

# DIM CINEMA

TRADITIONAL THEATRE, MOVING-IMAGE ART

words by Jonathan Kew // illustrations by Cian Hogan

**A** WEEKNIGHT SCREENING of Michael Snow's *La Région central*, 180 minutes of footage from a single camera abreast the mountains of Northern Quebec, spun autonomously by a pre-programmed robot: how did we all get here?

For Michèle Smith, one of the fundamental pleasures of film is the moment after the credits, when everyone looks around to see who else has shared the experience. Since 2014, Smith has been able to give this feeling to others through her role as curator of DIM Cinema, a monthly program of moving-image art at The Cinematheque now entering its tenth year.

DIM has a basic criteria: in the context of a traditional movie theatre, you will see experimental works in dialogue with the structure of cinema. This is to say, the films that are screened seek to question and subvert social and material practices, along with traditional film production and consumption. Go into a screening and you may experience a series of micro-shorts or an experiment in outstretched time. The film could draw attention to the circumstances of its own creation, prickling against the bare materials of film with distressed reels. Or, it could be more conventional. The upcoming June 6 DIM Cinema screening features *The 3 Rooms of Melancholia*, a quiet piece by Pirjo Honkasalo documenting the lives of children caught in the Chechen-Russian conflict.

Smith cites the pleasures of film that arise in diffuse responses, surprising reactions, the "lacunae and potential roads" that one viewer and one viewing cannot encompass. DIM's breadth speaks to a kind of freedom, with guest curators and collaborators as a constant, it has the luxury to go in new directions.

**T**his was not always the case. When I sit down with Smith on the eve of DIM's anniversary, she, flanked by a notebook and laptop, points me towards a rare article on the project: a 2009 *Georgia Straight* interview with DIM's founder, Amy Kazymierchyk. Then, DIM had an urgent purpose: to carve out space in a city bereft of the infrastructure to see moving-image art.

Smith is thoughtful, reflexive throughout our conversation. "The whole scene has changed so much in those years. It's interesting going back to Amy's interview, where she talks about this lack. I don't think there's this lack anymore."

If many of the art scenes featured in *Discorder* are under siege, Smith describes a kind of fortification in Vancouver's cineaste milieu. There are now many opportunities to see moving-image art and experimental film in its

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most potent form: one cinema, an audience and a shared sense of commitment.

Smith took over from Kazymierchyk in 2014. Having returned to Vancouver after a spate of roles in Europe (including at the Tate Modern and Museum of Natural History in London), Smith remains in-touch with transnational networks of film curation. She also emphasizes the impact of local curators, mentioning in part: Kazymierchyk, currently at the Audain Gallery; Pablo de Ocampo and Allison Collins at Western Front; Steffanie Ling, Sungpil Yoon and Casey Wei at VIVO Media Arts Centre; Jem Noble at Cineworks; and the Iris Film Collective.

**C**ollaboration is imperative in a local art world where money and screen-space are scarce. Smith describes a peculiar context in Vancouver, where most of the large-scale institutions — the Vancouver Art Gallery and Polygon Gallery for instance — lack cinemas. These institutions have the resources to transport artists from across the world for their programming, yet they must partner with venues like The Cinematheque, as do some of the smaller public and commercial galleries and artist-run centres. A network of community becomes coherent.

For all the fanfare larger organizations muster, DIM screens at an unassuming, focused pace. Half-jokingly, Smith suggests that DIM Cinema should get t-shirts for the tenth anniversary, designed to model typical band merch, but featuring the names of past collaborators.

**E**xperimental art is often filtered through abstruse codes. Much of my conversation with Smith revolved around the difficulty that DIM Cinema screenings may entail, and the tension between explanation and obscurity. Smith insists that the experience, the "shock to your system," speaks more than any Q&A can.

Collaboration provides another boon for DIM. Different scenes bring different audiences. A screening of Jeremy Deller's *Our Hobby is Depeche Mode* in 2014 brought together cinephiles, post-punk followers and fans of the celebrated British artist.

"The thing is, there's so much art. If you're honest, you can only work from a position of ignorance. Your approach needs to have humility and curiosity. Be ready to have people walk out. I'm very lucky in that the people who work here are constantly teaching me things. Hopefully I do the same. In that way, it's a conversation."

**S**mith doesn't like to insert herself so obviously into DIM's public persona. The project is on-rent, always in a state of becoming, and will continue with new curators after she has moved on.

But she's also open with her personal experiences and illustrative towards the question of accessibility. As a teenager, she got into cinema alongside repertory theatre and the music associated with film. "My friends were in bands and they'd make films about what was going on. And they were looking at Stan Brakhage. We didn't have the means to put this into words, it's just what we were seeing."

Smith shared a concept she would love to program. In the UK, she made acquaintances with a man who would smuggle films from the London Filmmakers Co-Op and screen them deep in Eastern Europe.

"In those days, after the Wall came down, Soviet companies took back their theatre equipment. The projectionists had nothing to do. He'd go to these villages and show structuralist film, Kenneth Anger, all this stuff. And he didn't speak the language. People would show up and they'd have no background. But I'm sure he had an effect."

**T**en years ago, DIM provided the rare opportunity to see moving-image art in Vancouver. Now, these opportunities are flourishing. In another ten years, it is impossible to know what the Vancouver scenario will look like. But so long as those physical spaces persist, there'll be the demand and desire to see something new. For newcomers, DIM Cinema may not be a question of how, but when.

*DIM Cinema takes place at The Cinematheque, and upcoming screenings can be found in The Cinematheque's Program Guides, distributed across Vancouver. For news and updates, along with a list of previous screenings and collaborations, visit [dimcinema.ca](http://dimcinema.ca).*