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# The Academy and the Avant-Garde: A Relationship of Dependence and Resistance

by Michael Zryd

*Abstract: This essay examines what was called the academization of the North American avant-garde in the 1970s and 1980s, arguing for a material historical understanding of the role that academic institutions played in sustaining avant-garde distribution co-ops, regionalizing exhibition, publishing criticism, providing employment, and developing future generations of artists, critics, and audiences.*

This essay argues that the study of film at colleges and universities has been central to the post-1960s North American avant-garde film world.<sup>1</sup> Compared to narrative, documentary, or animation, avant-garde film depends on the academy. Since the exponential rise of film studies as a discipline in the mid-1960s, universities have supported avant-garde film production, sustained its distribution co-ops, and served as its primary site of exhibition in North America. Furthermore, because sales and rentals to universities are the primary market for avant-garde film, scholarly criticism—serving a de facto publicity function—has had a decisive impact on the avant-garde film world in a way that is unthinkable for narrative feature-length filmmaking. Yet the avant-garde film world has largely ignored the university's function as its material base, perceiving universities at best with ambivalence and at worst with hostility. This was true especially during the 1970s and 1980s, when there was an outcry against the academization and institutionalization of the avant-garde.

The reticence of avant-garde filmmakers, critics, and supporters, including academics, to address the centrality of the academy in the avant-garde film world<sup>2</sup> reflects a larger disavowal of the institutional and economic matrixes that undergird, however meagerly, this marginal sphere of cultural activity. This disregard testifies further to the existence, especially in the 1980s, of a romanticized notion of the avant-garde as an anti-institutional, revolutionary political praxis that constructs the academy as an organ of simple ideological co-optation. A more material—and modest—understanding of avant-garde cinema as a tradition of heterogeneous independent artisanal filmmaking,<sup>3</sup> disseminated through university and art school education, might better recognize the salutary and indeed disproportionate impact that avant-garde film has had in expanding film aesthetics, broadening patterns of film spectatorship and reception, and integrating high art and popular culture.<sup>4</sup> In light of the present, extraordinarily healthy moment of avant-garde film practice, the

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myth of the academy as an innately repressive institution needs to be disentangled from the material reality of the long-term relationship between the university and avant-garde film production, distribution, exhibition, and critical discourses.<sup>5</sup>

**The Critique of Academization and Institutionalization.** The standard narrative for the post–World War II American avant-garde runs something like this. After many years of spirited activism and exhibition by figures like Maya Deren, Frank Stauffacher, and Amos Vogel through the 1950s and early 1960s, the avant-garde reaches its apogee of visibility and vigor as a cultural scene in the mid- to late-1960s, primarily around the activities of Jonas Mekas in New York.<sup>6</sup> Mekas organizes packed screenings at the Film-Makers’ Cinematheque, inspiring other underground film programming; the Film-Makers’ Cooperative (FMC), established in 1962, distributes films to numerous film societies, exhibitors, individuals, and universities and inspires the creation of other co-ops, including Canyon Cinema Cooperative (CCC) and the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre (CFMDC); underground film receives mainstream press in publications such as *Popular Photography* (1965), *Newsweek* (1967), and the *New York Times* (1967). (*Pull My Daisy* is even satirized in *Mad* magazine in 1963.) Several books on the avant-garde are published—notably by trade publishers—while Mekas’s *Film Culture* and his “Movie Journal” column (1959–71) in the *Village Voice* provide weekly publicity.<sup>7</sup> The avant-garde, like other late-1960s forms of countercultural expression and social protest, understands itself to be a vibrant alternative cinema, in sharp contrast both to mainstream America and a decaying Hollywood studio system.

With the establishment of Anthology Film Archives in 1970 and the ascendance of “structural film,” so named in P. Adams Sitney’s influential 1969 *Film Culture* essay, the narrative of the avant-garde takes a sharp turn from one of exuberant anarchy to institutionalized legitimacy.<sup>8</sup> J. Hoberman, writing in 1984, provides a typical description of “the once unruly underground’s” submission to “the formalist concerns of the art world . . . within the institutional web of administered culture”:

As the chaotic underground was superceded by the “cinema of structure”—a confusing term that forecast the theorizing that would soon dominate avant-garde thinking—few recognized the key structural event of the early 1970s, namely the institutionalization of the avant-garde. Even as an entire issue of *Artforum* [1971] was devoted to the accomplishments of the New American Cinema, the underground surrendered its popular base to the new phenomenon of midnight movies. Meanwhile, the free-wheeling programming policies of the Film-Makers’ Cinematheque were succeeded by the restrictive selections of the Anthology Film Archives. Opening in December 1970, the Anthology reified the avant-garde tradition, creating a fixed pantheon of filmmakers and certified canon of masterpieces, drawing heavily upon the late efflorescence of structural film. Avant-garde cinema left the theaters and entered the classrooms. By the early 1970s, almost all the major filmmakers (and a host of new ones) had come in from the cold—a protected species, like academic poets—to spawn a new generation of university-trained, tenure-seeking filmmakers, film theorists, and film critics.<sup>9</sup>

This account, echoing numerous others, is marked by some key features on which I will elaborate in this essay.<sup>10</sup> The first concerns who owns the style of the avant-garde.

The shift out of 1960s counterculture into the academy foregrounds conflicts over film-world values, dramatized as a conflict between populist, plain-speaking, expressive artists and elitist, professional intellectuals ensconced in institutions.<sup>11</sup> The artists' authenticity clashes with the pretentiousness of critics and academics. In this respect, the complaint against academization is directed less against the fact that avant-garde films are taught in universities than at the language of that instruction, especially the rise of "theory" and its specialized terminology in the 1970s and 1980s, which many artists saw as an intimidating barrier to institutional recognition. A contradiction surfaces here in that complaints about being excluded from institutions went hand in hand with condemnations of filmmakers who were embraced by institutions, what filmmaker Bill Brand called the "demoralizing . . . paradox of success as proof of failure."<sup>12</sup>

My point is not to deny the vigor of the underground or its achievements; nor do I deny the potential for pretension among academics and critics. Rather, my concern is that the oversimplified vilification of the academy and institutions distorts the rich and productive history of academic and institutional affiliations while creating a nostalgic (and inaccurate) horizon of expectation for the avant-garde film world.

The second key feature of Hoberman's account is its focus on canon-formation, which was seen as a force anointing old-guard establishment filmmakers and/or those favored by academic fashion at the expense of young, developing artists (many, ironically, emerging from art schools).<sup>13</sup> This conflict was a result of a scarcity of resources in the 1980s—a difficult period for the North American avant-garde—as cutbacks in arts and education led to fewer exhibition sites and little mainstream or academic attention. Notably, the institutionalization and academization of the avant-garde said to occur in the 1970s was not named or critiqued until the mid-1980s, when scarcity of resources exacerbated tension in the avant-garde film world.

The third feature of Hoberman's narrative is that he laments the move from the theater to the classroom. While he is correct in stating that the dominant percentage of rentals switched from nonacademic to academic sites, my own research into FMC records (and published evidence from other co-ops) indicates that academic rentals were a key component of avant-garde exhibition even during the heyday of the 1960s underground.<sup>14</sup> While there was certainly a rapid increase in the ratio of academic to nonacademic rentals, the shift in dominant exhibition space was gradual, and not due solely or even primarily to Essential Cinema or the rise of structural film. By 1967, the year that Michael Snow's *Wavelength* is said to have launched the "cinema of structure," academic rentals already accounted for the majority of FMC rentals (60 percent), reflecting the explosive growth of film studies as a whole. Whether this shift is fairly described as a retreat from the dynamism of the heroic 1960s requires much more historical contextualizing, as well as a sense of the long-term impact of teaching avant-garde film in the university.

In Hoberman's account above, avant-garde film exhibition switches from theaters to classrooms, and filmmakers slink into universities, betraying the revolutionary energies of the 1960s; indeed, like ideology itself, they are said to encourage their own capitulation by spawning the next generation of students. That theaters are presumed to be superior to classrooms as exhibition spaces reflects a nostalgia for

the underground and its moment of fame, sustaining a myth that the avant-garde film community seeks to broaden its impact in popular rather than academic spaces.

It is illuminating that economic and other material historical forces are all but omitted from Hoberman's account, which is couched largely in the passive voice. It is unclear who is submitting to the institutional web, and why. Did avant-garde films "leave the theaters" voluntarily? Or were they pushed out by cultural and economic conditions?

A number of factors need to be considered in relation to the falling popularity of underground film. First, the public profile that avant-garde film enjoyed in the late 1960s was, as one Canyon Cinema worker called it, an "underground fad" that faded when the movement lost the attention of the popular press.<sup>15</sup> Second, Hollywood's shift in 1968 from following the Production Code to adhering to the film ratings system relaxed the censorship regulations that applied to feature films, depriving the underground of one of its selling points. Third, the recession of the early 1970s created budgetary restrictions on film societies and alternative exhibitors, and more generally chilled mainstream interest in cultural experimentation. Fourth, and finally, like other forms of 1960s counterculture, underground film declined in visibility in the 1970s.

**Avant-garde Style.** Most accounts of the shift in the style of the avant-garde film world note that from the 1960s to the 1970s the unruly and chaotic, free and rebellious underground cinema—standing in for the counterculture idealism of the 1960s—was tamed by a formalist, theory-driven, institutional art world and university culture. Implicit here is a vision of a self-generating, organic, and autonomous community composed of free-thinking individuals distinct from an "establishment" high art and intellectual society composed of critics and academics with predetermined, inauthentic values. Rebel artists are supplanted by gray-suited establishment men camouflaged as black-clad SoHo art types and tweed-clad profs. As Patricia Mellencamp asserts, "In its Eighties ensconcement in academia and the art scene, avant-garde is legal tender, taught rather than fought": the militancy of the avant-garde seems lost.<sup>16</sup> The underground's critique of bourgeois elitism seems betrayed by the intellectual elitism of the academy and art world. Institutionalization, according to this characterization, is ultimately, as Paul Arthur suggests, a populist reaction against art and university elites.<sup>17</sup>

The ambivalence of the avant-garde toward the academy's economic sustenance—however marginal and inadequate it is—reflects a larger struggle over the ownership and definition of what constitutes the aspirations, practice, and potential of avant-garde artistic practice in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. Fred Camper's influential 1986 essay, "The End of Avant-Garde Film," portrays the academy as a mainstream institution at odds with the spirit of the 1960s, for which he evinces nostalgia:

The academization and institutionalization of American avant-garde film is an extraordinarily ironic phenomenon. A movement that took a strongly adversarial position toward mainstream America has been, to use a '60s word that has long gone out of fashion, "co-opted" by the culture as a whole, and especially by its dollars.<sup>18</sup>

Camper's complaint is symptomatic of the historically anti-institutional impulses of most avant-garde filmmakers. Whether drawing from theories of the nineteenth-century political avant-garde or the twentieth-century artistic avant-garde, the animating energy of any avant-garde—and the source of its appeal—is its desire to resist mainstream or establishment structures, institutions, and values.<sup>19</sup> The key debates in avant-garde theory arise over strategies of resistance, usually voiced as a choice between autonomy from or engagement with established social and artistic institutions. On the one hand, if the films are autonomous forms of individual artistic expression, their “authenticity” and “personal urgency” (in Camper's terms) may be compromised by an academic establishment. The avant-garde's revolutionary energies, embodied in its antibourgeois and/or anti-Hollywood stance, would further be compromised by affiliation with any institutional social apparatuses. On the other hand, as Peter Bürger's theory of the avant-garde suggests, this desire for purity and autonomy might more accurately be seen as a feature of modernism, which needs to be distinguished from an activist political avant-garde's engagement with society, which attempts to break down distinctions between art and life.<sup>20</sup>

Post-World War II American avant-garde film practice, in its extraordinary heterogeneity and richness, has embraced both autonomy and engagement, but its attachment to the imperative of resistance is clearest in its failure at commodification. This cinema was not embraced by the art market, and no North American avant-garde filmmaker has made a living solely on the basis of film sales and rentals. The view of avant-garde film as both art and commodity sees the avant-garde, on one hand, as idealistically critiquing bourgeois capitalism while seeking to remain separate and autonomous from it, and, on the other hand, as disavowing—or sabotaging—its status as commodity, an exchangeable object or experience imbricated within capitalism. Any success in the mainstream, whether measured in sales or publicity, therefore creates suspicion and the damning charge of selling out.

Writing in 1984, the cultural historian David Ehrenstein made precisely this charge when he compared the academy to a factory run by corporate America:

[Structural] films are grist for the academic and institutional mills that have come to be considered the proper province of all that is best in avant-garde and independent work today. There are papers to be written about them, courses to be taught, lectures to be given. Once a film's importance in that sphere is firmly established, there are museums and university film libraries that may wish to purchase prints. Overseeing the entire process are such commercial concerns as the Chase Manhattan Bank, the Exxon Corporation, Consolidated Edison, the Minolta Corporation, Agfa-Gavaert, et al., all too eager to benefit from the tax advantages and advertising goodwill contributions to this non-profit network provide. . . . It would not be inappropriate to take note of the pimps of Academe, laboring tirelessly at the behest of the *maison close* of culture.<sup>21</sup>

For Ehrenstein, any taint of corporate influence (however imaginary) corrupts the avant-garde and leads to a closed culture; although hyperbolic, his statement captures the polemical edge of the wider critique of institutionalization. What is at stake here is the principle of democratic openness established in the 1960s underground: anyone can make an avant-garde film, distribute it through a non-discriminatory co-op, and show it at an open screening for free. The academy,

because of its entrance requirements for students and hiring protocols for faculty, is by definition a *“maison close.”*

The utopian force of the avant-garde film world was based on the assumption, as film critic Amy Taubin puts it, that “anyone could, and it was thought everyone *should*, become a filmmaker. Every consumer a producer.”<sup>22</sup> The nostalgia for the 1960s, when the avant-garde seemed both to incarnate an authentic autonomous sphere and to have a public presence, cannot be underestimated.

The persistence of the avant-garde’s antagonism to institutional forces has led to an idealistic but often undermining disavowal of its inevitable institutional intersections and locations. That university classrooms should be the primary economic engine for avant-garde film points to how far removed this sphere of film practice is from the economy of the art market, its plausible home. Unlike certain forms of video art, which, despite sharing the potentially infinite reproducibility of film, retained protocols of scarcity and collectability, North American avant-garde film adopted the economic model of theatrical cinema; that is, distributors rent film prints to exhibitors for public or educational screenings. Even when film prints are sold to individuals or institutions, what is sold is the right to a performance—the right to project the print for an audience—not an object. With some exceptions—usually film installations—few avant-garde filmmakers sell their works as limited editions.<sup>23</sup>

**The Aesthetic Critique of Academic Art.** The academy has existed for the avant-garde in two senses: first, as an imaginary—“Academy”—a term of derision connoting both formulaic and vitiating academicism and co-optation by an “Ideological State Apparatus” (to use Louis Althusser’s popular term at play in this period) and, second, as a material reality, an institutional base that hires filmmakers as faculty, screens films for students, and sustains avant-garde history and criticism.

While Camper’s critique of academization momentarily raises questions of ideological cooptation, his is an aesthetic critique in which academic avant-garde film (almost an oxymoron) would be akin to academic painting or music. Here, academicism refers to work that is conventional or formulaic, an offense to the avant-garde’s commitment to innovation. Camper’s essay attacks such academicism for compromising the 1960s avant-garde’s particular values of authenticity and personal urgency. “One quality of academic art is that it avoids reflecting the complexities, the contradictions, the violent impulses of a life lived with passion, in favor of the airless repetition of the techniques of part art.”<sup>24</sup> Camper objects to what he sees as a divorce of technique and subject matter, and the dilution of innovation and artistic energy.

Another critique of academicism derives from its contemporary colloquial derogatory meaning, “of theoretical interest only, with no practical application.”<sup>25</sup> This resonates with the antitheory stance that many avant-garde critics have articulated against the academy and the perennial desire of the avant-garde to merge art and life, wherein the “impractical” sphere of the academic is seen as distinct from direct, lived aesthetic experience. Here the charge is not just against aesthetic vitiation but also political irrelevance.

Film critic Peter Lehman notes that even academics create a binary between the academic and the political, citing a theorist who “glorifies the political importance

of his work which presumably is not *merely* academic.”<sup>26</sup> In this case, the real-world impact demanded by the avant-garde prevails; the avant-garde must act as a direct and practical political tool. This imperative informs the ambivalence maintained by almost all academic commentators on the academization of avant-garde film. To be “academic” is an insult even for academics.

**Canon-Formation.** A second major objection to the institutionalizing force of academization is canon-formation, understood to be aligned with exclusionary practices inimical to the style of the 1960s. Hoberman and others identify Anthology Film Archives’ Essential Cinema as the foundational canonical list, although *Visionary Film* (1974) by P. Adams Sitney (an Essential Cinema jury member) is another common target.<sup>27</sup> A major, and salutary, critique of the Essential Cinema canon emerged among feminist critics, who noted both the all-male composition of the selection committee and the extremely low percentage of women filmmakers it selected for inclusion (6 percent of the filmmakers were women, and only 4 percent of the films were made by women).<sup>28</sup>

The question of which films to include in a canon—and the necessarily dynamic and contingent nature of that process of aesthetic differentiation—needs to be separated from the question of a canon’s more general institutional utility. As I shall discuss below, evidence suggests that, however problematic an avant-garde canon might be at any particular time, it can also serve an important function in influencing the composition of teaching texts and syllabi.

On average, 75 percent of avant-garde film co-op rentals are to universities. What is curious is that individual filmmakers, distribution co-ops, and other avant-garde institutions have not made a more concerted effort to put pressure on academics to screen more, or different, avant-garde films. Instead, with the exception of the mid-1980s texts cited in this essay, universities are remarkable for their absence from avant-garde film discourse. For example, the 1976 special edition of *Film Culture: Guide to Independent Film and Video*, which comprehensively maps almost all the major institutions related to avant-garde film and video art, does not include universities in its section on exhibition. Similarly, a survey of FMC newsletters published during its financial crisis between 1988 and 1990 reveals no mention of appealing to universities. Rather, the FMC initiated fund-raising to help exhibit films in museums, even though that market has rarely comprised more than 25 percent of the FMC’s rentals since the 1960s. What is astonishing is that most of the members of the board of directors of the FMC during the late 1980s were filmmakers who taught at universities; the mission to popularize the avant-garde consistently ignores one of its greatest resources.

In the few cases in which complaints about the university film canon are voiced, the underlying complaint is with the lack of exhibition spaces. Mike Hoolboom, who worked as the experimental film officer for the CFMDC in the 1980s, summarized that decade’s doldrums, noting that lack of “exhibition venues and theatrical screenings remain large problems—avant-garde work is most often shown in classroom settings—where the same small group of works by the same filmmakers (the canon) is shown over and over.”<sup>29</sup>



For most filmmakers, the problem with the canon is that it does not allow enough work by new filmmakers to be screened. This is perhaps an underlying complaint about academization: since the classroom is the major site of exhibition, there are a restricted number of screening slots, limited budgets, and defined curriculums. The lack of theaters and festivals becomes another major problem for new artists: theaters and festivals are the only venues over which the filmmaker feels a sense of agency and ownership.<sup>30</sup>

A major critique of canonization articulated on behalf of excluded filmmakers was staged in 1985 in *Spiral*, a small-press journal, edited by Terry Cannon in Los Angeles. In the “Point of View” section, readers were invited to respond to the following:

STATEMENT: A significant number of prominent institutions which exhibit avant-garde film, and publications which review avant-garde film, have elevated certain films and filmmakers to the exclusion of a great majority of filmmakers. . . .

1) Is the anointing of certain films and filmmakers over others inevitable when the exhibition of film art becomes institutionalized?

2) Is there a lack of understanding and appreciation (i.e., the prevalence of a very narrow elitist attitude) of filmic viewpoints which are not derived from formal academic training?

3) How accessible are these institutions and publications, which are largely controlled by well-educated whites, to the needs and representation of minority filmmakers?

4) Why do certain institutions (the Museum of Modern Art in New York being the most prominent) steadfastly refuse to seriously exhibit the work of Super-8 filmmakers?

5) How can curators and programmers at these institutions, and editors of publications, be made accountable?<sup>31</sup>

While the objections to the lack of minority and Super-8 filmmakers are quite pointed, the worries that “academic training” and institutionalization are narrowing the field of filmmakers who are “elevated” and “anointed” reflect familiar concerns with betraying the ethos of openness and emotional authenticity inherited from the 1960s. Tellingly, while curators, programmers, and editors of publications are to “be made accountable,” university instructors and librarians are not mentioned. Attacks on the academy have tended to be ideological rather than strategic, rarely attempting to intervene in the programming of films in the classroom.

One explanation for why the classroom is not seen as a legitimate venue for screening avant-garde film may be the specific conditions of programming, screening, and spectatorship. Kathryn Ramey’s recent work on the cultural politics and economy of the American avant-garde suggests that, given the negligible economic capital at stake, the circulation of what Pierre Bourdieu calls cultural capital is what has real currency.<sup>32</sup> Within the avant-garde film world, high cultural value accrues via screenings for other filmmakers, especially at avant-garde film festivals, while classroom screenings for students, even though they may result in marginal financial gain, have less cultural value. As Scott MacDonald acknowledges, even as he defends the classroom as a site of transformative discovery, “There’s nothing very romantic about the recognition that the primary location where dynamic cinema programming

remains possible is in academe. A vibrant 'underground' in a mysterious corner of a great city is far more intriguing."<sup>33</sup>

The classroom is, indeed, not a typical theatrical space or occasion. The viewers are students enrolled in a course that generally counts for credit toward a degree. And while students might choose a course based on the attractiveness of the screening list, much like spectators of avant-garde films at a museum, students generally choose a *course*, not a screening list. Their reasons for choosing a course in avant-garde cinema may have as much to do with scheduling considerations and program requirements as content.

Further, classes are not generally open to the public.<sup>34</sup> Rather, the viewers are a captive audience shaped by structures of evaluation: attendance is taken; students are required to respond to the films for course assignments; and there is a grade. The films are not chosen by a programmer or curator who is responsible for screening new artists or broaching new thematic material.

Although instructors formulating syllabi may feel responsible to screen new work, and may attempt to represent a diversity of filmmakers in terms of gender, sexuality, race, or national origin, they are just as likely to feel beholden to curricular requirements. For example, most avant-garde film courses take the form of survey courses (e.g., the avant-garde from 1920s to present), which usually require representing historical scope and limiting the possibility of screening new work.

Pragmatic considerations further limit the film instructor's choices (although these also affect the programmer and curator): budget, print availability, class length, and the ten-to-fourteen-week schedule. Even the physical conditions of viewing are different. Mellencamp is one of the few scholars to describe what is likely the dominant mode of viewing for avant-garde cinema: "most likely sitting in a hard, uncomfortable desk in a bland university classroom."<sup>35</sup>

Nonetheless, the classroom can also create exemplary conditions for engaged and receptive spectatorship. Films are introduced by instructors (and sometimes by the filmmaker) and are contextualized formally and historically; they can be screened multiple times and be available for close analysis; are seen in relation to other films and historical traditions; and can be discussed in class with the instructor and other students. Rather than replicate the potentially passive mode of theatrical product consumption, the classroom screening offers a potentially critical and collective experience of cinema viewing.

While some attacks on academization as institutionalization in the 1980s targeted a perceived culture of elitism and/or mainstream legitimacy (Ehrenstein and Hoberman), obscure theoretical language (*Spiral*), or academicism in filmmaking instruction (Camper), most avant-garde filmmakers, co-ops, and other institutions simply ignored the university as a site for consideration.

**Deinstitutionalizing the Institution: The Academy as Adaptable Site.** Todd Bayma's sociological study of the avant-garde "art world," undertaken in Chicago in 1991 and published in 1995, is one of the few accounts by an outsider of the American avant-garde film world. His findings suggest that the rhetoric of

cooptation voiced by Camper, Ehrenstein, and Hoberman is overstated insofar as it ignores the ways in which the avant-garde has managed to maintain many of the cultural values of the 1960s: “This art world attaches great importance to technical innovation, personal expression, and active engagement with art, producing an aesthetic that does not shun diversity in style or content or indeterminacy of meaning.”<sup>36</sup> Bayma sees avant-garde film as resisting the academy’s institutional culture and strategically mobilizing the resources of the university to enable avant-garde film production and education:

Affiliation with academic institutions has created sites for the fostering of innovation and interactive participation in local communities, while de-emphasizing the roles of gatekeepers and critics as arbiters of legitimacy and meaning. . . . Academic institutions do not monopolize participation in the art world as a whole, which extends to individuals and institutions making and exhibiting films independent of academia.<sup>37</sup>

As *Spiral* indicates, even though most avant-garde film rentals are to academic institutions, the avant-garde film world is much more attentive to the programming of films in nonacademic alternative theaters and museums. Thus, a sort of dichotomy is created in which universities constitute what Hoolboom has called “bread-and-butter” sustenance (for the co-ops if not the filmmakers), while nonacademic institutions, such as festivals and museums, provide prestige and cultural capital.<sup>38</sup> Bayma suggests that, unlike some art worlds (e.g., visual art, music) in which he observes more codification and conventionalization, avant-garde film, partly by virtue of its resistance to commodification, is characterized by “innovative” and “interactive” institutionalization: “This relatively unintegrated and inclusive form of institutionalization is driven both by the cultural values associated with experimental film and by such material considerations as the [avant-garde film] art world’s small size, unprofitability, and lack of prestige in larger culture markets.”<sup>39</sup> In the remainder of this essay, I shall outline the material history and conditions of post-1960s North American avant-garde film, especially as it intersects with the academy, in order to sketch the ambivalent, yet crucial, legacy of the avant-garde in universities, and of the university in the avant-garde film.

**There Have Always Been Avant-Garde Institutions.** As Camper has argued, “The years from 1966 to the present [1986] might be called the institutional period of American avant-garde film”—but the critique of institutionalization has had more to do with the *style* of avant-garde institutions than with the *existence* of these institutions themselves.<sup>40</sup> The period before 1966 is characterized by a dizzying constellation of avant-garde institutions—some academic—that were created in the heyday of underground cinema and before. Jan-Christopher Horak’s scholarship on pre-World War II avant-garde production, distribution, and exhibition and Lauren Rabinovitz’s accounts of the contributions of Maya Deren and Shirley Clarke to the avant-garde film world between the war and the 1960s point to the importance of many of these institutions.<sup>41</sup> As Paul Arthur enumerates, prior to 1966, Mekas alone was instrumental in “the New American Cinema Group (1960), Film-Makers’ Cooperative (1962), Film Culture Non-Profit Corporation (1963), Film-Makers’

Cinematheque (1964), Film-Makers' Workshop (1964), Film-Maker's Lecture Bureau (1964) [primarily serving universities inviting filmmakers to screen their work], Friends of the New American Cinema (1964), and Film-Makers' Distribution Center (1966)."<sup>42</sup>

Crucially, as Arthur suggests, it was Mekas's desire to "remain disorganizedly organized"<sup>43</sup> that made these institutions noninstitutional in *style* (at least until Mekas helped establish the Essential Cinema at Anthology Film Archives). Today, avant-garde institutions continue to flourish, albeit ephemerally in most cases, as in the following incomplete list: informal screening spaces, such as the Robert Beck Memorial Cinema at the Collective Unconscious space in Manhattan; David Sherman and Rebecca Barton's touring Total Mobile Home microcinema; and Alex MacKenzie's now-extinguished Blinding Light cinema in Vancouver; production co-ops, such as the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto; small distributors, such as Peripheral Produce and Joanie4Jackie; small-press magazines, such as Buffalo's Squeaky Wheel Collective newsletter, *The Squealer*; festivals such as Images (Toronto), Views from the Avant-Garde, and Media City (Windsor, Canada); and Web sites, such as Flickr.<sup>44</sup> Complaints with institutionalization are with the scale, power, and mainstream connotations that particular institutions such as the academy carry.

**Academic Freedom and Artistic Freedom.** It is worthwhile to ask how the academy is different from these independent avant-garde institutions and whether universities are necessarily repressive of radical expression. The university has historically served, at least potentially, as a site of debate and contestation. In Sally Banes's analysis of the grounding of American avant-garde performance in the post-1960s university, she lists several reasons that the avant-garde finds a home in universities, the most "noble" of which is that "the innovative avant-garde telos fits with the research university's mission to create new knowledge, and the avant-garde's critique of the status quo suits the liberal arts college's mandate to foster critical thinking."<sup>45</sup> Banes notes the symmetry of "artistic freedom" and "academic freedom," both of which are valued by the avant-garde, which has a long history of combating censorship.<sup>46</sup> More cynically, university "administrators uphold the teachers' and students' avant-garde proclivities because it shows they tolerate free expression."<sup>47</sup> Also, students, parents, and teachers use the seclusion of the "college experience" as a safe haven for experimentation, however short-lived it might be. In concluding her study, Banes uses language that, appropriately, echoes the underground film ethos of the 1960s:

That the university now provides a protected haven—however random or small-scale—for experiments in performance; that it animates in the next generation of young artists' ideas—however embattled—about innovation and originality; that it literally feeds those who make iconoclastic, deviant, or alternative art; and that it supplies dissident voices within the university system itself; all these aspects are crucial politically as well as culturally—not to mention pedagogically.<sup>48</sup>

In light of the general cultural post-1960s shift toward consumerism and political conservatism, I concur with Banes that those universities that have embraced avant-garde

artists have afforded a protected site of experimentation, innovation, and dissent, and have allowed for the transmission of those values through education.

**The Academy Was There in the 1960s Too.** Hoberman's claim that the avant-garde "left the theatres and entered the classrooms" ignores a much longer history of academic-avant-garde interaction. Film courses entered the academy before 1920. The first post-World War II expansion of American universities in the late 1940s and 1950s accommodated returning servicemen (using funds from the GI Bill), employing filmmakers such as Hans Richter and Sidney Peterson, whose film *The Lead Shoes* (1949) was produced as a collaborative class project at the California School (now Institute) of Fine Arts.<sup>49</sup> The next major expansion occurred in the late 1960s to accommodate the Baby Boom generation, during which film studies enjoyed its greatest growth. Film scholars Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery speculate that between 1965 and 1975 "it is quite possible that cinema studies was the fastest growing academic discipline in American universities."<sup>50</sup>

Distribution records from both Cinema 16 and FMC indicate that universities rented avant-garde films in the early 1960s (although Hoberman is correct that the volume increased in the late 1960s).<sup>51</sup> The intellectual and political ferment of those years helped to motivate radical and experimental artists, including filmmakers, to join university faculties, especially after 1968.<sup>52</sup> The beginning of the period that saw the sharpest rise in the number of film studies courses offered in American universities coincides with the period when the avant-garde enjoyed its widest popularity and public exposure, what Don Lloyd of CCC called "the independent film 'boom' of '68-'69."<sup>53</sup> Film co-op newsletters, community newspapers, and other documents of the period note that universities provided halls for screenings by independent and campus film societies alike, and the students provided one of the most important audience groups for screenings, whether on or off campus. The academy did not kill the underground; it helped it grow.

By the mid-1960s, the underground cinema movement recognized the academy. Jonas Mekas reports setting up the Film-Makers Lecture Bureau in 1964 (although the first and only catalog was published in 1968-69) "to service the constantly growing requests for personal appearances of independent film-makers at colleges, universities, and film societies."<sup>54</sup> In the '68-'69 catalog, ninety-three filmmakers and four critics are listed, several with film lecture topics, filmography, and vitae. Of these, sixteen already seem to have had full-time academic jobs, more list adjunct positions, and most report having given guest lectures at educational institutions. Of this group, forty-five indicate having attended a university (probably more did), and at least twelve more in this group who were not teaching full-time in 1968-69 later found full-time academic employment.

**Five Legacies of Academicization.** The teaching of avant-garde film in universities had at least five long-term material consequences for the avant-garde: (1) the maintenance (to the point of dependence) of distribution co-ops, as the classroom became the dominant site of exhibition; (2) regionalization, as centers of avant-garde film activity expanded beyond New York to multiple regional sites; (3) publication

### Film-Makers' Cooperative Percentage of Academic Rental Payments

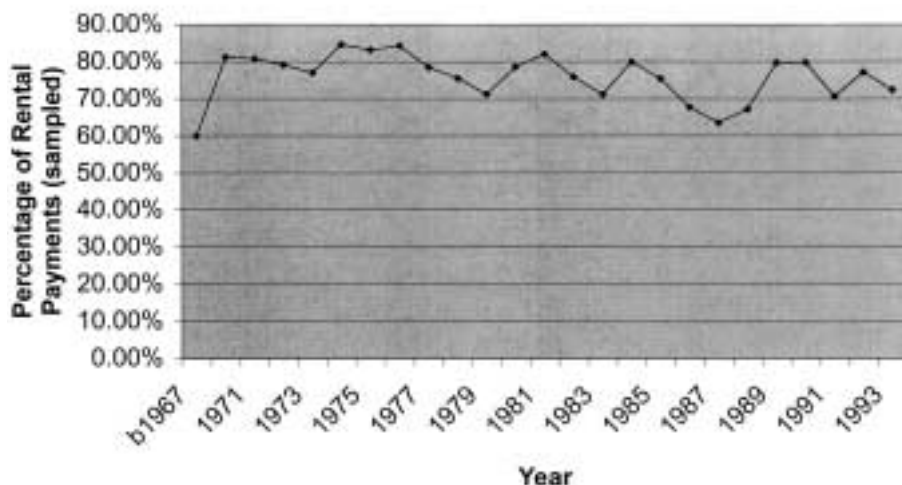


Figure 1.

mechanisms for the writing and dissemination of the history, criticism, and theory of the avant-garde; (4) employment for filmmakers as faculty or technical personnel; and (5) development of second- (and third-) generation students becoming filmmakers, critics, teachers, programmers, and archivists. All of these legacies have enhanced awareness of avant-garde film beyond its limited countercultural sphere. Bayma uses Charles Kadushin's term "movement circle"—an art world in which "the culture producers are a major audience for the works"—to describe the habitual hermeticism of the American avant-garde film world, a hermeticism that the academy often challenges.<sup>55</sup>

1. *Sustaining the co-ops.* As stated above, beginning in 1962 with the establishment of the Film-Makers' Cooperative in New York, experimental film was distributed mainly by similar co-ops such as Canyon Cinema in San Francisco and the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre in Toronto.<sup>56</sup> For these co-ops, rentals for classroom and university film societies have consistently comprised the majority of their overall rentals since the late 1960s, and represented a sizable percentage earlier in the decade. Over this period, academic rentals averaged more than 75 percent of FMC's total rentals, ranging from a low of 60 percent in 1967 to a high of 85 percent in 1974 (see Fig. 1).<sup>57</sup>

The period 1965–75, the era of "academization" or "institutionalization," exhibited two major trends: first, a rapid rise and fall in *overall* co-op rentals (reaching its apogee in 1967–69), and, second, a steady increase in the *proportion* of rentals to academic institutions. Rental income figures for 1964 and 1965 (different from but roughly proportionate to the number of invoices) for FMC indicate 20.1 percent

## Film-Makers' Cooperative: Number of Rental Payments (sampled)

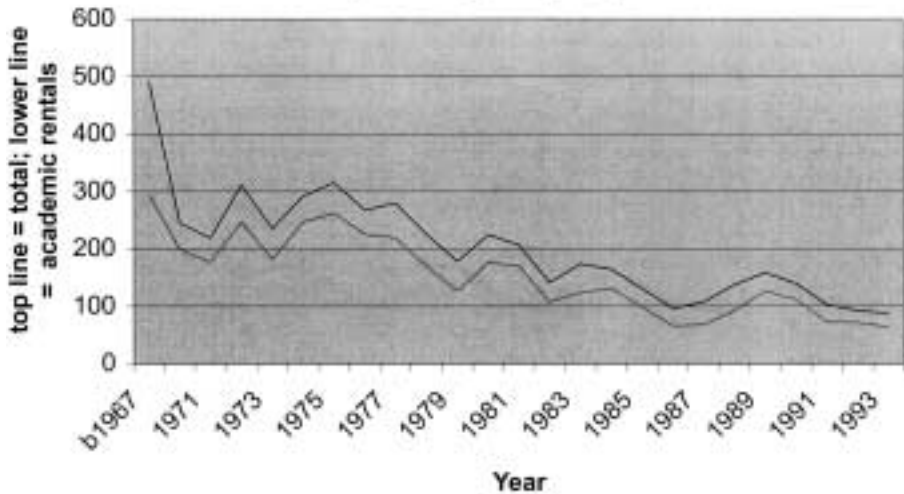


Figure 2.

and 29.5 percent of academic rental totals, respectively, a rise of 10 percent in one year.<sup>58</sup> By 1967, the percentage of academic rental invoice payments was roughly 60 percent, and it rose to 81 percent in 1970, after which the percentage fluctuated at 77 percent to 85 percent. But if the proportion of academic co-op rentals rose steadily in this period, there was nevertheless a drop in total rentals from the 1960s into the 1970s. Canyon Cinema reported a similar pattern; 1968–69 is called the “‘fad’ period for ‘underground’ films” after which CCC suffered a major drop in rentals that leveled off into the early 1970s, as gross rentals dropped \$10,000 from 1971 to 1972, creating what the CCC Board of Directors termed a ‘gloomy outlook.’<sup>59</sup>

Rentals of FMC films declined more or less steadily through the 1980s, which suggests a very bleak picture for avant-garde film. But this picture is complicated by the different institutional histories of FMC and CCC.<sup>60</sup> FMC went through serious financial difficulties in the late 1980s to the point where many renters thought it had gone out of business. Canyon Cinema, meanwhile, enjoyed a renaissance. As CCC director Dominic Angerame said in 1985, “In the past five years Canyon Cinema, Inc. has seen business increase more than 80 percent, and the future looks even brighter.”<sup>61</sup> Gross rental figures for 1988 increased almost threefold from their levels in 1980.<sup>62</sup>

Moreover, avant-garde production, as measured in the numbers of films deposited at the co-ops, remained healthy. At FMC, the number of films in the collection rose from 1,320 in 1975 to approximately 2,000 in 1978 to more than 2,500 in 1989 to 3,446 in 1993. CCC carried between 1,500 and 2,000 films in 1978, increasing to more than 2,000 by 1990.<sup>63</sup>

The health of film studies and avant-garde curricula has been inextricably tied to the health of the co-ops. A survey of late-1980s independent film distribution conducted by Wade Black supports this connection:

For the co-ops, the bulk of their rentals are to educational institutions, and their successes have been directly related to the developing number of institutions that have a curriculum use for independently produced short works. This primarily has meant those schools which teach film as film—in other words, those with film studies programs, production programs, and/or specialized programs in ethnography and visual anthropology.<sup>64</sup>

Black observes of both FMC and CCC that “as commercial distributors and non-profit programming services have appeared—and in most cases—disappeared over the last twenty years, the co-ops have continued to exist.”<sup>65</sup> The co-ops, in turn, have relied on the relative stability of the academic market. As Mekas, co-founder of FMC, has noted, avant-garde film distribution co-ops survived only in countries where successful film studies programs developed in the university system (the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom).<sup>66</sup> Compared to narrative, documentary, and animation (the other three main types of film analyzed in film studies courses), the fortunes of the avant-garde have been much more closely tied to the development of North American film studies programs.

2. *Regionalizing the Avant-garde.* Although New York was the center of avant-garde film activity in the 1960s (only the vibrant scene in San Francisco was comparable), numerous other centers emerged in the 1970s, usually following film festivals and the establishment of media centers (partially supported by newly available NEA and state government arts funding) and university programs. As Lauren Rabinovitz states, “Decentralization also occurred because of the intensified role that universities played in independent film culture.”<sup>67</sup>

Most major concentrations of avant-garde film activity in the academy have appeared in filmmaking schools that concentrated on teaching experimental filmmaking (although a few schools have or have had a tradition of teaching avant-garde criticism and theory). While some of these universities have been based in and around major urban areas (e.g., NYU; Bard; Cooper Union; Massachusetts College of Art; Art Institute of Chicago; Northwestern; San Francisco Art Institute; University of California, Berkeley; and California Institute of the Arts), other institutions with concentrations in avant-garde film have arisen outside major metropolises (University of Colorado, Boulder; SUNY Buffalo; Amherst College; University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee; University of Florida; Albright College<sup>68</sup>; SUNY Binghamton; and Antioch College). In Canada, avant-garde film has had a presence in several major cities, such as Vancouver (Simon Fraser, Emily Carr), Toronto (Ryerson, Sheridan, York, University of Toronto), and Montreal (Concordia), but also in smaller cities, such as Regina (University of Regina) and Nova Scotia (Nova Scotia College of Art & Design).

3. *Academic Publishing as Publicity.* Academic interest in the avant-garde was sustained through much of the 1970s, as evinced in the publication of at least eighteen books and the establishment of several journals. Notably, publications on the avant-garde in the 1970s shifted from trade publishers to museum, gallery, independent, and university presses. Rabinovitz relates this interest in the avant-garde to what she



sees as the overall 1970s “boom in cinema studies”<sup>69</sup>; more specialized film journals arose, many of which were, at least initially, primarily devoted to avant-garde film:

Although *Film Culture* had been a singular periodical devoted to independent cinema in the 1960s, new periodicals such as *Afterimage*, *October*, *Wide Angle*, *The Velvet Light Trap*, *Millennium Film Journal*, and *Jump Cut* constructed what was vanguard in the 1970s as they covered independent film activities and acquired international circulations. Many of these journals received support from academic institutions. The institutional consolidation of film studies also necessitated scholarly production about cinema (professors have to write to retain their faculty positions), and publications about independent film increased while being further absorbed in intellectual journals and established art magazines.<sup>70</sup>

One factor in the long-term health of avant-garde film practice is the tradition of academic criticism wherein, *pace* the connotation of “academic” as nonpractical, academic publication has served an important pragmatic role. In the narrative feature world, academic criticism goes largely unnoticed, but it is crucial to the avant-garde. Avant-garde film distribution co-ops are strictly egalitarian and therefore prohibited from promoting individual films and filmmakers. As the FMC catalog states: “Programming suggestions cannot be provided in any form by the Cooperative’s staff. . . . The Cooperative, itself, must remain clearly nondiscriminatory.”<sup>71</sup> This policy is radically unlike that in the narrative theatrical market, in which commercial distributors direct publicity, and the documentary market, in which broadcasters and theatrical distributors fulfill the publicity function. Especially since the academic market dominates avant-garde film exhibition, scholarly criticism, and teachers’ academic experiences (i.e., the films that they saw as students in previous experimental film courses) become strong determinants in a film’s total rentals (as do exposure to new films at festivals and nonacademic screenings).

The establishment of an avant-garde canon, while against the oppositional impulse of the avant-garde, has also served an important legitimating function by ensuring that the avant-garde, as a historically significant body of film production, has a place in film studies instruction as a whole. As Arthur notes, “After decades of neglect, or even worse, every new academic introductory film textbook now feels compelled to include a chapter or some major subchapter on the American avant-garde, and this simply wasn’t the case in the seventies or eighties.”<sup>72</sup>

Speaking in 2002, Arthur saw a resurgence of academic interest in the avant-garde, marked by the recent publication of “seventeen book-length studies in English devoted entirely, or substantially, to avant-garde film” and “significantly expanded” “coverage of avant-garde films in mainstream film magazines” and journals.<sup>73</sup> This renewed interest in the avant-garde arose as a result not only of the establishment of a canon but also of attempts to revise that canon. For example, books on such previously neglected artists as Jack Smith, Carolee Schneemann, and Joyce Wieland have recently appeared alongside volumes on artists such as Brakhage, Deren, and Snow. Although cursory, Wheeler Dixon’s *The Exploding Eye: A Re-visionary History of 1960s American Experimental Cinema*, as its subtitle announces, seeks to rediscover filmmakers not included in Sitney’s *Visionary Film*.<sup>74</sup>

4. *Employment.* Universities functioned as a major source of employment, providing health insurance, artistic resources, and creative/research time for avant-garde filmmakers at the very moment film studies enjoyed its most explosive growth, the 1970s. As Rabinovitz asserts, “By the end of the 1970s, the university and art school were not only the chief sources for film culture but were the primary economic support and organizational refuge for the avant-garde filmmaker.”<sup>75</sup> And Banes points out, university administrations could hire avant-garde performance artists because they were more affordable than established figures.<sup>76</sup> Avant-garde artists of the caliber of Brakhage (University of Colorado, Boulder) and Leslie Thornton (Brown University) sustained themselves and, in part, their artistic practice through the university.

The charge that employment in the academy makes artists bureaucratic vassals of the institution is, of course, not without foundation, although any artist not supported by the sales of his or her work is likely to encounter bureaucracies at other workplaces and granting agencies. The principle of academic freedom can also protect avant-garde filmmakers who want to explore dissident formal (and even pedagogical) experiments. This statement by Ken Jacobs and Larry Gottheim about the Harpur College/SUNY Binghamton film program they were establishing in 1970 suggests the attempt to maintain the spirit of 1960s underground and counterculture energies:

It's a Fine-Arts course, a visionary course, upsetting, wide-ranging, with actual seeing and hearing taking place, and thinking, and film-making where people get clubbed for being clever; our motto is “You take your life in your hands when you study film here.” People graduate, philosophers of cinema so sensitive, morally conscious, and concerned with genuine creativity they're incapacitated from making a living in the film industry as it exists today.<sup>77</sup>

Especially given the growing pressures on education systems to privatize and rationalize themselves as career-training institutions, defending academic freedom and the opportunities that arts and humanities programs present for artistic and intellectual exploration and play is imperative.

5. *Future Generations.* J. Hoberman worried that avant-garde filmmakers in universities, in addition to being coopted by the academic institution, would “spawn a new generation of university-trained, tenure-seeking filmmakers, film theorists, and film critics.”<sup>78</sup> The prospect of mere ideological replication both overestimates the power of the institution and underestimates the resilience of students. Exposure to avant-garde films in classroom screenings has helped to develop several new generations of avant-garde filmmakers and audiences. Moreover, evidence suggests that the members of these new generations are neither succumbing to a formulaic academic style of filmmaking nor remaining content as instructors to screen the canon. As early as 1987, Wade Black noted the long-term effects of MFA programs in filmmaking both in training teachers and creating a new market for the distribution co-ops: “As more MFA graduates become teachers, the rental base has been growing, and rental sites with no previous rental history are showing up with some regularity.” Moreover, he describes “a new generation” of viewers and

renters “willing to take risks with new artists” and “less inclined to limit choices to standard works.”<sup>79</sup>

Not only is the new generation keeping the tradition of avant-garde screenings alive, but they are broadening classroom screenings by not restricting themselves to a canon. Angerame, director of Canyon Cinema, also connects the strong market for avant-garde to a new generation of film instructors: “Many of them were in film schools in the ’70s. Now they’re teaching and in positions where they can rent films that had an influence on their lives and they want to see these works in their film form.”<sup>80</sup>

**Conclusion.** The current prospect for the avant-garde both within and outside the academy is very strong. Well-attended festivals offer a year-round circuit for avant-garde work; numerous new exhibition sites or “micro-cinemas” and festivals have arisen; and all the major distribution co-ops are experiencing stable, even rising rentals.<sup>81</sup> Dynamic cross-over with video, digital imaging, music, performance, and other art forms has invigorated production and expanded opportunities for distribution and exhibition. Largely abandoning the animus between video and film that marked 1970s and 1980s avant-garde discourse, multiple formats are used in production, distribution, and exhibition, in part because of the relative affordability and accessibility of high-quality digital image and sound technology (and cheap discarded film equipment).

A strong argument can be made for seeing the support of universities for the avant-garde as essential not only to the survival and health of avant-garde film but to avant-garde cultural practice generally, especially in the United States given its opponents among the conservative and parochial forces in mainstream culture. As Barnes argues:

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, when Congress and the White House are at loggerheads and both corporate and federal arts patronage are shrinking, the university still supports the avant-garde; indeed, it has taken on an increasing burden of avant-garde support as other sources dwindle. Rather than a conspiracy by a unified “ministry of culture,” university patronage survives because it is one of the few places in an increasingly conservative American culture where the avant-garde can still flourish and find protection from the demands of the commercial marketplace—where insurgency and both social and artistic criticism may be protected by the principle of academic freedom.<sup>82</sup>

The need to defend both artistic and academic freedom, both under threat given the corporatization of the university, is common cause for the avant-garde and for the academy.

## Notes

An earlier version of this essay was delivered at the SCMS conference in Minneapolis in 2003. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for *Cinema Journal* and the following for generously sharing their insights and criticism during the preparation of this article: Paul Arthur, Lee Grieveson, James Kreul, Bart Testa, Haidee Wasson, William Wees, and especially Tess Takahashi. As usual, the faults of the essay remain stubbornly my own.

1. I use “universities” to refer to all postsecondary institutions, although I recognize that colleges and other types of schools present different institutional contexts. The term “film world” describes not only the films but the larger culture of film production, distribution, exhibition, and discussion in avant-garde film communities. “Film world” adapts Howard Becker’s term “art world”: “overlapping networks of individuals and organizations that collectively take part in the production and reception of characteristic works,” as summarized in Todd Bayma, “Art World Culture and Institutional Choices: The Case of Experimental Film,” *Sociological Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1995): 81. I differentiate the terms to foreground the exclusion of film in the United States and Canada in the 1970s and 1980s from the high-art world of galleries and museums. Although art journals and galleries sporadically reviewed and exhibited film, avant-garde cinema never attained the cultural capital, and certainly not the financial capital, of the art market.
2. Notable exceptions include scholars such as Paul Arthur, Scott MacDonald, Patricia Mellencamp, and Lauren Rabinovitz.
3. Although the terms “artisanal” or “experimental” cinema might better describe this heterogeneous mode of filmmaking, this essay will follow the dominant usage from the 1970s onward, “avant-garde cinema.”
4. Paul Arthur suggests that conceptualizing the avant-garde in institutional terms supplies its most stable definition:

For me, the most remarkable thing about American avant-garde film is how little it has changed over a fairly long period of time. As long as the characterization of American avant-garde film isn’t constrained by modernist or even postmodern aesthetic categories, then the avant-garde seems to be doing much the same kind of thing as it’s done for a minimum of thirty years. I think that the most useful way to look at it is as some sort of mesh of institutional frameworks and practices—for instance, funding sources and generic protocols, a certain use of distribution and exhibition—as well as a set of exigencies or modes of production that remain fairly consistent: short form versus feature film, unscripted, made by primarily single individuals, non-sync sound, 16mm format, almost entirely films made for under \$10,000. This is a fairly productive way to define avant-garde film, at least in the present moment. “Round Table: Obsolescence and American Avant-Garde Film,” *October* 100 (2002): 116.

A more materially grounded historical understanding of the avant-garde may additionally help relieve the sometimes circular nature of aesthetic debates in which aesthetic, ethical, and political considerations are conflated.

5. Of course, not only avant-garde film but avant-garde literature and poetry, performing arts, and music have economic and institutional ties to the academy. Sally Banes cites “overwhelming evidence that at least since the 1950s, much of the radical activity in American avant-garde performance has been sponsored and supported by universities and colleges,” despite the persistence of what she calls “the myth of the natural antagonism between the avant-garde and academe.” See Banes, “Institutionalizing Avant-Garde Performance: A Hidden History of University Patronage in the United States,” in James M. Harding, ed., *Contours of the Theatrical Avant-Garde: Performance and Textuality* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 232. My thanks to James Kreul for directing me to Banes’s essay. Scott MacDonald makes a similar argument in “Avant-Garde Film: Cinema as Discourse,” *Journal of Film and Video* 40, no. 2 (1988): 33–42.
6. Although the history of avant-garde cinema has tended to be written as the work of great individuals, these figures have almost without exception set up or collaborated

with institutions (Deren and the Creative Film Foundation, Stauffacher and the Art in Cinema seminar and screening series, Vogel and Cinema 16's screenings and distribution network, and Mekas and the New American Cinema Group). Without undermining the extraordinary effort and vision of these individuals—more than in established film studios or art galleries, the unrewarding, small-scale avant-garde film world dictates extraordinary individual efforts—the history of avant-garde film in North America has been characterized by an enormous number of ephemeral institutions: production and distribution co-ops, magazines, theaters, screening series, collectives, conferences, and other events and bodies.

7. Larry Siegel and George Woodbridge, "A Mad Guide to Art Films," *Mad*, 1963, 13–18; Pete Hamill, "Explosion in the Movie Underground," *Saturday Evening Post*, September 28, 1963, 82, 84; "Cinema Underground," *New Yorker*, July 13, 1963, 16–17; Ken Kelman, "Anticipations of the Light," *The Nation*, May 11, 1964, 490–94; Shana Alexander, "Report from Underground," *Life*, January 28, 1965; Robert Christgau, "The New but Muddy Wave," *Popular Photography*, May 1965, 118–19, 125–26; Alan Levy, "Voice of the 'Underground Cinema,'" *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, September 19, 1965, 70–74; Jack Kroll, "Underground in Hell," *Newsweek*, November 14, 1966, 109; Elenore Lester, "So He Stopped Painting Brillo Boxes and Bought a Movie Camera," *New York Times*, December 11, 1966, 169; and Jack Kroll, "Up from Underground," *Newsweek*, February 13, 1967, 117–19. Books on avant-garde film published by trade publishers include Sheldon Renan, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (New York: Dutton, 1967); Parker Tyler, *Underground Film: A Critical History* (New York: Grove Press, 1970); Gregory Battcock, ed., *The New American Cinema* (New York: Dutton, 1967); and Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema 1959–1971* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).
8. P. Adams Sitney, "Structural Film," *Film Culture* 47 (1969): 1–10.
9. J. Hoberman, "After Avant-Garde Film," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 65.
10. See variations of this narrative in Mitch Tuchman, "The Mekas Bros. Brakhage & Baillie Traveling Circus," *Film Comment* 14, no. 2 (March–April 1978), 9–18; Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Film: The Front Line 1983* (Denver: Arden Press, 1983); David Ehrenstein, *Film: The Front Line 1984* (Denver: Arden Press, 1984); Dan Yannacito, "An Assessment," *Experimental Film Coalition Newsletter* 1, no. 3 (July/August/September 1984): 9–10; Paul Arthur, "The Last of the Last Machine? Avant-Garde Film since 1966," *Millennium Film Journal* 16/17/18 (1986–87), 69–93; Fred Camper, "The End of Avant-Garde Film," *Millennium Film Journal* 16/17/18 (1986–87), 99–124; Robert Rayher, "Response to Point of View," *Experimental Film Coalition Newsletter* 5, no. 1 (1988), 3–5, 22; and in mid- to late-1980s issues of *Experimental Film Coalition Newsletter* (Chicago) and *Spiral* (Los Angeles).
11. Arthur insightfully names the populist backlash ("Last of the Machine," 91), while "professional intellectual" is Lauren Rabinovitz's and characterizes her own ambivalence toward academization. See Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power, and Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943–71* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 194.
12. Bill Brand, "Avant-Garde Film and the Ideology of the Counter Culture," *Ideolects* 12 (1982): 4.
13. Janis Crystal Lipzin reports a "coup" in 1981 in San Francisco in which San Francisco Art Institute film students disrupted a screening of films by Ernie Gehr, Paul Sharits, and George Landow at the San Francisco Cinematheque in order to show their own

student films, charging a “deliberate and systematic lack of responsibility in representing the current work of local filmmakers in Cinematheque programming.” Quoted in Lipzin, “Letter from San Francisco April 1982,” *Ideolects* 12 (1982): 11.

14. My evidence derives from data gleaned from FMC invoice records and from reports and accounts in independent film newsletters and magazines regarding CCC and CFMDC. These three film co-ops are the largest and longest-lived distribution institutions in North America, and their collections are predominantly composed of avant-garde films; while they were not the only such distributors during this period, their distribution patterns indicate the general shape of avant-garde film exhibition.
15. Ken DeRoux, “Canyon Cinema: What Next?” *Canyon Cinemanews* 1 (1973): 1; *Film Coalition Newsletter* 4, no. 2 (1987): 2; and Ehrenstein, *Front Line*, 19.
16. Patricia Mellencamp, “Receivable Texts: U.S. Avant-Garde Cinema, 1960–1980,” *Wide Angle* 7, no. 1–2 (1985): 75.
17. Mellencamp characterizes this resistance to academia as a form of anti-intellectualism (a common element in populism) that favors a sentimental attachment to individual expression:

It could be argued that the institution of U.S. avant-garde (as broad and ill-defined as my use of that term is) has been historically plagued by a deadly, confining, humorless strain of anti-intellectualism. . . . the posture of art as “lifestyle,” unknowing “creativity,” drawn from the uncomplicated storage bin of the accessible unconscious, mixed with “feelings” and unencumbered by the rigors of language or the baggage of thought (or theory) is a dominant stance in the U.S., the artist’s litany and pledge of creative allegiance. See Mellencamp, “Receivable Texts,” 79.

18. Camper, “The End of Avant-Garde,” 106.
19. Two essays that survey the massive literature on the avant-garde are Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s “The Aporias of the Avant-Garde,” which interrogates the history of the term generally, and William Wees’s “On Defining Avant-Garde Film,” which considers film specifically. Both find common elements in crossovers between nineteenth-century political theories of the avant-garde and twentieth-century artistic avant-gardes. Wees isolates three crucial elements: first, “an oppositional stance vis-a-vis the social and artistic ‘establishment,’” second, “experimentalism,” and third, “a claim . . . to being always ‘in advance’” (7). Both Wees and Enzensberger note the problematic contradictions of art performing scientific experiments and the limits of prophetic vanguards, but they agree that the animating energy of any avant-garde is rooted in its oppositional desire, directed in revolutionary fashion against established structures, institutions, and values. See Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “The Aporias of the Avant-Garde [1962],” in *Zig-Zag: The Politics of Culture & Vice Versa* (New York: New Press, 1997), 235–64, and William Wees, “On Defining Avant-Garde Film,” *Opsis* 1, no. 1 (1984): 7–12.
20. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
21. Ehrenstein, *The Front Line*, 18–19.
22. Amy Taubin, quoted in Paul Arthur, “Movies the Color of Blood,” *Film-Makers’ Cooperative Catalogue*, No. 7 (New York: New American Cinema Group, 1989), vi-vii.
23. When this occurs, the difference in scale is astonishing. Contrast two films screened at New York’s Views from the 2003 Avant-Garde film festival, Sharon Lockhart’s *NO* (16mm, 2003), sold by the Barbara Gladstone Gallery for \$30,000 as a limited-edition print of three, with Michele Smith’s one hundred-minute single-frame hand-processed work *Regarding Penelope’s Wake* (16mm, 2002), available as a home-produced DVD

- directly from the filmmaker's Web site for \$45. Because Lockhart's films circulate in the art world, they mobilize the codes of rarity and authorial provenance; Smith's film circulates in the avant-garde film world, which favors wide circulation over the production of market value.
24. Camper, "End of Avant-Garde," 109.
  25. *Oxford Paperback Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 3.
  26. Lehman quotes Stephen Heath in "The Nature of the Material: An Interview with Michael Snow," *Wide Angle* 7, nos. 1–2 (1985): 100.
  27. P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974). A second edition was issued in 1979, and a third edition in 2002. In 1988, Robert Rayher quotes Oxford University Press figures to the effect that between fifteen thousand and twenty thousand copies of *Visionary Film* had been sold since 1979. See Rayher, "Response," 22. In its range of citation and popularity as a textbook, *Visionary Film* is likely the most important single work on the American avant-garde, although it is often cited to be rebutted.
  28. Maya Deren, Helen Levitt and Janice Loeb, Marie Menken, and Leni Reifenstahl comprise the five women artists out of eighty-nine filmmakers; only twelve films out of the more than three hundred films in the Essential Cinema were made by these five artists and viable candidates—Shirley Clarke, Storm DeHirsch, Gunvor Nelson, Barbara Rubin, Carolee Schneemann, and Joyce Wieland—were passed over. For further discussion of this controversy, see Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*, 176–78, and Michael Zryd, "There Are Many Joyces': The Critical Reception of the Films of Joyce Wieland," in Kathryn Elder, ed., *The Films of Joyce Wieland*, (Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival Group, 1999), 199–200, 211.
  29. Mike Hoolboom, "A History of the Canadian Avant-Garde in Film," *The Visual Aspect: Recent Canadian Experimental Film*, ed. Rose Lowder (Avignon: Editions des Archives du Film Experimental, 1991), 30. In Hoolboom's texts of this period, the term "avant-garde" appears with an X through the word, signifying it is under erasure.
  30. Camper's aesthetic critique of academization (voiced from his position as a critic) is radically different from Hoolboom's (voiced on behalf of filmmakers). For Camper, the problem is with what he sees as the formulaic, academic quality of the films being screened—Camper actually complains that too many (bad) films are being screened—whereas the new generation of 1980s filmmakers are disturbed because not enough of their new films are being screened.
  31. "Point of View," *Spiral* 1 (1985): 4.
  32. Kathryn A. Ramey, "Economics of the Contemporary Avant-Garde Community: Networks and Strategies," paper presented at the annual SCMS conference, Minneapolis, March 9, 2003. At the same conference, Chuck Kleinhans, in a paper entitled "Producing the Field of Experimental Film," used Bourdieu's work to investigate the avant-garde.
  33. Scott MacDonald, "Avant-Garde Film: Cinema as Discourse," *Journal of Film and Video* 40, no. 2 (1988): 40–41.
  34. For a discussion of the pedagogical and political dimensions of the classroom as a discursive space, see Ellen Rooney, "A Semiprivate Room," *differences* 13 no. 1 (2002): 128–56.
  35. Mellencamp, "Receivable Texts," 86.
  36. Bayma, "Art World," 80.
  37. *Ibid.*
  38. Mike Hoolboom, "Artist's Film Distribution in Canada: Some Thoughts About," *Independent Eye* 9, no. 1 (1988): 8.

39. Bayma, "Art World," 80.
40. Camper, "End of Avant-Garde," 104.
41. See Jan-Christopher Horak's *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), for an excellent introduction to what he calls the "First American Avant-Garde." As he notes, "The institutional history of the American film avant-garde has indeed yet to be written" (12n4); with the exception of work by Arthur, Bayma, MacDonald, and Rabinovitz, most institutional accounts of the post–World War II avant-garde, often anecdotal or polemical, is scattered among the body of ephemeral magazines and newsletters that have functioned as the North American avant-garde's primary site of discussion.
42. Paul Arthur, "Routines of Emancipation: Alternative Cinema in the Ideology and Politics of the Sixties," in David E. James, ed., *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 24.
43. Mekas, quoted in *ibid*, 24.
44. By the time this article appears in print, some of these institutions will likely have disappeared. The ephemerality of the avant-garde in part motivates the urge to create institutions and organizations, however ad hoc and temporary. Thanks to Bart Testa for this observation.
45. Banes, "Institutionalizing Avant-Garde Performance," 222.
46. *Ibid*, 225.
47. *Ibid*, 222.
48. *Ibid*, 235.
49. Sidney Peterson, *The Dark of the Screen* (New York: Anthology Film Archives/New York University Press, 1980), 23–45. USC established a program in the 1920s and NYU thereafter in 1941. Hans Richter taught film courses at the Film Institute of City College in the 1940s and 1950s. See Richter, "Learning from Film History," *Filmmakers Newsletter* 7, no. 1 (1973): 26–27.
50. Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 27.
51. At FMC, 101 separate academic rentals are recorded for 1965, while in 1967, the April, August, and November ledger entries alone register 294 separate paid academic invoices for film rentals.
52. See Banes, "Institutionalizing Avant-Garde Performance," 230.
53. Don Lloyd, "Whatever Became of Canyon Cinema Co-operative?" *Canyon Cinemanews* 1972, no. 2 (1972): 22. I have not had the opportunity to investigate FMC rental records for 1968 and 1969, although the much lower numbers for 1970 indicate a parallel decline in that period.
54. *Film-Makers Lecture Bureau* 1 (1969): i.
55. Bayma, "Art World," 85.
56. Space does not allow for a consideration of the non-co-op alternative distribution companies that emerged from the 1960s through the 1980s, some of which have folded (Drift, Serious Business, Picture Start) and some of which are still operating (Women Make Movies, New Day). The question of whether these distributors took rentals away from the co-ops is an interesting one; since all the co-ops have nonexclusive contracts with filmmakers, a print carried by a co-op could secure more publicity and rentals from a private distributor. Other alternative distributors operating in this period include the Museum of Modern Art Circulating Film Library; American Federation for the Arts; Centre Cinema Co-op; Northwest Cinema Co-op; Cinema Guild; Creative Film Society; Direct Cinema; Filmmakers Library; Films, Inc.; First Run Features; Genesis Films;



Grove Press; Picture Start; and Pyramid Films. See L. Wade Black, "Projecting the Future: Alternative and Non-theatrical Film Distribution," *Media Arts* 2, no. 2 (1987): 1, 14–15, and Edgar F. Daniels, "Plain Words on Underground Film Programs," *Journal of Popular Film* 1, no. 2 (1972): 112–21.

57. At the Film-Makers' Cooperative, I examined check payment ledgers from 1967 to 1993. These ledgers, meticulously kept by long-time FMC manager Leslie Trumbull, name rental sources and thus allow a rough classification of renter types. (Figures are unavailable for 1968 and 1969. Figures for 1964 and 1965 are for academic rentals only and so do not allow for a calculation of the proportion of academic rentals.) Because of the sheer volume of entries, I sampled three months per year (May, August, and November) and counted the number of academic (college, university, high school, and campus film society or art gallery) and nonacademic renters (which included museums and galleries, film societies and cinematheques, festivals, media centers, theaters, libraries, churches, youth councils, women's centers, hospitals, advertising firms, bookstores, publishers, film production companies and broadcasters, and individuals). When the classification of a renter was unclear from the name, it was grouped with nonacademic renters. Although some individuals were identifiable as academics, they were counted as nonacademic renters for consistency.

The check deposit ledgers I used for this sampling represent rental numbers fairly accurately. The FMC accounting system issued a separate invoice for each screening date. Most renters paid each invoice with a separate check. Some paid a number of invoices with a single check, but this tended to happen as often with academic renters as with nonacademic renters, evening out discrepancies. The May, August, and November sample months, chosen because they tended to be the heaviest payment months, do not necessarily reflect show dates; both academic and nonacademic renters would variously pay before or after (sometimes long after) a screening. It is possible that the choice of months skews the results since the heaviest payment periods coincide with the end of most North American semesters. To test this, I conducted complete-year tabulations for 1970, 1975, 1980, and 1985, which were consistent with my sample results within 2 percent (and in that case, the complete-year calculation indicated an even higher percentage of academic renters than the sample). Finally, it is likely that figures for complete-year tabulations would partially smooth out the graph of total yearly rentals. Despite these variations in overall rentals, the consistency in the proportion of academic to nonacademic rentals is notable.

58. From 1962, its first year of operation, to 1963, FMC reported a ninefold increase in rental income. In 1964, total rentals leveled out but still increased by 50 percent; of those rentals, 20.1 percent were from academic sources. By the first half of 1965, academic rentals increased to 29.5 percent. Rockefeller correspondence files, Film-Makers' Cooperative file, Rockefeller Archive Center, New York. I am grateful to James Kreul for generously sharing his research at the Rockefeller Archive with me. It is likely that the increase in rentals to academic institutions in 1965 and the last half of 1964 was due to academic renters renting the work of filmmakers who moved from Cinema 16 to FMC. When Cinema 16, until then the dominant distributor for avant-garde films, ceased distribution in 1963, it transferred its catalog to Grove Press. Unlike FMC, Grove demanded exclusive contracts and charged rental rates that were too high for many universities. See Scott MacDonald, *Cinema 16: Documents toward a History of the Film Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 16–17, 33n22.
59. DeRoux, "Canyon Cinema?" 1, and December 1972 CCC Board of Directors meeting minutes, *Canyon Cinemanews* 1972: 5–6, 1.

60. Although I do not have enough data to assess parallel situations in Canada and elsewhere, see Hoolboom, "Artist's Film Distribution," and the special issue of *Independent Eye* 12, no. 1, which contains reports on independent film distribution in Canada, Australia, France, and Switzerland.
61. Dominic Angerame, "Canyon Cinema," *Experimental Film Coalition Newsletter* 2, no. 4 (October–November–December 1985): 8.
62. Morrie Warshawski, "Canyon Cinema," *Media Arts* 2, no. 7 (1990): 6.
63. Meanwhile, the membership in FMC expanded from roughly 20 to 234 artists from 1962 to 1967; by 1989, 638 filmmakers were represented, which increased to 685 filmmakers in 1993. See Arthur, "Routines of Emancipation," 28; Robert Haller, "New American Cinema Group," unpublished report, Film-Makers' Cooperative files; "Camera Obscura Questionnaire on Alternative Film Distribution," *Camera Obscura* 3–4 (1979): 171–72; FMC Catalog 7 (1989); Black, "Projecting the Future," 15.
64. Black, "Projecting the Future," 15.
65. *Ibid.*, 14.
66. Jonas Mekas, personal interview, New York, July 23, 2002.
67. Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*, 196. Note that even as Hoberman is critical of the "institutionalization" of the avant-garde, he ambivalently notes its "success": "the current crisis [in 1984] is due (in part) to the avant-garde's past twenty-five years of success. The New American Cinema has left a crucial legacy of venues and distribution networks, as well as a sometimes backward institutional mentality." See Hoberman, "After Avant-Garde Film," 72. Elsewhere, he notes that "the partial absorption of the American avant-garde into the university has created half a dozen regional centers across the United States." Hoberman, "Three Myths of Avant-Garde Film," *Film Comment*, May–June 1981, 34.
68. See Albert Kilchesty, "10 Years of Home Cookin': A Brief History of Berks Filmmakers," *Spiral* 8 (1986): 26–33. Kilchesty describes the relationship between Berks Filmmakers and Albright College.
69. Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*, 197.
70. *Ibid.*
71. *Film-Makers' Cooperative Catalog* 6 (1975), 3.
72. Arthur, "Round Table," 119.
73. *Ibid.*, 118–19. Arthur published his own volume of writings on the American avant-garde. See Arthur, *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
74. On Carolee Schneemann, see Schneemann, *Imagining Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002); on Jack Smith: Edward Leffingwell, Carole Kismaric, and Marvin Heiferman, eds., *Jack Smith: "Flaming Creatures," His Amazing Life and Times* (New York: Institute for Contemporary Art/P.S. 1 Museum, 1997); J. Hoberman and Edward Leffingwell, eds., *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith* (New York: High Risk Books, in collaboration with Institute for Contemporary Art/P.S. 1 Museum, 1997); and J. Hoberman, *On Jack Smith's "Flaming Creatures" and other Secret-Flix of Cinemaroc* (New York: Granary Books and Hips Road, 2001); on Joyce Wieland: Kathryn Elder, ed., *The Films of Joyce Wieland* (Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival Group, 1999); on Stan Brakhage: R. Bruce Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1998); On Maya Deren: Bill Nichols, ed., *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); and on Michael Snow: Jim Shedden, ed., *Presence and Absence: The Films of Michael Snow 1956–1991* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1995). See also

Wheeler Winston Dixon, *The Exploding Eye: A Re-visionary History of 1960s American Experimental Cinema* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

75. Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*, 196.
76. Banes, "Institutionalizing Avant-Garde Performance," 222.
77. Jacobs and Gottheim, quoted in Jonas Mekas, "Movie Journal," *Village Voice*, July 23, 1970, 48.
78. Hoberman, "After Avant-Garde Film," 65.
79. Black, "Projecting the Future," 14.
80. Angerame quoted in Warshawski, "Canyon Cinema," 6.
81. The dependence on the academic market remains. The current manager of FMC, M. M. Serra, confirms that, although the co-op has recently enjoyed large rental packages from festivals, especially from European exhibitors, academic rentals continue to comprise 70 percent to 80 percent of total rentals and remain the mainstay of the co-op. Telephone conversation with M. M. Serra, March 4, 2003, and personal interview, May 16, 2003. FMC rentals have been aided by a recent online catalog. A 2002 Canyon Cinema press release reports that "rentals and sales are, once more, at an all time high, surpassing last year's figures by more than 23 percent."
82. Banes, "Institutionalizing Avant-Garde Performance," 222.