



## LEARNING RESOURCE | WORKING WITH FILM FESTIVALS November 2020

We are very happy to announce the publication of the first in a new series of SUPERLUX online resources. These resources aim to provide an overview and demystify some of the structures of the art and film worlds that artists working with moving image navigate.

As part of our SUPERLUX programme we offer regular advice sessions for artists. During lockdown we held these on a weekly basis, with each member of our team meeting with one artist for one hour to discuss any aspect of their practice and career. Over time and after many great conversations with our SUPERLUX members, we decided to create some new, written learning resources to share with all of our 850 members across Scotland.

These new resources will be published on the SUPERLUX members' website. The first topic that we focus on is 'working with film festivals'. We invited artist [Michelle Williams Gamaker](#), curator [Myriam Mouflih](#) and curator [Adam Pugh](#) to respond to five set questions on the subject, sharing their experiences and knowledge about festivals with you in writing.

The series will continue over the coming months, with contributions from more artists, curators and programmers within our networks both within and beyond Scotland. By inviting three people to answer questions on each subject, we aim to offer our SUPERLUX members a range of subjective views and experiences of each topic.

November 2020

**Michelle Williams Gamaker** works with moving image, performance and installation. Her practice is frequently in dialogue with film history, particularly Hollywood and British studio films, deploying what she calls fictional activism to restage scenes and reveal their imperialist roots. She recently completed *The Silver Wave* (2020), an Untold Stories commission for RAMM, Exeter and is recipient of the Stuart Croft Moving Image Award 2020 for *The Bang Straws* (2021). She is shortlisted for Film London's Jarman Award 2020.

**Myriam Mouflih** is a curator, film programmer and occasional writer based in Glasgow. Myriam has programmed for Africa in Motion Film Festival since 2017 and this year was a Programming Fellow at Berwick Film and Media Arts Festival.

**Adam Pugh** is a curator, writer and designer based in Newcastle upon Tyne, where until recently he ran the artists' moving image programme Projections at Tyneside Cinema. He contributes regularly to Art Monthly; and has taught, delivered talks and served on international juries for institutions and events worldwide.

## How might artists decide which festivals are best suited to their work?

**Michelle Williams Gamaker:** I would begin with festivals that play the films you love or from their synopses, the titles that make you want to see these films. Try to see which audiences they attract and find out what presenting your work at the festival will get you as a filmmaker. A good way to do this is to attend a festival and mingle – although it can be pretty draining if you don't have a film in the festival or even a concrete film to pitch, as there are many people roaming at festivals trying to get people interested in their project! That said, it is important to see how a festival that you might be interested in runs. There will be screenings, panel discussions and plenty of opportunities to meet producers, other filmmakers and festival goers. For moving image artists there are established festivals such as Berwick, Rotterdam, BFI London, Open City Docs, London Short Film Festival that have excellent programmes. By attending festivals like these and accessing the festival's digital library, you will get a good sense of the categories your film might fit - each festival has its own style/ethos/language. Make sure that you take a festival directory home with you – it will have lots of key contacts to industry people. Circle their names and follow up with an email.

**Myriam Mouflih:** To put it really simply: research. If you are able, attend festivals or check out their digital offerings. Understanding the type of work a festival presents and understand where your work fits in it. Talk to your friends and peers and discuss with them what festivals they like, where they would submit their work or what they would recommend. For close friends, I've advised on places their work might be suited to as different festivals can have such varied offerings.

It's also really important to remember the volume of work that gets submitted to festivals and that rejections aren't a reflection of how good or bad your work is (although it can be easy to feel that way). Rejections can be for a number of reasons and it's important not to take it personally.

Different festivals work in different ways, especially with regards to submissions and selection processes, and it's important to remember this too. If you can, talk to people who have screened with festivals you're interested in and ask them about the experience. I think this is also really helpful in informing the kind of experience you might have.

**Adam Pugh:** Start with your practice. What do you want out of presenting your work at a festival? Do you want it to be validated by, or gain more of a presence within the visual arts in particular, or to attract critical attention from more film-focused curators and events - or both? What about the work itself? Think about the way it is made; any issues or themes it deals with; the way you'd like it to be shown.

Research is crucial. Festivals tend to signpost fairly clearly what they're about and many stick to one or more specific speciality, whether based around form (short film,

documentary) or content. Some of the more progressive of the older, larger festivals with a predominant focus on new feature films dedicate a programme strand or weekend to artists' moving image, which, when it works, can feel like a festival-within-a-festival, and comes with the kudos of showing at a well-regarded international event.

The best guide to a festival's curatorial taste is its past programmes. Even the best and most original festivals don't vary their format that much from year to year, so looking through the previous year's programme will give a good idea of the type of work they screen. Most events make their programmes available online, so it should be easy to get the measure of an array of festivals fairly quickly this way.

Of course, there are many which cater specifically for artists' moving image - and it's likely that these will be suited to your work on some level. But don't feel that you should automatically submit your work only to them. As an artist, you should be freer to move between different types of festivals and to present your work across multiple contexts - and any good programmer, even of a fairly mainstream festival, should be looking out for new voices and different takes on the form that they specialise in. Don't think that definitions are concrete. If you like the look of the festival, try your luck, especially if there's no submission fee. Just be aware that the way your work is contextualised will differ from festival to festival, and certainly both the curatorial and physical environments of more generalist festivals might feel quite alien if you're approaching them from a purely visual arts background.

Ask around too, though. Do you know anyone who has shown work at a festival? Was it a good experience? Did they attend? Do they have any tips? Without doubt, the best way of getting a sense of any particular festival is to attend it. What the programmes at some festivals lack in curatorial interest, the delegate list makes up for.

## **What advice would you give to an artist who has never presented work at a festival before?**

**Michelle Williams Gamaker:** This can be daunting, but everyone has started in this position! I remember initially attending festivals and observing. This helped ease me into the festival circuit. I use this term, because that's what it is, just like with any private view, you will begin to recognise familiar faces (producers and filmmakers) at each of these festivals. It's important that you can see yourself among these people and also visualise your work being part of their programmes. Be honest about this, where does your work sit in the mix? If the answer is 'yes, I can see my work here' that's really good, because you might well fit the festival. If the answer is no, or you are not sure, it might be that you are not ready for this festival, or that the festival isn't the right space for your work. Try to attend the workshop-style sessions on offer, where you can ask questions relevant to your project. Also, don't be intimidated - many producers will say hello. Swapping details is a thing, but most important is getting the contact of the one person you actually think would be good to talk more to. Also don't swamp someone with your project and its details, I've seen producers who are really averse to this approach!

**Myriam Mouflih:** Think about how and where the work is positioned and situated. Don't be afraid to ask who else might be showing alongside and how your work might sit together with that and how it will be presented. Although typically if you're submitting a film to a film festival, the expectation will be that it will be screened in a cinema. This is sometimes not the case and it's good to know what the situation is upfront. If you've made the work with a specific way of presenting it in mind, it's good to communicate this to the programmer and see what might be possible. Saying that, trusting the situation is important as well and can allow your work to be shown in ways that you might not have considered before.

If there is specificity in how you want your work to be communicated in marketing, for example, it's important to make that clear. I think this can be something to think about with work that is personal or maybe touches on sensitive topics.

**Adam Pugh:** If you can attend a festival, do. If you've only exhibited in the context of visual arts institutions in the past, even the smallest festival should give you an idea of the differences between the two, not least the two big ones: you'll have no control over how, where or when your work screens, and everyone will have to sit and watch it captively in a cinema. But festivals have a set of cultural codes of their own, from the sometimes dizzying - and often barely-curated, if it's a competition - array of films they show to the social and networking opportunities.

When submitting your work, it's best to research likely festivals beforehand and make a list, rather than going through them one by one, as many charge submission fees - which can vary wildly in scale, from £5 to over £30 per film - and it would be a shame to run out of funds before you reach the event you're most interested in. Since most festivals only select films from the past year or two, it is worth making sure that the production date of your work is eligible. Don't go on submission fees alone, though: take a look at each festival's policy for selection, if it is published. Does it pay any sort of artist fee? Does it contribute towards, or even cover, travel and accommodation if selected? Regardless of how much you have to pay to submit, these are the details that could make the difference between being able to attend or not.

Make sure that it is easy for the programmer or selection committee to access your work (most will ask for a link on their submission form, so make sure it works!). If there's a video library - a resource for visiting curators to access films separately to the cinema programmes - consider signing up to it, and make sure that your contact information or website is included.

Weigh the extent you would want or need to attend the festival, if selected, against the probability of being able to: if you're submitting to an event in Canada which offers no funds towards artists' travel costs, would having your film screened without you still be worth the submission fee? Or would you rather try to attend in person - in which case, perhaps think about those festivals that are closer to home or would cover your travel.

When submitting to a festival, think about how your work is described, and whether it's right for the context. How do you want to present yourself? If it helps, vary the way you

talk about your work, and even yourself, according to the context of the festival - don't reinvent yourself afresh each time, but amplify those qualities of your work and practice that you think the programmer is most likely to be interested in. If you are asked for your CV, don't rewrite it to please the festival, but make the most of your non-festival exhibition experience, if you have any.

## **What can artists expect to gain from showing work in this context?**

**Michelle Williams Gamaker:** I think most filmmakers, even the shy ones make their work to reach an audience. There is something thrilling about seeing your work projected and it's great to share your thoughts with the audience in the Q&A afterwards. Festivals offer a vital space for feedback and new perspectives from different audiences who can help you to see what you have made. If there is some distance, festival screenings offer space to reflect, which helps the development of future projects, because you will have a better sense of what works and doesn't.

Each festival attracts a certain type of audience, I would say in general the conversation will be generous and constructively critical. Part of putting your work out there is to receive and process these conversations. I have always taken something away from these moments, because it's a very immediate, unfiltered form of feedback. Sometimes, it's less clear or if the audience aren't too vocal, it's important to not take it too personally. In general festival attendance will help you reach new audiences nationally and hopefully internationally. I love seeing my work subtitled and knowing that I have reached a new audience I hadn't anticipated.

**Myriam Mouflih:** I think the main thing to be gained is a new perspective on your work. Expect conversations and discussion and embrace critical feedback if it's offered. You don't always need to take someone's criticism, but it can be good to think about. In some contexts, you'll reach a wider audience for your work, in others a more specific context. There's something really special about sitting in a dark room with a crowd of people and feeling their response to the work that is being screened. For me, this is one of the joys of programming (and something I am missing greatly at the moment as we do more online screenings).

Having work screened at a festival is also an opportunity to see your work in an environment that you might not usually see it in. If your work is being screened in a cinema venue, it's often with a higher technical spec (big screen, good speakers) than you might be used to. If you're able to attend the festival, this can be a really good opportunity to see your work and reflect on it. This is also a great opportunity to notice things like pacing and rhythm as these things can feel really different in a cinema environment.

**Adam Pugh:** If it's a decent festival, your work will benefit measurably from being exhibited in this new context. At the very least, many more people will have seen it, and you'll be able to include the festival on your CV, which will be helpful when submitting to

others in future. But you might also receive other invitations, to festivals or gallery shows, as a result of visiting curators viewing your work. Don't imagine that exhibiting at a film festival means that you are entering a new world for good and leaving the gallery behind: many festivals regularly see institutional, freelance and art fair or biennial curators, academics and distributors visit.

If you are able to attend, you'll make many new contacts and get an introduction to a much more present, intense, and, if you're lucky, focused environment than inclusion in the average gallery show would afford you access to. The presence of an audience will give your work an instant reception, whether critically nuanced or reactive.

Whether or not you can visit a festival, the important thing to remember is the difference in culture. Festivals, by and large, are more formal (even when they're being casual). What is perhaps most notable immediately is that aside from private views, the audience at gallery shows is transient, dispersed and often intangible, whereas festivals, however large, tend to create temporary communities owing to the way they exhibit (often many programmes each day over several days, with many people present for the whole event). To me, this aleatory framework composed of who happens to be attending, and the conversations that take place over the course of the event, is as important as the published programme.

## **How can artists build relationships with festival programmers?**

**Michelle Williams Gamaker:** Building relationships with festival programmers takes care and patience. It might be that you think your work is ideally suited to be curated in a programme, but ultimately that decision rests elsewhere. I don't have a simple answer to this one, because I feel like it's a long game. I have developed quite a thick skin, accepting (multiple) rejections as part of the process. As my body of work grows and my moving image work gets known, I have felt more confident in reaching out. Often this might be an email (or direct message on Instagram if I already know them) to invite programmers to a screening or exhibition. Make sure you give them plenty of notice and reminders. If you can be there to meet them, it's a good moment to talk once they've viewed your work. Be generous and visit their programming too – they will thank you for it and hopefully you will have more to discuss. I have more recently been bolder, sharing projects before they are complete (sending film treatments, scripts) and I have done this to open up the process of making to those I feel might be interested in working with me in the future. Sometimes the conversations you have now will only find fruition years later. This is what I meant by a 'long game'.

**Myriam Mouflih:** I think in the same way that you build relationships with artists. Follow their work and see who is doing what and where they are doing it. I'm always trying to build relationships with artists, but this is definitely a two-way street.

It's great to know what artists are up to, especially if the work they make might fit into programming I'm doing. Sometimes unexpected opportunities to present work arise, perhaps guest programming and it's often in these contexts that I'm able to show work that might be outside of my usual interests.

If I'm interested in someone's practice, it can also be really nice to see works in progress, to know what people are up to and exploring. I think making films can be really hard and isolating and it can be so helpful to talk through things. For me, these discussions can inform my programming too, and how I want to approach things.

Please be respectful of boundaries though! Generally, I think programmers are open to seeing new work but receiving an impersonalised email with a request to for feedback can be tiring and not the nicest way to strike up a relationship.

**Adam Pugh:** Go to festivals, if you can afford it, even if you're not selected. At all but the biggest festivals, it should be possible to meet the programmers fairly easily. Unless you've the spare cash, though, this is unlikely to be an option, at least for events outside of the UK, which means you might have to make contact remotely at first.

I'd say don't send work to them via e-mail, unsolicited - but at the same time, don't fall into thinking that these are unapproachable figures. Most of the time they are at least partly publicly-funded and should have a duty to consider reasonable requests. If you do e-mail them, make it personal, and relevant. Why do you think they would like your film? How can you make it as easy as possible for them to watch it? Might they be interested in a studio visit? Bear in mind that many programmers from the larger international festivals will travel regularly and might be happy to meet while in the UK.

Showing that you've done your homework will often be more likely to open doors too: why do you like their festival or rate their curation or opinion? If you don't have any existing connections with programmers, then focusing on meeting people in person could be easier. At many festivals there are discussion events and post-screening Q&As where you can establish yourself as a beacon of enlightened opinion and thereby hope to catch the eye of programmers. Or, better still, just ask them for a meeting. Remember, they work for a festival. Their business is to find the best films and exhibit them.

## **If an artist isn't able to attend a festival in person, how can they get the most from the experience of having their work screened somewhere internationally?**

**Michelle Williams Gamaker:** I think this is quite tricky and perhaps very relevant in a Covid-19 landscape – I would say it would be great, if you are unable to attend, to access an online festival pass, if this is an option. Hopefully you can attend screenings featuring your work and be present for the discussions. Perhaps you can attend a panel via Zoom and reach your audience that way in the Q&A. I would also ask if you can have access to the festival's digital library, which holds all the festival's selected films. It is a great way to be able to see works by other filmmakers and to get an overall sense of the festival. Always follow up with the festival programmers by email as its good to establish some connection with them, as you may be meeting them in future festivals, and they might contact you if they remember your work for future festival calls. Whether I have attended a festival or not, I often receive calls to submit new works. This is because once

you've been selected, the festival is more likely to trust your content and wish to support you further. In this way, you can screen a number of times with a festival and build a slower relationship at distance.

**Myriam Mouflih:** I think this is where social media can come in really handy. It can be really hard to promote your own work, but I think it's really important and can allow you to connect with people in different locations that you might not otherwise meet.

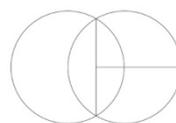
Finding ways to keep artists engaged when not able to attend in person has been made so much easier by an uptake in Zoom, and so offering availability to partake in live digital discussions or pre-recorded formats like video introductions can be really helpful.

**Adam Pugh:** Having people see your film is only one small part of being selected for a festival. Ideally, you'd have the chance to talk about, or at least introduce your work; to circulate your contact details in the event others are interested in it too; and to meet new people. Most of these should still be possible remotely.

See if there are other ways of contributing: could you offer to do a video Q&A (live or pre-recorded)? If not, is anyone you know planning to attend who could introduce your film on your behalf? Make sure you get into the catalogue, if there is one. Ask for the delegate list, if it hasn't already been sent to you, and get in touch with anyone in advance that you think might be an appropriate contact. This is one instance where unsolicited contact is almost expected - not that many will respond, necessarily, but aim to avoid impersonal, group e-mails and you might find that it has more traction.

As before, unless you have a real aversion to the idea, agree to include your work in the video library. This is perhaps even more important for online festivals where the distinction of a 'unique event' afforded by a schedule doesn't necessarily apply. Most festivals operate on an annual or biannual cycle and will want to screen films that are as new as possible. So make the most of the opportunity for other festival programmers to pick up your work while it's fresh by taking any options the festival gives you to extend its 'footprint'.

Whether or not the festival gives you the chance to contribute critically, or has a powerful PR engine behind it, you can publicise it yourself too, of course, via social media if you use it: make the most of it, and remember that it's an accolade to have been selected given the likely numbers of people that have submitted.



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