

# EDITH KRAMER: A FOCUS ON CINEMA, IN HER OWN WORDS

Kathy Geritz



Edith Kramer in her office at the Pacific Film Archive.

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Edith Kramer was a film curator at Pacific Film Archive for almost thirty years, and for more than twenty, also its director. She was my boss, too, although I often use the more old-fashioned-term: mentor. Over the course of 2014, a year in which the field was changing rapidly and the word “curating” had entered into everyday use, I interviewed Edith about film curating, her vision and practice.<sup>1</sup> Before her time at PFA, Edith had worked at Canyon Cinema and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. For her, film curating was a lifetime calling, not a career, and was tied to a love of the specific qualities and pleasures of film. She influenced countless people with her years of film programming, both members of the audiences and a few others, like myself, to whom she showed the way to a life’s work.

When the pandemic led to a shelter-in-place order in the Bay Area, I spent time with the transcripts of these interviews.<sup>2</sup> They were good company while working at home alone. On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Pacific Film Archive, now the film department of the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA), I am delighted to share an edited selection of excerpts from my conversations with Edith Kramer.

**KATHY GERITZ: When did you first discover your love of cinema?**

**EDITH KRAMER:** When I was a child growing up in White Plains, New York, my father took home movies, and he used to show them, after they were finished, to the children. It was a ritual on weekend evenings. He had his own projector. It was noisy; you’d hear a motor going—that was the soundtrack. He’d put a sheet up in the dining room, and we’d all sit around the dining table and watch. But it was a program, not just his home movies: he would rent one- and two-reeler silent films. We had Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, and he was very fond of Charley Chase.

The great thing for us kids was that after we watched them—because the projector had variable speeds and you

rewound the film by just going backwards—we showed every film backwards, because we were intrigued by the sort of Méliès trick it created, of seeing things jump around and go back into place. That made us laugh. Everything was absurd or surreal. I think that was my earliest experience of experimental filmmaking.

So, I was aware of the specialness of movies very early, at home. And like my father and his father, I loved to go to the downtown theaters. I was allowed, at a very young age, to walk downtown by myself and go to whatever was playing wherever. There were no restrictions on what I could see; there weren't any ratings in those days, and no one ever stopped me. Saturday-morning matinees were noisy, and kids would run up and down the aisles, so I went to the adult shows. There were four theaters downtown. I would see every film that came

to every theater—but I had to make sure I was home by dinner. I'd start at noon and go through the double bill, the newsreels, the cartoons. It was a full package in those days.

I liked the focus of seeing films. It shut out everything from the outside world and allowed me to immerse myself in the screen, with nothing to distract me. That's the way I saw my cinema. For me, a good theater was always part of the cinema experience. When the film was over and the lights came on, exiting the theater was horrible, it was painful. Going out into the sunlight from an afternoon screening, hearing people chatter, the noise of the street, hearing people talk about the films. I wanted to be alone, in silence. What is it called when divers go into the water and have to come back up slowly to avoid getting the bends? I needed decompressing. I liked to be by myself, not chat about the



**The PFA theater in 1974.**

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movie, to let it linger in my mind and go over it for several hours, and to be very silent.

I had this obsession with watching movies. And then you grow up and you put that aside: that's entertainment, that's not something you create a career out of. It didn't occur to me.

**GERITZ: How did you come to work at PFA?**

**KRAMER:** Because of my experience [at Canyon Cinema and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA)], Sheldon Renan and Tom Luddy invited me to come to Pacific Film Archive.<sup>3</sup> In between, I had an offer to teach film history at UC Davis. So, I was honing my teaching, honing the programming. When I got here [to PFA], they wanted somebody to do the avant-garde, especially because they had a grant to buy films and they needed somebody to take care of it.

Tom was interested in the avant-garde, but he was immersed in New German Cinema and Jean-Luc Godard & Co. He was doing this incredibly diverse program that was film history, but he was also making connections and inviting all these directors from every part of the world, and then connecting them with other people. He was the connector par excellence. He brought Glauber Rocha; Joris Ivens; Werner Schroeter; King Hu; Youssef Chahine; Agnès Varda; Pastor Vega and other Cuban directors; Ousmane Sembene and filmmakers from all the film-producing African countries—a huge series. And there was no Iron Curtain for Tom; he invited Soviet, Czech, Hungarian, Polish directors. Tom's early programs were unbelievably ambitious, in number and scope. Amazing. So he needed help: he just had to have an assistant, but he also needed somebody to take over the avant-garde programming.

And then there was the PFA theater. I had an emotional attachment to that theater. It was why I joined the PFA staff in the beginning—to show and see films in that theater, on that screen. When I started programming at Canyon, there was no theater. You had a storefront, or a church, or just a room. You were trying to do your series in jerry-rigged facilities, doing the best you could, and nothing was ideal. But you accommodated to that and your audience got accommodated, and the experience you had with them, that was part of it.

**GERITZ: Did you draw on any of your education and early jobs, in terms of how you approached putting together film programs?**

**KRAMER:** The discipline of art history [which I had studied and taught] stayed with me. I don't think I ever shook that

off in terms of a curatorial approach. That was the skeleton for me, but I think that Canyon Cinema liberated me: that you can have any kind of idea as long as you give it a structure. All kinds of things can influence you. It strikes me that the sixties, that breaking away from constraints and being able to think anything is possible, was a liberation for me. I had the discipline of art history on the one hand, a good structure to begin with. But you can come in with any idea from the world around you, from whatever is out there, what is going on, and you can find a way to tie it to film. I think that was essential.

I also returned to my childhood experiences with home movies, those early films that made me want to go back to silent film. When I came to work at the Archive, although I was supposed to primarily emphasize the avant-garde, the first thing that I asked Tom was if I could venture into silent film, because I had a particular desire to go back to that early period that was my childhood.

Tom had an impact on me. His ability to, I want to say, multitask—his ability to be everywhere at once, to maintain focus in such a large area. Observing him and working for him, I did pick up a lot of those skills, a multitasking of programming: that you keep multiple series going in your head, juggling them and figuring out how to put them into position. It was really like juggling lots of balls at the same time. Tom was an amazing force to watch, and I learned a lot from him. He taught me how to persevere to find films, locate prints, persuade producers to provide them. And of course, he introduced me to hundreds of films I didn't know.

**GERITZ: Do you remember when you first heard the word *curator* applied to the kind of work you did with film, and do you see any difference between the terms *curator* and *programmer*?**

**KRAMER:** It probably was in the art-museum context, not in the film context. When I came here to PFA, we were not curators. I was Tom's assistant. I don't even remember what my payroll title was: museum scientist? lab assistant II? The university had no way to classify the people working at the Archive. I'm not sure what Tom's title was then, because I don't think he was called the curator. Nothing made any sense in terms of titles.

For us, at PFA, the assumption was we would never be treated the same way as a museum curator. I didn't know a single museum with a film program, department, or archive where film wasn't a stepchild, a kind of Johnny-come-lately facing a certain arrogance and suspicion on the part of the fine arts; thinking film is not serious, film is income

generating (how little did they know), that it brings in the public. And of course, those of us who got our foot in the door weren't going to dissuade them, because we wanted both feet in the door. We thought a museum was a good place to have a film program. We thought this was appropriate: film is an art form. It's partly our fault for accepting entrance into that door. We really thought that it would both protect us and legitimize us. It was very strange to be in the museum and to realize that you were still illegitimate. Then, the battle was over how to prove to your administration that you were as legitimate as the painting department, and that took forever. Forever. And some would say even to this day, film is never as legitimate.

I learned that film colleagues around the world, in different museums and archives, weren't necessarily called curators. Paolo Cherchi Usai and others did a book on the whole topic of curatorship, and he was interested in the concept of curator versus programmer.<sup>4</sup> I said, "What's the big deal?" When I was coming up through the institutional systems of the museum and the university, doing different jobs, we didn't really worry about what we were called, unless it was an issue of equal pay. I think more than the title, we wanted parity.

It's a bit of a mess now, as to what you get called, but I think that curatorship entails a much larger territory. In the archive world, being a curator involves more than programming, because it means taking care of a collection. The assumption is that you have a collection, therefore you're taking care of it, conserving, preserving, and you're interpreting it.



**Hail to the Curator: Chris Marker's retirement gift to Kramer.**

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## **GERITZ: What did you see as the role of film programming, and did the way you see it change over time?**

**KRAMER:** I had to give a talk at the Pordenone Silent Film Festival when I got the Jonathan Dennis Award [in 2009]. I said, "OK, I'm going to share with you my philosophy of film programming, since I think that's essentially why I'm here. You may or may not agree, but here it is." I think of it as a journey. I'm going to take the audience on a journey, and a film series is part of that journey. It has its peaks and valleys, and it has its tangents, little roads you take off to the side, but ultimately, all the different films are pieces that make this journey complete. You have to have a beginning, and a kind of middle, and an end, and you have to think about that in arranging the films, about how they relate to each other.

I think from the first program, and even when I was teaching, that was a sense I had: that I am telling a story, that film programming is, in itself, a narration. Each series is my story. I like being a storyteller. That's what it was to me, and that was true from the very beginning.

I used to tease Adrienne Mancia [at MoMA, New York] because, unlike her, I didn't do "completist" shows. I said, "First of all, I don't have the budget, and I'm not traveling to Italy or wherever to see all the films." It was unrealistic financially. Also, there was no time to do anything on that scale. I have to be selective; that's essential to storytelling. I don't have the luxury of just saying, "I'm going to do everything." I was forced, by circumstances, to create interesting programs that are highly selective. There are short stories and there are medium-length stories and there are epics: you determine your beginning, middle, and end, and voilà, as the series finds its shape, it becomes more than the sum of its parts. If I had been in New York, I might not have been able to tell the same stories. It might have crimped my style. Maybe I'm lucky that I ended up here in Berkeley, because I suspect we've had more freedom than our colleagues at other institutions. I think that freedom we take for granted has defined who we were.

I saw so many changes in the field. I was very old-fashioned: I didn't study film, I went to films. I didn't have a degree in film history or film theory. The way film is being taught for the younger and current generation of programmers is from a theoretical standpoint, not from a purely historical base. That informs their way of doing programs. I didn't have an education in that approach, and I didn't keep up with those movements in film criticism or theory. I was stubbornly wed to: let's begin by seeing what's been made,

let's look at everything, and then the films can be analyzed and in doing so you will discover things.

The films you think are really wonderful don't exist in a vacuum: they're made at the same time that these other films are made, maybe even by the same people. When I spoke to wonderful, bright scholars coming out of school, it didn't seem to me they were seeing as many films as they should or could. They weren't coming to the Archive!

**GERITZ: How important was travel to your programming at PFA?**

**KRAMER:** I used to joke and say, "I'm an armchair curator," because I had to do a lot of reading and talking to colleagues who went traveling to festivals. Only when VHS became available did I have the luxury of really previewing films. In earlier days, maybe you could preview a 16mm print if a filmmaker sent it to you, but you'd have to pay for the shipping in and out, and of course you had to be very careful because they may be sending their only print. . . . It's a responsibility which is very different from mailing VHS tapes and DVDs.

In the early years, previewing was very limited and we were not really traveling, so we were dependent on printed information—from *Variety*, the *New York Times*, or whatever film magazines we felt were worth reading. I think you'd develop a kind of antenna to figure out what was worth investigating by different writers. It seems strange that that would work, but somehow, I think you are able to see through the writing as to what is really valuable—not the film's story, but how they write about the cinema, the film's style.

We were also inspired by other people's programming, poring over their calendars when they came in the mail: the National Film Theatre in London, Cinémathèque française, MoMA, Cinémathèque québécoise, the wonderful programming of Jacques Ledoux in Brussels. The times when we could actually go to a festival or a colleague's film archive were so infrequent that they barely informed our programming until later on, and even then we had to take turns to see who would go to which festival or archive. Not an ideal situation, but an economic necessity.

I did attend the Pesaro Film Festival. Everybody was in one theater, with a focus on, say, all the cinema of one country. What a way to learn; it was extraordinary. If you wanted to meet your colleagues or filmmakers, you did. I went down to breakfast in the morning and I was sitting next to the Rotterdam Film Festival's Huub [Hubert] Balls. Jean Rouch came in from swimming in the sea and sat down; Peter von Bagh was there, too. I'm starry-eyed,



**"Each series is my story": a selection of PFA program guides.**

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sitting with people who were my mentors in many ways, who were inspirations for me. It was friendly and relaxed, unpretentious. We all saw the same films every day, so we had something to talk about.

I also went to the meetings of FIAF [the International Federation of Film Archives], when the timing worked—in Lisbon, Stockholm, London—and every time, I used the trips to view films in the archives. When I went to Helsinki, I had the opportunity to see films I had never seen before. I already knew Peter von Bagh, but he kept saying to me, "You have to do a Teuvo Tulio series." It took a while for that to happen; it was after I retired. The only thing comparable to Tulio's films were the Mexican melodramas—those ecstatic, extreme melodramas.

But it isn't always about finding films. I went to Havana in 1986 for the film festival and the opening of the film school with Fernando Birri, who had already come to the Telluride Film Festival and the Archive. That's when I met Héctor García Mesa, then the director of the Cinemateca de Cuba, who became a friend. When you apply for full membership in FIAF, one of their representatives has to inspect your archive. It was Hector who paid us that visit in 1989 and approved us. And we did a program with him. Dear Hector, he was wonderful, so joyous and full of stories, so knowledgeable of the history not only of Cuban but of all Latin American cinema.

**GERITZ: Do you see film programming as educational work, creative work, or would you characterize it in other ways?**

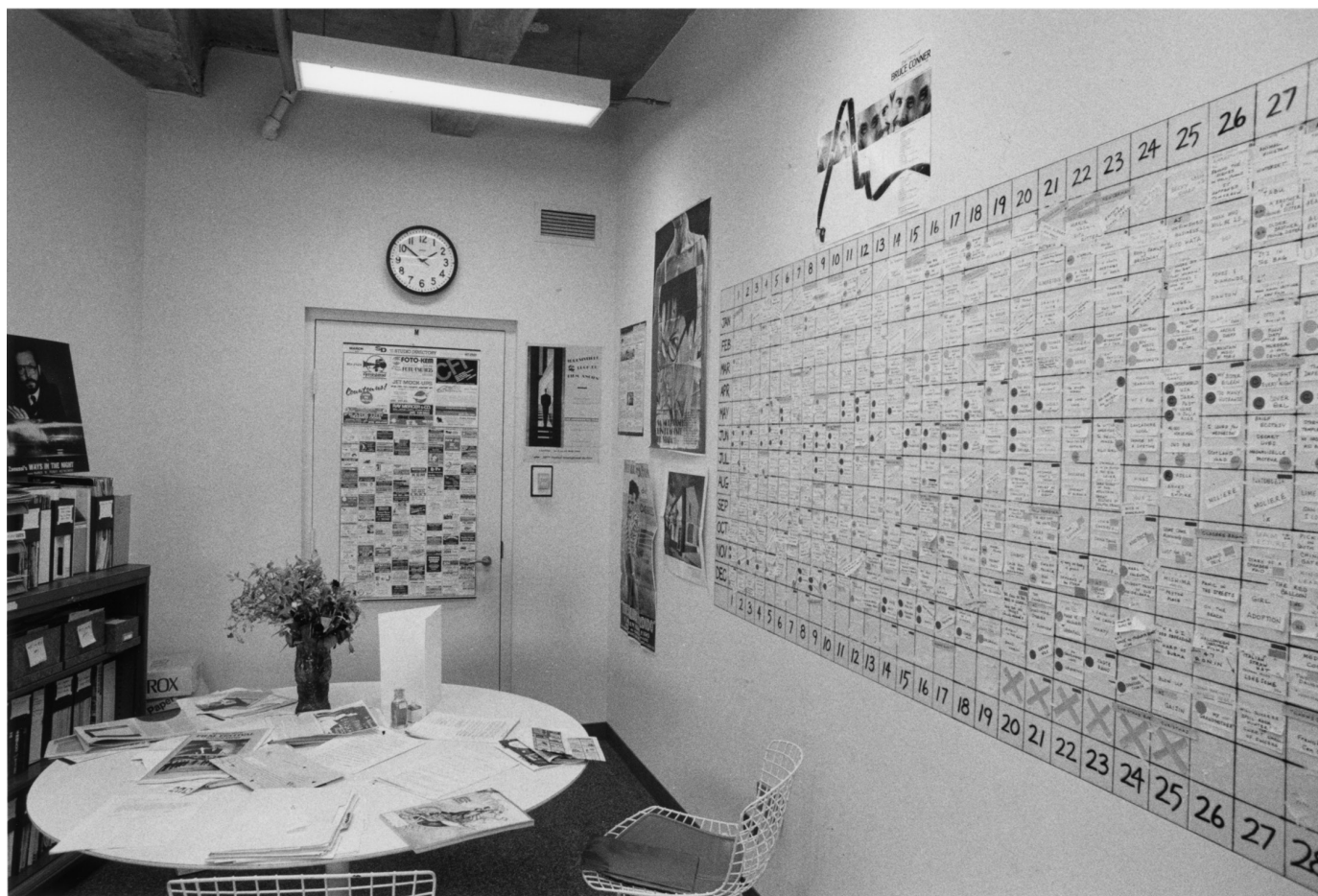
**KRAMER:** As PFA was part of UC Berkeley, I enjoyed the frequent and regular collaboration with film faculty. Their students came to the Archive to view the films that were required for their course. For example, Albert Johnson taught Third World Cinema one semester and Images of Minorities in Film [later renamed American Cultures] the other. He had the list of films he wanted his students to see, and I had the privilege and pleasure of suggesting he add films he didn't know. There was a real programming partnership and negotiation: his curriculum and my insistence on updating it. [laughter] At PFA, the films were always changing, while teachers tend to create a reading and film list they use year after year. That is a difference between teaching a course and our kind of teaching through public programs.

I always thought the whole function of curating was educational. It's a fun way of teaching, because you don't have to prepare a lecture every day and you don't have to grade your audience, right? But the fact is that we do grade our audiences. We look to see how they respond and

whether they get it, and we're disappointed if they don't get it, and we think, We'll have to do it again, we'll have to figure out another way.

It's our failure, but really, I've always graded the audience: Did their perception improve? Were they more open to things, were they more critical? I used to get upset when somebody would come up to me and say how much they loved a particular film, when I thought it was the weakest film in the series. [laughs] I remember saying, "You should have been more critical of that film. Don't tell me you love that film. It had lots of problems, didn't you see that?" You want them to become very sophisticated viewers, so that they demand more.

To be a good curator or programmer, you have to be creative. Ideas come from everywhere. I'll read a magazine article, I'll have a conversation with somebody, and suddenly, because I'm riffing on something, I think that's an idea for a series. Ideas also come from viewing. You notice things in films that are beyond content, beyond form. Things that reappear, fetishes or motifs, or aspects of film



Edith Kramer's office at the PFA, with its wall-length programming calendar.

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history. Why is it that all the film people we know like to eat well? That made me decide to do a series on food and cinema. The “Arab Cinema” series was percolating for a couple of years, as I was thinking whether there were enough new voices. Yes, I decided, there’s enough new that I should pull something together, but I also needed to go back and look at its predecessors.

Some ways of organizing series drop out of fashion; other times they come back in. I’ve probably done it all in terms of how people put films together, but my personal preference was always thematic, because there’s where you can play, and I think there should be lots of play in that.

My series “The Primal Screen” [in 1992] was, I think, my only attempt to do something very personal, but people didn’t understand. The idea came out of the very ritual of projection, and it was particular to the original PFA theater: the dimming lights that built anticipation for the moment the film hits the screen, that damn noisy curtain that had to be pulled, and the fact that the booth was not soundproof, and so we heard the motors. All of that had become part of that theater experience, and I loved it. I complained, but it also belonged to the personality of that screen. The films in “The Primal Screen” were supposed to be examples of this feeling I had in that movie theater, and the films were chosen especially for the way they began and drew you into the movie experience.

In and of themselves, retrospectives didn’t interest me. The challenge was how to make them creative. What order can I put these in? Or, because we always had several series going at once, how can this relate to what somebody else is doing? Can I do a double bill with a film in another series? I love double bills, because that is a very art historical trick of compare and contrast. It can be content, it can be form, it can be genre, it can be performance. You can play a game with the audience, and it is fun.

But, the one thing I had to remember is that an audience member doesn’t necessarily notice all the comparisons. You’re programming for an ideal audience, but ultimately it is you that is seeing all the connections. They’re all on paper, on your monthly calendar grids. How do you get anybody in the audience to see what you are doing? That’s tricky, and you know it will only happen with a few people who go to more films than you could ever expect anybody to go to. The reality is that when the film plays, they’re not necessarily there; they have lives. They dare to have lives that don’t include you! [laughs] But every now and then they get it: you have somebody who puts the pieces together, especially connections between the double bills.

## **GERITZ: How did you approach building an audience?**

**KRAMER:** When I came here, I inherited an audience that Tom and Sheldon had already developed. It was important to me to get to know the audience—the regulars, of course, but if I saw a face once and then recognized it another time, it made me feel good to see somebody was trying a film. I think you have to build their trust, to try to give them an experience that makes them want to return.

It was important to welcome the audience, talk to them afterwards, get their feedback. Even if they weren’t forthcoming, to ask them, What did you think of this? Did you like that? You should try this program. I think about how to create a kind of warmth and make them feel that they are special. I think that’s very important. . . . The theater was my home and I was inviting you . . . the audience had to pay, of course. [laughs] I always believed that the members of the audience are your friends and your guests, and you should behave like a good host. And I believe cinema can travel to every place and to everyone in its history, so why not in your own theater?

## **GERITZ: Were there certain kinds of series that particularly gladdened your heart?**

**KRAMER:** I think I was always gladdened when a series actually came to pass. For me the reward was being in the moment of a series taking place and sharing that experience with the audience. Of course, if it’s not working, you’re miserable; but if it’s working, that’s your high. . . . There’s that moment of elation when something goes well. It’s brief, but it’s a lovely feeling. You sense it, and maybe you get some feedback, too, from the audience or colleagues, that it went well, and you think, That’s terrific, that’s the reward.

You do a series, and it goes OK, and you move on to the next series. But years later, you return to that series because the audience is younger. That was the case with [Yasujirō] Ozu. We did Ozu many times. Finally, one of them was better than all the others. Maybe it was the quantity, maybe the timing, or the order in which I showed them. Something about that [2003] series was special, and I still wonder about it today. I was forced to put it in a time period that was not ideal—November, December, end of the semester, everyone thinking about the holiday season.

To sustain the audience, I made a commitment to be at each screening, saying something to bring people to the next film. One night I looked out at the audience in the theater and I said, “You are the Ozu family.” And if you know Ozu films, you know he deals with families.



**“I never looked up”:** Edith Kramer at her desk.

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And they became proud of that. Every time they came to a film, they’d recognize each other; there was a sense of community: “Hey, we’re all coming to all the films.” It was a state of mind, one of those unique things that can happen with a series, where you identify with other members of the audience as well as with the films. That was fantastic for me.

**GERITZ:** Sometimes there was an unexpected special moment around a program. The other day you mentioned how beautiful it was when Moufida Tlatli started the audience ululating in that emotional Middle Eastern cry. Peter Kubelka made mayonnaise onstage. Or the time when Chris Marker, who had a special relationship with PFA and the Bay Area, finally met with an audience.

**KRAMER:** I met Chris Marker through Tom Luddy, it must have been in the early seventies. Tom made it clear to me that Chris would never appear with his films or do the usual introduction and Q&A after a screening. He remains anonymous, he also won’t allow himself to be photographed.

I got to know him on his visits here—sometimes he arrived spontaneously, other times to work on a specific film—and on occasion when I went to Paris, I visited him there, and that was delightful. But then came the time when we were showing one of his films and he was in town. I don’t know what prompted me to ask him because I already knew what his answer would be, but I said, “The audience knows you’re here, word gets out, it is a packed house. Are you sure you don’t want to say anything to the audience?” He surprised me and said, “You can tell them I’ll be sitting in the café having a cup of tea, and if they’d like to join me after the film, that would be nice.”

I introduce the film and tell the audience this. As soon as the film was over, 234 people stormed the café; they took the chairs down off the tables, they sat on the floor, and gathered around him. I don’t know how long they were there, but it was a long time. We were supposed to be out of the building so security could close the museum, you couldn’t linger. And we were lingering. [laughter] And we lingered and we lingered. And it was wonderful. I think Chris enjoyed it immensely.

That wasn’t the only time we broke protocols with our programs, especially in the early days. When we showed Les Blank films, he always wanted an event. If the film had food in it, we were to cook food and serve it. I remember making an enormous pot of rice on a hot plate. With his garlic film, he wanted “Aromaround,” so we had little toaster ovens plugged into the outlets along the aisles and we were cooking whole bulbs of garlic, trying to spread the aroma.<sup>5</sup> But Les thought that wasn’t enough so he threw garlic cloves into the air, which landed on the carpet, and we stomped on them. I heard about that the next day. [laughter] Then there was the time that live musicians came. It was a Zydeco band as I recall, and people were dancing in the hallways. They got carried away and went up into the galleries, dancing. It was free-spirited, spontaneous, joyous. In the early years, there was such a celebratory spirit.

**GERITZ:** You were a curator or a programmer for many years. What kept you in the field and position?

**KRAMER:** I never looked up. [laughs] I think it’s true. You’re so busy. I want to say overworked, but that sounds like a complaint. It’s not a complaint, but you are overworked, I mean literally, in terms of hours. But you get so obsessed, I think, that you’re in the present and the future simultaneously. For everything you do, you want to do something else, and you want to do more. The possibilities are endless.

Before you know it, you’re expanding. Some part of you says you shouldn’t be expanding so much, because then you have to raise money, and they are always telling you there is less money. The endless budgetary issues. I think I just never had a moment to look up and step back and say, What the heck am I doing? Do I really want to keep doing this? I was enjoying it, I was challenged by it, I was thoroughly into it, and I didn’t know how to stop.

Finally, after a lot of years went by, I realized, maybe I should stop, I obviously can’t stay forever. I could keep going and it would be fun, but maybe it’s not as much of a challenge anymore; been there, done that. And there’s an awareness of time; I could just drop dead at my desk like some people do and I would never have done other things.



I had a sense of becoming more and more insular. I only read film magazines. Is that all I'm reading? Where's the literature? [laughter] I felt that the field had progressed beyond where I wanted to be in many ways. I thought, I don't fit very well; the field is somebody else's now.<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

1. I also interviewed her longtime colleague Adrienne Mancía, curator at MoMA in New York, who collaborated with Edith over decades; the transcripts constituted a transcontinental conversation. Garbiñe Ortega joined me for the conversation about Edith's "The Primal Screen" series.
2. I am currently shaping these transcripts into a book.
3. Edith Kramer curated films at SFMOMA in 1970–73 and worked with avant-garde film and filmmakers at Canyon Cinema, including starting up its screening series in a defunct

church in San Francisco during 1967–70. She first worked at PFA in 1975–81, and returned in 1983–2005. Sheldon Renan, PFA's founder and first director, was at PFA in 1967–75, including years when he programmed at Wheeler, prior to the opening of the University Art Museum in 1971. Tom Luddy was the program director and then archive director and curator of PFA in 1972–80.

4. Paolo Cherchi Usai, David Francis, Alexander Horwath, and Michael Loebenstein, eds., *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace* (Vienna: Österreichisches Filmmuseum, 2008). Paolo Cherchi Usai was the head of the Moving Image Department at the George Eastman House in Rochester, NY, for twenty years.
5. The film was Blank's *Garlic Is as Good as Ten Mothers* (1980). It screened at PFA on April 28, 1980, with Aromaround.
6. After Edith Kramer's retirement in 2005, Susan Oxtoby was hired as the senior film curator at BAMPFA.