

PRESS KIT: SENSES OF CINEMA

20 Years of the Filmmakers' Cooperatives

A film by John Hughes and Tom Zubrycki

Photo: Susan Lambert making SIZE 10

SENSES OF CINEMA

charts the cultural life of late 20th century Australia through the rise, fall and afterlife of the Filmmakers' Co-operatives - the passionate individuals who moved through them, and the powerfully independent films they made.



Many of Australia's most celebrated independent filmmakers began their creative lives in the Filmmakers Co-ops. Dedicated, energetic and young, filmmakers like Jan Chapman, Gillian Armstrong and Phillip Noyce, fondly acknowledge the formative influence that was the Sydney Filmmaker's Co-op.

The founder of Sydney's underground cinema 'Ubu Films', Albie Thoms, along with Martha Ansara, Richard Brennan, Pat Fiske, Susan Lambert, Margot Nash, Jeni Thornley, Stephen Wallace and Tom Zubrycki, were all involved in the work of the Sydney Co-op.

In Melbourne Barbara Creed, Sue Ford, Ian Gaal, Peter Tammer and countless other artists and filmmakers embraced the international counterculture and emergent Australian cinema, through independent film and video.

The Filmmakers' Co-ops transitioned from making and exhibiting 1960s avant-garde movies, to distribution of films for the women's movement, Indigenous rights, prisoners' rights, gay and lesbian liberation, and gradually transitioned to a critical engagement with a market driven film industry.

By the early '80s conflicts between the community-based cooperatives and the managerial style of centralised government bureaucracy, challenged the Co-ops' viability, and led to their ultimate demise.

The Co-ops' stories and films are vibrant, surprising, and essential to Australian cultural history.

It's time to tell their tale.

"It was the early 1970s – the end of 23 years of Liberal/Country Party government – of Australia being one of the most censored and in some ways closed societies in the western world. There's a changing of the guard."

Phil Noyce

The rise and fall of Filmmakers' Co-operatives is a lively, untold story of late 20th century Australia that links social movements of the 1960s, '70s and '80s with an 'underground' cinema that fostered alternative filmmaking enterprise in production, distribution and exhibition.

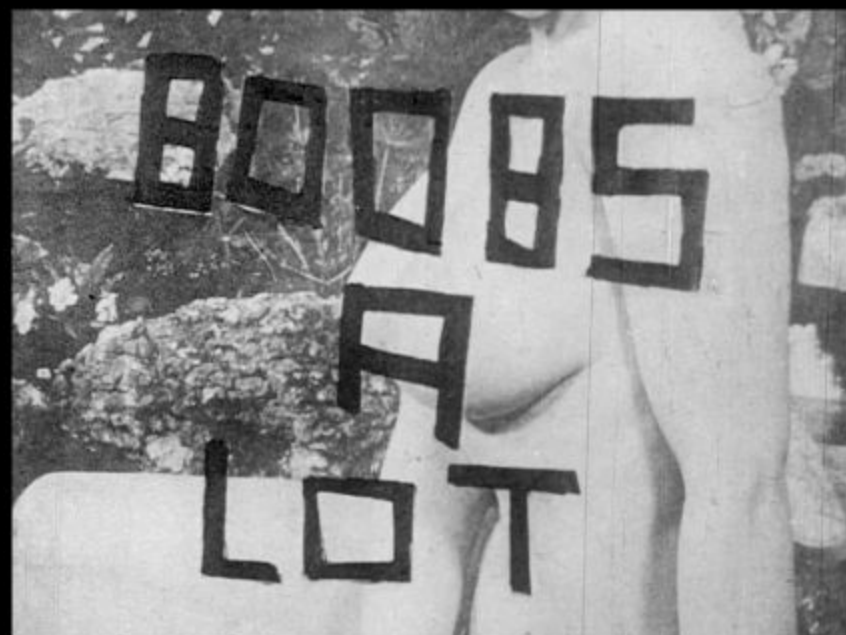
An extraordinary diversity of creative ambition converged with a groundswell of social change, as the Co-ops became a forum and a vehicle for 'minority' voices denied expression in mainstream media.

The Co-ops nurtured Australia's 'film renaissance' and created new markets for strikingly innovative Australian content articulating a rebellious historical moment.

The co-ops catalogues constitute a remarkable invisible archive of radical and political cinema, yet to be reassembled as an accessible, digital collection.

Startlingly innovative works like Margot Nash and Robin Laurie's provocative agit-prop film WE AIM TO PLEASE (1976), Helen Grace's cool and critical SERIOUS UNDERTAKINGS (1983) and Gillian Leahy's MY LIFE WITHOUT STEVE (1985), a bold, contemplative, insightful essay drama reflecting on Gillian's break-up with her lover, generated passionate debates. Jeni Thornley's first-person diary film MAIDENS (1978), Barbara Creed's HOMOSEXUALITY: A FILM FOR DISCUSSION (1975) and Pat Fiske's wonderful documentation of contested geography and place in inner city Sydney WOOLLOOMOOLOO (1978), made a difference and were widely seen through the Co-ops distribution networks.

Then there are the features, the animations, the short dramas and activist video.



Boobs A Lot, Aggy Read 1968



Bluto, Albie Thoms 1967



Vietnam Report, Kit Guyatt 1966



A Sketch on Abigayl's Belly, David Perry 1968



Bolero, Albie Thoms 1967



Phallic Forest, Kit Guyatt 1970



Melbourne Co-op screenings began at Pinacotheca Gallery in Richmond in 1970. The following year, weekly screenings were held at a members built 'underground' cinema, 'Babylon' (161 Spring Street, now the European Cafe).

But Victorian authorities forced the Spring Street cinema to close and a new venue on Lygon Street Carlton (adjacent to today's Cinema Nova) flourished from late 1973 until July 1977, when federal government cutbacks forced the Co-op's closure.

After several years above Bob Gould's Third World Bookshop, the Sydney Co-op launched their new Filmmakers' Cinema in St Peters Lane, Darlinghurst (formally the New Theatre) in 1973.

The new Filmmakers Cinema opened in May with Bert Deling's radical feature DALMAS. It was Jan Chapman who made the curtains for the new Co-op cinema screen.

"I'm embarrassed to say that I personally made the curtains for the cinema, but hasten to add that I was also for a time on the steering committee for this formidable and articulate collective, and eventually had my own films screened there."

Jan Chapman





"We won, they left. I don't know whether that was right or wrong, but certainly, the films moved. The Co-op, I think, overall benefited from it."

Susan Lambert

The Filmmakers' Co-ops weathered internal tensions. Some filmmakers pursued professional and commercial ambitions in an emerging mainstream industry, while others practiced a dedicated resistance to this, favouring avant-garde creative expression, and/or political advocacy. The women's movement radically challenged the libertarian tendencies of the underground avant-garde that had initiated the co-ops.



Susan Lambert

Battle lines were drawn as activist filmmakers dedicated to the women's movement and other 'liberation' imperatives displaced the '60s avant-garde with a new focus on identity politics, human rights and political issues.

Feminist Film Workers, formed in 1978 - dedicated to expanding the distribution of an activist catalogue of women's cinema concerned with women's liberation, sexuality and gender politics - was very successful; they built a substantial nationwide market in print sales and rentals.



Serious Undertakings
Helen Grace, Erika Addis 1983



Starting Right Now
Gillian Leahy 1976



Woolloomooloo
Pat Fiske 1978



Maidens, Jeni Thornley 1978



Love Letters from Teralba Road,
Stephen Wallace 1977



Film For Discussion,
Sydney Women's Film Group 1974

"The Co-op was crucial in establishing the gay and lesbian film culture. We hired all the gay and lesbian films we could find, and ones that had images of gay and lesbian people in them. We had screenings every month. People were able to analyse, discuss; it brought the gay community into the Co op."

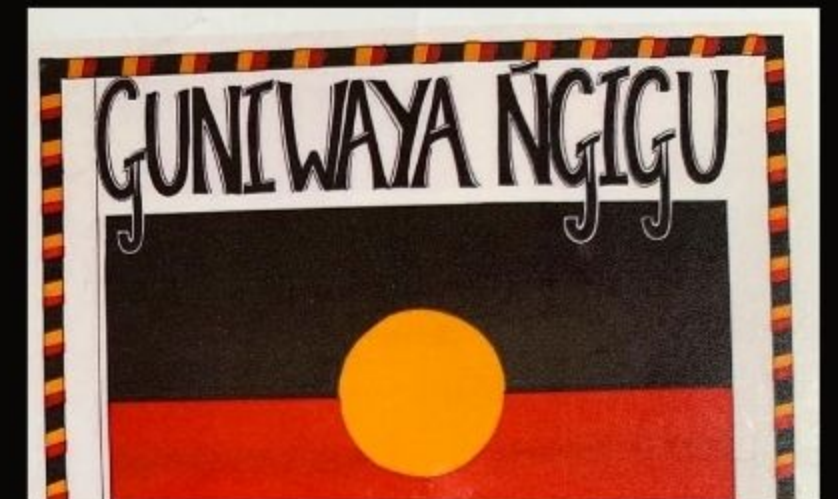
Digby Duncan

The gay and lesbian rights movement had an enormous impact, transforming personal lives and interpersonal relations; the One in Seven Collective's WITCHES AND FAGGOTS, DYKES AND POOFERS (1980), documenting gay and lesbian Australian history, gathered extraordinary reportage of the first Gay Mardi Gras in 1978.



Alessandro Cavadini and Carolyn Strachan's NINGLA A-NA (1972) documenting the establishment and struggle over the Tent Embassy in Canberra, PROTECTED (1975) on the Queensland Acts, and TWO LAWS (1981) are landmark films demonstrating creative collaboration with Indigenous communities.

In 1981 the Filmmakers Co-op in Sydney initiated an 'Aboriginal Film Worker' position that allowed Madeline McGrady to organise distribution of films into Indigenous communities, and with Johnny Bayles and Jerry Bostock, to establish a Black Film Unit that made among other films the classic GUNIWAYA NGIGU - WE FIGHT (1983) documenting resistance to the Commonwealth Games in Brisbane in 1982.





Faces, Sue Ford 1976



Marinetti, Albie Thoms 1969



Applause Please, Ivan Gaal 1974



N'ingla A-Na , Alessandro Cavadini 1972



Two Laws, Borrooloola Aboriginal Community,
Carolyn Strachan, Alessandro Cavadini 1981



Guniwaya Ngigu - *We Fight*
The Black Film Unit 1982

The Sydney Co-ops' monthly Filmnews launched in 1975. It was a remarkable publication, 1975-1995, edited for its entire existence by Tina Kaufman. Managed by an editorial committee, with interlocking directors from within the Co-op and contributions from some of Australia's most noteworthy cultural critics, it was distributed around Australia free; it was widely read and very influential. Filmnews engaged with government film industry agencies and their policy and practice, with vigour and candour.

The Co-ops had an historical contest with the Australian Film Institute (AFI), an agency of government that also ran independent film distribution and exhibition. The Australian Film Commission sought to 'rationalise' independent distribution and preferred the AFI over the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op, despite AFC research demonstrating the Co-op's more effective distribution of Australian titles, and better returns to filmmakers.

In the mid 1980s, a Co-op annual general meeting debated whether to defer payments owing to filmmakers or declare the Co-op bankrupt. The meeting voted for the latter. The AFC could have made up the shortfall, which had occurred largely because of the AFC's demand that the Co-op move from St Peters Lane in Darlinghurst to more salubrious and conventional business occupancy in Ultimo – but they didn't. Helen Grace reflected in 2011, "we weren't 'too big to fail'. Digby Duncan: "they could have funded the Co-op properly, or not at all. They chose not at all"

"So then we formed the Save the Co-op action group. Australian Film Institute wanted to take over independent, government subsidized distribution of independent film, and we felt it should stay in Filmmaker's Co-op, filmmaker's hands."

Gillian Leahy



We Aim to Please
Robin Laurie and Margot Nash 1976



Backroads, Phillip Noyce 1979



Witches and Faggots, Dykes and Poofers
The One in Seven Collective 1979



My Survival as an Aboriginal
Essie Coffey 1979



Stirring Jane Oehr 1981



My Life Without Steve, Gillian Leahy 1987

"Before the Co-op people thought: 'no one wants to see these films; there is no market for them. What the Co-op proved was that they did, and that there was a market for them and people did want to see those films and I think still do."

Margot Nash

Senses of Cinema is a 'hidden history' project that gives voice to a generation (or two) little known outside informed Australian filmmaking communities. In bringing together films and stories from the Co-ops, we offer younger generations access to this 'invisible archive', as, unlike Film Australia, Commercial TV or ABC production, this body of work is not yet archived as a collection.

The legacy of the Co-ops resonates with contemporary independent creative practice.

Today, filmmakers find themselves building a 'counter public sphere' through innovative distribution and exhibition practices as mainstream media, including public broadcasting, vacate commitment to documentary traditions, the short film and the low-budget feature, embracing instead ratings driven aesthetic forms. The essential values and imperatives that appealed then, retain their force. The spirit of the Co-ops emerges wherever people gather to make new work that gives voice to 'minority' experience, wherever people gather to see and discuss moving image work that speaks beyond mainstream media.

There is today an 'underground', and it is everywhere.

DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

"The struggle [...] against power is a struggle of memory against forgetting."

Milan Kundera

A powerful capacity of documentary film is remembrance. For us, a guiding imperative of the Co-op film has been to set out for emerging generations of filmmakers a history of Australian independent film culture in Australia that is a radical tradition, characterised by critical and compassionate creative ambition. If **Senses of Cinema** arouses curiosity among younger filmmakers of the digital era about the 'invisible archive' of analogue film and video made and distributed by dedicated and passionate young filmmakers around the Filmmakers Co-ops from the mid '60s to the mid '80s, the struggle over ten years to get the work out there will have been very worthwhile.

John Hughes' credits as a producer, writer and director span four decades of award winning film, art and television projects. He has been a commissioning editor (SBS Independent 1998-2001) and writes on documentary (*Studies in Documentary Film, Senses of Cinema*). His moving image works are collected by museums and galleries in Australia and internationally. An Adjunct Professor with RMIT University and Honorary Fellow with the University of Melbourne; he has a PhD from RMIT University Melbourne, is a recipient of the Stanley Hawes Award, Critics Circle Award, NSW Premiers History Award, AFI and ATOM Awards and was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 2017. His most recent broadcast film was PEACE PILGRIMS (ABC Compass August 2001).

Previous films dedicated to a radical Australian film history include FILM-WORK (1981), THE ARCHIVE PROJECT (2006) INDONESIA CALLING (MIFF 2008)

Website: www.earlyworks.com.au

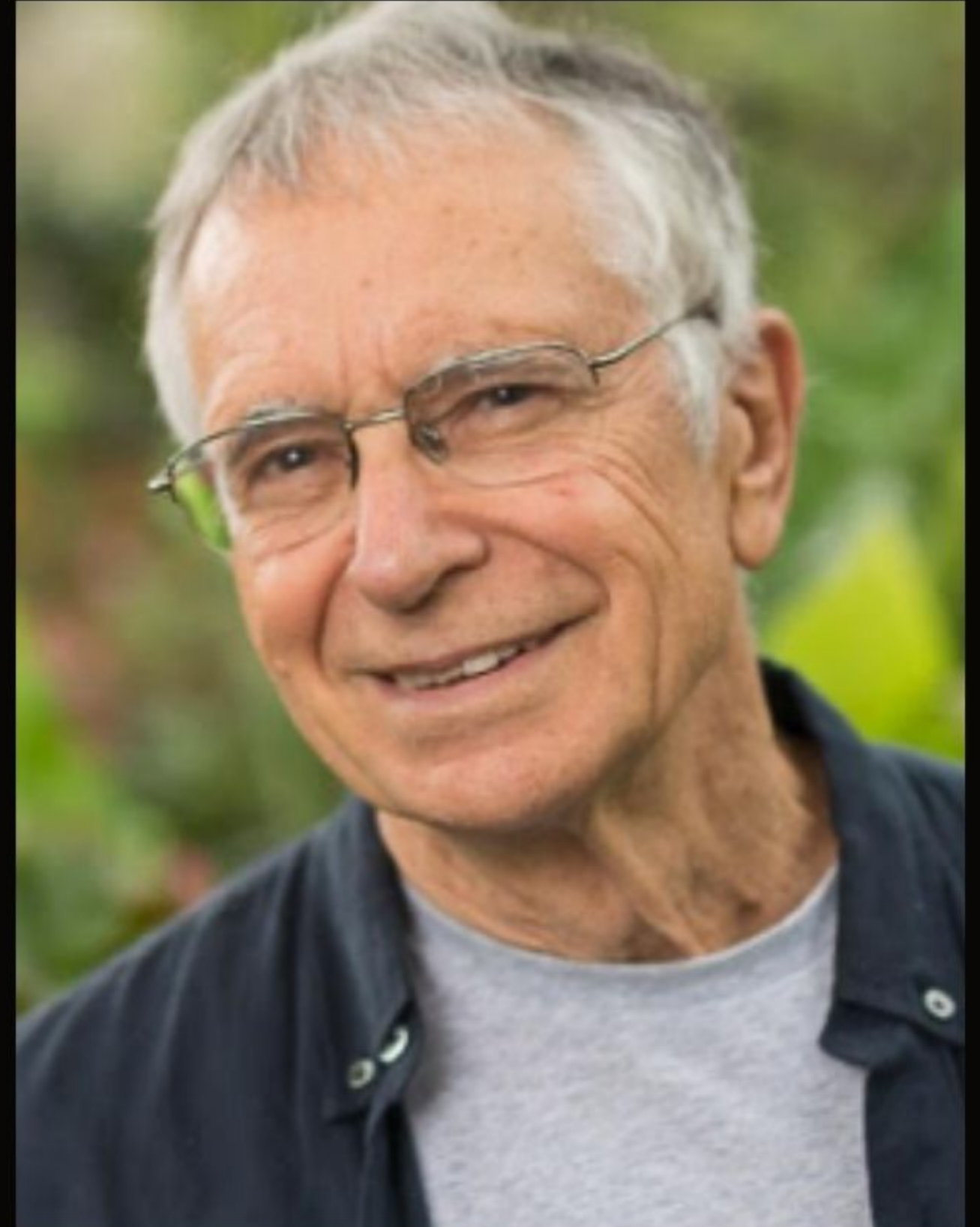
The Films of John Hughes: a history of independent screen production in Australia (Cumming, 2014) is published by ATOM.



Tom Zubrycki has been making documentaries for over 45 years. He has won many awards for his work and his mentorship on behalf of the industry. As director Tom's documentaries have a distinctive observational story-telling style, and have focused around a personal response to the issues of the day. Films like *THE DIPLOMAT* (MIFF 2000), *MOLLY & MOBARAK* (MIFF 2003), *THE HUNGRY TIDE* (MIFF 2011) and *HOPE ROAD* (MIFF 2017). As producer and executive producer Tom has worked both with experienced and also new and emerging directors. Recent films include *FAIR GAME* (2017), *UNDERMINED – TALES OF THE KIMBERLEY* (MIFF, 2018), *THE WEATHER DIARIES* (2020) and *ABLAZE* (miff 2021).

Tom is a recipient of the prestigious Stanley Hawes Award, and has actively championed the cause of the documentary sector over a number of years. His monograph *The Changing Landscape of Australian Documentary* published in 2019 by Currency House was a Platform Paper about the state of documentary in Australia from a historical perspective.

More information on his website. www.tomzubrycki.com



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