

# CIRCLES

## Aims & Objectives

Circles is a feminist distribution network, set up by and for women, to distribute women's film and video, and to promote women's work in other related media such as tape-slide presentations and performance art. Circles also encourages research into the history of women's work in these areas. In addition to distributing films and videotapes, Circles organises women-only screenings with the opportunity for discussion afterwards. In this way Circles hopes to encourage more women to make and show their work on their own terms.

### 1) Structure/membership

Every woman who has a film or video distributed by Circles is a 'member' of Circles and has a say in our policy-making. Circles is a company limited by guarantee (without share capital); it is non-profit-making and its legal constitution has been drawn up to comply with requirements for registering as a charity. At its Annual General Meetings, Circles' members delegate responsibility for day-to-day running to an Executive Committee which meets on a monthly basis. This Committee (sometimes in consultation with specialist women's groups) is also ultimately responsible for the viewing and selection of new work to be included in the Circles' catalogue. The film/video-maker's decision to place work with Circles reflects her commitment to the principles of feminist distribution.

### 2) Research

Women have been making films for the past 80 years, but much of this work has been hidden, or overlooked by 'historians'. As well as promoting current productions, Circles is also concerned to bring back into distribution women's work which has been previously unknown in this country, or which has been unavailable for a long time. It is important that earlier films are presented alongside contemporary material so that women can see that they have a history in film-making, and can begin to discover the threads which run through and link much of the work. Circles wishes to encourage more research by women for women, and is slowly building up a collection of reference materials which are available for consultation on its premises.

### 3) Women-only screenings

Circles organises regular women-only screenings at 113 Roman Road and elsewhere. Programmes are usually around a particular theme or issue (e.g. woman and mental health, childbirth, sexual politics) followed by discussions with the film/video-makers. Sometimes guest speakers, perhaps women from specialist groups, are invited to

co-ordinate discussion. It is important that the barriers between film-maker and audience are broken down, and that there is inter-action and feedback between the two. We also feel it is important to create a public space for discussion and for all women to participate in the making and showing of their work.

### 4) Programming and education

Because of the continuing male domination of education, there is still a tendency to ignore women's work. It is, therefore, important to get this work included in the curricula of more schools and colleges, as well as to ensure its availability generally. Programme information is sent, not only to mainstream educational institutions, but also to women's, trade union and community groups around the country. Groups who cannot (or who do not wish to) attend Circles' screenings are encouraged to hire these programmes to stimulate their own discussions. Circles' films, videotapes and programming advice are available to individuals and to organisations which may have mixed audiences, but, as we wish to promote the idea of women-only screenings, reduced hire fees are offered to women's (and some educational) groups.

### 5) Working Practice

Circles sees the making, showing and distribution of films and videotapes as part of a unified practice whereby film/video-makers can retain control of their work. This is particularly important for women who must also have the opportunity to question dominant modes of representation. It is important, too, that women's work is not misappropriated, and that contexts for that work are created, both in Circles' catalogues and in the women-only screenings and discussions that are organised. It is equally important that women receive proper financial recognition for their work. For this reason, more than 50% (and usually 60-75%) of all rentals and sales is paid to the film-maker; any profits go back into Circles to enable it to continue its activities.

Felicity Sparrow,  
*Circles Aims &  
Objectives* (1980).  
Text for the first  
distribution  
catalogue.

## Work towards a new ... aims & objectives

### Cinenova Working Group

Cinenova is a non-profit organization dedicated to distributing feminist film. Formed in 1991 from the merger of two feminist distributors, Circles and Cinema of Women, Cinenova provides the means to discover artist, experimental, narrative, documentary and educational moving image works, distributing the titles brought together by both organizations as work that reflects the 'diversity of approach' to film-making that they represented during their periods of activity. Cinenova is collectively organized by a volunteer-led Working Group. In 2016 Cinenova moved with LUX to a new building in North London; in parallel we began work on a new website that has prompted the re-articulation/visualization of what we do and of the relationships with the film-makers we work with – expanding on the work that precedes us, its aims and objectives. In our collective contribution to this issue of MIRAJ we have attempted to reformulate the Circles Aims & Objectives from 1980.

### 1. Structure/membership

Faced with closure since 2001 when the London Film and Video Agency cut the organization's regular funding, Cinenova has been run by volunteers dedicated to the constellation of films, histories and politics that make up the collection, believing in the necessity of keeping it autonomous and in active distribution, rather than dispersed into larger and more general archives. The selection of works was made over the course of the organization's history up to this point (with very few exceptions, the newest works were acquired prior to 2001). We have decided to commit to

this body of work and assist in its distribution and preservation. A body of relationships, politics, practices and a collection of films form the basis of our work now – the basis from which we continue to build upon, depart from and amend, drawing alliance towards new works through screening events and research projects. Although we do not strictly have a membership-led base, the choices concerning how we work with the collection are informed and aided by the conversations that we have with film-makers and specialist groups, who are invited or request to view the films and work with Cinenova. The Cinenova Working Group acts as the organising committee, asking how this group can operate collectively and voluntarily to ensure the ongoing care of the collection and its public access. It faces the question: how can an un(der) funded organization stand against the replication of exploitative working models?

## 2. Research

In many ways the necessary day-to-day labour of administration is simultaneously a research method engaged with the collection and the film-makers. Some of the work that we distribute is not in good shape and some of the films and videos are the only surviving copies of a work. Rather than hiding these material conditions, we encourage a conversation about this, a conversation about the various forms of precarity the materials and the history of the collection both figures and resists, and that define the efforts of the Working Group and its collaborators in many different ways. We believe that it is incredibly important for the work of the film and video-makers whom we represent to stay together. The collection has become a very specific assemblage, has changed over time and been worked on by different hands. For us, distribution has been a process of re-contextualizing and reflecting on distribution from the angles of politics, desire and contingency rather than sticking to performing a delegated authority ('on behalf of'), which the distribution contract implies. Thus the films should traverse debates in this moment, be seen side by side with contemporary works, be they film, video or other media, on platforms that were not necessarily envisioned for most of the organization's time in existence. Now Showing is a monthly screening event that we began in 2015. The series intends to materialize relationships between contemporary moving image practice and the feminist/organizing legacies present in the Cinenova collection, and continues on the work of Circles, which, by bringing early twentieth-century work back into circulation, sought to highlight new concerns and issues in contemporary film-making practice.

We approach practitioners whose work seems to already have a resonance, whether formal, contextual or thematic, with some of the films and videos in the collection, and where an exciting dialogue can be developed. The screening series as a whole represents a research process for the Cinenova Working Group that we will be drawing on once the organization is in a position to take new work into distribution – something increasingly near at hand. We have been talking more recently about distribution as a process and as research, rather than a rigid institution: distribution to mobilize desire. There is always more to be distributed than the works themselves.

## 3. Women-only screenings

Cinenova originally distributed work nationally through thematic programmes that addressed the oppositional histories, post and de-colonial struggles, questions of (reproductive) labour, and representations of gender and sexuality contained within

the extensive collection, importantly drawing out the relations and alliances between these different struggles. When funding was removed in 2001, we lost the time to maintain this distribution tactic, or to take on other works that contemporaneously reflected ongoing developments in these areas. As the organization strives towards greater stability, we hope that we can once again use the collection to discuss these issues publicly. We have already begun this process with a shift of an adjective – from women's film and video to feminist film and video, reflecting a collection of works made by directors who identify variously as women, transgender, gender non-conforming and gender non-binary, and marking a wider shift in understandings of the subject within feminism.

#### 4. Programming and education

Since 2014 the increasingly large numbers of digitized works from the collection have been available for preview by the general public at The Showroom in Central London. The Showroom is a long-standing supporter of the organization, and this generous hosting has enabled interested individuals and groups to simply book a viewing slot and come to watch work (a previously precarious process reliant on volunteer time). In addition to overseeing the day-to-day running of the collection, we also undertake exhibition, screening and educational projects that seek to highlight the conditions of the collection. We strive to turn any such invitation outwards; rather than programming works ourselves, we invite those in proximity to the given project to further get to know the collection and invite them into the collection to programme. In practical terms this might mean an invitation to work on an exhibition project by a European Kunsthalle being itself shared in turn by invitations to a number of local groups and individuals to programme elements. We sometimes use a structure such as a 'chain letter' to programme a screening, where members of the chain include those involved in and around the inviting organization and members of the Working Group. Each chooses a work in turn in relation to the previous choices. We have begun to formulate an understanding of what we term 'programming as distribution' or 'distributed programming' whereby we share knowledge of the collection as a whole, and as a resource that might be further activated in the future, not merely through individual works.

#### 5. Working practice

One of the more helpful attributes that we might take as a model, influence, or protocol for our practice is the care needed in attending to an organization influenced by feminism, by class-based analysis, race, questions of social justice and media representation, whilst conforming to the legal demands of running a limited company with charitable status in the United Kingdom. This movement between different ideas and practices is crucial to the work that we do together, and in the process of doing it, we are building relational and communication skills with others. We make no claims towards a radical method; we are doing the work that is necessary for the basic upkeep of the collection, over a long period of time, and for most of this time with very few material resources. The work that we do operates across volunteer-run spaces, public arts spaces, self-organized programming, educational context, social, community, public and private, through circuits of desire. We do it because we are committed to this material and the relationships that are embedded in it and the relationships that

it makes possible in the present. Through national and international distribution and organizing, Cinenova acts as an agency for artists, educators, curators and their audiences. Cinenova is a source of very specific knowledge; it is a network and cultural community that engages directly with feminist moving image work and with the question of how to make this work more accessible. Whilst there are fewer independent cinemas, there has been increased programming of film and video in art contexts and museums, as well as political spaces, and in research practices in higher education. In our current work we try to encourage dialogue around the screenings that we and others organize through making connections with existing groups in the places where the work is shown or circulated, and by inviting people to watch, curate and write about different works.

Circles was founded in 1979 by Jane Clark, Joanna Davis, Rachel Finkelstein, Tina Keane, Mary Pat Leece, Annabel Nicolson, Lis Rhodes, Felicity Sparrow and Susan Stein. The original Aims & Objectives text was composed by Felicity Sparrow for the group's first distribution catalogue published in 1980.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

The Cinenova Working Wroup is made up of members based in the United Kingdom, the

United States and Germany. The group collectively reflected upon Sparrow's original text to reflect Cinenova's current working practices and aims.