

ARTICLES

OUT OF THE PAST: AN INTERVIEW WITH CINENOVA

By Mira Mattar , 28 June 2011

The feminist film archive housed and animated by the collective Cinenova poses many perplexing questions about how the gender politics and aesthetics of the recent past relate to our present moment. Mira Mattar went to meet two of the collective's members – Emma Hedditch and Marina Vishmidt – during Cinenova's recent show Reproductive Labour at The Showroom gallery

She speaks (as a woman) about everything, although they wish her to speak only about women's things. They like her to speak about everything only if she does not speak 'as a woman', only if she will agree in advance to play the artist's role as neutral (neuter) observer. She does not want to speak (as a woman) about anything, although they want her to. There is nothing she can speak of 'as a woman'. As a woman she cannot speak.

- Susan Hiller, *Ten Months (Six)*, 1977-79

Cinenova, a not-for-profit, volunteer run organisation which distributes and preserves feminist films and films made by women, set up camp at The Showroom gallery for a six week stint earlier this year. During the show - which included screenings selected by guest curators, talks and reading groups - Cinenova's rich and often rare library of films was available for viewing by the public. I talked to Emma Hedditch and Marina Vishmidt during the exhibition about Cinenova's history, its future, and its current incarnation as Reproductive Labour.

Mira Mattar: Cinenova was formed in the early '90s through a merger between Circles and Cinema of Women; can you tell me how that happened?

Emma Hedditch: Well, the BFI (who store many of our 16 mm and 35mm films) used to fund both organisations, but in the late '80s/early '90s the funding was cut by 50 percent and they were forced to merge, and formalised as Cinenova which emerged in the early '90s. It does depend on who you talk to, there's evidence that there was a campaign against the merger from both organisations.



Image: A selection of paper materials on display at Cinenova's show Reproductive Labour at The Showroom, photograph courtesy of Kaisa Lassinaro

MM: Why is that? Can you say more about the differences between the two organisations and where Cinenova stands in relation to those histories?

EH: Cinema of Women focused more on documentary and educational films with a very broad range of content and

Circles had more artists' and experimental films many of which came out of the London Film-makers' Co-op (1966 - 1997), which tried to combine screenings, writing and performance in addition to distribution.

MM: Can you tell me a bit more about the Co-op?

EH: It started in the late '60s and was originally based near Regent's Park, then it moved to Camden and existed there until the late '90s. Eventually it became Lux - the historic archive that Lux has is a combination of the London Film-makers' Co-op and London Video Art. The Co-op was a social space, both a workshop and an educational space but relatively autonomous from institutions such as the BFI or Arts Council. A lot of people who were involved in Circles were artists interested in structuralist/formal film-making. The London Film-makers' Co-op had facilities where you could work with the physical material of the film, there were optical printing and processing facilities. People could go there and use the equipment and make work which they could then screen and distribute through the organisation. Cinenova's distribution works in much the same way as Lux's distribution: a film-maker leaves their material with us, it's effectively on loan, then we're responsible for it, if an organisation or individual wants to screen something they can do so through us. Usually we come to an agreement with the artists, we become a central point where programmers can find out about a film or video. Unfortunately a large amount of the films and videos are never seen, but the whole collection is here and it's an extraordinary situation to be able to see them. Under normal circumstances you have to pay a fee to be able to screen a work, which is an obstacle to many people, but we also rely on these fees to sustain the organisation.

MM: I guess that's the point of the show...

EH: Exactly. We want to ask how it can be a sustainable practice not just in financial terms and not one based on just a few works. It also creates a culture around those film- and video-makers and at different times the organisation has operated with more of a social function, and as a support network. It's not about individual films, it's more about building a language and as they're all made by women, some of the work is much more explicitly feminist.

MM: Is there a criteria for the type of films you take on in terms of where you situate yourselves within feminism?

EH: It's obvious to me that it's not just any women's films, but because we haven't acquired any new films since we've been working with the organisation (acquisition stops at 2000 when most of us started to get involved) we need to re-think what kind of films we want when we start re-acquiring. We're asking ourselves how we understand the terms 'women' or 'feminist'. The material we have already is a historical object in a way. It's about this organisation, about the idea of it being women only. But within that are always misconceptions, for example several film-makers have changed their gender since they made the films, there are also films made in collaboration with male film-makers. The term 'women's films' was pertinent in a certain moment but perhaps it's changed.

Within this working group we're inclined to a feminist/queer perspective. We're interested in what the historical position of women is and the queer/feminist discussion surrounding it. As for selection, in the past a small committee would meet every so often and watch films and discuss what might be appropriate to distribute, then of course there was the question of whether the artist wanted to be distributed by Cinenova. We used to have a lot more speculative submissions but more films are likely to have been acquired from film festivals - if there was something we thought people would like or was really important then the decision was made based on that. There were a lot of factors to consider, mainly the question of whether we could really promote it.

MM: Do you think the fact that Cinenova is a women-only organisation may put some women off? Do you find it hard to defend that position sometimes?

EH: I think women-only spaces make explicit what already exists in terms of a sense of exclusion within certain practices. In Cinenova we're trying to work with race and class issues and the politics of labour; things that aren't *just* women's issues. There are many film and video works included in Cinenova that have been excluded in other contexts, which is why we consider it an important collection.

MM: I noticed that you chose women *and* men to select films for the programme. Can you tell me a bit about how you came to that decision?

Marina Vishmidt: I think it was a good idea to invite people to make selections to the programme, it provided a tangible way in. We had a meeting yesterday with a group of feminist film-makers and film academics who have been meeting as a discussion/action group, and they had some suggestions for the Cinenova site to enhance and expand these ways into the collection, which would be great if we had the resources or time to put into practice, like having a blog with commissioned essays on selected films from the collection. This could be one way of sharing material and drawing attention to the collection from a new public.

MM: How does the working group work and are there any people who have been part of either Cinema of Women or Circles that are now part of Cinenova? If so, what's their perspective on the changing nature of

the project?

EH: We came together at different times. At the moment two of us are working on this four or five days a week, but usually it's one person one day a week, it should be more if we want to make it a more functioning organisation. The more work you do, the more you generate. One of our board members, Elaine Burrows, was involved in Circles, she's the thread. Lis Rhodes, Jo Davis, Felicity Sparrow and Annabel Nicolson are responsible for starting Circles and we met with Felicity very early on to discuss this exhibition. Felicity has been very supportive of the exhibition as have many other film- and video-makers in the collection.

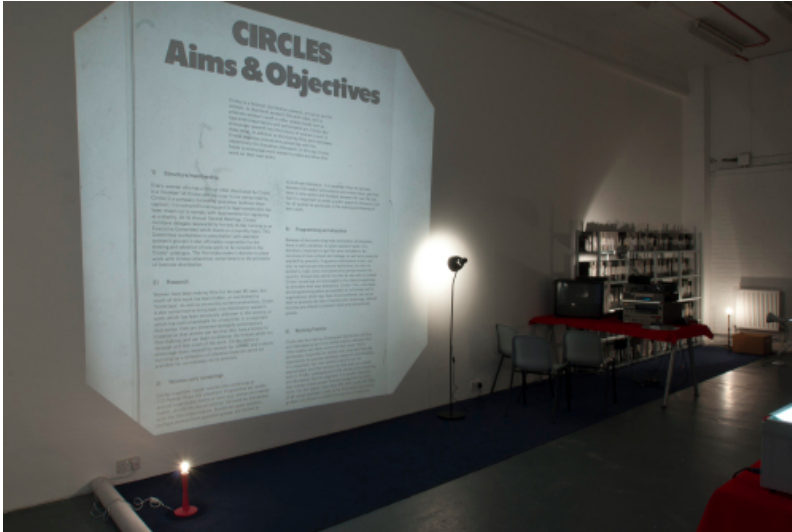


Image: Installation shot of Reproductive Labour, The Showroom Gallery 2011

MM: What was the thinking behind this exhibition aside from the making available of the collection?

EH: Emily [Pethick], as the director of The Showroom and a member of Cinenova's working group, suggested the collaboration and we started to talk about what that would mean for us. In terms of the distribution itself, we have things we have to maintain and the exhibition has activated more work. So we are asking ourselves how are we going to deal with this? How can we cope with the actual labour?

MV: In making it public on a certain level and creating other dynamics of communication, and of course in calling the exhibition Reproductive Labour, we're gesturing towards some of the themes and politics within the films and some of the histories that are accessible through those films and documentaries. Also, as Emma said, it's about the activity of thinking how to proceed as an organisation and thinking about this in public. So, in this sense any kind of mediation of work is its own work and also the work of the working group.

MM: Do you think you're going to want to do more projects like this (public projects)?

EH: I think this has been quite a big scale venture, it's shown us lots of things, like what it means to do this kind of work and to try and be as open as possible. It has been really surprising in terms of how much it's generated in the way of discussions, and how many people have been coming and our interactions with them. It's been interesting in that way, to try and harness some of that energy or interest - we need to figure out how that translates into how we and the audience work with this material and not just consume it?

MM: How do you think you will harness that energy in terms of potential ideas for future projects?

MV: There's different levels even to that kind of question. For instance how will Cinenova continue into the future? On what basis will it operate? And we have to consider physical, practical and structural questions. Also having this opening into people's interests, research and practices has generated lots of things - interviews, presentations to students, and just people wanting to find out. That can take lots of different forms and temporalities.

The last ten years or more of Cinenova's existence as an organisation and its various activities have not been funded so while the idea of entering into collaborations with other organisations wasn't something we'd originally conceived of, it may help in some practical senses but might also have potential impacts on Cinenova's autonomy. We'll see what happens. An advantage to staying here at The Showroom [which is a possibility] is that people have been coming here so think of Cinenova as based here, and we've started a lot of projects with women's groups in the area. But there are a number of practical and institutional issues militating against that option.

MM: Can you tell me more about some of the work that has been produced as a result of your being here? Was it always on the cards?

EH: We've worked with a local organisation, the Marylebone Women's Refuge; they worked with Louise Shelley (from The Showroom) to select some appropriate, relevant materials to screen for their art and culture night. The exhibition has acted as a meeting and social space, we've met a lot of people and the films act as a starting point for discussion.

MV: Yesterday we were discussing the idea of a publication about Cinenova with a group of female academics. Not only to redress the gap in the UK's history of experimental cinema and the moving image - which is mostly dedicated to white men and is perhaps unintentionally patriarchally inflected (which is a huge omission in education) - but also to think about strategies of history writing so they're not just slotting 'a piece' of history in, but rather trying to articulate the writing of history through making work. They've also been meeting and discussing the ideas stemming from the initial provocation.

MM: The idea of Cinenova functioning in part as a social space seems really pertinent. What would you want it to do?

MV: I guess it would depend on how we function as a collaborative organisation, what our borders are, how this 'we' is constituted on an everyday basis and what kind of time and activity our relationship to Cinenova can contribute.

EH: We would want it to be a place where people could work, meet, organise events - something with enough of a structure for people to connect and communicate.

MM: What was your experience of the Shulamith Firestone day? [On 12 March Cinenova held a group reading of Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*. What was read was also simultaneously transcribed. Interjections and discussions were also transcribed to create a live record of the attempted reading of the text (we got to the end of chapter one...). Simultaneously, another member of the group was laboriously copying the text by hand from the book itself (she didn't get much further). This was followed by a screening of *Shulie* - a shot by shot re-make of a little known student film about Firestone from 1967. Marina read, transcribed and copied at various points].

MV: It felt very different when copying it from the book than it did when transcribing while people read. Either way it wasn't so much about really paying attention to the text of the book, I was writing mechanically and listening to the words. It became a direct activation. I had a lot of thoughts which were mostly triggered by the film *Shulie*. The fact that the actress playing her was wearing a very obvious wig really stuck with me. Shulamith Firestone came from a very Orthodox Jewish background so there's an interesting connection between the assumption of gender - or the assumption as in 'costume' of gender - and then how she denaturalised gender. The wig acted as a gesture of that in a way.

MM: It seems like religious identity is a possible thread in Cinenova's history. Do you see any other prevalent topics? And if so what is their relation to global feminism?

MV: We do have a lot of films about Jewish and Middle Eastern identities. We are documenting certain struggles, thinking about generations of feminism also in relation to labour. Also there's a strong thread of problematising the researcher. Some of the more documentary, or docu-fictional films in the collection, use reflexivity and performance to problematise the relationship of researcher and object of research, and relate that to the production of subjectivity in feminism, but also the splits occasioned by the multiple roles women have to occupy in everyday life. *Bred and Born* is a good example of this kind of work.

EH: The screening on Saturday was interesting, both speakers - Karolin Meunier and Cecilia Wendt - were presenting things with a strong emphasis on technology and the body, and the production of subjectivity through the use of a camera, the use of camera as self-declaration. A lot of the work functions more as a document of a particular moment of an ambition - like multiculturalism, or the UN Decade of Women (1976 - 1985) - there are a lot of films from around that time that took an internationalist approach to women's issues.

MM: How do you tread the line between personal and political? Do you see a difference? Do you have very personal films in the collection and are they necessarily political?

MV: Films were probably placed with us because they are both personal and political. A lot of the films deal with issues of identity and self-representation. They were probably submitted to Cinenova because there was a political intention behind them, even if they seem very personal.

EH: Some people would say all decisions and choices are political. I would say the films that seem for example at first very much about style from the late '80s early '90s - even the way I'm saying it dismisses it in a way - but at the time there was a reason; they were being made during the Thatcher era when sexuality and pleasure were a very difficult subject, sexual expression was almost a luxury because of laws like Section 28. There was a moment when there were a lot of films that felt very personal in a way, but also used a conventional narrative structure about heartbreak or romance. Lots of films documented those experiences and struggles and there is quite a big section of intensely lesbian romance films. It was interesting as a moment when that kind of expression was first able to

happen.

Coming back to the idea of reproduction, a lot of film-makers are influenced by each other and working together. That's the case in many of these more personal films. You can't view them as just names, many of the women were in relationships together. A lot of films from that time feel slightly embarrassing, posed even, but taken within the moment of history in which they were made, they make sense. They don't *look* like political films, they're not films as protest, but they're still about certain choices people had to make about content, production values and where the work is shown.

Ten years ago there weren't many museums that showed films in exhibition spaces, people were showing work in small cinema spaces or dedicated single screen spaces. It is interesting to see what communities those films were shown in. In politically very conservative times, an affirmation of identity was important.

MV: It's also very important to take into account where these images circulate, as Emma said, in what aesthetic or political contexts. It is quite interesting that these films seem glamorous or frivolous, and these differences really need to be historicised both in terms of production and distribution. Those films were also quite nostalgic so it's always fascinating for new generations. But I guess what's so interesting about this collection of films is that they're always acting at the same time as documents, as visual mediations of much broader or systemic forces as well as modes of self-fashioning that can seem romantic or arcane to us now, if no less fascinating.

MM: Yes, particularly given that there are so many different types of film in the collection. The juxtaposition of art films, video art, documentaries and educational films is really interesting.

EH: It creates a question for Cinenova structurally; how can we present this work in an art space? Even if people consider themselves artists or writers or curators, nobody has taken specific roles; or rather there have been no particular struggles for these roles. But perhaps we've held back from our inclinations.



Image: Cinenova's animated GIF file from The Showroom website, <http://www.theshowroom.org/programme.html?id=46>

MM: Do you think that smoothness of operation is related to the fact that the working group is only women?

EH: Maybe, but more than that we were aware of those issues early on in the project and didn't want to bury them, so we addressed them. Lots of discussions were about how to continue to be engaged and what was interesting to us, and what could each person do. I'm not sure if that's because we're women only or because we're honest about our own situations and material conditions.

MV: But in a larger more abstract sense that's an interesting point also because, again going back to the idea of reproductive labour and the questions contained in that, what *is* women's work, whether we're talking about the material in a film and video collection, or the maintenance, selection, mediation, administration, representation, etc. activities performed on its behalf, but also as part of a thinking about how to organise and de-individuate as a group of people involved in this process, bounded by practical and temporal constraints, what kinds of work are involved in 'reproducing' such a mutable 'institution'? You could say it's Cinenova, or feminism in general, in some respects, and political projects mediated in the art field. The idea of women's work in the collection creates a problem around the question of roles and gender. How does the fact that it's only women affect the work and what we do together?

EH: That is interesting because we started the discussions with those questions. Maybe at certain points you lose attention and those questions get lost. It's been a while since we talked about it.

MV: Economic conditions entered very much into our thinking of how we presented ourselves as a working group

and how we relate to each other in the process. We didn't want to assume a purely negative identity by taking on a curatorial group identity - we wanted to produce something else, not just give, not to stage or perform our curatorial or political subjectivity.

Emma Hedditch is a London-based artist

Marina Vishmidt is a London-based writer currently conducting PhD research at Queen Mary, University of London on 'Speculation as a Mode of Production in Art and Capital'. She is co-editor of *Uncorporate Identity* (2010) with Metahaven, and *Media Mutandis: Art, Technologies and Politics* (NODE. London, 2006). She is a frequent contributor to *Mute*, *Afterall*, and *Texte zur Kunst*. She also takes part in the collective projects Unemployed Cinema, Cinenova and Signal:Noise

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Info

Cinenova's show Reproductive Labour was at The Showroom from 9 February - 26 March 2011

View Cinenova's archive listing at <http://www.cinenova.org.uk>

Afterall's coverage of Cinenova [<http://www.afterall.org/online/cinenova/>] features eight exclusive and rarely-seen video clips released from their archives, including works by Pratibha Parmar, Lizzie Borden and Joanna Davis among others. The piece also features an introductory text and individual commentaries for each video clip by curator, writer and artist George Clark

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