

Feminist Film & the Politics of Distribution



Women Make Movies

For thirty years now, Women Make Movies has witnessed the rising development of feminist film and the great strides made by women filmmakers in the Hollywood mainstream and the Independent film community. Many of today's most acclaimed women directors – including Jane Campion, Julie Dash, Kim Longinotto and Trinh T. Minh-ha – began their film careers with us, only to later inspire other women to create films that explore themes related to art, identity and politics. As a result, WMM is now one of the world's largest multicultural, multiracial, non-profit media arts organizations that facilitates the production, promotion, distribution and exhibition of independent films and videotapes by and about women.

Established in 1972, Women Make Movies was first created to address the under representation and misrepresentation of women in the media industry. From these beginnings, the organization grew to include services to both users and makers of film and video programs, with a special emphasis on supporting work by women of color. We have worked in two areas to facilitate the development of feminist media has been through our internationally recognized Distribution Service and a Production Assistance Program.

The Women Make Movies' Distribution Service is our primary program. As the leading distributor of women's films and videotapes in North America, we have worked with organizations and institutions that utilize non-commercial, educational media in their programs. This includes media arts centers, museums, galleries, colleges and universities, as well as other non-profit organizations and agencies, ranging from hospitals to prisons to labor unions to the U.S. Army. Our collection of more than 400 titles includes documentary, experimental, animation, dramatic and mixed-genre work. The films and videotapes represent a diversity of styles, subjects and perspectives in women's lives. More than half of the works in the collection were produced by women of diverse cultures, and the collection includes a variety of works by and about lesbians, older women and women with disabilities.

Women Make Movies also offers a unique Production Assistance Program, which provides training, fiscal sponsorship and information services to independent media artists. The services included in this program reflect Women Make Movies' commitment to outreach and development of both emerging and established women film and video makers. The Production Assistance Program's fiscal sponsorship service provides consultations on fundraising, proposal writing and production management. The projects are produced and directed by women representing a cross-section of ethnic, cultural and racial constituencies.

This unique history, coupled with our continued dedication to supporting the arts and education through alternative media, has not only made the organization a long-standing advocate for quality films by women, but also one that is dedicated to advancing social change.

Political/Cultural Responsibility

One of the most important mandates at Women Make Movies is to maintain a high level of social responsibility and respond to the current events that affect everyone as global citizens. We were recently reminded of this mission after the tragic events of September 11th. Like many non-profit organizations located in Lower Manhattan, this frightful day had a profound impact on the staff and community of Women Make Movies. Throughout our thirty years, we have never had to respond to a single event with such broad political, social and cultural implications on our daily lives. The destruction of the World Trade Center inevitably signaled the entry into a new era of uncertainty for our organization and prompted us to reflect on our mission as a feminist, multicultural distributor of films and videos.

As a media organization, we were quick to notice the lack of representation of women in the mainstream press after the 9/11 tragedy and were deeply concerned about the effects of racial profiling on the Arab and Muslim communities. We were especially disturbed by representations of the Middle East on television, which presented this region as a territory inhabited only by men. As the distributor of a highly respected collection of award-winning films and videos about women in Islam and the Arab world, we knew quite well that there existed an alternative perspective to the mainstream. We decided to fill-in this information gap by providing free rentals on a selected group of Middle East titles to universities and non-profit organizations for the purpose of educating the community-at-large about the Arab and Muslim experience through our "Response to Hate" campaign. We would supply the tools for groups to organize "teach-ins" or screenings to foster communication, challenge cultural stereotypes and, perhaps, prompt new forms of grassroots activism.

Since September 11th, we have reaffirmed our long-standing support of films and videos that present the alternative perspectives and creative achievements of women from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This unfortunate event proved without question the need for information sharing and creating open forums for discussion and debate about all current events. More importantly, it demonstrated to all of us at Women Make Movies that our mission, educational aims and overall support of independent media is essential to encouraging tolerance and mutual understanding.

Future of WMM: How can WMM continue and develop as a leading organization of film/video distribution for over 30 years?

The future of Women Make Movies rests not only in our continued advocacy of women filmmakers and our attentiveness to social issues, but also in the incorporation and development of new technology and the expansion our distribution and promotion efforts through the Internet. We are particularly eager to become a model in the area of non-profit distribution by being among the first to digitize our films and videos to DVD. Currently, there are few independent titles in distribution on DVD format, and fewer that are being preserved in this format for archival purposes. We hope to raise the bar in this area by transferring our classic WMM titles – including *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* by Trinh T. Minh-ha and *History and Memory* by Rea Tajiri – to DVD, with new features including fifteen-minute interviews with all filmmakers, outtakes, filmmography and biographical materials. We strongly believe that the DVD versions of our selected collection will provide an invaluable resource for film scholars and students conducting

primary and secondary research, and contribute to the preservation of some of the world's most important films made by women.

The Internet is an additional area that we expect to grow in the future. Our website, while used primarily by our customers for ordering purposes, is also an important resource for many academics, curators and film enthusiasts looking to find useful information and links related to women's film. We want to encourage individuals to return to our website by offering expanded information on-line on our filmmakers (including press kits, bios and curriculums), resources to grants and funding opportunities for emerging filmmakers, and screening information of our films and videos at festivals, museums, and academic conferences around the world.

Strategies and objects of WMM for discovering and distributing Asian Feminist film.

Throughout the organization's history, Women Make Movies has supported the talents of emerging and established women filmmakers from Asia and has been among the first to widely distribute their work to audiences in the United States. Our commitment to advancing the role and presence of Asian women in the film community has allowed us to acquire a highly esteemed collection of documentary and feature films reflecting the diversity and evolution of Asian feminist cinema, such as *A Tale of Love, Shoot for the Contents*, and *The Fourth Dimension* by Trinh T. Minh-ha; *Nu-Shu: A Hidden Language of Women in China* by Yue-Qing Yang; *Out of Phoenix Bridge* by Li Hong; and *Women of Being* by Wen-Jie Qin.

During our year-long 30th Anniversary celebration, we will be collaborating with several Asian media arts organizations and festivals to promote our growing collection of films by and about Asian women. We recently launched our anniversary events in Asia with a presentation in New Zealand, which was accompanied by a workshop attended by the local Maori community, and will continue our Asia tour with screenings at Substation, a multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary arts center in Singapore; and the University of Manila in the Philippines. We are also currently working on an exciting program with Asian Cinevision, the US-based media arts center dedicated to the promotion and preservation of Asian/Asian American film and video makers, which is scheduled to tour their sister organizations throughout Asia. It is our hope that these screenings will allow up-and-coming Asian women filmmakers to learn about Women Make Movies and consider submitting their work to us for possible distribution in North America.

The continued growth of Women Make Movies is a sign of the increased opportunities and markets for films made by and about women; however, there is still work to be done to allow women more access and entry into the film community. As cited by the Guerilla Girls and Alice Locas on their "Anatomically Correct Oscar" billboard, now hanging Melrose and Highland Boulevard in Los Angeles for the 2002 Academy Awards, women still only account for 4% of all working directors, while men write and direct 93% of all major films. These glaring statistics make our work at WMM as a feminist distributor is more important than ever. As we continue to celebrate our 30th Anniversary, we are committed to advancing the role and presence of women working in film and look forward to promoting new works that reflect the experiences of women from around the world.