

UBU & THE SYDNEY FILMMAKERS CO-OP



AFI CINEMA SAT 11 DEC

Single session \$7/10, Both sessions \$10/15

Sydney Intermedia Network invites you to attend this special evening highlighting the work of the UBU film group and Sydney Filmmakers Co-op. Their activities were central to the expansion of film culture in Australia from the mid 1960s to mid 1980s. These programs have been selected and will be introduced by people involved during those years; Albie Thoms, Megan McMurchy and Susan Charlton. Gillian Leahy will chair a forum at the end of the second program. Then stay and celebrate at our end of year party in the foyer!

SIN gratefully acknowledges financial assistance from the Australian Film Commission.

**5pm
program**

Albie Thoms
introduction to selection

It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain
Bruce Beresford & Albie Thoms
5 min, 1963

Blunderball
Albie Thoms, excerpt 5 min, 1966

Ding A Ding Day
Garry Shead, excerpt 5 min, 1966

The Film
Ubu Films, excerpt 5 min, 1966

Man & His World
Albie Thoms, 1 min, 1966

Vietnam Report
Kit Guyatt, 3 min, 1966

Bluto
Albie Thoms, 4 min, 1967

Sketch on Abigail's Belly
David Perry, 2 min, 1968

Boobs a Lot
Aggy Read, 3 min, 1968

Tobias Icarus Age Four
Clemency Weight, 4 min, 1968

Marinetti
Albie Thoms, excerpt 5 min, 1969

**Megan
McMurchy**
introduction to selection

Maidens
Jeni Thornley, 33 min, 1978

**7pm
program**

Susan Charlton
introduction to selection

Behind Closed Doors
Sarah Gibson & Susan Lambert
6:30 min, 1980

Foolish Things
Peter Wells, 11 min, 1981

Serious Undertakings
Helen Grace & Erika Addis
28 min, 1983

Panel discussion chaired by
Gillian Leahy
during the last hour then...

PARTY !
in the foyer

 **SYDNEY
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AFI-Cinema
PADDINGTON TOWN HALL AT OXFORD & OATLEY 361 5398

Albie Thoms

The Sydney Filmmakers Co-op emerged from the radical concerns of the early 1960s - free speech, sexual liberation and anti-authoritarianism. My first film, *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* was banned in 1963 and through 'underground' screenings I discovered other filmmakers who had made short films that didn't conform to the esthetics of the ABC and the Commonwealth Film Unit (then the only recipients of government subsidy) or the foreign-owned film exhibitors (who promoted Hollywood product)

Ubu Films was formed in 1965 to challenge the reactionary esthetics of mainstream cinema and its first film was *Blunderball*, a parody of mainstream cinema. When completed in 1966 it was shown in a program of 'underground' films which was organised co-operatively, along the lines of the painter's group exhibitions, with a sharing of the profits.

The interest shown in these films, and the money raised by the screening, encouraged further film production, and a year later there were enough films for another program of 'underground' films, which was screened right around

Megan McMurchy

In August 1969 I saw my first program of UBU films - a touring package of films by Albie Thoms including the remarkable *Marinetti* - which gave me a glimpse of what 'underground filmmakers' were up to in southern parts of the country. This was still in the era when the notion of 'an Australian Film Industry' was a distant fantasy - something that people like Michael Thornhill and Sylvia Lawson were trying to write into reality through their regular pieces in *The Australian* and *The Nation*. In that year I'd given up attending classes at university in favour of seeing as many films as I possibly could - I managed about 350 features in the space of twelve months. The NFT had just started regular screenings in Queensland and in '69 was running programs of classic Swedish cinema and Warners films from the '30s and '40s; I was involved in the University of Queensland Film Group and had organised a Festival of American Gangster Films which was a tribute to American *auteur* directors like Fuller and Siegel who'd been 'discovered' by the Cahiers du Cinema critics. Peter Wollen's *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* was published in 1969 and 'film theory' had just crossed the English Channel.

Susan Charlton

Like Megan McMurchy, my interest in cinema and the possibility of being a filmmaker was heightened by several encounters with works associated with the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op. One of these occasions was a screening at the Media Resource Centre in Adelaide of a package of films made by Australian women filmmakers, which included Jeni Thornley's work *Maidens*. I also remember the pleasure of discovering *Filmnews* and avidly tacking down back issues so that I could drink in reports of feminist filmmaking practice that was taking shape in Sydney and was articulated as being different from women's films. I moved to Sydney in 1980, specially to take part in this film culture and in the wider scene associated with the Women's Warehouse in Ultimo. The talk, film, music and action of the time was volatile, feral, and glamorous.

I immediately became involved in screenings and discussion organised by the Sydney Women's Film Group, which operated out of the Co-op, and ultimately I got the job of Women's Filmworker there in 1982. One of my first tasks was to help organise the International Women's Day screenings for that year. The program opened with *My Love is Burning*, a film by Kenji Mizoguchi set in postwar Japan. This was the first time a film not directed by a woman had been shown at an IWD screening. Chantal Akerman's *Je Tu Il Elle* was also screened with several other works, grouped together under the title 'Women and Sexuality'. After pairings like women and work, women and health, women and education, it

Gillian Leahy

Gillian Leahy is an independent filmmaker who was involved with the Sydney Filmmaker's Co-op from 1974 until its closure in 1986. Her filmwork includes *My Life Without Steve*, *Doled Out*, *The Settlement*, *Shot to Pieces* and *With Inertia*. She is currently working as a Film and Video Lecturer at the University of Technology, Sydney.

Australia and later abroad. Demand for the films also resulted in the establishment of a distribution service, managed by Ubu Films.

Ubu was also busy with other activities, staging rock'n'roll lightshow concerts and publishing an 'underground' newspaper. Since a number of its films were banned, it waged an anti-censorship campaign, and was actively involved in anti-Vietnam War activities. It was all very illicit, alternative and chaotic, but it was also a film business capable of making advances to filmmakers, paying their lab costs, loaning them equipment and promoting their films. So it was decided that the Co-op should be separated from Ubu Films, registered under the NSW Cooperatives Act, and run as a more orthodox film company, thereby qualifying for government subsidy from the newly constituted Australian Council for the Arts.

The Sydney Filmmakers Co-operative Ltd was formed in 1969, but didn't receive government subsidy until 1973. Instead it became the lobbyist for filmmakers trying to cope with the government's ill-conceived film schemes and was the only body interested in giving public screenings to the hundreds of films resulting from these schemes.

But in Brisbane in 1969 the possibility of actually *making* films oneself was a remote goal, so UBU Films provided an inspiring model. I joined the ABC, came to Sydney and trained as a radio producer, left the ABC disillusioned by professional media practices and got involved in community access video in the mid-'70s. Strangely enough, Albie Thoms appeared again as an influence - he was experimenting with 1/4" Akai portable video recorders before the famous Sony portapak revolutionised alternative media production. It was through my involvement in community video that I finally became a member of the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op around 1978.

I was part of the 'feminist takeover' of the Co-op, a development that re-energised the Co-op and become possible because of the remarkable success the 'distribution power' of the collection of feminist films which came into the Co-op during that period. Made over several years by Jeni Thornley who was one of the earliest feminist filmmakers to join the Co-op, *Maidens* is for me a film that reflects both the experimentalism that characterised UBU Films and the Co-op's founding films, and the experiential-based, politicised filmmaking that feminists introduced to the Co-op. Its poetics are very much of its time, but the connections it proposes between personal and social histories give this film a timeless force.

was inevitable that women and sexuality would steal the limelight and irrevocably change the films we began to see.

Already the notion of feminist filmmaking was under interrogation, especially through theories of representation. It was no longer solely a question of whether a film could be said to be a women's film or a feminist one, but more that films were texts that could be read - perhaps against the grain. It became possible to screen a wider range of films and analyse not only their internal operations, but what happened when they were programmed alongside each other. Films were not just interesting because they articulated a women's issue, but because they realised the possibility of women's pleasure and desire. I don't think it was possible to speak of women's films in the same way after seeing *Je Tu Il Elle*.

The remainder of my 2 1/2 years at the Co-op was largely spent questioning the usefulness of the category of women's films and arguing for the dismantling of my own position through writing, screenings and discussion. But this was also true of women filmmakers and their works—as the Co-op's collection of women's titles boomed, it was increasingly made up of films that problematised their own existence. It was a time when no category was left unturned.

Working at the Co-op fuelled a passion for film programming and its effects. As a result I am cursed with always wanting something to 'happen' when films are put together. It was not an easy task to choose works for this screening. There were many films from the Co-op's collection whose emergence remain momentous in my memory including *Against the Grain*, *We Aim to Please*, *Two Laws*, *The Song of the Shirt*. At one stage I couldn't shake the desire to screen *Je Tu Il Elle* (80 min subtitled, only available on VHS, never part of the Co-op collection) with *Behind Closed Doors*.

Finally I have put together three films I remember liking a great deal for the poetic and cerebral way they insist upon writing personal and political concerns into cinema. I am interested not only in what they convey of another time, but also what they might have to say in the present moment. Because I haven't seen any of them for nearly 10 years, their effect is as unknown to me as it may be to you.