


UNDERGROUND

THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE FUNNEL FILM COLLECTIVE





"Writing with his usual grace and fire, Hoolboom traces the currents that fed on international politics, art and social movements to inspire the intensely local, widely influential Funnel. For anyone who wants to understand cinema movements, Canadian culture or plain old subversion, this is essential reading. Light and time, sex and censorship, cliques and real estate — it's all here."

CAMERON BAILEY

Artistic Director
Toronto International Film Festival



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by Mike Hoolboom



Funnel theatre, 1978. Photo by John Porter.



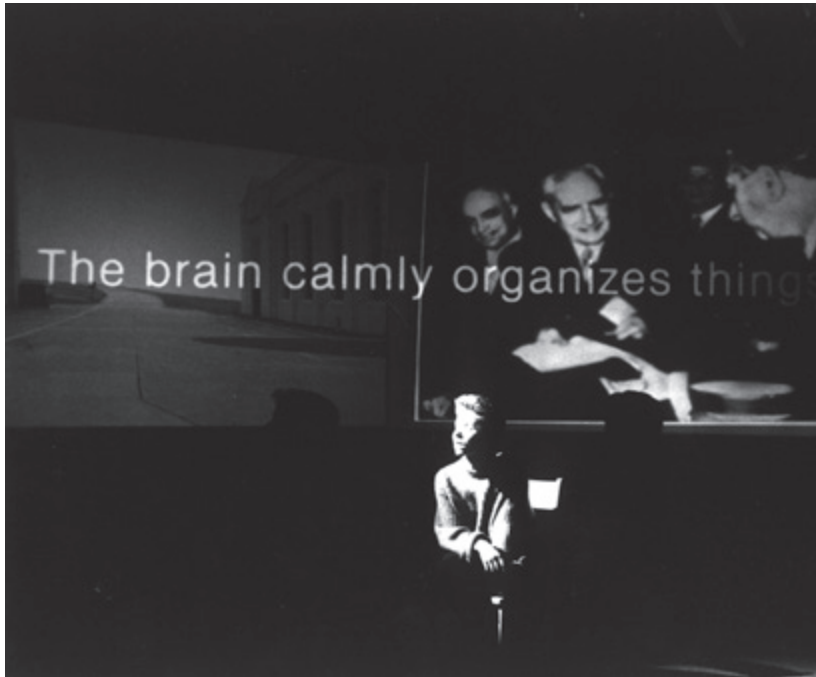
Funnel theatre, 1978. Photo by John Porter.



Renovations: Paul McGowan, Michaelle McLean, Tom Urquhart, David Bennell, Peter Chapman, August, 1982. Photo by John Porter.



New Year's Eve Funnel Painting Party in the men's washroom: Michaelle McLean, Martha Davis, David Anderson (behind Martha), Midi Onodera, Karen Lee, Anna Gronau, John Porter, Dec. 31, 1983. Photo by John Porter.



Judith Doyle in *Transcript* (performance), Funnel, Jan. 29, 1982.



Food Trilogy by Midi Onodera, 1981.



Mikki Fontana, Michaelle McLean, Ericka Beckman (in town from New York to show her work), Jim Anderson in Jim Anderson/Dot Tuer/John Porter's studio, December 2, 1983. Photo by John Porter.



Rebecca Baird's *Gallop Exit To*, Funnel Gallery, May 16, 1983. Photo by John Porter.



Videotaping interviews for "The Frontier" PBS series at WNED-TV in Buffalo, September 9, 1981. Producer Lynn Corcoran; guest filmmakers Michaelle McLean, Jim Anderson, Patrick Jenkins, John Porter. Photo by John Porter.



Mikki Fontana, Carolyn Wuschke, Mike Cartmell, Michaelle McLean, Martha Davis, James Benning, Ross McLaren, Anna Gronau in Funnel office, March 4, 1983. Photo by John Porter.



Mike Hoolboom, Tom Chomont at the Funnel, October 12, 1985. Photo by John Porter.



Ross McLaren behind the camera, Sharon Cook with ball. Production still for Eldon Garnet's movie *Political Error* (1984), 1983. Photo by Eldon Garnet.



Edie Steiner UFO, August 2, 1980. Photo by John Porter.



David Bennell with his anti-censorship poster in a Funnel members group exhibition in the Funnel gallery, November 5, 1982. Photo by Michaelle McLean.



Annette Mangaard in *Rite of Ritual* (film/performance), Artculture Resource Centre, May 4, 1986. Photo by Annette Mangaard.



Eye of the Mask by Judith Doyle, 1985. Photo by Adriana Angel.

FUNNEL

FROM VANCOUVER
GORDON KIDD
IN PERSON
WED. DEC. 5 8 PM
Self Portrait
Maya Preluda
Gulf of Georgia Towing
Olympus
Lark Process
Sketches

FRI. DEC. 7 8 PM
WEST COAST FILMMAKERS
PETE LIPSKIS
AL RAZUTIS
CHRIS GALL
BILL HORN
MARIA INSELL
Filmmaker Pete Lipskis from Pumps Gallery in Vancouver will appear.

HISTORICAL FILMS
WED. DEC. 12 8 PM
Fantaisie de Melies (1903) 10 min.
Conquest of the Pole (1912) Melies 15 min.
The Crazy Ray (1923) Rene Clair 20 min.
Entr'acte (1924) Rene Clair 15 min.
ADMISSION FREE

MALCOLM LE GRICE
FRI. DEC. 14 8 PM
EARLY FILMS
Table (1967) 20 min.
Berlin Horse (1970) 8 min.
Whitcomb (1970) 8 min.
After Lumiere (1972) 17 min.
Academic Still Life (Gosanne) 5 min.
Time and Motion Study (1977) 19 min.
Malcolm LeGrice, one of Britain's best-known and well-respected avant-garde filmmakers, will be present.

OPEN SCREENING
WED. DEC. 19 8 PM
FREE ADMISSION IF YOU BRING A FILM:
16mm, Super 8, Sound, Silent, Loops, Dual Projection, Home Movies, Found Footage, etc.

SAT. DEC. 15 8 PM
EMILY - THIRD PARTY SPECULATION
1979 60 min.
MALCOLM LE GRICE will be on hand to present this, his latest film, which explores new approaches to narrative.

In the Funnel Gallery
WATERCOLOUR PAINTINGS BY
RENATA WENDLER
1PM - 5PM Daily
December 3 - 14

king east
OVER
DADA
FUNNEL EXPERIMENTAL FILM THEATRE
507 KING ST E
TORONTO
364-7003

Funnel calendar, December 1979.

FUNNEL

RECENT FILMS
FROM THE CANADIAN FILMMAKERS' DISTRIBUTION CENTRE
presented by Richard S. Stanford
FRI. FEB. 1 8pm
Night Mail
Unborn Child
Freaky
Dust and Bones
Anticipation
Tom Miller
-George Sussel
-Igor Terentyev
-Philip Hoffman
-Peter Piotrowski
-Lorne Macie
-Rick Innes
-Nick Griffin/Chris Lewis
-Veronica Soud
-See Jeremy Nishitani
-Ross McLaren
Monday, January 17/79

MAYA DEREN
WED. FEB. 6 8pm
Heures de la Afternoon (1943)
Al Ladd (1944)
Study in Choreography for Camera (1945)
Introduction to Film (1946)
Very Nice of Night (1949)
HISTORICAL FILMS
Free Admission

Robert W. Gutteridge
FRI. FEB. 8 8pm
Dissolution (1978)
Freaks (1977)
Mishaps (1978)
Biblical Personality (1979)
The House of the Dead (1979)
The Face (1979-80)

Neal Livingston
Aurora-Gone (1975)
One Side Left Corner (1976)
The Beach or the Idiot (1979)
Contact-Nature (1979)

ANDY WARHOL'S
"VINYL" + "CHELSEA GIRLS"
(1965) 70 min. (1966) 195 min.
THUR. FEB. 14 SAT. FEB. 16
ON DOUBLE SCREEN
Presented by SUPERSTAR ONDINE

Jerry Tartaglia
FROM NEW YORK CITY
FRI. FEB. 15 8pm
Fastfood Journal (1976)
Four Minutes (1979)
The New York Times (1978)
Jenny (1977)
Jenny (1977)
Jenny (1977)
Jenny (1977)

Historical Films
WED. FEB. 20 8pm
FREE ADMISSION
Geography of the Body (1943) - Willard Ness
Harry Mark (1957) and others - Marie Menkin
Political Films (1944) - Sidney Peterson
Balls of Steel (1952) - Jan Rapp

Jim Anderson
FRI. FEB. 22 8pm
The Big Key (1972)
The Big Key (1972)
The Big Key (1972)
The Big Key (1972)
The Big Key (1972)
The Big Key (1972)
The Big Key (1972)
The Big Key (1972)

OPEN SCREENING
WED. FEB. 27 8pm
FREE ADMISSION IF YOU BRING A FILM:
16mm, Super 8, Sound, Silent, Loops, Dual Projection, Home Movies, Found Footage, etc.

Jack Chambers'
"HART OF LONDON"
(1969 - 70) 80 min.
FRI. FEB. 29 8pm

In The Funnel Gallery
Mon.-Fri., 1-5 pm
Jim Anderson Feb. 11-23
Patrick Jenkins
Feb. 25-March 8

king east
OVER
DADA
FUNNEL EXPERIMENTAL FILM THEATRE
507 KING ST E
TORONTO
364-7003

Funnel calendar, February 1980.

FRONT COVER:

Midi Onodera, Judith Doyle, Rhea Tregobov. Photo by Karen Levy. Thanks to *NOW Magazine* and the Media Commons Media Archive at the University of Toronto.

BACK COVER:

Christian Morrison in shared house at Duncan and Adelaide dubbed "Boytown," 1980.
Photo by Ian Cochrane.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1516 Thomas More built a perfect city out of words and named it Utopia. It was a clockwork palace, a delivery vehicle for the happiness of each of its citizens, and this city would become a touchstone for anyone who occupied a street or participated in a march believing that another world was possible. The word utopia has Greek roots meaning “no place,” as if it conjures a home too perfect to be recognized in a world like this one, or else that home is everywhere you look, too nomadic to be tied down to an architecture, erupting instead out of every encounter whose outcome is radically unknown. As queer utopianist José Muñoz wrote, “We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.”¹

This book is about a utopia called the Funnel. It was a Canadian fringe film collective that built its own movie theatres, re-versioned home movie equipment to produce avant-garde art and published its own articles of faith. It created a distinct economy based on volunteerism, a shared set of historical codes and aesthetic benchmarks derived from artists’ films, all fueled by a radically egalitarian decision-making process. Curiously or not, it was run by hippies who had turned into punks, all bound by a communal ethos. The Funnel was a proto-queer, post-family structure, deploying a pre-Internet web of international contacts and micro-scenes.

The collective aim was to produce an autonomous state opposed to capitalism, first by revising the role of the public theatre. The Funnel’s three theatres, built between 1977-1988, were a projection of its audience. They were constructed, staffed and maintained by volunteers; converted during off-hours into movie sets, recording studios and private party backdrops; and maintained in their public display mode as screens strictly dedicated to experimental films that took aim at the very heart of a neo-liberal consensus. The blank screen was the no-place that made this utopia possible, the gathering point of a collective that became artists by carefully attending to the accumulating projections.

Experimental film is an art of attention. Each movie might be as long as a single frame or run for days. It encourages viewers to keep the frame of attention front and centre, because the way movies are made changes what is being seen. Form is also content. The hope is that new forms can be invented that will allow new subjects to emerge, along with new kinds of pleasure. These fringe/avant/independent movies are usually made by a single artist, though exceptions are the rule in this microverse. They invite a return to a developmental stage where curiosity is the keynote; they can encourage deep listening and new receptivities.

After many fringe screenings — and the Funnel was no exception to this — the artist is typically invited to hang out with their audience, restoring a new democracy where visitors might become part of a tribe, one which allows itself to be touched and transformed, subtly enlarged. Discussions can continue well after the screening. These casual debates, swirling around the no-place of the screen, were at the very heart of the project of the alternative modernist utopia known as the Funnel.



Funnel calendar, November + December 1983.

Fringe histories are notoriously difficult to track because they emerge from local scenes. They often leave little trace in official media; even the more specialized back pages of the artworld rarely embrace fringe media projections. Whether it is Yann Beauvais and Miles McKane beginning the first experimental movie distribution in France out of their bedroom, or the backyard screenings that started up Canyon Cinema in San Francisco, or the friendship of Keith Lock and David Anderson that resulted in a landmark film series at Freud Signs hosted in their downtown Toronto loft, the fringe is often a story of local inspirations amidst makeshift conditions. Some of these initiatives have endured, while others have shape-shifted into different organizations, or become part of a necessary media compost for new directions. How might these scenes become part of the larger history of Canadian cinema? How could a media archaeologist begin to mine the layers of conversations, once-only screenings, handmade posters, movie performances and visiting guests? Often the only way is to interview the artists who were present, those who could bear witness; and while memory



New Films screening at Freud Signs, 1976. Photo by David Anderson.

can be an unreliable resource, the cinema is necessarily a collective project, so one person's account can be checked against another.

This book took shape as an elaboration of fringe media's oral culture traditions. Having been steeped in the fringe movie codes of artist confessionals, I've undertaken a three-decade-long project of interviewing Canadian moviemakers in the hopes that artists might be both seen and heard. Two oversized books of interviews have already been published, with a third in preparation. These volumes unwrap in-depth encounters; they are primary documents of a multi-generational Canadian media art scene.

I am not a disinterested observer of these mostly forgotten and left behind moments. I started going to the Funnel in 1980 and retained membership for most of its operation, which meant, like everyone else, I sat on the board, projected movies, took tickets at the door, put up posters and swept the floors. I worshipped at the altar of committees. I learned the value of everything money couldn't buy, and how ideals could build community one volunteer hour at a time. What follows is an insider account. After a quarter century it's past time to gather the documents, make a scrum of the witnesses and lay down some tracks so that others can see where we had found the good light, and where we lost our way.

The many voices in this book are a formal projection of the Funnel itself, a horizontal organization that tried to give weight to every member. While there were directors and programmers, individual members were encouraged to pipe up about everything from hoped-for guests to the state of the toilets. If the admittance fee was an inhuman amount of volunteer labour, the reward was having a say in every decision that mattered. More than once, faced with yet another crisis at the doorstep, the entire membership would be summoned for a meeting that no one imagined ducking.

Many of the events described in this book were carried on by twentysomethings. Blame it on our youth. Through it all we tried to hold space for a minor cinema, and the thousand undreamt worlds that these new pictures might make possible. Along the way there were censorship mountains,

personality divides, film-versus-video head scratchings and the flowering of community. I'm not exactly sure why the story of the Funnel hasn't been told before. We burned out, we grew older and had children, or else became children. We got real jobs or else we continued the drift at home. It's harder to imagine now, this fiercely first-person cinema relying on a collective architecture and shared gear. Today, all of that can be contained in a computer the size of a pocket book. But you can't get naked with someone inside your computer, at least not yet, never mind feel the collective gasp of wonder as homegrown magics flicker across a blank wall for the first time. Was the Funnel a necessary prelude, a final analog embrace before the digital flood tide, a tribal summons? Where had we been all those years anyway — the underground?

This book is divided into three parts. The first section explores the complex swirl of relationships that helped create the Funnel, including the resistance to the Vietnam War; gay liberation; the back-to-the-land project called Buck Lake; early exhibitions of fringe film in Toronto; and the calamitous rise and fall of CEAC (Centre for Experimental Art and Communication), the gay Marxist collective that first housed the Funnel. The book's midsection examines the organization's operations, its contentious relationship with the provincial Censor Board, and its vertical integration of production, distribution and exhibition. Finally, the book's third section details a story that has eluded even most insiders up until now: the reasons why the dream ended.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

KATHLEEN PIRRIE ADAMS was the original bass player for Fifth Column, iconic all-women band. Queer outlaw and pure genius.

DAVID ANDERSON was one of the founding members of the Funnel. Tall Dutch painter who also made fringe films (along with his brother Jim). He lived at the Buck Lake co-op, ran the New Films series at Freud Signs, a year-long exhibition series, with his pal Keith Lock before pouring volunteer energies into the Funnel.

JIM ANDERSON was another Funnel founding member. He made movies with Keith Lock before striking out on his own. He was one of the premier artists of the group, creating beautiful movies that were animated, or else lyrically photographed. Always too willing to see the many sides of every issue.

RIC AMIS is a self-taught film/video artist and photographer (he had a show of his buried photos at the Funnel gallery), artist-run centre employee at Trinity Square Video, ANNPAC maestro and other notable intersections.

CAROLINE AZAR was the lead singer (and often lyric writer) for Fifth Column. Instrumental in making movies with John Porter for the band. Lived in a collective band house around the corner from the Funnel. Ravishingly eloquent.

NAPO B formed the art duo FASTWÜRM with Kim Kozzi in 1979. They made a delirious profusion of super 8 wonders, along with a pair of installations that lit up the Funnel gallery. Napo left for New York in the mid-80s, and FASTWÜRM continued with Kim and Dai Skuse.

PHILLIP BARKER showed a mammoth street installation that mixed multiple 16mm projections and live performers as part of Funnel programming in 1987, then joined the board for a moment as the organization decided whether or not to move to Soho Street.

YANN BEAUVAIS was the head and heart of the Parisian fringe film scene. Not only was he busy making his own kinetic multi-screen movies, he started up the Light Cone distribution co-op with his partner Miles McKane and programmed a weekly avant screening series called Scratch that remains a European keynote. He visited the Funnel twice.

DIANE BOADWAY was a performance artist and CEAC insider who participated in some of the group's European tours. She was CEAC's first film programmer. She appeared in Mike Snow's installation *Two Sides to Every Story* (1974) and his movie *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young)* by Wilma Schoen (1974).

MIKE CARTMELL was a filmmaker and frequent Funnel visitor, and ran his own mini-Funnel in nearby Hamilton called Zone Cinema, named after Tarkovsky's longed-for destination in *Stalker* (1979).

PETER CHAPMAN was a founding Funnel member. The smartest guy who never wrote a book. He always had a "real" job at a film sound place called Pathé. He made a series of filmic gestures designed to leave few traces.

IAN COCHRANE was a fringe moviemaker, student of Ross McLaren's and part of the second wave of Funnel members, after the founders built the second theatre. Tireless volunteer. Cheerleader of the avant-scene. Those blonde curls and soft eyes. Demon on the optical printer.

SHARON COOK's super 8 movies were fantastical, restlessly inventive and stunningly beautiful. Student of Ross McLaren's, and part of the second wave of Funnel members, after the founders built the second theatre. Cast as Jesus in Gary McLaren's movie *Just Talk* (1986). After firing John Porter, she stepped into his role as Funnel programmer.

DONALD SUBER CORLEY (aka Suber Corley), partner of Amerigo Marras, co-founder of Kensington Art Association that morphed into CEAC (Centre for Experimental Art and Communication). Draft dodger. Suber worked as a teacher, then a computer programmer, so he paid for the art that the grants didn't cover.

MARTHA DAVIS started making street performance films as a young student at the University of Toronto before joining the Funnel. She became a core member, a ubiquitous and cheery presence. She made a pair of super 8 features before moving on to LIFT.

DIRK DEBRUYN is a key Australian fringe filmmaker who reinvented his methods after a stint in Canada. His animated deliriums and wordplay, touching the darkness of the artist's earliest developmental periods, have found important roots in a deep material practice.

JUDITH DOYLE was a Funnel staff member and filmmaker. She ran a micro-press, made performances around language and memory and co-founded Worldpool, a pre-Internet artist's networking body. Went to Nicaragua during the civil war and shot an hour-long doc. Insanely smart.

PETER DUDAR was a painter before he turned to conceptual dance moves and filmmaking. For ten years (1972-1982) he worked with fireball Lily Eng as Missing Associates, reimagining dance and performance. Some of these embodied thoughts became movies.

BRUCE ELDER was a Funnel founder. Ryerson professor, a dominating figure in the Canadian Film Studies Association (at least in regards to fringe movies), a programmer and prolific filmmaker.

KATHRYN ELDER was an early Funnel member, and curated a "Historical Series" (dating back to the earliest moments of cinema) that began on December 12, 1979 and ended on April 18, 1984 at the King Street location.

ELLIE EPP is a Vancouver-based media artist. Her structural movie about a London swimming pool, *Trapline* (1976), remains a touchstone, as do the powerfully meditative, observational shorts that followed.

LILY ENG's virtuosic rage lent a keen edge to Missing Associate's groundbreaking work. They were the first Canadian performance artists to receive Canada Council funding and to open a door between galleries and traditional dance spaces.

BRUCE EVES was a CEAC staff member, performance artist, queer archivist. He did all the layout/design for *Art Communication Edition* and *Strike* magazines.

JOHN FAICHNEY was a structural dancer who became the librarian at CEAC. Occasional curator. Participated in CEAC's performance art tours.

MUNRO FERGUSON started his filmmaking career when he was seven years old with a short made on a super 8 camera he had saved all year to buy. At the Funnel his campy send-ups of consumerism (*Loblaws Check Out Game* [1983]) using throwaway miniatures and industrial discards were custom built for the Funnel's no frills, no budget ethos. His dad invented IMAX.

RICHARD FUNG is a media artist, writer and activist. His thoughtful reflections on censorship, post-colonial oppressions, race and sexuality have raised the bar for helpful discourse. Winner of too many awards to name.

ELDON GARNET ran *Impulse Magazine* from 1975-1990. Made movies with his pal Ross McLaren. He's produced handsome public sculpture and photography. Artworld kingpin. What didn't he do?

RON GIII (aka Ron Gillespie) was a performance artist and prolific writer. His run-ins with the city's psych establishment led to a series of provocative performances. A prolific writer and CEAC insider.

PETER GIDAL is a London-based filmmaker whose influential polemical writings and curating brought Marxism into an analysis of the image. His work was slow and sober, modernist and reflexive.

MARC GLASSMAN ran the city's best bookstore, Pages. He remains a living network machine, always smiling. Programmed movies all over the city, including a series at the Funnel ("The Displaced Narrator") that was accompanied by a catalogue.

SHALHEVET GOLDHAR was a media artist and one of three principal founders of Toronto's Super 8 Festival. Her selfless volunteerism made it possible.

SAUL GOLDMAN was a media artist who ran CEAC's video studio at their 15 Duncan Street location. After funding was cut he stayed on with Brian Blair and Paul Doucette and moved CEAC to new digs on Front Street and then Lisgar Street before closing operations in 1980.

JOHN GREYSON is a prolific and gifted media artist whose fertile imagination and overdriven work ethic continue to find new ways to marry art and politics. As an activist he took up the causes of men busted in the bathhouse raids of 1979, South African solidarity, anti-censorship struggles, Palestinian liberation and so much more. The Funnel took part in the province-wide action known as Six Days of Resistance that he helped to organize. Made his first film at the Funnel.

ANNA GRONAU was the Funnel's second director. Filmmaker, writer, feminist, Buck Lake pioneer and fierce anti-censorship fighter. Started the Funnel Gallery, and began writing on the back of the screening poster, redubbing it a newsletter. Always in black.

RICK HANCOX taught first-person-filmmaking at Sheridan College, birthing a new generation of artists who were steeped in his diary flicks and tech rebellions, sometimes named the Escarpment School. An early member of the Toronto Filmmakers' Co-op, and an articulate spokesperson for the movement.

MARTIN HEATH remains a legendary Toronto projectionist, making space for alternative movies in alternative settings. After moving to Toronto from England in the early 70s, he moved into Rochdale, then helped organize the first Women's Film Festival in 1973. He created touring inflatable mobile cinemas in the mid-70s, and continues to work in a coach house theatre named CineCycle.

FRIEDER HOCHHEIM was a founding member of the Funnel, a filmmaker who learned his chops at Ryerson. He invited fellow Funnel founder Adam Swica to start working on feature films, and now runs Kino Flo, a large lighting company for movies located in California.

PATRICK JENKINS was a do-it-yourself formalist who had turned his parents' wedding into a detective story of loss and sexual stereotypes. After an early run of prize-winning experimental shorts he turned to animation. He joined the Funnel shortly after the second theatre was built.

PATRICK LEE was one of the young dreamers who started up the Toronto Filmmakers' Co-op. Filmmaker and visionary, endlessly volunteering.

KEITH LOCK is a fringe moviemaker who lived at the Buck Lake co-op and initiated a screening series with David Anderson in their shared studio space, Freud Signs. While he was never a Funnel member, his landmark feature *Everything Everywhere Again Alive* (1975), a diary flick about the back-to-the-land artist collective at Buck Lake, remains a key Funnel document.

MALCOLM LE GRICE was a London-based powerhouse whose film performances, writings and single-screen movies relentlessly explored their own material conditions.

JORGE LOZANO is a prolific film and video artist, and a co-founder of aluCine, a festival dedicated to Latino media expressions. A dedicated intersectional artist, he has worked hard to bring together disparate communities, queer horizons and experimentalisms from people of colour. He was part of an unnamed art school collective that felt the Funnel was already the establishment.

ANNETTE MANGAARD is a filmmaker who began her feminist reworkings at the Funnel, weighing in on bodies and power via a homemade practice she transposed from painting. Her discussions with Marc Glassman led to the start up of the Images Festival in 1988.

AMERIGO MARRAS was the man in charge of CEAC. He had the energy of ten mere mortals, published magazines (*Art Communication Edition*, *Strike*), programmed performance, installations, talks, movies, and along with partner Suber Corley purchased a four-storey warehouse building in downtown Toronto. He let the Funnel begin in the basement of his organization, along with the city's first punk club Crash 'n' Burn.

PAUL MCGOWAN lived near the new theatre on the city's unexplored east side, in a shared warehouse that would become a sort of after-hours version of the Funnel. He was a Funnel founder, helped build the theatre, made super 8 films and ran a lot of the open screenings.

DAVID MCINTOSH was the Funnel's fourth director (after Ross, Anna and Michaele), and the first to come from outside the family. Intellectually gifted, he presided over a major expansion of Funnel activities. There were catalogues, programmers, more production and many more members. He produced Jack Smith's five-night stand in 1984.

GARY MCLAREN was the Funnel's last director. After studying at Ryerson he succeeded Midi Onodera as the Funnel's production coordinator. He presided over the move to Soho Street, and when money troubles and construction workflows went south he housed all the gear and organizational files in his warehouse space. Younger brother of Funnel founder Ross.

ROSS MCLAREN was the Funnel's founder. He was the director/programmer for the first three years, before handing over the reins to partner Anna Gronau. He also helped start the Toronto Super 8 Fest. Taught a filmmaking class at the Ontario College of Art; many of his students became Funnel regulars.

MICHAELLE MCLEAN was the third director of the Funnel and not incidentally Anna Gronau's best friend. An energetic formalist who logged major volunteer hours in order to keep the operation running.

JEARLD MOLDENHAUER was an American draft dodger and gay activist who helped start *The Body Politic* newspaper as well as Glad Day Bookstore.

PHILIP MONK is a prolific Toronto writer and curator who has done stints at the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Powerplant. His 1982 exhibition "Language and Representation" was split between A Space and the Funnel. He has worked diligently to represent the Toronto community over the years.

CHRISTIAN MORRISON was one of the first of Ross McLaren's students to join the Funnel, along with boyhood pal and roommate Ian Cochrane.

MIDI ONODERA was the Funnel's second production coordinator. She was part of the queer she-crowd around all-girl band Fifth Column, and wrote a column for the zine *Dr. Smith*. Former student of Ross McLaren's, second wave Funnel member. Brilliant filmmaker.

ANDREW JAMES PATERSON is a media/performance artist, writer, man about town. Queer elder statesman. Perfect memory machine.

PAULETTE PHILLIPS lived just a block away from the Funnel, a polymath artist who wanted to make movies only to find the Funnel door closing every time she reached for it. She made intelligent and performance-oriented vids before turning to installation.

GARY POPOVICH was a Pleasure Dome co-founder, LIFT staffer, fringe filmmaker. Came out of Sheridan College, part of the Escarpment School.

JOHN PORTER was a Funnel founder and helped to build the second theatre. A super 8 flag waver, he has made over 300 movies, most of them the length of a cartridge, sometimes documentary-based time-lapses or else visually witty performances. He was the Funnel's director, then programmer in 1986. Strong anti-censorship advocate.

AL RAZUTIS was a Vancouver filmmaker who made the iconic eighteen-part three-hour movie *Amerika* (1972-1983). One of these sections was released as a short in its own right, *A Message from Our Sponsor* (1979), a semi-otic deconstruction of mainstream advertising that was banned by the Ontario Censor Board.

MELINDA ROOKE became Funnel director in the summer of 1986, succeeding John Porter. She oversaw the fateful move from King Street to Soho Street.

MARTIN RUMSBY is a New Zealand native who bought short fringe movies and toured them, often across North America.

STEVE SANGUEDOLCE is a fringe filmmaker who came out of Sheridan College, part of the Escarpment School.

JIM SHEDDEN was a co-founder of the Innis Film Society (1985-1993), a bold reinvention of the student film club that hosted major seasons of fringe movie heavyweights.

MICHAEL SNOW is an artist and musician who works in many media. He was a longtime member of the Funnel and premiered several of his movies there. Structural film kingpin and Funnel godfather.

LISA STEELE is the co-founder of Vtape (video art distributor), and an early and prolific video artist who now produces in collaboration with partner Kim Tomczak. Shelves full of glittering prizes.

EDIE STEINER was a Funnel member and super 8 filmmaker who eventually migrated to the LIFT co-op. Lived around the corner from the Funnel. Friend of John Porter who introduced her to the Funnel. Began work as a photographer under the name Julie War.

BARBARA STERNBERG is an accomplished fringe filmmaker who worked at the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, was a co-founder of Pleasure Dome, wrote a column for *Cinema Canada*.

ADAM SWICA is a Funnel founder who lived in CEAC's basement where he built a darkroom and gave workshops. Designed the group's logo. His super 8 films were performance oriented, almost narrative.

DOT TUER was a force of nature when she strolled into the Funnel saloon. She had opinions about experiences that we didn't know could be named at all, and spoke with intellectual curiosity and propulsive conviction, as if nothing in the wide world could matter more than our small shared droppings of experimentalism. At the Funnel she programmed, wrote catalogues, asked questions after screenings. Media historian.

JOYCE WIELAND was a visual artist and filmmaker who was a longtime Funnel member and showed her work there. Feminist icon. Her blend of political engagement and formalist chops continues to inspire.

WYNDHAM WISE was a critic and filmmaker who worked for years at *Cinema Canada* before restarting the iconic Canadian film mag *Take One*. In his earliest years, he produced avant-garde performances that sometimes showed at CEAC.

PAUL WONG is a Vancouver-based media artist, a prodigiously talented iconoclast whose bad habits led him to produce dazzling videotapes. His Vancouver Art Gallery show *Confused: Sexual Views* was censored and then screened across the country, even at the Funnel.

OPENINGS



Ron Giii, 4 St. Patrick Street, 1975.

BUCK LAKE

The dress rehearsal for the Funnel's post-punk microcinema occurred far from any city borders, in a back-to-the-land rush that was led by some of the fresh-faced women and men who streamed across the border from the US, determined not to suit up for the war in Vietnam or support it by staying at home. This generation of American expats were young, educated and politically charged, and it is impossible to overestimate the effect they had on a growing Canadian art scene.

LISA STEELE, video artist, Vtape co-founder: By the time we were planning to move up to Canada (from Kansas) we were living in a hippie commune of three couples. We were part of a Marxist group at that point, and then a Maoist collective. We did a lot of work around factories that were producing components used in arms. The other two couples we were living with had already moved up to Toronto; we were the last to join them. The American ghetto was on Baldwin and McCaul Streets and we were right around the corner. We met other people in the ghetto very quickly and worked with the draft dodgers that were here, and the organizations that supported them.

SUBER CORLEY, CEAC co-founder: The border crossing into Canada was very smooth. The Canadian border officials quickly understood what I was doing (dodging the draft) and helped me to understand the process that I needed to follow to gain landed immigrant status.



Buck Lake, 1972. Photo by David Anderson.



David Anderson and Anna Gronau at Buck Lake, 1972. Photo by David Anderson.

Many American draft dodgers worked hard to transform their new country. Lisa Steele found employment at a women's shelter before co-starting Vtape, which would become one of the world's largest and most important distributors of video art. Its film equivalent, the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, had been launched years earlier by a wide-eyed crew that included David Cronenberg. By the 70s there was an American behind the wheel at the Centre, Jim Murphy, a gruff-faced charmer with a heart that never stopped opening.

KEITH LOCK, filmmaker: Hanging out with Jim Murphy was an education. He had bookcases filled with nothing but film books, all of which he claimed he had stolen or "liberated." He had an encyclopedic knowledge, not just of Hollywood, but also the American Expanded Cinema movement. More than forty years ago, while a student in New York, he had foreseen the rise of China and was studying Mandarin at St. John's University. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been assassinated only a few years previously and the Americans who came up to Toronto at that time had well-formed views on the kind of politics most Canadians barely had any notion of.

ANNA GRONAU, Funnel founder: Jim was from New York City and had a really great political and strategic sense. In the early 70s, draft resisters brought a huge injection of energy to the city, particularly in the cultural area. Jim was either involved with or very familiar with the Toronto Film-Makers' Cooperative in New York, and that experience was likely a huge contributor to the development of the Toronto Filmmakers' Co-op and Distribution Centre in Toronto.

KEITH LOCK: After finishing my third year as an undergrad at York University in 1972, I dropped out of school. The anarchist draft dodgers at the Toronto Filmmakers' Co-op were definitely an influence. This was the era of "tune in, turn on and drop out." There was so much urgency in the air around the Film Co-op, Rochdale College and living at the house on Roxborough Street with Jim Murphy, Anna Gronau and the others. This made it very difficult for me to reconcile what was almost becoming a double life — making films in the underground/indie scene and being a full-time student at York.

I had visited Buck Lake (160 kilometres east of Toronto) with some of the people living at the house on Roxborough Street. I had been totally

entranced by the place itself and the possibility of creating a new society based on love, personal freedom, mutual respect and living close to nature. I had read many of Marshall McLuhan's books and believed that my generation, the first to grow up with television, was thinking in a completely different way. McLuhan said that the new television generation will "live mythically and in depth." This totally describes how I felt about living at Buck Lake. There was a mythic quality to the place. Anna Gronau had already moved up there.

DOROTHY WOODEND, film critic: "I watched it happen. People got old milk trucks, VW vans and made their trek into the country. They arrived without any money, or any plan, just the idea that they had to get out. The height of it was about 1974 and by 1979 it was over. Whether it was because people came to realize how much work it really was to do everything yourself — make yogurt, grow bean sprouts, milk goats — I don't know. But it ended as mysteriously as it began. After a while, all the hippies either blended in or went back to the city."²

ROSABETH MOSS KANTER, sociologist: "For many communities the various communal themes came together in the one ideal of a return to the land. By carving out a piece of land of their own and engaging in agriculture, they fulfill a number of the impulses toward utopia. They gain closer contact with nature and the natural order and return to a simpler life more concerned with the fundamentals of existence. The kinds of jobs to be done around the land often require no special skills and provide an opportunity for everyone to work equally...A number of tasks, such as the harvest, lend themselves in particular to communal work efforts with all members participating. The physical labour required by a land-based way of life is vital to integrating the body and the mind. The land also provides the community with its own means of livelihood and direct access to its own natural resources and sustenance, reducing the community's dependence on the outside and increasing its self-sufficiency. Finally, the utopia stakes out on the land its own territory, sometimes far removed from the outside world and under its own control, which can be an important source of identity."³

KEITH LOCK: I remember one day Tom Brouillette, the acknowledged leader at Buck Lake, had been crashing at our house on Roxborough. One day he and Anna were outside loading stuff into an old vehicle. I was standing

on the sidewalk watching and wishing I could join them. I summoned my courage and asked if I could go too. Somehow, I knew that if I got in that car my life would change forever. Tom was a bit surprised, and unsure what I meant exactly. I explained that I wanted to go with them and live at Buck Lake. Tom and Anna said okay and sounded happy. I got in the truck and rode to Buck Lake.

DAVID ANDERSON, Funnel founder: Buck Lake wasn't so much a farming community as an informal collection of artists going back to the land. Everyone stayed in an A-frame structure; there was a wood stove in the middle and people slept in lofts at each end. There might be four, six, eight people there at a time, an ebb and flow of comings and goings. I would hitchhike up occasionally. I did spend a week completely alone, because there was a chance to try that. I shot some rolls in regular 8 Kodachrome. After a few days by myself I started noticing things in a new way and filmed a list of little objects. It was the middle of winter and the skies were overcast, so the film turned out very dark. It was more fun when a few others were around.

ANNA GRONAU: I can see lots of connections between Buck Lake and the Funnel, not just the whole building-the-barn/building-the-theatre



Patrick Lee, Lynn Urquhart, Tom Urquhart. Sitting: David Anderson, Charles Bagnall, Leslie Padorr, Marsha Kirzner, Peter Dudar. Photo by David Anderson, 1974.

connection. I lived at Buck Lake for maybe four or five years, but the barn building, which Keith portrayed in his film about the place, happened over the period of only about a year. Both endeavours — Buck Lake and the Funnel — were utopian projects based on a belief in the strength of the collective. Both were extreme visions of a culture that could operate outside of the mainstream. I was among many at the time who subscribed to a belief in a cultural/political/spiritual avant-garde that would live, rather than simply espouse, change. And yes, people from Buck Lake ended up at the Funnel. There was Jim Anderson and Jim's brother, Dave Anderson, who was at Buck Lake a lot and became a core member of the Funnel. Michaelle McLean also spent a lot of time at Buck Lake with me. Michaelle had met my brother Jim (which is how she and I met) at Alvin Filsinger's organic farm, north of Kitchener, where the two of them were among an army of willingly unpaid hippie slave-volunteers on the farm. Once Michaelle and I were there alone for about a week in the winter. One evening, as we were finishing chores by lantern light, in the dark, we saw this brilliant light shining through the trees off in the distance in the direction of the old logging road. We were terrified that it might be some snowmobilers sneaking up on us: two women alone, miles from anywhere, no phone, no protection. I don't know if we still had a shotgun at Buck Lake, but I doubt either of us would have known how to use one anyway. We went into the house to re-group. We came out again a minute or two later to see if the light had moved at all. It had gotten higher, it was the full moon! Michaelle and I still have insane adventures together, but that was the one where we both took up smoking.

MICHAELLE MCLEAN, Funnel founder: I met Anna Gronau at the Ontario College of Art in 1971 and then at Buck Lake, which was a small, back-to-the-land commune near Orillia, Ontario on 100 acres of forest. Anna's boyfriend owned it. After building the A-frame main house and a cold-cellar, and clearing some land, they decided they needed a barn. They bought one, and then took it apart, stone by stone, brick by brick, and rebuilt it in a clearing. They had cows, pigs and chickens. Her boyfriend was a boiler-maker and had to go away for three weeks to make some money, so I went to stay with Anna. It was during the winter and the chainsaw broke, the road was a mile and a half away, and it was several miles down the side road to Highway 11 to get into town. The house was heated by a wood stove on which all the food was cooked. We found an old Swede saw and

soaped the blade so it would cut through the wood more easily. We milked the cows and collected the eggs, and ended up with way too many eggs and milk. They had a huge stack of Sunday magazines, the ones that used to come with the *New York Times*, which were there to be used as fire-starter. Leafing through them one afternoon we found soufflé recipes and realized what we could do with all those eggs and milk! Those three weeks at Buck Lake cemented our friendship. I was eighteen or nineteen; I guess we all were. Buck Lake was definitely driven by a do-it-yourself spirit.

ANNA GRONAU: Both Buck Lake and the Funnel were focused on alternative technologies — at the Funnel, it was low-cost/no-cost filmmaking, while at Buck Lake we were exploring older technologies that operated off the grid. When I was talking to Keith Lock he mentioned that the Funnel was an outlaw organization. I think he was referring not only to our fight against the powers-that-were, but our positioning of ourselves against mainstream culture. There were lots of ways in which Buck Lake was also an outlaw organization.

KEITH LOCK: The question was, how do you get outside the system? Overthrowing the established order was talked about by a few, but the real and lasting revolution was going on in people's thinking. Among ourselves, we would sometimes ironically refer to Buck Lake as a "hippie commune," usually to mock the mainstream media and their stereotypical images. The idea at Buck Lake was to get people together and build our own society the way we thought things should be and which made sense to us. There was never any manifesto and we never tried to discuss or define it, but we just knew who we were and what we were about — no possessions; love, sharing, honest physical labour and staying close to nature. Since a number of us were visual artists and filmmakers, experimental art practice could be added to this list.

SUPER 8 FESTIVAL

The temporary community of a film festival has become commonplace in Toronto, which currently hosts more fests per year than any other city in the world. But back in the 70s there were only two legs standing — one culled

movies from other fests and dubbed itself the Festival of Festivals, while the other was dedicated to the pleasures of super 8 film. While future Funnel directors were learning the joys of communal efforts outside the metropolis, its soon-to-be founder Ross was busy in the deep city trying to conjure new screen dreams.

ROSS MCLAREN, Funnel founder/director: I started the Toronto Super 8 Film Festival in 1976 with a group that included Shalhevet Goldhar and Scott Didlake, who did a lot of the heavy lifting, and John Coull who was a teacher at the art college. My interest of course was in artists' film.

SHALHEVET GOLDHAR, artist: Scott was the driving force behind the whole thing. I seriously doubt it would have happened if he wasn't involved. Ross was interested in a venue for experimental films, and I was essentially a nihilist with good time-management skills, which I lent to the project as a way to distract myself. Scott had a political, idealistic outlook on the technology. He felt that super 8 could make filmmaking accessible to anyone in the same way a pencil can make writing accessible, and he was interested in home movies and in soliciting entries from non-filmmakers. I'm sure he'd love YouTube and web publishing if he were alive today. Plus he was an ambitious person, albeit in a counterculture kind of way. I think that's how the festival turned out to be a major event, with entries from all over North America and showings on the big screen at Cinema Lumiere, an actual movie theatre. These were Scott's ideas and/or the way he pushed things along. It was obviously a collaborative effort, but in practical terms I would say that Scott was the director and chief marketing/PR person, the two of us did most of the organizing and Ross helped out in various ways, for



instance with the design of the poster that pictured super 8 as film spaghetti. I quit making art and doing schoolwork for a full semester in order to put the thing together, and at least one of the teachers later complained that he couldn't grade me because organizing a festival is all well and good, but it's not art. It was a lot of work and a bit of a gamble, too. We weren't exactly ready when the entries started piling in. I guess we really didn't know that there would be any entries. We split them up to save time on pre-screening and took them home with a projector to view on the wall. We picked the ones we liked and included our own films as a modest payback.

KERRI KWINTER, culture critic: "The films that really distinguished themselves at the festival were the Art/Experimental films. Being experiments there were no recipes to follow. Thus they were not handicapped either technologically or experientially by Super 8 qualities or clichés. Some were successful attempts to find new or develop old vocations for the Super 8 camera and film stock. Only these films utilized, to their advantage, Super 8's superior ability for movement, temperamental behavior in artificial light (very 1959 birthday party) and its characteristic colour and textural traits."⁴

SHALHEVET GOLDHAR: The following year Richard Hill and his wife Sheila took over — i.e., once they saw that the festival was a success, they decided to take the credit. At least that's how we felt about it. They were old farts, too, as far as we were concerned, though probably quite a bit younger than I am today. Richard Hill was the head of film/video at OCA, and responsible for the department's name change to the "Photo Electric Arts Department" or something horrific like that — a precursor, I suppose, to "New Media," etc. I don't know about using the word "corporate," but the festival did get taken over by "the establishment."

ROSS MCLAREN: A year later Richard Hill, a teacher at the art college, and his wife Sheila, gave the festival a corporate makeover, and when they officially incorporated I guess they neglected to phone me. It was part of the usual split between artists working in film and other filmmakers. There was a lack of respect for artists. I guess there were good things about the new and improved Super 8 Festival. It was a lot higher profile and held at Harbourfront, but it became more of a trade show.



JANET SADEL

Janet Sadel was determined to spread the super 8 gospel via bring-your-own-movie events across the city. It was her luminous energy that was responsible for gathering a scene of local narrow-gauge makers together, along with a horizontal politics that would build a community by ensuring there was a place for everyone. Her exhibition momentum landed her at the Centre for Experimental Art and Communication (CEAC), a gay Marxist art organization that opened doors for whatever didn't hang on a wall.

CEAC POSTER: "The Canadian Super 8 Distribution Service at 15 Duncan Street offers an open Forum for filmmakers, in particular those working in super 8/experimental film. The filmforums take place every monday night at 9 starting October 11. Anyone exploring the medium in an experimental way is invited to screen their films."⁵

PATRICK JENKINS, filmmaker: Up at York University I met another student, Janet Sadel, who was putting together a super 8 distribution centre. There was a lot of excitement about super 8, especially among amateur filmmakers. There was an exciting festival dedicated to it at that time, the Toronto Super 8 Festival. It was the first time you could make movies with relatively little money. But the problem with super 8 was distribution, because unlike 16mm or 35mm, no one had projectors. You would have to send or take a projector along with the films in order to show them. Janet organized open screenings around the city, at Hart House for instance, and the Ontario College of Art and at CEAC.

SUBER CORLEY: Janet Sadel was in the CEAC orbit. The whole Super 8 community was adopted by [CEAC co-founder] Amerigo Marras for their freedom to express themselves without being encumbered by a lot of tradition, technology or structure. The same was true, though it was more costly, for the video artists who worked at CEAC. The idea was to build a heterogeneous community of artists and art forms.

JOHN PORTER, Funnel founding member: The Super 8 Distribution Centre was inspired by the success of the Super 8 Festival. (Its directory listed 118 super 8 films and a handful of videos by forty-eight artists.) There were so many films being shown, the feeling was that they should be distributed... but the Centre didn't last long enough to do any distribution. It was more



Sign Language by Patrick Jenkins, 1982.

of a dream at that point, going through all the films shown at the Festival, then contacting artists and asking if they wanted distribution. There was a falling out between some of the people at the Distribution Centre and CEAC and Ross, so the Centre lost their Ontario Arts Council funding and were kicked out. I think it only lasted a year.

ROSS MCLAREN: The Super 8 Distribution Centre began with a \$2,500 starter grant at CEAC. There might have been four of us when it started. There was no distribution for super 8, but there was a whole scene of makers, a festival and community, why not see if we can get some money for a distribution service? Janet Sadel was a go-getter, and her boyfriend Glenn James was a great guy and filmmaker. We had a little office space at CEAC. It ran for a year and published a catalogue, but one Monday when we came in we found that Janet had changed bank accounts and taken the \$2,500 in a sheer power grab. I remember going to the Ontario Arts Council and explaining what had happened, and that was the end of her dreams of separation. What was she thinking? [laughs] Strange scenes from the goldmine. I talked to Amerigo Marras about the idea of hosting screenings and he was always supportive of anything oppositional, so we hosted half a dozen open screenings on the fourth floor of the new building, largely attended by people from the Ontario College of Art. That was the beginning of the Funnel.

CEAC

Amerigo Marras was an architecture student from Italy, and together with partner and American draft dodger Suber Corley, they retrofitted their Kensington Market house and turned it into an art gallery. Housemates Jearld Moldenhauer and John Scythes started The Body Politic newspaper and Glad Day Books out of the coach house in the backyard. Within a year the couple moved, rebranded and then moved again, this time to a giant downtown warehouse that they purchased. They were Marxist landlords filled with countercultural urgencies, and made a series of daring alliances that embraced outliers of the Canadian art scene, including artists who worked in super 8, performance and music.

AMERIGO MARRAS, CEAC co-founder: “[CEAC’s] first initiatives, through the publication *[The] Body Politic*, were clearly negativist and neo-Marxist in ideology and were implemented within a larger militant collective working towards a praxis of liberation: feminism, gay liberation, children’s liberation, anti-psychiatry, anti-ageism, and radical design...The collective attacked society’s specialization of roles and its homophobi[a and] sexism; specialization as practiced in such models as the nuclear family and the all-dominating labour ethic.”⁶

LILY ENG, Missing Associates (performance duo): Amerigo Marras, powerhouse and visionary, wanted art that was unique, cutting edge, not something one would find on a wall in any gallery. As a man of action, he started the Kensington Arts Association, then CEAC to showcase all the experimental art forms that he wanted people to see and appreciate, including performance art, dance, music, film, creative writing and other alternative art forms. “Everything but the wall” became his mantra.

DIANE BOADWAY, CEAC insider, performance artist: I first experienced the experimental film world from inside out. Through an acquaintance of Mike Snow, I was asked to be in two of his films. Also at that time I had met Peter Dudar and was invited by him to be in performances with Missing Associates. Their performance work was “structurally filmic.” Amerigo Marras actually invited Lily Eng and me to the Kensington Art Association to help work in the gallery. He had seen me in performances by Missing Associates and had been really impressed with Peter and Lily’s performance art, which

was very important — it was some of the first performance art done in Canada. I suggested to Amerigo that I curate independent, experimental art films and video works, and run advertising for them. Initially, I went to the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, viewing films in their screening room until I found something that I felt would fit a particular evening. Of course, as the events became more broadly known there were lots of submissions, particularly from artists at the art college and from video artists. I can remember certain incidences of animosity when artists were not chosen for a program. In late 1975 and early 1976 this program ran at two locations, on John Street and subsequently at 15 Duncan Street where Ross McLaren’s work was included.

PETER DUDAR, Missing Associates (performance duo), filmmaker: Just nine months after the move to John Street, CEAC acquired a larger warehouse on Duncan Street. It was marvellous. CEAC had transitioned from a row house in Kensington Market to the largest non-museum gallery in Toronto.

SAUL GOLDMAN, CEAC video studio operator: At the Duncan Street building, CEAC operated the basement and the fourth floor. We had two long-term tenants: an organization called Presentation Services that produced corporate slide shows, and the Liberal Party of Ontario. Both had long-term leases so they weren’t covering a high percentage of the operating costs; it was a bit of an economic problem. On the fourth (top) floor there was a large hardwood performance space in the centre, with offices, the library and video studio situated on the periphery of that central space.



Amerigo Marras at CEAC, 15 Duncan Street, 1977. Photo by Diane Boadway.



Amerigo Marras and Donald Suber Corley, 65 Kendall Avenue, 1970. Photo by Jearld Moldenhauer.



Jearld Moldenhauer, Joey, Amerigo Marras, Donald Suber Corley. Aug. 20, 1972.
First Gay Picnic, Hanlan's Point. Photo by Charlie Dobie.

JOHN FAICHNEY, CEAC librarian: There was not enough momentum to instantly create programming on all levels. The Funnel was there on sufferance because there was no immediate requirement to make use of the basement. Ross had known Amerigo for some time, and Amerigo was generally supportive of the super 8 scene that Ross was part of, so he said, go ahead, use the space. The basement was long and narrow and the Funnel built risers and ran their own show.

ROSS MCLAREN: "Originally, my intention was to construct a media centre for the production, exhibition and distribution of film, art, or whatever happened to congeal and mutate. As the long suffering debate over the Canadian film identity festered in the alphabet soup of organizational CF-DCBCFINBBs, I thought a happy solution might be to forge a film gallery in some warehouse space and actually develop an audience for these orphaned film gems..."⁷

FRIEDER HOCHHEIM, Funnel founding member: The theatre was a collaborative effort. We were a group of artists who had a passion for cinema expression, willing to try anything. It was our theatre.

PETER CHAPMAN, Funnel founding member: "The filmmakers affiliated with CEAC, headed by Ross McLaren, have put a fair bit of time and effort into turning the old Crash 'n' Burn space into a functional, small movie theatre capable of showing works in both 16mm and super 8. Ross and his co-workers plan to have regular showings every Tuesday night. These shows will be anything from selections from the CFMDC, retrospectives of a particular filmmaker's work, shows by visiting filmmakers, and of course open screenings where anyone can bring their films, finished or otherwise. It is hoped that this will promote and sustain an audience for experimental film and provide filmmakers with a source of 'feedback.'"⁸

ADAM SWICA, Funnel founding member: After my last year at the art college I went to London, UK for four months and came back flat broke. I was hired by CEAC for a place to stay and a \$100-a-week honorarium. Ross and I lived in the basement where the Diodes ran the Crash 'n' Burn punk club on weekends. I built a darkroom, and started teaching black and white processing and printing. We built rooms to live in and a very small theatre space, with a tiny screen and a couple of projectors. We ran mostly open screenings in super 8 because people couldn't afford to make 16mm films. We brought John Waters in, but mostly we showed our own movies. The audience would range in size and often included students from York, Ryerson and the art college. That was the Funnel.

ANNA GRONAU: I remember Adam Swica getting extremely tanned in the summer and having piercing dark eyes and a surprising flop of straight, sandy-coloured hair that hung down when he looked in a camera viewfinder. I remember that he was very creative visually. He was the one who came up with the idea for our Funnel t-shirts — the word "Funnel" scrawled in white chalk on a black background. We silk-screened the image on black sweatshirts and t-shirts. I thought it was brilliant — original, minimal and a little bit anti-establishment. They sold really well — until somebody stole our entire stock (whoever it was must have really liked them!).

FRIEDER HOCHHEIM: It wasn't called the Funnel until later; Ross came up with the name. "What do you want to call this thing?" "I don't know, the Funnel?" It cracked me up because, what is Dada? If you asked any Dadaist what is Dada they would tell you: I don't know, it's just what we called it. It meant nothing in particular.



Penetrated (Male) by Peter Dudar, shot at CEAC, 1977.



Shooting *Penetrated (Male)* by Peter Dudar, Charles Bagnall and Jim Anderson, 1977. Photo by Kalli Paakspuu.

PETER DUDAR: I first put CEAC on the police radar by advertising one of my Funnel screenings (featuring my film *Penetrated* [1977]) solely with the word “uncensored.” It was the first CEAC opening attended by police. My *Penetrated (Male)* and *Penetrated (Female)* films are one-on-one martial arts sparring matches. The female version is the more visceral, since the opponents are from different disciplines. They are two-screen films, and the screens can only be synced in the mind. Like many others, I shot and presented my first film at CEAC’s John Street location, then progressed to CEAC’s Duncan location, then downstairs to the nascent Funnel, and then on to the Funnel’s independent King Street East location.

TORONTO FILMMAKERS’ CO-OP

The nascent screening group in the CEAC basement was not the first collective movie effort in the city; the counterculture expressed itself in communal structures across North America, whether in shared households, back-to-the-land collectives or the Toronto Filmmakers’ Co-op (1971-1978). Because film- and videomaking required expensive equipment, co-ops began to pop up to share the load. The Toronto Filmmakers’ Co-op was a hippie hangout with a roomful of gear and a universe of hallucinogenic conversations. It was housed in Rochdale College, an alternative school and living experiment of fering inner and outer trips.

ANNA GRONAU: I remember as a young art student venturing to attend a few Co-op meetings during its heyday at Rochdale. I went with Leslie Padorr to a workshop for women in how to use one of the Co-op’s dauntingly heavy-looking 16mm cameras. The meeting had a very radical feminist tone to it. The idea was a kind of newsreel interventionist cinema, in which women could document things happening in their communities. Leslie’s daughter, Mona, was in the Campus Co-op Daycare, and the University was threatening to close it, so an occupation by parents was being undertaken to prevent the closure. I don’t know if a film was ever made about that, but I think it was discussed. At another meeting I went to, someone said their goal was to make Monty Python-style comedies. There were wildly different ideals being expressed, yet they were able to co-exist because we were all young, poor, pretty much aspiring, but not yet achieving. What we had in common was greater than our differences.

KEITH LOCK: I was in attendance at the first meeting of the Toronto Filmmakers’ Co-op at Rochdale College. This was the first film co-op in Canada, which later morphed into the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto (LIFT). Wildly anarchistic, they designated me, in absentia, to be the co-op’s first chair. The thinking was: Keith is Chinese, therefore he should be our chair because he will be like Chairman Mao, who is also Chinese. It was a good-humoured “fuck you” to those outsiders who demanded such things as a chair in the first place. This was typical of Rochdale, which was often the first stop for young American draft resisters fleeing the Vietnam War. Here, being Asian was not a negative. If anything, it had a kind of strange cachet. Rochdale College was filled with fresh ideas and an urgent energy — both the Filmmakers’ Co-op and the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre (CFMDC) offices were located there. I taught courses in filmmaking for the Co-op. I was immersed in all the stuff surrounding Rochdale, the incredible experimental free university, and had just turned twenty.

RICK HANCOX: I joined the Toronto Filmmakers’ Co-op in 1974 and had the audacity soon after to run for the board of directors. I was elected on my “platform” that since I lived next door, I could be available at a moment’s notice. I certainly hung around there a lot. The Co-op was in an old Victorian house on Jarvis across from the Red Lion pub that housed not just the Co-op, but the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Center and

Cinema Canada magazine, spread over two interconnected floors. Every time a new independent film would arrive for distribution at the CFMDC, we'd grab some beers from the fridge and gather in the common screening room. Discussions about the cinematic art got more profound (or so it seemed) as the air filled with the smoke of funny cigarettes. It inspired us to write strange items now and then for the TFC newsletter, appropriately called *Rushes*. The best rush I got was working in the editing room at the Co-op, neg-cutting Mike Snow's four-and-a-half-hour *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen* (1974). He and I sat together at the AGO premiere, nudging each other and tittering in all our favourite spots.

PATRICK LEE, Filmmakers' Co-op founder: "Sandra Gathercole had taken over as coordinator and had supervised the move from Rochdale to Jarvis Street. When Sandra resigned, to work with the Council of Canadian Film Makers, Bill Boyle was chosen as coordinator. The policies he followed in the next four years involved expansion of the Co-op in all areas. The workshops were expanded and the fees to attend them steeply raised. We moved from 406 Jarvis to a similar house next door, and then to much larger premises on Portland Street. Much new editing and sound equipment was acquired."⁹

BRUCE ELDER, Funnel founder: "Equipment that could not be paid for from rentals at rates 'experimental' filmmakers could afford was purchased. In order to meet the costs of this equipment, the Co-op had to make great efforts to attract commercial filmmakers. As a result, the nature of the Co-op changed. It became more a loose alliance of small businesses than a collective of filmmakers."¹⁰

PATRICK LEE: "Bill Boyle felt, as did most of the executive of the Co-op, that the Co-op should try to be self-sufficient; we needed to reduce our dependence on government grants. I believed that this should be done by reducing salaries and overhead. Bill, on the other hand, thought that expansion of the Co-op would attract money from filmmakers. The filmmaking scene in Toronto now included several small production companies, made up of one or two filmmakers producing films for television or the NFB. The Co-op was adapted more and more to suit their needs. This led to a loss of support from the original core of members, the personal filmmakers."¹¹



Keith Lock at *Freud Signs*, 1976. Photo by David Anderson.



Rochdale College, 1971.

ROSS MCLAREN: It became an organization run by ten small businesses. They tried to accommodate industry types by buying industry-standard equipment, and they went bankrupt. "Hollywood North." The rental rates were significantly lower than standard commercial rates, so IBM rented the equipment for six weeks in a row. But it wasn't low enough for artists, and the Co-op certainly didn't make any other accommodations for artists.

ANNA GRONAU: Unfortunately the problem was that the film industry was not able to support its own people, so potential industry filmmakers would use the Co-op until they got on their feet. If they continued an affiliation at all, it was just for the use of facilities. It lost its co-operative aspect and became a service organization. Any workshops or seminars were technically out of league with the kind of things people like us were doing. We were alienated by their involvement in production-type films.

WYNDHAM WISE, writer: In the end it turned out that Bill Boyle, who was running the Co-op, was sifting the money off for his own personal projects. It was absolute corruption.

ANNA GRONAU: The Canada Council asked members of the independent film community to get involved and try to save the Co-op. A number of people who did so were also trying to help the Funnel get on its feet. We were already doing screenings and offering workshops at CEAC.

ADAM SWICA: We (the screening group at CEAC) were looking for an organization and got an invitation from the Toronto Filmmakers' Co-op to

check them out. A number of us including Ross, Anna and I wound up on the board just as everyone who had been there was bolting for the door. We thought it was an opportunity to get some equipment and start doing our own thing.

ANNA GRONAU: As you know, we — a few future Funnelites — were trying to save the Filmmakers' Co-op and make it a future institutional home for the Funnel. We had a number of meetings there for that purpose, and then, of course, meetings to deal with its horrific financial situation and initiate bankruptcy procedures. Once it was clear that the Co-op had no choice but to declare bankruptcy, the issue arose of whether its funding would continue to exist and be applied to another organization (yes please!) or just get absorbed back into the overall pot.

ADAM SWICA: Francoyse Picard at the Canada Council was instrumental in getting us (the Funnel group) money previously allocated to the Co-op. They had been receiving money for years and botched it, so we became the perfect vessel for that cash.

ROSS MCLAREN: I went through a couple of bad experiences with cultural funding in Canada; there were a couple of roadblocks and detours. I know it's always difficult, but I was developing scar tissue on my forehead from banging my head against the wall. I'd go and meet these film officers and I couldn't understand how such bad dressers could be giving out funds. They would show up in plaid pants and paper shirts and gold chains and they didn't know what I was talking about. We've all been there, haven't we? I was living in the basement of CEAC and they would be off to Holt Renfrew to gear up. There was very little trickle-down between state employees and impoverished artists. I'm sure it's better now.

CRASH 'N' BURN

Many punks continued the communal living experiments of the back-to-the-landers, putting life and work under the same squalid roof. Self-reliance was the new rule: if it was already established it was no good. The dreamy collective hopes of the 60s turned to anger and a bracing anti-authoritarianism. Michael Nightmare of the Ugly: "If I wasn't in rock 'n' roll, I'd be making you

*guys lie on the floor right now and I'd be taking your wallets."*¹² Inspired by three-chord purgatories south of the border, new record labels, micro-published zines and noisy garages spread slowly across Toronto. The very first club to poke its head out of the concrete was hosted by the gay Marxists at CEAC, in their vast and derelict basement space that was also home to the Funnel's open screenings.

ROSS MCLAREN: In the summer of 1977 CEAC was quite excited because punk broke and a local band called the Diodes approached them about starting a punk club in the basement. The Crash 'n' Burn ran for six weekends. It would go all night at 110 degrees and was completely illegal. It quickly became part of a circuit that included San Francisco, New York and London. Finally it was shut down because it was illegal. But the great thing about oppressive Toronto is that opposition always oozes out somewhere.

BRUCE EVES, CEAC staffer, artist: After the Talking Heads finally made it to Toronto with a packed performance in the auditorium of the Ontario College of Art, the punk rock buzz was in the air, but lacked a venue. The alienated stance of punk rock complemented what was happening upstairs at CEAC, so when we were approached by Ralph Alfonzo, the manager of



David Buchan, "Fashion Burn," *FILE*, Fall 1977.

the Diodes, in the spring of 1977 about the possibility of using the basement level of the Duncan Street building as a weekly music venue, the idea was given the go-ahead. The Diodes booked the bands and did all the (legal) legwork — ensuring that each weekend there was a party permit in place from the city so beer could be sold. It's been said that Ralph owned the club; rented the club; that it closed because it lost its liquor license; that it was the scene of ongoing mayhem...all rubbish. The club operated independently from the programming two floors above, but it existed under the umbrella of CEAC. We paid the hydro bills and through *Art Communication Edition* [magazine] promoted the bookings.

CAROLE POPE, musician: “The bar was a door sitting on two garbage cans, at which only Molson's Black Label was served, a punk aesthetic, perhaps. Making an anti-establishment statement, the club sometimes forgot to charge admission. Bands like the Dead Boys, the Dishes, the Curse, the Diodes, the B-Girls, Martha and the Muffins and the Viletones all vented their caustic, warped sensibilities there.”¹³

KATHLEEN PIRRIE ADAMS, musician, writer: In the summer of 1977 I started going to the punk club, the Crash 'n' Burn, on Duncan Street where the first Funnel screenings were held. There were also events upstairs at CEAC. I remember going to a lecture by French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy. He had come to announce the end of revolutionary possibility, and that seemed to disturb those who were hosting the event. He said that the class revolution was an obsolete framework for emancipating the human spirit. That's my recollection anyway. As a wanna-be high school revolutionary I was a bit shocked as well. Much of what I was experiencing was beyond my understanding but that's part of what made it so exciting. My way of finding out about things was to go and see them. There was no Internet. I was just Googling with my feet.

ROSS MCLAREN: “Punk was breaking and they (the CEAC braintrust) saw this as the children of the bourgeoisie revolting in the suburbs, about to kill their parents. So naturally they were in support of it!”¹⁴

ELDON GARNET, artist, editor/founder *Impulse Magazine*: “It is 1976. Ross McLaren is actively organizing film screenings in the basement of the Centre for Experimental Arts and Communication (CEAC), a non-institutional,

revolutionary art space operating at the edge of the edge. CEAC's mastermind and director, Amerigo Marras, gay, young, was an architecturally trained anti-advocate for the status quo. He had grown up in radical Italian politics so, in the fresh cultural territory of Toronto art production, he was willing to open his cultural space to whatever was tough, Marxist, advocated world change, and had no time for history and its lies. Here, one was confronted. Here, in the art basement, McLaren created his seminal *Crash 'n' Burn* (1977), named after the short-lived downstairs punk club. With a wind-up 16mm Bolex, he films in silence a visual rendering of the rancorous. Jerky, rough, in grainy black-and-white, lead singer after lead singer takes off his shirt, gyrates, shakes his ass in the face of an audience who scream and jump up and down. In the film, the audio is not synced to the visual, but this is seamless disjunction. The once-stars of early punk, the Dead Boys, Teenage Head, and the Diodes pass as McLaren zooms in and pans. It is a documentary, yet not. Scratches on the film reverberate with the snarling performers who want nothing more than to announce destruction, feign their own deaths, and draw knives across naked, emaciated stomachs. The celluloid explodes in raucous frenzy: discordant, awkward, and pertinent. These are not folk singers, these are suffering punks who scream out to us: ‘I'm in a coma/Pull the plug on me/ I'm in a coma/please listen to me/I've got the right to live, I've got the right to die.' Isn't this what it's about? Kill me, it's so fuckin' boring.”¹⁵

ROSS MCLAREN: Amerigo had \$500 from some slush fund, and I bought half an hour of 16mm Tri-X and shot four of the bands. At the time I had some idea about documentation and editing and how I shouldn't touch the footage, so the final film is twenty-seven minutes long. There was a CBC crew there with lights and equipment, so when they turned their lights on I'd shoot. The microphone was slung over the sprinkler pipes and attached to a reel-to-reel tape recorder that I kept running. I was shooting non-sync with a wind-up Bolex that had a Panasonic video camera lens on it. I really liked the way it looked. I was never very influenced by the punk thing other than its general philosophy of doing things yourself. This was one of the first punk rock docs in the world, so I think that my work influenced punk. I cut *Crash 'n' Burn* (1977) over a couple of nights at the Toronto Filmmakers' Co-op. I remember having a very bad cold and being on severe Nyquil cocktails. I don't know if that affected the editing or not.

BRUCE EVES: Now to the \$64,000 question: why was the Crash 'n' Burn closed down? I think there were two or three factors that led Amerigo to a stupid decision. Freshly back from Documenta in Kassel, he found himself in the position of becoming what he had once detested, and no amount of rhetoric would change the fact that he had begun his entry into art stardom. All the nihilist posturing aside, the bands were in search of record deals, and for Amerigo this led to disillusionment. According to Diane Boadway, he thought the bands simply weren't radical enough. There's one thing I forgot to say about the Crash 'n' Burn, and in a funny way it gives an idea of the vibe of the place. Mysteriously, at some point over the course of the life of the club, a really bad painting had invited itself to grace the north wall. After the place closed it was found that every single square inch of wall space had been tagged with graffiti — yet this anonymously donated, really bad painting had remained untouched.

ROSS MCLAREN: After the punks left I was looking for a theatre and we got enough CEAC dollars for lumber. I built a small room with bunk beds that I could live in, along with my first wife. It was off to the side by the boiler room. Don Corley was a good carpenter, so he did a lot of the work. There was also a booth and raked seating, and we got a brand new screen. I remember getting a five-gallon paint sprayer and we just kept pouring in the matte black paint and blacked the whole space. That was quite a job; I've done that many times. I can be angry and grateful to CEAC. On the one hand they were supportive of young artists starting up, and gave me the basement for free. As the programming went on there was obviously a bit of a split because they weren't interested in artists' film, they were interested in political activist stuff. But I'm pissed off because didn't they know they were going to be martyrs? [laughs] This is the thing about political theory and actual street sense: you must have some idea of cause and effect. There's no point in being subversive if you're just going to be a martyr. CEAC was loosely knit, but there was a core of us that did the work. Officially, there was a board of directors, and I was peripheral to the official administration, but I was there every day. There were all sorts of performances and film screenings at CEAC, and I learned something about grantsmanship and how the whole game works. These guys were way ahead of the rest of the scene, that's for sure, though their publicity and outreach wasn't so good. There was a lot of resentment from the arts community because they were too hip.

INTIMIDATION

Canadian artist-run centres of the first generation often began as collective solidarity vehicles, and then generally turned into personality avatars — blown-up versions of a charismatic founder. The mood was oppositional, countercultural and internationalist. One cultural noteworthy dubbed it “An era of intimidation.” The prickly tracts and insider language from CEAC, General Idea, Centerfold Magazine were aimed at art centres across the country, and even beyond.

JORGE LOZANO, artist, organizer: There was punk culture, the Red Brigades in Italy, the communist revolutions, S/M discourse was becoming public. One of the most incredible films I saw was at the Nova Convention in New York (a three-day homage to William Burroughs). It was shown on two screens in 16mm. A guy walks into an alleyway when a car rolls up and stops, another man steps out and beats the guy up. One screen shows a wide shot, the other shows close-ups. Finally the guy's all beat up, they kiss and leave. It was an arranged sadomasochistic encounter. All that was in



Debbie Pollovey, Lily Chiro, Marlene Elasz in *Katchibatta* by Ron Giii, CEAC opening night, 15 Duncan Street, September 18, 1976.

the air. We were inquiring into the society of control, even auto-control. It was a moment of great initiatives, incomparable to now unfortunately. There was less history of experimental filmmaking, more that was new.

BRUCE EVES: The participants invited to participate in Joseph Beuys' "Violence and Behaviour" workshop [September 8-16, 1977] included a contingent from CEAC; a group from South Africa, Reindeer Werk; and a contingent of the Polish Contextualists. While Beuys was installed in the museum for the entire run of Documenta, the "Violence and Behaviour" workshop was only a small part of his program and lasted at most a week to ten days. Lily Eng and Ron Giii both presented heart-stopping work and my lecture on homoeroticism and the simulacra of violence in punk and BDSM, while praised afterwards, aroused much hostility from the audience in attendance. At the after-party, when the worship had finished, Beuys launched into a series of demeaning and contemptuous impersonations of his invited guests and ended his thanks by sticking his tongue down my throat. Beuys thought of us as his students; we came to think of ourselves as props. He was a HORRIBLE man, and when he died in 1986 I didn't shed a tear (crocodile or otherwise).

RON GIII, artist, CEAC insider: Documenta was the anti-celebrity performance where I invited a harmonica player from the streets. Having driven a taxi I knew street people, and there's one thing they all have in common: if you have money they'll do anything you want. I talked to him about a performance and he said, sure, no trouble. I was the first one (of the CEAC group) on. I got up to the blackboard and drew a wheel and wrote out six famous artists' names on the wheel. It was an homage to Duchamp. Joseph Beuys was there. I had the harmonica player come in and he played "Lili Marleen." That lasted two or three minutes. I gave a little bit of a speech and that was it. They took some pictures and I just wanted to get out of there. I felt this overwhelming anxiety.

POLICE RAIDS

In Toronto, a pair of events proved essential in the formation of a nascent and self-identified gay community. In both instances urgent meetings and then street demonstrations were held to protest anti-queer state violence. In refusing to accept police/legal definitions of what gay men could or could not do, the community began to define for itself, in a newly public and self-aware way, exactly who they were. These new formations had a profound and galvanizing effect on the arts community that is still being felt today.

JOHN GREYSON, artist/activist: When I joined (art magazine) *Centrefold/Fuse* in 1979, our typesetting was being done at (the gay newspaper) *The Body Politic*. I got to know some of the collective and wrote a few articles for *TBP*, reviews and fiction. They were still going through the courts because of Gerald Hannon's 1977 article "Men Loving Boys Loving Men," which is still worth reading today. It's a very subtle and nuanced examination of man-boy love in which he interviews and spends time with a couple of boy-lovers and their boys. It arrived at a moment of global child porn/pedo hysteria, accompanied by Anita Bryant's anti-gay crusade south of the border. A moral panic held the United States in its sway, and *The Body Politic* wanted to fight back and contribute something complex to these debates. For their troubles they were charged with distributing obscenity through the mail. They were found not guilty and free speech prevailed, but the crown appealed (twice) and there was much collateral damage.



The Body Politic, May/June 1974.



Demo against bathhouse raids, February 20, 1981.
Photo by Gerald Hannon for *The Body Politic*.

It's pretty much accepted that Toronto mayor John Sewell lost his bid for re-election because of his appearance at a fundraiser for *The Body Politic*. While he had critics on many issues, many feel it was his principled stand on freedom of expression that sunk him politically. And for those who believe that there was an easy divide between the gay Marxist politicians at CEAC and the postmodern glamour squad on Queen West, it's noteworthy that General Idea, the Clichettes, Clive Robertson, Lisa Steele and a clutch of other Queen West luminaries performed at this fundraiser.

ANDREW JAMES PATERSON, video artist, musician: *The Body Politic* arrests and trial, the raids against bathhouses (there was a raid on the Barracks in 1978 and then of course there were the massive raids of February 5, 1981)... Yes, these were definitely mobilizing factors in the formation of a queer community (queer here meaning gay). "No more shit!" was the primary chant at the demo the next night, and "no more shit" referred to a lot more than just the raids. No more being passive targets, no more entrapment by cops with nothing better to do, no more intimidation and violence from homophobic bashers. Although there were gays and lesbians who weren't particularly convinced by issues of men's right to anonymous sex in what might be privately-owned but still public spaces, many did see the larger issues of censorship and surveillance.

JOHN GREYSON: *The Body Politic* trials over Hannon's "Men Loving Boys" article divided Toronto's fledgling gay community. Many regarded the newspaper as a radical, divisive, non-representative rag. Two years later the bath raids changed everything. These occurred on February 5, 1981, when 150 Toronto police officers did a midnight raid at Club Baths, the Romans II Health and Recreation Spa, the Richmond Street Health Emporium and the Barracks, arresting 286 men. I think the police once again miscalculated the gay community. Perhaps they thought, who's going to defend a bunch of guys in towels having sex? In fact, it was the largest mass arrest since Trudeau's War Measures Act in 1970, and it was met with instant outrage. Meetings were immediately called and 3,000 people marched the next night chanting, "No more shit." It was one of those extraordinary moments when most everyone saw things very clearly and did the right thing — and it's rightly acknowledged as Toronto's Stonewall moment.

FIRST SEASON

The rallying of a nascent gay community was part of a collective momentum that hearkened back to the oldest ambitions of Amerigo Marras, Jearld Moldenhauer and The Body Politic's explicit advocacy of liberation. The swirl of events around the gay paper was part of a crucial wind of gathering that occurred at the same time as the Funnel's identity as a film community hub began to take shape. The narratives were not the same, but there were vital cross currents: the old liberationist dreams and the utopian hopes of a new community were central to both efforts.

The Funnel began at CEAC with a bouquet of open screenings to ground the presence of the new super 8 hopefuls, then Ross McLaren took up the reins and began programming in earnest. This time there would be no Festival interlopers trying to turn the dream into money.

The 1977-1978 season was funded by CEAC cash and featured over forty screenings, including fourteen one-person shows (a men-only zone), monthly open screenings and group shows from the UK and Holland, with occasional nights of performance and video sprinkled in. Future core Funnel members like Villem Teder were granted evenings swooning with chemical reveries, while both Anderson brothers took solo bows. When I asked the Funnel faithful what they remember from the endless Scheherazade gatherings most look back at me blankly, but the name that returns more than any other is James Benning. James was a soft-spoken math teacher from Milwaukee whose master-shot movies seemed to offer a way out of structural cinema's tireless reflexivity. In Benning's seminal 11 x 14 (1976) the main characters of the movie, according to its director, are "a car, a train and an airplane."¹⁶ In Benning's machine universe, subjectivities are created out of replaceable parts, partnerships are dissolved and recombined, the merely human emerges as a symptom of technology. It was a formalism that said yes to ecology, feminism, narrative and beauty.

MICHAELLE MCLEAN: I remember James Benning had problems getting across the border because he arrived with his films in paper shopping bags along with a change of underwear. I guess the customs guards didn't like the looks of him, but he did eventually reach us just before showtime.

JOHN PORTER: CEAC had already been showing films upstairs for a year, and held their first super 8 open screening in October 1976. It was basically Ross McLaren and his Kodak super 8 projector and a few friends like Adam Swica and Anna Gronau helping out. In 1977-1978, the Funnel opened up in the basement, continuing the open screenings both for super 8 and 16mm, and hosting some visiting filmmakers. The Funnel people liked my films so I liked going there. The space was very small, though the ceilings were high enough to have risers, and they had a little projection booth. There might have been room for forty people maximum.

ROSS MCLAREN: During my three years as programmer, I tried to maintain a balanced menu of international, Canadian and local work. Monthly open screenings where anyone could project absolutely anything in a spontaneous, informal context served as an important forum for works-in-progress and for discovering new talent. Working with a small budget and much volunteer labour, we managed to raise the visibility of these films in Canada and also have our work screened internationally. Forming links with filmmakers and organizations in other countries was crucial as experimental film was getting very little recognition in the rest of Canada.



The Funnel's first location in the CEAC basement, 15 Duncan Street. Photo by Adam Swica.

DAVID ANDERSON: You couldn't not go. Especially since the audiences could be small. Every person not sitting in a seat would be missed. It was part of being a good host. You'd come to be supportive of the filmmaker.

ANNA GRONAU: My belief as a young art student was that avant-garde art would be taken up by people at large. I never thought of art as a permanently separated cultural activity. The idea that there were avant-garde films seemed completely natural to me. The counterculture was still something people believed in. There was a lot of performance going on and anti-object art was big at the time. Idealistically, I believed that the ghettoized, even despised, status of avant-garde film was only temporary.

FRIEDER HOCHHEIM: We were experimenting a lot with film, exploring this art form, this cinematic language. What is cinema? It was a great opportunity to get together and toss around ideas.

DAVID ANDERSON: One of the films I showed at my CEAC screening was called *Birthfilm* (1974). The film started with Jan (a friend) turning in front of the camera to show the changes her body was going through. The idea was to keep doing this to show her body changing as the baby grew. So every few weeks Jan would visit and repeat the same turning or I would circle her with the camera, moves I would have picked up watching Michael Snow films. As we became less camera shy we decided to film the delivery. It was a home birth with a midwife, Jim (the father), and Jan's mother. It was tough because a 16mm camera is an intrusive thing; it made a lot of noise. But it all went very well. The baby's name was Galen.

JORGE LOZANO: The Funnel was a great place to go; they were always showing new works without having to call them new works. The availability of those spaces, the fact that we could access them and show our work, was part of that moment. At that time art schools were connected with the art community. There was a sense of dialogue and experimentality; the Funnel had that. At the Funnel you saw things for the first time. Now you see repetitions, but then you saw things for the first time. I met John Porter there and saw his stop motion films that were fun to look at. I made a film about the Viletones called *Ein Hund* (A Dog) (1979). It's a three-minute film that I re-filmed from original footage shot at a bar called Meat and

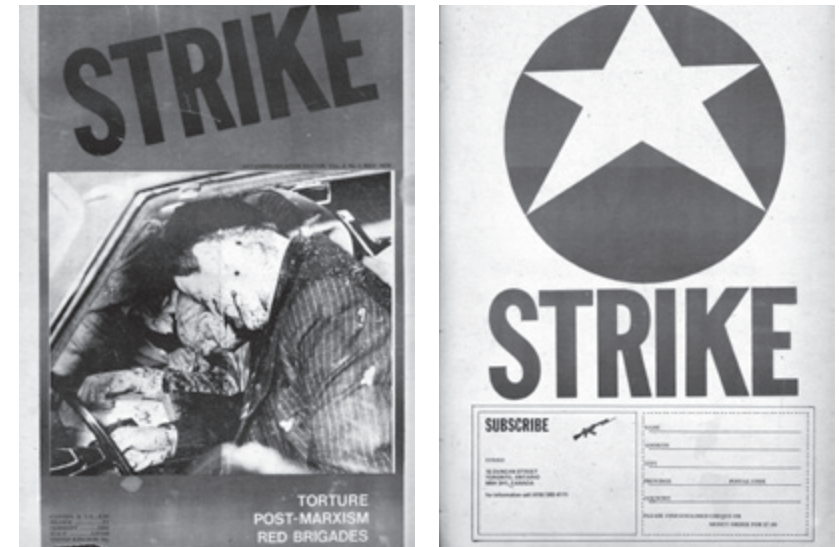
Potatoes on Yonge Street. The singer (Nazi Dog) was burning and cutting himself. I happened to come by with a super 8 camera, so I just recorded it and then I burned the footage and re-filmed it. At some point we were all part of the Funnel, it was the place to go. But like in all communities, there were differences in status and hierarchy. I was not one of the founders or curators. We did our own things separately.

CEAC CRISIS

*The Marxists at CEAC, refuelled by a stint with Joseph Beuys at Documenta, cranked up their polemical attacks on the state. Launching a version of Beuys' Free University, they had the handsomest video studio in the city, and turned an in-house newsletter into an international magazine dedicated to "speaking out one's own oppressions. The students' riots, the gay activism, the feminist or blacks' polemics, terrorism, and a few other currents have in the past taught us a great lesson. The refusal to co-operate with the subjugations..."*¹⁷

BRUCE EVES: CEAC was nestled in the middle of a decade that began with Leonard Bernstein's cocktail party to benefit the Black Panthers and ended with the launching of *Fuse* and *Bomb* (the magazines). There were events happening literally every day — it almost had the intensity of a latter-day Warhol's Factory (minus the drugs).

SUBER CORLEY: At the same time, our intellectual forays with visiting artists from the US and Europe were not quite satisfying. Most were likely to want to share and to support in their own way, but many were more interested in having careers than creating change. So, yes, I agree that eventually art was no longer "enough." However, what we were doing was still intellectual and not radical. We wanted people (all people) to be more open to new ideas and less dependent upon the old. We wanted to support those who were ignored by *Artforum* and give them a forum. We also wanted to be stimulated by those who had ideas beyond our own. We were selfish in that way. We wanted to grow and to improve and we wanted access to intellectual power. But we didn't want to keep it to ourselves; we wanted to share it. That was the objective. Building. Thinking. Sharing. Supporting.



Strike Volume 2, No. 2, May 1978.

ROSS MCLAREN: In May 1978 I was coming into the theatre and spotted the *Toronto Sun* headline "Ontario Arts Council Supports Terrorist Group." I thought, oh that's juicy, I wonder who that is? I put my nickel into the box and found out it was us. That came about because there was such envy in the Toronto arts scene. CEAC had applied for some grants and were denied outright, even though they had done such great work. Also they didn't do a lot of outreach, a lot of political glad-handing, stuff you have to do to shake the money tree. There was a lot of resentment. When they didn't get their grants, they said, fuck art, now we're going to go strictly politics. This also described the split between upstairs and downstairs, between CEAC and the Funnel. There wasn't any animosity; it's just that I was interested in running artists' film rather than activist documentaries. So they ceased *Arts Communication Edition* and turned it into a magazine called *Strike*. The second issue had a picture of Aldo Moro, the former Italian prime minister, dead in the trunk of his car. He had been assassinated by the Red Brigades, and the editorial said, "We support the activities of the Red Brigades in accelerating the demise of the existing capitalist structures..." I don't think the *Toronto Sun* newspaper found this on their own — someone from the disgruntled arts community gave them a copy. The logo for *Strike* was a

machine gun and a beret; it was like politics as poetry. There was no ammunition or guns there, obviously. But the *Toronto Sun* headline was a big deal, and the supposed arms-length funding of the councils dried up in a matter of weeks.

SAUL GOLDMAN, CEAC staff, artist: I think we were more surprised than anybody else. Everybody was busy pushing limits on all fronts. Amerigo and Bruce and Ron and all of those people were very interested in the intellectual aspects of revolution. I guess we didn't realize how dangerous the idea was until the mainstream media decided to pick up on some of the articles that were in *Strike*.

JOHN FAICHNEY: It was a little creepy because the news went out before the *Strike* publication had been returned from the printer. There was a sense that somebody had been monitoring this and leaking it. It seemed as if strings were being pulled to make something happen; it's never been properly investigated. The originals were sent to an offset company in Mississauga, but we didn't have the paper in hand when the first public news arose. I remember getting a call at seven in the morning from someone at the *Toronto Star* asking me about it, but I hadn't seen the new issue of *Strike* yet so I had no idea what they were talking about.

TORONTO SUN, newspaper headline: "Ont. Grant Supports Red Brigades Ideology: Our Taxes and Blood-Thirsty Radicals"¹⁸



Bruce Eves and Amerigo Marras at CEAC, 1977. Photo by Peter Dudar.



Saul Goldman in *Electric Chair* (a video by Saul Goldman), 1977.

YORK UNIVERSITY FACULTY OF ART: "Having established a facade of respectability, CEAC, through its affiliated publication, has now formed a political front to denigrate all art-making, to urge the overthrow of all existing social structures and to declare its support for the terrorist strategy of the Red Brigade."¹⁹

BRUCE EVES: If I may act as a dime-store armchair psychologist, Amerigo was daunted by the prospect of artworld success, and fear of success can prompt self-sabotage. While a sensible, media-savvy person might have offered a retraction and some lame excuse to weather the storm, knowing it would die down eventually, Amerigo took the media bait and got argumentative. The attempt to justify the offending issue only made the situation worse. Much of the blame can be laid on the shoulders of the board because of its passive acquiescence to Amerigo's wishes. In the real world he would have been given two choices: fall on your sword to save the organization or be fired. By the end of May the issue had reached the floor of the House of Commons as a means for the Conservatives to politicize cultural funding and embarrass the government. What's curious about the entire affair is that there was another CEAC European tour in the midst of all of this. In retrospect, the scandal mustn't have felt very threatening at the time, otherwise the appearance at the ArteFiera in Bologna in early June followed by a gig in Zagreb would have been cancelled.

SUBER CORLEY: The way that Canadian politicians caved in to the mad howling of the right-wing media reminds me of the political environment that exists in the US today.

BRUCE EVES: The funding cutoff was completely unilateral and abrupt. The Canada Council cutoff came on July 4 (1978) and the Ontario Arts Council on July 10. Needless to say we were mortified by the Councils' decisions but there was some debate as to whether it was simply too late to mollify them. They were watching out for their own necks as well. There appears to have been only one letter to the Ontario Arts Council expressing astonishment that anyone would take allegations made by the *Toronto Sun* seriously. There were no protests from the "art community" because there is no such thing as an "art community," merely a group of individuals and groups working in similar areas scrambling for the same government handouts. There was fear for their own funding as well as lust for the goodies CEAC was able to acquire.

PETER DUDAR: Dadaist types don't ingratiate themselves. And the Toronto parallel gallery scene was riddled with rivalries. There was intense jealousy because CEAC had managed to develop an international profile, especially in Europe. Amerigo swore that a gallery director had phoned him, crudely demanding that he reveal to her the secret of how he'd managed to crack Europe. The dread overall was that the scandal would make the two levels of government clamp down on the arts councils, jeopardizing everyone's funding.

RON GIII: We didn't expect support from anyone. The older artists, the Carmen Lamanna artists, were probably anti-CEAC. There was a "thank god it's over" feeling.

JORGE LOZANO: When CEAC had its funding cut off, that was an act of censorship by the government and we artists kept silent. I've mentioned this many times to artist friends who became activists against censorship. CEAC should have freedom of speech, right? The freedom to write whatever they want. That's an issue that needs to be discussed, what happened with CEAC.

ELDON GARNET: CEAC wasn't defended properly; the Toronto arts community didn't rally behind them. I felt betrayed by all the political leftists in the city. The artists who were doing *Fuse Magazine* should have rallied around them, but obviously they didn't because they were afraid, self-serving. A Space should have rallied, but they didn't; there was a general inability to react. CEAC was the last true revolutionary space. Their ideas, even their capitalist ideas, were brilliant.

JOHN FAICHNEY: The grant was integral in operating the building, so losing our means of support meant that many meetings were devoted to whether the money could be rescued, and, when it became clear it couldn't, what the next course of action should be. When CEAC blew up after the publication of the second issue of *Strike*, Amerigo, Suber and Bruce said to themselves, there's no more point in doing this art thing anyway, we're finished with that project.

FUNNEL RESTART

The Toronto Super 8 Festival had been taken away from its founders, the Toronto Filmmakers' Co-op had gone down in flames, and now a third institutional trauma was about to be added to the mix. CEAC had been a sheltering haven for the Funnel, but now its very existence was threatened. How would the nascent organization respond?

JOHN FAICHNEY: The crisis at CEAC may have precipitated some formalization of the Funnel as an organization. Now that they were faced with a move they would have to be more self-conscious, more corporate in a way, about their procedures. They incorporated around this time and officially named themselves "The Funnel, a theatre near you."

JIM ANDERSON, Funnel founder: Before the Funnel was really starting Ross approached me and said they were trying to get together a few people to make a place for experimental film and I could be part of it if I liked. He invited me to be part of the Funnel, though I don't know if it was even called the Funnel yet.



The first Annual General Members Meeting at the Funnel's new space, 507 King Street East, Toronto, November 7, 1978. Photo by John Porter.

ROSS MCLAREN: Our incorporation happened just as we were leaving CEAC. We were an amalgamation of many clusters of filmmakers. We had the Andersons involved (Dave and Jim), people from Ryerson (Frieder Hochheim and John Porter), the art college people and David Bennell from the University of Toronto film club. During that year (1978) I'd started the process of incorporating the Funnel as a separate, non-profit corporation, and that came around the same time as the split that had to happen, because with the funding gone CEAC couldn't keep the building. It was an irony that this "terrorist" organization was the landlord of the Ontario Liberal Party. We had RCMP officers wearing bad sunglasses and long trench coats asking if they could buy all of the back copies of *Strike*. It was so goofy. Everyone's phone was tapped. There was an editorial cartoon in the *Globe and Mail* that showed a guy who looked like Fidel Castro with a beard and a bullet belt asking the Ontario Arts Council for a grant to buy ammunition. It was reactionary old conservative Toronto stupidity. At the same time there were all kinds of other reactionary repressions going on. *The Body Politic* newspaper was raided, there were illegal bathhouse raids, and a "clean up" of Yonge Street was announced after the murder of shoeshine boy Emanuel Jaques. Roy McMurtry was the Attorney General and he was busy putting a lid on things. There was a real fascist tone at the time.

ANNA GRONAU: It was either Jim Murphy or Bruce Elder who spoke to the Canada Council and its position was that we had to be very clear that we were neither the continuation of CEAC (heaven forbid!) nor the rebirth of the Filmmakers' Co-op (it was illegal to declare bankruptcy and then change your name and do exactly the same business). I think they asked very specifically for a letter that stated we didn't support CEAC. Probably, by that time, they had received word from other arts organizations declaring as much, but nothing yet from the Funnel. We discussed the whole issue of what to do about the Council's request/demand. It was definitely a quandary. I think we were all somewhat torn because it would be a betrayal of CEAC. On the other hand, CEAC seemed to be bent on self-destruction, and their public advocacy of violence was pretty ugly. At that point, I don't think we actually reached a decision.

THE MEETING

CEAC's request for a support letter was a pivotal moment in the history of the fledgling organization that was the Funnel. It had been run as an ad hoc group centred around Ross, but now, for the first time, a community meeting was called to which twenty or thirty people showed up.

MICHAELLE MCLEAN: I was living in the studio next to Anna Gronau and she said, "You should come to one of these meetings. This place is going through a political thing right now and it may or may not survive, and I really believe in it."

JOHN PORTER: So a meeting was called at the Funnel space, in the basement of CEAC, in the spring of 1978. It was the first time I had seen so many people, as many as thirty, who were regular supporters. There were a few people there I knew, like Bruce Elder from Ryerson and Jim Murphy from the CFMDC. The issue was to decide what to do. CEAC wanted the Funnel to write a letter of support to maintain their funding, as a kind of character reference. Some felt this would implicate the Funnel in the terrorism charges. I felt, what's the harm in writing a letter that doesn't say we support their politics, but acknowledges that they've been very good to us, they've given us this space and brought in experimental filmmakers? But the overwhelming consensus was that we wouldn't write this letter, we'd move out and find a new space. We needed money upfront to sign a lease so we all agreed to become official members and fork over \$100 each.



Adam Swica and lamp, 1979.



A Sense Of Spatial Organization by Patrick Jenkins, 1980.

ADAM SWICA: The CEAC guys said, either you're with us or against us. They wanted us to support them politically and nobody wanted to have anything to do with it, as I remember it. They were going places we never saw. They had given us free rein; they were basically supporting an arts group in their basement. But the work shown at the Funnel didn't have CEAC's political thrust at all. To me they seemed very hard-edged, politicized guys. That was one of the problems. I don't think anyone was interested in that. We called everybody in and made a decision and bolted that night. We came in after hours and emptied out absolutely everything and put it in storage. Ross and I were living there at the time; he might have gone off to live with Anna Gronau, I'm not sure, and I don't know where I ended up. I spent four years happily without a fixed address.

ANNA GRONAU: We were annoyed at CEAC for throwing away a good thing, especially when we were in transition anyway. I think we also felt that the rest of the arts community had already bailed on CEAC and we'd just be committing institutional infanticide by killing off the fledgling Funnel through a noble gesture that had no chance of eliciting solidarity or saving CEAC. But I believe we felt pretty guilty about the whole thing and were relieved when the guilt was spread around by a vote that gave us what we had wanted.

QUEEN STREET

Besieged externally by censorship and arrests, and internally by competing visions and fiscal free-for-alls, the first wave of artist-run centres in Toronto came to an inglorious close in the late 1970s. CEAC flamed out, the Toronto Filmmakers' Co-op drowned in debt, the Artist's Co-operative of Toronto grew tired. CEAC was a multimedia organization; it had said yes to dance, book works, performance and film. It had counterparts in Vancouver (Intermedia) and Montreal (Optica), and even across town at A Space. All were omnibus, first-generation, artist-run centres, wide open in their embrace of new forms of art. What would emerge in their wake was a series of specialist joints, as individual disciplines carved out turf, and some of the once-young radicals were hired in local art schools. Careers

were taking shape and reputations were growing as the scene became, for better or worse, professionalized.

Of course, many organizations soldiered on, including Art Metropole (General Idea's bookstore and publishing wing), and the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, Canada's oldest artist-run centre. But the late 70s marked a profound change for these centres as well, as both moved towards Queen Street and helped anchor what would become a newly self-conscious art scene. The second wave of artist-run centres would not only generate its own mythologies, it would provide expanding frames for self-scrutiny. Released from the internationalist art corps of CEAC and A Space's Nicholas Street incarnation, the new creed emphasized local specialization and collaboration. An interlocking web of centres would come together to create city-wide celebrations of painting (and other art habits) (Monumenta, 1982), sculpture (The New City of Sculpture, 1984), and even video (New Works Video, 1984). The Funnel was part of this second wave, though it lived far from the fashionably shabby Queen West establishments. But such was the newfound gravity of the scene that one could measure for the first time one's own distance (real or metaphorical) from the centre. While networking was the rule, the Funnel found ways to keep their distance from the pack, aided not a little by their faraway eastside location.



Queen Street, 1977. Photo by Shirley Stanfield.

BARBARA FISCHER, art curator: “With their focus on international avant-gardism, both A Space and CEAC were seen by artists and by those working in more traditional media to be exclusive, self-serving and unresponsive. The blowups functioned to fragment and to expand the art scene, creating ambitious new spaces and venues for all forms of art. These changes were so dramatic that within a year, Only Paper Today started to publish ‘maps’ of the Toronto ‘art scene’ advertising the locations and programs of the centres, and File Magazine started ‘Your Guide to Queen Street West.’ In June 1980 Betty Ann Jordan submitted a report to ANNPAC (Association of National Non-Profit Artist-run Centres), entitled ‘An Investigation into the Nature of the Toronto Arts Community’s Contribution to the Cultural and Commercial Growth of the Queen Street West Area.’”²⁰

THEATRE BUILD

Forced to flee their newly tainted patron CEAC landlords, Ross McLaren, Jim Murphy, Tom Urquhart and Anna Gronau looked at spaces all over the city, and finally hunted down a large east end warehouse. The fact that it was located in an anti-neighbourhood, far from the gathering scrums of an emerging Queen West art scene, might have provided a reassuring echo of Buck Lake’s geographical remoteness, and offered the new crew an insulating distance. For many utopian communities the outside world was equal parts seduction and threat; many of the most successful communities maintained strict lines in order to manage and negotiate outside contact. For many utopian groups, once a location was secured a series of commitment mechanisms were put into place, developed by the collective itself in order to create its own operating principles. Imagine a machine creating its own manual. There was no part of group life that did not touch on the question of commitment, whether it was workload, decision-making, recruitment, ideals, leadership or boundaries. The Funnel was also a social machine, managing and regulating relationships to produce group identity, creating a sense of insiderdom, belonging and, most of all, meaning.

Most utopian communities in the past 200 years have built their own structures, from the communal houses of the Hancock Shakers to the barn

at Buck Lake. The Funnel’s task of building a movie theatre by hand required self-denial and an all-for-one commitment, but the resultant structures became larger-than-life symbols of their collective effort, magical pictures charged with the effort that had brought them into being.

PETER DUDAR: I knew the warehouse building at 507 King Street East well before the Funnel moved into it. A lone sculptor, Mia Westerlund, had a studio there. The entire floor was one dark, empty space, and she used just a corner of it. By the time the Funnel arrived the entire building had been subdivided. The Funnel’s frontage now shows up on the TV series *Orphan Black*, as a police station.

DAVID ANDERSON: It was an ambitious undertaking, converting a warehouse space into a theatre with raked seating and a proper projection booth. David Bennell was in charge of the construction, teaching us about stud walls and sixteen-inch centres.

ANNA GRONAU: Tom Urquhart, who I think was at CFMDC at that point, helped tremendously with the logistics of moving out of CEAC and setting up the new space. Jim Murphy had been involved with both CFMDC and the Toronto Filmmakers’ Co-op, and as I mentioned before he was very important in transitioning the demise of the Co-op and keeping the Funnel from going down the tubes along with either CEAC or the Co-op. He also managed to find the actual theatre seats that we bought from a defunct porn theatre, which we reupholstered and installed.



507 King Street East, Toronto. Photo by Les Standfield.



Orphan Black police headquarters, 507 King East, Toronto.

PAUL MCGOWAN, Funnel founder: The first thing that comes to mind is working with David Bennell and Tom Urquhart building the risers for the first theatre at 507 King Street East. David was the only real carpenter. He designed a jig to assemble the risers' supports, so almost anyone could hammer them together. Tom and I had some experience roofing. We were both young, able and had a good idea of what to do with a hammer. Consequently, we ended up spending a lot of time as David's primary movers. I got my first introduction to drywall holding a sheet over my head in what would be the projection booth. As I recall, it was a cramped, backbreaking job I swore I'd never do again. A truly unfortunate introduction, as it led to renovation and carpentry becoming much too big a part of my life. But I still have all my fingers and toes, so what the hell.

JIM ANDERSON: In some ways we were adopting the same old way of doing things with a closed-off projection booth; isn't that how all theatres are set up? Why do you need a projection booth? There was this idea that the spectator should be in a certain kind of environment with the screen. But the spirit of that time was expanded cinema. What did that mean? It meant breaking down those distinctions, celebrating environmental cinema, having the projector in the midst of the audience. Some Funnel members like John Porter did projector performances. But our original theatre was designed in a classical way.

ADAM SWICA: The theatre on King Street was built from the ground up. The building was quite cheap to rent; it had been a framing shop. The owner's name was Chris, and he eventually quit his shop and became quite a

successful grip in the film industry. The place was just a hardwood floor, so we put in raked seats and a projection booth. There were probably fifteen to twenty people working on it; everybody was a volunteer.

KENNETH BOULDING, economist: "If we once start making sacrifices for anything — a family, a religion, or a nation — we find that we cannot admit to ourselves that the sacrifices have been in vain without a threat to our personal identity. Our identity is in part created by identifying ourselves with the organization or the community for which the sacrifices have been made. In these circumstances, the object of sacrifice becomes 'sacred' and it is in a position to demand further sacrifices."²¹

DOT TUER, writer, artist, Funnel member: When I became involved with the Funnel, I was given the impression that its relational structures were cemented around the building of the theatre and production spaces. That's the story I heard from historical figures like Adam Swica, Ross McLaren and Jim Anderson. It was a mythic and often repeated tale of a heroic moment that united the founding members.

ROSABETH MOSS KANTER: "For communes, the problem of commitment is crucial. Since the community represents an attempt to establish an ideal social order within the larger society, it must vie with the outside for the members' loyalties. It must ensure high member involvement despite external competition without sacrificing its distinctiveness or ideals. It must often contravene the earlier socialization of its members in securing obedience to new demands. It must calm internal dissension in order to present a united front to the world. The problem of securing total and complete commitment is central."²²

MICHAELLE MCLEAN: I remember sanding and mudding drywall at the Funnel's King Street location. My lungs are probably paying to this day because of all that drywall dust. There were a dozen of us, including Anna, Ross McLaren, Adam Swica, Jim Murphy, Virginia Kelly (who stole the "Virgin Place" street sign next to the building, explaining, "That's part of my name"), Jim and Dave Anderson and David Bennell, Mikki Fontana and Tom Urquhart. Villem Teder would have been there too. He was our mechanical/electronics whiz and his answer to almost any technical question was "It



David Anderson at Freud Signs, August, 1977. Photo by Keith Lock.



Tom Urquhart and Paul McGowan rebuilding the darkroom door, January 6, 1983. Photo by John Porter.

depends.” “Can you make it work?” “It depends.” You had a sense you were building something. It was still the hippie era; young people were going back to the land (not only at Buck Lake) and becoming self-sufficient. We were interested in learning new skills, and for us city-folk this might mean growing vegetables or learning how to build risers and put seats together. I was twenty-two by then and it was all great to learn.

JOHN PORTER: There would be a handful of people on specific days, ten at most, when it would take on a party atmosphere. You could drop by anytime and there would be someone there...There was a lot of assembly line work done on those hundred seats because they needed to be repaired. There was lot of cleaning, painting, plastering.

FRIEDER HOCHHEIM: There was a whole bunch of us. Whenever I had the time my efforts would go into it. It was everyone’s theatre. Everyone had a vested interest in making the theatre a success.

KATHRYN ELDER, film librarian: “There are several reasons why experimental filmmaking had failed to flourish in Toronto. Aspiring filmmakers did not have regular access to work of historical and contemporary significance,

they did not have a forum where they could exhibit their own work and exchange ideas with other filmmakers, and they did not receive necessary critical attention.”²³

ROSS MCLAREN: I knew the conventional places were not showing our work. So I thought, what do you need? You need a room you can make dark and you need a projector. That was the initial idea.

JOHN PORTER: The lease was signed in November 1978. We built the theatre pretty quickly, in one month. We opened in December 1978.

MICHAELLE MCLEAN: I’m a gardener. In nature you need diversity to survive. You need many species and plants and seeds to create a healthy whole. That’s why we need little spaces like the Funnel — they provide the diversity that allows the mainstream to exist.

GARY POPOVICH, filmmaker: I was scared the first time I went to the Funnel. I had a bit of reverence for those who had worked so hard to build such a theatre, and a bit of awkwardness about fitting in. But I loved the after-screening talks with the filmmaker present, beer flowing. I said yes to the shackles of structural materialism, and no to the campy excesses of psychodramas...or vice versa. My impressionable mind fell in love with every style and every new filmmaker who polished some unknown corner of their neighbourhood and made it shine in some new way for us to see. The Funnel gave me my first local screening and brought in the old heroes of experimental film, some of whom I had taken for dead. Rubbing elbows with these role models, in a sometimes indifferent world, showed me that it was possible to continue.



Beginning to build the projection booth, 1978. Photo by Adam Swica.

WELCOME TO MY WORLD



Printing and drying second edition of Funnel t-shirts. Michaelle McLean, Suzanne Naughton (under t-shirt) Anna Gronau, Edie Steiner, John Porter, Jim Anderson, Paul McGowan, Mikki Fontana (under t-shirt), April 26, 1981. Photo by Ross McLaren.

FUNNEL 2.0: UTOPIA

When the Funnel faithful recalled the all-for-one volunteer muster that put their second theatre together nail by nail more than a few talked about how much fun they had; it seems that more than just a theatre was being built. Of course the question of commitment was a two-way street. While the nascent cash-strapped organization required a surplus of free labour to get the theatre up and running, the amount each member was willing to surrender emotionally, physically and psychologically was invariably tied to what they received from the group.

The dividends of belonging to a greater cause, the proximity to a charismatic leader and the fulfillment of community service helped realign the very idea of the self with what members were giving and getting. While Funnel groupthink relied on a posse of maverick outsiders, the well-being of each individual increasingly depended on behaviour that supported the group project. Maintaining the group was another way of maintaining the self.

While the organization grew ever more expansive in its demands, each of its members posed their resistances, realigned personal ideologies and learned how to say yes and no to the new collective order they were shaping. It all came down to commitment — the emotional alchemy that would convert self-interest into social requirement. Commitment wasn't simply the first demand of the new organization, it's what every joiner had in common, it lay at the very root of community. The lease was signed in November 1978 and the all-volunteer construction crews were so diligent they built an instant theatre and opened a month later.

ROSABETH MOSS KANTER: “Utopian communities in the nineteenth century sought both to enhance meaningful interpersonal relationships and to provide political, economic, and other services for their members...They built a world centered around sharing — of property, work, living space, feelings, or values. They offered identity and meaning, a value-oriented life with direction and purpose.”²⁴

DOT TUER: The Funnel imagined a space outside of late capitalism. We had a shared mission in constructing an alternative universe. For us that alternative universe was the Funnel; for other people it was A Space, or the indie music scene. There was a sense that you could construct value outside of Bay Street, of whatever everyone else was doing to make money. There was

still a notion that art could live outside of an economic system, outside of the capitalist script for living.

CAROLINE AZAR, Fifth Column (band) singer: The Funnel was not about making your films “right,” it was about making them “real” or “wrong.”

KATHLEEN PIRRIE ADAMS, writer, Fifth Column bass player: Becoming part of a utopian community and creating an alternative lifestyle involved constant critique: how you earned your money, what values informed your relationships, gender, sexuality, ownership, consumption...everything. Analysis wasn't a special-occasion activity.

CAROLINE AZAR: What was amazing about that time was the need to invent. Never go for a formula. We were like scientists mixing this and that. The failures were interesting, and yes there were more failures than successes because the experiments don't always work. If it's always working then you're not making anything different. How could fear not be a part of that?

DOT TUER: I still think of the Funnel as embracing a modernist structure of utopian dreams that doesn't exist in the same way today. When I teach my students about revolutionary avant-gardes they're incredibly puzzled.



Michaëlle McLean, John Porter (with shades), Ross McLaren, Anna Gronau in new Funnel theatre, 1978. Photo by Edie Steiner.

They don't understand why people might work eighteen hours a day on revolutionary art without getting paid. At the Funnel, there was a collective purpose where one put all of one's time and energy. It was a context for meeting people around the world, a way of making work and a way of living.

JUDITH DOYLE, artist, writer: Who goes to see films at a place like the Funnel? People who are engaged in art cinema, performance, pedagogy, the self-taught movement. It was a hub of discourses and perspectives. Clearly, it was a place for dykes and fags, for gender-bent rangers and people working with the excluded.

CAROLINE AZAR: To be that young and have that pure, radical heart was explosive. Every night the emotions and ideas about truth were so big I didn't know if by the following morning I would wake up dead. There was no one else saying it in our sphere, and for that reason it was deeply lonely while also exhilarating.

DOT TUER: It was almost a salon culture. I always think about literary magazines from the 1920s. They might have had a readership of a hundred



Funnel calendar, November 1979.



Funnel calendar, March 1980.

people, but some of the writers, like Jorge Luis Borges, are the most famous authors in the world today. These were precedents that made you believe that it didn't matter if you had a huge audience; what mattered is that collectively you were creating new versions of the avant-garde. There was a lot of volunteer labour, but that was also common in the early music scene, the gay scene, *The Body Politic* newspaper and the artist-run centres. It was the way collectives formed and exhibited. It had a lot to do with the fact that rents were cheap; we all had big studios and you could live on relatively little money. I had jobs working in the ex-psychiatric world of Queen Street, drop-in centres, community centres. You would think that would be phenomenally exhausting. It was intense, but the world moved a lot slower then. There was no email or Internet. You wrote letters and they came back three weeks later. I made \$800 a month, and I never remember feeling short of money or time.

ROSS MCLAREN

The Funnel's anti-capitalist movies were part of an ongoing critique of post-war mass cultural norms in North America. The warming embrace of the cause would be transmitted by what German sociologist Max Weber named charisma, the magnetic leadership that was at the centre of most utopian communities. Whether it was Tom Brouillette at Buck Lake or artist Paul Wong at Vancouver's Video In, the fearless leader recast the collective purpose into a body.

JUDITH DOYLE: Artist-run spaces are situated in what Robert Filliou famously called the "eternal network" of artists and artist-run centres. Artists created avatar-like alter-identities for themselves, and curated publications, pageants and gatherings that featured these performative stand-ins.

ELDON GARNET: "I knew Ross as a filmmaker, collaborator and the founder of the Funnel, the most important locale for experimental film in Canada. It wasn't just the man's charm, but his films — awkward, jarring, disjunctive, and, of course, ironic — which grabbed my attention. It was the late 1970s. It was punk. No one followed, everyone did what they weren't expected to

do. No reverence for commercial film, no desire for distribution. You made films because they needed to be made. Why not try it this way; let's see what it looks like. A failure in film was a celebrated success."²⁵

FRIEDER HOCHHEIM: Ross McLaren was the driving force behind the screenings. He was the conductor, the ringleader.

ROSS MCLAREN: While I was in art school, my Eglinton Avenue studio was a meeting place for a lot of people. We'd go up there and make music and shoot films. I shot *Baby Green* (1974) in my studio, parts of *I.E.* (1976) and *Snorkel* (1976). We would have screening nights, do music concrete, make a lot of noise. A core contingent of people that later became involved in the Funnel met up there, it's where things congealed, and out of that came the desire to go more public. When I first started getting involved in art activity, I made paintings and sculpture. I found that after a while I had a lot of objects, and needed a warehouse to keep things in. During my studies at the art college I started making films, and felt that my personal situation better suited films, because I couldn't afford to buy space. My films went into a knapsack, and from there I could send them around the world. It seemed like a good way to work. When I started making films in school I was very lonely because there was no place to show them. There were cultural institutions showing the same work over and over, so I became lonely and stopped. I thought, well, how can I change the situation? Because I think as an artist, the completion of a piece comes with a connection to a public. I'm perfectly happy playing and doing things that no one will see, but sometimes it's good to connect with others. My solution to the problem was to get a dark room and a projector and a screen and put some posters on telephone poles and invite people to come. As artists we used to like to get together and smoke dope and show each other our films. We still do that, don't we?

ADAM SWICA: Ross, Anna and Michaelle were the public faces of the Funnel once it was a bona fide arts group. Ross was the star. He was the creator of the organization it became, and came up with the name. It was obvious that he (and Anna and Michaelle) had the most aptitude for interfacing with the funding bodies. His films were always the most unique and engaging. He was very charismatic and funny.

JORGE LOZANO: Ross was part of a group that was dictating taste. At every historical moment there are people who decide what is good and bad. He was a figure with a certain aura, a presence.

EDIE STEINER, Funnel member, filmmaker and photographer: I remember seeing Ross McLaren while he was filming his punk documentary at the Crash 'n' Burn, though I didn't really meet him until three or four years later. We got to know each other at the Funnel and became good friends. We created music together, and started a band called the Elementals. On nights the theatre was dark, we made experimental recordings onto reel-to-reel tape using the sound booth. I would play keyboards and guitar and sing while Ross played guitar.

ROSS MCLAREN: "We'd get together and Edie'd say 'I got this song'... and I'd say 'Well, do you want it slow or fast' and she'd say, 'well, sort of fast' and then we'd tape it."²⁶

PAUL MCGOWAN: Even though Ross provided leadership, he wasn't the Leader. In practice, and I'm pretty sure this was a conscious decision on Ross's part, when the Funnel began it was a "flat," non-hierarchical organization. Coming out of the punk/anarchist scene, the informal consensus to be flat was already there. The whole punk ethos was "fuck the corporate music/art scene, let's get together to form a band to play for our friends at the local pub, speakeasy, basement."



Ross McLaren, Leslie Thornton, Michaelle McLean, April 20, 1984. Photo by John Porter.



The Elementals (band) recording in the Funnel Theatre: Paul McGowan, Ross McLaren, Edie Steiner, April 26, 1981. Photo by John Porter.

JIM ANDERSON: Individuals can put a stamp on an organization, even if they're not the one officially in charge. Ross had a certain say about that, impressing his personality on the organization. Ross had a strong New York connection; he's lived there since the 80s. He was very open about his thoughts about what was good and what was not so good, what was experimental and what was not.

ANNA GRONAU: Ross had a lot of drive to make things happen, but his convictions were uncompromising and often unforgiving. There wasn't much room for agreeing to disagree. This may have helped produce the Funnel's distinct "identity," but it was also a fatal flaw, a kind of Achilles heel — the weakness inherent in a strength — that led to people eventually drifting off or feeling driven away. There was also some background to that. Ross told me that he had started the Toronto Super 8 Film Festival when he was a student at OCA, but that Richard and Sheila Hill had "stolen" it from him. I never knew the full story of what happened, but it seems Ross felt the Funnel could also be stolen from him.

ROSS MCLAREN AT THE ONTARIO COLLEGE OF ART

While the Funnel was getting started, Ross was teaching a filmmaking class at the Ontario College of Art (today's Ontario College of Art and Design University). This class became a vital feeder pool for the fledgling org; many of Ross's students became Funnel members who offered both youthful cachet and contributed to the circles of insiderdom that shadowed the Funnel from the very beginning. While some theatregoers were never invited for post-drink chatathons at the nearby Dominion Tavern, Ross's students were a mainstay.

ELDON GARNET: My connection with the Funnel was through Ross McLaren. I got to know him on one of the Ontario College of Art's annual bus trips to New York. There were seven busses and Ross and I were assigned to look after one of them, which was a disaster. We were more trouble on the bus than the students. I think I was smoking marijuana when we were going across the border. That's when I first met Ross, who was teaching at the college, like I was.

CAROLINE AZAR: He was everyone's favourite teacher at the Ontario College of Art. Ross McLaren, Eldon Garnet and Barbara Astman were the teacher superstars.

ELDON GARNET: "Under McLaren's direction, the Funnel was involved in the entire process of filmmaking; as important as the screening of films were the film classes and workshops. His teaching efforts began in the CEAC basement where he would run film workshops, and continue today with his active involvement in teaching film and video at a number of impressive schools in New York. It is this impulse to foster artistic talent which was at the core of the Funnel."²⁷

ROSS MCLAREN: My art jollies come largely from my teaching interactions. I love the moments that happen, and they are moments, rather than great stone templates of masterpiece works. There's something that happens when you're doing things. You're an artist, you know that. That moment when you're with the good things and they get you high. That's important, you have to cultivate that. That's the starting point. If you skip right ahead to the grant application and the show then you're missing the point. If it gives you pleasure, then you don't have to ask why.

CHRISTIAN MORRISON, Funnel member, artist: My favourite class at the Ontario College of Art was with Ross McLaren. Ross was still in his twenties, he looked like a punk, wearing a leather jacket and Doonesbury glasses and tight jeans like we all did. He looked like one of us. This was 1978-1979.



Ross McLaren and Mikki Fontana, 1985.
Photo by Annette Mangaard.



Eldon Garnet, Judith Doyle, Sharon Cook. Ross McLaren is behind the camera. Production still for Eldon Garnet's movie *Political Error* (1984), 1983. Photo by Eldon Garnet.

He would sit there, very relaxed, with one arm over the back of a chair and gas us up. As much as we all loved Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) he wasn't talking about that kind of film, he was interested in transgressive cinema. It was like sitting in a room with Lou Reed only better because this guy was much younger and cooler. We all made work and brought it into class. I don't think there were any parameters; anything went. People always felt supported, that was Ross's thing. People like Ross and John Porter were so encouraging. You could make kooky, possibly horrible films, and still feel supported.

ROSS MCLAREN: Isn't everyone an artist? I get students who are blocked, they can't do a thing, and I know it's because some art teacher slapped their hand in the third grade because they didn't draw a tree right. Everyone can draw a tree. And if they don't have anything to say, then they should just shut up. Maybe they'll make art for a little while and then they'll come back and make a little more later. It doesn't have to go on and on like a car company. If you have a careerist artist they hit on something, the critics like it, and then they keep making variations on the same thing. As soon as Claes Oldenburg hit it with those big soft sculptures he went back and destroyed all his earlier work. He wasn't interested in talking to anyone unless it was about himself, and that just made him more insecure. There's no end to it.

SHARON COOK, Funnel member, artist: Ross was a young teacher with a trademark leather jacket. He was passionate about film and open-minded. He had a relaxed teaching style but with a conscientious attitude that always supported the underdogs. There were no weekly assignments, we just made films.

ROSS MCLAREN: The idea of art education is relatively recent. Even though I've been immersed in it all these years, sometimes I have my doubts about the whole idea of art school. I think either you have it or you don't. Anyone can make art, but either you have it or you don't.

MIDI ONODERA, Funnel equipment manager, filmmaker: At the time, experimental filmmaker Ross McLaren was one of my teachers. Besides showing various classic and current experimental film works, he tried to expose us to the world beyond school. This of course included a field trip to the Funnel.

ROSS MCLAREN: I like teaching because it's direct. I do too much teaching and I have too many students, but it's a two-way thing. That's how I keep so young and vital and good looking. It's a vampire thing with students. I'm always trying to suck them dry for their vitality and life force and good ideas. It's very gratifying. I'm not that crazy about faculty meetings though. I'd rather shovel snow.

OPEN SCREENINGS

The Funnel had begun as a community portal, welcoming newcomers to share their offerings in open screenings. Even as the organization spread its wings to include foreign visitors, production workshops and distribution, for many the open screenings remained the heart of the matter.

PAUL MCGOWAN: When we were close to finishing the theatre Ross McLaren asked if I was interested in joining the core group. We each put in \$10 a month towards the rent and that became the annual membership fee of



Front row: Dave Anderson, David Bennell, Jim Anderson, Patrick Jenkins. Second row: Michaelle McLean, Anna Gronau, Frieder Hochheim, Suzanne Naughton, Bruce Elder, Peter Chapman, John Porter. Third row: Paul McGowan, Ross McLaren, Stephen Niblock, Tom Urquhart, Jim Murphy, Villem Teder, Adam Swica, January 10, 1979. Photo by John Porter.

\$120. Each of us ran, or helped run, two shows a month. I usually ran the open screenings that happened once a month, and helped out with another screening. I did a fair bit of projection, which could be a stressful job but I liked the challenge of being at the open screenings. Every imaginable kind of work came through the door.

MICHAELLE MCLEAN: I remember their popularity; a lot of people would go. I showed my work there. Anybody who had something new came around, often with films fresh from the darkroom.

EDIE STEINER: There was always an audience. The size would vary, but there would be a core group of twenty; some of the membership was very committed and came out to everything. I showed my work there for the first time. It was great to be part of a new artistic community.

PETER CHAPMAN: The open screenings were to me the most consistently interesting thing about the Funnel. I rarely saw anything that profoundly affected me but it was the liveliest aspect of the whole operation. People who never screened their work in front of an audience got that chance. It would be hard to describe to someone for whom there's always been a YouTube. Access to filmmaking equipment was hard enough; curiously, the means to present a film to an audience was even harder. Before the Funnel there had been ad hoc film nights, at Hart House, at artists' studios, but nothing regular. The Funnel provided that space and time. There were always film students from York, Ryerson or Seneca showing their film projects, that was a given. And the private auteurs, guys that made epics in super 8 who

always acted like they were the only real filmmakers in the room. One night a quiet, middle-aged man came to an open screening. He brought with him close to an hour of super 8 footage shot from his Spadina Avenue apartment balcony. Had he ever even heard of Andy Warhol or Michael Snow? I doubt it. There were many filmmakers like John Porter and Villem Teder who would quite regularly show something that they were working on. They used the open screenings as a kind of test bed for their ideas. The first time I ever saw any film work by FASTWÜRMS was at an open screening. They would do quick knock-off films that were truly funny. One night, I had nothing to show so I did a performance piece, still under the Cage-Fluxus influence. It was called *This Is The Film That I Am Showing*. I grabbed a reel of film from the projection booth, walked up in front of the screen and said to the audience, "This is the film that I am showing." I held up the reel, turned it around in my hands to show it on both sides and then sat down.

NAPO B, part of FASTWÜRMS (artist group): Every few weeks we'd make a new film, turn up at the Funnel, and show it at an open screening. Our films were so well received at the Funnel that it started a frenzy of making. In 1980 we completed *Chino Chu Chu* (1980), *Suicide Re-entry* (1980), *Universal Colour Systems* (1980), and *A Few Notes on Eradicating the Star System in American Cinema* (1980). *Chino Chu Chu* was shot at the Art Gallery of Ontario where I worked as a security guard. The gallery was closed and I asked my supervisor if we could go around the galleries and look at art. Sure, no problem, just be cool. Once we got in there we pulled out the cameras and shot footage of me walking in front of the paintings, stopping and snapping my fingers and saying, "Snap out of it," and then falling on the floor face first. The alternate footage was of Kim, Kandis and me arguing at the Leslie Spit. The movie ends with Kim cawing like a crow. Mr. Peanut (Vincent Trasov) once told us we behaved like parentless children; maybe that's why we weren't tighter with people at the Funnel. We could be abrasive even with people who were nice to us.

Suicide Re-entry shows Kandis K running down parking ramps at night dressed in a little plastic raincoat. She smashed against the big gate at the bottom of the ramp before she turned around and said her lines. We used cut-up techniques to formulate our scripts; the quotes were from Hollywood tabloids like the *National Enquirer*. Kandis would say, "That's the last time that fucking witch speaks to me," then we'd cut to a scene of



Judith Miller and John Porter (Bickford Park, Toronto, 1980) in *Cinefuge 4* by John Porter.



John Porter and his 200 films, 1984. Photo by Edie Steiner.

someone slowly bleeding in a bathtub while another person carefully tiles the wall with macaroni and bologna slices. The soundtrack featured Apollo astronauts from the first lunar mission talking with mission control about switching buttons. It was very structured and precise — one ramp, then a suicide scene, and then another ramp.

MARTHA DAVIS, Funnel member: I got involved at the Funnel in 1978, the first year it was at the King Street location. I would usually go once a month for the open screenings; for me it was the most interesting part of the schedule. You never knew what was going to happen. I would often bring something to show but I felt my work was so different from what others were making. Funnel films were highly experimental — people drew on film, ripped up the film and showed long movies without people in them. There was upside down stuff, stuff taken from a garbage bin and treated with an optical printer. My work was closer to John Porter's, who became my hero. His stop motion miniatures about daily life were quite connected to what I was doing. My favourite film of his is *Cinefuge* (1979-1980), where he swings the camera around on a fishing line.

JOHN PORTER: "Many of my films, and especially *Cinefuge*, were influenced by Sergio Leone's scene in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* when Eli Wallach runs full speed around the camera while it follows him. There is something about spinning movements and blurringly fast movements which move me when I see them. I swung a cheap, small camera around me on the end of a twelve-foot fishing line, while I stood on the spot. The line was attached to the front of the camera so it would always be aimed at me. By following the camera I could appear stationary. By standing still I could appear to be spinning. I consider this film to be a dance so I got a professional dancer — Judy Miller — as a partner. Her role was much more difficult than mine. She had to run around me as fast as possible and she had to enter and leave the perimeter of action without colliding with the camera or the line."²⁸

MUNRO FERGUSON, Funnel member: The open screenings were about audience participation. There were a lot of experimental films, but people arrived with home movies from childhood and sometimes pretty risqué stuff like homemade porn in one case — that was a funny night. I loved it when people brought random found footage they found in the garbage. Sometimes there were not particularly great student films, but I liked the fact

that everyone was welcome. Atom Egoyan brought his second short film *After Grad With Dad* (1980). He worked with a very low budget, but made it look like more than what it was, that was his knack in those days. After the Censor Board shut down the Funnel's open screenings, I organized a series of open screenings at the University of Toronto. Even though the screenings were public, university property was considered private. People from the Funnel came, as well as many others. It was definitely an offshoot of the Funnel activities.

MARC GLASSMAN

Christian Morrison was a Funnel experimentalist who worked at Pages, the city's finest bookstore, which was run by Marc Glassman, the silver-haired smiler and anecdote machine who embraced culture as an oral transmission of interlocking friendships. In later years the store became part of the city's anti-censorship crusade, and its windows were filled by Funnel regulars who brought paintings and projections. Marc himself became a one-person cultural juggernaut, programming films across the city, inspired by his forays into the strange new world of the Funnel.

MARC GLASSMAN, programmer, writer: Christian and I were out drinking with Peter Chapman. Christian could do a devastating impression of William Burroughs, and *Cities of the Red Night* had come out fairly recently. I



Christian Morrison, pool party.



Susan McKay, Nick Schefter, Marc Glassman, Martin Heath, Ted Myerscough at "The GAP" (Grange Arts & Performance) celebrating after the last of the Macadamian Film Society screenings at The Rivoli - March 15, 1985. Photo by John Porter.

was reading a book called *Six Guns and Society* that offered semiotic takes on the western. Peter suddenly said that we should do a performance piece for the Funnel's opening night in, I think, 1983. It would involve westerns and William Burroughs. Gordon W. would dress as an Indian — which he mostly did anyway — and lay down eastern rhythms on a tabla, Christian would be William Burroughs reading a Wild West section from *Cities of the Red Night*, and I would lecture from the semiotics book wearing a lab coat. Peter found a silent western and ran it backwards.

CHRISTIAN MORRISON: I had an uncanny ability to imitate William Burroughs and pretty well memorized everything he'd written. I could do Bukowski too. I loved those transgressive writers. Marc and I sat in two chairs with films running behind us. It was goofy, fun and literary.

MARC GLASSMAN: We called the piece *Cowboys, Indians and Burroughs*. I thought the performance was going well when all of a sudden Gordon decided that he was going to light his (bread) hat on fire. Some people told me later that I endeared myself to the Funnel forever because I started screaming, "You're going to burn down one of the few places in the city that we love!" as I tried to stamp out the fire. For Gordon it was all part of the performance; he kept playing his tabla as the semiotic lab technician stamped out the flames and the film rolled behind us. That was my performance debut at the Funnel.

CHRISTIAN MORRISON: Some of our shows were musical. Mark DeGuerre, Ed Lam and I would get together and project films and make noise. At the end of the cold war there was a brief apocalyptic period when everyone thought the world was going to end in a nuclear winter, so we called the group Einstein's Barbeque. We performed at the Art Gallery of Ontario and in a church on Avenue Road and at the Funnel's open screenings. We'd show super 8 collage movies of bombs going off.

MARC GLASSMAN: A couple I got to know right away was Carolyn Wuschke and Peter Chapman, who were into books, film and music, much like me. In November 1979, Carolyn came up with the idea that she would live in the Pages bookstore window for a week. She would have black and white filmstrips shot by Villem Teder behind her, she would sit at a black and white checkerboard table with a black cat and a white cat, and she would only read New Directions poetry and novels (which feature black and white

photos on their covers). Villem was a member of the Funnel and Peter was working there at the time. I was naive and didn't know how to attract media attention until we did this window and got written up by Stephen Strauss in the *Globe and Mail*.

PETER CHAPMAN: Briefly, in rare moments, I did feel as if, beyond the art-talk, there were works that pointed to a greater continuity, a richer reading of what we were. Works that in the dark did not just present shadows but the outlines of human brilliance.

MARC GLASSMAN: Carolyn and Peter invited me to the Funnel, which had recently started in their King Street East location. I thought, wow, this is amazing. This group of artists had built a theatre by themselves and had created a post-production facility so they could actually make films there. It was such a nice combination. But another thought hit me right away: how are you going to get people to come? What the Funnel was doing couldn't be more wonderful but what the hell are they doing way out on King Street hidden inside an office building? It was like being part of a club. How was anyone else going to know about any of this wonderful stuff except for me and whoever else is invited? That threw me off.

DAVID CRAIG, Film, Photography and Video Officer, Ontario Arts Council: The only thing that was unusual was that it was so far from the downtown core where everybody else was. The facility itself was fine but it did seem like it was in its own world. It felt like a frontier outpost because the rest of the alternative artworld was clustered around Queen and Spadina.

VOLUNTEERISM

Like the all-for-one efforts at Buck Lake, the Funnel ran on volunteers. Whether putting up posters, cleaning the floors, or attending the endless meetings, unpaid work was the norm. Here the "problem of labour" (its isolating alienation, disembodied mechanics and purloined profits for the ruling class) was resolved by a classless horizon of workers bent to the common ideal of an alternative cinema. Funnel members had found a community uniform in a shared architecture, a place where work and belonging were the beginnings of a new kind of hope.

PATRICK JENKINS: In December 1978 when the Funnel opened up on King Street I started going, and had a screening four months later, in March. The invitation to show came out of a casual discussion. “Do you want to do a night of your films?” From there I got involved as a member. As I recall the etiquette for becoming a member was that you had to hang out. And hang out. [laughs] This used to drive some people nuts. But you had to hang out and get to know what was happening. Don’t forget this was a theatre that had been built from scratch by a bunch of very dedicated people. I remember in the summer of 1979 I didn’t have a lot to do, I was unemployed, and so we built the office. David Bennell was in charge of the construction. Adam Swica, Tom Urquhart, Peter Chapman, Frieder Hochheim, myself and a few other people would work a little each day, and it took us all summer on and off to build it. It was all volunteer work of course.

ROSS MCLAREN: We didn’t have any money, but we had energy. The strategy was to be suspicious of state culture control. We wanted to be self-sufficient, financially independent, so that’s how it started. Everyone had to understand that it was somewhat Marxist — you got out of it what you contributed. You couldn’t just use the place as a service organization; you had to be involved in keeping it going because as you know there was a hell of a lot of work required. We were very ambitious and energetic and we

spread ourselves a little thin but we did everything. Exhibition, distribution, workshops, production, publications.

DAVID ANDERSON: Building a theatre was only the first step. It needed an organization, some kind of structure, to select the programming and present the films. The Funnel had an active membership. Once you became a member you volunteered for the various jobs like being the monthly monitor to make sure the gallery was open, to collect tickets at the door and sweep floors. We also took turns projecting the films. The film might have been poorly spliced, or insects and leaves may have been stapled to the celluloid, but it all had to go through the projector, plus you were often projecting originals. During a screening I’d hold my breath as a thick splice stuttered through the gate, or frantically try and blow away a clump of dust with a canister of compressed air (very audible in the theatre!). In spite of our best efforts films would suddenly clatter to a stop. “Quick, turn off the projector so the bulb won’t burn a hole in the jammed frame!” The theatre, pitch black. Gradually heads would turn around to see what was happening in the booth as you scrambled around. You’d stick your head out the door and say, “Just a moment, there’s a little problem.”

INSIDERS

Who belonged to the collective, and who was only there as a spectator? The line between insider and outsider was central to the organization’s sense of purpose and identity.

KATHLEEN PIRRIE ADAMS: My primary allegiance was with music culture; film was part of a broader context so I didn’t seek out the same sense of belonging within the experimental film community. But I think that it’s true that the Funnel makes a nice parallel to punk rock. Initially anyone could come and participate, but fairly quickly there was a clear sense of who was inside and who was not...

CAROLINE AZAR: The Funnel was not folksy, it was not home. You were not to make it your home because that would border on “hippie-like.” And “hippie-like” was not what the Funnel was after. So you better bring or do



Patrick Jenkins builds Funnel office, 1979. Photo by Adam Swica.

work, represent your thoughts using the medium, the more experimental and radical, the better.

MUNRO FERGUSON: There was a rebelliousness, an irreverence and humour in the films we saw and in the people who were there. There was a feeling of cohesion in the group, everyone knew each other.

JUDITH DOYLE: For me the Funnel was about a sense of community.

CHRISTIAN MORRISON: The Funnel had a very slow-moving, easy-going arts administration style. Either Ross or Michaelle McLean asked us to join and become core members. Of course we said yes, and after that we went all the time. We swept the floors and took tickets at the door.

MARTIN HEATH, projectionist: I must have gone there fairly early on and got the impression it was a cliquey group. They weren't exactly welcoming so I didn't go back for a while. In order to use the facilities you had to become a member. Let's put it this way: no one encouraged me to join.

JIM ANDERSON: The idea of the Funnel was that experimental film was fragile and small and not very well known, and had different intents than commercial or independent filmmakers. We were probably too narrow-minded, suspicious of people who wanted to use the Funnel for their own reasons.

ANNETTE MANGAARD, Funnel member: The Funnel felt friendly and energized, exciting. Avant-garde and underground. But it also felt a little cliquish. There was a core group of insiders who were special.

MARTHA DAVIS: There was an "inner sanctum" group that made decisions.

PAULETTE PHILLIPS, artist: It was a clubhouse. There was an inner circle and an outer circle. I remember being told that I couldn't join because it was a closed shop. You couldn't sign up, you had to be a member already. I remember that catch-22. Unless you were already part of the club, you couldn't become a member. I was shooting film at the time and my language was more filmic than video, but the Funnel turned me into a video artist.

CAROLINE AZAR: I had noticed a touch of elitism and perhaps snobbery, yet in hindsight it could have been shyness or trauma brought on from the many suburbs and childhood arenas most of us escaped from. After all, the

film and media work had differing styles and approaches but one thing that was consistent to my eye and ear was the documented anguish against the norms of society.

ELDON GARNET: Belonging to the Funnel didn't compromise people's work, but there was a clique there, it's inevitable. There was a soft nepotism at work, a sincere lack of criticality about what your friends were making.

ANNA GRONAU: One of the perks of being a core member (apart from having first dibs on those dreadful doughnuts and that coffee we sold) was the right to have your work shown at the Funnel. This wasn't really a problem. Most films that members made were quite short, so they could fit into group screenings. If someone had a new film, everyone would already know about it because we were also a collective of filmmakers. I don't think members would actually have to apply or anything. When I was the director/programmer I always just did my best to accommodate them. When filmmakers made longer or more major works, we'd give them their own show. I didn't always like everyone's work, but I thought the principle was more important. I cringed during the odd group screening, in fact! But you know, the films that weren't perfect were generally made by filmmakers



Michaelle McLean and Anna Gronau, 1984.

who weren't all that serious about making films, so they didn't produce a lot, and being asked to show reams of work I didn't like never became a problem for me while I was programming.

DOT TUER: The only way you could join the Funnel was if you were asked by the board. It was a completely closed system. It's not unusual for artist-run centres. I was one of the chosen ones, adopted if you will. Perhaps they thought I had useful skills.

ROSABETH MOSS KANTER: "Whereas people on the outside are often only vaguely aware of their membership in social communities, people who live in a utopian community explicitly know that they do belong, what the community stands for, how it is distinguished from the outside, and who else belongs."²⁹

JIM ANDERSON: There was a perception that the Funnel was a closed group, a closed environment. We were reacting defensively. It was a bit paranoid really, thinking we would get swallowed up if we made the organization more democratic and open to everyone. The concern was that we'd get swamped by people who wanted to use the Funnel as a way of getting into Hollywood. Hollywood, Canada.

DOT TUER: I remember there being a loyal core of Funnel members, a collective of thirty people who came every week. Their dedication and sense of commitment meant that the collective functioned as a community. People affiliated with other film groups would come and go; some were involved with the Innis Film Society, or Sheridan College (Rick Hancox, Richard Kerr, Phil Hoffman). The first time I ever met [York University professor] Seth Feldman, when he was reviewing the first curatorial program I did at the Funnel, "Cache du Cinema," he intimated that he saw the Funnel collective as a kind of cult. He suggested to me that I should go to York and study film there, instead of hanging out at the Funnel, which people from the outside saw as a closed, inward-looking group. Yet, ironically, of all the artist-run centres in Canada, the Funnel was the least inward-looking and the most connected internationally through a network of film centres. In the 1980s we were the only ones who saw that as essential to our vision of who we were. Our network included centres in New York, San Francisco, London, Paris, Eastern Europe and Japan. When you travelled there was a built-in experimental community that you could hook up with.

FIRST SEASON ON KING STREET 1978–1979

Ross McLaren programmed forty-three screenings in the first season at the new theatre, a staggering sum. There were eighteen solo shows by men and two by women, eleven open screenings and a bevy of group shows often pulled from the shelves of the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre. The year's programming was a mix of canonical giants like Mike Snow (also a Funnel member) and James Benning, with playground nights of performance and make-believe (one evening featured avant wedding movies under the title "Almost Valentine's Day Screening"). It was serious fun at a relentless pace for audiences starved to see difficult movies. A programmer's dream. People were so eager that nearly anything could light up the screen and be met with gracious curiosity.

KATHLEEN PIRRIE ADAMS: This morning I was thinking about what remains of the idea of the alternative. I remember how exciting it was to participate in and discover hidden parts of the culture that had very distinct purposes, but whose delivery vehicles were mysterious.



Ross McLaren and Anna Gronau in Funnel office, October 1980. Photo collage by John Porter.

PATRICK JENKINS: There were two screenings a week, mainly by American and English filmmakers and us. Exhibition was the focus in those early days. I went to every screening; most members did. I liked Fellini a lot, as well as Surrealism and the films of Maya Deren, and I thought experimental film leaned in that direction. Little did I realize that wasn't the case!

ADAM SWICA: I went to almost every show. The core group was there all the time: Ross, Anna Gronau, Michaelle McLean, David Bennell, Stephen Niblock, the Anderson brothers. We took turns projecting; there was a sort of "duty roster." Other people would come and go.

JUDITH DOYLE: It didn't matter what was on, you would just go.

NAPO B: It was great meeting Kenneth Anger. We watched *Scorpio Rising* (1963) and realized how rough and tumble it was; hearing him talk about film really fuelled us. I also clearly remember the Beth B films from NYC being shown at the Funnel, films that also had that FASTWÜRMS manic energy. Watching movies at the Funnel really helped; it was a very New York kind of place — when you were inside you didn't think you were in Toronto anymore. It was a very east side thing; it seemed remote and quiet, anonymous. You were free to become anything you wanted to be when you were on the east side of the city.



Potluck dinner party and mailing at Jim Anderson and John Porter's studio on December 19, 1980. Anna Gronau, Amber Sansom, Jim Anderson, Mikki Fontana, David Bennell, Peter Chapman, Villem Teder, Caroline Wuschke, Patrick Jenkins. Photo by John Porter.



Takahiko Iimura at the Funnel, November 3, 1979. Photo by John Porter.

ROSS MCLAREN: We took the most rigorous, formally difficult films with no apologies and screened them. The sense then was that you couldn't show those films, you have to kid-glove the audience, give them popcorn and cartoons first. But we went hardcore right from the start, and at the same time did a lot of posterizing and got the word out. We received a lot of publicity in the first few years, we were hot, and I was quite proud of that. There were good crowds and we didn't compromise. Much like CEAC before us, we probably pissed some people off who were used to having the arena to themselves. We were part of an international exhibition circuit and also worked to get our work shown abroad.

CHRISTIAN MORRISON: They showed such great work, if you missed an evening it was crazy, you'd kick yourself. I just loved James Benning's films and I loved meeting him. He was a fatherly, awesome genius. He framed these beautiful landscapes and gave you time to see them and then an ice cream truck would roll through the frame creating strange narratives. I found out that he had a daughter who made films and I thought, oh god, how wonderful, she would be a perfect girlfriend for me. If only she wasn't gay. [laughs] After the screenings people would hang out in the gallery area. You could go up to someone like Benning and say, "Oh wow, I really loved that," or offer some asshole-ish comment that people always make about films to filmmakers, and then Ross would announce that we were all going to the Dominion Tavern. We'd drink out of stubby bottles until last call and go home to Parkdale. Magical times. It didn't matter if you were a person of colour, or a guy from the Ottawa Valley. Audiences hung on your film, watched it right to the end, and after people would talk to you. From 1978-1979, those were the halcyon days of early artist-run collectives. The feeling of collective spirit charged the receptivity of audiences. You couldn't tell why the room was full of people. There might be a blizzard outside and there would be a couple of students showing work, but everyone would come out and watch. There was such energy and attention. Of course we didn't have a TV back then, you couldn't rent videos or troll the Internet. I think the Funnel was a very romantic place. I can't think of anyone more beautiful than Anna or more handsome than David Bennell, they were god-like to a young student.

THE POLITICS OF MATERIALS

At the Funnel, the underground movie theatre was reimagined as a new workplace. The labour audiences were going to perform there would refine the art of attention and allow newly patient gazes to dwell on the apparatus of cinema itself. Within the apparatus, audiences would find the codes that underlay capitalist social relations. The key to it all was attention.

ELLIE EPP, filmmaker: Technically, duration is something quite particular — when you keep seeing something that doesn't change very much you stabilize into it, you shift, you get sensitive, you cross a threshold, something happens. It's useful for anyone to learn to do that. It's an endless source of pleasure and knowledge. And yet it's often what's hardest for people who don't know it as a convention. It's the central sophistication of experimental filmmakers. We all had to learn it. We probably all remember what film we learned it from. I learned it from *Hotel Monterey* (1972), which Babette Mangolte shot for Chantal Akerman. Almost an hour, extremely slow. I made the crossing. It was ecstatic. What it is, is this: deep attention is ecstatic in itself.

ROSS MCLAREN: Films by artists are not strictly for entertainment, or selling tickets at the theatre door. They're involved in an analysis of what film is about. When I started making films I tried to get rid of all preconceived notions of what film is. Think of it as a piece of acetate that is covered with light sensitive emulsion, OK? You have this little box that you can run around and gather light with. If you start with that notion of what film is, then you'll develop new possibilities for meaning.

DOT TUER: The glue of the Funnel was an almost messianic belief in a certain kind of structuralist cinema.

CATHERINE RUSSELL, writer, professor: "The term 'structural film' was introduced by P. Adams Sitney in a *Film Culture* article in 1969 and institutionalized as a chapter in his seminal book *Visionary Film* in 1974. Sitney used the term to designate a group of films in which 'shape is the primal impression of the film.'"³⁰

JIM ANDERSON: The structural films that came out of New York were a strong influence at the Funnel. P. Adams Sitney's book *Visionary Film*: is



Malcolm LeGrice from the UK and the projectors for his film performance in the Funnel gallery, 507 King St. E., Toronto, December 14, 1979. (Hand-manipulated photo). Photo by John Porter.



Dot Tuer, Daniel Steiner, Yann Beauvais (in town from France for his screening at the Funnel), Jim Anderson, and Renate Steiner in Jim Anderson/Dot Tuer/John Porter's studio, November 25, 1983. Photo by John Porter.

that what we were? Sitney tried to sum up the different styles of experimental film, and it all wound up with structuralism. Structural film was a New York influence. It determined what was legitimate, what was the correct thing to make.

DAVID MCINTOSH, Funnel director: If you read Malcolm Le Grice, his notion of structuralist cinema is that you take up and deconstruct the apparatus and transform it into content. A light bulb shining in a room for ten days is a work of structuralist cinema, a work of light and time. The intent was to have an active audience, to escape the suspension of disbelief and bring into awareness a whole set of industrial relationships that underpin traditional cinema. Potentially, there is a utopic moment of liberation when the active viewer participates in the co-construction of meaning, as opposed to industrial cinema where you lie back, it washes over you and you leave. You have to be passive to be part of that industrial structure.

PETER GIDAL, filmmaker, writer: "Each film is not only structural but also structuring."³¹

MALCOLM LE GRICE, filmmaker, writer: "Structuralist art can be thought of as the material formation of experience through the explicit incursion into the thing (event) observed by the mode of observation. In this sense, structuralist art does not *express* experience derived from the world; it *forms* experience in the trace of a dialectic between perceiver and perceived."³²

PETER GIDAL: “The structuring aspects and the attempt to decipher the structure and anticipate/recorrect it, to clarify and analyze the production-process of the specific image at any specific moment are the root concern of Structural/Materialist film.”³³

YANN BEAUVAIS, filmmaker, writer, programmer: In each location, the filmmaker experiences a different film as the context modifies its reception. Some films require large screens, others more intimate surfaces. The Funnel was an exception, not the only one, but one of them, for which the question of projection was an important formal aspect of the film work. It seems that the questions structural/materialism was addressing to the conditions of reception were not forgotten. It was always possible to have multiple screens or expanded forms at the Funnel without the usual pain in the ass smile for an OK. These possibilities were very positive: it meant that in this place there was not only one way to think about films, that the experience of making and showing experimental films was also understood as something challenging the “usual” business. This problem reappeared within the artworld with the standardization of the moving image installation.

PIL+GALIA KOLLECTIV, artists: “The act of splitting reality into a ‘no longer present’ object and a representation of that object is, according to structuralist theory, equal to the economic division of labour that distances the commodity from the process of its production through circulation and exchange. Following a shift of interest from industrial manufacturing to the operations of the creative industry, many neo-Marxists, from Adorno to Debord, saw films as a new battlefield for the souls of passive spectators who fell under the illusory spell of the moving image.”³⁴

CAROLINE AZAR: The content of all the good work we’re talking about emanates from a lack of trust. You don’t trust the constructs: parent, government, bank, school or hospital. Why should you? Every single song Fifth Column wrote, and every single film I saw at the Funnel always implied, “I don’t trust this.” Heteronormativity, homonormativity — all that bullshit. That is the angry side. If you’re not angry, what’s the point? The other side is a celebration of the simple, and John Porter is a great example; his films are like pop art. He looks at something very small and follows it. The same impulse led us to write a song based on the rhythm of a broken washing

machine. It’s either pure anger or observation about the minimal. Those were the trends I noticed.

DAVID MCINTOSH: One of the things that still resonates with me about the Funnel is its insistence that everyone could make a film. The aim was to get the technology into as many people’s hands as possible. If you get technology into everybody’s hands, that will produce innovation. Now there’s a word that has undergone changes over the years. In the mid-80s, innovation was about radical social change, now it’s about what product you can contribute to Google...There might have been a shared history of cinematic avant-gardes that we had in common, but we insisted on a distributed power. You put the tools into as many hands as possible and have a dialogue with experimental cinema and push it somewhere else.

DIRK DEBRUYN, filmmaker: I had to work in a space where questions of power were evident. Eventually I gained access to the powerful engines of coercion and persuasion called editing machines. I have spent years of my life sitting at an editing machine running pictures over and over, stilling the image, seeing it backwards. I want to give this experience to the viewer, to communicate this feeling of constructive self-affirmation, putting the audience in the empowering position of the editor.

Canada, like my home country Australia, is in a more marginal cultural position than the US and UK. My feelings about Le Grice and Gidal are changing. These people have become the canon, but they produced more aestheticized and academic arguments for these forms of cinema than similar developments in Serbia, for example. In Canada and Australia we are doubly disempowered because we are at the margins of the empire — there is something in that that makes the Funnel even more important. I think it is good to mention Ellie Epp; there is an opportunity here to argue for a particularly Canadian brand of resistance. Perhaps the Funnel was also tempered by Innis’ tensions between the forces of space and time, and this need to hold onto duration as an act of holding onto civil society — I think George Grant was into that as well, wasn’t he?

The interesting thing is that you intimate that the Funnel sits at this cusp of transformation, and that at the margins of empire it produces invisible but different possibilities than those resisting at the centre. The Funnel creates a double negative, participating in a communal resistance, which is itself a marginal activity.

DAVID MCINTOSH: I think people at the Funnel really did believe that we will do this work and we will prevail. That one day people would wake up and say Julia Roberts films suck, I want to go and see a Michael Snow movie. I think we really believed we were changing the core of representation. It was a project of radical social change through representation.

MICHAEL SNOW AND JOYCE WIELAND

The Funnel could stand on the shoulders of its famous primal couple Mike and Joyce, and beyond them, on the traditions of avant-scenes past. Max Weber defined tradition as “the authority of the eternal yesterday.” The movie avant-gardes that the Funnel lay claim to by embracing historical screenings alongside movies made in the past month, imbued it with legitimacy and authority, burnishing proceedings with the aura of history. Even if members were just making it up as they went along, they were part of a lineage of experimentation and improvisation, they were old and new at the same time.

JUDITH DOYLE: When David McIntosh or I show films like Mike Snow’s *Wavelength* (45 minutes, 1967) to students and drag the projector into the classroom and watch what happens to them, it’s unbelievable. They have almost no experience of watching something for that long without a break. The sense of time is almost brutal, you feel you’ve committed an act of hostility. Students feel gobsmacked, whacked in the face with time. But without understanding that kind of time-space, I don’t think you can



Wavelength by Michael Snow, 1967.



Joyce Wieland in *A and B in Ontario* by Joyce Wieland and Hollis Frampton, 1967.

understand the Funnel. The sense of shared duration was part of what created community.

MICHAEL SNOW, artist: I was working on *Wavelength* in 1966 and finished it in January 1967. It took a couple of weeks to shoot, but I spent a year making notes. A number of previously separated things tried to find a way to resolve themselves. I worked on the Walking Women exclusively from 1962 to 1967 and I was looking for a way out. *Wavelength* was part of that — it was a heavy thing in my life before it got seen or anything. I was becoming more and more interested in trying to make a kind of temporal shape so what you felt in seeing a film had something equivalent to a sculptural experience. I knew I wanted an extended zoom in a closed space, and it took me another year to figure out how to do that. This film is a continuous zoom which takes forty-five minutes to go from its widest field to its smallest and final field. It was shot with a fixed camera from one end of an eighty-foot loft, shooting the other end, a row of windows and a street. Thus the setting and the action which takes place there are cosmically equivalent. The room (and the zoom) are interrupted by four human events including a death. The sound on these occasions is sync sound — music and speech occurring simultaneously with an electronic sound, a sine wave, which goes from its lowest rate (fifty cycles per second) to its highest (12,000 cps) in forty minutes. It is a total glissando, while the film is a crescendo and a dispersed spectrum — so the film as a whole attempts to utilize the gifts of both prophecy and memory, which only film and music have to offer.

DOT TUER: What made the Funnel different than video art, which was a new art form, was that there was an intergenerational sensibility. This was an avant-garde continuing in an avant-garde tradition, and Canada had a great role in this lineage. I think that was important. Did people like Michael Snow and Joyce Wieland, both members of the Funnel, set the agenda? No. But they were supportive. They weren’t influential but they were elders, people to look up to. They made fabulous films, they were famous.

MUNRO FERGUSON: When Michael Snow and Joyce Wieland moved to New York they stayed with my family while they were looking for a place to live. I was about a year and a half old at this point, I was babbling away but the sound didn’t make any sense. Mike came up with this idea that I was the reincarnation of a Tibetan Lama. They would read the classified ads to me and ask which apartment they should get. “Does this loft sound

good to you?" I would make a lot of noise and they would say, "Oh yes, very profound." Apparently Mike would do things like pick up a spoon and say, "Fork, fork," trying to teach me the wrong words for things. He was mischievous like that. When I was a kid I would be taken to their film screenings. Joyce and Mike were people I knew really well. I would visit their loft and Joyce would take me to the Museum of Modern Art and show me paintings and talk about them even though I was seven years old. It was pretty amazing to get their perspectives on the world. I thought filmmaking meant you were supposed to hold the camera upside down. I thought comic books were art. I realize now that they had very unusual views but at the time it felt normal. I thought making experimental films was what everyone did; it was certainly what I wanted to do. I saved up my ten cents a week allowance for a year so I could buy a super 8 camera. I didn't want candy, I just wanted to make movies. Both Joyce and Mike have had a really good influence on art practice in Canada. When I look at the Canadian art scene and how strongly avant-garde it remains, I think they gave courage to the rest of the visual artworld, particularly the generations that came after them. They had a big influence at the Funnel. While there were other important artists like Stan Brakhage, Mike and Joyce were members and lived in town. They helped legitimize the place and encouraged everyone to go as far as we could.

WYNDHAM WISE: The underground had a disrespect for authority. A willingness to push the boundaries and to bring graphic sex into the cinema. It was about pushing film and video as far as they could go. It was all part of a community vibe and at the centre were Snow and Wieland, they were the major stars. It can only be described as a downtown elite.

JIM ANDERSON: At the Funnel there was a sense that we wanted to be like New York. New York was the underground, and then there was another place, the Funnel, that was imitating the first underground. So what's that? Does that become the same thing or different?

ANNA GRONAU: I really loved the materialist aspect of Michael Snow's films. They seemed to offer a way to branch out into different things. I think his work inspired other filmmakers at the Funnel. Joyce Wieland's films always excited me, too. I'd say that Joyce and Mike were equally important to me even before I was making films myself. I loved the way Joyce was political and personal at the same time, and the way Mike was minimal/formal and spiritual.

KEITH LOCK: Today it's hard to imagine the intellectual environment Mike was working in. I remember being on the set shooting one of the scenes in *Rameau's Nephew*. We were in a really seedy hotel room, above a tavern. Mike had hired a professional cinematographer. I don't recall the elements of the scene, but I remember the total lack of respect he received from the "professional" whose attitude was that Mike was a complete amateur who didn't know what he was doing. Mike is very clear about what he wants and does not suffer fools lightly. I recall there was a clash on this set. The cinematographer's condescending attitude was pretty common in those days because there were no film school graduates working in the "industry." In fact, Jim Anderson and I had been in the very first university production class ever taught in Canada. I can still remember Mike's reaction one day when I brought up the topic of the National Film Board. He said



Audience from the first private show of Michael Snow's *Wavelength*. Standing: Ken Jacobs, Mary Mitchell, Robert Cowan, George Kuchar, Shirley Clarke, Mr. and Mrs. Zemmo. (Sitting, some cropped out): Ken Kelman, Richard Foreman, Amy Taubin, Joyce Wieland, Michael Snow, 1967.

indignantly, “Oh they really know how to make films! They know it all!” I believe, when he first came back to Canada, he had taken a meeting with an NFB producer, but his ideas had not been received very favourably. For his part, Mike thought the entire notion that film was an industry was totally ridiculous. As far as he was concerned, film was Art with a capital A.

Sometime after the *Rameau's Nephew* hotel shoot, Mike was looking for a new cinematographer. I think Jim Murphy suggested Jim Anderson and me as possible candidates. I remember showing him *Work, Bike and Eat* (1972) at the Filmmakers' Co-op. He dutifully watched the film and I got the impression that he thought it was okay in a conventionally narrative way. We were really eager to work with Mike. I remember blurting out, “But this is not what we're into now...we want to make different work.” In the early 70s the term “experimental” wasn't totally accepted by artist-filmmakers. Mike used to call the kind of films he made “underground films.” He didn't warm to the “experimental” term at first because he thought it carried the connotation that the filmmaker was merely experimenting, and not really serious. In the 70s I shot quite a bit of film with Mike. Besides *Rameau's Nephew*, I was the cinematographer for *Presents* (1981), an installation piece called *Two Sides to Every Story* (1974), and the photographic book *Cover to Cover* (1975).

I fondly remember working and hanging out at the house Mike and Joyce shared with their cat Dwight on Summerhill Avenue. The house was near the railway tracks and trains would slowly rumble past from time to time. Sometimes Mike would take me down to the basement to show me models of new sculptures. They would often have visitors and I remember meeting Pierre Théberge and chatting with a First Nations activist who was trying to stop the Great Whale dam project in Labrador. Sometimes we would just watch TV. They sort of took me into their world. Mike insisted that I just call him Mike, and explained certain art ideas in an unpretentious and direct way. They were both very open and sometimes they would ask me about Chinese things. I remember Joyce used to read the *I Jing* (*I Ching*), as did a lot of artists at the time, and Mike once quoted the first words in the *Dao De Jing* (*Tao Te Ching*) to me — “The eternal path does not have a name” — remarking on how profound that line is. Mike once told me that watching films was like going to church in the sense that you sit with a lot of other people and think deeply about things.

ANNA GRONAU

Born in Montreal in 1951, Anna Gronau moved as a teenager to Toronto, where she became a central figure in the city's turbulent fringe film scene. When Ross stepped down as the director/programmer the reins were handed over to his then-partner Anna from 1980-1982. She has written and lectured tirelessly on feminism and the avant-garde, touring work and championing marginal expressions. She was a fixture at the King Street location, her voice pitched a note higher than it might have been, which gave her a winning patina of moral authority and vulnerability. Even her smile seemed serious. Her memories of the longest years of her life require a luxury of space to unfold.

ANNA GRONAU: I was hired initially as office manager and I did that for about two years, before I became director. As I recall, we made an application to the Canada Council — at their invitation, actually. As I mentioned, there were a number of us who were around when the Filmmakers' Co-op folded, and I think the Council liked the fact that we were separate from CEAC, and at least in the same medium (film, I mean) as the Co-op, so they could re-allocate some of their budget to us. They told us we should apply.

One of the things our initial Funnel group decided was that we would need to have someone do office stuff. Ross and I had just started dating around that time and discussed the idea of working together. It seemed like a good solution for everyone, so the board approved my hiring. As far as me becoming the director/programmer, the two contributing factors were that Ross didn't want to be programmer any longer and that I obviously had more experience than anyone else with how the place was run — especially with budget-related things and grant applications. I probably seemed like the best candidate. I don't remember if the board looked for anyone else or not. I don't think so, though. Again, I'm sure that Ross and I both thought it was a good idea. He was teaching at the time and what with that plus all the work at the Funnel, he wasn't getting much time to do his own work. I may be wrong, but I think Ross stayed on as president of the board and equipment manager. And that's when my friend Michaelle McLean became office manager.

Shortly after the Funnel's establishment on King Street, new government investment rules encouraged the growth of a homegrown film industry. Usually that meant American productions would come here to get various financial breaks hiring local crews, but it also meant that, finally, arts councils



Anna Gronau, 1984. Photo by Edie Steiner.

weren't being asked to fund absolutely everything made on film. The big boys could actually pay their own way and this left a bit of a void. We made a lot of noise about the fact that Ontario Arts Council juries seemed to be largely composed of industry and/or aspiring industry types, and after a few years, we managed to convince them to institute a separate jury for experimental film. Ross had always complained that the Distribution Centre didn't promote experimental film enough, and that was why he had wanted to distribute at the Funnel. But the complaints started to be taken a lot more seriously once we had the platform of our own space and funding, and after a while, a separate experimental film officer was hired at the Ontario Arts Council.

There was never any problem finding work to show. For international shows we sometimes used a fabulous publication called *The Film and Video Makers Travel Sheet*. It was published on a regular basis by the film department of the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh. It was a clearinghouse for artists and exhibitors to find each other. There was a real circuit in those days. The only way you could get your film shown was by travelling with it, so you'd post an announcement that you had a new film and wanted to go on the road. Exhibitors would also post information about their programming. So we used that quite often. After a while we got a good reputation and received lots of requests for shows. There were many more than we could possibly have ever shown, and we were having screenings at least two evenings per week! We got many submissions from Canadian filmmakers and we did our best to show their work. There was no quota, but it was a priority. I don't recall if there was any stipulation from funders that we should do that, but it wouldn't seem odd if there had been. Even if there was a rule about it, I'm pretty sure we would have tried to show local and Canadian work anyway — it was in our best interests as filmmakers, after all, to build a profile for homegrown talent.

We were also something of a community resource for the arts. Sometimes we'd get requests from various people to present curated shows at the Funnel. For instance, Vito Acconci came to town to do something with another artist-run gallery, so we were asked if his films could be shown/sponsored by the Funnel. (I think that one was under Michaelle's aegis.) Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1979) was shown at the Funnel, co-sponsored with another group. We did a number of shows in co-sponsorship with the AGO, and so on. Toward the end of my tenure, I was really interested in trying to show more work by women, particularly in the context of feminism, so I'd try to use whatever contacts I had to curate shows that explored those issues.

YANN BEAUVAIS: The different types of programs at the Funnel were very attractive not only because they were international in inclination, but also because of a curatorial emphasis on women filmmakers. The exhibition of gay and lesbian work, along with an emphasis on a diversity of Canadian scenes made the Funnel a place that you had to visit if you were interested in contemporary film culture. At that time, Toronto's scene seemed very vivid and much more established than the one in France.

ART GALLERY

Many of the Funnel's core members did not begin as filmmakers, but as painters, drawers, musicians, photographers. In the spirit of the club's ambitious, DIY, can-do spirit, the shabby beer-soaked lobby, a pre-screening gathering point for audiences, was redubbed an art gallery and began to feature exhibitions by members and invited guests.

JUDITH DOYLE: The Funnel was more than a screening facility; it was a distribution centre, a workshop zone, a place where artist-residencies were conducted. It offered a wide array of training programs, it was the centre of a healthy zine culture and it had a gallery that showed some remarkable projects.

MICHAELLE MCLEAN: Anna Gronau and I turned the Funnel lobby into a gallery. I remember the art collective FASTWÜRM (Kim Kozzi and Napoleon Brousseau) did an installation involving chocolate.

NAPO B: A year later we did another installation at the Funnel called *Fish-hooks to You*. I was still living at 2 Berkeley, around the corner from the Funnel. On Eastern Avenue at Berkeley there was a warehouse that made cake toppings. Chocolate chips and marinated cherries would arrive in forty-five gallon drums. One night I found a drum of chocolate, so I shoved it on its side and rolled it to my studio where it sat for months. When we had an opportunity to build a set at the Funnel I thought, why don't we just grab stuff from our studio and the halls of the building and bring it down there and spread it out? Then we'll put up the white plastic (you used to buy this ten-foot-wide plastic) and once it was hung it would create a beautiful effect. It was a quick way of taking over a space. Light could go through it,

but it wasn't translucent. We spray painted all kinds of tags on the walls, then Kim and Martin Stock and I spent a whole night slathering everything in chocolate.

MICHAELLE MCLEAN: They painted all the furniture with chocolate and it smelled like heaven for the first two days. And then for the next three weeks we gagged on the smell as the sun came out and warmed the room. They had such fabulous energy and made installations with super 8 films, so they were a natural to be in the gallery.

EDIE STEINER: In 1982 I had a solo show in the gallery and a screening to launch it. In the gallery I showed photographs of music personalities at the time, including the all-women band Fifth Column and other local artists. I was transitioning from portraits to urban objects. The gallery was a great space because it was a gathering point for conversations at intermission or after the show. It was a very social environment, and we sold beer.

MICHAELLE MCLEAN: I think the feeling about the gallery was, let's do it because we want to. We weren't going to be constrained. The artist-run centre movement was in full swing by then, and we all felt that if it wasn't invented yet, we'd invent it. We were told that what we were doing



David Anderson in front of his show *Tenderness* at the Funnel Gallery, 1979.
Photo by David Anderson.

(experimental film) wasn't art, and found that the galleries weren't interested in it, so we decided to just build our own damn gallery and theatre. FASTWÜRMS had that kind of cowboy energy as well. I had a couple of exhibitions of my paintings and collages. Ric Amis had a show of his 35mm still photographs that had been buried in the ground, and then dug up and printed, microbes and all. Rebecca Baird was a Métis artist who worked with FASTWÜRMS and she had a show involving Rice Krispie cacti that stayed up a long time.

JUDITH DOYLE: I think that some of the art exhibitions were equally transient. I'm thinking of Rebecca Baird's installation at the Funnel that re-worked western motifs using cacti made out of Rice Krispies. It began to fall apart right away; people ate it between screenings. It was somehow live and ephemeral even though it stood in the gallery.

ANNA GRONAU: Artists like FASTWÜRMS did installations in the gallery that would be accompanied by screenings of their films in the theatre. I think we did have a gallery committee, but because we were a pretty small group there was a lot of discussion and collaboration, so programming was consistent between the two spaces.

NAPO B: We built two movie sets in the Funnel Gallery. The first installation was called *Be My Magnet* and that was for a film I was doing about an alien. It began with a twelve-by-eighteen-foot painting called *Decade Decay* that covered an entire wall of the gallery. In front of it was a red dance floor made with a piece of red cardboard and fifty coats of paint. Then we built a little couch, and Lena Spoke who worked for Malabar (costume house) made an alien costume based on *Close Encounters of the Whatever Kind*. It was the bubble-headed guy with long fingers. I put up a white plastic curtain around the set that ran from floor to ceiling and cut UFO-shaped peepholes into the plastic so you could watch the alien. The show's opening doubled as a film shoot. The audience was on one side, while we filmed from both sides of the curtain. Inside, the alien is waving at everyone while on a loudspeaker a commentator announces a draw to spend an evening with our guest, the alien. We spoofed on Kenneth Anger's film *Fireworks* (1947) because the alien had a huge dick with a sparkler firing from it. Everyone had tickets, but there was no winning ticket.

OPENINGS

Each Funnel season began with a summoning of the membership. Everyone was asked to contribute a work, and these were usually custom-made for the show. Each programming season was announced with a screening calendar that saw local movies mixed with programs by visiting artists.

ANNA GRONAU: We tried to have members' group shows at least once a year. A few times we picked a theme and provided everyone with a roll or two of super 8 film. The results were really fun.

JUDITH DOYLE: Every September at the beginning of the season, members were given three-minute cartridges of super 8 film. The films they shot were compiled for the opening night screening.

ANNA GRONAU: We also had a lot of visiting filmmakers. Typically, there were two or three guests each month, but we had no money for hotels and so they stayed with members, often with Ross and me. Later, when Ross and I stopped living together, visitors frequently stayed with me. Sometimes I'd clear out and let them have my place to themselves. My cat, Napaloni, developed a meaningful relationship with Kenneth Anger that way. And yes, it was a wonderful way to get to know people. We tried hard to be good hosts to our visitors. Because they weren't being paid much, we'd feed them and buy them beers after the show. Sometimes we'd take them sightseeing. Happily, we also received a fair amount of reciprocated hospitality that way.



Opening of *Be My Magnet* by FASTWÜRMS, Funnel Gallery, Feb. 14, 1980.



Invocation of My Demon Brother by Kenneth Anger, 1969.



Kenneth Anger's Halloween show at the Funnel, October 31, 1981. Photo by Edie Steiner.

Kathryn Elder, who was a film librarian, did an excellent series of historical films for several years. And of course there were always the monthly open screenings. I liked Michael Snow's work a lot, but Paul Sharits' stuff didn't do it for me all that much. Nor was I ever a fan of Stan Brakhage's work. We did have P. Adams Sitney at the Funnel as a co-sponsored program with the AGO, but even though he drew a crowd, I wasn't really all that interested in what he had to say. It seemed to be old already. As far as the "older generation" of filmmakers went, Kenneth Anger was a filmmaker whose work I loved. Does he count as a white male formalist? His work was sensual, transcendently so, I think. And transgressive in its own quiet way. I liked Owen Land's work, too. He wasn't all that much older than we were, but he was part of the "canon." His work seemed a lot more youthful than some of the other white guys. It was funny and inventive, and formally it was much more connected to popular culture.

OWEN LAND

On October 12, 1983, American artist Owen Land came through town. He was one of those anointed by P. Adams Sitney as an avant torchbearer so the room was packed. He sat on a small chair at the front of the theatre and announced excitedly that he had rediscovered a piece of his own writing, a poem in fact, recently scribbled out on foolscap, and that it contained



Owen Land at the Funnel, November 19, 1982. Photo by Michaelle McLean.



Thank You Jesus for the Eternal Present by Owen Land, 1973.

the word "funnel." Wait, did he say he was going to read a poem? Poetry? Owen proceeded to recite a long text at rapid speed that most found thoroughly mystifying, but he did it with such high voltage verve that everyone listened as if it mattered. He showed his strange, beautiful films and then the lights went up and no one said a word. This was not unusual at the Funnel, but Owen had no way of knowing that. Visibly angry, he gathered up his little chair and planted it backasswards near the front row, looking something like an avant-garde movie gunslinger. Then he crossed his arms and announced, "I've come all this way, and I'm not leaving until I take some questions!" More awkward silence. At last my fellow student Carl Brown raised his hand and ventured, "What film stock did you use in the movie with the woman and the car?" Carl was referring to a film that begins as an abstract, high contrast, black and white Rorschach, and then loops through generations of copies, each one revealing a bit more of the original picture. At last we could see that the picture we hadn't been seeing was a car showroom with bathing beauty adornments. Land named this film Thank You Jesus for the Eternal Present (1973), because, as it turned out, he was a Christian, and vitally concerned with the Christian conversion experience, which his movies were designed to emulate and provoke. What was the artist's reply to Carl's probe? "I didn't think we asked questions like that anymore." Another loud silence ensued as awkwardness and hostility radiated across the room. As usual, I was glad I had picked a seat near the back.

TALK HABITS

At the Funnel, many were drawn by the allure of a picture large enough to swallow language itself. The mark of a film's seriousness could be measured via its emphasis on the visual, its eschewal of language, its almost infantile recall of texture and prelinguistic sensation. As the Brit psychologist/aphorism machine Adam Philips notes, "The sane adult is always smuggling his childhood into the future, refashioning his childhood pleasures as legitimate adult interests."³⁵ The privileging of the haptic, along with the suspension of language's analytical judgments, was key to the state of radical curiosity promoted by fringe media.

Newly arrived at the present via a cinema that aimed to "bring its audience to its senses," the Funnel offered different takes on language, from the famous silence of the avant-garde to late night talk fests at nearby beer parlours.

ANNA GRONAU: Many in the Funnel cohort held a deep suspicion of intellectuals — people who told the working class families they grew up in that it was wrong to want the goodies the middle class had. International struggles toward a classless society were concepts that intellectuals used. Many of my friends' fathers had been on strike when we were kids in Hamilton, and we all knew the deprivations that had caused. The families knew about unfairness in their bones, but they were damned if they weren't going to buy consumer goods when that wage settlement finally came through. It's like the punk bands that discovered the plug had been pulled on Crash 'n' Burn just because the boys upstairs didn't like the fact that they wanted record deals. Fancy talk — from bosses, or from university-educated socialists — wasn't something that would lead anywhere useful or fulfilling, and it was more likely to be turned against you than for you. There was also, I think, until the early 80s, a kind of taboo about getting too theoretical amongst artists of all stripes. It had to do with what people understood about art. As New Painting and postmodernism caught hold, Christina Ritchie put together a series of lectures called "Talking: A Habit" (1983) at the Rivoli that were later published in *Parallelogramme*.³⁶ The lecture series was supposed to get people to acquire the habit of talking about art and I think it surely did. There was a strong feminist undertone to this, and the series included a lecture by Philip Monk that alienated a lot of people in seeming to dismiss the work of some local male artists. I was also asked

to give a lecture. I'd never done anything like that. I read a ton of books to make myself feel/seem smarter and made my arms numb with writing and typing. I was shaking with fear when I finally stood up to talk, but I wasn't laughed off the stage. These details aren't important historical facts, but I just wanted to get across the fact that talking was *not* a habit, and there were social, political and cultural reasons for it.

PHILIP MONK, writer, curator: Presentations in Toronto are invariably followed by an awkward silence before somebody starts up a discussion. In general there isn't a lot of participation by the audience. The audience doesn't seem to be able to carry the discourse, or is too anxious about their own lack of authority. I think it's endemic to Toronto; whether it's endemic to audiences in general I don't know. There's always been a lack of discourse in Toronto, though there are brief moments of efflorescence when it happens.

GEOFF PEVERE, writer, programmer: "Discussions following screenings are an integral and even crucial part in the total appreciation of the viewing experience of experimental cinema. The films are usually conceived, financed, shot, edited and distributed by one individual, so the presence of the artist at the presentation of the work can make for a lively and valuable exercise in demystification...The presence of the filmmakers also allows the viewer to play an active, participatory role in the event."³⁷



Dot Tuer, David McIntosh, New Year's Eve, 1990. Photo by Judith Doyle.



Funnel Painting/Cleaning Party: David McIntosh, Michaelle McLean, Sharon Boase, Villem Teder, Ross McLaren, Ian Cochrane, Martha Davis, Peter Gress, September 16, 1984. Photo by John Porter.

DOT TUER: I felt like I was in charge of asking the questions at the Funnel. I had my role. If questions were being asked they often sounded like this: “In the third frame of the seventh minute were you using a red or a green filter on your camera?” On the other hand, if everyone asked questions like mine it would have felt like a classroom.

JUDITH DOYLE: The screenings didn’t begin and end with the films; they were reframed in late night discussions, and these conversations in turn led to collaborative productions and reconsiderations that took many forms.

ROSS MCLAREN: “We’ve begun a document library of post-screening discussions with the artists. We’re archiving members’ material, written and otherwise.”³⁸

DOT TUER: Making and screening films led to discussions and a conceptual framework, and that’s what made the Funnel a community as well as an entity.

PHILIP MONK: 1982-1984 was the high point of discourse and discussion in Toronto; there were many lectures, talks and symposiums organized within the community. It was a highly theoretical moment in contemporary art, in part because of the breaking of postmodernism around 1979. There was also a generational change within the art community, and something different was happening in art criticism because of French theory and the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin’s allegories, etc. It was a period in which New York was reasserting itself, *October* magazine was newly ascendant, so Toronto was catching up and copying again. I think the community was a bit more self-aware and self-conscious about creating itself as a community. But it was very short lived, and really ended around 1984-1985, and nothing’s picked up since. There have been decades with a paucity of talking about art in Toronto.

DOT TUER: People who prided themselves on their theoretical or intellectual frameworks saw the Funnel as anti-intellectual. I had lots of friends who asked, “Why are you there? It’s not theoretical enough.” But some of these same people couldn’t understand why I worked in the field, on the ground, running community centres in Parkdale. I like the ground, I enjoy different perspectives. As Donna Haraway writes about in her famous “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1985), I am searching for affinities and diversities, not cohesion. In a different context, Susan Buck-Morss writes about how the



Dot Tuer and Frans Hals in a detail from *Overtime Dream: Frans Hals & Friends*. Painting by Jim Anderson, 1986.

co-existence of different modes of radical vision was essential to the formation of the Soviet avant-garde. The Funnel came into being at the tail end of the Clement Greenberg days, when artists were seen but not heard.

PHILIP MONK: In the early 80s I dedicated myself to writing a history of art in Toronto, trying to deal with the lack of a history. There was a problem of history being in arrears: you can never catch up because you don’t have an older history to fall back upon — to follow or critique. There’s always been a resistance to stating, writing, establishing or proclaiming a history of art in Toronto. People constantly criticize me for my idea of a lack of history, but I don’t know why. Nothing has been synthesized, and a separate problem is the resistance to writing this history. The orthodoxy became, you can’t have a history of Toronto art if it’s not all-inclusive; you can’t have a point of view or representation that isn’t all-inclusive. And that ideal isn’t possible. Because if you write a history you have to make a representation of some sort, you have to select and value, establish lineages, chains, series, where some moments are more important than others. You can’t include everything.

ANNA GRONAU: As for history, that was never part of what I aspired to. My art education was one that thought highly of work that was an art

conservator's worst nightmare. It wasn't meant to last. Or perhaps, better put, it was meant to *not last*. The idea that you could write your own history as you went along seemed, and still does seem, ludicrous to me. It's like proposing to psychoanalyze yourself — it can't be done. There has to be some otherness, some distance involved, even if it's only the distance of time. One of the funny things about critical distance, if not historical distance, with the Funnel, was that every time someone came along who had the interest and ability to write critically about the works we were showing, they became a member! Bingo! Distance gone!

CENSORSHIP: JUST SAY NO

The darkest shadow cast across Ontario's media communities in the 1980s was censorship, particularly when Mary Brown ruled from 1980-1986. The new head of the Censor Board turned out to be a charismatic, media-charmed crusader who lived to see her name in print. She was personally going to ensure that Ontario would not slip into depravity by keeping the sight of unwanted blowjobs away from the province's collective imagination.

The Censor Board seized upon the arts community as a whole new territory where they could project their reach. Soon they busted A Space gallery and seized equipment, and threatened Trinity Square Video, which responded with members-only screenings. While it imposed an exorbitant stress on the Funnel, the Censor Board also gave rise to new feelings of group definition. As Turner and Killian note in their groundbreaking Collective Behaviour study, "[persecution] heightens the symbolic intensity of a group's values."³⁹ The articulation of borders is a key to holding utopian communities together.

JOHN PORTER: The open screenings were always the backbone of the Funnel. One of the things that led to the end of the Funnel was that the Censor Board banned these screenings. They were illegal, and once the Censor Board found the Funnel, they said we couldn't have open screenings because they have to see the films in advance.

NAPO B: What happened with the Funnel that really pissed us off was the incursion by the Censor Board into the spontaneity of open screenings. That totally wrecked everything; there was a lot of anger about it. People



Funnel ad for *Impulse Magazine* by David Anderson, 1984.

had to hand in movies this week to show them next week. Because the films were original and not prints, we worried about films being destroyed carelessly, because the Censor Board wasn't really equipped, nor did it have the mindset to be respectful of super 8 art films. There was nothing dangerous, there was nothing subversive or offensive about these films; the Board was simply trying to squash the Funnel. We decided to take all the underexposed film we had cut with brief outtakes and edit this monstrous reel and bring it into the Censor Board. We tried to convince other filmmakers to do the same and bog down the Censor Board with boring content, so they would abandon the whole idea. But no one wanted to rock the boat, and even such pranks were a distraction and we simply started having screenings in alternative locations.

DAVID ANDERSON: The fight with the Ontario Censor Board tired everybody out. We were continually being forced to meet new building code requirements.

PAUL MCGOWAN: I sincerely hope someone mentions the fire code renovation. The Funnel was instrumental in the anti-censorship fight. I believe as a result of this stance, inspectors were sent in, which resulted in a \$35,000 upgrade in order to meet code as a theatrical venue. Drywall (five/eight-inch fire-resistant) needed to be applied to the entire interior of the theater. Steel doors and panic hardware were installed. This was accomplished by what started with a core group of thirty people providing \$10 a month to cover rent and expenses. This was a freaking miracle and a huge turning point. Keep in mind this is my version of what went down. In my opinion, bureaucrats hated the Funnel's punk-rock, anarchistic guts. I happen to think it's a very good thing to be hated by bureaucrats.

CHRISTIAN MORRISON: After problems with the Censor Board, city inspectors came and demanded extensive renovations to bring the building up to code. The Funnel had to be completely isolated from the rest of the building, so we had to build a box around the space made out of fire-retardant drywall. The booth was sealed off so that if a projector caught fire you would be able to close the door and it would burn itself out. David Bennell was in charge of construction. I think they were also using contractors, but I remember carrying the chairs out and then carrying them back in; that's what I was good for, a big lunky kid with lots of time to spare. I would go there once a week at least; others went every day. It was a real community builder — everyone who did it felt they'd earned their stripes.

MUNRO FERGUSON: The fight against the Censor Board was the big battle everybody was really upset about. I remember John Porter doing a performance where he screamed about the Board. There was a lot of anger. But in retrospect I realize it was great to have something to fight against. It energized the place. I came in and helped out a little with the 1981 renovations that the fire marshals demanded to bring the building up to code.

ANNA GRONAU: I remember the renos and dealing with our neighbour — the business below us was named Jean's Cutting. They cut out fabric for clothing, using huge cutting machines. Do you remember that during screenings there would be loud thumps every now and then? That was Jean stamping out another batch of shirts. Anyway, we had to cover the ceiling



Renovations under the Funnel by Peter Chapman, John Porter, Robin Lee, Ross McLaren, September, 1982. Photo by Michaelle McLean.

of their space with special fireproof drywall, so we had to wait for them to go on holiday. Then we had to work around all their really expensive machinery and tables piled high with stacks of fabric — all of which were covered of course, but it was still a horrible job trying to work over top of all this stuff without wrecking any of it.

JOHN BENTLEY MAYS, journalist: "Tonight (Nov. 5, 1982) at eight, the troops will gather for the first time in months in the tiny theatre nestled under the Don Valley Expressway at 507 King Street East. Fashionably late, the lights will go down. Then the three-minute bursts of super 8 footage will start. For the next hour or so, the packed house will be riveted to its collective seat by flashes of formal experiment, knockabout humour, haunting elegies, cinematic poetry and prosier items. All of which can only mean one thing. The Funnel Film Theatre, Toronto's foremost production and exhibition centre for the new and radical in film art, will have begun its fifth season. Granted, the curtain-raising show of one-cassette works by Funnel members is coming a little late this year. Cause of delay: a \$35,000 overhaul of the facility (begun in April) that took longer than anyone thought it would. But given the twists and turns of the Funnel's history, there's a bit of a miracle in the fact the theatre has lived to see its fifth autumn..."⁴⁰

EXCEPTIONS

The fire inspection had been designed to shut the Funnel down, and when that didn't work the Censor Board reached out with a deal that offered a special exemption for the organization. But the Funnel membership concurred with director Anna Gronau: there would be no independent arrangement for the Funnel alone. This didn't stop the Board from continuing to broker deals with individual artists, or other organizations, or even one-time passes for the Funnel itself.

AL RAZUTIS, artist, professor: "Early in 1981 several exhibition houses (the Funnel, Art Gallery of Ontario) obtained special permits from the Board for one-time screenings of selected 'art films': *Rameau's Nephew...* and *Presents* by Michael Snow, and *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* by Bruce Elder. The Board said filmmakers of 'international reputation' with work exhibiting 'artistic merit' qualified for special exemptions. It is not surprising that these exemptions were granted after personal meetings between Elder, Snow and Mary Brown to discuss how to deal with 'art films,' since it was in the interest of all parties to safeguard their position, whether political or legal. What is surprising, however, is that these discussions (and I think 'secret negotiations' is appropriate) directly contradicted a public stance (especially on the part of Elder) that portrayed a categorical opposition to censorship. These negotiations resulted in privileging a few artists and dividing the anti-censorship movement between those who sought special exemption for the arts and those who sought an end to censorship."⁴¹

TARYN SIROVE, media historian: "Beyond creating a high/low binary of 'fine-arts' and 'not-art,' videomaker Richard Fung asserts that the elitism of legitimization based on the criterion of artistic merit is a historical privilege for the colonizing West."⁴²

RICHARD FUNG, video artist, writer: "Is it opportunistic to invoke the defense of artistic merit, which is available to certain types of censored material, or for galleries and festivals to advocate (or accept) exemption from submission to film and video censor review? This discussion has evident implications with regard to the cultural products of minoritized communities."⁴³



OFAVAS (Ontario Film and Video Appreciation Society) vs Ontario Censor Board, Feb. 9, 1983. Drawings by David Anderson.

ANNA GRONAU: It was horrible telling touring filmmakers from other parts of the world that they had to arrive in Toronto early so that their films, along with a fee we had to pay, could be couriered to the Censors' offices up in the suburbs, screened and stamped — if you can believe it — with a special stamp of approval, and then shipped back to us with a permit before the screening. This sometimes meant delaying screenings while we waited for films to be returned to us. And of course, our members and other local and Canadian filmmakers didn't like it any better than the international filmmakers did. Once we had American filmmaker Larry Gottheim showing a brand new print of a film that had recently been included in the Whitney Biennale. Poor Larry rushed to get to the Funnel and was very gracious about going along with the ridiculous local custom of censorship. But when we got the film back from the Censors it was not only stamped, but had a large scratch on it. Eventually, by making a whole lot of noise about it, we managed to get the Censor Board to pay to replace that reel of film. But it took a lot of work to achieve that, and it had been a humiliating experience and the opposite of good hospitality. Unfortunately, I don't have the complete record of events, so I can't tell you exactly when and how certain things came to pass, but I do know that at one point the Censor Board agreed to a system they called "Examination by Documentation." This meant we had to fill in a form outlining the content of the films, running time, etc. This was no less morally despicable (some would say it was more so), but it was somewhat easier. Nonetheless, the Censors retained the right to demand to see anything they felt like seeing. I always wrote very

vague descriptions of the films that couldn't have really suggested any need for them to see a film, but their whole shtick, of course, was control. The other "concession" they made was that they agreed not to stamp films anymore. I'm sure the new system was mainly instituted to make things easier for the Censors and to try to silence us. I'm just guessing, but I would imagine that after they'd seen some of the flickery, grainy, abstract or sometimes very long films we often showed, they were beginning to realize they didn't really want to see this stuff after all. Obviously, however, they couldn't and wouldn't back down.

COMMUNITY SPLIT

The Funnel's impossible mission saw them tied to a theatre that was suddenly overly visible, too much a target for a newly aroused Censor Board determined to extend its reach into every corner of the media universe. Either they could recognize the Board's authority and continue to negotiate in order to show fringe films, or else they could permanently close in protest. Because they refused to fall on their sword they were widely derided by the video community, or at least its most vocal and politicized members, who were categorical in their refusal of the Board's authority.

LISA STEELE: "We have been avoiding the Censor Board where possible, challenging when necessary and always denying the jurisdiction of the Theatres Act over our work."⁴⁴

VARDA BURSTYN, writer: "But the state already has too great a power to determine what we see, what we know and what we can make known; any further extension of this power won't work for feminism."⁴⁵

JUDITH DOYLE: Back then some of the alternative galleries — what we now call artist-run centres — claimed exemption from censorship on the basis of being art spaces, alternative galleries, not cinemas. They had the stance that moving pictures circulating in the artworld should be afforded different limits than the public cinema system. Because the Funnel was a cinema, it couldn't really claim it was not a cinema. We were compelled to frame ourselves in the general fray of movie theatres and could not exempt the Funnel as a gallery, an art zone, subject to different representational



In A Different Voice catalogue, curator: Judith Doyle. Editors: Judith Doyle and David McIntosh. Published by the Funnel and YYZ to accompany film and performance series at the Funnel, Jan. 28-Feb. 28, 1986, and concurrent exhibition at YYZ.

jurisdictions, like it or not. Clive Robertson, the editor of *Fuse Magazine*, was particularly patronizing and felt the Funnel was being naive by dealing with the Board at all. But he wasn't being very pragmatic. The Funnel was a theatre, and hence a very different kind of space than the galleries that showed video. It was a screening space address that could be closed down.

The kinds of spaces that Trinity Square Video or Vtape screened in were more like pop-up-shop-type spaces. If it didn't work, if the screening got shut down by the Censor Board, it could pop up again at the Spadina Hotel, for example. Video was pop-upable in a way that film wasn't.

DAVID MCINTOSH: I saw more plainclothes cops at video screenings where they didn't submit to the Board than at the Funnel. The Funnel audiences were pretty loyal audiences so you knew who was there. John Greyson and I used to go to video screenings at A Space or Vtape and pick out the cops.

PAULETTE PHILLIPS: Censorship and artist fees were two areas where the video community was strident about how others could act. The Funnel was attacked for being compliant with the Censor Board but I thought it was another interesting act of subversion, having to submit forms for these crazy movies that the Board was obviously not interested in looking at. The problem I've always had with the video community is that they have an all-or-nothing attitude, there's just one way to do it and they know what that way is.

ANNA GRONAU: The Censor Board had been exercising exactly the same kinds of rights to censor commercial films for years, and none of the commercial filmmakers had spoken out about it at that time. In effect, I believe we were being blamed as victims — especially because we were young, marginal and artists, and in my case, I suspect, because I was young and female.

DAVID MCINTOSH: One of the important movements in that period was women working against censorship. Anna Gronau was part of a group that took the Censor Board to court, Judith Doyle published a history of censorship in the province and there were also others working outside the Funnel including Lisa Steele, Varda Burstyn and Carol Vance. There was a collaborative effort to try to understand why censorship was happening. We came to the conclusion that censorship wasn't about protecting the public — it was about shutting down independent, non-traditional voices. The obvious targets were women who wanted to express themselves in an overtly sexual way, and the queer community.

JUDITH DOYLE: Because we were in the spotlight of censorship, some of us at the Funnel worked with consciousness and clarity depicting our personal sexuality and the political effects of its representation on a day-to-day

basis. There were no queer spaces then for art (unless you count the casting couch with senior artists). For example, my performance *Rate of Descent* (1983) was curated by Sky Gilbert at the Theatre Centre. The Funnel, by virtue of its compromises, became a space charged with sexual politics. The Funnel became a nascent or proto-queer space, a space of feminist sexuality as well, because it was not exempt from the law that bore down on everyone else (queers, diesel femmes, feminists who self-represented sexually) who was bashed, smashed and muzzled, with no refuge in artistic exemption. There were boundary creatures (John Greyson, Richard Fung) who came to the Funnel, but many of the art potentates at the time were never seen there. I guess I am implying that the repression and censorship that coalesced around the Funnel operated as a magnet that at least briefly transformed the space. These pressures temporarily opened up wider dimensions of political representation for Aboriginal and Latin American voices, for example.

ANNA GRONAU: Honestly, I don't know if what we did was the right thing or not. I do believe, however, that if the Funnel had decided to simply defy the Censors right off the bat, we would likely have been charged with violation of the Ontario Theatres Act and forced to defend ourselves in court. This would probably have led, eventually, to the Funnel being closed down, as we didn't have the resources or, at that point, the community support for a court battle. Whether or not, following our potential demise, the Censors would have spread their net to pick off other arts groups, one at a time, is hard to say. But because we chose to remain standing, so to speak, with our continued public existence being our chosen means of defiance, I think a groundswell of public opposition to censorship gradually grew — to the extent that the Censors couldn't isolate any one of us, and they had to acknowledge that there was a serious problem.

MESSAGE

AL RAZUTIS: "In June, 1980 [my film] *A Message From Our Sponsor* [1979] [a nine-minute ironic combination of advertising images juxtaposed with a few stock pornographic shots] was exhibited as part of the National Gallery Series IV package in Ottawa without incident. It was only when



A Message from Our Sponsor by Al Razutis, 1979.

this package was sent to Toronto for a September screening at the Funnel Theatre that it came to the attention of the Censor Board. The response of the Board was quick and direct: Mary Brown, director of the Board, contacted the Ontario Provincial Police and relayed through them a directive to the National Gallery curator, Darcy Edgar, that *A Message* would have to be cut or withdrawn. If the offensive material was not eliminated, the police informed Ms Edgar, she would be liable to arrest and prosecution for distributing pornographic material. Mary Brown went public and asserted (in several news articles) that this film contained material that contravened the Criminal Code of Canada. While the Gallery administration, over the objections of the curator, was prepared to withdraw the film, a protest was mounted by the participating filmmakers (Patricia Gruben, Rick Hancox, et al) threatening to withdraw all the films from the package if *A Message* was censored. After several months of protest, letter writing and negotiations between filmmakers and Gallery (negotiations by Anna Gronau acting on behalf of the filmmakers), the results amounted to a standoff: the Gallery reinstated the film, but left it up to the provincial censors to decide the fate of each screening, and the filmmakers dropped the proposed boycott.”⁴⁶

ANNA GRONAU: I was a programmer for an experimental film show at the Canadian Images Film Festival in Peterborough, Ontario in spring 1981. One of the films I helped choose was Al Razutis’s *A Message from Our Sponsor*. The Censor Board found out that Al’s film was going to be shown and they raised hell. They said it couldn’t be shown without cuts. Of course no one intended to allow any cutting. The festival executive decided they would put on a public screening of the film, regardless.

The Board charged Susan Ditta, the programmer of the Canadian Images Festival; David Bierk, the Artspace gallery director; Ian McLachlin, anti-censorship advocate and Artspace board member; and fringe movie artist Al Razutis for violating the Theatres Act after they showed Al’s A Message from Our Sponsor. In a painful irony that underlined community splits, Anna Gronau was subpoenaed and made to testify against her comrades at the festival. Eventually Al walked while the other three were convicted.

ANNA GRONAU: One of the main reasons that film and video censorship really started to heat up at that particular time was that cheap portable video equipment — for both recording and playback — started to be available. Coinciding with this historical moment was a surge in the critical mass of a “second wave” of feminism in North America and Europe. I think that governments, and possibly corporations, began to wonder whether they might lose their control of images, while women began to wonder who controlled their images. There was a growing pro-censorship movement among feminists! It seems strange to think of this today. But Andrea Dworkin and other feminists were getting militant about pornography around that time, and for many feminists censorship seemed like a great solution.

DAVID MCINTOSH: Most experimental work that was sexually explicit tended to be critical of commercial cinema in all of its expressions, from Hollywood love stories to porn. People interested in reshaping the representations of gender and sexuality were caught, and again this was largely women and queers.

ANNA GRONAU: After the Funnel’s troubles, the Series IV debacle and, now, Canadian Images, it was like an alarm bell had been sounded in the Toronto arts community. I think everyone started to realize that this wasn’t going away. Lisa Steele and Clive Robertson called a meeting at *Fuse Magazine*’s

office. It was great that now the video and wider artist-run community was interested in actively helping with the fight. There was lots of debate at that meeting about what to do. Many people felt that another screening in defiance of the censors was a good idea. I wasn't too sure if this was the best strategy. Finally, Gary Kinsman, a member of the gay cultural/intellectual community, spoke up and convinced everyone that before we got into that kind of an action, we should think seriously about what we wanted to achieve. Gary made an extremely important contribution to our being able to start to strategize as a community, rather than just react. We decided that we would form an organization, Film and Video Against Censorship (FAVAC), that we would set out our demands, and that we would do a public forum on censorship.

CONFUSED: SEXUAL VIEWS

After teach-ins and networking efforts, lawyers came on board to help. The Funnel and Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre (CFMDC) both launched suits against the Board — costly, time-consuming legal slogs that were dismissed as soon as the government swapped out a few lines of fine print from the Board's procedures. Another anti-censorship organization was initiated by Anna Gronau, David Poole (CFMDC) and Cyndra McDowall from Canadian Artists' Representation Ontario (CARO); this organization was called the Ontario Film and Video Appreciation Society (OFAVAS). Their plan was to challenge the Board's right to exist under the new federal Charter of Rights and Freedoms that became law in the spring of 1982, though it wasn't until persistent government harassment led an exasperated Glad Day Books to court that the rules finally shifted.

*The legal trysts were a slow-motion theatre, and there were other flash-points of resistance led by Pages Bookstore, Fuse Magazine and Artculture Resource Centre. The community had been deeply split between the Funnel, who were widely regarded as collaborators with the Censor Board, and a video/arts community that refused to acknowledge the Board's authority at all. But slowly a multifarious approach advanced, including a ten-day fest named *Forbidden Films* (October 18-28, 1984), the brainchild of bridge builder Marc Glassman who helped create new community resistance fronts. The culmination of these collaborations might have been Paul Wong's video*

installation Confused: Sexual Views. It was shown illegally in open defiance of the Censor Board, and film and video artists alike gathered alongside the artist to say yes.

PAUL WONG, media artist: *Confused* was my contribution to the sexual arena, to the problems arising from the fundamentalists, the right, and the government's fear of people being able to do their own thing. And VHS technology offered new possibilities to control your own sexual imagery. The first incarnation of *Confused* was for a 1983 performance at Harbourfront for the Video Culture Festival. I produced for the big stage because I knew I could get away with fucking and sucking and nudity because Mary Brown couldn't touch it. As part of the research for the piece, I interviewed twenty-seven people about their sexual inclinations, and some of this material was also used in performance, along with live projections. Then the Vancouver Art Gallery approached me for a show to inaugurate their new space, and as I already had this project going, I thought I would take the interviews and create a piece out of that. The second incarnation of *Confused* was a nine-hour edit of the twenty-seven people talking. They were shown on a series of monitors as an installation. Two days before the opening, the show was pulled. A curator had gone to gallery director Luke Rombout and said, "You should have a look at this; if you have any problems, we should



Confused: Sexual Views poster, April 1984.



Press conference announcing the Ontario Film and Video Appreciation Society (OFAVAS) court case against the Ontario Censor Board at Trinity Square Video, 172 John Street, Toronto, April 19, 1982. Anna Gronau (Funnel), Cyndra MacDowall (Canadian Artists Representation Ontario), Charles Campbell and Lynn King (lawyers), and David Poole (Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre). Photo by John Porter.

deal with them now.” The director felt it wasn’t art, and that it would offend their members. That started several years of actions and litigation.

Shut down moments before his own opening, Paul took Confused on the road and gathered ten sponsoring organizations — including the Funnel, where he had a one-night screening. I was shocked to see video in the theatre, though it happened again a year later when Vito Acconci’s devastating Theme Song (1973) played and eight of us had multiple orgasms for the first time. Paul’s tape featured a succession of talking heads, including the artist himself, dishing about the most intimate moments of their lives. It was a community snapshot whose currency was the conversion of private into public. In general, there wasn’t a lot of talking in the movies shown at the Funnel; there wasn’t a rule about it or anything, but the theatre was a place for looking most of all. If you had to use words, the unspoken feeling was that you weren’t quite a filmmaker. Paul’s talk-cascades drowned that commonplace; it was as if all our unspoken conversations had collected in a single video.

JOHN GREYSON: “Future historians may well identify the eighties as the decade when sex-as-discourse supplanted sex-as-practice in the popular imagination.”⁴⁷

ANDREW JAMES PATERSON: It is almost a truism that queers would stand against censorship of all sorts, and therefore AA Bronson and Felix Partz of General Idea would be natural recruits for *The Body Politic* rally on January 3, 1979. However, not all artists were anti-censorship, although one might think artists would be. There was some collusion between feminist anti-porn politics and entrepreneurialism. There were, and are, many for whom censorship was not an issue. In 1982, when it became required for the Video Video component of what is now TIFF to submit to the Censor Board for classification, many artists thought that withdrawing work over this classification issue was itself a form of self-censorship. Many thought hysteria over censorship was either “elitist” or “Canadian” — meaning protectionist and anti-entrepreneurial. I myself was not the most committed activist back then. I complied because I fell for the line about having my work visible outside of art ghettos and so on. Later on, I realized that those who pulled their works in 1982 were right all along. It is interesting that Marien Lewis, who was the programmer for Video Video, and who

dismissed the refuseniks as being whiny grant-dependents, played John Bentley Mays in Colin Campbell’s tape *Snip Snip* (an anti-censorship lampoon made for 1981’s edition of Video Video, an event framed as a “trade fair” that therefore did not require Board classification).

RICHARD FUNG: “For many artists of colour, censorship is at best a peripheral issue, a luxury. At worst, anti-racism and anti-censorship are imagined to be in competition with one another. Over the last fifteen years, I have worked with other artists of colour on anti-racist and equity initiatives. Whenever I have involved myself with issues of artistic censorship, however, I have been able to count the number of non-white faces on one hand. The reasons behind this absence are seldom elaborated upon, but one need only think of the defence of genetic determinist Philippe Rushton, or the image of Holocaust-denier Ernst Zundel with ‘Freedom of Speech’ emblazoned on his hard-hat, and it starts to become clearer why politically conscious people of colour may be reluctant to jump on any civil-libertarian bandwagon. Add to this the fact that when artists of colour address the effects of systemic racism and white privilege they are often themselves accused of censorship, and a degree of mistrust seems only natural. The politics can be reduced to a simple equation: artists want freedom of expression; people of colour and ethnic minorities demand freedom from oppressive stereotypes and expressions of hatred. For the most part, anti-racist and anti-censorship activists stay out of each other’s way: anti-racists don’t normally comment on porn busts, gay and lesbian book seizures, or instances of artistic censorship; those who work on anti-censorship issues in the visual arts don’t jump to criticize restrictions on the Heritage Front or the KKK. But for someone like myself — a person of colour and a cultural producer who sometimes works with sexual imagery (and queer representation at that) — this segregation of anti-racist and anti-censorship politics, although expedient, seems intellectually shortsighted and strategically risky. As anti-hate-speech advocates team up with pro-censorship, anti-porn feminists, and civil libertarians defend the racist’s right to speak, it becomes even more crucial to address these movements’ central assumptions about representation, pedagogy, and the state.”⁴⁸

JOHN GREYSON: There was a small group of us that organized the civil disobedience action called “Ontario Open Screenings: Six Days of Resistance against the Ontario Censor Board” in 1985. The group included Colin

Campbell, Kim Tomczak, Lisa Steele, Pat Wilson and myself. We dreamed this up in part because the whole defensive strategy of fighting censorship through the courts was so wearing. These cases (A Space, Funnel, Images) were tiptoeing forward, with high costs and many setbacks, contributing to much organizational fatigue, and a general chill in terms of film/video exhibition. In contrast, the prospect of civil disobedience lit us all up. The action was done for about ten cents; we raised money for a poster and made a lot of telephone calls. I forget what the exact stats were, but there were something like eleven Ontario cities and forty art centres involved, all of us collectively breaking the law. Six days became eleven days. The Law Union volunteered its members to attend screenings and provide legal support. A statement was read at the start of every screening requesting that all cops and Censor Board agents leave immediately. Audience members were asked to turn ritually to one another and ask if the other was a police officer. We became adept at identifying the undercover cops since the standard uniform from 52 Division for infiltrating the arts community seemed to consist of a brown suede vest, copious gold chains, and mutton chop sideburns. We asked suspects to sign a statement, swearing they weren't police officers. If they wouldn't sign, we asked them to leave. By law, they had to sign or go. I can think of few epiphanies sweeter than the moment when I told a cop with a suede vest to take a hike. Fighting censorship had become fun again.

KERRI KWINTER: “*Six Days* was designed to accomplish two primary goals: to educate viewers and unite resistance. Different groups in different locations in the province [had] developed critiques and mounted legal challenges to the Censor Board in the past years. It was time to organize so that the benefits of the critiques and the force of the legal challenges could be maximized.”⁴⁹

JOHN GREYSON: “*Six Days*” showed the most eclectic list of films and videos imaginable. There was no curatorial unity whatsoever — that was the whole point. Each group and audience was encouraged to decide for themselves what they wanted to show and see. “*Six Days*” included documentaries on immigrant women and purely formalist, experimental films, as well as German dramas featuring hardcore gay sex. We gambled that if we all broke a bad law very publicly then nobody was going to get charged. And sure enough, nobody got charged. Our strategy was to empower our

communities through collective action — to remind ourselves what we do best, which is decide for ourselves what to make and show and discuss.

JOHN PORTER: I made film performances during “*Six Days of Resistance*,” and then I toured them around. They were based on reading the film classification law carefully and literally. I would stand up in front of the theatre and demonstrate different things that you could be charged for that you wouldn't guess. Like holding a photograph in your hand and moving it. That's a moving image. And what if you run a movie, and put your hand in front of the projector lens the entire screening, so the audience can't see it — does that have to be approved? I demonstrated that too. I did an installation for Eye Revue Gallery at Union Station, the big train station in Toronto. The sign read “*Uncensored Movies*,” and there was a peephole where people could see strips of film moving in the wind of a fan blowing on them.

JOHN GREYSON: “*Six Days of Resistance*” went to great lengths to move beyond a libertarian analysis, which unproblematically champions free speech in absolutist terms. Instead, we tried to encourage a critique of power relations within the spectrum of media exhibition, particularly noting how marginalized and disenfranchised artists and communities have very different stakes in the censorship debate. We proposed that our diversity, our right to argue, was our most important point of unity, and that we couldn't argue if we couldn't see each other's work.

MIDI ONODERA

While the struggles against state picture control slowly and painfully went on, the Funnel slowly began to attract a new generation of artists who were interested in taking the project of experimental film into new and unexplored regions. First among equals was Midi Onodera. When I met her she was fresh out of the Ontario College of Art, and she appeared in a shock of coloured hair and excellent running shoes. A new house style had arrived at the Funnel. She was the equipment manager, and no one deemed it curious that a serious tech geek could look like they were waking up from a new wave daydream. She was one of the Funnel's finest filmmakers, bootstrapping

structural cinema into new territories of race representation and queer politics. She was tight with the all-women band Fifth Column who lived just around the corner, and while she was a thousand shades of serious, I remember her deep, baritone-inflected laughter cutting through the sometimes awkward scrums in the Funnel's lobby/gallery/beer parlour. While she had been a student of Ross McLaren's, itself a kind of guarantor of belonging, she hadn't been one of the theatre builders, and that meant that no matter how many hours she spent carrying the Funnel flag, she would never fully belong.

ANNA GRONAU: The equipment managers we had were also really important: Villem Teder was followed by Midi Onodera, and both of them were incredibly creative and helpful, getting filmmakers going with the tools they needed, holding workshops and supplying the theatre with the best equipment possible. They were really the people who made the community come alive. Seeing films by local and international filmmakers was important, but the real artistic and social expression that defined us came from people getting their hands on cameras and making work.

MIDI ONODERA: When I look back on the early 80s now, I realize that many of the screenings I had took place within a feminist context. Some of my



Midi Onodera, 1984. Photo by Edie Steiner.

early exhibitions (photography and text pieces) and screenings were part of the International Women's Day Conferences, and of benefits for various lesbian and feminist publications. There seemed to be so much going on within the feminist community and in the world of experimental film. Being an artist-run centre, the Funnel was on a tight budget and couldn't afford to hire new staff unless it was through a government-sponsored program. But as a recent art school grad, I knew I wanted to work there and start my life as an artist. Through a program called "Futures" I was hired as the equipment coordinator and paid the grand sum of \$150 per week. Needless to say I was barely able to survive, living mostly on Jamaican beef patties, popcorn and soup. My job consisted of checking all the equipment, keeping it in running order, orienting members on all the equipment at the Funnel, organizing workshops and assisting with the biweekly screenings. It was one of the best jobs I've ever had. I learned how to solder, make seamless reel changes and load the ancient 16mm Frezzolini camera. I worked during the day at my job and then would stay on late into the night working on my own films, using the equipment free of charge. During my years at the Funnel from 1984-1986 I met and hopefully assisted probably every artist who was working in film in Toronto at that time.

JUDITH DOYLE: Today [July 2012] we're in a situation where the educational institutions have never been under so much pressure from Conservative government forces to take over education and manage it from the top-down. But what the Funnel generated, along with a number of other artist-run centres, was community-based education. There were workshops and more casual demonstrations, as the equipment manager Midi Onodera trained countless people how to use our super 8 cameras. The Funnel was particularly welcoming to new artists, and operated as a node along a route into larger international art networks.

MIDI ONODERA: The 80s were an exciting time. I felt the rawness and tension of the feminist movement; the debates around women-only events and spaces; the constant conflicts about pornography and censorship; the dying flames of the punk movement, its commercial morphing into new wave; the rapid growth of lesbian and gay culture through the beginnings of lesbian and gay film festivals; the embryonic development of "multiculturalism." But these events and communities were completely separate from each other, and any kind of crossover was usually viewed with suspicion.

How could I love punk and call myself a feminist? The gay and lesbian movement at that time was predominantly white and issues of race hardly ever entered into discussions of equality, while ethnic communities rarely debated queer representations.

Art, film and personal practice were the glue that held my life together. Without them, I think I would have gone mad. In some ways, I never felt that I could truthfully be myself in any of the politically charged communities, except at the Funnel. At first I believed that I had found my home, a community of like-minded people. But in the end, the utopian world I thought I had found didn't really exist. It's difficult to explain: it's not that I faced distinct and direct racism, homophobia and sexism. It's just that there was this undercurrent of tension, an off-kilter feeling that I was intruding, that I didn't really belong.

As I gained more exposure to the growing number of films being made by women, my confidence grew and I felt more and more that I could embrace what naturally came to me — storytelling. This discovery was completely empowering. Finally with the rise of “new narrative” I saw that stories could be created outside of a Hollywood framework. To this day, when I think of some of the early films by Chantal Akerman, Chris Marker, Valie Export and some of the New York underground scene, I can still see shadows of their influence in my current work.

But as much as I found these works energizing and provocative, I think that they helped cause a creative divide amongst the Funnel membership. As some of the women embraced this infusion of narrative, some of the men resisted this “trend,” staunchly defended structuralism, and tried to preserve their perceived role as dominant “experimental filmmakers” in the city. For me this aesthetic/political/theoretical split finally took its toll when I started to make *The Displaced View* (1988). Michaelle McLean was one of my producers for the film, and besides the obvious route of arts council support, we decided that we needed to source alternative methods of funding. One of our first thoughts was having the Funnel sponsor the film so we could collect donations in exchange for a charitable receipt, since the Funnel was a registered charity. Michaelle presented our proposal to the board where it was rejected on the grounds that my film was not “experimental.”

DAVID MCINTOSH

I'll never forget the first time I met David, the Funnel's director for the longest two years in recorded history. It was during the mid-1980s at a job interview that was done Funnel-style, meaning that all thirty “core” members were on hand to interrogate David. Previous directors had been drawn from the family; this was the first time the club was stepping outside of the bloodlines, and it occasioned both apprehension and excitement. When David walked into the room thirty people fell silent as we looked him over like he was a rare zoo specimen. He might have bowed. He was funny and well spoken and so smart that eight-syllable adverbs kept falling out of his faux leopard skin suit jacket. I kept worrying that at any moment he was going to wise up to the fact that he didn't belong here. He was too smart and beautiful to be ready for his Funnel close-up, and the longer the interview went on, the more I had the sense that he was interviewing us. Would he find the bride acceptable? After a final, lunatic question about corporate fundraising was broached (Corporate? Fundraising? At the Funnel?), David replied, “I believe new forms of capital reinvestment require skills involving cocktails and blowjobs, and I'm excellent at both.” There might have been other candidates, I can't remember now, but it was clear as soon as he left the room that a new director had found us.

DAVID MCINTOSH: The majority of the memories I have of the Funnel are largely unprocessed, and I think that's because the Funnel was and is indigestible. In fact, I think a lot of people at the time — mostly Toronto people



David McIntosh at Judith's house, 692 Adelaide Street W, 1991. Photo by Judith Doyle.



Local Moon. Photo by Eliza Drews.

— were kind of afraid of the Funnel. It was not for the faint of heart. It was no cutesy “free to be you and me,” left liberal, warm and fuzzy, struggling artists playpen. This was an unruly and unpredictable collective where the fight against corporate, industrial, mass-produced representation was constant and fierce. Funnel people would fight for days — what am I saying, for years! — over the relative radicality of a dissolve versus a cut. Long before the current round of multimedia vertical integration and corporate concentration, the Funnel had a clear and insistent countercultural mission, an integrated concept-to-consumption vision of experimental film that included production, distribution, exhibition, publication and training workshops. With minimal financial resources, but a surfeit of collective energy and motivation rarely seen in the maturing artist-run centre culture of the period, the Funnel presented twice-weekly film screenings; maintained a collection of films for distribution; operated an extensive equipment access program, which included access to an optical printer and film processing equipment; held regular public film production workshops; and published newsletters with original critical texts, along with several catalogues of curated series. And the Funnel was multi-disciplinary, obviously presenting film screenings, but also performances, video, sculpture/installations and painting exhibitions. All managed on a shoestring budget and seemingly endless volunteer energy.

JACK SMITH

*Jack Smith was an underground legend, a queer and charismatic recluse who raged against the American empire via overwrought performance stylings that New York tastemaker Jonas Mekas pronounced “Baudelairian cinema.” Smith’s film *Flaming Creatures* (1963), a dishevelled sublime featuring various gender benders getting ready for an orgy that never quite arrives, remains a fringe media standard bearer, a disorderly field of casual perversity.*

In the last couple of decades of a life cut short by AIDS, Jack had turned his attention to performances that mostly went on in his own loft. His five-night stand at the Funnel was a rare out-of-town event modestly attended by a thrilled and bewildered crowd on opening night (“Is this it? Has it started

yet?”) who left before the fireworks, and for the most part never came back. Jack raised anticipation to an art form; he had taught Andy Warhol how to wait and showed Robert Wilson how to slow down. Everything he touched turned into the best version of itself, transformed by his abject charisma.

ROSS MCLAREN: Jack’s place was filled with every kind of junk; there was hardly a path to walk through the street trash he’d collected. He didn’t say a word to us — he was just feeling the vibe. He was nailing a trellis to the wall. “No, it wants to go here.” He’d move it a quarter of an inch and look at it for ten minutes and announce again, “No, it wants to go here.” This went on for forty-five minutes. He was feeling us out to see how we were going to react, I suppose. I visited Jack on a couple of other trips and suggested he might want to come to Toronto, but he was a little paranoid. Genius-off, but off. During the Forbidden Films Festival in 1984, they wanted to get Jack up because it was about censorship, and after I called, he agreed to come. He had fans — there were creatures waiting to meet him at the airport. (I don’t know if you remember a guy named Gordon W.; he wore a loin cloth all year round and his body was oiled and he cooked chapatis.) Jack refused to bring his films across the border because he was worried they would be



Jack Smith, 1984. Photo by Edie Steiner.

taken away from him. He was concerned about losing control because he felt that Jonas Mekas had exploited *Flaming Creatures* and made a career for himself at Jack's expense. He wanted to do something the Censor Board couldn't touch, so he did a performance called *Brassieres of Uranus* because, as he said, you can't censor the name of a planet.

JACK SMITH: "It's very interesting being legendary when you can't even make a living and the public's never heard of you."⁵⁰

DAVID MCINTOSH: People in Toronto didn't know quite what to do with the Funnel. It remained sort of "odd man out," "from the wrong side of the tracks," isolated in many ways. It was not part of the Queen Street art scene of the 1980s, being located on King Street East near Eastern Avenue, a decidedly unhip hood at the time. And it was shunned conceptually by prevailing art mavens. A perfect example of this positioning of the Funnel in the Toronto scene was the Jack Smith performance, a week of nightly presentations of his new work for the Funnel, entitled *Brassieres of Uranus*. I basically produced the event, and even performed in it as a worker in Jack's "Brassiere Museum," wearing a black leotard and a pair of upholstered flowerpots strapped to my ass to exaggerate my buttocks, Jack's erotic obsession at the time.

EDIE STEINER: One of my favourites was Jack Smith, whose week-long performance engaged us as participants in an evolving spectacle that no one, including Jack, seemed to know the outcome of. We spent days fashioning ornate "bum brassieres" — bras to be worn on our backsides — and Jack was never happy with our work. That week Jack came to my studio for a private portrait sitting. He arrived bearing a large red vinyl suitcase filled with costume jewelry, and later I took him to the St. Lawrence antique market, which he described as "the jewel pit of my dreams."

MARTIN HEATH: Gordon W. told me that Jack Smith had performed at the Funnel the previous night, and that he was going to be there for the next three nights. We had to go. It turns out that on the opening night, David Buchan, a local performance artist, was naked on top of a stepladder. He was probably wearing angel wings or something. Jack Smith did his usual thing, which is to do nothing until people who were easily bored left. People who were truly interested, or felt that something might happen if they

stuck around, stayed. Well, that didn't happen because everybody left but Gordon. Rather than being simply affected by performance, or consuming it, you could watch the need arising, and that took time. When Jack performed in New York some people were always going to leave, but others knew what it was about. In Toronto, no one knew.

DOT TUER: "Arising from his prone position, Jack mumbles about the parasites of the cultural institutions, of his fate as a creature 'twisted horribly' by the art galleries and schools. Flinging his veil about him, he takes from a suitcase beside the divan a jumbled assortment of papers and stuffs them in the asses of his creatures perched upon ladders and bent over forwards. He then systematically removes them and returns to his throne, to the centre of the Brassiere Museum on Uranus. By this time some of the audience is asleep, some convulsed in laughter, some intrigued. For what they have seen is no Halloween game, but something more and something less than the last marginalized vestiges of a campy freak-show tailored to our prescribed day of dress-up in American culture."⁵¹

DAVID MCINTOSH: A quick Jack moment. I was working on getting props together for his performance when he came into my office holding a muffin tin on his ass, and asked me, "Do you find this erotic?" And I kind of did. It was like twenty small buttocks on his ass. Virtually no one from the Queen West art scene attended any of Jack's performances. Joyce Wieland and Michael Snow were regulars in the audience, and a couple of people like Martin Heath and Gordon W. joined in the performance, but that was it. A couple of decades later, a number of Toronto curators finally began showing Jack's work and acknowledging his position in art history, yet Jack's performance work at the Funnel remained undigested, perhaps indigestible, and unmentionable for them.

ROSS MCLAREN: You know, I made Jack over a thousand bucks, I did the best I could, but he was disappointed that the audiences were dwindling. It was bound to happen; it happened every place he went. No hard feelings though, it was great having him as a guest. He was on all the time, a very entertaining guy. When he came back to New York his performances involved a new character called Art School Cutie Pie, and that was me. It was just a romance gone wrong. I think Jack had designs and it didn't work out that way and he was disappointed. I'm sorry.

GENDER TROUBLE

The history of fringe movies is filled with moments of queer resistance; alternative film forms sometimes accommodate alternative subjects, even new ways of loving. If the Funnel had a distinctly feminist lean thanks to directors Anna Gronau and Michaelle McLean, its new director, David McIntosh, would add queer perspectives to its intersectional picture politics.

DAVID MCINTOSH: I moved to Toronto in 1980 and the bathhouse raids happened a year later. The raids were formative for the queer community. In the ensuing demonstrations I was on the lines with thousands of other queers in what was basically a riot on Yonge Street. Harry Sutherland made a film about this moment called *Track Two* (1982). He had started shooting around the hustler track in the Church and Isabella area, and then the raids happened and it became a whole other production. That was one of the earliest works that showed collective consciousness in the Toronto gay/lesbian community, and this was a moment of radical change. I think the Funnel connected with that moment, even though the organization wasn't overtly queer.



J.D.s zine (8 issues 1985-1991, eds. G.B. Jones, Bruce LaBruce)



Ondine, Zoe Yanofsky, John Frizzell at Michaelle McLean's place, 1983. Photo by Michaelle McLean.

JUDITH DOYLE: When David McIntosh became the director of the Funnel from 1985-1986, he focused the Funnel lens on the land of gender trouble. David invited former Warhol superstar Ondine for a residency. Ondine was a regular in Warhol's films and factory studio/home. Ondine toured the college and art-house film circuit with Warhol's movies. We had fun in Toronto and at the Western Front in Vancouver, where I made a video with him about his fascination with Maria Callas called *Gilt Feelings* (1983). If Ondine arrived as an ambassador of Warhol's queer performativity, he was also a reminder that the drag/camp/queer momentums that had been so vividly portrayed by people like Colin Campbell in the video world had been left behind at the Funnel. As the new director, David McIntosh helped to heat things up at the Funnel in a good way, and if you are looking for the fault lines that led to the organization's collapse, I think that's where you can begin to find them — around questions of gender trouble and feminism.

JUDITH BUTLER, theorist: "The bad reading of *Gender Trouble* goes something like this: I can get up in the morning, look in my closet, and decide which gender I want to be today...Performativity [of gender] has to do with repetition, very often with the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms to force them to resignify. This is not freedom but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in."⁵²

ANNA GRONAU: As time went on, there started to be more gay and lesbian experimental film being made and shown. We brought Ondine to the Funnel to screen some Warhol films. Jerry Tartaglia came with him and did a screening of his own work and discussed gay experimental film. Midi Onodera, who was our equipment manager later on, began to make work that pushed those boundaries, as well as the ones confining filmmakers of colour. She and David McIntosh really achieved a lot in terms of broadening the conversation, so it wasn't just the white male formalists. I think if the Funnel had continued in a similar direction, it would have been decidedly less white and male as time went on. As far as formalism is concerned, the high formalism of the 1960s and 1970s was pretty much a historical blip, from what I can see — not just in film, but in most art forms. Postmodernism threw that trajectory way off, so I can't imagine who is being nostalgic for some "good old days" of white male formalism. But most of all, I can't imagine why one would be.

DAVID MCINTOSH: To engage publically with queer culture meant working outside the mainstream. It's hard to think of queer films from that time, other than the creepy ones, the odd Hollywood horror film like *Cruising* (1980), where queers were psychopathic murderers or murder victims. The core members of the Funnel weren't overtly queer at any level. But that being said it was a place where gay and lesbian and transgender artists brought their work. John Greyson made his first film at the Funnel. Bruce LaBruce showed his earliest films. There was a lot of space at the Funnel for people to do things and some of it was queer. Bruce LaBruce and G.B. Jones put out a zine called *J.D.s.* Midi and Jean Young and Candy Parker did a zine called *Dr. Smith* that wasn't a Funnel publication, but the Funnel was where they all hung out. It was their club. The presence of queer artists at the Funnel during that period was remarkable. Kenneth Anger came often, as did Warhol superstar Ondine. I don't think it was an overtly queer space, but in the pre-HIV, early 80s, queer culture lived outside of the mainstream.

JUDITH DOYLE: Maria Klonaris and Katerina Thomadaki, a pair of French lesbian experimental filmmakers with a French sense of engaged material sensuality, arrived as part of an exhibition called "Film Portraits of Women by Women" that ran from April 18-May 9, 1986.

DOT TUER: At the time they were representative of a French feminist avant-garde cinema that drew on the writings of Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig. These authors were also very influential in Quebec's experimental feminist writing scene. Katerina and Maria made lyrical and visually intense films about women, nature and ceremonies. Of course they also brought sexuality in, but not via identity politics, which is how sexuality was approached by the Toronto media art scene, but from a French psychoanalytic and avant-garde tradition. During their women-only workshop we made a wonderful film that has since been lost.

JUDITH DOYLE: Their all-women workshop created a collaborative super 8 film called *Studio Mirrors* (1986). Their work raised the under-investigated question of generating collaborative structures. I think of artwork as a working surface between myself and the people I am either documenting or collaborating with.

Kathleen Pirrie Adams lived around the corner with bandmates from the iconic all-women dyke band Fifth Column. The Funnel was a regular hangout zone, a place where they could stretch their networks and polish their attitudes.

KATHLEEN PIRRIE ADAMS: Fifth Column wasn't a hobby. You didn't *play* in Fifth Column, you *were* Fifth Column. We were a group of people trying to develop an alternative sensibility, inventing our own version of feminism, creating art and music as a way of speaking to the world and making a place for ourselves in it. Our subversive agenda was connected with experimental art practice — it was at the core of our shared vision. Our ambition was to create a world outside the mainstream, outside the world we were familiar with, and to some degree we were successful in doing that. We worked to create an alternative context to ground our artistic practices and also to develop different ways of thinking about the world and ourselves. We lived together, spent most of our social time together, and of course we made music together. We generated different kinds of projects — zines, music and videos — and forged a community with other artists who were trying to remake the world. The Funnel was important for linking avant-garde art practices and subversive lifestyles.

DAVID MCINTOSH: I think the Funnel played an odd middle role. The Funnel membership was committed to changing filmic content, to get over the suspension of disbelief in order to create active viewers. But it was also



Dot Tuer and David McIntosh, Havana Film Festival, 1986.



Production still from "Portraits of Women by Women" workshop (by Maria Klonaris and Katerina Thomadaki), Funnel, April-May 1986.

about bringing people in and providing access to technology so that they could express themselves. Then they're not just activated viewers, they're activated makers, which was not part of the old vanguard model. The old vanguard model was modernist, while the distributive model was post-modern or anti-modern. Hence the unquestioned willingness to include or invite queer culture into what was not a particularly queer space. I think members saw that there was a ripple effect when newcomers were granted access; the forms of representation change, and the more this happens the more we can survive as a group against capitalist hegemony.

FUNNEL STYLE

For some at the Funnel, their practice was a marriage of founding members and avant-garde godparents Mike Snow and Joyce Wieland. From Mike the Funnel faithful learned something about material engagement and self-reflexive time shaping. Joyce carried some of this weight too, but made it all personal, even risking an overt politics (Quebec separatism, US anti-imperialism). The fascination with materials so prevalent at the Funnel arose in part because there had never been the opportunity to see so many experimental movies in the city before, and much of the membership were new to the whole enterprise of making. The contact zone between artist and material was a stage where new roots could be uncovered and projected.



Sharon Cook with her film gear at home, 695 Adelaide St. W., Toronto, August 29, 1984. Photo by John Porter.



Michaëlle McLean, ink drawing by David Anderson, Oct. 12, 1981.

Was there a house style? A way to wrap up all those nights of emulsion and lay them inside a single thought balloon? Filmmaker Patrick Jenkins insisted there was no common cause, though part of the reason he left the fold was because he was tired of being offered a spot in Funnel group programs. Perhaps it's inevitable some artists argued for the singularity of their work, while others were more likely to see the connective tissue.

PATRICK JENKINS: The work of the artists involved at the Funnel was completely diverse. We were not a school or a movement or a style. My approach was unique, as was everyone else's. We were a bunch of people making something that seemed experimental, and were keen to see work from around the world. The late 70s was a challenging time to be an artist with my interests. Performance art was all the rage. Punk had arrived and some punks were very anti-art. They hated experimental film. The Funnel membership weren't punks. Punk could often be very conservative. It was three chords — basic music and anti-art. Secondly, although super 8 film was not considered a serious artistic medium, not even by visual artists, we were excited about having a theatre we could show our super 8 work in. But there was a feeling in the larger art community that we should be making video art, not film, because film was seen as an expensive and old-fashioned way to do things.

MICHAELLE MCLEAN: I remember feeling we were on the outer edges of what was considered film. There was a lot of contentious feeling in the Queen West arts scene. The videomakers versus the experimental filmmakers versus the Co-op filmmakers. From today's perspective it seems strange and picayune, but in those days it seemed very important to draw a line and say this is where we begin and this is who we are. There was sometimes an adversarial relation between groups instead of bridge building.

ELDON GARNET: The Funnel aesthetic could be described as a broken up structuralism. There was a lot of experimentation with form; content was secondary, film itself was the subject. You were experimenting to see how you could expand the territory. It might have some narrative qualities but that wasn't a major concern. It was about a playful manipulation of the actual medium, film itself, the materiality. And it was done on the cheap; many people showed their originals. You can see this in the work of artists like John Porter or Ross McLaren. At the time we were not aware of

post-structuralism. Those ideas of the French theorists didn't have any impact on the artistic community until the late 70s and early 80s, so the key films at the Funnel were structuralist films. The people you would talk about would be Wittgenstein and Lévi-Strauss. You had a notion of order, which was contrasted with the artist's tendency towards disorder, and that created an interesting tension.

MICHAELLE MCLEAN: At the Funnel we described our work as the bastard child of the art scene and the film industry. Neither wanted us or understood our work. Video, by a similar definition, would be the bastard child of the television industry and art, but video simply never put itself on that spectrum. Anything that looked conventional didn't belong at the Funnel.

DOT TUER: In jest, I would say that the Funnel aesthetic was, "no more than an hour." And if you were John Porter, there is a reason that super 8 reels are three minutes long, because anyone can watch three minutes, but anything longer than that should be eliminated.

PAUL MCGOWAN: Extremely low budgets were definitely something we had in common. The films of Andy Warhol and Michael Snow were influential, formalism was very important, and yet it was an artist's culture not an academic one. I recall Keith Lock whose work had a natural narrative; he was very interested in formalism and minimalism. Those aesthetics were what we as a group referred to, or maybe deferred to.

DOT TUER: The Funnel's aesthetic is hard to pin down because it was part of a larger international conversation about experimental cinema. It was firmly rooted in a modernist ethos — it owed its roots to structural film-making, to material processes and to a firm notion of the avant-garde. It had an allegiance to non-linear forms developed by auteurs.

JUDITH DOYLE: For me the Funnel was about a sense of community. It was about sitting through long evenings, like the work of Funnel member Villem Teder who would present us with an hour and a half of emptiness. What was he doing with those images? They were beautifully associative explorations of material and colour with very little sound. Here are some titles: *Red*, *A Circle*, *Loop with Three Colours*, *Eyes*, *Cellular Progression*, *Incidents from the Trim Bin*. I think he was a disciplined filmmaker, but there



Anna Gronau, Midi Onodera, Michaelle McLean, 1986. Photo by Elizabeth McKenzie.

wasn't a hint of progression, or narrative, or even accumulation. It was a big, flat landscape of time that allowed the viewer to drift in ways that interested me. There was a sense of being in the same space with your friends who were drifting in and out of what he was doing, and then afterwards everyone went out for a drink at the Dominion Tavern and talked about whatever it was that we just did together. There was a strong sense of respect for the filmmaker's work. The artist was often present, and while the crowd was not large, there was an urgent sense of discursive engagement. We took each other's intentions quite seriously. And we could be painfully jealous of the small gauge feats someone had accomplished — for instance, how Villem had produced a certain shade of red in one of his films. It would preoccupy you, you'd be thinking about it a lot.

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM, theorist: "How can we switch from ordinary to sacred time? Recklessly. Don't signal. Don't make an announcement. Simply drift, or veer, into the other lane. The crucial tactic is this sliding movement, which Barthes calls 'drifting.' 'I choose drifting.' Sometimes he calls it 'skidding.' He wants to prevent gelling or coalescence, and to slip away without fanfare. To skid, to leak, to drift: these processes, which Barthes celebrated,



FASTWÜRMS (Kim Kozzi and Napo B). Photo by Edie Steiner.

had an underground affinity with cruising, a state of sexual readiness akin to readerly readiness — a willingness to pick up codes.”⁵³

MIKE CARTMELL, artist: Drifting is a form of attention and inattention. The French word for drift (*dérive*) is used by Lacan, Lyotard and others to describe the movement (the most fundamental of all movements) of the drive. The movement of the drive is something to which it is impossible in principle to give any attention whatsoever. And yet there are moments in the cinematic experience when one is far from fascinated, or fascinated in some way which one can't explain, with something which seems to lack any of the familiar components of the compelling, and those moments seem, sometimes, to stick. I sometimes call these “moments of unwatchability,” but there are other kinds of moments that stick for me as well.

There was an Australian guy at the Funnel, David Bennell, who made a film called *Brooklyn Bridge* (1979). It was shot from a car crossing the bridge, and then going back via a tunnel. It was certainly one of those “horizontal” films. It runs twenty minutes or so, and there are very few shots or at least different types of shots. Nothing happens. But there was something that engaged me, although I can't say what it was. I liked it then and I think about it from time to time now.

PRODUCTION

Modelled after the old Hollywood studios, the Funnel saw itself as an integrated production-distribution-exhibition emporium. Though having overseen the death of the Toronto Filmmakers' Co-op after the incursion of commercial filmmakers, the Funnel was loath to purchase any gear that might help any but the most orthodox of fringe film artists. Nearly everyone was working on a project, or about to embark on one; the collective environment was an easy place to swap tips and seek assistance.

MICHAELLE MCLEAN: I didn't make films until I got involved with the Funnel. The films were related to the physical gesture of drawing, the camera was like a pencil. I would do things on the ground and film them. They were connected to language and structure.

NAPO B: Our most freaky film magic moment came with the film *Polymer Rabbit Launch* (1981). My studio was broken into and everything was stolen, and my rabbit Bic was gone. Someone wrote in blood across my studio door: We Ate Your Rabbit. Who were these people? I wanted to make a film about the rabbit. I told Dave [Dai Skuse] to meet me at the studio where everything had been smashed and stolen. On my way there I thought that because the rabbit's name was Bic, I would get two Bic lighters to light the scene because all the power was off in the studio. I would hold them up like big ears when I talked.

Still on the way I found this crumpled mask of an old man's face by the side of the road. I thought I would wear the mask to represent the faces of the thieves, with the Bic lighter ears for lighting. We shot all these scenes in nearly total darkness. You only hear voices and movement in the dark and then these flaming ears appear and a twisted mangled face, and I deliver a line — “He was emerged from this point here” — three times, and then the lighter goes out so it's dark again and you hear all this other talk and shuffling in the dark. We shot five or six apparitions, with the final one being Dave wearing the mask, lit by the flame ears, jumping eight feet down from the loft.

We needed another part to the film but had nowhere to shoot. By that point I had to find a new studio and had moved to 44 Dovercourt. There was a huge empty studio in the building, so we kicked in the door and put

on our own locks and took over the space. We built sets and then got everybody together to shoot the final scenes for *Polymer Rabbit Launch*. We had Kandis K, Kim [Kozzi]'s sister, holding her arms up over her head while wearing a big shaggy sweater, creating a shadow that looked like a giant rabbit's head. The shadow moved over piles of straw and we added some voice-over and music. The final scene showed Kandis as a rabbit repeating the jump scene. It's completely dark and then you see the ears and hear a voice screaming and a crash of someone landing on the floor. The film ends with credits on an injury board we found at the entrance to the building.

That fall we were at the Festival of Festivals lined up to see a movie when I saw my jacket. That guy's wearing my jacket, and he used to live at 2 Berkeley! We recognized the people who had broken into my place. But a lot of time had gone by, and I was glad I had got rid of all that stuff, even though the death of Bic warranted a thrashing of these people. But I wasn't interested in confrontation, so I let it go. I saw their faces and recognized my clothes; they were all wearing parts of my life. These same people moved into 44 Dovercourt, into the same studio where we shot the last scene for *Polymer Rabbit Launch*. In the middle of the night, the guy who had broken into my studio fell out of his loft bed and landed on his head and got facial paralysis for a year. His face looked like the old man mask I had found. That made us think we had to be more careful making movies — it's like some kind of magic ritual where you can actually make things happen, like the irony of Chris Reeves playing Superman and winding up in a wheelchair. Filmmaking brings together energies that can wreak havoc at times. It's the dark side of films, the Hollywood Babylon ritual magic side. We found that as we made more films, the events we projected would manifest around us.

DOT TUER: There were people at the Canada Council who wanted production, programming and distribution separated. The Funnel did all three, we had a vertically-integrated structure. If you look today at Trinity Square Video or LIFT (Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto), people come and go, make their work and leave; occasionally there are screenings. There's not an identifiable core group like the Funnel had. The glue that held us together was funding, shared resources and a vertical integration of all aspects of what one did with film.

JIM ANDERSON: Sometimes I wish we had been more of a community. Did we nurture and support each other? Looking back I wish I was a bit more

open. I was there, but with my own work I tended to be a bit isolated. I wouldn't show people my stuff or look for feedback. I'm trying to think if some of the others shared their process. I didn't often visit other people's places and see their work. Perhaps others were doing that; it depends on your character. "Hey, what are you doing? What are you working on?" Well, I did ask those questions, but I didn't always follow up. Perhaps I'm too sensitive about other's judgments. I want my stuff to be, what, exceptional? Better than someone else's? Why couldn't I hold the feeling that we're all in the same stew pot, so let's acknowledge each other, have fun, pat each other on the back?

MUNRO FERGUSON: I was entering a community of people. There was a feeling of cohesion in the group, everyone knew each other. I really liked the spirit of the Funnel, it was cool. It supported traditional avant-garde film, with revolutionary/psychedelic influences from the late 60s and 70s, and there was a punk attitude layered on top that created something edgy, exciting and fun. I had a great time there.

ANNETTE MANGAARD: I learned everything by trial and error, and the nice thing about the Funnel was that you could find people who could help you. There was a strong sense of purpose and community. I would work on my movies at the Funnel, cutting and optical printing, and members would drop by and give feedback. Optical printing was a gift to me; the ability to rephotograph original footage meant that I could fix whatever mistakes



Optical Printing Workshop by Christoph Janetzko (New York), Paulette Phillips, Cindy Gawel, Brenda Longfellow, Ian Cochrane, Paul McGowan at the Funnel, Feb. 19, 1986. Photo by John Porter.



Optical Printing Workshop by Christoph Janetzko (New York), Paul McGowan, Ian Cochrane, Cindy Gawel, Paulette Phillips, Brenda Longfellow at the Funnel, Feb. 19, 1986. Photo by John Porter.

happened during filming. I could redo it frame by frame. It took forever but it was great. I hand processed film there and brought my own little Russian developing tank. People were always willing to show you how to do something.

IAN COCHRANE, Funnel filmmaker: I spent many hours in the absolute dark of the optical printer room, counting frames, testing exposures and durations, shifting time. This can all be done now quite quickly in Final Cut Pro, but then it took days! I also helped run the small black and white reversal processor there, processing 16mm and super 8 film for myself and other filmmakers. We were able to push and pull process on this machine, and do manual negative processing on our home bucket system. I found it quite satisfying to be able to help others in this way. I edited several short films on the rewinds in the lobby/office, working at night as it was quieter then, in overnight sessions with the radio playing along in the background, punctuated by the occasional streetcar rumbling by. I always considered film a kind of shared dreaming, existing in a space analogous to the Japanese ideal of a “floating world.” In Japan this refers to the night world of theatre, geisha and nighttime adventure under the influence of the moon. The alternate,



Lorne Marin's optical printer workshop at his apartment with his home-made printer. Mikki Fontana, David Bennell, Lorne Marin, Villem Teder, Ross McLaren, Midi Onodera, Anna Gronau, April 30, 1984. Photo by John Porter.

dreaming world made manifest. The Funnel made possible a particular kind of “floating world” of creativity which was not there before, and possibly not since. It was not any kind of heaven, of course: there were lots of disagreements, and the meetings could be exhausting. But there were also the after-screening beers at the Dominion Tavern with our guests, and many other good times. I was honoured then and remain so, now, to have been involved.

ANNA GRONAU: In terms of the social fabric of the Funnel, production was another glue that bonded us to one another. We often worked on each other's films, but we also often worked alone. Working alone was something that we each did completely uniquely, and yet there was that shared understanding of the task of collecting and creating images, choosing or making your sounds. I remember feeling that one of the wonderful things about making a film was the ridiculous things it made you do. I remember spray painting a pair of shoes with fluorescent paint and buying a black light at a head shop. When I went to film them, the light, it turned out, made the painted shoes seem to glow as if they were radioactive. If you were helping someone else, you did things that might seem meaningless: hold this, wave this around, etc. But it was with a sense of trust and faith that there was something that would come of this. A sense of shared work — whether it was counting frames on the optical printer or making coffee for a screening evening — gave us a feeling that you couldn't get from the work you do to earn money. Even my slogging job, doing the bookkeeping and figuring out budgets, which I did to pay the rent, felt different than other jobs I'd had. Making films was work that was often indistinguishable from play.

MICHAELLE MCLEAN: “Since 1978, when I started working with film, I've been dealing with a community that is specifically interested in what has been called ‘experimental.’ I loathe the word. It's a very local community and it's often women. It's yourself [Judith Doyle], Anna, Midi, and occasionally I'll see another woman's film that I don't know from another part of Canada...Over the last few months, when Anna and Midi and I have sat down and talked together about our films, it sounds like we're all talking about the same film...Like Anna and her grandmother and great-grandmother, and Midi and her mother and grandmother...these conversations are aimed towards the past and trying to find roots for our identities...When I talk to women about our work, the ones I have really good discussions

with talk with a lot of questioning, a lot of doubt. Other people I talk to — I always feel they're representing their work to me, they're not talking about their work. That ties in with, in my earlier stuff, my working hard to veil my heart. I felt that was what a work of art had to be. It had to be about representing itself through a system of representation that I didn't feel comfortable with. It was about distancing yourself from your work and I no longer feel that. In the end, I've gained strength from my friends because of our questioning. I think that *The Subject of Magic* is about the power of doubt. The dark side of questioning is called doubt in this culture, and it's not approved of, it's not considered strength."⁵⁴

DOT TUER: We were all reading Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975); there was a huge amount of feminist film theory informing what people did. People like Anna Gronau, Judith Doyle and Michaelle McLean made analytical/structural films that were influenced by feminism. There were a number of aesthetic currents at work, and I think that's what blew the collective up eventually. What was so fruitful in the Funnel's heyday was the co-existence of all these different aesthetics. I loved their attraction of opposites. You had the tech boys, a homemade super 8 ethos, an auteur 16mm tradition and a strong core of Funnel members who were thinking about politics, feminism and race.

When film theorist Catherine Russell described the divide at Toronto's Experimental Film Congress in 1989, she might have been speaking about the rift at the Funnel.

CATHERINE RUSSELL: "The two kinds of filmmaking that were being played off against each other, like fashions, were not only 'old' and 'new,' but modern and postmodern, male and feminist, canonized and alternative, non-narrative and new narrative. In the only paper that came close to theorizing this distinction, film theorist Maureen Turim characterized it as a difference between 'vision' and 'textuality'; a difference between the cinematic eye and the social and textual 'I' as categories of subjectivity."⁵⁵

VARDA BURSTYN: "For the structuralists 'ideology' or language constructs us. For them, all human relations are so thoroughly imbued and overdetermined by this ideology, that no aspect of human consciousness is anything more than a product of the dominant ideology."⁵⁶



Anna Gronau and Midi Onodera in *Ten Cents a Dance (Parallax)* by Midi Onodera, 1985.

DAVID E. JAMES, writer: "Relinquishing the populist ambitions of the underground and the revolutionary ones of contemporary political filmmakers, structural film became Art...Precluded from engaging or even recognizing its own social situation, it had no story to tell. The formal concerns, the absence of content, and the insistent reflexivity all corresponded to an absence of any positive social function, the denial of any audience but the specialist. Its symbolic utopia of uncompromised film was achieved not merely by negating all previous uses and situations of film, but by negating cinema."⁵⁷

JORGE LOZANO: The Funnel held very closed definitions of what experimental film was at the time and we [Jorge's group of art school pals] weren't into that, we were doing something different. There was an orthodoxy. I would like to revise what they did, because I don't think they were all that experimental.

DAVID MCINTOSH: This was a point in time when people were trying to move away from what they called the "blob" films to more narrative work. Blob meaning colour field, abstract, chemical films.

DOT TUER: The first structural-feminist work came out of the Funnel with Anna Gronau's *Regards* (1983); a questioning of history and memory came out of the Funnel with Judith Doyle's *Private Property/Public History* (1982); the first structural-experimental work that thought through race came out of the Funnel with Midi Onodera's *Ten Cents a Dance (Parallax)*

(1985). Midi's film was a structural film, but it contained other elements as well. You could never call it fiction, but there were some people who said it wasn't experimental.

MARUSIA BOCIURKIW, writer: "For Onodera, as for many women, lesbianism is an identity that overlaps with others: race, class, gender. Mainstream representations remove the complexity of difference and present lesbians as dealing only with relationships, as existing only in the present, without history or memory. Work, money, family background, and culture are also issues that preoccupy lesbians, but which, if included into the *image* of the lesbian, could quite possibly change her other-ness, and begin to remove her from the role of spectacle. She would then become transformed into a more generalized representation: woman, worker, mother, lover. It's not an easy thing to pull off, it's a major deconstruction of a given notion."⁵⁸

DOT TUER: A lot of the work was groundbreaking, it was pushing the edge of what constituted experimental film, but it wasn't framed that way inside the Funnel. Instead there was a lot of internal debate around whether it was really experimental or not. Instead of positioning the work as setting the agenda for a new discussion of experimental cinema, the points of view imploded, and the organization became less progressive and more conservative. By "conservative" I don't mean politically conservative, but literally "to conserve." The organization turned backwards to preserve older understandings of what experimental cinema was. I think some of the collective members wanted to go back to a world where they were the one avant-garde, making films and screening them for each other. I don't know if everyone was in favour of the work around programming that David, Midi and I were doing. We were producing program series and catalogues that gave the organization a lot of energy and fiscal worth, which meant that you could run things in a different way. But that may have been a direction that not everyone wanted. I see it as an ideological split. If people ask me what brought down the Funnel I would say it was the larger cultural shift from modernity to postmodernity. For me the Funnel as a collective project could not be sustained unless it was able to incorporate this shift, which would have meant that its founding ethos would have to move away from a modernist, structuralist paradigm to accepting experimental narrative, feminism and more overtly political points of view.

MIDI ONODERA: During the 1986 San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, *Ten Cents a Dance* was programmed in two separate short film evenings. The first screening that took place was called "Four from the Commonwealth." As odd as it sounds today, my film, representing the commonwealth of Canada, was shown with other short films from New Zealand, Australia and Britain. This screening took place without incident. Because of the perceived lack of lesbian works in that year's festival, the film was also programmed in an evening called "Lesbian Shorts." I did not attend the festival but was told afterwards by the Festival Director, Michael Lumpkin, that my film caused a riot to break out in the audience. The reasons for the audience reaction were mainly focused on the issue or definition of what makes a film a "lesbian film." Does the maker of the work need to be a lesbian? Does the subject matter she chooses to explore have to be a "lesbian specific" subject? Can a lesbian portray other sexualities in a film and still make a "lesbian film"? These questions, combined with the lack of lesbian-oriented work in the festival, and the ongoing tensions between the gay and lesbian communities, all contributed to this reaction.

QUESTIONS

Would the charismatic founders of the Funnel be able to let go and allow new waves of experimentalisms to flourish? Could a group that had been born out of the crises and collapse of their parent organizations (CEAC and the Toronto Filmmakers' Co-op), and that had barely survived a mountain of censorship troubles, be able to navigate the new eruptions of gender trouble and post-colonial interrogations? The Funnel's newfound success meant that other screening groups were at last willing to try their hand at exhibition, and a blizzard of local making was underway. How would this homemade utopia respond to the deep shifts in Toronto's fringe media ecology?

ENDGAME



Voyeurs 3: Edie Steiner, John Porter, Annette Mangaard in a poster shoot at the Funnel, January 6, 1986, for an upcoming performance at the Rivoli. Photo by Edie Steiner.

NEIGHBOURHOOD

Before the Internet, location was central to the project of the underground. No matter where it arose, the counterculture was also a neighbourhood — or to put it in the mantra of the real estate agents that would doom the project of the avant-garde in Toronto: location, location, location. The Funnel was not the only fringe media project in Toronto's neglected east end; there was also Fifth Column, the queer, all-women politicians whose Funnel meet-ups were part of their very own subculture of zines and fringe movies and tempo-shifting musics. Kathleen Pirrie Adams was the bass player.

KATHLEEN PIRRIE ADAMS: I'd been making music and trying to put together a band. I started playing with G.B. Jones, Caroline Azar and Janet Martin, the original members of Fifth Column. G.B. was a student at the Ontario College of Art and very knowledgeable about art. We had a shared interest in Andy Warhol and the Velvet Underground. She was the first person I met who already knew what the Funnel was and really understood what was important about linking avant-garde art practices and subversive lifestyles. The Funnel was important for feeding that impulse. We saw Vivienne Dick's films and I think we both related to her interest in transgression, in girls using violent imagery as a tool for feminism. That was our punk rock.

VIVIENNE DICK: "I was living on the Lower East Side and I didn't think when I was making movies that they were going to be shown outside of the places I was frequenting like the clubs and so on, you know? I had met some people who were making super 8 films like Scott and Beth B, and we were beginning to show work in very ad hoc places, like between bands in various places. I didn't think of myself as a filmmaker even, I was just making something to show, you know? It was like that. Which was great because I suppose if I had thought too much about it, it would have stopped me."⁵⁹

CAROLINE AZAR: I first saw Vivienne's work at the Funnel with the Scott and Beth B films. They had that raw, New York, I-don't-give-a-fuck quality. It gave us news from the streets. Here were people documenting who they were and being aware that they were interesting.

KATHLEEN PIRRIE ADAMS: Like many other people involved in subcultures, we looked to our immediate community as our principal way of interpreting

and understanding the world. When Caroline Azar joined the band she immediately brought her friends into the fold. Caroline, Midi Onodera and Candy Parker had gone to high school together. Midi was studying at the art college and had quickly established herself as an experimental filmmaker. Candy was a zine maker who set in motion a lot of important fanzines.

JUDITH DOYLE: Zine producers, weaned on the soup of pop culture, underemployed as an effect of the widening divisions of wealth resulting from economies of scale and consolidation of ownership, are electing to operate outside the mass market instead of seeking a microniche in it. The most activist of these do-it-yourself producers also boycott consumption of corporate product — some drug- and alcohol-free urban vegan punks do not buy or sell books, films or music by artists who have "crossed the line" of independent production. Zine culture is an alternative — not a stepping stone — to the mass market.

DAVID MCINTOSH: The Funnel was a place where zine culture thrived. Zine culture didn't flourish at many other artist-run centres, but it sure did at the Funnel. I've already mentioned two: *Dr. Smith* and *J.D.s*. And while we may



Fifth Column: G.B. Jones, Janet Martin, Anita Smith, Caroline Azar, 1982.
Photo by Kenneth Davison.

not want to think of zine culture as the vanguard of academic discourse, it has survived a lot longer than some of the academics we were talking about at that time. The zine producers became central to a cultural shift.

*The New Lavender Panthers (which included Fifth Column galpal Candy Parker) produced a xeroxed punk zine named J.D.s. Writing about their collective project, they insisted, "This is not art and it is not theory, it is the way we live — photos of our friends, stories people tell us."*⁶⁰

ROSABETH MOSS KANTER: "Utopians can develop their own communication channels, such as newspapers or radio stations, rather than relying on extra-community media. They can act toward the outside as a unit... In general, they can consider that their own internal affairs are more important, more valuable, than are the demands made on them by the larger society. Their separateness and uniqueness are paramount."⁶¹

WILLIAM GIBSON, writer: "Bohemias. Alternative subcultures. They were a crucial aspect of industrial civilization in the two previous centuries. They were where industrial civilization went to dream. A sort of unconscious R&D, exploring alternate societal strategies. Each one would have a dress code, characteristic forms of artistic expression, a substance of choice, and a set of sexual values at odds with those of the culture at large. And they did, frequently, have locales with which they became associated. But they became extinct."⁶²

WYNDHAM WISE: The primal scene of the underground was Warhol's Factory — that was point zero, the centre of it. A little of it came up to Toronto via people like Mike Snow and Joyce Wieland because they'd been in New York. This whole notion that Toronto could be New York has been around as long as I can remember.

KATHLEEN PIRRIE ADAMS: Early in our performance history we made a connection with John Porter at the Funnel. We invited John to project his super 8 films on us as we played. It was an obvious homage to the Velvet Underground and Warhol's Factory. We were interested in the idea of a multimedia experience much more than we were interested in being rock stars performing in any conventional sense. I think the first time we did this was when Fifth Column played a benefit gig at the Funnel in May 1982.

CAROLINE AZAR: Mostly everyone was sorely pissed at his or her family in one form or another. Perhaps this was the generation responding to Dr. Spock's baby propaganda. The idea of making families to me was aberrant back then because the family is what I was running from.

KATHLEEN PIRRIE ADAMS: The politics of everyday life and the official role of the state were part of the mix. Living a life of creativity and transforming the world were pretty involving. Was there time, space or energy left over to raise kids as well? I think for a lot of people it didn't seem so. The immediate assumption was that the family was an obsolete format for developing the self or transforming the world. I wonder if today it has reversed, if women see motherhood as a way of trying to transform the world? Parenting no longer seems like an obstacle but might even seem like the only conceivable path.

FRIEDER HOCHHEIM: For some people, having children would be an impediment to pursuing their art. The last thing on my mind was having kids.

ANNA GRONAU: I think our generation in general was less prolific kid-wise than previous or succeeding generations. There was the idea coming from the past that you couldn't be an artist and a mother at the same time, plus the idea that domesticity was oppression. I think we were doubly discouraged from considering parenthood.

KATHLEEN PIRRIE ADAMS: Age is significant in terms of the question of expectation. There was an appetite for new information. In one sense I was consuming a lot of culture from different disciplines, trying to put together a bigger picture. I wanted to understand the immediate past of cinema and rock and roll, trying to imagine what might happen next. That was enough to keep me searching and looking and consuming. So in one sense I was very much a consumer of culture, but not a very enthusiastic member of consumer culture. Bigger wasn't better. I was accumulating experiences, not things. And I was part of those scenes, those cultures. It was a way of encountering new ideas. Higher rents ate away at the most important luxury we had become used to: free time. This was also a period before people invested so much in what they consumed. It was very unusual for anyone who lived downtown to have a television or a car. People cared about what they wore, but it was almost all second hand, being creative with how you dressed was part of that lifestyle. That was the other big luxury we enjoyed:



Fifth Column: Caroline Azar, G.B. Jones, Kathleen Pirrie Adams, Janet Martin, 1983.
Photo by Edie Steiner.

urban living before brand culture took over. Can the avant-garde be a life-time passion? I don't know. I feel that for me experimental music and film have been about experiencing thresholds. Once you have experienced that threshold and revisited it once or twice it reframes your experience, and doesn't carry the same thrill.

SILVAN TOMKINS, psychologist: "Development ceases when the contribution of present information becomes primarily illustrative, as a special case of past generalization. It is not unlike the relationship within any science, between what is established and its frontier."⁶³

CAROLINE AZAR: If I saw Marina Abramovic in 1982 naked and crying in a doorway I would be shattered. If I were to see that today at the Theatre Centre I'd say, "Yawn, take a pill, bitch. Who cares?" The age when you encounter an "experimental experience" is a major part of the context.

KATHLEEN PIRRIE ADAMS: There are practices using silence in music or abstraction in film that were provocative and exciting to encounter, but it's not possible to maintain the same relationship to those formal gestures.

Today it's challenging to find new formations in experimental film. I find those transformative moments in other kinds of practices, and I don't think I'm alone in this. History is somewhere else, cultural practice has moved on. Today Harmony Korine is the Funnel. *Spring Breakers* (2012) is the new frontier. Artists like Harmony are doing things that may not exist within the same framework that gave rise to the avant-garde, but I suspect they are having a similar impact.

BAD TASTE

Utopian collectives often struggle to manage the boundaries between insider belonging and the outside. Many intentional communities foundered as external goods and styles converted groupthink into individual expression and materialism. The Funnel was an urban service organization; its community interface was primarily through its theatre, its distribution collection, informal workshops and publications. But behind its mission to nurture a growing community of anti-capitalist film artists was the development of commitment mechanisms that ensured the solidarity of an inner sanctum. There were growing tensions between the opposing desires of public service/ education and the joint sacrifice that Eric Hoffer called "the effacement of individual separateness,"⁶⁴ the group processes that convinced members that meaning and worth were derived collectively, and allowed the operation to keep rolling.

Every experience at the Funnel was not fairy dust, covered in the warm mist of recollection. If there hasn't been an extended history of the organization offered since its passing, it's at least in part because the Funnel left such a difficult taste in so many mouths. Here is my pal Steve on his first impressions. He is a veteran fringe maker, but was reluctant to use his real name because he was concerned about "a jihad from the McLarens."

STEVE SANGUEDOLCE, artist: The Funnel was unfriendly and uninviting. I only went three or four times. It was like going to an after-hours club where they do you a favour by letting you in, but if you make one wrong move, you're out. No one talked to you when you showed up; collectively they had the social aptitude of a crackhead, distant and uninterested in anything outside of themselves. I'm only saying that because the next organization

born in Toronto of which I was a part was LIFT (Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto), and it was like a daycare for novice filmmakers. So open, so welcoming.

JIM SHEDDEN, programmer: “I always felt alienated at the Funnel, like an unwanted intruder, because I was not part of ‘the crowd.’ Many people I have spoken to have just not wanted to go to the Funnel because of the sheer unpleasantness one feels just walking through the door.”⁶⁵

MIKE CARTMELL: I always felt unwelcome at the Funnel, as if I were somewhere I shouldn’t be. I wished I could be a part of it, but it was clear I could not. I was running Zone Cinema in Hamilton and gave shows to a goodly number of Funnel makers including Patrick Jenkins and John Porter. I went to many shows there, like we all did, and I was invited out to a nearby bar exactly once in 1981. The Expos were in the playoffs that year, so it must have been 1981.

DEPARTURES

The effervescent animator Patrick Jenkins wound up leaving the Funnel early, though it wasn’t crackhead manners that concerned him. Instead, in a gesture that would be repeated again and again, his interests as an artist changed. Even though he was one of the Funnel’s earliest members, he felt it was necessary to leave the organization in order to search out broader cinematic horizons.

Patrick, Martha Davis and Edie Steiner all narrate a certainty about what properly belonged to the field of experimental film. Apparently their expanding interests, which were clearly exploratory, were unwelcome. Who decided what was heretical, deviant, unwanted? The Funnel exodus was led by some of the very artists who used to be the ones everyone pointed to when they said the word “Funnel.” Many were bent on synthesizing a thousand nighttime vigils at the avant grail into movie makings that were at once deeply personal and newly sophisticated. There was a general movement towards an examination of family roots, whether in Anna Gronau’s dream masterpiece Mary Mary (1989), Edie Steiner’s Places to Stay (1991), Annette Mangaard’s diary-based drama Let Me Wrap My Arms Around You

(1992), Dave Anderson’s films about his daughter, and, of course, Midi Onodera’s The Displaced View (1988) which looked at the internment of Japanese-Canadians. Many of these productions required gear, facilities and hundreds of hours of production time. More than one artist spoke about the feeling of community that developed in long edit sessions at the LIFT co-op. Some of the most striking movies made by the Funnel faithful happened after they left the fold.

PATRICK JENKINS: About this time, in 1983 or so, I felt that the field of experimental film was too narrow for my interests; it didn’t contain all that I needed. It was supposed to be about freedom, but there was so much I couldn’t explore. I was interested in a lot of other things like humour, storytelling, music, science fiction, novels, illustration, painting, but I couldn’t figure out how to grow in experimental film. Also, I didn’t like the fact that a lot of people were very antagonistic towards experimental film. When I would tell people I was an experimental filmmaker, quite often they would tell me immediately how much they hated it. That was a hard attitude to work around.

EDIE STEINER: I decided I wanted to work in 16mm and was starting to write scripts. I was still connected to the Funnel but I decided to become involved with a different community and make a narrative film. I joined LIFT in 1985. I wanted to move into narrative filmmaking, and that wasn’t part of the mandate of the Funnel. I didn’t want to just make experimental work.

MARTHA DAVIS: I joined LIFT in 1987 after finishing *PATH* (1987) because they had good equipment and I wanted to work in 16mm. Atom Egoyan



The Displaced View by Midi Onodera, 1988.



Martha Davis in her studio at 433 Palmerston Avenue, Toronto, 1983. Photo by Edie Steiner.

was a friend from my days at Trinity College and he used to tease me that working in 16mm was where it was at, and that super 8 was for amateurs. I found myself eventually agreeing with him and I wanted to start working seriously in 16mm. I felt I couldn't do that at the Funnel. There were also philosophical differences. I wanted to make films that were more accessible and less experimental. I remember staying up all night at LIFT working away, and that gave me a feeling of belonging. I made more friends.

JOHN PORTER GETS FIRED

The Funnel wore more than a few faces in its tumultuous, exhibitionist, thrill ride of a decade, and one belonged to John Porter, the super 8 stalwart whose childhood never ended. He made beautifully inventive miniatures, hoisting his camera down the side of buildings, or spinning it around his head on a fishing line. John's operettas appeared as the culmination of something, a snowy white cap of narrow gauge cinema. In the mid-1980s he was hired as the Funnel's director, and I remember him quietly taking snapshots of everyday activities that he included in the organization's annual grant application. The application closes with a picture captioned "The Funnel's new Director John Porter after a 24 hour session preparing this O.A.C. grant application." The artist looks back at the camera in stunned confusion, pain etched into every new line on his face. He might be asking, "Why did you make me do this? How could you?"

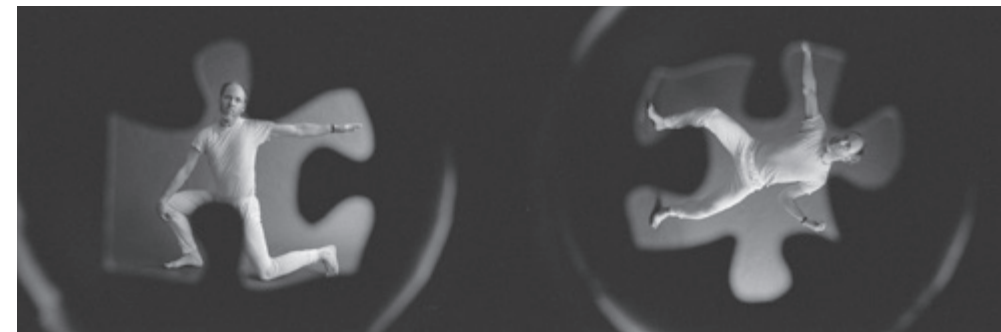
When the board of directors found out that John had applied the same wide-eyed ingenuity to his new job that he used to make movies, they were panic-stricken, and the grant was quickly rewritten at the eleventh hour, restocked with the usual administrative tried-and-truisms. What no one had noticed, however, was that in a technical error, John had written the wrong kind of grant to the Toronto Arts Council and cost the organization \$7,500 in a single misstep. John was fired as the org's director, and a jittery board split the job into two parts: a new person would be hired to look after the money, while John would remain the programmer.

JOHN PORTER: In 1986 I became the director, and then (in July) the programmer of the Funnel, and got into trouble with the Funnel board for organizing an open screening which may or may not have been illegal. Instead

of submitting the actual films to the Censor Board, we could submit a form for each film, and they would rate the movie based on the programmer's written description. "Examination by Documentation" was a lot of paperwork, and sometimes there were time constraints because the film would arrive with the filmmaker that afternoon, so you'd talk to the artist on the phone and get a verbal description. The description was a bit arbitrary, you could withhold details, but it also put the signer of the form in liability, they could be charged if there were any problems.

I submitted a form, and under the heading "Title" I wrote, "Open Screening," and for a description I wrote, "Various subjects, various content included in various films brought by filmmakers to open screenings." It was the truth, but vague. It was a game. I was testing the Board of Censors to see whether they actually read the forms or only rubber-stamped them, because often we would have a dozen or more forms per screening for programs of shorts. My open screening was approved. There was no mention of any obscene material, but they gave it an Adult Audiences Only rating, because if they couldn't see the film, it was automatically restricted.

I held this open screening without the Funnel board's specific permission. I decided I was the programmer and this is what I wanted to do. In the next board meeting I was told, "John, you should have told us, we could get into trouble. If the Board of Censors found out that this was an open screening..." I said, "But they've signed the form." They responded, "But they probably didn't read it, and if they catch us, we could be charged." I think the Censor Board would have just warned us. So I was fired partly on that account because they said they couldn't trust me. My strong position



John Porter's "Jigsaw Puzzle" pieces for his Films and Toys show in the Funnel gallery and theatre, April, 1980. Photos by John Porter.

against the Board was well known, and they were afraid that I was going to do something else. “OK, he can’t have open screenings, but what else does he have up his sleeve that is going to get us into trouble?” This was in late 1986.

DAVID ANDERSON: John’s firing wasn’t a good sign. John can be rigid about some things but he’s upfront and fair and always has the best interests of the film community in mind. His firing made me step back.

ANNETTE MANGAARD: Everybody was always talking; it was a hotbed of intrigue. There were factions that didn’t like each other. Ross and Anna were living together and then they split up. For such a small group there was a lot of infighting. What were people fighting about? “What should the Funnel do next? Whose films should be shown?” People fought over control. David McIntosh left with bad feelings; there was a lot of tension and high feelings. Then we hired John Porter who was a nice, enthusiastic guy and one of the original members. Everybody already knew John of course. He got fired while I was away on a trip to Brazil. He called me the moment I was back and told me that he’d been fired, but that it wasn’t legal because the entire board wasn’t present. I had no idea he would be fired before I left... I had no way of knowing who was doing a good job and who wasn’t. I had agreed to sit on the board only because they needed another body. I told John I was sorry, that I didn’t know anything about what had happened. I felt really bad.

SHARON COOK: I hated firing John Porter but it seemed like there was no choice. I think he remembers it right — something about an open screening. At the time I was vice president of the Funnel so the task fell upon me, although I was not alone when we did it. I then became the interim programmer. At first I was just going to do it until someone could be found, but I liked it so I stayed on.

JUDY GOUIN, Ontario Arts Council officer, 1987 assessment report: “This organization has always been controversial, and has always suffered from political infighting. As it has been until very recently virtually the sole resource for experimental filmmakers, particularly for exhibition, conflicts were probably inevitable. By the same token, however, expectations for the Funnel have always been high. The change of administration in the past year was a cause for optimism. Unfortunately, the caution expressed by

the advisors has been attributable to more or less the same factors from several previous years. It seems unlikely that substantial change will take place without provocation from outside the organization.”⁶⁶

THE MEETING: OCTOBER 1986

There were 1,001 nights at the Funnel, though one has been brought forward in members’ recollections more often than any other. For many it was the turning point, the moment when the expansionist hopes of the organization died.

JUDITH DOYLE: On October 5, 1986 there was an annual general meeting where we had a debate about opening up the membership.

DOT TUER: There was a widespread sense of being excluded, but I felt I was part of the inner sanctum. There was a history I didn’t share but I didn’t feel like an outsider. Not everyone was adopted so readily. Some people tried to be part of the Funnel “family” for years but their adoption papers never came through.

ANNETTE MANGAARD: The Funnel felt like a family. I wasn’t part of the core family at the Funnel, I was a second cousin, and welcomed in that role.

DOT TUER: The number of full-member volunteers and their energy were ebbing, while at the same time there were artists producing really great work who wanted to become more involved. How did you become a full member? The closed group had to vote you in. C’mon. A lot of our volunteer labour was coming from associates at that point, they were doing almost as much work as full members — couldn’t we at least let them vote?

JIM ANDERSON: I think I would have been in favour of Dot’s motion. How could I say no to Dot? Was it again a case of, are people here for the right reasons? Perhaps associate members would inundate the membership.

DOT TUER: Yet my proposition was seen as far too radical by the historical figures. That’s when I became un-adopted. I was a full board member with quite a bit of authority, but every person who had been there from the Funnel’s beginning voted against my proposition. Every single one. They saw

opening the organization as a threat to its fundamental ethos, and voted for the status quo. At the time it was heartbreaking and a lot of us were upset. When the motion was forwarded, I wish there had been a tape recorder because the discourse was so venomous, accusatory and defamatory that there was no going back. The old guard said such horrible things: “You’re interlopers, it’s a coup, how dare you, you ingrates, you bad adopted children.” It was the ugliness of that meeting that drove people away.

JUDITH DOYLE: Many associate members had been participating at the Funnel for years. And some had come to occupy queer spaces, politically and socially engaged spaces. This is who was being barred from participating. Why would an organization bar a significant portion of its membership from voting? When you have to entrench a membership in that way then I think there’s a structural flaw, because in a democratic system one hopes to enfranchise as many actively interested people as possible.

DOT TUER: Over the years I’ve been in different groups and they always end the same way. People refuse to open the group up, because opening it up means new ideas and change. But if groups don’t have new ideas and change they atrophy.



Jim Anderson, Dot Tuer, Paul McGowan, Edie Steiner, John Porter, Jan 22, 1994.
Photo by John Porter.

DAVID MCINTOSH: I was at the meeting where it [Dot’s motion] was turned down. I was allowed to become a full member after my resignation in March 1986. Midi had resigned a month earlier, and I felt it was time to move on to allow the organization to regenerate itself. The membership application was a Byzantine process; I can’t remember if I had to have a spanking or what was involved. Half a year after I resigned, the issue of privilege and opening up the membership came to a head with the October vote. After the vote I don’t think I ever set foot in that place again.

ROSS MCLAREN: Many people had put in so much sweat equity, the idea of allowing it to become a wide-open store where anyone could pay money and get services done was not what we wanted. There was a democratic vote for the kind of membership that would keep the place directed internally, rather than being dictated by external situations. And without getting into naming names, some people play politics as a sport. There was an attempted coup and they lost, and they took away their toys, and bad-mouthed the situation.

DAVID MCINTOSH: The core understanding of everyone at the Funnel was that more voices were better, let a thousand voices speak. We were always trying to bring more people in. As you know, that project failed, the Funnel died over that. But the idea was simple: the more people that can self-represent, the more we are liberated from the requirements of industrial cinema and its capitalist underpinnings. If you put technology into people’s hands they will self-determine how and what they will say. This is very different from other models of vanguard movements where a core group of people lead the way, and once everyone else realizes the error of their ways they get on board and you have a revolution. This is the core vanguard model of political revolution that occurred in places like Cuba. But it was superseded by the Zapatista movement, which was about interconnection and horizontality, not a small elite galvanizing the masses.

REAL ESTATE

Shortly after the decisive vote, the Funnel got caught up in a wave of warehouse renovations that had begun to sweep the city clean of a new generation of post-punk musicians and anyone looking for a way to live outside

the code. The Funnel's building was sold to someone determined to make his investment pay back with dispatch. Starting November 1, 1986 the annual rent would go up from \$10,800 to \$15,600. There were vague promises to fix the heating and clean up the toilets. But where the old landlord saw a rundown building in a neighbourhood that remains neglected thirty years later, the new boss saw a hardworking group that had built their own theatre — surely they would pay any price to keep it rolling, even if it meant raising the jack 45%. The response to the landlord's gambit was curious. Faced with a daunting cost escalation the Funnel decided to ask for more room.

IAN COCHRANE: Melinda Rooke was hired [after John Porter's firing] because we needed someone who had more contacts with the funding bodies, a professional administrator who indeed was not an “insider,” to negotiate with the Canada Council and the province, and to help the Funnel make the transition that the CC especially were pushing very strenuously. We were told that if we didn't move we might have our funding removed. It was a way of forcing the Funnel to re-examine its position politically, in my opinion. So hiring Melinda was seen as a strategic way to move forward. It became apparent to us, certainly to me, that we had to show the Canada Council that we were willing to open up our organization by moving outside of our little circle.

DOT TUER: Hiring Melinda Rooke was a huge mistake because she didn't have the collective interests of the institution in mind. She didn't care about art; she was a bookkeeper. And secondly, the advice she gave them was terrible. She told them, “Overspend and you'll get bailed out.” What sane accountant gives advice like this? An accountant's role is to say, “No, you must stick to the budget.” It's the director's role and the collective's role to be visionary and tromp off like Don Quixote tilting at windmills. It's never the accountant's job to recommend reckless financial spending, which is precisely what I heard she did. Even before the move she wanted to expand within the building itself.

MELINDA ROOKE, Funnel annual operations grant: “During the month of October 1986 Melinda Rooke and Gary McLaren negotiated with the new landlord for the empty space across the hall. It was necessary to act quickly for the opportunity for this additional 1,000 square feet would not be a long



Anti-arts-cutbacks march down Yonge Street with Peter Gress holding Funnel banner painted by Jim Anderson, March 16, 1985. Photo by John Porter.

one. The Funnel was poised on fulfilling a promise to the filmmaking community; developing the first production studio space for artists developing the medium of film. While this move did relieve some of the pressures of overcrowding, it did not provide the best solution — namely, a more accessible location and larger facility. In the months of November, December, and January, we continued the hunt for new space. While the contingency plan of renting additional space across the hall was helping to relieve the pressure of cramped facilities, it was not an adequate solution though a speedy and necessary compromise.”⁶⁷

PAUL MCGOWAN: After ten years we were burnt out and could now afford to hire management. So the Funnel brought in a former Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals manager [Melinda Rooke]. The beginning of the end arrived in a tweed skirt. She was a nice lady who loved animals and carried a streak of megalomania (in my opinion — I've been wrong before). There were a number of us who didn't like the idea of bureaucracy being part of a punk/anarchist-era arts collective. It turns out we were right, and a lot of good that did us.

THE MOVE

John's firing and the failure to open up the membership structure caused both the membership and screening attendance to plummet. There was also growing competition for audiences. The Innis Film Society was rolling out avant movies each week, and networking king Marc Glassman was busy showing work all over the city. The Funnel was no longer the only game in town, but in the backrooms Funnel mandarins plotted countermoves.

MELINDA ROOKE, Funnel annual operations grant: "Realizing we could lose no time in hesitating, negotiations with the property management of 11 Soho Street were begun immediately...11 Soho Street is a two storey building, designated in zoning as industrial space, making the rent an agreeable \$8.50/sq ft gross for the first year. We will now have two editing rooms with an adjacent lounge and a 1,600 square foot shooting studio with an



Sharon Cook in her studio, 1985. Photo by Edie Steiner.

ample lighting grid...In addition we are installing a temperature-controlled vault for our growing film collection. Our film laboratory facilities will now be located in the basement of 5 Soho (right next door) and will include separate areas for animation, optical printing, contact printing, a stills darkroom, a film preparation area and another lounge."⁶⁸

SHARON COOK: By the time I became the programmer, the Funnel was already well established as a venue for experimental film and related media. Good international connections had been forged, so it was relatively simple to organize visiting filmmakers to screen their work in person. But there was a problem. Audience numbers had been progressively dwindling. I remember apologizing to Adele Friedman for the poor turnout for her screening. Unless you were Stan Brakhage (a sold-out show), you weren't going to fill the theatre. The solution it seemed was to move to the Queen Street West district, and so a new theatre was built on Soho Street. I remember slightly increased foot traffic at the new location. The numerous films that I programmed are now one giant blur and oddly I remember the filmmakers more than individual films. I remember things like how one filmmaker (Rose Lowder) was aghast at having to eat at a food court and drink from a can before a screening at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

ROSS MCLAREN: The board felt that the Funnel's international reputation deserved a more central place in the city. And the landlord was trying to force them out, always shutting off the heat — it was a hassle. It wasn't a unanimous vote, but the board decided to move downtown, thinking they would be able to get more funding. But the artists left at the Funnel were largely young people who had no voice at any of the arts councils. When they moved they were financially stable, but grants were denied by various juries who realized that the organization didn't have political clout.

JIM ANDERSON: I was in favour of the move. I realized that rent was going to be a lot higher, but in principle I was in favour of being in a more central place, closer to the art scene. The bars and pandemonium. If the theatre was in the Soho area, it was more likely to get people coming to screenings. Though the prospect of a move was overwhelming.

PAUL MCGOWAN: The board decided to move. They had been assured by management that she could raise the money to pay for the new renovation and buy new equipment for the new (expensive) rental space, on trendy, hip

Queen West. Our new manager felt certain the grants to move and upgrade were a lock — the board bought in, and I found myself involved in another renovation. This was the third major reno of the Funnel in ten years.

DOT TUER: I had already left the Funnel by 1988 when there was a decision to move. It's as if they tried to relive that heroic moment by building another theatre, in the belief that it would bring everyone back together again. But of course it was a different historical moment in terms of people's ability to volunteer time; funding structures; a decimated membership; and the rise of postmodernity that challenged what some would say was an insular notion of the avant-garde.

MARK ROGERS, cultural critic: "The Funnel moved to 11 Soho Street in the heart of Toronto's Queen Street strip in the fall of 1987 and began to renovate the 5,010-square-foot space."⁶⁹

IAN COCHRANE: David Bennell was in charge of the new theatre, but we didn't have the bodies ready and willing to work that there had been in the previous theatre incarnations. David worked on it himself, and I helped him now and again but was working full-time as usual. [A few months later] I returned and took over, with David's help, the finishing of the theatre in the new space so we could try to get some people in to see some shows. Some dodgy scheme with UI (Unemployment Insurance) was brought forward so that Gary McLaren could continue to provide technical services to what remained of our membership. It took so long because there were only a few people working on it, and we all had jobs as well.

PAUL MCGOWAN: The Soho renovation caught me by surprise, frankly. There was a budget, apparently, to hire some drywallers so I wasn't needed. I'm pretty sure the budget got blown pretty quickly as there wasn't much going on when I was there. It wasn't long before we started to lose the necessary cash flow to finish building the new space. David Bennell did show me the double walls for soundproofing the recording studio. Everything was done right in the sense that it would be well built. But soundproofed, sand-filled walls were as far as the new space ever got. The theatre was dead on arrival. More than ironic. There were walls and dusty floors but no risers; there was enough space for forty to eighty seats, for offices, a studio and a lab space. Yet an unpleasant feeling or intuition of stalled energy pervaded the space — something was undeniably wrong. I recall asking about the

missing risers, and why there weren't any materials to work with...there was no lumber or at least not enough to build with. It was something of a mystery as to where anything had got to; I can only suppose the money had dried up. I never did get any answers about where the equipment went: where was the animation stand, optical printer, the editing gear? It was all very unsettling.

MUNRO FERGUSON: Pascal Sharp and I received a small Ontario Arts Council grant to make *Western Civilization* (1988), which was a reprise of our Mr.-Potato-Head-in-the-Oedipus-story, but now we wanted to parody western views of civilization. The film began with Genesis and ended with the death of Elvis. We worked with models, sets and cardboard costumes. When it turned out there was money left over, my hope was that we would keep on adding scenes. But when we finished, Pascal wanted to use the rest of the money to buy lumber to build the raked floor the seats would be bolted into at the Funnel's new theatre on Soho Street.

JOHN PORTER: It took them forever to build the theatre, six months or something, because they had so little help. I went by when it was being built to pick up posters, but anytime I went, there was no work being done. There was a pool table or a ping pong table, and just a couple of people who couldn't work because they were waiting for someone else. I heard from volunteers that they were told that work would be done at a certain time but then no one was there to let them in. It was indicative of the low spirits that they couldn't build a theatre in a month like we did the first time.

DAVID CRAIG, Film, Photography and Video Officer, Ontario Arts Council: The renovation stalled because they ran out of money. The equipment was sitting in Gary's apartment, and artists in the community were convinced that with the renovation running aground, the equipment would go to New York. That was one of the main concerns.

MONEY PROBLEMS

In October 1987 there was a very sparsely attended annual general meeting where Gary McLaren and company said it would all be fine. But shortly after they signed the lease, the building was reassessed by the city, and the

Funnel's new share of taxes was \$11,000, more than a year's rent on their old space.⁷⁰ This was another secret that had to be kept from the membership. By November, just a month after the annual general meeting, the entire staff was laid off because there was no money left to pay them. Plans for a five-star, avant-garde equipment centre and lab were abandoned. The deficit by the end of September was a vertigo-inducing \$36,706.⁷¹

Melinda and Gary had undertaken a daring gamble to put the Funnel back into the spotlight, refurbish its token gear shelves and mobilize a new downtown audience. Even after the membership exodus, the shaky cash decisions, and the interminable construction delays it could all be salvaged with a single government grant. It was called CFIP, and provided wheelbarrows of cash for building or renovations. It was a provincial horseshoe, and required the feds to kick in as well. This proved to be a big "if" clause. If you had one puzzle piece, but not the other, you had nothing. The Funnel's CFIP grant was approved by the province, but they had to get the feds to ante up. Unfortunately the feds lost the application and no one at the Funnel followed up. An eleventh-hour bank loan was refused. All of the Funnel's financial projections crumbled when this single grant didn't come through, even as the organization poured thousands of dollars of government grants into the pockets of their insatiable Queen Street landlord.⁷²

COLLABORATIONS

*Without a theatre, efforts were made to decentralize programming, and seek out other groups to partner with. From October 2-4, 1987 the Funnel held hands with the Artculture Resource Centre to co-produce Phillip Barker's wondrous multimedia spectacle *Trust a Boat* on Queen Street. On a blustery fall evening, we stood in congested knots on one of Toronto's busiest streets waiting for the arrival of darkness when nine warehouse windows lit up, each with a projector behind it, unveiling a lavish surrealist spectacle of childhood discovery.*

PHILLIP BARKER, filmmaker: "*Trust a Boat* started as an idea I had from watching windows when I was living in Amsterdam on the fifth floor. Across the street were a series of apartments where people all seemed to do

things at the same time, like at eleven o'clock they'd watch the news. They would all be watching one of the two Dutch TV channels so the rooms were all lit up with one colour or another. It created very graphic patterns running through the building. [For *Trust a Boat*] the original 35mm film was cut into nine 16mm films that were rear-projected upon nine windows of a building. In the opening live segment, nine performers each occupy a window and act out choreographed movements in silhouette against paper screens — their habitual everyday routines seem paradoxical when seen together. These live elements are gradually blended into and replaced by the rear projection of a film, raising the question: which image is 'real' and which is film? Each of the nine windows contains a segment of the total image, as if the entire building were an aquarium; or a woman's face, colossal in size, spread over four windows and pressed against the glass; huge



Marianna Ebbers in *Trust a Boat* by Philip Barker, 1986. Photo by Philip Barker.

hands taking up two windows; a high angle shot of people walking over a zebra crossing which occupies all nine windows. The resulting feeling of disorientation is a condition with which the artist enjoys working. Cast adrift, as it were, by these disorientations, the viewer's imagination has to come to the rescue and provide a kind of logic suited to the conditions."⁷³

We didn't have a clue what it meant and we didn't care. All of that useless beauty made us believe in something larger than ourselves, and it was a hit to watch all of those exacting clockwork calibrations aimed at such a loosely fanciful wanderlust. Later that fall, in a stab at fringe movie solidarity that was an early picture of what later became the Images Festival, Annette Mangaard and I set up a barroom screening ("New Waves in Cinema") that brought together the city's two film co-ops (the Funnel and LIFT), along with an indie distributor.

ANNETTE MANGAARD: In 1986 I was on a westbound streetcar when Marc Glassman [former owner of Pages Bookstore, and film curator/writer] walked on. A number of local artists had been turned down by the international film festival and I said, "It's crazy, they don't show video art, they only screen a handful of local films. We should start our own festival and be inclusive." Marc said, "Yes, why don't we?" I got together a number of people.



Gary McLaren at the Funnel, 1985. Photo by Annette Mangaard.

Marc was great because he knew film and video artists. Kim Tomczak and Lisa Steele, b.h. Yael, Marg Moores and Richard Fung came to a meeting. The idea was to show both film and video, particularly experimental work, and video art that was more political. TIFF felt far away and removed; this would be a festival for us. We'd been having screenings called "New Waves in Cinema" at the Rivoli that you and I cooked up, and lots of people would come. Clearly there was an audience for this work. The Images Festival grew out of a need to show these two communities together.

LAST CALL: APRIL 7, 1988

With the organization drowning in debt, and a community increasingly concerned that it was losing a staple fringe resource, local movie artists invited the Funnel and the arts councils to work out a solution.

GARY POPOVICH: There was a big meeting that the arts councils called, probably at our request. We (at the CFMDC) had been having discussions amongst ourselves in informal scrums about what to do with the Funnel. One of our primary worries was that the equipment wasn't accessible; this was gear that had been specifically earmarked for experimental filmmakers but was now only available to a small group of people. The councils were also concerned because the amount of money going to the Funnel was substantial but served so few. When we got to the meeting Gary McLaren and the Funnel remainders looked besieged, they weren't happy with us coming into their space hoping to make changes. It felt like they were threatened and saw us as usurpers. Gary always seemed silent and closed, worried, perhaps scared. I remember feeling both a sense of responsibility and that their project had gone awry. We were trying to fix it for the community that they had supported so well in the past years, but now they were floundering. We wanted to hold the meeting in their space because we thought it would make them feel more comfortable. The Funnel had become a closed shop run by a tight little group that wasn't letting the community enter. Essentially we wanted to open up the organization.

GARY MCLAREN, media artist, Funnel equipment manager, then Funnel director: "The past year has been one of transition and growth. We have moved to a more central, accessible, higher profile location that has already

shown advantages through a dramatic rise in attendance in the past few weeks. We have a new theatre, workable offices, and an exhibition space in the lobby...We are expanding the use of the facility to include theatre and performance events, as well as gallery exhibitions. Our activity level and profile are rising as the public learns of our new location.”⁷⁴

Pushed and pulled by exhausted funds and a hungry landlord, the few remaining Funnel members made a pitch to media artists and organizations to come and rent their space. After all the backroom fire breathings, the exchanges at this meeting were polite and faraway, until at last a real question hit the floor.

ARTIST: “Would you be willing to open up the membership and allow some of the many who have left the Funnel to return in order to program the theatre?”

DAVID BENNELL, Funnel founder: “The meeting wasn’t called to answer questions like that. The membership is closed...”

PAUL MCGOWAN: “The Funnel members are acting like cornered rats. I’m interested in a forum for change, not in backstabbing.”

BETTY FERGUSON, filmmaker: “The building of the Funnel was a heroic act, these people should be congratulated.”

JIM ANDERSON: “Is the Funnel building a heroic act, or is it a problem that so few people were involved?”⁷⁵

IAN COCHRANE: I think it was at this point that the big meeting you mentioned occurred. I remember going, but I don’t remember much about it. I think I, not to mention everyone else involved, was exhausted. I believe it was a last ditch attempt to see if any groups in the community had any ideas for or interest in helping the space go forward, in any way it could. The problem of the membership and access to gear was that this was tied closely to the Funnel’s identity as a centre for artists rather than a purely filmmaking center. I think there had been neither the time nor energy required to re-conceptualize the Funnel without the restrictions that had been in effect (no commercial use, etc.). It seems kind of old-fashioned now, but this was one of the major sticking points preventing change there.



Stephen Niblock, 1984. Photo by Annette Mangaard.

CLOSING TIME

In May 1988, hoping to salvage an increasingly difficult situation, Francoyse Picard, the media arts officer at Canada Council, offered an eleventh-hour proposal/demand. To make clear he was being asked to stab himself in his own back, Funnel director Gary McLaren underlined her name in his response.

GARY MCLAREN: “Francoyse Picard of the Canada Council has suggested to the Funnel that a restructuring of the access to the facilities of the organization would be beneficial to the film community and the Funnel. She suggested that the Funnel retain the lease of the current Soho space and that equipment, exhibition and office space be shared in some manner with LIFT, the CFMDC, the Toronto Animation Society and the A Space Film Committee, with each organization retaining its specificity of purpose.”⁷⁶

After the groups declined, the Funnel’s landlord also put a hex on any idea of groups coming together in his building. More bad news followed. The Toronto Arts Council became the first funder to bail, and the gear was moved back to Gary McLaren’s living room. In a final humiliation, in order to break

the lease they couldn't afford even when they were being funded to the hilt, they were asked to remove the theatre they had finished less than half a year ago. Seats were donated to Hamilton Arts Inc. In July, Ontario Arts Council officer Judy Gouin had a lengthy chitchat with Funnel mainstay and board chair David Bennell.

JUDY GOUIN: “[David Bennell] sees the Funnel as being essentially the organization it always was: small, ‘underground,’ largely fluid but with a consistent central core. This makes sense of its history, in particular the increasing insularity of recent years, and the defensiveness of the past ten months which finally exhausted the sympathies of the rest of the experimental film community. The Funnel, once its core members have recovered from the trauma of this year, will probably take shape again in much the same way as it did in the earliest days at 507 King Street East. A permanent exhibition space is something that it will almost assuredly not have. Three cinemas (one was rebuilt to conform to new fire regulations) were built in less than ten years entirely with volunteer labour, and it is unlikely that this will happen again. Although very serious errors were made by both the administrator and the board in moving to the new space, the major error



Edie Steiner, 1985.
Photo by Ellen Higton-Maloney.



Funnel poster, April 1989.

was in not seeking the assistance of the Councils last August when things started to go really wrong. The attitude apparently was, ‘we mustn’t tell the Councils or we’ll lose our funding.’ This is of course untrue. Had the Councils been told at that time, and been able to work on the Funnel’s behalf, I’m sure that we would have a vital operation at 11 Soho Street today.”⁷⁷

MARC GLASSMAN: When David McIntosh left in 1986, everything changed, the Funnel sunk into invisibility. Anna and Michaelle had been great directors. David was amazing, he had such a brain, and he was very collaborative in those days. After David what happened? That was a moment when there should have been a hiring process. I guess when Gary came in he felt he had to save his brother’s dream. I found him [Funnel director Gary McLaren] a difficult person to talk to. I have it in my head that he was a taciturn guy who didn’t say very much. You know what I was like in those days, I was probably effusive. I told him that I was looking forward to being neighbours and that I would be happy to help in any way, and he just stood and looked at me. I’m surprised I wasn’t asked to help at all. I don’t think I was ever physically in the new building; I was never invited and never went to a screening.

KATHLEEN PIRRIE ADAMS: When the Funnel’s venue on King Street shut down there was a big time lag between that closing and the new venue starting up. I lost the habit. I went to the new theatre on Soho once and didn’t enjoy myself there. I didn’t like the environment for some reason. It’s partly about the changes I had already made; I didn’t need that anymore.

ELDON GARNET: When the Funnel announced their move I knew it was the end. It felt like they were trying to regroup but it didn’t work. When the Funnel moved to King Street and built their first theatre it required a major collective force. I don’t know if the Funnel had that kind of collective energy when they moved to Soho Street. I felt they didn’t.

JOHN PORTER: The Funnel held screenings for less than a year on Soho Street, then lost funding, which meant that they had to give up their lease. They would have to tear down the whole facility that they’d just built, which would break their hearts. I didn’t think they would have any gumption left to go on.

EDIE STEINER: I think promised funding didn't come through for the new space and that's what caused the demise of the Funnel. Some thought the new space wasn't affordable. By the time they moved, I was no longer a member. I visited the new space but it felt very different, it didn't have the same sense of energy or community, and a lot of people I knew had moved on. I was already part of another community and had met a lot of new people. I was less interested in what happened at the Funnel and it seemed that only a short time passed before the Funnel no longer existed.

CINEMA CANADA

After the closing of the Funnel's Soho Street theatre, Cinema Canada, the national house organ for cinemas large and small, ran a short memorial by Wyndham Wise entitled "The Funnel Down the Tube." Funnel director Gary McLaren, who was now hosting all of the gear in a warehouse space he shared with his girlfriend and new Funnel VP Heather Evelyn (another one of Ross's students), shot back this reply: "Clearly advantage has been taken of the Funnel during our move to Soho...By infiltrating and dominating support structures on all levels, these state-artists influenced the perceptions of the powerful few, sufficiently to cause dramatic and unprecedented funding cuts. Enter the Councils; a largely corrupted and abusive system where a finite group share turns at granting money to each other. It is a system where artistic creation takes a backseat to careerism and personal vendettas. Naturally, all actions are clouded by vague policy statements and trumped-up criticisms, and secret advisory panels. Perhaps they wear hoods at meetings to protect themselves from themselves."⁷⁸

WYNDHAM WISE: Part of my job for *Cinema Canada* was writing monthly news briefs. One of the items I came across noted the Funnel closing. I wrote it up and after it was published Ross McLaren came into my office in the basement of 67 Portland and tried to rip into me. He was pissed because I'd got it right. He wanted me to retract the notice, how dare I? I said, "Ross, let's talk about the equipment. Where's the equipment?" You know where the Funnel's equipment was? In his basement. You know how I know that? Because he told me so. I've seen stories on the web about

the Funnel's equipment disappearing. Well it didn't disappear — when the grants ran out Ross stripped the place and walked away with everything. The equipment didn't disappear, it went into his bank account. I don't like dealing with people like that. I've met more scum in the film business, but it was never so personal.

LAST DANCE

David Craig was the new person in charge of media arts at the Ontario Arts Council, one of two key funders for the Funnel. If David and his Canada Council counterpart Francoyse Picard could be convinced that the Funnel would float, the club could re-muster in an architecture-free setting.

DAVID CRAIG: On November 16, 1988 there was a delegation from the Funnel that came to see me. It included Gary McLaren, David Bennell and Mikki Fontana. They had come because I was new, and they wanted to update their situation. There was such an atmosphere of paranoia on their part about whether or not funding would continue. They had heard some of the concerns that artists had about the equipment. There was a concern that whatever resources the Funnel had were being sequestered under the devious command of Ross McLaren. People were saying Gary, the new Funnel director, didn't have any real authority, that he was acting completely under the orders of Ross. I suggested they submit a revised proposal with a financial update.

GARY MCLAREN, revised Ontario Arts Council proposal: "We are proud to say that we have successfully pulled the Funnel away from the grips of bankruptcy. Debt management reached a scale that the Funnel has never required to deal with in the past. We have taken charge to correct the misrepresentations and financial errors of the past administrator. We have worked double-time to fulfill the organization's commitments to councils. The physical work of renovations was being carried out at the Soho location, in order to restore full operations. Additional energy was gathered to respond to criticisms from the independent film community. The most difficult responsibility which we have answered to was the irony

and collective heartbreak involved in moving out of the Soho space. We envisioned 11 Soho to be a community centre, designed to encourage film activity, with room enough to accommodate the next ten years of expansion. An analysis of the value of the Funnel's past activities and its technical and archival resources has led us to re-assess our current priorities. We have now returned to the most fundamental of our ideals; to promote an exchange of thought among people, by presenting filmmakers' work in a public forum; by making available a collection of artist' films, and a library of books, journals and periodicals; by keeping open international contacts for exchange; and as artists, by producing our own work."⁷⁹

DAVID CRAIG: When they submitted the new proposal I organized an assessment committee: Jane Perdue, Seth Feldman, Marc Glassman, Annette Mangaard, Gary Popovich, Barbara Fischer, Martha Davis, James Quandt. In a jury process, the jury has complete autonomy over their decisions. If they say, this number of people will receive grants and these people won't, that doesn't get tampered with. But with an assessment, it's the officer's responsibility to make a recommendation to the board, predicated on the advisor's comments. I spoke with a number of different advisors, some in person, some over the phone. I spent a lot of time talking to people about the Funnel. There was definitely the feeling that the Funnel had to get beyond themselves and become a more public organization. The group that was the Funnel at that time weren't really capable of making the turnaround, they certainly didn't have a lot of support from the community, and there was a sense that it was becoming a morass and throwing more money at it wasn't going to make it better. When I went through the proposal the numbers didn't work for me, and my sense was that I couldn't really support funding it.

The procedure was that after the advisors weighed in, I would have to write a detailed memo to the board describing the situation, the determinations of the advisory process, my analysis of the budget and final recommendation. I was quite trepidatious about it because it isn't very often that you close down an organization's funding. I knew a lot of people involved, some were friends or professional colleagues. The proposal was filled with grand plans for the new theatre but I thought that there wasn't enough tangible evidence to support them. There was a sense that what was in the application didn't reflect what was going on whatsoever. That was one of



Annette Mangaard in performance. Photo by Annette Mangaard.

the most difficult things. It all sounds good on paper, so why am I getting all these phone calls? People would ring me up and say, "You're not going to fund the Funnel, are you?" It was a weird situation. Why would I spend that much money on a project that was going to fail? But I was paranoid; I thought, I had just come into this job and the first thing I do is kill the Funnel. That was definitely part of my thinking at the time. I was the guy who killed the Funnel. But my strong sense was that the community was fed up, and I made the recommendation not to support them. And subsequently the fallout was a whimper not a bang. They all disappeared.

MUNRO FERGUSON: The Funnel was definitely not for everybody. Maybe its exclusivity was its downfall; like every organization the best thing about it was ultimately its weakness. What made it great was that it was a club, a tight group of people, a community.

ANNETTE MANGAARD: The Funnel felt like a small, secret society. We were underground. Today there are people who have big bad feelings about the place, there's a huge amount of emotion, even though twenty-four years have gone by. I don't have those feelings myself, but others do. Some people thought they owned the Funnel, like Ross and his brother Gary, so at the

end when Gary took all the equipment into his own space, it created bad feelings. I don't think it was legal.

MARC GLASSMAN: Organizations often start with a charismatic leader. Through charm and drive such individuals gather the necessary energy and people. At some point that relationship sours: the mission and mandate, the organization itself begins to change, only the charismatic figure can't see it. He or she is blind to changes, much like many parents are blind to their kids. S/he doesn't see that the child is now an adult, that it's time to pull back and let them make their own choices. This happens everywhere — at art galleries, film festivals, organizations small and large. So I feel sympathetic towards Ross McLaren and the other people who started the Funnel in the 70s. Starting something is major, but at some point you should leave. It's almost in the DNA that someone with so much oomph finds it hard to say, "Oh, you mean I shouldn't be around anymore?" It seems to me that the original group had run out of energy and wouldn't let new people come in to breathe new life into the Funnel.

ROSS MCLAREN: I can't speak with any authority on the subject because I moved to New York in 1986. It would seem that "the community," meaning a select and secret group of people who had the ear of the councils, successfully denigrated the Funnel's efforts and had the funding transferred to their own interests. I saw some of them sliming around when I was at Images [Festival in Toronto] and the Exis Festival in Seoul last year. They are still bad dressers, looked much older and generally seemed miserable.

JUDITH DOYLE: I object to the idea that the Funnel was sabotaged by outside forces. There seemed to be a lot of struggling between members to control and own the space. Maybe they felt they had sweat equity, that the space belonged to *them*, not some Johnny-come-lately associate members, but look what they were left with. Without an engagement with the broader community, there was nothing to feed the project. Since 1994, the dissemination of film has changed so radically that the old models are hardly recognizable. But in the late 70s and early 80s, we focused on what a space meant, and how film and video were made possible via that space. It's a very different context in which to think about the project of the Funnel. It sets into relief the idea that one could control a space and the dissemination of experimental film.

DOT TUER: For me, the most important thing about the Funnel was that by participating in a community, people made work together and for each other. If it was just a social club, that would be relational. The Funnel was a shared and collective project to think about and make films. It closed because the project was based on a certain notion of experimental cinema. The Funnel unravelled not only from interpersonal issues, but around questions of what constituted experimental cinema, and where it should be going.

PETER CHAPMAN: Our screenings of artists' work with the artists present were part science demonstration and part philosophical presentation. Was one watching a sacrament and a sermon, or an experiment before the Royal Society? I remember a time when we really didn't know what to do with cinema, so we made it do all kinds of stuff. We watched what each other did and some of us chose to think about it and bring those thoughts into the next thing that we made. Toronto had a lot of catching up to do. I lived at a time when that was important and there was a value attached to that.

JUDITH DOYLE: I remember the intensity of the after-screening debates about what should be screened at the Funnel. What kind of distribution exchanges would occur, who would the visiting artists be? Feminist objectives were pronounced, queercore investigations floated, even the possibility of queering traditional texts. How did Jack Smith put it? "Meet me at the bottom of the swimming pool." He had a lifelong self-identification with poverty and writing about artistic exploitation. Can't we read this as an intersection of class conditions and queer desire? The debates leading to the crisis point weren't necessarily about the films themselves but about how they were framed, how meaning was understood. The old guard at the Funnel may have felt they were losing the homogeneous space they practiced in since the beginning, but this isn't exactly true, because when you go back to the antecedents of the Funnel — the open screenings at CEAC — we see a highly politicized space. How did we wind up at the end of the 80s with this cramped and defensive stance, fearing that the true Funnel was going to turn into a hotbed of identity politics? I'm not sure what the fear was. The Funnel founders supported increasingly rigid ideas of experimentalism that kept a guarded distance from video art and documentary media. They were committed to certain lines of practice and

interpretation and actively resisted perceived deviation. Understanding this situation in terms of a politics of difference might help make sense of why the Funnel fell apart.

MARTIN RUMSBY, media artist, film collector and exhibitor: In Toronto, the scene seemed beset by factionalism related to ownership of the idea and practice of avant-garde cinema...Then all the equipment went missing, creating a great smoke cloud that has never really dispersed. [Funnel president] David Bennell was pretty bitter about it all as it unfolded. [One of the few remaining Funnel members] Ian Cochrane probably knows a lot, but then David hauled off with Ian's girlfriend in the middle of it and everything really turned to custard.

ELDON GARNET: I wasn't surprised when the Funnel closed; CEAC was more of a surprise. CEAC's closing was a failure of Toronto. The Funnel's closing came from a lack of collective drive and purpose; super 8 was dead by then, video was taking over. Shooting super 8 today is unnecessary and expensive; it's mannerist. I don't think the Funnel was necessary any longer. It had lived out its mandate.

JIM ANDERSON: Why should the Funnel continue? We'd already got things started, so experimental film had a more visible presence, and there were other groups working. Maybe the Funnel didn't have to go on anymore.

MICHAELLE MCLEAN: I got involved in 1978 and left in 1984; that's six years of cleaning toilets and that was enough. I think I was totally burned out. I had worked seventy-five hours a week without a lot of money in return. I think we accomplished a huge amount, but I don't think we realized the cost. The concept of burnout just wasn't there. Maybe it's youth; you don't know that there are limits to what you can take mentally and physically. The work fell to too few people. Many people contributed, but if one is cleaning the toilets, and writing the grant applications, and taking an artist out to lunch, introducing a screening, doing a question and answer period, taking them out for drinks, taking them home, getting up in the morning... well, there's only a certain number of years you can do that before you burn out. Hunger doesn't make for happy people. It was, even then, an underfunded area, and I think we turned on each other in ways that, if the funding had been healthier, wouldn't have happened. We scrapped over the

little bits thrown in our direction. After David McIntosh was hired I pretty much walked away from that place. I'd done my time. I also left the Queen West art scene. It was time for something else for me.

DAVID MCINTOSH: I was sad to hear that the Funnel was having difficulties, but there was nothing I could do. The people who made those decisions at the October meeting got what they wanted, which was finally a small and miserable vision. Nobody knew why they decided to move to Soho.

PAUL MCGOWAN: As "success" began to arrive in the form of grants and notoriety, things changed. The "flat" organization of the Funnel needed to interact with government and corporate bureaucracies. Ross and Anna and a few others managed to deal with them at first, but the whole point was to screen work, not push paper. Do you see where this is going? The flat Funnel began to engage with "Power Over." We were a community based on providing a venue for our art and others' art. "Power Of" began to engage cultures very different from our own. At first this took the form of conflict: there were ongoing battles with the Censor Board, and the fire code renovation was a direct



She Bit Me Seriously by Annette Mangaard, 1984.

result. This was probably far healthier for the Funnel community. When "success" beckoned with grants and reviews, the Funnel (in my opinion) succumbed to the notion that we needed a new form of bureaucracy, we needed "management." Unfortunately, we weren't fully aware of what was happening while it went down. We betrayed the integrity of our community of artists, that's what killed us. There was a creeping disintegration of our purpose to create a venue for our community to play, to share the "Power Of." At any rate, in a matter of months, an organization that had been built from the \$10 a month the members kicked in a decade earlier to pay the rent, and had become an experimental theatre recognized as one of the best in the world, was now flat broke and locked out. It was a great ride while it lasted, and looking back I recognize how fortunate I was to be involved.

MARC GLASSMAN: I remember being shocked when I found out it was over. For the Funnel to close in a period when people were becoming more interested in experimental work than ever before meant they really must have gone out of their way to kill themselves.

KATHLEEN PIRRIE ADAMS: Many communities were vibrant in their initial years and then seemed to produce their own pseudo-institutional lethargy. How distressing that when alternative cultural spaces become established, and gain some traction, they reproduce some of the worst habits of mainstream culture — monopolizing resources, repetition of activities (in this case, programming sameness), establishing a hierarchy of values of what is OK and inside and what is outside. They too often coalesce around judgments about cultural practice that are limiting. Informal networks of people contract and become inhospitable.

EDIE STEINER: At the same time as our communities were growing they were becoming more fragmented. In the mid-70s there were very few music venues or art galleries, but eventually new ones started up, and people gravitated from one space to another. A lot of us were very young in the early 80s, and after a decade of struggling as artists many people dropped the ball. I was always disappointed when that happened. Stephen Niblock is someone I admired so much as a filmmaker and a visual artist, I was shocked when he felt he had to give up his art practice when he had a child. I was saddened that people couldn't afford to make work or weren't getting grants. As people got into their thirties, communities dispersed and

reshaped, people went on to do other things. New people created spaces that were different physically and ideologically than what we thought was important in the 80s.

DAVID MCINTOSH: I think that my commitment to ongoing forms of representational resistance is strongly grounded in my involvement with the Funnel. I've never given up on that, and I've been in a very fortunate position in the last ten years to be able to make artworks in a new way that I feel are taking that ethos in a new direction and at a different scale. The Funnel has had a fundamental impact on how I see the world, how I see making things and the purpose of making things.

DOT TUER: The original Funnel was built with incredible collective effort, and this became the bond between its members. There were screenings twice a week and people were there every day making films. It was a large, communal, familial structure. As it got bigger there was a split between people who wanted to open it up to become a different kind of organization based on an elected board from an open membership, and people who didn't. The split in the Funnel, with many members resigning, divided along gender and race lines, and left the rump of the old guard. They then received bad advice from their accountant, who urged them to spend because the government would bail them out. That was one aspect of the Funnel's demise. I'm convinced that they decided to move and secure a new space because they imagined they could reproduce the energy that had brought the first space into being, they hoped to rekindle a sense of community. But it was another era; the rents were too high, and the city had changed. The Funnel was built on a modernist notion of cinema, and when poststructuralist/feminist cinema arrived, there was an ideological and aesthetic confrontation. What does it mean to introduce narrative that was inflected with feminist and race issues? The membership could not collectively come to terms with these shifts and the organization imploded. While this was tragic in many ways, it also marked the end of an era of experimental filmmaking that had run its course. In comparison, some artist-run centres keep going and you don't know why. They might show good work but what exactly is their identity anymore?

PLEASURE DOME

As the remains of the Funnel dissolved, fringe media scrums around the city, formal and informal, floated the vexing question of exhibition. The Innis Film Society was up and running full steam, a renovated student association that had been taken over by a clutch of university students (led by Jim Shedden) with a formalist bent and supernatural energies. The Art Gallery of Ontario was busy presenting seasons of work by the canonized few under the tutelage of Cathy Jonasson, and Marc Glassman was creating alternative pop-up cinemas that ran the gamut from Fritz Lang to Wrik Mead. Toronto audiences were hungry, even for fringe movies, though the festival explosion that would fundamentally remap the city's exhibition landscape would not arrive for another decade. The development of an audience for fringe movies was clearly inspired by the Funnel. It had hosted nearly 500 shows in the past decade, prompting others to take up the cause.

Radical projectionist and community strongman Martin Heath had been busy plying his trade since the earliest days of Rochdale in the 70s, before receiving state funding to produce a suite of inflatable mobile cinemas that toured the country from 1976-1979. By the time the Funnel was dying he was about to marry the two great loves of his life, cycling and cinema, and open CineCycle. In its first location (1991-1995) it was a rough-hewn beauty of a warehouse space that fronted into an alley. It was the most hospitable spot for movies of every stripe, regularly inhabited by devotees of unusual and hard-to-see cinemas.

The Funnel was part of a bitterly divided Toronto turf, so the increasingly heated chitchatting around new models of fringe exhibition were looking for a way around the lines drawn in the fringe media sandbox, the old ego feuds granted an organizational perch. We longed for a non-denominational church, a place that could run the gender-fuck of Abigail Child's Mayhem (1987) and the dazzling post-colonialisms of Isaac Julien without dampening the thrill factor. Couldn't there be a house where we didn't have to decide in advance what "our" avant-garde would be; perhaps we could let it sing in multiple directions? Three-minute super 8 miracles, feature films, multiple-projector performances — bring them on. On a spring afternoon in 1988, Jayne London, a former member of the Funnel's programming committee, approached me with the idea of formalizing these barroom discussions and creating an entity that would throw its arms around fringe media

exhibition. I rang up Barbara Sternberg, Phil Hoffman and Gary Popovich and all of a sudden we had a collective, working for nothing, venturing into the territories that the Funnel had backed away from. We would name it Pleasure Dome because watching fringe movies didn't mean having to fight a civil war every weekend. We would announce open screenings again, just like CEAC, and run an evening of local premieres, like the Funnel's opening nights, only it wouldn't be reserved for members. We wanted to show movies for nothing, because artists that made every other kind of work showed in galleries without admission. But the arts councils forced us to charge every head two bucks, a tax that remained unchanged for nearly two decades. We would flat out refuse the Censor Board, and instead of holding onto our little membership circle of kingmakers, we would let anyone join and make programming decisions as a collective. We would make the organization porous and transparent, so that over the years it could be steered by whoever had the inclination, the spare time, the love.

JIM SHEDDEN: Back in the summer of 1989 I was at the CFMDC previewing films for the Innis Film Society. I had to go into Mike Hoolboom's office for some reason, and had no choice but to eavesdrop on a meeting of the "Toronto Artists' Film Exhibition Group" (or something like that). I could hear that the group — Mike, Phil, Jayne, Barbara and Gary — was trying to establish a cool name for itself and nothing was quite working. I suggested "Pleasure Dome," after Kenneth Anger's *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954), which, in turn, was derived from Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." I thought it fit perfectly with the new group's "subversive cinema" tendencies. Still, I was surprised that everyone went for it but they did, and it stuck, and it still seems to suit them.

BARBARA STERNBERG, media artist: When the Funnel went under, meaning that the only artist-run centre dedicated to screening experimental film in Toronto would be no longer...the intent was to rescue arts council funds the Funnel had been receiving for screenings, and preserve them for that purpose. We would take over their function and those monies. We succeeded in the former — Pleasure Dome was inaugurated — but not with the latter. The Funnel's funding went into the "general pool" and Pleasure Dome had to start from scratch. We decided to keep overhead as minimal as possible: there would be no office or permanent theatre space, no paid staff. We worked collectively, sharing responsibilities for curating and overseeing

screenings at a variety of venues around Toronto as suited the program. Later we received operating funds, hired an administrator and held more screenings; we still had no office or theatre but kept going strong.

GARY POPOVICH: The Funnel had been key in kindling a love for watching and making experimental or alternative cinema in Toronto. But at some point the Funnel shrank. This happens all the time — something starts to



John Porter in publicity shot for *Post Man with a Movie Camera*, Pleasure Dome show, Euclid Theatre, Dec. 1, 1989. Photo by Edie Steiner.

die and something else grows up to replace it. It's not the same, but it serves a need and finds its extended family. And here it was happening in our little experimental world. What should we do? Make something new! We had our loves and hang-ups; but we wanted to do something collectively and openly. In the face of delegitimizing voices always ready to cut arts funding, we wanted to restore a sense of trust with each other and our possible audiences.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

I've recently rejoined the board of Pleasure Dome after a twenty-five year absence, and I'm grateful to find the fringe movie scene filled with young people who seem interested in difficult movies for mysterious reasons. They assure me that it is more difficult than ever before to have local work shown here, that while the number of media artists have exploded, exhibition portals have shrunk. Screen real estate is mostly guarded by curators who are both reluctant to stand down, and have little understanding of how culture is nurtured, part of a living conversation. The usual smokescreens of excellence are used to alibi white formalisms that would not have looked out of place in the earliest days of the Funnel. The old tensions continue to recycle, even as new initiatives are brokered and new resistances invented.

Over the course of these interviews I was reminded again and again how a single sentence, often spoken years ago, can hold a terrible weight. The wounds of contact, of refusal, of voicelessness, have proved formative for so many, part of a vast and unwanted living history. One of the key mysteries of community that the Funnel never solved was, how can we get over our bad feelings?

The standing rule in dominant culture says that if it doesn't last it doesn't count. If the marriage doesn't take you both into your graves, it's a failure. But the bloom of fringe cultures is not about continuity or monuments. We never wanted to sit at the master's table and look over the kingdom. We were at home in the other place, on the margins, where new lives and possibilities were busy being born and dying. We mistrusted anything that lasted too long. Duration was reserved for our movies, not the joints that served up movies. What we craved was intensity, connection, transformation.

Of course, we also had our ruts and ruttings. We used to construct our utopian collectives out of shared gear needs and architecture, and some of

these cornerstones are still up and blinking in metropolises around the world. But these sometimes nostalgic flagships — the old distribution co-ops, the institutions dedicated to past glories — are not where the rub lies today. The collapse of supportive artist-run structures in production, distribution and exhibition has meant that artists have had to fend for ourselves. There are new voyagers of the heart trekking across the remains of narco-states in South America with digital media, pouring out of the underclass to bear witness, along with startling documentary forms emerging out of India and China and the Middle East. At last, the white grip of the fringe is giving way to new counter-cinemas of capitalist resistance, projecting new subjects and subjectivities. New forms of utopia.

At the Funnel, we lived inside rooms and machines while we tried to learn how to live with each other. We had become newly hipped to the questions of being framed, and we loosened some of the old enclosures of naming. We learned that we could love each other in new and unimagined ways. We were angry and tired and broken, and we made pictures of that too. Some of us are still busy building oases of pictures and sounds. Perhaps you're in one of them right now. I hope you enjoy the breeze, the new pleasures. We've been working for all these years to make it possible. And we're not done yet.



Diane Boadway, 1977. Photo by Ron Giii.

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Happy Birthday Fruitcake! Ron Gili & Marlene Elasz, studio performance, 14 St. Patrick Street, 1975.



Lily Eng in London, (CEAC tour) 1976. Photo by Peter Dudar.



Scott and Beth B in the Funnel theatre, October 17, 1979. Photo by John Porter.



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Jim Anderson in his studio, 1985. Photo by Edie Steiner.




Shooting *Regards* (a film by Anna Gronau) L-R: Amber Sansom, Villem Teder, Patrick Jenkins, Anna Gronau, Ross McLaren, Funnel Gallery, 1983. Photo by John Porter.



Eddie Steiner and Stephen Niblock. Photo by Eddie Steiner.



Michaëlle McLean and Anna Gronau in Michaëlle's apartment, 11 Yorkville Avenue, Toronto, 1978. Photo by Michaëlle McLean.



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