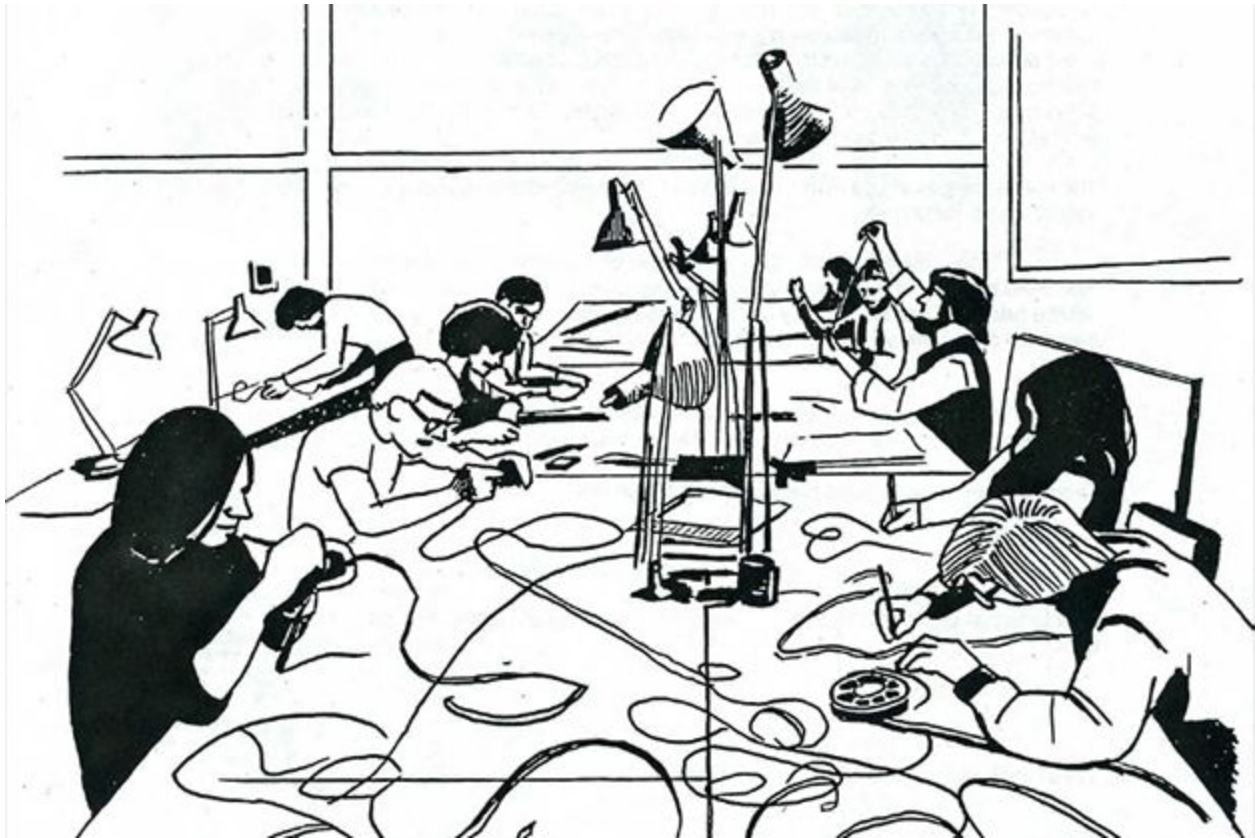


Kitchen Sink Cinema: Artist-Run Film Laboratories

By [Genevieve Yue](#) on March 30, 2015



page from *Recipes for Disaster: A Handcrafted Film Cookbooklet*, by Helen Hill, 2005

There are roughly [65 film labs](#) left in the world, of which around 20 are in North America. These ranks, along with the number of film stocks being manufactured, dwindled as digital technologies have saturated the realm of production and studios have moved away from film. When it comes to labs that process 16mm film—a mainstay of experimental film—and small-gauge stocks, only a few commercial options exist, mostly in the United States: [Cinelab](#), in Boston; [ColorLab](#) in Maryland; [in Kansas](#); and [Fotokem](#) in Burbank. One of the most recent casualties of this technological shift has been Pac Lab, which closed in New York, leaving the city without any facilities to process and print 16mm.

The decline in commercial film production, however, has been countered by a rebirth in the phenomenon of artist-run film laboratories. What in the early Nineties was limited to a handful of cooperatively owned, independent labs, mostly in France, has grown into an international network of over 30, many of them formed within the last several years. The decline of film processing created a surplus of cheap, unwanted equipment that, in the right hands, could be repurposed for the smaller-scale operation of an artist-run lab. Saved from the scrap heap, many discarded contact printers and lomo processing tanks have begun a second life as artists' tools.

For many, this historical juncture between film and digital media has been cause for lament. But among those in the growing artist-run film lab community, the view is considerably more sanguine. Many are younger filmmakers drawn to the creative possibilities of hand-processing in workshops at places like [Mono No Aware](#), in Brooklyn, or [Big Mama's Cinematheque](#) in Philadelphia. For these artists, film offers a range of textures and expressive possibilities not available in digital formats. Others

are drawn to the “home-brew” DIY spirit that celebrates the autonomy of artist-run labs. Josh Lewis, who in 2012 founded the [Negativland](#) lab in Ridgewood, Queens, describes it as “a more involved way of being a filmmaker. You can’t rely on an industry that serves Hollywood. You need to be a technician *and* a filmmaker.”

For filmmakers like Lewis, the current moment offers the opportunity to sever cinema from its industrial tether. In many ways, this is the culmination of the avant-garde dream to become fully independent. Experimental film, at least at the level of materials, has been invariably tied to the commercial conditions of the film industry at large, though its output may have more in common, aesthetically and culturally, with the types of objects that circulate in the art world. Now, in response to a collapsing apparatus for the production of film, avant-garde filmmakers are developing the means and momentum to adapt and design their own methods of making films.



Brûle la mer

The current artist-run lab movement has historical roots in the independent strain of the avant-garde. In 1966, the London Filmmakers’ Co-op, modeled after the shared distribution structure of the [Filmmakers’ Co-op in New York](#), added to its operations a darkroom and lab space for making films. Later, a few small labs were established in Europe, including, in the Eighties, Studio Één in the Netherlands, and [Atelier MTK](#), set up by the collective Métamkine in Grenoble, France. Both of these were open to anyone who wished to use their facilities. MTK became a hand-processing hub for filmmakers in France, Switzerland, and Belgium, and by 1995 it had proved so popular that it had to shut its doors to newcomers. The founders, however, offered to assist others in establishing new labs.

Among the many facilities that MTK helped to build was [L’Abominable](#), which has become the largest collective artist-run film lab today. L’Abominable, founded by 10 filmmakers in 1996, set up residence in a basement on the outskirts of Paris. It initially operated with no funding, scavenging equipment wherever it could, and later acquired support from the CNC (the National Center for Cinema and the Moving Image), a branch of the French Ministry of Culture. Hundreds of filmmakers came to use its facilities over the course of its first decade. In 2011, L’Abominable moved into the kitchen of a former school in La Courneuve, a municipality that has donated the space to the lab. Even with their expanded facilities, which includes, rare among artist film labs, a continuous processing machine, L’Abominable has not been able to keep up with the demand, admitting a maximum of 40 new members per year. But like MTK, it has done much to assist others in forming their own labs. From 1995 to 1999, a group of European labs published the newsletter [L’ébouillanté](#), which helped the network to share resources and information. Since 2005, following an international meeting of artist-run labs in Grenoble, the website [filmlabs.org](#), along with two listservs, has provided crucial support for maintaining this network and expanding it to North America and Asia.

The most distinctive quality about the current artist-run lab movement is the international circuit that sustains it. In its current manifestation, the artist-run film lab can be both an autonomous unit in Toronto ([Niagara Custom Lab](#)), Seoul ([Space Cell](#)), Bogota ([Kinolab](#)), or other locales, and a satellite attached to an international network. The idea of a collective, which stems in part from the cooperative organizations of the Sixties, persists in terms of the labs' mostly open-door policies as well as this broader global unit. These collective dimensions are both political and practical. On the political side of things, some labs are more explicitly anti-commercial than others: Anne Fave and Emmanuel Carquille, in their statement "[We Remember \(1995–2002\)](#)" on the L'Abominable website, pointedly describe "the necessity to establish our own means of production" apart from the industrial system, and many labs operate as non-profit organizations, securing grants to not only provide workshops to their communities, but to stage screenings as well. But not every facility operates according to these ideals. Some labs more strictly restrict membership, functioning as barely more than a shared artist studio. And some like no.w.here in London, the [Super8 Reversal Lab](#) in the Hague, Niagara Custom Lab, and [Nanolab](#) in Australia even offer processing services for a fee, particularly in those areas where commercial facilities have shut down.



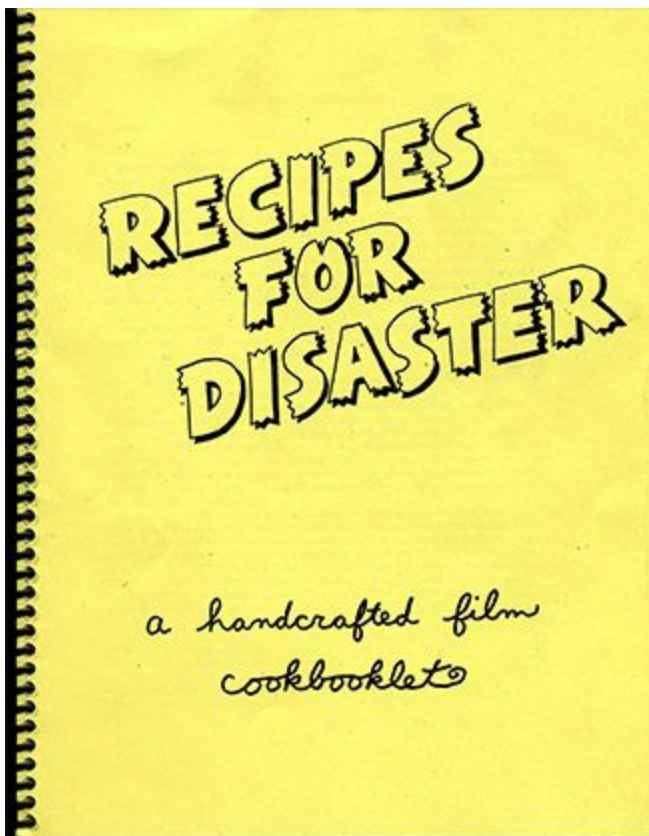
Seoul Electric

Practically speaking, resources are limited. Equipment, even when acquired cheaply, is often difficult and laborious to maintain. Beyond the basic setup of a sink, a lomo tank (or bucket), and a contact printer, few labs have the plumbing capacity necessary for continuous processing machines. When Lewis came across a 35mm processor with 25-foot tanks from a lab that was closing in New Orleans, he found he could afford the equipment, but couldn't manage a space adequate for it. Running an artist lab, moreover, comes with the reality of rising rents, the necessity of having a day job, and members who don't always get along or stick around. Expertise in maintaining equipment can be learned but takes time. A few, like Lewis, are former employees of commercial labs; more often the people who run and service equipment are self-taught, like Richard Tuohy and Dianna Barrie of Nanolab, or gain experience by visiting other labs, as in the case of Kevin Rice, one of the founders of [Process Reversal](#). And many labs, even well-established ones like L'Abominable, have struggled to find and maintain a workspace. Collectivity, more than a political ideal, may in fact be most effective as a survival strategy in an age of austerity and economic decline. Instead of rejecting the dictates of capitalism by declaring oneself independent, the pooling together of resources

serves more appropriately as a calculated *response* to inevitable conditions. Where physical space is not guaranteed, the network helps to maintain and redistribute knowledge and equipment until a temporary home can be found. Quite simply, labs help secure the existence and future of each other.

In many instances, the idea of the collective, and the sharing of resources, has been more important than the establishment of a physical space. In 2011, L'Abominable was evicted from its cellar headquarters before moving to La Courneuve. Fave and Carquille maintain that it was "a collective, well before it was a space." Process Reversal, a new organization located in Colorado, has yet to build a workspace, though its members have in the meantime acquired enough equipment to build several labs, and they devote their efforts to touring workshops and assisting the formation of other labs. Rice explains: "We don't see ourselves as a site-specific organization. Our original intention was to set up some public workspace that all of us could access. Now it's more of a supportive role, going to communities and helping them to set up their own labs."

Tuohy and Barrie, in addition to maintaining Nanolab in Daylesford, a rural community outside of Melbourne, are just as busy visiting and setting up labs elsewhere. The pair has visited roughly two-thirds of all the artist-run labs in the filmlabs.org network, and as their activities show, creating a lab also means instructing others in lab work. What was once a set of carefully guarded industry secrets has become a matter of open access, with expertise and salvaged equipment shared among a loose federation of film artists. A typical lab origin story goes like this: two years ago, at the Rotterdam Film Festival, Tuohy, who was there showing his own work, met a group of filmmakers from Indonesia who were interested in setting up their own lab. They had been offered a space in a vacant government building that had, in fact, formerly housed a film laboratory. Tuohy and Barrie visited the facility, helping the filmmakers restore equipment and build a new printer out of various parts to get the lab functional. Its name, [Lab Laba-laba](#), translates to Spider Lab, which is as good as any metaphor for the international web of artist-run labs.



The practicalities of survival are also a part of an enduring DIY ethos. In his workshops at Mono No Aware, which he runs in conjunction with Negativland, Lewis advocates the simplicity of the "bathtub model," where film can be hand-processed at home. "There's no secret knowledge," he says. "You can make any kind of chemistry you need." Hand-processing has the advantage of being cheaper and having a faster turnaround than commercial facilities, which often require shipment to an offsite processing center. Some artists, like Joel Schlemowitz (*Incantation of the Spirit of the Silver Halide*, 97) and Tony Conrad (in his cooked and electrocuted films from the Seventies), have made hand-processing part of their performances by shooting, developing, and projecting filmstrips in front of an audience. Among the resources available on filmlabs.org is Helen Hill's *Recipes for Disaster: A Handcrafted Film Cookbooklet*, a handmade, liberally illustrated and collaged 2005 collection of tips and procedures for making and processing films on one's own. It includes a page on Hill's 2001 film *Madame Winger Makes a Film (A Survival Guide for the 21st Century)*, which also serves as a primer for DIY filmmaking. In it, the animated Madame Winger, a gravel-voiced Southern dame, asks: "When your film lab is reduced to rubble, how are you going to keep making films?" Much as the threat of "nuclear war or gigantic terrorist attacks" serves as the impetus for creating a

"film lab bomb shelter" in *Madame Winger*, *Recipes for Disaster* was shaped by catastrophic events. The text exists only in photocopied form; the original was destroyed along with many of Hill's films during Hurricane Katrina.

The decline of commercial film laboratories in the last 15 years was a result not of violent natural or man-made disasters as Hill mordantly predicted, but gradual technological and industrial change. Artist-run labs have sprung up to fill some of these gaps, though these are unevenly dispersed. The majority of independent labs are in France and other parts of Europe; the fewest are in the United States. Paradoxically, the persistence of a few major American commercial labs like Deluxe or Fotokem has undermined the establishment of artist-run labs domestically. Abroad, where commercial facilities closed far earlier, the necessity for independent labs has been around longer. Film manufacturing, which is more or less limited now to Kodak, along with places that process film, have historically had their base in the American film industry. It might seem then that where commercial facilities exist, there can be few or no artist-run labs. Yet, as many see it, the commercial base is necessary for the existence of even autonomous labs, if only for the continued manufacture of 8mm and 16mm film. (Though there are recent efforts to create homemade film emulsions, including the work of Esther Urlus of [Filmwerkplaats](#) in Rotterdam and Alex MacKenzie in Vancouver, as well as various emulsion workshops in the U.S. run by Lewis and Process Reversal, these are not enough to sustain the level of production among the artist-run lab circuit.) However atrophied these commercial facilities have become, they function as the de facto base for which *any* filmmaking can occur. The continued industrial operations in the United States, then, enables the formation of artist-run labs elsewhere. Tuohy observes: “Kodak will last as long as Fotokem lasts. The artist-run film lab needs you to have commercial facilities in the U.S.”

The artist-run lab, however, is not only about reproducing the technical mechanisms of filmmaking. There is an aesthetic range between those that seek to approximate professional standards in processing and those who wish to use the laboratory as the site of experimentation. Moreover, many independent labs have engineered new equipment and techniques. In part, this is a pragmatic innovation: machinery acquired from defunct commercial labs or university classrooms usually has to be modified to fit the scale of the artist-run lab. But it also offers a new set of creative possibilities. Instead of the fetishism or the resuscitation of a “dead” medium (though that element certainly persists, perhaps most commonly in the art world), filmmaking finds new life in the autonomy afforded by the artist-run lab, fulfilling a longstanding avant-garde conception of the medium defined as an artistic one, well before its technological determination. Like more traditional artistic forms like painting and sculpture, it might be defined as a method of making whose tools can be changed and renewed, but whose governing impulse remains the same. Pip Chodorov of L’Abominable writes in “The Artist-Run Film Labs” in last fall’s issue of [Millennium Film Journal](#): “There are no format wars, no compressing or codecs, no backing up or transcoding, no upgrades or obsolescence problems, no corporations to force us to buy new equipment. We are not in an economy but an ecology...” Film need not compete with digital media—and [filmlabs.org](#) serves as a crucial communicative infrastructure to the artist-run lab movement—but might coexist as a related form alongside it.