

Roundtable discussion: Distribution after digitization

With Ben Cook, Lauren Howes and Lori Zippay
Chaired by Erika Balsom

Introduction: Erika Balsom

When a group of independent, documentary, and experimental film-makers, producers, and actors in New York City came together to issue ‘The First Statement of the New American Cinema Group’ in 1961, they foregrounded the pressing matter of imagining an alternative to commercial film distribution. The document makes clear the extent to which the task of the New American Cinema was not simply to create new forms of film-making, but also to build new film infrastructures to support them. Its fifth point states, ‘We’ll take a stand against the present distribution-exhibition policies. There is something decidedly wrong with the whole system of film exhibition; it is time to blow the whole thing up’ (1970: 81–82). The next point offers a glimpse as to how this would be accomplished: ‘We plan to establish our own cooperative distribution center’ (1970: 82). This would occur in 1962, when the opening of the New York Film-makers Cooperative established the artist-run cooperative as a model that would be replicated around the world, for both film and video.

This model remains vital today, but infrastructural and technological changes have presented organizations such as LUX, Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI) and the Canadian Filmmakers’ Distribution Centre (CFMDC) with both new opportunities and new obstacles. The relative monopoly once possessed by the rental model has now given way to a situation in which radically different forms of distribution compete and cooperate, from the sale of limited editions on the art market, to authorized and unauthorized online distribution, and the sale of mass market DVDs. In this conversation, recorded at the Oberhausen Film Festival in 2013, the heads of LUX, EAI and

CFMDC discuss how their respective organizations have grappled with distribution after digitization.

Erika Balsom: How do you think digitization has had a positive impact on distribution organizations? How have you tried to take advantage of the opportunities it provides?

Lauren Howes: We have been digitizing as much of the back catalogue as possible. We've been putting it online, password-protected, so programmers and curators can log in and see our work. Because we do a lot of work with festivals – it's a huge part of our business – we're no longer mailing out 200 DVDs every six months to all of these programmers. So in that sense it's changed the day-to-day handling of new acquisitions. It's really hard to get a read on whether that's working from the programmers' end, but in terms of global access it's really much simpler. So on the positive side, accessibility is definitely increased.

Ben Cook: The most obvious opportunity, like Lauren said, is access. We're quite heavily invested in putting stuff online, both publicly and for private–professional use. The profound positive is being able to get work to people more easily and for that work to be more accessible. But I think there are more challenges than positives, really.

Lori Zippay: I'll agree with Ben there. We've been digitizing work now for quite a while. Already in the mid-'00s we had a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts to start the process of moving the collection into files. We're digitizing both for access and for preservation because we have a dual mission of access to the collection and stewardship of the collection. Part of this involves creating ten-bit uncompressed files that we hope will be viable for future digital formats. In terms of access, we have a password-protected video site where curators, researchers and programmers can log in and preview works online. We're also working on a major educational streaming project, in which education institutions will be able to subscribe to the EAI collection for classroom and library use. That's in progress now. The reality is that this is the way that moving images are being created, exhibited, distributed and preserved now. Although I must say that we are still also invested in the preservation of analogue work and trying to maintain those analogue formats, if only in storage. We've found that it's incredibly important, particularly dealing with a historical collection, to maintain those analogue works because you never know when you'll need to go back to them as the best existing copies for preservation.

EB: And what kind of problems have you encountered in dealing with this shift?

BC: I think, firstly, that it brings into play quite a difficult, conceptual problem that has to do with the sense of value and objecthood of these works, which has always been a highly contested issue. I think the introduction of file formats raises these issues quite profoundly. In a funny way, it's a question that stretches from the philosophical side of what the work is to the practical side. I think it causes a real problem. In organizations like ours, we are trying to hold a line all the time, in terms of representing these works in the best possible way that they're intended to be shown. I think that digitization confuses or muddles this kind of question more. We're losing a sense of the fixedness of works. We had this problem before – that things were infinitely scalable, infinitely reproducible – but the idea of file formats makes it even worse. The sense that you just have a file seems to make works even lighter and less valuable somehow.

LZ: There is a fluidity and mobility to moving image work already that is built into the medium. In some ways, it is reproducible, mutable and variable by definition. But the introduction of file formats brings us to a fascinating, contradictory moment where there may be a file-based work that is conserved at a major museum but also with a distributor. When you have this fluidity and mobility, when there are so many different contexts in which the work can be seen and understood, there are real contradictions that arise. In terms of exhibition, what we are doing now with file-based formats is exponentially more complicated.

BC: Yes, the practical side of this issue is that we are working in a highly non-standard, fast-changing situation. I would go so far as to say it is a crisis moment. On the preservation side, file degradation represents a profound crisis in digital archiving. We're facing that, as I'm sure you are. Basically the whole question of digital archiving hasn't really been resolved at any level. The fast-moving technology means that if you did undertake a digitization programme five years ago, today you might be looking at re-digitizing the entire collection.

LZ: We've been around since 1971. To have to migrate the collection over decades and decades, particularly for a non-profit, is extremely costly. That's not going to end with digitization, either. It's just an on-going situation of constant data migration.

BC: Absolutely. I think a lot of people have this utopian idea about digital distribution, but it doesn't really exist at the moment in the kind of file sizes and quality levels that we're talking about – that's still to come in the future. And the third nightmare is presentation. There's no standardization for digital exhibition. It's a nightmarish world of subjectivity. If we send somebody a file, what do people do? They use media drives, they use mini Macs. Now, if use a mini Mac, what are the specifications? What graphics card does it have? We are just troubleshooting all the time. In the past if you sold a 16mm print you just ...

LZ: You'd put it in a bag and send it out!

BC: It also depends on the skill level of those people receiving things. It's a completely non-standard situation and there are so many variables that could go wrong.

LZ: I think what is interesting is the cultural – and maybe generational too – paradox of platform agnosticism, the idea that you can see something on any screen. It could be on your iPhone, as a projection, on a CRT monitor, or whatever. A lot of our collection was originally analogue. Sometimes, the artist's intention is to see the work on a CRT monitor. A work made in 1970 that is a performance piece scaled to the human face or that refers to the television monitor as a piece of domestic furniture. It changes the meaning when that work is shown on a flat screen, when shown on a computer screen, or when it is projected. Those are things that we try to monitor very closely. We try to work with the artist's intention. As we move into the digital world, it becomes very complicated because as much as we try to adhere to the intentionality of the artist, there is a different kind of cultural, maybe generational, understanding of how images are presented in the world – this idea that the image can move from any kind of screen, any kind of device, any kind of platform.

LH: I think it's a generational thing. I'm finding more and more that emerging filmmakers coming into distribution will say yes to YouTube, yes to Vimeo, yes to any kind of digital pay-per-view download, to put it up for free on every platform possible. But that's really challenging because we want to make sure artists are remunerated for their work. There is a tension between it being free on YouTube and trying to get exhibition fees for the work. It's interesting to create a distribution strategy that meets their expectations while still trying to work with clients who pay fees and take exhibition standards seriously.

BC: There is fundamental inability to articulate our primary experience in viewing moving images, which I think is a way in which film studies as a discipline has singularly failed us. If you look at art history and theory, there is a sensitivity to primary experience and it's articulated again and again, in a way that a lot of film studies courses don't do. If you're doing an art history course, you would know that at some point it would be good to go to the Louvre to see the actual Mona Lisa. There is still an understanding that it would be good to have that primary experience. In cinema, I'm not sure how we can get back to that idea that there is a certain primary experience of things. I think that's been something that we've all failed to articulate properly. I don't really have a problem with the presentation of work on different platforms or the

online presentation of things. I just wish that we could better articulate the difference between those experiences.

A friend of mine has a music studio. When they record music now, the last thing they'll do is play it through the worst speakers they have. What happens is that ultimately everything is brought down to that level because that is the main way people are going to experience things. Things fall to the bottom rather than rise to the top.

EB: Do you feel like you see something analogous happening in artists' moving image, where there is an anticipation of the work being shown outside a standard cinema situation?

BC: I think there's some resignation there. We as an organization find it very hard to hold a line with these things. It's as Lauren was saying, there is a weight of expectation, both from the artist, as well as from the viewers. If you ask something specific about the way that your work is presented, what will happen? It won't be presented.

LZ: We all work in very different contexts: we're working with museums, cinematic screenings and educational institutions. I think that there is a sense of the differentiation of experiences. With our current educational distribution, as well as with this new model for streaming for educational institutions, it is made very clear to the artist and the professors that what is being seen is going to be something that is not maybe how it would be presented in a museum exhibition context. If we are doing our job correctly, we will be providing that context: there might be installation shots or other contextualizing material. We have been going back to every artist in the collection because we need their permission to do this streaming project. We've been talking to artists about this and in some cases they're actually relieved because it makes this differentiation clearer.

EB: I think the streaming initiative is a very important one, because it's very difficult to teach recent moving image work because of a lack of access to a lot of the material. Despite what was said about emerging artists being very interested in having their work disseminated across multiple platforms, the last twenty years have also seen the rise of the opposite attitude, in which artists restrict circulation of their work and offer it only in limited editions. How have your organizations interacted with this model, if at all?

LH: We don't really deal with that.

BC: We come out of a similar tradition as EAI of working with uneditioned works, but in the last ten years we have made a conscious decision to stop doing that. Basically we felt like we had to find our place in the art market economy. It felt difficult for us to maintain that position given the way that the economy of artists' film was going, with this rise of editioning. What we were encountering from a lot of museums was that they only wanted to buy editioned works. We also wanted to work with a lot of artists that had gallery representation, so we had to rationalize our relationship with commercial galleries. We decided to stop selling copies of what might have been collection-level works. Instead, what we started to do was work with galleries to administer sales on their behalf. The galleries would make the sales, but we would deal with the process of creating the edition, liaise with the buying institution, and take a percentage from that work. That's been very good for us. It's allowed us to build a very good relationship with the commercial gallery world, and it feels more appropriate in terms of the way that work is bought and sold. We know that we're not the best organization to deal with that kind of thing. The other thing that we had to do was rationalize our role as a distributor within the editioning system. We distribute the artist's proof of editioned works through LUX: the material we hold belongs to the artist and we have a contractual relationship with them. So this is how we think distribution and editioning can exist side by side and not be mutually exclusive. We have a really good relationship with galleries now, but a few years ago they thought that LUX was anachronistic in our distribution model and sometimes antagonistic. I've seen a profound

change in the last ten years in that kind of attitude. They were very suspicious of us before, but now we have blue chip galleries contacting us, asking us to look at their stable of artists because they understand that we can do a lot of things that they can't do, such as the distribution and circulation of works, which is nickel-and-dime stuff to them. They don't have the skills or the resources to do that, whereas we do. But what they do realize is that there has been a real change in peoples' understanding that these are works that fundamentally need to circulate in the world. That is a change from the 1990s, when there was an absolute paranoia about works getting out. The idea was that value came totally from exclusivity. All sorts of funny things were done to weigh down works into objects in different ways, like melting fingerprints into VHS tapes, and there are still residuals of that. One of the funniest things for me is that some galleries sell works on custom-made hard drives with the artist's signature etched into them.

EB: It's the new version of the signed DVD.

LZ: Or the signed VHS in the 1990s, when galleries were beginning to edition work. At that point in time, we had come out very fundamentally and philosophically in favour of an uneditioned model. The founding of EAI was based on an almost utopian notion of reproducibility, access, and an idea that video was a democratic medium. We came out of this philosophical and political stance in the late 1960s and 1970s. Howard Wise closed his gallery specifically to create this alternative paradigm to deal with work that did not fit into the commercial gallery. He had been a commercial gallerist, but he famously said that he thought that by closing his gallery to support video art that the art would move out of the gallery into 'the ocean, the sky, and even outer space.' And in fact, with the Internet, he was right. So these are the founding principles of what we're doing.

However, the edition model has taken hold. This is the reality. A large percentage of the artists in our collection also work with galleries now, so we needed to find a way to actually make this work. As with LUX, we've found that there's been a complete shift in the galleries' relationship to us. They'll come to us with artists and looking for advice. We have 43 years of dealing with media work and they recognize the value of what we're doing. So we have actually a very good relationship with the galleries now and work with them. The way we work with editions at this point is not monolithic; it's quite specific to artists, to works, and to galleries. Typically we will work with an artist's uneditioned and editioned work, which we will represent for exhibition and educational use, for the most part, and the gallery will deal with it for sales. They are sending exhibitors to us because they know that we can enforce the exhibition standards, do the technical work, and that we know about proper formats. That's our area of expertise, and so they come to us for that. They want their young artists to be seen within the context of this history. But it happens on a case-by-case, artist-by-artist basis.

At this point, there is a lot of editioned work that is in some way represented through EAI. Again, this is the reality. These models do coexist. There is the online model, there is the commercial gallery model, and then there's this alternative paradigm. I call it a third way. I think we were all founded as alternative paradigms, as it were, to handle work. What's astonishing to me is that we were founded 40-something years ago as an alternative paradigm, and that 40-something years later that alternative paradigm is still needed. It's still valuable and still works somehow, even in this really bifurcated moment of the editioning model and the wide-open online distribution model.

BC: Certainly. When I'm called upon to explain to people from the art world why we would have a medium-specific organization like this, it seems very clear to me that the very nature of moving image work is that it is fundamentally performative. It doesn't flow through the natural routes of the art world and it does need these special functions to keep it circulating. So I think it feels more necessary than ever. I think

also that the really encouraging thing is that these economies can exist side by side, and they don't actually contradict one another. We are all invested in the life and the value of the work. In that way, we are all working towards the same goal. The commercial galleries are invested in the visibility and circulation of the works, which is how they accrue value. I think it's something that needs to be articulated a little bit better.

LZ: Something else I want to point out is that our distribution is very artist-driven. We work very closely with living artists or their estates. We're in constant touch with artists about the distribution and preservation of their work. It's very hands-on. The artists are interested in having their work represented in these coexisting ways, so we are responding to what the artists want. The galleries respond to what their artists want as well. Having artists advocate for this kind of multi-part distribution has been very important. It's also about context. There are artists who create different iterations of works for these different contexts. A work might have an installation version for the gallery that is sold as an edition, may also be online in some way, and have yet another iteration placed with the distributor. It's very complex, but I feel very positive about how this has come out over the past decade. It is an acknowledgement of these coexisting economic models.

BC: I feel very positive as well because now we are seeing the opposite of 40 years ago. Now, for the institutions that want to exhibit the history of art in the last 40 years, they have to seriously engage with this area of practice. I think this is a very interesting time, as the moving image has really come from the periphery into the centre. No institution can ignore it now. It's positive for all of us. We just need to make sure that we're positioned in the right place to be able to benefit from that, and for artists to benefit from that.

EB: Moving to the opposite end of the distribution spectrum, is unauthorized distribution an issue for any of you? Have you had to deal with instances in which works in your collection were being distributed without your consent, whether online or not? Unauthorized distribution has always existed, of course, but with the online circulation of images it has taken a qualitative leap.

LH: Because we are a non-exclusive distributor, it's actually not my role to say 'take that down'. It's the artist's role to do that, unless the artist is not alive. So I've left that up to the artist. But honestly, you would have to have full time staff dedicated to policing the Internet.

EB: Like Hollywood does.

BC: They're not doing a very good job!

LZ: There have been multiple instances over the years where we have found pirated work online. We have then tracked it down and tried to have it removed. In certain cases now it is also up to the artist, because some artists are placing their work online in certain contexts and want it there. For example, we have artists who want their work on UbuWeb. We've worked with UbuWeb to make a link back to EAI and to give credit for using our text. There will be a link to click on if you to rent the work. That situation is evolving, but I think it is another acknowledgement of this coexisting reality.

EB: Were the partnerships with UbuWeb something that was initiated by EAI? By the artist? By UbuWeb?

LZ: Partnership's probably not the right word. I think there was a mutual agreement to sit down and talk about how the work was being handled. I know a lot of professors are using online sources for teaching, so if there are pirated copies or copies without attribution out there, we need to sort it out. If the artist is into it, we'll work with it. We'll figure out how to at least give proper credit.

BC: We don't really pursue piracy. We do not exactly have a partnership with UbuWeb, but we have some works officially endorsed on UbuWeb. Our business model hasn't been about restricting individual access to works, so I've not really had a problem with it. Actually, our business has probably been helped by it. The fact that people

know and consume works in the world is really a benefit to us. At the moment I feel that if UbuWeb wants to take responsibility for that, that's ok. If we had the resources to create something better, I would, and then I would deal with it. But at the moment, we're not providing that service ourselves, so I'm sort of happy for that to happen. But I would like to see something better in the world, and I would like to think about the potential of returns for artists. That's probably the bigger question about the potential to commodify online content: how to monetize it? That is something I'm interested in working towards in the future.

Sometimes I'm okay with piracy. We do quite a lot of DVD publications and some of them are quite big projects. Weeks after we do them they appear online in lovingly deconstructed versions. For example, our DVDs are often accompanied by a book or something like that, and then they appear on forums where somebody's ripped the whole thing, in the full size, and they've scanned the book into a PDF. For me that's an act of love. I'm quite happy with the labour involved in doing that and the sharing. The people we sell to are those who are into objects. They don't want a deconstructed version. So to me, actually, a lot of piracy is an act of sharing and love, in an individual way. I don't want to stand in the way of peoples' individual relationship with works. Often it contributes to the value of works; maybe we will benefit further down the line from that kind of passion. But we would like to be able to have the resources to intervene, to actually make something in the world that is better than what exists.

EB: Kenneth Goldsmith has often said that if the experimental film community is mad about UbuWeb, then they should just do it better.

BC: He says he only puts out works that are not published. But many of works we publish on retail DVDs are still on UbuWeb. So that's not true.

LZ: For us, we're trying to 'do it better' with our educational streaming project.

LH: As for that standard of 'doing it better', permission is a good place to start. That's very basic. Bottom line.

LZ: Getting us back to our foundational question about digitization and the larger concept of digital culture, one manifestation of it is this notion of a mashup culture. The work in our collections – work we have been preserving, working with and lovingly tending to for so long – is suddenly being seen as part of a crazy digital mashup that you can just take and do what you want with. That's something else that we're grappling with right now.

EB: In 1994, John Perry Barlow wrote in *Wired* magazine that the Internet would spell the end of intellectual property. On the one hand, that has happened. But on the other hand, the opposite has also happened. There has been increasing laxity, but also more copyright protection than ever. The idea that works are inherently variable and malleable plays out even in something like the decision to project Dara Birnbaum's *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* at MoMA, even though it was made for monitor-based presentation. Another example would be showing film works on digital transfers in a museum context.

LH: That's been going on for so long, though. Big galleries in Toronto that should care about exhibition standards just don't, and it's always really shocking to me.

LZ: We've become quite strict with major institutions in terms of exhibition standards. We're more sympathetic to small places that don't have the resources for proper equipment.

LH: As opposed to a major gallery that has the resources.

EB: I think it's a vestige of the very long history of major institutions not respecting the moving image as a legitimate artistic medium.

BC: I think it has to do what I was talking about earlier: the potential of scalability of the moving image and the need to attend to the primary context of presentation that these works have. We are really involved in this all of the time because we still deal with film, and we still deal with exhibition on film in galleries.

LH: Often galleries just want that single channel work to play 40 times a day on a looper, even though it never was supposed to be an installation. That's happening too.

BC: It's a question of intentionality at the end of the day. It's not about being obtuse, but we do often get accused of being obtuse about these things. It's not like someone would say, 'That painting's a bit big, does it come in a smaller size? Does that come in any other materials apart from canvas?'. When you give people a few analogies they realize. You wouldn't believe it, but we really have to fight. I'm naming no names, but we are fighting with major institutions all over the world over all these things.

LH: They've lost perspective and don't realize that they look really unprofessional when they do this.

BC: But again it's a problem about objectness, or lack of objectness. Because I honestly think if your video is attached to a big Richard Serra-style steel sculpture, it would focus peoples' minds because it has weight and mass. It's difficult to move around, it's potentially dangerous, and it's expensive.

EB: It's also a matter of the disciplinary training people have.

BC: As I was saying earlier, the centrality of moving image to contemporary art is now such that you can't ignore it. You have to deal with it properly. But there are some inherent issues. Part of the problem is that all of these works are completed by shifting technologies. Some editions are sold with the technology as well, which is an interesting thing to me. I'm not sure this is the case now, but with Tacita Dean, for example, the gallery would sell the projector and the looper with it, so it becomes a sculptural work. I'm not sure if they still do this, but Tate would buy a video work and then would get the artist in and buy technology to show it on. One example they told me about was early Matthew Barney piece, where he chose a three-colour-separation video projector, a very specific presentation technology and a very specific aesthetic. There is an idea that media supersede each other, that they get better all the time. But no, it's an aesthetic decision.

LZ: It's not necessarily forward progress, it's just change. U-Matic was a fabulous format. It was just made obsolete by the industry. Analogue one-inch broadcast standard was also a fabulous format, but it became obsolete. It's not that what replaced it was better, it's just that they replaced it.

LH: It's also so tied to the economy. At least with film, economics is what's driving the shift. It is really hard to say to someone they should spend \$40,000 at a film lab to make that film, as opposed to ...

BC: Sure. It's an art form that's totally beholden to the vagaries of a commercial technology.

LH: It is interesting though, because it is an art form that is dominated by this huge commercial impetus. It's manipulated beyond the artist's control. It's planned obsolescence. You have to keep the industry changing so that consumer, or prosumer, is shifting along with it. But aesthetic implications are rarely discussed.

EB: One solution to some of these problems is better education. Are there other kinds of ways that you feel your organizations can do something to help people navigate what Ben earlier called a crisis?

BC: For us, it's very much about education. We're very involved in education and professional development, so we're trying to take a lot of people along with us. It's very much a process of learning for us and we pride ourselves on that. In terms of our education and development programmes, we don't academicize things. We are dealing with things that are a professional reality. That's the special thing that we bring to our programmes: the things we discuss are in a professional context, they're real world decisions. But fundamentally one of the problems is we're all very, very small. We don't have a loud voice, even together. One of the questions for me is thinking about who with a louder voice could help us. For example, we're trying to work with the BBC or the BFI to try and at least understand whether there's anything that we can learn from

them. But we're very specific, so we don't exactly align with the interests of larger organizations.

LH: Our reality is we just don't have a lot of HR resources to dedicate a lot of time to engage in a meaningful way, to create change, or to make any kind of impact, even on a very small scale.

LZ: We've tried to do as much as we can by publishing these online resources, like our online resource guide for exhibiting, collecting and preserving media art. When people call with questions, we can refer people to these things. There are many people – programmers, curators – who really want to do the right thing, show the work properly, and understand the technology. We've had registrars, for example, who are very proactive. Part of the reason why we publish so many online resources is because our staff get so many questions. There is a demand for information and a desire to be educated and to do the right thing by the medium. As much as I can identify the problematics and challenges involved in these issues, there is a want for proper information. So our response has been to try to publish this information and put it online for free so we can point curators, educators, exhibitors, collectors, etc., to these resources. They are not comprehensive answers, but at least we're raising the issues that we need to be thinking about.

REFERENCE

(1970), 'The First Statement of the New American Cinema Group (1961)', in P. Adams Sitney (ed), *The Film Culture Reader*, New York: Praeger, pp. 81–82.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Ben Cook is the founding director of LUX and has been professionally involved in independent film sector in the United Kingdom for the past twenty years as a curator, archivist, producer, writer and teacher.

Lauren Howes has been working as the Executive Director of the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre since 2006. She is also currently the Chairperson on the Board of the Media Arts Network of Ontario (MANO). She sits on the

advisory committee for Visual and Media Art at the Toronto Arts Council and served as Treasurer on the Board of the Independent Media Arts Alliance from 2008 to 2010.

Lori Zippay is the Executive Director of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI) in New York. EAI is one of the leading resources for video art and interactive media. EAI's core programme is the international distribution of a major collection of experimental video. Other EAI programmes include a pioneering video preservation programme, extensive online resources, educational initiatives, and public exhibitions and events. Over the past thirty years, she has also curated numerous exhibitions, written, taught, and lectured extensively, and has participated in many panels, conferences and international festival juries.