

The Museum of Modern Art

Curatorial Statement for Private Lives Public Spaces

“Professional pictures must appeal to mass interest and mass interest does not always embrace the things that ought to be known. On the other hand, the amateur has no necessity for appealing to mass interest. He is free to reproduce and record any action his fancy or fancy of a friend may dictate.”

Hiram Percy Maxim, editor Amateur Cinema League, December 1926ⁱ

“The day is close when the 8mm home-movie footage will be collected and appreciated as beautiful folk art, like songs and the lyric poetry that was created by the people. Blind as we are, it will take us a few more years to see it, but some people see it already.” Jonas Mekas, “Movie Journal” The Village Voice 1963ⁱⁱ

“Like the amateur still photographer, the amateur film-maker can devote himself to capturing the poetry and beauty of places and events and, since he is using a movie camera, he can explore the vast world of the beauty of movement.” Maya Deren, “Amateur Versus Professional” Film Culture 1965ⁱⁱⁱ

Home movies are a form of personal filmmaking made to entertain intimate audiences of family and friends at private screenings. Since the introduction of small-gauge, portable cameras in 1922 heralded the unofficial birth of amateur moviemaking, the many thousands of reels of non-theatrical film shot by individuals around the world amounts to perhaps the largest body of work on film produced in the twentieth century. Commonly orphaned by those who made them, sold for stock footage and used as documentation, less attention has been given to what home movies represent as an alternative to theatrical film and what they share with the work of avant-garde filmmakers.

Featuring works dating from 1907 to 1996, *Private Lives Public Spaces* is the Museum’s first major exhibition of home movies and amateur films drawn exclusively from its collection. Democratic, personal, and unregulated, this “people’s cinema” is viewed as a precursor to social media, and MoMA’s installation is predicated on the expanded opportunities for display provided by digital media and the fresh appreciation that viewers bring to self-expression in present-day moving image culture.

Inspired by photographer Edward Steichen’s influential exhibition *The Family of Man* mounted at the Museum in 1955, over six-hundred reels of 16mm, 8mm and Super 8mm film were reviewed over the past two years from which 200 reels were chosen for non-theatrical installation on 102 screens. Following Steichen’s lead, the selection embraces a multitude and diversity of content, and an immersive display style, reflecting the overload of social media. With notable exceptions, these newly preserved films are silent, unedited, and exhibited as individual works. Different screen sizes and configurations loosely distinguish between interwoven groupings of ethnographic and social interest, family life, artist and celebrity subjects, and the Museum’s institutional history. Acknowledging the truism that “all home movies are amateur films, not all amateur films are home movies,” *Private Lives Public Spaces* mixes varying degrees of amateurism in the selection and display of work. In an intimate gallery setting, it’s hoped that blurring the lines between the hardcore amateurism of family home movies, films by artful amateurs, and the work of artists who honor the amateur aesthetic will have an instructional effect.

Consisting largely of family histories and travel diaries cinema, the home movies on display demonstrate signature aspects of the form: its wayward connections to narrative; quick takes

and camera movement; technical mistakes, and the chemical scars of neglect that often predate their acquisition. In preparing the films for exhibition; the Museum has preserved these characteristics as unique aesthetic markers. Individually, the home movies in *Private Lives Public Spaces* are fragile “souvenirs” of lives-lived; collectively, this installation proposes, they take on meaning akin to the poetry of movement and generations passing.

ⁱ Maxim, Hiram Percy. “Editorial” *Journal of the Amateur Cinema League*, December 1926. Quoted in Alan D. Kattelle’s *Home Movies: A History of the American Industry, 1897-1979*. Nashua, NH: Transition Publishing, 2000, p 296.

ⁱⁱ Mekas, Jonas. “8mm as Folk Art” *Village Voice* 18 April 1963, *Movie Journal* New York: Macmillan, 1972, p 83.

ⁱⁱⁱ Deren, Maya. “Amateur Versus Professional” *Film Culture* 39, 1965, p 45-46.