

In the fall of 1972, I moved to Chicago fresh off the success of a community film society that I had launched in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, with my college friend and new SAIC graduate student Warner Wada. We wanted to start a film series at the school but learned that the Film Center had just received an NEA grant to do just that. January 1973, as I recall, was the opening night of the Film Center: Warner was the projectionist, I ran the box office and typed program notes. Before long, I was writing the program notes, too. Whenever a print was delayed, unavailable for preview, it fell to me to haul the heavy 16mm reels back home to my loft in River North (which, back then, was the domain of soup kitchens, SROs, and gay bars). In the pre-computer era, I'd stay up late typing my text, then drop it off at the Michigan Avenue printer on my way to the office—for delivery in time for that night's show.

It's hard to imagine today, but in the era before there the internet, before streaming, before video, before email, hell, before computers ... film exhibition was very different. Frequently we'd have to trust colleagues in other places and then book it, sight unseen. Always, we had to attend film festivals, the Flaherty seminar, and other key events, to be able to see the films we'd want to show and meet the people with whom we'd want to collaborate. We were filling in film history for audiences, from the experimental films of Kenneth Anger, Carolee Schneemann, or George Kuchar—all of whom appeared in person—to film history, through such august figures as King Vidor and Alberto Cavalcanti—who all came to Chicago. For years, I dreamt of visiting Galveston, Texas: the stories that King Vidor told me about his hometown were that magical.

There was an archive, too, which the Film Center's founder Camille Cook was committed to growing. That's how I ended up on a European train platform in the freezing cold of the 1974 winter to hand over a bundle of cash to the legendary Gregory Markopoulos (who had taught at the Art Institute) in exchange for a prized print of his rare, proto-gay masterpiece, *Twice A Man*, which I then hand-carried back to Chicago. And when Joseph H. Lewis made a donation to the Film Center of his archive, some of which looked more like the contents of his attic, it contained an early prototype: a wire recorder. I'd heard about the Maya Deren collection at the Boston University library. I carried the wire recorder with me when I traveled to Boston to visit my family, and transferred many of Maya Deren's early wire recordings, all stored in Medaglia d'Oro coffee cans. One had a recording of her appearance on the Dave Garroway radio show, explaining voodoo and why Haitian women wear their blouses off the shoulder (really!) while another was all cats howling and endless drumming. This was a time of discovery of Maya Deren. VèVè Clark would later come through town researching the giant encyclopedic *The Legend of Maya Deren: A Documentary Biography and Collected Works*, written by a collective of women and published by Anthology Film Archive. It was a time of discovery in general, but above all, of films by women.

My proudest moment came in 1974 with the landmark Films by Women festival. Gene Siskel had invited me and Patricia Erens (then on the Film Center's board) to create a women's film festival that the *Chicago Tribune* would finance. I said: Oh no, it has to be a collective! Thus began months of planning and wrangling that led to a week-long festival with attendance of 10,000, a touchstone event that women, for years after, would come up to me in the street to credit—for jumpstarting their careers, ending their marriages, shaping their friendships. It was the biggest event the Film Center had ever attempted and it was a smash hit. Jill Godmilow came

in from New York and, from Paris, the late Nelly Kaplan (who was victimized by a pickpocket on Michigan Avenue). There were even how-to video workshops.

And the Tribune suits made their critic, Gene Siskel, review our shows every day. That led, one night, to his coming to my loft to watch a 16mm print of

In 1976, I tried to repeat that success with another big festival, a version of the Bicentennial series that were ubiquitous then, usually as John Ford retrospectives or histories of the Western as an emblem of Americana. None of that for the Film Center! We put on a festival of “Revolutionary Films” and again the *Chicago Tribune*’s paid for it. Its marketing department put pressure on editorial: the cover of the Sunday arts section was a raised fist clenching a film strip, all red and black and white!

With an advance copy on hand, I was on my way to Philadelphia on 4th of July weekend to attend the “anti-Bicentennial” protest march in Philadelphia, on a bus organized by my downstairs neighbors in my new loft on Milwaukee Avenue: the Salsedo Press, the co-op named after Andrea Salsedo, the anarchist printer and friend of Sacco and Vanzetti. We joined thirty thousand others from across the country there to march and protest. Then the Film Center presented a definitive retrospective of radical cinema, with a catalogue that was the gold standard for years to come. And the films! From Barry Shear’s *Wild in the Streets* to Shinsuke Ogawa’s *Peasants of the Second Fortress* to dozens of Latin American films, the Film Center offered a portal into revolution—with a table of books from a radical bookstore in the lobby. Right on!

The 1970s were the golden age of cinema. With the fervor of a new form, 16mm spawned movements across continents. And with the rise of independent non-profit exhibition houses like the Film Center, audiences were discovering the full scope of filmmaking, not just across countries but across genres and decades as well. It was after one Film Center screening that, eating a burger at the Wabash Inn, we watched Richard Nixon announce his resignation on the television in the bar.

By the end of my half-decade at the Film Center, I began writing for *The Chicago Reader*, taking a bus across town to turn my paper copy in to my editor every week. Then I briefly taught at the School and curated film programs around the midwest, from the Walker Art Center to Ohio State University, before moving to New York City to head up the film and video programs at the New York State Council on the Arts. Everything I do in life started back there at the Film Center and with the energies of Chicago in that magical moment of hope and radical thinking, back when outrage was more common than paralysis, back when the future truly seemed magical. Thank you!

--B. Ruby Rich