Mapping the Independent Media Community: MIMC

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Independent Film in Pittsburgh

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For those who are not familiar with Pittsburgh, that name usually conjures an image of large-scale commerce and industry. Only those who know the city are aware that the legendary grime and smoke have been vastly reduced since the 1950’s, and appreciate the attractiveness of its hills and valleys, the richness of its ethnicity, and the variety of its cultural activities. For people involved in the film world, however, Pittsburgh bears other connotations; in the past decade the city has come to be identified with a particular tradition that stands in opposition to the model of commercial/industrial film—that of personal and independent cinema.

Presently, the city has two primary centers of independent film activity: the Film Section of the Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute and Pittsburgh Film-Makers Inc., both of which have been designated Major Media Centers by the National Endowment for the Arts. Under the auspices of these organizations, independent filmmakers are regularly invited to present and discuss their latest work, and both institutions program independent film as part of their ongoing weekly exhibition schedules. In addition to being an important city for the viewing independent cinema, Pittsburgh is also one that encourages independent film production. A primary function of Pittsburgh Film-Makers is that of operating a film, video and photography workshop, where some 170 members currently have access to extensive media equipment and work facilities.

Largely because of the activities of these two institutions, Pittsburgh is a city in which independent film flourishes, and one that can claim an active and committed film community.
When Pittsburgh Filmmakers was founded, its primary mission was to serve non-commercial filmmakers and photographers in the Pittsburgh area by providing low-cost access to the expensive tools of their art forms. Pittsburgh Filmmakers’ membership program, allowed community artists to gain equipment access, initially to filmmaking and photography equipment and later to video cameras, computers, digital editing suites, digital still cameras and digital printing facilities. The organization’s first home was in the basement of the Selma Burke Art Center in Pittsburgh’s East Liberty neighborhood. We started an exhibitions program in order to educate the public about the kinds of art members of this new organization were producing. We established an education program, offering short courses and workshops to the public in order to train aspiring artists.

By 1972 Pittsburgh Filmmakers had expanded the scope of its small group of courses and established a relationship with the University of Pittsburgh whereby students from the University could register for classes at Pittsburgh Filmmakers while receiving credit from the University. In 1974 we made a similar arrangement with Point Park College, establishing collaborative majors in “Cinema” and “Photography.” Pittsburgh Filmmakers designed the discipline-specific aspects of these majors and Point Park supplemented those curricular designs with academic courses.
**HISTORY**

**It all started at The Crumbling Wall.** The 1960s was a time of great excitement and experimentation in the arts. Traditional media such as painting and sculpture were used in unconventional ways, and things that had not been considered art at all — like commercial illustration, film, or even noise — were suddenly co-opted into the artistic endeavor by people like Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, Stan Brakhage and many others. New York and San Francisco were the centers of this experimentation, but the excitement soon spread.

“The Crumbling Wall” was a non-denominational coffeehouse run by the Lutheran Church on Forbes Avenue, across from the Carnegie. The proximity of these two places is interesting, because both were to play a part in the development of Pittsburgh Filmmakers. A variety of programs were presented at The Crumbling Wall, including experimental films programmed by Chuck Glassmeyer. A group of interested people developed around these screenings, and soon they wanted more, including making their own films.

This incipient "scene" intensified in 1970, when Leon Arkus and Sally Dixon started the Section (later Department) of Film and Video at the Carnegie. Dixon started bringing artists into town to screen their work. It soon seemed like a natural development that if the artists were here, they should be able to work on their films. She acquired a grant to purchase 16mm filmmaking equipment to this end.

The group found a space in the basement of the now-defunct Selma Burke Arts Center in East Liberty. The general shape of Pittsburgh Filmmakers as it exists today was already taking form then. The building included darkrooms and filmmaking facilities. Workshops in the use of equipment, as well as screenings, were offered. The early presence of photography is attributable to the fact that one of the energizing forces in our development was photographer Robert Haller, later an executive director of Pittsburgh Filmmakers, and now administrative director at Anthology Film Archives in New York City. Photography has always been integral to our activities.

In 1971, a more formal organization was formed. Articles of incorporation were filed and the name Pittsburgh Filmmakers was adopted. Bob Costa was our first director and Robert Gaylor, a successful designer, the first president of our board of directors. Space, and a lack of it, became an issue. The University of Pittsburgh offered us space during 1974. In an empty building at 205 Oakland Avenue, a screening room and spaces for classrooms and darkrooms were made after a lot of sweat. Its location in the heart of the university district was not ideal. Pittsburgh Filmmakers began to slowly grow.
1. Provide each region of the United States with a centrally located film resource facility where research and advanced film study may be done with minimum cost.

2. Provide each region with an information center and information-dissemination service to encourage the development of broad-based film education.

3. Provide regional contact for the Library of Congress to facilitate preservation of our film heritage, and specifically to insure that the films indigenous to each center’s region are preserved and available for study in that region.

4. Provide a regional showcase of important cinema, and through the establishment of regular showings in the best possible conditions, help to build a more discerning film audience nationwide.

5. Provide special help, wherever and whenever possible, to individuals and community groups producing non-commercial cinema.

Regional Development: Major Media Centers

To assist Media Arts Centers to undertake a variety of projects which will make the arts of film, video, and radio more widely appreciated and practiced. Centers may be independent or associated with another organization such as a museum, university, or state arts agency.

Alabama Film-Makers Co-Op, Huntsville, AL
Appalshop, Whitesburg, KY
Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
Bay Area Video Coalition, San Francisco, CA
Boston Film/Video Foundation, Allston, MA
University of California, Berkeley, CA
Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, PA
University of Colorado, Boulder, CO
Film in the Cities, St. Paul, MN
Global Village Video Resource Center, NYC
Haleakala, New York, NY

Media Study, Buffalo, NY
Millennium Film Workshop, New York, NY
Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
Northwest Film Study Center, Portland, OR
Pittsburgh Film-Makers Association, Pgh, PA
South Carolina Arts Commission, Columbia, SC
Southwestern Alternate Media Project, Houston, TX
Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
University Film Study Center, Cambridge, MA
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN

NEA Annual Report 1979, 125-126
Initial Motivations for Media Arts Centers

- **Exhibition**
  - Film society or cinéma-thèque

- **Resources and Technology**
  - Artist Collective

- **Collection and Study**
  - Film Library or Archive

“A phenomenon of the [1970s], media arts centers bring works of classic and advanced media art to the public through exhibition programs, workshops, and residencies. They focus the attention of artists, critics, and public on key issues affecting our understanding of the media. And they provide a vital resource for media artists through equipment access programs and to the public through maintenance of film-video collections and publications.”

Conclusions: The Pittsburgh Regional & Major Media Center Conference 1978

“the need for improved preservation processes and funding of preservation;

the need for more sophisticated and durable hardware for film and video-making;

a recognition of the importance of scholarly research in the field, and the publication of that research;

agreement on the importance of expanding their activity as forums of exhibition of film and video work by artists and independent producers in the medium;

and recognition of a special responsibility to act as advocates for both individual artists and the medium (independent film/video)”

Major Media Center Conference Attendees
Excerpts form the Final Report on the 1979 National Conference of Media Arts Centers

- presented 550 personal appearances by film-makers in 1978
- presented 285 personal appearances by video-makers in 1978
- paid $170,000 to these visiting film and video-makers in 1978
- presented 7,450 film and video screenings…to an audience of more than 850,000 people (more than 80% paid admissions)
- broadcast…programming seen in 2,000,000 homes
- provided film and video-making equipment to nearly 8,000 people (85% paying some form of nominal dues)"

NAMAC Member Organizations by Founding Date

1-5 yrs (1999-2004) 10%
6-10 yrs (1984-93) 22%
11-20 yrs (1984-93) 22%
21-30 yrs (1974-83) 22%
31-40 yrs (1964-73) 15%
41+ yrs (< 1963) 9%

“How Old Are We?”, MAIN: Media Arts Information Network (Summer 2004): 15.
Data Source 1:

*Film and Video Makers Directory* (1978 - 1979)

“...intended to encourage and facilitate a wider use of exhibition and lecture tours by film and video makers. It will of course, have many other uses as well.”

Image courtesy of Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh PA
“The Institutions Section contains encoded information on the screening facilities and policies of some of the organizations listed. Our intention is to give an indication of the exhibition components of such organizations, and emphasize the importance of good exhibition equipment and appropriate compensation for the artists.”
Data Source 2:

Film and Video Makers Travel Sheet

Published monthly from 1973 through 1987

“The purpose of this travel news sheet is to make it possible to more fully utilize film makers tours.”
The purpose of this travel news sheet is to make it possible to more fully utilize Film Making News.

The sheet will be sent out the first week of each month and will contain film maker travel plans on a projected three month basis. Additions and corrections should be mailed by the last week of each month to the above address.

Please note that applications for the Film Marker Travel Grant are due on the 15th of each month.

The deadline for the next Film Marker Travel Grant will be January 15, 1990.

Any additions or corrections should be mailed to the above address.

[Additionally, there is a list of film submissions and grants for various institutions and organizations.]

Images courtesy of Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh PA
MIMC Development

August 2014 – Planning and initial development

January 2015 – Scanning Initiated

September 2015 – Database Development

January 2016 – Visualization Development

July 2016 – MIMC Prototype Launch
MIMC Goals

• Visualize the data from the *Film and Video Makers Travel Sheet* and *Directory* representing artists and organizations supporting the production, distribution, study, and preservation of film and video

• Incorporate additional historical datasets from sources outside of *Carnegie Museum of Art*

• Develop and open access research portal for the continued study of independent media in the United States and abroad
CMOA Partners: Katherine Barbera + Emily Davis
UI Partners: Dr. David Eichmann + Nicole White
UI SLIS GAs: Patrick Curtis + Kara Wentworth

MIMC Project Site mimcproject.org