



A PERSONAL VIEW

A N A R C

OF INDEPENDENT/EXPERIMENTAL

I N S T I T

BY PETER LIPSKIS

WHILE ATTEMPTING TO RECREATE THE HISTORY of exhibition in British Columbia's independent film sector, a notion struck me. The conflicts between production and exhibition of artists' films and tapes resembles a classical tragedy. Inevitably, the exhibition of independent/experimental film and video results in a dynamic tension between the forces of anarchy and those of institutions. Artists are motivated by anarchy, a Greek word deriving from "anarchos," which evokes a spirit of "lawlessness, disorder, chaos." In attempting to be original, artists who reject convention and explore media follow an anarchic impulse, which becomes a factor in the works' public exhibition. By contrast, institution comes from the Latin word "instituere," and means "to set up, erect, and construct." Institutions are organizations which follow "an established custom, law, or relationship in a society or community." The interaction between artists' anarchic tendencies and the expectations of institutions that support and serve them to the public are not necessarily diametrically opposed, but they are often at odds. This helps explain why erratic and unstable screening situations are a way of life for most makers of artistically-motivated, non-commercial motion pictures in B.C.

The Pacific Cinematheque Pacifique was founded in 1972 and has provided Vancouver with alternative cinema on a regular basis. They show mostly thematic (international and historic) features, but also present various programs of shorts, including those from the independent experimental film communities. The Cinematheque schedules its works in

H Y A N D

FILM EXHIBITION IN VANCOUVER

U T I O N S

repertory cinema fashion six evenings per week, the only "dark" night being "budget Tuesday," when most commercial theatres attract audiences with reduced admission prices. In addition to 16mm and 35mm Dolby projection, the 210-seat Pacific Cine Centre recently acquired a superb video projector, with the capability of patching in camcorder home movies to attain audio/ visual quality unimaginable a few years ago.

Pearl Williams, a long time active member of the Vancouver film community, told me that the roots of the Pacific Cinematheque can be traced back to the '30s, with the burgeoning of a national film society movement in Canada. Private, self-sustaining film societies started up in most Canadian cities and towns as a way to view foreign films (from countries other than the U.S.) that regular movie theatres weren't interested in and they helped break down censorship barriers.

Originally, all exhibitors had to pay a fee and provide the provincial censor with the film several weeks in advance.

facing page:

RIDGE THEATRE
800 seats, excellent
16mm projection

56 GALLERY

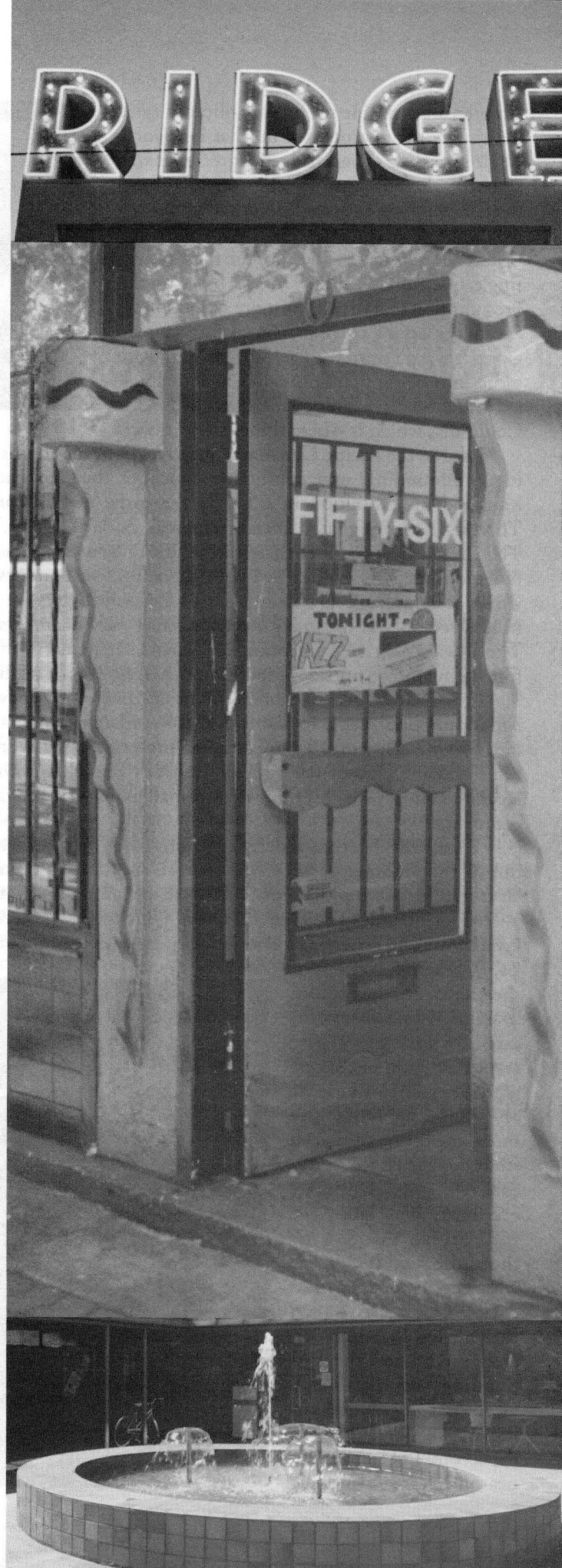
PACIFIC CINE CENTRE
home of
Pacific Cinematheque
Cineworks
Canadian Filmmakers
Distribution West

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details from the above
photos

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PETER LIPSKIS

all photos:
MANDY WILLIAMS



This created problems for distributors who didn't like their prints tied up that long for a single screening. Eventually an agreement was reached whereby film societies could submit the title only, on the condition that admission would be to members who had to purchase tickets for an entire series, rather than only a single, questionable film. This was based on the presumption that they had a more serious interest in the art of cinema than average movie goers. It wasn't until the Pacific Cinematheque came into being that admission to individual events became available to members in British Columbia, which is where things stand today.



Prior to the Pacific Cinematheque's creation, the confusing, confounding, and conflicting epoch of the '60s had impacted on exhibition in B.C. By the early '60s Odeon Theatres had designated certain cinemas as "art houses." These venues showed French new wave, Italian neorealist, and other European fare. Odeon began to exhibit on Sundays, which coupled with its changed exhibition policies, resulted in film societies losing many available screens and members. The '60s also saw the burgeoning of "expanded cinema," with films being shown outside of traditional theatrical contexts. In 1962-3, Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and other "new American poets" came to Vancouver for conferences organized by University of British Columbia professor/critic Warren Tallman. One of the visitors was Stan Brakhage who, legend has it, showed his films in informal, living room environments.

Three years later, Sam Perry sponsored the Trips Festival during the Summer of Love (1966). This multimedia event "featured fifty-two projectors, 25,000 ft. of screen, and imported rock bands (The Grateful Dead, Quicksilver Messenger Service, and others). This was in keeping with the romantic, Wagnerian concept of theatre: to turn theatre into a single, gigantic instrument, whose every part would function in concert with the rest to transport an audience from the mundane to the mythical, from the partial to the absolute."¹

Two years later, the Californian Al Razutis shook the staid B.C. scene with his avuncular presence. "Upon arriving at Intermedia, [he] immediately established the first ongoing 'underground' exhibition program, featuring weekly screenings on the second floor. It ran for nearly a year and offered

showings of a wide range of American underground films integrated with showings of work by Vancouver avant garde filmmakers (Rimmer, Lee-Nova, Shandel, and others). Intermedia Film Co-op extended an umbrella for avant garde animation, dramatic shorts, and student film, and in its inaugural event, Intermedia Film Marathon — a six-hour showing of films and works-in-progress at the Vancouver Art Gallery — succeeded in raising sufficient funds to maintain itself in operation throughout its early months."²

It was after Razutis' arrival and before the establishment of the Cinematheque that I first began to view avant garde film. During the early '70s, while still in high school, I attended screenings of Godard's *One Plus One/Sympathy For The Devil*, featuring the Rolling Stones, and Jim Morrison's *The Unknown Soldier*. I saw my first Canadian experimental film during this time, David Rimmer's *Variations On A Cellophane Wrapper*. It reminded me of the psychedelic light shows which were common then. From 1970 to 1986, the Pacific Cinematheque's main screen was the National Film Board Theatre on Georgia Street. It was practically next door to the Vancouver Art Gallery. Among the most memorable and influential screenings which I attended were those by John Whitney, Larry Gottheim, and David Larcher at the Cinematheque, and Rimmer and Razutis at the Gallery.

In addition to occasional individual presentations of experimental filmmakers, the Cinematheque and the Gallery combined forces and resources to present "Personal Film: Content and Context" in November, 1974, and the "This Very Eye of Light" series eleven months later. Vancouver hasn't seen anything like it since. The former event brought quite an assortment of artist/filmmakers to town for a week of

screenings and workshop presentations. Attendees included Lenny Lipton, Pat O'Neill, James Broughton, Warren Sonbert, Jon Jost, Mark Rapaport, and Arthur and Corinne Cantrill. The latter consisted of twenty-five different programs, beginning with "Absolute Film, Dada and Surrealism" from the '20s, and ending with "Film as Film" and "Film as Diary/Film as Light" fifty years later. Personal appearances for "This Very Eye of Light" were limited to Morgan Fisher and Warhol presenter, Ondine. These exciting and stimulating series

