

## **Notes on the Recent History of a Self-Sustained Exhibition Scene For Experimental Forms of Cinema in North America**

by Ed Halter (2004)

"Provided a filmmaker is ingenious and creative enough, the marvelous can take place in an ordinary-sized room or a small studio set of obvious dimensions." - Parker Tyler, *Underground Film: A Critical History* (1969)

While much has been written of the flowering of mainstream independent cinema in the 1990s thanks to new television outlets, increased video distribution and the multiplex, less notice has been given to a contemporaneous increase in exhibition opportunities for experimental film and video: the flourishing of an extensive circuit of self-run microcinemas and allied underground film festivals.

Conceived and run in the same creative spirit as the artists they showcase, this loose congeries of exhibitors emerged as a corollary and counterpoint to not only commercial systems but also the established set of institutions that traditionally supported experimental works. Largely the work of a younger generation who came of age in the 90s, after the underground cinema boom of the 1960s had apotheosized into semi-secret legends gleaned from sporadic museum screenings, art-school teacher anecdotes and yellowed paperbacks, this new scene molding the legacy of Amos Vogel's Cinema 16, Jonas Mekas' Film-Maker's Cinematheque and Andy Warhol's Exploding Plasticineville into something coextensive with indie rock's neo-punk do-it-yourself pragmatism.

In most cases, the pursuit of sub-commercial cinematic forms existed not exclusively (or even necessarily primarily) as artistic avocation but also as a form of socio-cultural repositioning away from what was perceived as mainstream entertainment-saturated society, if not self-conscious resistance to same. The embrace of ultra-low-budget means (the yard-sale trove of 16mm and Super-8 equipment, discarded in the wake of video's triumph) melded nostalgia for elementary-school A/V departments to a nagging dissatisfaction with mass-market values of slickness, high technology, and commodification. In this way, the second-hand store functioned the antithesis mall: thrifting was not only form of anti-shopping, enjoyed for its own active pleasures of fleabag of the mall connoisseurship and aleatory delight, but also a means to acquire the instruments for a self-made culture. Video projectors also became more available than in previous decades; the rapid evolution of projection technology meant that older models became available for relatively lower costs.

To an even greater extent than the parallel, much larger music scene, there were few pure spectators for this underground cinema; the scene was comprised almost exclusively by its own active contributors, inclusion in the world being largely predicated on participation. Whether or not the music scene provided

direct inspiration for filmmakers (as some attested), the structures of the two worlds were unmistakably congruent, as a recent analysis of 90s punk illustrates:

As an economic system, DIY works much like a remote local village: capital circulates among the members of the scene, providing a common economic base and support system that is necessary to keep the scene economically viable. As a political system, it works much like the field of high art: generally, little outside corporate or commercial influence is tolerated; hence there is little taste and style imposed from without the scene, although the appropriation of external forms from within certainly does occur.

And what powered this creative energy? It drew strength from that onerous disquiet so familiar to those raised in the suburban deserts of late-20th-century America: a raw, naked drive that vacillated between an itchy impulse for concrete social change, an obsessive-compulsive fear of creative boredom, and a personal ambition to craft a life for one's self as sharply drawn and gaily decorated as the celebrities who lived among us, via television, throughout our early lives<sup>1</sup> or, should that seem too crass, then something coyly modeled on the doughty notables and colorful artist-pioneers we learned of in our college readings on countercultural history, both assigned and extra-curricular. Which is not to say necessarily that any of these alleged reasons for making and living avant-garde cinema were consciously planned. Indeed, given the oft-noted lack of analytical writings or philosophical engagements that emerged from the culture during this time (in contradistinction to the scads of airy volumes produced by the FilmCulture generation), one could mark it as a subculture that placed more value on acting, recording, and re-enacting than deep theorization. Were self-reflection to occur, it would be through images, not words.

#### THE PICTURES THAT GOT SMALL

In the late 80s, scholar Tom Gunning theorized the birth of a 3minor cinema<sup>2</sup>--a new state of the American cinematic avant-garde that eschewed lofty notions in favor of submerged narratives told via celluloid tinkering. Unlike the artists of the 60s and 70s, whose grand (and self-aggrandizing) revolutionary narratives set forth to alter the experience of vision, topple Hollywood, and reshape the world, 3these filmmakers manifest no desire to supplant dominant cinema. Embracing Super-8 filmmaking long after video dislodged it [they] proclaim their resistance to the onslaught of technological progress. Certainly economies dictate here, but stern necessity has bred an affection for the limits of their medium rather than frustration.<sup>2</sup> Only a few years after Gunning's observations, a special kind of screening space emerged as these small-gauge aficionados multiplied nationwide. The spread of minor cinema begat the Microcinema.

The term "microcinema" was coined by filmmakers Rebecca Barten and David Sherman, who began a venue called the TOTAL MOBILE HOME microCINEMA in 1994, a thirty-seat mini-theater built in the basement of their San Francisco Apartment, complete with a projection booth gerry-rigged out of the space for

their gas meter. Writing years after the name they gave their literally home-made theater had become widely used for a variety of low-budget movie events, Barten and Sherman outlined an ethos that was shared by many others. "As filmmakers reliant upon our own funds, functioning totally out of the mainstream, we wanted to create an intimate non-institutional space right in our basement, where the distance between film and audience and artist and audience might be activated and transformed."

Though the term was new, the practice of self-run cine-salons was as old as the artist-made film itself. One key immediate precursor for Total MobileHome was San Francisco's Other Cinema, founded by filmmaker Craig Baldwin in the mid 1980s. While older venues like the San Francisco Cinematheque by that time focused more on established names and avant-garde traditions, Other Cinema's programming played faster and looser, incorporating media activist works, archival films and ephemeral videos, performance elements and cult films, as well as shows featuring old and new artists of note (or not). More like a music club than a standard nonprofit art society, Other Cinema also supported itself off its door fees. "Not that we'd turn away a grant!" Baldwin explained, "but we can't put ourselves in a position of dependency." This ultra-low-budget economic structure endemic to most microcinemas<sup>1</sup> which in the case of Other Cinema extends naturally from the *arte povera*<sup>1</sup> of Baldwin's found-foot a liability than a strength, allowing considerable room for artistic risk when there are no institutional overseers to please, grant applications to shape your vision to, long-lead PR campaigns to plan for, or full-time salaries to raise. As Sherman puts it, glossing their venue's name: "we all assume the occasional TOTAL failure."

Moreover, the homology between the way microcinemas were run and the manner in which underground filmmakers conducted their own lives meant to many participants that these tiny, low-budget venues provided a more appropriate site to show these films. "If a work by Brakhage, Anger, or Jack Smith receives the imprimatur of a museum, public library, or university," a Baltimore chronicler of microcinemas opined, "whatever subversive potential exists in the content of the piece is irrevocably compromised by the official endorsement it receives from the *œstate* institution"hosting it."

Though Barten and Sherman's theater exhibited for only three years, its influence lives on in the term they coined. "A lot of people around the country have started running MicroCinemas," Barten wrote in 2000, almost three years after her home theater had ceased operation. "Every time they call me I ask them what they mean by the term because I'm not sure. The answers are all different but the common factor is that they are starting them all by themselves." Whether directly influenced by Barten and Sherman or spontaneously conceived in the same cultural moment, numerous microcinemas erupted all over North America, many in smaller cities: Edison Electric (Vancouver, BC, later becoming The Blinding Light Cinema), Mini-Cine (Shreveport, LA), Basement Films (Albuquerque), Peripheral Produce (Portland, OR), Independent Exposure (Seattle), The

Mansion Theater (Baltimore), the Aurora Picture Show (Houston), Balagan (Boston), numerous Flicker events (Chapel Hill and elsewhere) and Orgone Cinema (Pittsburgh), to name only a few. New York City alone hosted multiple events, the most long-lasting including Ocularis and Rooftop Films in Brooklyn, and Jane Gang's Pink Pony Series and the Robert Beck Memorial Cinema on the Lower East Side. Some established themselves in permanent, rooted venues. Curator Andrea Grover created Aurora Picture Show by purchasing and renovating a small church; Skizz Cyzyk similarly reworked an old funereal home as a space for The Mansion Theater. But many microcinemas were peripatetic, moving from space to space as needed.

#### PUNK ROCK AS DISTRIBUTION MODEL

By 1997, there were enough microcinemas and allied spots around North America that filmmaker Danny Plotnick penned a how-to article on self-touring films across the continent, traveling with prints in hand, rock-band style. The American showbiz tradition equating life on the road with self-determination found new expression: "By booking your own tour," Plotnick wrote, "you can guarantee yourself as many shows as you want, tailor the shows to your taste, and not limit yourself to the cities serviced by festivals. You won't be guaranteed audiences and you won't be guaranteed money, but you'd be surprised how much of each you might be able to rake in."

In his article, Plotnick's relates his experience touring his 1997 Super-8 film *I'm Not Fascinating*<sup>1</sup> *The Movie*. A fictional story starring a real-life band, its roots in the music scene is hardly coincidental. For many filmmakers of the period, touring music and touring films were closely allied experiences. Though predating the film tours of the 90s, the rise of a national self-touring circuit for punk and indie-label bands was itself a relatively recent innovation, popularized by a number of DIY primers, most notably music zine *Maximum RockNRoll*'s legendary "Book Your Own Life" guide. By the mid nineties, the Internet played a key role in strengthening communication between isolated underground film scenes; particularly central were Scott Stark's Flicker website (later renamed Hi-Beam) and Pip Chodorov's experimental film listserv, *Frameworks*.

Some, like animator Martha Colburn, doubled as musicians and filmmakers, touring both activities simultaneously. James Schneider's 1997 film *Blue is Beautiful* documented an East Coast tour by the band The Make-Up; when the film was complete, Schneider then toured with it in a similar manner. Schneider called *Blue is Beautiful* an "experimental documentary and just a rock movie. It was sort of a transcendent road trip, in that it's a movie about ascension in some ways. It's about exploring uncharted space, but in kind of an orgiastic sort of way. An orgy with the audience." Similarly self-referential in their production were the works of wife-husband team Suki Hawley and Michael Galinsky. Their first film, *Half-Cocked* (1994), told the neorealist tale of a makeshift band touring to survive, starring members of the Chapel Hill music scene, playing characters based on themselves. While traveling with *Half-Cocked* in Europe with bands and

other films, Hawley and Galinsky shot their second film, *Radiation* (1998), likewise about a group of artists on tour in Europe.

By the end of the decade, tours by filmmakers had become a frequent occurrence. The late 90s and early 00s saw self-booked tours by Thomas Comerford and Bill Brown (the *Lo-Fi Landscapes Tour*), Vanessa Renwick and Bill Brown (The *Lucky Bum Tour*), and Jim Finn and Dean Rank (The *Men and Animals Tour*). Astria Suparak's position as self-made independent curator attests to the strength of the network at this time. After running the film series at The Pratt Institute as a student, Suparak compiled programs and toured them herself around North America and Europe, sometimes as part of bands' tours. Portland filmmaker and musician Johnny Eschelmann even brought a mini-microcinema on the road with him. Called the *Traveling Cinema*, Eschelmann's portable 101 x 101 mini-theater was deconstructable and fit in the back of a van. When functioning, it seated about three people and was created to show a selection of Eschelmann's own super-8 films and videos; the artist provided live musical accompaniment by folding himself into a tiny recess behind the screen, playing guitar and DJing records.

The independent rock scene likewise provided inspiration and means for alternative video distribution. Miranda July, first known as creator of performance-art audio collages released through K Records, began a series called *Big Miss Moviola*, in which films and videos by girls and women were circulated chain-letter style; July later compiled selections and released them independently through K. Portland's *Peripheral Produce* also started a mini-line of experimental movie home video releases during this time. *Blue is Beautiful* was made available through The *Make-Up*'s label, *Dischord*, while *Half-Cocked*'s video release and soundtrack were both distributed by *Matador*.

#### PLAYING FEST AND LOOSE

The spread of the underground film festival model occurred contemporaneously with the rise of microcinemas, and the two scenes overlapped substantially. The first New York Underground Film Festival took place March 1994, and the first Chicago Underground Film Festival happened in August of that same year. Within the decade, a number of festivals emerged with similar or related outlooks: The Honolulu Underground Film Festival, Baltimore's *MicroCinefest* (run out of the *Mansion Theater*), the Vancouver Film Festival (run out of the *Blinding Light Cinema*), Philadelphia's *Lost Film Festival*, Austin's *Cinematexas*, San Francisco's *MadCat Women's Film Festival*, Chapel Hill's *Hi Mom! Festival*, and numerous others. These festivals did not comprise as tight a network as, say, the lesbian and gay festival circuit did; with some exceptions, most films did not circulate through more than a few of these events in a given season. But collectively, underground festivals supported the same DIY scene that microcinemas did. Music also played a key role: many films showcased were about or by musicians, and live bands playing parties quickly became a signature event.

But underground festivals also differed from microcinemas in some aspects. Some underground festivals took part in the independent film industry in ways the microcinemas did not, serving as gateways in between the worlds. The festivals were regularly covered by mainstream press and music zines that did not normally report on experimental cinema, and feature films and documentaries could garner publicity and attention via these festivals in order to secure distribution or other career benefits. Nearly all underground festivals, from their earliest days, sought and secured funding from corporate sponsors. Such a collusion with capitalism undoubtedly seemed heretical<sup>1</sup> or at least suspicious--to many in the microcinema scene, but festivals defended their use of sponsors as pragmatic.

Whereas microcinemas primarily fostered activity within local scenes, underground festivals also existed to promote the notion of underground film and its filmmakers to a wider world. Not surprisingly, then, the early underground festivals gravitated towards a neo-exploitation, attention-getting esthetic evolved from the days of New York's Cinema of Transgression, in-your-face Gen X film zine *Film Threat*, and the cult-film psychotronics of the video store generation, dutifully playing the media's received ideas about underground film back to them, in full force. While underground film festivals also drew on the histories of experimental cinema, the genealogy they constructed--at least early on--gravitated towards an Anger-Kuchar-Warhol nexus rather than, say, a Brakhage-Structuralist one. "This isn't the underground of Hollis Frampton or Maya Deren," New York Press critic Godfrey Cheshire wrote of the first New York Underground Film Festival. "It's the Gen-X spawn of Jack Smith, Russ Meyer and John Waters." Such willful naughtiness belied a desire to overturn the then-dominant notion of experimental film as something dry, academic, and essentially do-goody; but in their zeal for making the avant-garde seem sexy again, the underground festivals came dangerously close to making it appear laddishly stupid. After the mid-90s, this now-clichéd pose retreated, both due to shifts in the work being produced by experimental filmmakers (the mainstream film industry, following Tarantino and *South Park*, having taken over the shock, sex and subversion racket) and an increased social greasing among the microcinemas and underground festivals.

The microcinema and underground film festival circuit was not the only locus of experimental North American filmmaking in the 1990s. Extant venues established in the 60s, 70s and 80s, such as Anthology Film Archives, Millenium, the San Francisco Cinematheque, Pleasure Dome, the Mass Art Film Society and, of course, the Black Maria Film Festival remained vital, interconnected in countless ways to the newer scene. But with more colleges offering film and video production programs, and image-making technologies becoming increasingly accessible, the first generation raised on VCRs and home-video produced more experimental filmmakers and video artists than ever before. The microcinema

and underground film festival world grew to meet the demand for more exhibition opportunities.

And this new underground was hardly the only world of experimental moving-images that boomed in the 90s. A somewhat separate but related tradition of identity-based experimental works, were substantial parts of gay and lesbian festivals, women's festivals, and Latino, African-American and Asian-American festivals, particularly in the early half of the decade. An upsurge of video-based art appeared at nonprofit art spaces and commercial galleries, video-mixing became a staple at music shows, raves, dance performances and clubs, and a torrent of image-making capabilities were released by various forms of new media and Net Art. The independent film world and even Hollywood remained broad enough to include a number of radically adventurous artists. A rough breed of underground documentaries were tape-traded, samizdat-style, and later bootlegged on the internet. Other subcultural forms like skateboarding, political activism and backyard wrestling produced their own bodies of self-circulating video works. This essay does not even touch upon parallel and unique developments elsewhere in the world.

While all these forms grew out of the film and video pioneers of previous decades, only a fraction of this work became part of the microcinema/underground film festival scene. The innovations of the 60s lived on, but the counterculture begat innumerable subcultures, each producing moving-image artworks structured by their own internal rules and esthetics. The notion that there still existed a single tradition called "cinema", with its own, relatively small "avant-garde," had become self-evidently absurd.

Ed Halter is the Director of The New York Underground Film Festival, a freelance writer for The Village Voice and faculty member at New Jersey City University. In 2002 he was the Film Programmer for the Annual Robert Flaherty Film Seminar held each June at Vassar College.