

INTRODUCTION

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In this “Special Focus” section, *Film Quarterly* celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of the Pacific Film Archive (a.k.a. PFA, the Archive, the film department of BAMPFA), which opened its doors to the public on January 22, 1971, in a theater within the University Art Museum, a purpose-built brutalist building designed by Mario Ciampi.¹

The two specially commissioned pieces that follow offer salutes to a pair of pivotal and underacknowledged individuals with monumental influence. Edith Kramer, the PFA’s longest-serving director and the person most identified with the Archive, is interviewed by Kathy Geritz, her longtime colleague. Geritz’s tribute here, adapted from a work in progress, offers a clear-eyed appreciation of Kramer’s model of curation and service. The late Albert Johnson, whose long film-exhibition career overlapped with the PFA and with Kramer but preceded them by decades, is profiled and memorialized here by *FQ*’s Josslyn Luckett, whose undergraduate years coincided with Johnson’s later years as a professor at UC Berkeley. Luckett, in fact, took classes with him and bears witness to Johnson’s remarkable showmanship and film acumen, both in class and in public events.

I here add my own perspective, with some thoughts on the PFA within the postwar exhibition sector in general, as I find myself drawn to recalling its contributions and central players as a source of wonderment during the extraordinary 2021 season of stuttering public life.²

The PFA: A Personal and Institutional Context

A peculiarity of film studies is that so much attention has been paid to films as films—textual analyses, histories of national cinemas, auteurism, genre analysis, the richness

of films helmed or otherwise created by directors, actors, screenwriters, studios—but virtually none to the institutions that brought cinema to its publics.

For the generations of filmgoers between World War II and the invention of the VCR, it was the independent theaters, media arts centers, art houses, museums, and university film series that offered the only entry to the richness of a field. No longer new and shiny, they have nonetheless managed to survive the successive arrivals of cable, video, DVD, Blu-ray, and Netflix, each in turn luring away their audiences; today, they are even more endangered by the pandemic-accelerated move to online consumption. Yet paradoxically, these entities, which created modern film culture, have passed more than half a century of their institutional lives almost entirely unheralded and unexamined. Film festivals hog the attention instead.

I came of age in the waning days of the old commercial art-house sector, trekking to the obscure theaters of Boston (and those not so obscure, like the Brattle). I had my first professional job in the new independent sector at today’s Gene Siskel Film Center at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, then a much smaller enterprise. It opened its doors in January 1973 with the help of advice from PFA founder Sheldon Renan, who shared the PFA’s application to the National Endowment for the Arts’ new film-exhibition program. With award letter in hand, the Film Center’s brief was to show classic and avant-garde films, both US cinema and international work, preferably with the filmmakers in person (King Vidor! Carolee Schneemann!) and always with commissioned program notes; an archive and study center were also part of the plan. For the archive, I once traveled to a train platform in Belgium in the winter of 1974 to hand over money to Gregory Markopoulos in exchange for a 16mm print of his legendary *Twice a Man* (1963); it was part of the Film Center’s mission to make such efforts. After all, the PFA had already shown the way at a scale far vaster than anyplace else could manage (apart from the long-established MoMA).

The PFA archival holdings were rich in Soviet and Eastern European film, Japanese film, Russian silent cinema,

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and avant-garde film and video. The attention to the USSR and to the countries of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was a logical one for a Berkeley institution. But its screenings went far beyond any narrow remit, encompassing the broad richness of filmmaking at a pivotal time of creativity and invention.

The PFA was established in an ideal location for what it wanted to accomplish. Berkeley has long had an outsize influence on US politics and culture for a town of its size: the Free Speech Movement (and the Free Love Movement), the Black Panthers, the start of the US anti-apartheid movement, a broad-based Palestinian solidarity movement, and Alice Waters's prescience for what would become the Slow Food Movement. It was only natural to bring film into this mix.

Also, this was a crucial moment in film-exhibition history: the landmark decision of 1960 in the *Lady Chatterley* trial in the United Kingdom had defeated censorship in the world of literature, while in 1968, the end of the US Production Code and the start of Jack Valenti's new ratings system at the MPAA marked a corresponding moment of tremendous change in the film-exhibition sector. As pornography went mainstream, the old art houses began to be bought up and converted to presenting films formerly shown only in "X-rated" storefronts.³

As a result of real-estate deals, then, the multitude of theatrical offerings disappeared. Film scholars traveling to Paris to study "theory" were invariably astonished at the range of tiny movie theaters with such depth of programming on offer, unaware that the United States used to have them, too. The NEA was persuaded that, without an infusion of government funding, all cinema apart from

box-office-driven production would soon be lost; seeking to avert such a fate, the nonprofit exhibition model was born.

The Pacific Film Archive was the brightest star in that early firmament. Renan himself was inspired by the example of the Cinémathèque française to such an extent that Henri Langlois came personally to give his benediction and helped out in the early years with loans of prints and in-person visits. Renan had already been screening films with both Tom Luddy and Albert Johnson in campus halls at UC Berkeley, and both were involved in the programs at the PFA. Then Renan left to enter more directly into film production, and Johnson, while continuing his involvement in exhibition at the PFA, the San Francisco International Film Festival, and internationally, also began teaching at UC Berkeley.

Tom Luddy, already curating PFA programs, became the archive director, and has long cited Johnson as his mentor.⁴ Luddy was the Zelig of the day, seemingly omnipresent across the United States and internationally, whether traveling to Moscow or Rio, serving on the New York Film Festival selection committee, or holding court—at Cannes as well as at Chez Panisse, which opened the same year as the PFA. The PFA–Chez Panisse connection was hardly incidental: Luddy and Alice Waters were a couple at that time. In fact, film and food were so intertwined through them that the restaurant took as its name the character of Honoré Panisse in Marcel Pagnol's celebrated "Marseille Trilogy."⁵ And of course, it was at Chez Panisse in 1979 that Werner Herzog famously ate his shoe—cooked by Waters herself—to reward Erroll Morris for making his first film.⁶

Luddy was known for hosting filmmakers in his own home in those early days (with Glauber Rocha and Nicholas Ray among his guests). But he was also out and about, up and down the social ladder. Susan Sontag was on the PFA's original advisory board, and he was frequently her film "adviser" at a time when she was writing on cinema. Once in 1976, during the New York Film Festival, he took me to a party at the Swiss consulate for Swiss director Alain Tanner's *Jonah Who Will be 25 in the Year 2000* (widely acclaimed at the time, forgotten since), declared the party boring, and piled us all into taxis to move to a fancier party where I spotted Mick Jagger in one corner, Bianca in another. As Edith Kramer notes in her conversation with Geritz, he was always busy connecting people, often at less glamorous levels entirely, saving prints, looking for producers.

In his pre-PFA days, he'd even helped Agnès Varda produce her documentary *Uncle Yanco* (1967) and in fact introduced Varda to her own uncle! And while still at the PFA, he cofounded the Telluride Film Festival, which he



From left to right: Susan Oxtoby, Sheldon Renan, Peter Selz (Berkeley Art Museum's first director), Edith Kramer, and Tom Luddy outside the PFA in 2015.

has headed for nearly fifty years with a shifting slate of collaborators, now anchored by Julie Huntsinger.

The Pacific Film Archive is an institution, of course, which means that it always comprised more than one man or woman.⁷ When Luddy left to hang his shingle at Francis Ford Coppola's American Zoetrope in 1980, he was succeeded by Lynda Myles. She had made her name running the Edinburgh International Film Festival, where she famously "rediscovered" Douglas Sirk living in Switzerland with his wife and brought his films back into circulation; as with Luddy, the lure of production proved too strong; finding Berkeley too small, she left after two years to join David Puttnam at Columbia Pictures. It was then that Edith Kramer, who'd started at the PFA in 1975 but had recently left, finally accepted her fate: she agreed to become the new head of the PFA and served in that capacity, with great distinction, for the next two decades—from 1983 to her retirement in 2005, when she in turn was succeeded by Susan Oxtoby, its current director. In that time, apart from the mammoth number of screenings and retrospectives she oversaw, Kramer grew the archive's collection to more than

twelve thousand films, always keen to preserve the past and present into the future.

Up on the PFA screen, now in sumptuous new surroundings in its Diller Scofidio + Renfro–designed museum setting, is where the most elemental function of any film institution was then and still is performed: the public encounter with a film, the discovery of directors and actors and films never before seen, the revelation of new visions and styles and strategies. Successive PFA curatorial teams—Kathy Geritz, Steve Seid, Kate MacKay—have held fast to the original mission—the institution's motivating idea that cinema at its finest could still change lives, open eyes, shift the culture.

Edith Kramer, with her steadfast love of cinema and good company, her acerbic wit and deep knowledge, has kept the faith and toiled with enormous humility to sustain the field. I remember the time I spoke to her and she complained, jokingly, of just getting off a phone call from a certain filmmaker in Helsinki: "He says I'm the only one who can save Finnish cinema! What am I supposed to do?" Once I found myself trapped in a seemingly endless film



The PFA in its new Diller Scofidio + Renfro–designed building.

Courtesy of the University of California Berkeley, Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive, Film Library & Study Center.

premiere, with the director posted just outside the door to spot anyone who left; I was saved by Kramer, who led me through a labyrinth that included the projection booth itself so I could escape through the loading dock without giving offence. She laughed: it was their special escape route.

Through it all, the early influence of Albert Johnson has remained pivotal. As a man of the world, with friends on every continent, he was the rare Black curator in a position of international influence in film in those days. But there was more: Albert Johnson was debonair, cultivated, a song-and-dance man who could charm anyone, a man who was obviously, emphatically, but unspokenly, gay. He was of the generation that didn't talk of such things. But let the record show that he was not alone. An astounding lacuna in the annals of film-exhibition history is the erasure of the gay men who built it. Their sexuality may be unremarked, but their taste was exquisite and their names are well known: David Overbey at the Toronto International Film Festival, Richard Roud at the New York Film Festival, Héctor García Mesa at the Cinemateca de Cuba in Havana, Fabiano Canosa at New York's Public Theater, Alf Bold at the Arsenal in Berlin, and on and on. Albert Johnson belongs in that list.

Hopefully, film scholars and historians will begin to pay attention to the ecosystem of nonprofit exhibition before it dematerializes. Across the United States, such organizations as Film Forum, the Walker Art Center, Film at Lincoln Center, the Coolidge Theater, the UCLA Film Archive, Upstate Films, and the Cinema Arts Centre, among others, keep the faith and keep their doors open, their screens lit up, connecting with their publics. To borrow from the mission statement of the Cinema Arts Centre on Long Island, this is a brand of film exhibition that exists "to bring the best in cinematic artistry . . . and use the power of film to expand the awareness and consciousness of our community. . . . We have a long history of using the power of film to do social good. Programs unite, inspire, educate, mobilize, and create empathy in a world where empathy is greatly needed." For all their utility and convenience, Netflix and Amazon, HBO Max and Disney+, and all their kindred streamers, are unlikely ever to issue such a statement.

The Pacific Film Archive has been a flagship for the best in film and video for five decades now, most pointedly back when it served as the Northern California counterinfluence to the Hollywood machine to the south. Today, with so much leveling of "content" into one shared streaming fire hose, its model is more important than ever. May it continue

to offer the finest and most important work of filmmakers who deserve recognition to a public that, whether realizing it or not, needs it badly. Viva, PFA. Viva!

With special thanks to Jason Alley for his early research and perspectives on the culture and history of the PFA.

Notes

1. Alas, the building was deemed seismically unsafe in 1997. The PFA offices stayed, but in 1999 all screenings ("public assembly") were moved to a temporary theater on the edge of the UC Berkeley campus. Finally, in January 2016, the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, now dubbed BAMPFA, triumphantly returned together in a magnificent new building at 2155 Center Street, designed by the firm Diller Scofidio + Renfro. See <https://bampfa.org/>.
2. Time here to acknowledge a slight conflict of interest: In 1994, as I've written elsewhere, the PFA invited me to present a program in its "Scary Women" summer series. I offered up a double bill of Russ Meyer's *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965) and Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct* (1992), which led to further writing on both films in the years to come. Thanks, Edith and Kathy.
3. See, among others, Justin Wyatt, "The Stigma of X: Adult Cinema and the Institution of the MPAA Ratings System," in *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era*, ed. Matthew Bernstein (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 238–64.
4. At an Academy tribute to Luddy in San Francisco a few years ago, he spoke of his debt to Johnson and credited him as his mentor; thanks to Edith Kramer for this reference. For more details on Luddy from an earlier tribute, see Brian Darr's blog entry "Tom Luddy's Long Happy Life," April 12, 2017, <https://hellonfriscobay.blogspot.com/2017/04/tom-luddys-long-happy-life.html>.
5. These films are available from Criterion. See www.criterion.com/boxsets/1264-the-marseille-trilogy.
6. For documentation, see *Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe* (Les Blank, 1980).
7. Two helpful histories of the PFA are Lee Amazonas, "Guerrilla Cinematheque Comes of Age: The Pacific Film Archive," *Chronicle of the University of California: A Journal of University History*, no. 6 (Spring 2004): 147–59; and, coauthored collectively by the PFA staff, "The Pacific Film Archive," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 16, no. 1 (1996): 39–42.