generated by the commercial film industry and preserved by the FIAF archives.

Restoring the Andy Warhol film collection has vividly underscored for me the marginal status of experimental films and filmmakers in the culture. Warhol's films can be seen as underground works, dealing with taboo themes (sex, drugs, and rock and roll), and shown in noncommercial venues; yet, at the same time, Warhol acted like a film studio producer through the Factory system he created for making art. Between 1965 and 1967, Warhol regularly shot 33 minute reels (1200') of 16mm sound film, paralleling filmmaking practices around the turn of the century, such as that of Griffith at Biograph. Warhol straddled both the underground world of experimental filmmaking and the commercial system of production, distribution, and exhibition.

Because of his worldwide notoriety as an artist and star personality, the preservation and distribution of Warhol's films was more readily assured than that of other seminal independent filmmakers, who did not manage the same fortune. In contradistinction to Warhol's filmmaking enterprise, other

experimental filmmakers have worked in relative isolation, creating their films like the hand of the artist, not as the producer for consumption by a mass audience. As Donna Cameron, a contemporary experimental filmmaker, who is represented in the "Fragile Emulsion" program I have curated has stated,

I explore film as a visual artist as opposed to as a commercial producer. I feel that film and painting are mediums which are similar in that creating with them, the artist builds up the image -- in film with the frame, in painting with the brush stroke -- to record a moment in time.<sup>1</sup>

From a FIAF perspective, then, the problems of preservation and restoration encompass not only turn-of-the-century films and classic (Hollywood) films, but also (American) avant-garde films. Since independent filmmakers often could not afford to produce many duplicate copies of their films, their materials frequently survive only in the form of original camera positive or a single reversal print. In other instances, artists reworked the same material, producing different versions of the same film, some by only a few frames (such as Len Lye's KALEIDOSCOPE), all versions of which

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<sup>1</sup>Donna Cameron, quoted in Cineprobe program note, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 February 1991.

archives should conserve in order to accurately document the artist's working process. The early films of Robert Breer, Ernie Gehr, Mark Rappaport, Warren Sonbert, and others must be cared for along with their recent creations, so that a complete record of their filmmaking careers can be protected. Saving avant-garde films from neglect today will prevent their being lost in years to come.

When archival institutions are fortunate enough to acquire the artist's original materials, they spend many years restoring the films. Joseph Cornell's collage films have been restored by Anthology Film Archives, and Len Lye's color, scratch, and direct films have been preserved by The Museum of Modern Art. The Pacific Film Archive has recently acquired the Scott Bartlett collection, and these materials must be assessed and a preservation plan put in place. The Museum of Modern Art's preservation of the Andy Warhol film collection, consisting of many hundreds of reels of 16mm reversal film, will take at least seven more years, encompassing a preservation footage rate of about 20,000 feet of 16mm film per year, at a total cost of more than \$700,000!

As I embarked on a program about ten years ago to purchase works by independent filmmakers, I became increasingly sensitized to the enormous problems confronting these filmmakers. First of all, the

vast majority of these artists are financially poor; they supplement their filmmaking work with other jobs. These artists work in almost total isolation, literally single-handedly producing their films. The filmmakers can barely afford to generate prints, once their films have been completed. Furthermore, the exhibition outlets for these films is extremely limited. Today in the United States, with the economy in a downturn, small media centers and cinematheques have been forced to cut back their screening programs, or even close their doors permanently. The most recent example in New York City of this catastrophe is the Collective for Living Cinema, which has now closed its doors forever. During the past decade, archives in the United States have seen a greatly increased interest in their holdings by the studios because the films in the archives' collections can be reproduced on videotape, and profits made. Such is not the case for the experimental filmmakers. There are no corporate mergers and international media conglomerates to market these films, because there is no real profit potential in the marketplace.

Thus, there are no advocates for the independent filmmakers unless the archives themselves take the initiative. While we may only make small dents in the problem on a filmmaker by filmmaker basis, I firmly believe that even these efforts represent important progress. Here are some practical steps I suggest, that when taken

on a collaborative basis by film archives, will begin safeguarding this material for future generations.

1. First and foremost is the importance of identifying the independent tradition in the country of the archive. Whether in the United States, Japan, Portugal, or Brazil, I have sought out and seen such works, even though they may represent a limited part of the national production. Who are the filmmakers? What are the films they have made?

2. Second, we must identify the location of this material. In the United States, we have begun a coordinated effort through the National Moving Image Database project, to locate those institutions holding independent film material, to identify the titles of the films, and to ascertain their uniqueness. However, the vast majority of the independent films lies outside the archival system. Other material resides in laboratories, vault warehouses, film cooperatives, and with the filmmakers themselves. No stone must be left unturned, no locale overlooked.

Many filmmakers store their originals in laboratories. In the United States in the last five years, there have been the foreclosure on several film processing labs. Films temporarily stored in these labs have been readied to be junked. In several

cases, the colleagues at Anthology Film Archives were able to jump in and rescue thousands of reels of film, including works by Yvonne Rainer, whose most recent film PRIVILEGE has received attention on the film festival circuit.

Other filmmakers have stored their material in vault warehouses. As for Warhol, there was an enormous mythology surrounding this personage. One myth was that he had taken his films out of distribution in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and destroyed them. However, when I went to a commercial film warehouse shortly after his death, I felt like I was in the final shot of CITIZEN KANE, discovering Rosebud. There were literally thousands of reels of film packed in boxes and cases of all sizes and shape, which I had to order, shift and sort, since most of the films were marked by reel number only and did not have a title affixed to them.

Valuable films also exist in Film Cooperatives. While we think of cooperatives as distribution centers, it often occurs that a print placed on deposit turns out to be the artist's best copy, and should be reclassified as an archival master. This situation has occurred in the Filmmaker's Cooperative in New York City as well as in Light Cone in Paris, and in the London Film Coop.



It is of utmost importance to work closely with the filmmakers themselves, developing personal relationships and a feeling of trust, and advocating for them. The filmmakers most often hold the original camera materials, and only a close collaboration between the archive and artist can produce internegatives and prints of the best aesthetic quality. It also creates a pre-condition for the filmmakers to be disposed to deposit their films, especially the camera originals, with the archive in the event of their death. Such key filmmakers as Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, Ed Emshwiller, Andrew Meyer, Will Hindle, Curt McDowell, and Roger Jacoby, to name only a few, have all died within the last few years. Without the archives to pursue their legacy, the filmmakers works might have remained neglected by their heirs.

3. Third, we must insure the safeguarding and preservation of this work. On a most basic level, this means a commitment to storage. Taking the films out of the filmmakers closets where variations of temperature and humidity severely damages the material, as well as removing them from laboratories, where the films are secondary to commercial productions in terms of priority, and where they risk confiscation or discard, and instead, placing them in archival storage where the archive can mediate their restoration and use, assures a permanent places for the independent filmmakers in the canon of film history and archive work.