

Filmforum:

The Pasadena Years, 1975-1983

By Terry Cannon

The opportunity to recount here the early history of Filmforum (known as Pasadena Filmforum between 1975 and 1983) has come at a momentous juncture in my life. A veteran film programmer from New York City, with whom I had had no contact for nearly a decade, telephoned me recently and seemed surprised and somewhat relieved to hear my voice. This gentleman proceeded to advise me that a rumor had been circulating around the Big Apple that I had passed away several years ago. I found this report of my premature demise to be very entertaining and something of a tonic for the lethargy that has befallen me in recent months. (I truly must get out more often!) In the spirit of

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another returned-from-the-dead *enfant terrible* of experimental cinema, Kenneth Anger, I was busily preparing my obituary for the *Village Voice* when the request came to write this brief essay on Filmforum's origins. So consider the following as either my return to the living or as notes from the "hereafter."

No doubt every fledgling nonprofit arts organization has its moment of crisis—a seemingly cataclysmic state of affairs that can jeopardize the very existence of the group or, if it survives that moment, can strengthen its resolve in previously unimagined ways. For Pasadena Filmforum, that moment came with its first public event on the evening of Saturday, November 8, 1975. In the summer of that year, along with a small band of film enthusiasts, I had concocted the idea to start a nonprofit film society. Incorporation papers were filed, 501(c)3 status was obtained, and Pasadena Filmforum received a grant even before its first program was scheduled. The Pasadena-based Community Spirit organization awarded

Filmforum a start-up grant in the princely sum of \$75.00. The November 8 event was touted as a "party and social gathering" to introduce Filmforum's lofty goals to the community, to ply favorably disposed people with alcoholic beverages in order to loosen their pocketbooks, and to show a selection of short films. A University of Southern California film professor offered his stately two-story home in Altadena to hold this kickoff party. The evening arrived, a lively group of perhaps 35 to 40 people showed up, and Filmforum had become a reality. The homeowner, unfortunately, had failed to inform me that on the same night as our party, a USC film crew would be upstairs filming a docudrama on the life of Emily Dickinson. Now Emily Dickinson liked her "space" and valued her solitude, and anyone in their right mind could have anticipated a conflict with a bunch of wild-eyed, half-drunken film buffs ranting about semiotics and structuralism. Sure enough, whenever the USC group rolled its cameras to record the private thoughts of Miss Dickinson, which seemed to be every ten minutes or so, one of the students would come downstairs and rudely command the revelers to shut up. Less than an hour into our event, I was seething. One of the partygoers, perhaps sensing a violent turn of events, offered a solution. She worked at the Altadena Public Library, which was only a mile or so away, and had a key to its auditorium. She offered to transfer the entire party to the library. This seemed to me to be a viable alternative to murder. I am happy to report that everyone got in their cars with nary a protest (obviously the effects of many bottles of cabernet were beginning to be felt), and our party proved to be a smashing success despite the rather inauspicious beginning. Filmforum had been launched and had survived its first major crisis—all in the same evening.

A couple of months later, in January of 1976, Pasadena Filmforum began its weekly screenings at the Neighborhood Church (a Unitarian congregation) on Orange Grove Boulevard. The inaugural events included a series of ethnographic films (Robert Gardner, Jean Rouch, et al.), a tribute to Paul Robeson (with screenings of *The Emperor Jones* and *Song of Freedom*), and three evenings devoted largely to West Coast "underground" films of the '50s and





*Pasadena Filmforum's home by the railroad tracks
Photo by Rachael Siegel*

Engel, Sara Kathryn Arledge, and a very rare and magical appearance by the late Jim Whitney.

Filmforum's stay at the Pasadena Community Arts Center was short-lived. Since many different performing arts groups shared this building, there was a constant clash over usage of the space. The final straw as far as Filmforum was concerned came one night (I believe it was during Jules Engel's program) when a particularly nefarious local theater group, meeting in a room right next to our screening space, decided to try its hand at some kind of aberrant mixture of psychodrama and primal screaming; their emotive outbursts nearly ruined our presentation and sent us packing shortly thereafter.

In May of 1977, Filmforum moved to 99 East Colorado Boulevard in the rear of a large building leased by Aarnun Gallery, the leading contemporary art gallery in Pasadena at the time. We decorated this space with old sofas and would call this home for nearly four years. It was like a giant living room, very informal and funky, and it was dearly loved and fondly remembered by everyone who passed through its door. Filmforum presented many of its most memorable programs at this venue. Highlights included David Wilson's 3-D film installations, *Tying Dogs' Feet*, which were exhibited in August of 1980 and would be a harbinger of things to come with his Museum of Jurassic Technology; Italian filmmakers Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi's remarkable "scented" films (*Lombroso—Scent of Carnation*, *Vladimir Propp—Wolf Smell*, *Alice Scented with Rose*, and others) in which the artists released perfumes and scents into the theater to run

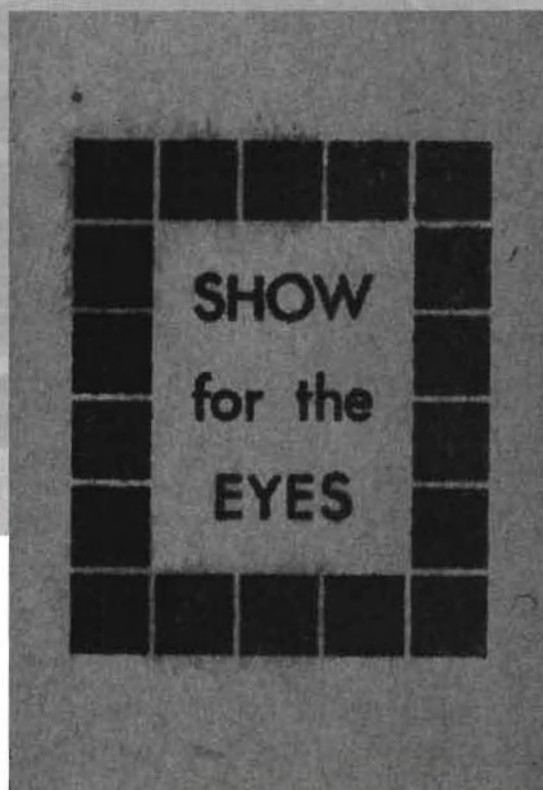
parallel to the images as another "presence;" and the Pasadena Festival of Jazz on Film, an annual series which ran for four years and celebrated this unique American music form as preserved on film over the past 60 years.

Since I was also the projectionist for every Filmforum program in Pasadena, I vividly recall Tony Conrad's visit in 1978. As the time, Tony was heavily involved with exploring the physical properties of film itself, including "exhibiting" film strips pickled in mason jars and projecting films previously cooked as part of a recipe. One film, which I believe was baked in pasta sauce, nearly destroyed our 16mm Bell & Howell Filmosound projector while flooding the screen with its colorful and abstract imagery.

Filmforum's location next to the railroad tracks on Colorado Boulevard (in an area now known as "Old Town") provided its devotees with one of the great

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'60s. The response to the experimental work of Brakhage, Baillie, Anger, Broughton, and others was tremendous, and I realized at that time that Filmforum's *raison d'être* would be the exhibition of personal and avant-garde cinema from throughout the world. In April of 1976, Filmforum moved to the Pasadena Community Arts Center, which had recently taken up residence in a former bank building on the corner of Los Robles Avenue and Green Street. In June of that year, Filmforum presented its first one-person show, an evening of "chronographic" films by the then Arizona-based (now San Diego-based) artist Louis Hock. A quick glance at my old program notes also indicated that Mr. Hock was the first self-described "unemployed filmmaker" to show his/her work in Pasadena. During the next seven years, Filmforum would sponsor nearly 300 screenings, including more than 150 in-person presentations by the preeminent filmmakers of the time including Richard Myers, Roger Jacoby, Tony Conrad, Marjorie Keller, Curt McDowell, George Kuchar, Vincent Grenier, Barbara Hammer, Bill Brand, Kurt Kren, George Landow, Shirley Clarke, Paul Sharits, Robert Huot, Willie Varela, and Holly Fisher. Filmmakers residing in the Los Angeles area who were represented in "solo" shows included William Scaff, Pat O'Neill, Chick Strand, Betzy Bromberg, Beth Block, Michael Guccione, Jules



pre-screening rituals and traditions in the history of experimental film. The Amtrak train from Chicago to Los Angeles would roll by Filmforum at approximately 8:00 p.m. every Monday. Since our screenings did not usually start until 8:15, the visiting filmmaker and his/her audience would hang out by the tracks and await the train's arrival. It was always my pleasure to deposit a quarter on the rails to be flattened by the oncoming train. The quarter would then be presented to the filmmaker as a memento of his/her visit. Following our little ceremony, filmmaker and audience would return to the theater to enjoy the show. Many of the artists who visited Filmforum during those years still proudly display their souvenir squashed quarters.

When The Aarnun Gallery's lease expired (a branch office of Scientology would be the next tenant), Filmforum moved less than a block away to its fourth, and final, venue in Pasadena. Filmforum took up residence in another old bank building, this one at the northeast corner of Colorado Boulevard and Raymond Avenue, which had been renovated by an equity-waver theater company and was imaginatively named The Bank Playhouse. (It is an interesting sidebar that of the four screening rooms Filmforum had in Pasadena, all but one of them were in churches and old banks—two bastions of civilized society that have been scrutinized and often assaulted by the more politically conscious independent filmmakers.) We played our surroundings at The Bank Playhouse to the hilt, even going so far as storing our projection equipment in a vault and serving lemonade and tea cakes out of a teller's window.



Filmforum presented two very significant series at The Bank Playhouse. The first, in the summer of 1982, was a retrospective of Dada and Surrealist films titled *Show for the Eyes*. That series culminated on August 30 with the premiere of an International Mail Art/Film project, a nearly three-hour assemblage of frames, outtakes, clips, fragments, and completed works submitted by over 150 artists from throughout the world. The individual pieces were spliced together chronologically in the order of their receipt, and a catalog documenting the project was sent to all participants. Another summer long series, presented in 1983, was titled *El Ojo Apasionado* (The Passionate Eye) and was the first major retrospective of Mexican and Chicano experimental and per-

sonal films in the Los Angeles area. That series opened with a benefit screening of the most complete version of Sergei Eisenstein's legendary *¡Qué Viva México!* (1930-32), a 35mm print that had been recently reconstructed in Russia by Grigory Alexandrov, Eisenstein's longtime associate.

Filmforum's last show in Pasadena (and the final one under my directorship) was on December 19, 1983. Fittingly, that last show was called *Armchair Adventure* and was a collection of "travel" films by artists whose deeply personal reflections and sensitivities to the cultures depicted made these works far more than mere travelogues. This program appropriately set the stage for major changes as Filmforum, as the organization would pack its bags and head south on the Pasadena Freeway to an exotic new locale—downtown Los Angeles. In January of 1984, Trish Knodle took over the leadership of Filmforum, and the inaugural show in Los Angeles was presented at the Wallenboyd Center. And the rest, as they say, is history.