

The Struggle for Funding: Sponsorship, Competition and Pacification¹

By Peter Thomas

Introduction: History of Conflict/Conflicted History

This essay analyses the interaction between an artists' co-operative and a state arts funding bureaucracy over a 15-year period. Given the divergent aims, operational philosophies and internal structures, it is not surprising that their viewpoints differ and that they frequently failed to appreciate each other's position. Likewise, the kinds of documents they produced and extent to which they have been preserved differ, sometimes radically. Taken separately, the document collections tell largely separate stories, even where they deal with the same events. The conflict is frequently worst at such convergences because, at its base, it was over who would control cultural production and provision, and what means was best to deliver it. While these perspectives cannot be unified, aspects of them can be described and considered. The following account gives more attention to the artists' co-op, partly because it was the first of the organisations to concern itself with experimental film, and partly because this conflict, and co-op's activities before it, are rarely written about and sometimes poorly understood.

LFMC I: Underground Origins

October was a significant month in the 'Swinging' London underground of 1966. On the 11th, an underground newspaper called the *International Times (IT)* was founded by, amongst others, John 'Hoppy' Hopkins and Jim Haynes. It had an editor but no editorial policy – whatever was sent in was printed. As the paper was not expected to pay for itself, a bootstrapping operation was devised whereby a series of benefit raves supported the paper and publicised its existence, while the paper publicised the raves. At the first of these on the 15th, a band called Pink Floyd received its first public notice, and the London Film-Makers' Co-operative (LFMC), formed earlier that week as an open-access film

distributor and freewheeling underground exhibition group, had its first show. In the next month LFMC field their first major film series, the ‘Spontaneous Festival of Underground Film’² (which received 4 pages of coverage in *IT*, which of course LFMC also wrote³), and then filled the rest of the year with a series of open screenings – screenings where anything that turns up on the night is projected. At Christmas the *IT* raves shifted to a fixed venue, the UFO Club, where the LFMC provided projections throughout the six months the venue lasted,⁴ alongside lightshows, bands, jugglers, performance artists, food stalls and so forth.

By mid-1967, while UFO was being ejected from its venue, *IT* founder Jim Haynes was working with others to found the first UK Arts Lab. When it opened in September at Drury Lane, it had a theatre, coffee shop, gallery and a cinema run by LFMC member David Curtis, who had previously been grinding films at the UFO.⁵ When a film workshop formed there and later merged with the LFMC, production, distribution and exhibition were brought together in the same organization, and a new activist philosophy was propounded whereby the filmmaker would operate and be responsible across all the areas from making to showing. It is central to this time that many artist filmmakers not only made films, but also built and maintained equipment, organized and promoted shows. Later they knocked holes in walls to get equipment out of difficult buildings, did DIY renovations to new places, and lobbied for funds. The LFMC was a resource for the activist milieu that had created it to answer their own needs. LFMC’s distribution collection was an important resource for programmers and budding event managers, and guaranteed the availability of films that might otherwise sit dispersed with their various makers. The cinema exposed the work, and an equipment collection was created in the workshop. The LFMC existed and grew because it was to the advantage of its activist membership that it do so.⁶ At the point of merger it was made clear that LFMC was to be a *filmmakers’* organisation – owned, run, and for the benefit of filmmakers. These are some of the points ratified by the vote:

I. The co-op should be a service run by film-makers (and film-makers only.)

- [...] all decisions should be rejected or endorsed by reference to the film-makers.
as a) there are no policy decisions to make - the co-op is a service
b) there are no taste decisions – ALL films submitted will be accepted [...]
2. whoever is prepared to take responsibility for a sphere of activity will be responsible for making all of the decisions in that field, and will announce them in the NEWSLETTER. Should any controversy arise, a vote will be taken at a meeting.⁷

In this way the LFMC organise or supply the films for over 60 events at festivals and galleries across the world by 1975.⁸ This system does a good job of pushing experimental and avant-garde film, and the work is being done by the filmmakers themselves.

Arts Council I: FACOP

The Drury Lane Arts Lab folded under debts in October 1969.⁹ Jim Haynes' farewell letter notes that, despite two years of considerable multimedia achievement, no support was received from an Arts Council which instead gave £37,000 annually to the kitchens of the Royal Opera House.¹⁰ But the Arts Council *was* groping towards a way to support such projects. As one problem was that applications from the underground tended to be mixed media, while the Arts Council's panels were single media, a New Activities Committee (NAC) was created to assess such applications¹¹. But an artists' group, 'Friends of the Arts Council - Operative' (FACOP), referred to by ACGB observers as 'the London extremists',¹² formed soon after to instead assess *the ACGB's* activities.¹³ FACOP's central demand through 1969 was for the Arts Council to be replaced by an 'Artists' Council', which would be democratically elected at meetings like those FACOP organized¹⁴. This idea, and FACOP's periodic infiltration and railroading of the NAC, infuriated NAC chair Michael Astor, but he comforted himself that an 'Artists' Council' would 'bring together and identify the extremists, the nihilists, those who are given to raving in public and one or two more serious political activists.'¹⁵ He offered them £50 from his own pocket to start.

At this time FACOP were periodically coordinating from the Institute for Research in Art and Technology (IRAT), also known as the New Arts Lab, a derelict fire station found by John 'Hoppy'

Hopkins. IRAT applied to the NAC for £600 to help outfit an exhibition/concert space, a cinema, theatre, wood workshop, electronic and cybernetic workshop, video workshop, the LFMC and a metal and plastic workshop.¹⁶ While the NAC considered IRAT's application high quality, inexpensive and backed by a strong team,¹⁷ like the Drury Lane Arts Lab the year before, no help emerged, although Secretary General Hugh Willatt did write a supportive letter to the Greater London Council¹⁸.

However, the reasons were not the same. While the Junior Members' Panel had recommended a grant to the Arts Lab, the central approval necessary to making the grant was withheld.¹⁹ When IRAT applied in 1969, they were told that only the NAC could make such a grant as Housing the Arts was fully committed, but that NAC was spending its entire budget on a series of large shows.²⁰ Yet IRAT survived long enough for central disapproval to deny them £70 in 1970.²¹ What this shows is not that the Arts Council was monolithically suspicious of the underground, despite the NAC chair's hostility. As LFMC member Malcolm LeGrice observed in his report on a FACOP seminar, there was a deep administrative split in the Arts Council between its remit to provide largely archaic art to the public, and its new endeavour to support contemporary activity.²²

However, in the midst of this the LFMC received its first substantial donation. Not from the Arts Council or British Film Institute (BFI), who had been approached, but from an 'underground millionaire', the kind of person who actually put a lot of the money into the underground. Victor Herbert, the wealthy businessman who gave the £500 that started the *International Times*²³, gave LFMC £3,000 for printing and processing equipment.²⁴

LFMC II: The Politics of Patronage

Throughout the early 1970s, as the LFMC built up its distribution collection, exposed work in and out of the UK, and its members used the workshop to make films which have become the mainstay of UK avant-garde film retrospectives, lobbying continued for support and recognition from national subsidy bodies. In 1972 artist-activist Malcolm LeGrice accepted appointment to the BFI Production Board,²⁵

and in 1973 activist David Curtis accepted appointment to the ACGB's new Artists' Films Sub-Committee (AFSC).²⁶ LeGrice lobbied the Production Board to support production by funding workshops rather than individuals, which, FACOP-style, would allow works themselves to be made with little reference to the Board's interests.²⁷ At the same time, the AFSC awarded small grants for productions whose real expense was often deferred by the LFMC workshop. Little of this touched the LFMC until another premises crisis arose in 1975. The urgency of this allowed for a change that opened the way to substantial BFI support. Prior to this, LFMC had made an unsuccessful application to the Group Support Fund for less than £5,000, but the Production Board believed that the workshop equipment applied for 'could not be efficiently utilised without there also being a paid operator/instructor.'²⁸ When the negotiations were over, the Production Board committed £16,000 – half as much again as the entire Group Support Fund – as meeting the 'real needs' of LFMC, including for paid staff. While this started annual grants that continued until 2001, and was something long aimed for, it also changed the Co-op. Volunteer distribution, workshop and cinema organisers became paid staff, while the volunteer secretary and treasurer roles atrophied. The role of the volunteer organisers had been within a wider volunteer effort, and, as no one was being paid, the organiser roles were an emanation of general co-operative volunteerism. The successful application stated, under 'Future Developments' that 'We want to expand'.²⁹ But what if the increased labour demands of this expansion coincided with a decrease in volunteerism? Further, as LFMC had never made enough money to pay staff before, it was now reliant on continued subsidy to do so.

1975 was a good time to expect expansion. In February the massive First Festival of British Independent Film in Bristol had been a substantial success, and in November the dedication of an issue of *Studio International* to avant-garde film and video was both a real achievement and the source of several seminal, much reprinted essays.³⁰ Though LFMC work was prominent in the festival, the programme included work from many of the radical workshops then in existence. While it had received

BFI and Arts Council funding, this was only after prolonged lobbying by the festival organisers Independent Cinema West³¹. Further, these disparate groups had formed their own peak body, the Independent Filmmakers' Association, the previous year, and soon inherited LeGrice's seat at the Production Board.³² At that time the term 'independent' signalled the idea of a broad coalition of groups, from campaign and community groups to the avant-garde, and the Bristol festival was a celebration of this. The beginnings of support and some recognition from funders was seen as part of this success.

The Arts Council's Artists' Films Sub-Committee had largely confined itself to production awards and bursaries until 1976, when it sought to increase the public exposure of the subsidised works. The Film-Makers on Tour scheme (FMOT) was piloted in 1977, making selected AFSC-funded filmmakers available with a night's programme for £10. Filmmakers received £30 plus travel. In many cases the cost to the venue was less than the rentals would have been from LFMC, though the money to the filmmaker was more. Because the active relationship was between the funded filmmaker and the AFSC, the only consideration the LFMC received was that a percentage should go to a film's distributor, which the LFMC refused lest it discourage filmmakers from entering films into distribution.³³ While the intention was to increase exposure and find new audiences, the most obvious effect was the simultaneous growth and migration of the Art College market from LFMC to FMOT.³⁴ LFMC distribution had been routinely organising small shows and college gigs for its members, charging between £25 and £60 and taking 10%.³⁵ Thus, a hirer group developed and serviced by the LFMC shifted to a subsidised Arts Council scheme for price advantage, but was still able to access many of the same filmmakers and prints, the latter still in the LFMC distribution collection. This was obvious even in the pilot stage 1977,³⁶ and by 1979 the AFSC were prepared to lose £5,000 depressing the prices,³⁷ LFMC's distribution only grossed £7,000 in 1978-9, and £5,000 went to filmmakers.³⁸

In 1977 the Arts Council organised a massive retrospective of UK artists' film at its own Hayward Gallery. Nearly all the UK works at the 'Perspectives on the British Avant-Garde Film' exhibition were made at and distributed by LFMC, yet LFMC was never mentioned in the exhibition programme because, as the introductory notes make clear, the retrospective was of the AFSC's work.³⁹ But at the same time, the LFMC had organised a British Council sponsored show in Paris, was looking forward to future British Council collaborations⁴⁰ and, as stated in the Summer 1975 BFI application, to fielding more programme packages. But in late 1977, as the Arts Council/British Council sponsored international touring version of the Hayward show reached contracting stage, the LFMC and its members perceived that they were being pushed into the background and their historic functions were being taken over. A series of fractious meetings were called in December to deal with 'the position of the Co-op's Distribution Office in view of the Arts Council's heavily subsidised screenings of films.'⁴¹ However, discussion was focused on the Perspectives Tour, and the burst of negotiation after served only to convince the AFSC to lift the price to venues and increase money to filmmakers.⁴² LFMC received the anomalous impression that the package would at least be Europe-only, and were then mortified to find it competing with their own long-accustomed slot at the Edinburgh Film Festival⁴³. During the meetings of December 1977, LFMC Distribution wondered if they would become merely a distributor of US films in the UK,⁴⁴ yet the next Arts Council touring package was of pre-eminent US avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage, possibly LFMC's most popular distribution member⁴⁵.

In the early 1970s, LFMC distribution had been challenged by Gate Cinema's attempt to acquire the cream of US avant-garde cinema, but as most of those filmmakers were members of various co-ops, LFMC could deploy co-op solidarity to block the Gate's supply⁴⁶. But, with the exception of the Perspectives Tour, very little of this could be mustered to deal with the AFSC. Though it may not be a complete explanation, it is the case that, within a short time from the entry of BFI capital into the LFMC and AC capital into the promotion of LFMC films, the urge to omnivorous volunteerism which

had created and sustained the LFMC visibly subsided. In 1979 an artist-activist lamented ‘a drift by many filmmakers toward being simply producers, whose responsibilities end by placing the film can in the Co-op cupboard.’⁴⁷ Yet some were neglecting even that, and keeping the films at home for FMOT screenings.⁴⁸ All this ran counter to the foundational philosophy of the LFMC, which was predicated on destroying the segmentation within film industry (production/distribution/exhibition) and culture (maker/critic/impresario) with fierce DIY activity. Yet, in the cultural politics of hard interests, the LFMC’s centrality had been shored up by its importance to the activist milieu that created it. When the BFI started paying for co-op services to be provided, and the AFSC to offer alternative promotional opportunities and income streams, the question of what the LFMC, as a co-operative, was still for, was a deep one. In 1981, when the LFMC faced a massive rent/deficit crisis from their funded expansion, the Artists’ Film and Video Sub-Committee (AFVSC) provided one answer:

The cinema there is the main venue for showing films produced with the film awards and bursaries [from the AFVSC] and their equipment is used in the actual production of these films. [If the LFMC closed down] There would be an immediate reflection of this in greatly increased costs in artists’ applications.⁴⁹

But by 1980, even the AFVSC had noticed a creeping passivity in the experimental film milieu, particularly a lack of exhibition applications.⁵⁰ Sub-committee member and LFMC artist-activist Guy Sherwin suggested that the existing schemes were not engaging, and proposed a flexible policy where anyone could pitch short programme of work of their choice, extra prints would be made so as not to interfere with existing distribution, and existing distributors could be paid to service the packages on the AFVSC’s behalf⁵¹. This could potentially give the lead back to the artists themselves, and remake connections from maker to audience. Although several excellent packages emerged, the response was relatively slight and slow, especially compared to the energy which had once existed. Opening for applications in mid-1981, this ‘Modular Scheme’ was collapsed into the ‘Umbrella Scheme’, later Film

and Video Umbrella, only months after the first Modular package became available in early 1983.⁵²

Under the Umbrella scheme, touring packages were programmed by an AFVSC appointee and conditions for distributors were less generous⁵³.

What is especially ironic about this final scenario of filmmaker passivity is that the activities taken over by AFSC schemes largely originated in the activist milieu, and were indeed carried out for the AFSC largely by activists who were formed in that milieu. The desire for wider exposure of work was general at the LFMC, as was the urge to pursue subsidy, but in this case the outcome was the evisceration of that milieu – to that point the source of the films, ideas, and energy.

¹ This is based on the paper of the same name given as part of the ‘Cultural Consecration and its Discontents: the Arts Council v. Film and Video Artists’ Organisations, 1975 to present’ panel, which was the closing plenary session of the *Screen Studies* Conference, 2005.

² A title possibly related to the Spontaneous Underground at the Marquee Club earlier that year, where an unknown band called The Pink Floyd Sound became a fixture at the weekly variety performances. See Barry Miles, *In the Sixties* (London, Jonathan Cape: 2002), pp. 98-106

³ ‘Underground Film Festival Supplement’, *The International Times*, 31 October –13 November 1966. Source: British Artists’ Film and Video Study Collection (BAFVSC).

⁴ David Curtis, ‘English Avant-Garde Film: An Early Chronology’ in Michael O’Pray (ed.) *The British Avant-Garde Film: 1926 to 1995* (Luton, University of Luton Press/John Libbey/Arts Council of England: 1996), p103.

⁵ *ibid.* See also Michael Maziere, ‘Interview with David Curtis’, available at <http://www.arts.ac.uk/research/filmcentre/maziere/interviews/Curtis.html>.

⁶ Peter Thomas, Interview with Peter Gidal, 17 October 2005.

⁷ LFMC: Notice of Film-Makers’ General Meeting, 13 March 1968, p. 2. Source: BAFVSC.

⁸ LFMC, Application for Assistance to the BFI, Summer 1975, pp. 7-8. A list of events is provided. Source: BAFVSC.

⁹ Jim Haynes, ‘Newsletter 1’, 28 October 1969, available at <http://www.jim-haynes.com/letters/newsletters/N.1%20ArtsLab28Oct69.pdf>

¹⁰ *ibid.* The letter also contains an abbreviated list of the lab’s achievements. See also Richard Witts, *Artist Unknown: An Alternative History of the Arts Council* (London, Little Brown Books: 1998), pp 473-4.

¹¹ Hugh Willatt (Secretary-General, ACGB) *Arts Council of Great Britain: New Activities*, Council Paper 433, 10 October 1968. Source: Victoria and Albert Museum, Arts Council of Great Britain (VAM/ACBG): Records, 1927-1997; ACGB/35/146 Box N.2. Unless otherwise stated, all documentation relating to the New Activities Committee, FACOP, the Drury Lane Arts Lab and IRAT are to this box.

¹² Dennis Andrews, Minute Paper to Hugh Willatt on the National Artists’ Assembly, 27 October 1969, p. 1. The New Activities Committee, which then contained several FACOP members, paid for the Assembly.

¹³ *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 June 1969. This appears to be free publicity for FACOP’s conference of June 8. See also David Bieda (for FACOP), Letter to Michael Astor (Chair, New Activities Committee), 28 May 1969.

¹⁴ See John Lifton and Robert Dodd, ‘Presentation of the Case’, undated.

¹⁵ Michael Astor, undated report to Hugh Willatt, pp. 3-4. Note also ACGB’s fine collection of FACOP documents.

¹⁶ See IRAT: Information Bulletin 2, July 1969; ‘The New Arts Laboratory Project’, undated; Bidy Peppin, Letter to Hugh Willatt, 26 June 1969.

¹⁷ Minutes of the Fourth meeting of the New Activities Committee, 20 February 1969, p. 2.

¹⁸ Hugh Willatt, Letter to David Curtis, 20 May 1969. Source: BAFVSC.

¹⁹ Witts, *op.cit.*, pp. 473-4; Minutes of the Junior Members’ Panel, 7 October 1968, p. 3.

²⁰ Hugh Willatt, Letter to Bidy Peppin, 13 August 1969.

²¹ Bidy Peppin, Letter to Lord Goodman, 22 May 1970.

²² Malcolm LeGrice, ‘Patronage Seminar’, *Circuit* 10/11, July-August 1969, p. 3.

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- ²³ Jim Haynes, *Thanks for Coming!* (London, Faber & Faber: 1984), Miles, op.cit, p. 133.
- ²⁴ Michael Maziere, Interview with Malcolm LeGrice, available at <http://www.studycollection.co.uk/maziere/interviews/LeGrice.html>.
- ²⁵ Malcolm LeGrice, Letter to Keith Lucas (BFI Director), 8 April 1975. Source: BAFVSC. Maziere, Interview with Malcolm LeGrice, op.cit.
- ²⁶ Hugh Willatt, Letter to David Curtis, 2 February 1973. Source: BAFVSC. Maziere, Interview with David Curtis, op.cit.
- ²⁷ Maziere, Interview with Malcolm LeGrice, op.cit.
- ²⁸ Peter Sainsbury (BFI Production Board), Letter to William Raban (LFMC), 17 April 1975, p. 1. Source: BAFVSC.
- ²⁹ Undated LFMC application to BFI Production Board, Summer 1975, p. 11. Source: BAFVSC.
- ³⁰ See *Studio International* v.190 n.978, November 1975.
- ³¹ David Hopkins, *Programme of The First Festival of British Independent Film*, ICW, February 1975. Source: BAFVSC.
- ³² Maziere, Interview with Malcolm LeGrice, op.cit.
- ³³ Felicity Sparrow (LFMC Distribution), Letter to Chris Garratt, 14 October 1977. Source: Lux, old distribution ringbinder.
- ³⁴ Minutes of the Artists' Films Committee, 2 May 1977, p. 2. Source: VAM/ACGB/54/60, Box 3. David Curtis (AFVSC), Letter to Stuart Marshall, 30 October 1981. Source: VAM/ACGB/56/96, Box 2.
- ³⁵ Felicity Sparrow (LFMC Distribution), Letter to Stan VanderBeek, 27 September 1978. Source: Lux, old distribution ringbinder. William Raban, Letter to David Curtis (AFVSC), 24 October 1981, p. 1. Source: VAM/ACGB/56/96, Box 2.
- ³⁶ Minutes of the Artists' Films Sub-Committee, 13 December 1977, p. 2. Source: VAM/ACGB/54/60, Box 3.
- ³⁷ Minutes of the Artists' Films Committee, 26 March 1979, p. 5. Source: VAM/ACGB/54/60, Box 4.
- ³⁸ LFMC: Distribution Financial Report 1.4.78 to 31.3.79. Source: BAFVSC.
- ³⁹ See programme of *Perspectives on the British Avant-Garde*, Hayward Gallery, 2 March-24 April 1977. Source: BAFVSC.
- ⁴⁰ Felicity Sparrow (LFMC Distribution), Letter to Chris Garratt, 7 July 1977, p. 2. Source: Lux, old distribution ringbinder.
- ⁴¹ Minutes of LFMC General Meeting, 10 December 1977, p. 1. Source: BAFVSC.
- ⁴² Minutes of the Artists' Films Committee, 23 January 1978, p. 1. Source: VAM/ACGB/54/60, Box 4.
- ⁴³ Felicity Sparrow (LFMC Distribution), Announcement of Meeting 9 January, undated; Announcement of Distribution Meeting 6 March, 16 February 1978. Source: BAFVSC.
- ⁴⁴ Minutes of LFMC General Meeting, 10 December 1977, p. 2. Source: BAFVSC.
- ⁴⁵ Simon Field, Letter to Stan Brakhage, 9 October 1978. Source: Lux, old distribution ringbinder. Minutes of the Artists' Films Committee, 18 December 1978, p. 2. Source: VAM/ACGB/54/60, Box 4.
- ⁴⁶ Thomas, op.cit.
- ⁴⁷ Mike Leggett, LFMC General Meeting 28.10.78- Discussion Paper, p.1. Source: BAFVSC.
- ⁴⁸ Felicity Sparrow (LFMC Distribution), Letter to Chris Garratt, 10 August 1977; David Finch (LFMC Distribution), Letter to Tim Cawkwell, 25 August 1982. . Source: Lux, old distribution ringbinder.
- ⁴⁹ LFMC: Application for Accumulated Deficit Grant, 13 February 1981, p. 2 Nb, this is an internal AC document, not the application from the LFMC. Source: VAM/ACGB/58/7.
- ⁵⁰ Minutes of the Artists' Film and Video Committee, 28 April 1980, pp. 6-11. Source: VAM/ACGB/54/60, Box 6.
- ⁵¹ Guy Sherwin, Proposal for a Modular Film Exhibition Programme – For Discussion, June 1980 and June/September 1980. Source: VAM/ACGB/55/28. Minutes of the Artists' Film and Video Sub-Committee, 27 October 1980, pp. 2-3. Source: VAM/ACGB/54/60, Box 6.
- ⁵² Subsidised Exhibitions: April 1983/84 (packages and venues), undated, 1984, pp. 1-3. Minutes of the Artists' Film and Video Sub-Committee, 19 April 1983, pp. 2-3 and 20 June 1983, pp. 8-9. Source: VAM/ACGB/54/60, Box 9
- ⁵³ Minutes of the Artists' Film and Video Sub-Committee, 5 March 1984, pp. 4-5. Source: VAM/ACGB/54/60, Box 9.