

APPENDIX:

TRANSCRIPT: INTERVIEW WITH KAREN COOPER OF FILM FORUM,
NOVEMBER 18, 2005

Amy Frazier: First of all, you took over the directorship of Film Forum in 1972...

Karen Cooper: Right.

AF: ... and you've devoted your entire career to it.

KC: True.

AF: In that time, Film Forum has grown to be one of the most influential and durable non-mainstream cinemas in North America. Which is a pretty amazing achievement in a time when so many other non-mainstream cinemas and even the arthouse movement itself has seen enormous declines. So obviously a lot has changed since 1972. Could you speak to the changes that you've seen at Film Forum and in film culture in general over the course of your career?

KC: Okay, very big question, very big question, and a good question. Maybe I should start by giving you my five-minute schpiel on just what some of the structural and financial changes are in terms of our organization and how that works within a larger context of film culture. Film Forum was started by two

young cinephiles, with two-thousand dollars and a little Bell and Howell projector, and a love of movies, and coming off kind of a 60s sensibility that the arts could exist outside the mainstream and outside of conventional venues. I mean, this is a time when people were participating in “happenings,” and Andy Warhol was starting to become famous; you know, it was a very different cultural milieu and there was a lot of experimentation. And that was 1970.

Now, in 1972, I had been out of college for a couple of years, and didn't have a specific interest in film. I was actually someone with a greater focus on language than on images – I had been an English major at Smith. But I was working for a film periodical called *Filmmaker's Newsletter*, and I got to know the fellow who was then running Film Forum, which had 50 folding chairs. So it was a long way from what it is today. And he asked me if I wanted to take over the business.

Well, the business wasn't much of a business, and I said yes. And the business mainly consisted of looking very aggressively, and kind of innovative efforts to find work that didn't play in commercial theaters – anything that would be outside the Hollywood studio system. And my initial impulse was to broaden what [Film Forum co-founder] Peter Feinstein had played in his little loft space with the 50 folding chairs to include foreign films as well as American, and to bring in a lot of documentaries, and do less with experimental work, and to stick to documentaries and unusual approaches to narrative. So that's where I began to take the programming, which is of course our real *raison d'être*: it's about

selling tickets to movies that you can't see anywhere else.

Over the course of 33 years, the theater has actually become a theater, and moved several times, so we're now in our 4th incarnation. We moved into this theater in 1990 after our last one was demolished for real estate development. And I raised 3.2 million dollars to build a three-screen cinema out of essentially an empty shell and an office building. So that's fifteen years ago.

I would say the biggest change other than the fiscal growth of film forum and the financial growth from a tiny budget of under \$20,000 a year to 4.1 million, is my really coming together with another programmer in 1987, who is Bruce Goldstein, who selects all the repertory programming. And while I and my colleague Mike Maggiore select the premiere films, Bruce selects all the classics and genre films and re-releases, that he presents on a screen exclusively devoted to older work.

AF: So you consider the repertory a crucial part of Film Forum?

KC: Absolutely. We really have a two-pronged programming philosophy: the new and the old. And we have three screens, so one screen is always devoted to New York City theatrical premieres, another to repertory, and the third is kind of a catch-as-catch-can.

Now in the course of these three decades, what has happened in the larger context? A great deal. The most obvious is that thirty years ago, I would say that I was presenting independent film and nobody knew what I was talking about. It was a moniker that just didn't have any name recognition. People thought it was pornography, they didn't know what to make of it. And this was further confused by the fact that directors like Altman and Marty Scorsese and Spike Lee consider themselves in a sense independent because of their very particular vision that they put to work but in much larger-budgeted and more conventional narrative works that do come out of a studio. So it's still a phrase that's not easy to pin down, but I think it's understood by a great many more people than originally.

The other big thing that's happened is in about 1985 or '86, home video coming in completely changed the marketplace. And that made it possible for films to be made with the hope of investors getting their money back because there were more places to go to make a dollar after the film was completed.

AF: Was that not as much of an issue prior to home video?

KC: It wasn't an issue at all. Before home video, you made your money in theaters or in television or in the educational market. There was no home market.

So the fact that there was a whole new market and a new way of looking at films encouraged people to make more films. There was more money to make films. And this was not – it sounds like a good thing, and to some extent I guess it was. But it flooded the marketplace, and that flood has frankly never stopped. When I began showing films in 1972, maybe 3-6 films opened a week in NYC. Today it's not unusual for 12-16 films to open every week. So you have a great many more films to choose from, and it doesn't mean that those films are any less mediocre than the 3-5 films that played 30 years ago. Most of any work produced by human beings is – and I hope you don't think this is cynical, but frankly it doesn't move way above the mediocre bar. So it's really hard to make a really great work of art, or even a very good one. And I think with the market as flooded as it is, people get tired. It's like trying to find the symphony music, you know, the orchestra, with a lot of noise playing in the background. So this has created a much more competitive marketplace, and it's harder to convince people that your work, the work you're playing is worth their time and money. And that's a very big change, and I think certainly DVD has created yet another very large change. So certainly the marketplace has changed.

In terms of what people look at, documentaries have become less poisonous. We used to have a joke that documentaries were the “D-word,” that people wouldn't go to a movie if you told them it was a documentary. But one of the major changes in that marketplace occurred when Michael Moore was so incredibly

successful at making films that were both political and also entertaining.

AF: Building from this idea of technology changing everything, the role of the cinema itself, by which I mean the bricks-and-mortar venue to which people go to see films, given that these days I think more films are seen outside the theater than inside the theater...

KC: Well, of course in the United States, sure...

AF: Right... would you care to give your opinion on what might become of the cinema in the future? Will people still come?

KC: Well, a lot of people are wringing their hands saying theatrical is turning into a dinosaur. I don't believe that. After all, you can make a fine meal at home, and yet people continue to eat out at restaurants, don't they? It's more convenient to eat at home, it's certainly less expensive. But eating in a restaurant gets you out of an environment that you're in all the time, so it's a change of pace, and it also is a social experience. And going to the movies does both of those things as well. And I think when a movie is a powerful experience, and certainly the films I play, I try to play work which, some of it is politically powerful, some of it emotionally powerful, hopefully a lot of it is intellectually powerful. Having that experience with other people around you is very different

from having it alone. And I think that's a dynamic that occurs when you're in the presence of other human beings. So I'm not so concerned that movie houses will not always have a role to play in people's social lives.

AF: Have you seen any changes in your audiences since you began? Do you think you have the same people coming now that you did in 1972?

KC: Well I think a lot of the same people are older; in 1972 they were 30 years younger. But I think a lot of that generation – which is my generation, the Baby Boomer generation – continues to go to the movies because we grew up during a very exciting time when movies were considered a force for political change, and when there were great directors coming from Europe and Asia: people like Kurosawa and Fellini and Rossellini and Pasolini and Truffaut and Godard. So those folks, when they made a movie it was a major cultural event. And I think that generation continues to see films as an art form and not simply kind of a passive entertainment.

AF: Would you say then that people my age – I'm about two weeks shy of 30 right now – do you see fewer people in my age group?

KC: Very hard to say. Every film seems to attract its own audience. Very hard to say. I'm playing a documentary right now called Ballets Russes about the

legendary Russian ballet company, and many, many people in the audience I would say are easily over 60 or 70, because they remember the Ballets Russes. Or they are members of an audience that goes to live ballet, which tends to be an older audience. So that is a very old demographic for movie-going. At the same time, we're also playing a film noir called *Classe Tous Risques*, which is a French film noir and while it's an older film, it's never played before in New York, and it's bringing in younger people. And I think that's because film noir is considered kind of sexy and interesting and a genre that younger people like. I've never done extensive market research, so I can't really tell you what the average age of someone coming here is, or why they choose one film over another.

AF: Personally, I look around at people in my age group and I see many, many, many people who want to be filmmakers, but there are very, very few people who want to do all the rest of it: you know, the exhibition and... a lot of people run festivals, but I see very few people who are trying to start art-house theaters and become film programmers and work in that end of the field. Do you think that's accurate?

KC: Oh, I think that absolutely it's accurate. Sure. Everybody wants to... I mean, there's a joke, "well what I really want to do is direct." So it's considered the "fun" thing to do. I think most... not most, that's unfair to say, but certainly with the proliferation of film schools, there's an assumption that making movies is fun

and creative and, frankly, easy. You know, to write a book you have to sit over a computer or a typewriter; to paint a picture you have to sit with paints; to make a movie you can push a button and the camera rolls. So it has the appearance of being easier. In fact I think it's extremely difficult. So many factors have to come together and work in concert for a film to be strong.

AF: You're one of a very small number of people in the United States who has the ability to take an unknown film and lift it out of obscurity and help it find an audience. In fact, in a recent piece in *The Independent* magazine, I read where you talked about your wish... you continue to support films even after they leave Film Forum...¹

KC: Well, we do and we don't... what did I say we did? (laughs) Obviously our focus is really on making them successful here. We're not distributors, so we don't have an ongoing, day-to-day relationship with films once they leave here.

AF: Well, do you see your work as being – I mean, obviously it's all of these, but primarily do you see your work being in the interests of your audiences, or filmmakers, or film as an art form in a general sense?

¹Nicole Davis, "The new IFC Center crashes New York's arthouse scene," *The Independent*, Oct. 2005, Vol 28, No. 8, p. 21

KC: You know, I don't think there are hard-and-heavy demarcations. I think what is good for filmmakers is what's good for the public: showing strong work. I think if you raise standards by only showing the best films that are available and make it a very high bar that people have to reach to in order to get their work on screen, I think that only works to everyone's advantage. But I consider filmmakers part of the general public, and it's in their interest, as it is in all of our interests, to see work that really demands to be seen and not to be, you know, sort of have a lot of static noise thrown at us all the time.

AF: Here's an obvious question: given that so many other non-mainstream cinemas have failed since 1972, what do you think it is that's made Film Forum different, what have you done differently?

KC: I think I have better taste... I mean, to be very, very candid. And I would say that it's also true of the fact that many repertory houses have failed, and yet Bruce continues to be extremely successful. He's a very smart and savvy and sensitive programmer of classic and genre films. And I think I maintain extremely high and sometimes impossible standards for new work. But in terms of the financial structure and what works, I don't think there's any mystery to the fact that we're a non-profit, and without the support of both private and public funders – the New York State Council on the Arts and the NEA and wealthy individuals and foundations and so forth, corporations that give us

grants – we simply would not exist. I mean, the budget is 4.1 million dollars, and of that, 1 million dollars is not earned income; it's essentially contribution. So without that, I would be out of business, too. So really, this kind of exhibition, like any cultural enterprise, depends upon the largesse of funders, and you can't expect it to work in a dog-eat-dog marketplace. And I think those folks who've gone under, a great many of them were commercial entities. I think the non-profits that went under went under because weren't well-run or they didn't have high standards in terms of what they presented.

AF: Speaking to standards, and again going back to your personal taste, what specifically do you personally look for in films to show at Film Forum?

KC: Well... that's a toughie. I've been asked that question many times. I think the key here is not to have pre-conceived notions, not to be looking for any one thing. I don't look for films that are ninety minutes in length; I've shown films that are nine hours in length, and I'm going to show in January a four-minute film about corruption in Peru. It's going to be four minutes of people moving large stacks of cash across a table, taking bribes. So, I think there are many ways in which I look at a film without deciding in advance that it's a good film or a bad one because of length or because of country of origin, or because I liked or didn't like the filmmaker's previous film. It's really about looking at work with a fresh eye. And looking for films that say things in a new way, or say old things

with a different point of view, or say brand-new things that no-one's ever thought about before. There's really no secret or special list of criteria; it's about passion and intelligence and craftsmanship and artistry.

AF: One last question, if you don't mind. Apart from funding – because obviously there's always a dire shortage of money in the arts, at least to go around to everybody – what do you think, apart from funding, could be changed to help continue or even improve the development of film culture in the United States? Is there something that we're missing that exists in Europe or elsewhere?

KC: Oh, well, of course, apart from funding... the big difference of course is funding. The big difference is that there are cities like Berlin and Vienna that have larger cultural budgets set aside by their city councils than our entire nation. I mean, it's outrageous. Europeans see culture as part of their national birthright, and we see it as some kind of frivolity that is money down the tubes. So I think that's a very, very important difference, and it's a difference that stymies creativity in this country. So, I mean, it's a very good question you ask, but there's no way I can cut out money. You know, money may not be the root of all evil, but it's at the root of just about everything – evil and creativity and everything else. No money, no films on screen.

AF: Well, maybe to re-frame it slightly, what do you think the ultimate purpose

of that money, that funding, should be? Should it go to production, or should it go to exhibition...?

KC: It should go everywhere. There's no point having well-funded exhibitors if they don't have first-rate films to show, and there's no point having first-rate films to show if there's no place to see them. So it really has to be spread across the board.