



Brooke Jacobson, Ph.D., talks about the founding of the Film Center in 1971, its early programs, and meaningful conversation.

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There was a national explosion of film arts organizations in the early 1970s. Where do you believe that came from?

I think actually it was an explosion that had been building up from the post-World War II years and the Italian Neorealist movement followed by the French New Wave. People suddenly saw film not as simply entertainment but as something about what was going on in the world and something truer to people's everyday experience. In addition, there were artists who had come to the US to escape Fascism, and they infused Hollywood with a different tone. A real avant-garde development began: Jonas Mekas started the Anthology Film Archive in New York, people like John Cassavetes were drawn in, films like PULL MY DAISY were made, the Canyon Cinema Co-op evolved in San Francisco, as did the idea of preserving film as an art form.

How did the idea for having a film arts organization in Portland come about, and how did you get involved?

The National Endowment for the Arts decided to fund regional film centers to help promote film art. Sheldon Renan of the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley had ties to Portland. He visited to talk about whether Portland could be a place for a film center. I, and Bob Summers after me, had been running a thriving student film screening program at Portland State. We liked the idea. I quit my teaching job in the fall of 1971 and devoted myself full-time to laying the groundwork for the Center and to developing some initial programs. Bob left for graduate school at NYU, where he worked to generate contacts and ideas.

What was your vision of the Film Center's mission those first years?

We wanted to have a showcase for independent film and filmmakers but also historically significant films—deepening and enhancing appreciation for the public. We wanted to be the place to come if you wanted to make films or if you were an independent filmmaker with a film to show. We wanted to help local filmmakers seek grant funding, to assist teachers in public schools teaching film, to connect with the evolving cable television movement and local television stations, as many of them had documentary units. We saw the Film Center as kind of the hub of connection with all of these developments.

What community members were important at this time?

We relied heavily on the good will of people who wanted to help make the Film Center happen. Jack Eyerly, Northwest Coordinator of Experiments in Art and Technology (EAT), was an arts activist and mentor who helped to guide our work, and Rachel Griffin, Curator at the Portland Art Museum, was very supportive. Nina Lowry, Cultural Affairs Advisor at Portland State, and Richard Gilkey, Director of Educational Media for Portland Public Schools, contributed advice and expertise. Margaret Hixon, instructor in Communicative Arts at Portland Community College, and Tom Taylor III, film instructor at PSU's Center for the Moving Image, added filmmaking skills to this initial board of directors.

Where was the Film Center located and what was it like?

We began at the Hillside Center on NW Culpepper Terrace. It had been the old Catlin Gabel School before it moved to its present location. Artists had space there, potters and painters; Ed Carpenter, then a stained glass artist, had a studio there, and someone else ran a cooking school. It was a small art colony up there in the hills. We had a large room and a smaller office space. Bob [Summers] had an enormous library and personal film collection that he brought to the Film Center. It was a major undertaking.

Did you partner with other organizations?

I'd say it was much more organic. We did want that linkage between Portland State and the Art Museum. Because we were interested in film education and Portland State was where teaching was going on, we thought we could augment that by having workshops conducted by filmmakers. On projects, there was definitely community outreach, like with the people at Oregon Public Broadcasting or KGW. We were trying to reach out in different directions and see what was possible, what worked, what didn't work.

What were some of the Film Center's early programs?

We brought director Nicholas Ray here and did an all-day workshop at KGW television for filmmakers. That was an absolutely wonderful event, very rich. We also did a workshop with George Stoney about community television and cable TV production. Dave Foster from the University of Oregon taught a workshop for teachers on pinhole photography and "do-it-yourself" film processing. As part of my work with a national committee on film resources and services, I organized a gathering of film and video makers from around the Northwest. We met at Portland State to discuss and reflect on where we were as a film community and what should or could be developed. The Film Center hosted a video event that was attended by Jonas Mekas. I remember my first meeting with him in New York. When I told him I was from Portland, Oregon, he went over to a map on his wall to see where the place was.

Where did you go after founding the Film Center?

I went on to work with local filmmakers to develop The Media Project. One of our goals was to put out a film directory of what Portland had to offer in the way of equipment and professional expertise. The other aspect was to put together programs of film by local filmmakers and to carry those to film societies around the state. That was where I focused my work for a year or two before I left to go to graduate school in Los Angeles, finished my Ph.D. in film, wrote my dissertation on the independent feature movement in the US, and then came back to begin teaching at Portland State. I still feel that that's where my strengths really lie, in bringing together knowledgeable people and engaging the audience in discussion of film.

In this era of abundant technology, how can film centers have a role in building community today?

I feel technology is expanding at a much faster rate than the ability of people to understand what they're working with and to use it in meaningful ways. We're in a very strange position right now, with a flood of technology while people are going hungry and living on the streets. How do you bring these two worlds together, so that we use media in meaningful ways to actually communicate through art and share human experience? When I think about the Film Center's early people or the early events, I realize that society actually was different. You could have conversations. We had time to talk to one another. I miss it tremendously.



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