Arts on Film Archive

450 Arts Council documentary film and video productions are now accessible for research purposes, thanks to an initiative by the University of Westminster and the AHRC.

Dr Joram ten Brink, Elaine Burrows and Steve Foxon explain how this was achieved.

The Arts on Film Archive – http://artsonfilm.wmin.ac.uk/ – established at the end of 2007 at the University of Westminster, is designed to offer online access to a range of films and video titles on the arts produced in the United Kingdom since the 1950s. The archive will be a unique record of British and international art and of post-war documentary film-making in Britain. As its first phase, launched by Sir Nicholas Serota at Tate Modern on 2 October 2007, the archive provides a complete database and on-line video streaming of 450 films commissioned by the Arts Council between 1953 and 1999.

Many titles in the archive contain rare material about individual artists; other titles offer definitive coverage of their subject. The collection is therefore an invaluable primary research resource for scholars in the arts and humanities. Its contents are essential source materials for biographies and monographs, as well as for other forms of research in art history and documentary filmmaking.

Like so many projects, the idea of the Arts on Film Archive grew out of a personal experience. In 2001, Dr Joram ten Brink, Reader in Film at the Department of Media, Arts and Design at the University of Westminster, organised a tribute to the late David Rowan, a maker of films on many arts-related subjects, and, latterly, a lecturer in film at the University. Dr ten Brink found that many of Rowan’s films made for the Arts Council in the 1970s and 80s were difficult to access for research and screening purposes; recognising that this was true of most of the Arts Council-sponsored documentaries, he decided to establish a resource which would enable future researchers to find and view this wealth of material. The project – to set up a website permitting access to materials which are properly curated and documented, and offer streaming on demand of high quality images – was accepted by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, who agreed funding of £320,000.

**THE ARTS COUNCIL FILM DOCUMENTARY FILM COLLECTION**

Between 1953, and 1999 when it closed its film department, Arts Council England commissioned or participated in the production of some 450 documentary films, which recorded many aspects of – mainly contemporary British – arts. The subject matter, length, and format of the films are as varied as they are eclectic. Moreover, because of the Council’s liberal attitude to sponsorship, and the creative freedom their commissions offered, the collection is a unique record of a partnership between the Arts Council, artists and filmmakers.

The productions commissioned by the Arts Council included the work of painters and sculptors such as Francis Bacon, Edward Burra, Gilbert and George, Barbara Hepworth, David Hockney, Henry Moore, and Stanley Spencer, as well as Marcel Duchamp, Alberto Giacometti, Bhupen Khakhar, Käthe Kollwitz, Roy Lichtenstein, Bruce Nauman, Claes Oldenberg and Cindy Sherman. There are films about the Odeon cinemas and their Art Deco designs, British domestic architecture and the Modernist movement, the architecture of British India, the innovative work of Frank Lloyd Wright, a survey, by Robert Hughes, of old and new buildings in Barcelona, and discussions of town planning and conservation.

Films in the collection look at the work of literary figures such as Basil Bunting, John Cooper Clark, Roy Fisher, Linton Kwesi Johnson, and Simone de Beauvoir, Grazia Deledda, Carlo Levi and Audre Lorde. There are productions about community theatre in London.
and the British Pantomime Dame, a survey of Howard Barker’s dramatic works, and a record of parts of Ken Campbell’s productions of The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy and The Warp (‘the world’s longest play’).

Several of the films are about photography and cinema: the images created by, for example, Bill Brandt, Humphrey Spender, Ajamu, Eugene Atget, and Homai Vyarawalla; a study of the development of early cinema, a survey of abstract cinema, the work of Jeff Keen, Malcolm LeGrice, Margaret Tait, and Maya Deren.

Music is represented by films such as records of performances of Henry Purcell’s Ode on St Cecilia’s Day and Joseph Haydn’s The Creation, as well as surveys of the work of Peter Maxwell Davis, Tunde Jegede and Mike Westbrook. The dance collection is particularly rich. In addition to funding films about the Royal Ballet, the Ballet Rambert, DV8 and the Ballets Negres, Britain’s first all-black dance company, in 1991 the Film Department commissioned a series called Dance House, for which choreographers such as Jacob Marley and Carolyn Choa produced original works. This was followed by several series of Dance for the Camera, which, between 1993 and 2003 (some were taken over by ACE’s Dance Department after the Film Department formally closed in 1999), enabled a wide range of choreographers, dancers, and directors – Gaby Agis, Liz Aggiss and Billy Cowie, Matthew Bourne, Milfid Ellis, Shobana Jeyasingh, Miranda Pennell, and Margaret Williams among them – to create new work specifically for television.

Many of the films can be seen in the context of wider social questions such as race and post-colonialism, and gender studies. HIDDEN HERITAGE: THE ROOTS OF BLACK AMERICAN PAINTING, TEXTURING THE WORD: 40 YEARS OF CARIBBEAN WRITING IN BRITAIN, and FRANTZ FANON – BLACK SKIN, WHITE MASK are all important contributions to discussions of racial issues. THE DARKER SIDE OF BLACK considers the impact of recent Caribbean-based popular music on violence and homophobia among young black men in the West Indies and in Britain. There are also profiles of, for example, Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti, a series on Five Women Painters, featuring the work of Carrington, Eileen Agar, Nina Hamnett, Dame Laura Knight and Winifred Nicholson, and a study of the life and work of Elizabeth Maconchy.

In 1989, the Arts Council set up its Black Arts Video Project, an important initiative to fund young black and Asian filmmakers to produce short films about aspects of their life and culture. This resulted in nearly 50 productions on subjects as diverse as batik, Chinese folklore, Ghanaian funeral customs, and the activities of Munirah Theatre Company, and was the inspiration for the Black Tracks series, six short pieces on black and Asian music and culture in Britain and the Caribbean.

Among the many directors who made the film and video productions in the collection were Noël Burch, Steve Dwoskin, Atom Egoyan, Michael Grigsby, Isaac Julien, Anthony Minghella, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, John Read, Raul Ruiz, and Krzysztof Zanussi.

HOW THE PROJECT WAS ORGANISED

The first phase of the project was to determine what material should be included. No one organisation (not even Arts Council England itself) had a complete list of the productions which the Council had been involved in over
the years, and most lists that existed made no distinction between the two major groups of films, those more experimental works produced under the auspices of the Artists Film and Video Committee (see the British Artists’ Film and Video Study Collection at www.studycollection.co.uk), and the documentaries commissioned by the Film Department. In addition, the documentaries made in the 1950s and 1960s had been almost entirely forgotten, even by the Arts Council. By combining information from different sources – the Arts Council, Concord Film & Video (the educational distributors), film and video laboratories, individual filmmakers, artists and arts catalogues as well as the BFI National Archive which actually held preservation copies of the very early titles – a comprehensive list was finally achieved and the search for physical materials began.

The Arts Council’s collection of ‘working’ materials (tapes used as source for the supply of copies for sale) is held by HVS Media, in south London, some of which were also to be found at the BFI. Another, small, collection of prints was finally tracked down to a store in Bournemouth – and is now at the BFI. While it turned out that there were also many video copies (and even some film elements) in a north London facility used by the Arts Council for off-site secure storage. Despite the existence of all these groups of materials, filmmakers themselves proved to be the only sources for two or three titles, and one film, David Wheatley’s MONSIEUR RENÉ MAGRITTE (1977), has still not been found.

Once all this information had been collated, a paper exercise was then undertaken to make an initial judgement on the materials most likely to be the best for duplication. Inevitably, a level of pragmatism came into play here and it was decided to use existing high quality tape copies, regardless of what other elements were held. Then, Steve Foxon spent eighteen months working through film elements (for the 90 or so titles for which no suitable video materials existed). All source materials were copied to DigiBeta at HVS, the BFI and at TKOne, a London facilities house, with time-coded VHSS produced at the same time. These DigiBetas and VHS tapes are now held at the BFI.

Meanwhile, a FileMaker Pro database was set up (with input from database designers, Cruse Control), and the task of cataloguing began. This involved viewing all the VHS copies, gathering full credits and writing detailed synopses of each one, all of which were entered according to pre-existing rules (in use at the BFI Archive and elsewhere) for moving image cataloguing. The original intention had been to identify all art works and people featured in the films but this proved to be an impossible target to reach in the lifetime of the project. Searching internet resources – the Bridgeman archive, for example – is not as simple a job as might be imagined: some images are not displayed for copyright reasons, differing titles may be given by different sources for the same work of art, and so on. Today, television programmes can easily caption anything shown. In earlier days, captions would have had to be specially prepared and filmed and then overlaid on the images. In consequence, even people crucial to the subject of a production weren’t often identified on screen, and sometimes they weren’t even listed in credits.

The synopses were initially prepared as Word documents, and then descriptions of segments of the films, matched to time-codes, were entered, along with credits and short summaries, to the FileMaker database. The encoding was done at the British Universities Film & Video Council by Steve on equipment set up specifically for the purpose. Doing the encoding in this way enabled him and Elaine Burrows to work closely together, ironing out any problems as they occurred.

With cataloguing and encoding completed, the final task was to build the website through which the catalogue could be searched and the films viewed, and this was done by staff at the University of Westminster’s School of Informatics. The University became so enthusiastic about the project that it is now offering to host similar data sets produced by outside organisations.

The project also commissioned Vision On (Wallflower Press, 2007), a book from noted filmmaker John Wyver that narrates the distinguished and, at times, turbulent history of British art documentary film and TV.

FINALLY
For copyright reasons, streaming of the Arts Council films is only available to enquirers with ‘ac.uk’ domains, though the complete database is open to all internet users.

In addition to the complete set of DigiBeta and VHS tapes now lodged with the BFI Archive, the University of Westminster’s Harrow Campus Library holds a set of DVDs as a research resource. A hard copy of the catalogue can be printed from the website.

Dr Joram ten Brink
Archive Director

Elaine Burrows
Database And Catalogue

Steve Foxon
Film Restoration and Encoding

http://artsonfilm.wmin.ac.uk/