

Interview with MM Serra for The Film-Makers Cooperative

By: Hannah Holiday May 2014

MM Serra is a filmmaker and runs the daily operations of the Film-Makers Cooperative as well as hosts and organizes screening, distribution; grant writing and the like under the title of executive director. She sits on the board alongside legendary names like Phillip Glass, and Ken and Flow Jacobs, and underground filmmakers like Bradley Eros and Anne Hanavan. She is the warm back bone of a striving film community that comes out of 60's counter culture and the initial efforts of 20+ film-makers headed by Jonas Makes in creating a space to archive, distribute, and support emerging film makers. At the time that the Coop was founded experimental film was not being taught in the universities and there was not even an east coast film festival.

One of the aspects of the FMC which most appealed to Serra when she considered becoming involved with what was then The New American Cinema Group, was the collective dynamic. Both her grandfather and father were organizers of coal miners unions, which greatly impacted her growing up and spoke to the structure of a community-based organization. Her favorite part of working at the Coop has been meeting the filmmakers, doing the screenings, and coming up with ideas to make the Coop more visible and organic.

When I asked Serra how she got involved with the FMC she pointed to her mentor and life long friend the legendary film maker Shirley Clark. At the time that they met Serra was a working student at UCLA. Clark allowed Serra to audit her class and according to Serra was particularly supportive of her as a woman at a time when there was very little space provided for women's voices in the art and film world. Serra tries to counteract the continued marginalization of female filmmakers by diversifying the board of advisors and board of directors at the FMC. Since her arrival the numbers have

become close to fifty fifty. She also makes an effort to hire female workers and interns.

Under Clark's guidance Serra made a series of one-minute films for which she recently received a grant to archive. "Shirley Clark used to say if you can make a one minute film you could make a feature. A one minute is the essence of the film." Clark was also one of the founders of the FMC along with other legendary female filmmakers like Carolee Schneemann and Storm De Herche.

When Serra moved to the east coast she became a member of the Coop. She was drawn to it as a home for personal vision. When I asked what personal vision meant to her she replied, " You don't need a big budget, pick up a camera and make a film for \$500". Personal vision went on Serra is going against the Hollywood model in an exploration of the film makers and the films relationship to the audience, the duration of the film, the subject matter, the perspective, the sense of time, are all in their own way subversive and counter cultural, that is the root from which they spring.

The Coop seems to most closely protect these roots by preserving, screening, and distributing films from a focused group of film makers that come from the 60's era of film making. This is important in protecting and making visible film history and work that otherwise is not often seen. There is an aspect of rarity to these films, which I had the chance to explore as an intern. This also made a space for the kind of mentors and experienced filmmakers who actually grew up in the era of counterculture film to thrive. At the same time as a young filmmaker myself I wondered how the Coop supported and represented younger emerging artists. From my interview I found out that the FMC sponsors young filmmakers by acting as an umbrella organization from which to procure grants. There are also younger emerging filmmakers on the board like Kat Bauers.

The Coop has the largest oldest collection of independent and avant garde film in the world. They have an online catalogue from which one can find films that move from the 60's through to today. They are also working on digitizing film and video so that they can bring the archive into the internet streaming world through the film site Fandor.

Anyone who is in the archive has a chance to be supported by the Coop in submitting to Fandor in their process of becoming visible online. From my interview with Serra I found out that any filmmaker could become part of the archive globally. She invited me to submit my own films and suggested that they may even go onto Fandor.