

Field Notes \ Programming Experimental Documentary

Genevieve Yue with
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Pablo de Ocampo
Jason Fox
Haden Guest
Shai Heredia
and Jean-Pierre Rehm

The past twenty years has seen an explosion of film festivals and exhibition spaces devoted to a practice that is more or less recognizable as having its roots in a documentary practice. Provisionally we might call this *experimental documentary*: a practice that relates to real-world subjects, with an explicit engagement with formal experimentation. The following conversation was convened on Zoom so that programmers who have been on the front lines of this change in the film festival landscape could speak together about their experiences, their understanding of this field of practices, and their own evolving roles in this ecosystem.

CONVERSATION

Shai Heredia

I'm a filmmaker and curator based in Bangalore, in India. In 2003 I started Experimenta, a festival of experimental film, as a filmmaker. I was interested in watching genres and learning from moving image-making practices. The idea for me has always been to mix genres, formats, cultural contexts, and art-historical traditions, as I feel that it's in the sorts of encounters and collisions within a program, or within a festival, that the challenging discourse really gets generated. I'm also interested in complicating the pursuit of terminology, and the construction of classifications and canons around cinematic practice, as I have often been at the receiving end of navigating the problematics of this.

I have to say that I have always found the term *experimental documentary* quite confusing, and frankly a bit troubling, as it means adding yet another framework of navigation for both the maker and the programmer to work through. I can see why it can be liberating for filmmakers who are not fully aligned with

a mainstream form of documentary or experimental filmmaking per se—that we have constructed this category to support amazing work of experimental filmmakers and artists across the world. However, I think as gatekeepers—which we all are, whether we like it or not—we each have a particular lens based on our own cultural context and histories of exposure to cinema and art. I feel I have to constantly remind myself of what this kind of genre constructor can potentially do. Canons are forms that are culture-specific, and therefore expected. They elude multiple languages and practices of making to fetishize particular techniques, actually shutting out fresh and raw work around stories and social issues. It is yet another genre that is kept separate from the mainstream, which to my mind really only serves the market and industry of both art and film. I feel it's important to resist the market, to continue to challenge mainstream forms and genres, to push for engagement with a range of practices, and to bring audiences that are already pretty sophisticated into this process. My position is: Why reinvent the wheel by creating and asserting a new form, when we are aware that these practices have always existed? I'm more interested in working to create and expand audiences and influence the trajectory of the medium of cinema by bringing multiple filmmaking practices to audiences. Which I feel is really my job, the curatorial work I try to do.

Pablo de Ocampo

I'm coming to you from Minneapolis, Minnesota, where I work at the Walker Art Center in the moving image program here. I currently work at an art institution with a regular program in cinema, as well as galleries and performances and other programs. But I've previously worked in the film festival context as well. There is a

deep question that doesn't necessarily relate specifically to documentary—I think this could extend to many other practices within filmmaking—around the difficulty of categorization. I've always been drawn to things that defy that categorization. These are works that break through that mold and straddle different genres or categories. They tend to be things that articulate new languages or articulate new ways of working, and that, years after the fact, I still find myself thinking about or looking at, wondering about what they are. Maybe the question of how something is defined or categorized is not really answerable.

Haden Guest

My thinking on documentary cinema has been constantly evolving. I am the director of the Harvard Film Archive, both an archive and a cinemathèque, where we screen films all year round, in non-pandemic times. Actually, the engine for that collection is our cinemathèque, the many artists that we bring in, and our desire to keep that collection of-the-moment. One of the most cutting-edge areas of cinema is in the realm of documentary, however we define it. I feel like documentary has always been a sort of testing ground for the limits and possibilities of cinematic form—perhaps even more so than fiction—because of its claim to have some engagement with the real. This is true from the very beginning. And my role, and the role of the institution I lead, is not only to engage with the present moment but also to reflect on the history of documentary traditions and forms. There's such a rich history of radical, experimental, non-traditional, and category-defying modes of nonfiction filmmaking that have existed around the world, and I'm always amazed to discover new unwritten chapters of documentary cinema. That's something I'm really interested in,

whether it be 1960s Japanese documentary, contemporary Chinese documentary, traditions of essay films in France and Spain, or radical political documentaries in Latin America. Two of the things that I see as our duties, among this group, are to engage modes of cinema that challenge traditions, and also to reflect upon that history.

I think the term *experimental documentary* has a polemical charge that is important, in that it distinguishes itself from the sort of mainstream documentary that's become so pervasive on streaming platforms. By this, I mean the three-act, character-driven documentary, or topical documentary that makes palatable a complex issue. And yet, at the same time, I worry about marginalizing experimental filmmakers who are working in non-traditional forms, by saying that these filmmakers are *simply* experimental. So I'm trying to find a way to leverage a difference that cuts against the grain, and doesn't just put these filmmakers in a corner with experimental cinema. I see that as a real challenge.

María Palacios Cruz

I'm here because I'm the director of a documentary film festival called Open City, in London. Before Open City, I had been working many years for another film festival called Courtisane, in Belgium, which does not define itself as a documentary film festival, but which has shown a lot of works that would be included in this category of *experimental documentary*.

Some initial thoughts: Experimental documentary is not really a category here in the UK. I guess we have invented our own umbrella or equally loose terms. These are maybe meaningless in other cultural contexts. For instance, *artists' moving*

image is an attempt to bring together all these different radical or non-traditional forms. *Nonfiction cinema* would be another, and it's one that Open City has been using. In preparation for this conversation, I went through all the Open City programs, and there was a shift in the last ten years. When the festival was founded in 2010, it referred to *documentary cinema*, and in 2017 there was a shift of terminology to *nonfiction cinema*. I guess this is a way to also embrace the avant-garde and artists' moving image, with *nonfiction* being seen as something more expansive. But the idea of nonfiction seems equally troubling, or the idea of having to define ourselves as what we are not; a negative term rather than a positive term. And then—and this may be leading into Jean-Pierre who will follow me—there is the idea that in French, we talk about *cinéma du réel* or “cinema of the real,” which seems more affirmative. I wish that in English we could refer to cinema of the real, something that emphasizes that relationship to reality or has self-awareness about that relationship to reality.

In terms of festivals of the last twenty years, it is interesting how festivals used to define themselves in relationship to a genre—documentary festivals, short film festivals, narrative, etc.—and now there's been this coming together. With Courtisane, we would often think we were interested in the same works as FIDMarseille, for instance, even though they're a documentary festival and we thought of ourselves as an experimental film festival. Our programs were getting closer and closer. In relationship to what Shai brought up in terms of resistance to categorization and narrowing, I would say that both in Belgium and in the UK, although different contexts, the work we've been trying to do is of claiming these works to

be cinema, or claiming these works to be art, and not trying to divide further into smaller corners or categories. Instead we try to occupy the entire space of the visual arts or cinema. Maybe, in the UK at least, there is still a trauma in regards to the term *experimental*. It's a term that's very uncomfortable for practitioners here, and this could be for many reasons, including the demise of the London Film-Makers' Co-op in the 90s, as well as funding reasons. There is no longer funding for experimental film or artists' film from a film perspective. There is only funding in the visual arts, so there has been a clear transfer from one frame of reference to the other.

PdO

María, I appreciate your bringing up cinema of the real. I don't think I've ever put much thought to how that's a really beautiful and brilliant way of indicating there's a relationship to the real that doesn't necessarily try to articulate something as being in the binary of truth or fiction. Just being in relationship.

Jean-Pierre Rehm

When Genevieve wrote to me about this topic, I thought I would turn it down, because I haven't been interested in "documentary" for a while. I'm in charge of FID-Marseille, and the letter "D" is still there, but maybe like a silent letter, because the festival is already known—nobody really cares what the letters mean. They would rather hear about Marseille: an open city, full of sun and sea, migrants and history. I think that's much more meaningful than anything else. In the beginning, although I told the board I had a lot of trouble with documentary, I realized that documentary was something really thrilling. Then I decided to enclose the festival in a genre, which was one that relates politics and

cinema, drawing from the heritage of the late 60s and early 70s, mixed with the beginning of television. Back then there was this connection between militancy on one hand, and the need for television to have cheap programming on the other.

Experimental documentary for me is a pleonasm, because I've always thought that documentaries should be experimental, that they should be experimenting with something. I totally agree with María when she says that *nonfiction* is so sad a term; it's a mourning term, because these people are very obviously mourning documentary. Anyway, I think if documentary means something today, it is in terms of modes of production. I mean production that does not at all obey the rules of fiction films, which sometimes makes documentaries as expensive as a low-budget fiction film. But what I've learned from filmmakers I've met, young people in Argentina, the Philippines, Thailand, is that it can be a totally different way of producing films: cheap, fast.

Rather than a gatekeeper, as Shai said, I think of myself as a gate-opener. My mission is to go where things are happening. For example, the first feature from Payal Kapadia, *A Night of Knowing Nothing* (2021). What would you call it? It's obviously a documentary production. I know the cost because she was in FIDLab first. It's amazing. She intertwines the demonstrations in Bombay and a love story. I don't think she's interested in categorization. Of course, this film can be shown in the context of a regular film festival—it premiered in Quinzaine at Cannes—but also in many doc film festivals. For me this is the capacity of moving around that is much more interesting than wondering what we should do or what should be done. It's the same even for films that are

obviously much more expensive, but also that were done in a totally different way of production, like *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, which was filmed in 2010 by Apichatpong Weerasethakul. The way he worked to prepare his film is that he stayed on location for several months, not shooting, but taking notes. This would resemble—not to say that it belongs to—a documentary approach.

Jason Fox

One of the unifying elements to the responses that you all just gave is a suspicion of terms. This is a suspicion around categorization, and a desire to use programming as a way to break down boundaries. It seems that this abiding concern with breaking forms apart might obscure some of the consolidating work that forms do, and that we do, as programmers, organizing formally complex work and organizing complex social dynamics. Being the orchestrators of a social space, who do you feel you are accountable to? Either as programmers now or when you came into programming moving image work: How did you understand your accountabilities, your solidarities, or in what spirit you were doing this work?

MPC

George Clark, another esteemed colleague that many of you know, runs a film-curation course here in London. Last week I went to his class to talk about Open City, and something that came out in the discussion was the sense that there has been, at Open City but also other festivals, for the last ten or fifteen years, a trend of collapsing, removing, undoing categories, sections. I can remember how radical it felt when Rotterdam did it—there used to be hundreds of categories, but then suddenly Rotterdam removed these categories that had been a way of navigating the

program and organizing meaning, and it replaced them with bigger groupings. It was a bringing together, which is a similar process to opening up terms, things no longer belonging in different boxes. This also happened with *Courtsane*, which was born as an experimental short film festival, and now is a film festival that shows not only short works but some of the longest films ever made. Already more than ten years ago, it had someone like Philippe Grandrieux as an artist-in-focus, breaking away from the sense that the focus was on experimental film or documentary film. I'm interested in this idea of presenting everything together and in the same way. That's what we did at *Courtsane*, presenting historical and recent works in the same programs, without making a distinction between them. Before I joined Open City, it was already moving in this direction. Obviously collapsing every category comes with its own dangers, of losing the sense of context or historical specificity. And that's our responsibility as programmers. We can show these things together, things that are in different boxes historically, but then we have a duty to know how these films were shown, in what contexts they were made. We have to honor all of that through the way we accompany the work.

PdO

A big part of categorization is about the limits of knowledge within the boundaries of a defined box. It's something I feel very viscerally, having had a long history within experimental cinema, for lack of a better word (I also don't really like that term). But you show a bunch of experimental films, and you throw in something that one would consider to be *documentary*. Sometimes you'll have audiences that are just—"That's not what I'm here to see; I'm here to see this thing. Because

I know what I want to see, and I know what I like.” That’s one way to think about how this work manifests itself within public programs and audiences, and how my work is done for various publics. Like María, I extend beyond rigid categories of experimental film, or experimental documentary. An audience may see a film I’ve programmed and the association might not be, you know, cinema related; it might be a piece of music, or poetry, or another art form. I think that for artists, when someone is making a documentary or any type of film, there are many influences that one is drawing on. So the presentation of works within these boxes is something that’s always very troubling. But it’s also been pushed against. I’ve only had the privilege of going to FID once, but the time that I went, it was a super eye-opening experience of how to articulate the concerns of, for lack of a better term, documentary, across many types of moving image practices, both historical and contemporary, both fiction and things that are other than fiction. I’m trying to not say “nonfiction.”

laughter

SH

To Jason’s point about solidarities: When I started Experimenta, I was in Bombay. The context I was navigating there was Bollywood. I tried to create a context of practice for a bunch of practitioners that were making this kind of work, but had no place to show their work. This is why *experimental film* became the term that I used, because it already had some exposure. So I began to show this work. Then the festival tagline kept shifting, from *artists’ moving image* to *experimental film* to *moving image* and so on. I did that deliberately because I was trying to complicate that situation. But what tended to happen

was that people were making work that was experimental. Following that, a sort of canon was constructed around five male filmmakers, whose work was called “cinema of *prayoga*.”¹ This was just bullshit, because the point of the whole festival was to be critical of the canon, rather than to form a new canon. Meanwhile you have built a community that’s into looking at a *range* of practices. Actually, Experimenta is not really a festival for filmmakers. It’s a festival for a general audience—we have scientists, lawyers, accountants, and all kinds of people coming in. And that is what allows one to keep it quite fresh.

To respond to what Haden mentioned, that documentary film is a testing ground for new cinematic form: When I began to do research and look at the history of experimental cinema in India, I encountered Films Division of India, which is a state-funded film and distribution organization. Essentially, the socialist state was supporting experimental work that was very much rooted in documentary film. So you had filmmakers like SNS Sastry and Pramod Pati, people who were seemingly making films on family planning, but they were radical, crazy films. You had Mani Kaul who was making a promotional film for Kashmir, which is a beautiful film but it’s rooted in the documentary context. That was really inspiring, and that made me realize that these forms can productively collapse. As a point of resistance, it was clear that this was not happening in the fiction realm, since fiction is very much about a Bollywood sort of syntax.

In terms of accountability, I should also talk a bit about the context that I’m coming from. In India, since the Emergency in 1975, the documentary film context has been pretty conservative. That was a

significant rupture in this sort of experimental form, and it led to social-justice, activist documentary cinema. For example, Priya Sen’s film *Noon Day Dispensary* (2014) is an experimental film here, and in New York it’s a documentary film. So what is that? That’s the position I’m thinking through, which is examining what is happening with institutions and exhibition contexts across the world, and where we are in making these frames that filmmakers have to jump between, confront, navigate.

Genevieve Yue

Some of you may have seen an article in the *Film Comment Letter* last week, by Abby Sun, about Cinema 16.² In that article, she talks about how the institution desires permanence. Institutions are interested in sustaining themselves and existing in perpetuity. So I wonder if some of that desire for terminology comes out of the institution’s need to have something easily identifiable and marketable. Perhaps that opens up a space for us to think about how, as programmers, you’re not necessarily married to your institutions. Many of you are freelance or move across different institutional spaces. Can you speak to your relationships to these various institutions that have their own set of demands and interests?

HG

In certain ways, I am married to an institution. I’ve been at the Harvard Film Archive for fifteen years. But I think that being in a university setting offers really dynamic possibilities for a cinematheque, and for a film archive, especially in terms of *interdisciplinarity*. This may be one of the most used and perhaps overused words, yet the reason why there’s so much excitement around it is this possibility of breaking boundaries and connecting

departments in an enriching and revelatory dialogue. I think there is real potential there. I see one of my roles as connecting different departments and communities in ways that maybe cut against the institutional grain. Admittedly, I’m at a university in which the visual arts have always been marginalized to a certain extent, even though there are really rich institutional collections across the visual arts. There’s also been an accepted tradition of academic investigatory filmmaking, of course, especially with ethnographic cinema, which had many of its early roots within the academy, and at Harvard. So I see the creation of a space for dialogue, between artists/filmmakers and academics/investigators working with film, as very important. This for me has to do with accountability. I’m also a film historian, and I find it equally exciting to reflect on the past in new ways. For example, looking at a film like *Scorpio Rising* (1963) and reminding audiences that this is a documentary about the Hells Angels, how it began, and how it still is. A single film like this can have real pedagogical potential for teaching us about other ways of engaging with the real.

To go back to market forces and the challenges of funding, I do think the market is something that really shapes filmmakers and their practices. There are so many cases where I’ll see a film in an early form, and then as it moves toward grant funding, it becomes more and more conventional, less and less adventurous. I see this as a problem. I think that festivals and cinematheques can offer an alternative space. We also work with different residency programs where filmmakers can come for longer and shorter stays, and we’ve been working with places like the Film Study Center at the Radcliffe Institute to try and create more of these

opportunities, so practicing artists can be engaged in a longer-term dialogue.

PdO

I'm thinking about the institutional investment in longevity. While I think that what Genevieve said is totally true, there are ways to reconsider that dynamic and how things shift and change over time. One example is Chick Strand, the American filmmaker whose work migrated through time, not while it was being made, but after it had been made and, I would say, not until after she passed away. Her films migrated from the boundaries of experimental film into nonfiction documentary, or whatever we want to call that practice. Another example that I point to, which shows how a practice shifted, is the work of Lis Rhodes. There's a way in which, as an experimental filmmaker, as a structural filmmaker, however one might want to put it, Lis Rhodes was associated only with *Dresden Dynamo* (1971) and *Light Music* (1975). Then her existence as an experimental structural avant-garde filmmaker ceases to exist, where she then becomes a political filmmaker, a filmmaker that is working in relationship to the real. But there was actually no difference between what her concerns were as an artist and the philosophy and ideology that went into *Dresden Dynamo*, and more recent films like *Journal of Disbelief* (2000). The structure of the films didn't actually change. But then there was a shift in what concerns were visible and how they were received. When no one is seen, when there's no human physical form, a film is an experimental film, but all of a sudden, when there's a body or voice or person—and I think it's important to recognize that when it's a *female* person—then the film is no longer experimental or structural.

JF

One of the things that Genevieve alerted me to was the way in which criticism often takes shape in relationship to a perceived sense of vulnerability around experimental work. Oftentimes critics of experimental work are seeing and writing about films on their own dime. It's also difficult not to be acutely aware that one's review might be the only published writing artists are going to get. That writing is incredibly valuable with respect to grant applications, to promotion and tenure if the person is employed in the academic system, etc. This could be seen as a conservative and preservative mode of wanting to treat the field as vulnerable. But what's lost when we approach the field from that position? What might be explored or pursued differently if we could step away from this feeling that we're in a marginalized field that's always at risk of disappearing?

GY

This conservatism is tied to the question of funding as well, as Maria mentioned. For experimental film, funding has all but dried up, but there's ample funding for moving image work. There's both a sense that this form is endangered and disappearing, and at the same time, there's this utter proliferation, with more work than ever and more festivals than ever. So I'm interested in tracking all these different kinds of movements and what they allow in terms of new forms of expression, but also what is limited, or not able to be made.

MPC

Going back to the idea of institutional responsibility, I think it has to do with the nature of the institution, as is the case with Haden, being the director of an archive. As an independent curator, I can

indulge my tastes more as a person than as an institution. Though, as the director of a film festival, I'm more aware of my responsibility toward a community or fields of practice, and have to measure my own tastes and inclinations more. The question of funding comes into that as well, because, as a socialist, I am very aware of the fact that in Europe we work with public funding. Open City is a festival that's part of a university [University College London], so I'm also in that same academic context, and I'm very aware that the festival is being funded by student fees. The festival needs to give something back to that community, and I need to think very carefully about how I'm using that money.

To respond to Jason and this idea of how we get so few spaces to write about films that we always end up in that position of championing work: In that sense, programmers are like critics, because obviously we wouldn't program a film that we didn't like or embrace. It would be very perverse for a curator to program something just to demonstrate how bad it is in a very public way. At the same time, even though we might think this form is everywhere in many festivals and exhibitions, we still feel that we are in the margins. We still carry that history of being in the margins, so we keep thinking that we need to be protective. Genevieve, you have mentioned that in writing your essay, there wasn't a discussion that you could reference, so you created it. I think we are still in that process of having to create our own literature, our own texts, and our own terminologies. This is not that different from what filmmakers were doing in the 60s, writing the texts and the histories that were not there. But then how do we break out of that sense of being in the margins and having to constantly write what's not

there? And when can we move to a more critical relationship to our own practice?

GY

We have a question in the chat: Could you speak more generally about how films come to you or how you come to assemble a program through submission or solicitation?

JPR

At FID, most of the films are sent in, and we receive around something like three thousand submissions. Then we scout. Our selection committee is a small team and we travel. We also connect to friends and filmmakers so that we're aware of what things are in the process of being made. We are inevitably selective. There was a panel at Ji.hlava International Documentary Film Festival about why there's so little film from Eastern Europe being shown in Western Europe. I told them that it is true, we don't have a lot, but I could say the same about US films. For a very long time, we had no US films at all, because what we got was very conventional and not experimental.

SH

Jason, I wanted to go back to your point about vulnerability, because in the context that I work in, there is no market at all, either for documentary or experimental film. There's no funding, there is no real distribution context. So you *are* navigating a situation where you are vulnerable, and you are on the margins; and yet, we have developed over the past fifteen years a critical mass of people. We have an audience, a community of makers, some writers, and I think there's strength in that. Also, one does not necessarily want to be connected to this sort of market. Having said that, everybody goes to the West to get funding for documentaries.

But then, of course, you have situations where you're not documentary enough, or you're not Indian-documentary enough.

GY

Some questions from the audience. One has to do with the apparently negative connotation of terms like experimental, marginal, critical, and so on. This may be less problematic in traditional art contexts. How does this affect filmmakers, and what do they make of these terms? What is that like, on the filmmakers' side, in your interactions with filmmakers? Another question asks how, as programmers, if your mandate is to discover things, how much is there to reliably discover? In other words, how do you handle competition from other programmers to discover new things? And is there ever a downside to this discovery? I suppose both of these questions speak to the contours of the labor that is expected of you as programmers, but also to how filmmakers self-identify or put their work out in a certain way, at least insofar as it concerns funding.

MPC

I think the negative connotations are generational, or maybe geographical. Filmmakers in the 60s, 70s, 80s, people like Chris Marker and Peter Kubelka, they were very vocal about the fact that they didn't like the term experimental cinema. They were not experimenting; they knew exactly what they were doing. So this is not a new resistance. It's true there is not that same kind of resistance to talking about the experimental in music or literature. On the other hand, no one talks about experimental painting or experimental sculpture. Maybe among a newer generation, we can embrace the term without the baggage of history. One of the people I'm thinking of is Ana Vaz, and

depending where we are, she can be described in different ways: artist, filmmaker, experimental filmmaker, documentary filmmaker. But Ana is very vocal about the fact that experimental film is her family. That's where she sees her work coming from. Whenever she speaks publicly about experimental film in such an embracing way, it seems really radical. So maybe there is a new, younger generation that can embrace everything without feeling that weight of history.

To the question about discovering: I used to think that I was someone that just found things. I didn't really look for them, but I would come across something and then think about what to do with it, how to show it. Again, with this difference of the institutional responsibility as a director of a film festival, I can't content myself with just finding something and then showing it. I need to be out there looking for things. But, more than that, I'm not that interested in discovering; I'm more interested in making things visible. So I think it is more about that act of transmission and giving, creating a space and giving visibility. That's what's really at the heart of my practice, rather than that obsession with discovery.

JPR

But, María, what's the difference between discovering and making things visible?

MPC

Discovering puts that emphasis on the person that has made the discovery. There's this connotation of being the first, of finding something that has never shown before. I don't think that's what matters.

JPR

It does, I think. Because there is some-

thing at stake, like putting Wang Bing, someone no one had ever heard of, in competition, with a film (*Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks*, 2002) that was nine hours long. It's not about being the first, but it's about making decisions, and choosing the people you want to support, and how you want to support them. Is it out of competition because you're not sure; maybe it's their first film. Or you're very convinced something is really happening. For instance, we showed a film [*Haruhara-san's Recorder*, 2021] by Kyoshi Sugita. It was his third film, and he had never shown his films outside Japan. And then someone passed his film to us, and it was an amazing, yeah, discovery. Because when you discover something, actually it's not you discovering it, it's an event. Nobody can hide a tsunami. You could say that Wang Bing was a tsunami. But then again, to put it in competition was a very strong decision, and he won the grand prize. It totally changed everything. Even in China, people were amazed that we had dared to make that move. So it didn't change only him, it also changed the situation of people who were doing very different films in China. So it's not about saying "we" or "I" discovered something. Rather, it's a gesture akin to archeology. You have to dig. Then, when you've found something, you pull it out and say, I found a stone here that might be really interesting.

I also remember Raya Martin—he was twenty years old and we showed his first feature [*Autohystoria*, 2007], and then we followed up with him. That's another thing, following up, to be truthful and faithful to an artist. I think this is very important because it means you have to be brave. Especially when the festival is relatively small. If you're Cannes, it's pretty easy. The strength of Cannes is that it's still fighting for people that have little

visibility and mixing them with others. But when you're like us, who have a much smaller budget and a completely different machine, it's very different. I call it bravery and I think it's part of the job. And I must say I'm proud about that, because it means you stand for a form of working and making. It's politics. For me this is the difference between ideology and doing real, practical work.

Leo Goldsmith from audience

There's always been a trend in film festivals to have a kind of experimental ghetto. But it seems to me that this is very different in the case of experimental documentary, where the form is increasingly recognized among more mainstream documentary film festivals like DOC NYC. It's a continuation of what Pablo was talking about, but I think it shows that more mainstream or commercial documentary circles are recognizing this as a kind of brand. And the fact that it's being recognized makes me think that they see it as a money-making opportunity. That's what I find bizarre—that they might see a film like *Leviathan* (2012) and think, Let's catch some of that *Leviathan* magic for our mainstream documentary. What does this do to the festival landscape, and filmmakers, too, if they're thinking about selling their work in that world?

HG

Any avant-garde practice that really makes an impact will be co-opted by the mainstream in some way. You can see this in documentary trends, like the use of animation, where it's become such a common practice now, but when it first emerged it was seen as really cutting edge. With experimental documentaries, I don't think we're there yet. I think it still remains a vibrant field. But that's a dynamic that's very real. The market for

documentary is so lucrative that I think it's inevitable that that'll happen. But, hey, I would love it if Teddy Williams was invited to make a twelve-part documentary about baseball or something like that. That could be really exciting.

SH

I think it's natural for big mainstream festivals to have that small experimental film section. They'll tell you they have no money, and then when you come, they'll be these giant events. I think somehow they feel like the experimental section legitimizes them, or makes them cool. But to stick with the experimental or experimental documentary festivals that we work in, if we are to be engaging this term, the interesting thing for me would be to bring together historical and contemporary work, and build a dialogue around these histories. To open out the parameters of what experimental documentary is. Obviously, no one is going to buy this idea that it only appeared twenty years ago. That sort of tracing back helps build discourse in both the experimental context and the documentary context. And that's the sort of new formation that we're all trying to talk through.

Endnotes

- 1 "Cinema of *prayoga*" is a term coined by Indian filmmaker Amrit Gangar, who argues that Indian experimental cinema should not be construed in the Western sense of "experimental," and offers this term in its stead. (*Prayoga* means experimental.) See Brad Butler and Karen Mirza, eds., *Cinema of Prayoga: Indian Experimental Film & Video, 1913-2006* (London: no.w.here, 2006). Shai Heredia has elsewhere remarked on Gangar's project: "Amrit Gangar is trying to create a certain formal theory that is rooted specifically in the Indian art historical context. However, I don't fully understand how his theory differs from other similar Western theories. *Prayoga* actually means 'experimental'. Anyway, to me cinema of *prayoga* is essentially about constructing a new canon. But I'm not interested in that. My practice is all about critiquing and resisting the canon." Luka Ostojic, "I Am Not Interested in Fetishizing the Form," *Kulturpunkt.hr*, October 14, 2019, <https://www.kulturpunkt.hr/content/i-am-not-interested-fetishizing-form>.
- 2 Abby Sun, "Giving Time: Amos Vogel and the Legacy of Cinema 16," *Film Comment Letter*, November 15, 2021, <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/giving-time-amos-vogel-and-the-legacy-of-cinema-16-sfmoma-art-in-cinema-whitney-museum-abby-sun>.