

Queer Wellbeing and Solidarity: Marie Menken's Experimental Films as Sites of Cultural Resistance
(*Malay Kesejahteraan Queer dan Solidariti: Filem Eksperimental Marie Menken sebagai Tapak Penentangan Budaya*)

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ABSTRACT

This paper reexamines the experimental films of Marie Menken (1909-1970), a Lithuanian American filmmaker active in postwar New York, as practices of queer wellbeing and cultural resistance. While Menken has been discussed within feminist film and American avant-garde cinema, her work has rarely been analysed as a relational and communal practice embedded in queer networks under Cold War repression. Drawing on queer theory, feminist film criticism, and historical analysis, this study situates Menken's filmmaking within the collaborative activities of the Gryphon Group, an experimental film collective composed largely of queer artists. Under conditions marked by heteronormative gender norms, state surveillance, and the marginalization of queer lives, experimental cinema functioned not only as an aesthetic practice but also as an infrastructure of survival, care, and solidarity. This paper conceptualizes wellbeing not as an individual psychological state but as a relational and cultural condition sustained through collective artistic practices, shared spaces, and networks of mutual support. By examining Menken's collaborative production, social relationships, and underground screening cultures, this study argues that her films contributed to sustaining queer wellbeing in a hostile sociopolitical environment. Through this lens, Menken's experimental cinema is reframed as a site of cultural resistance that prefigured later developments in queer film culture, including New Queer Cinema. This analysis highlights the importance of artistic collaboration and community-based practices in understanding the role of experimental cinema in queer histories of wellbeing and solidarity.

Keywords: Queer, Wellbeing, Feminism, Community, Experimental Cinema, Cold War America

ABSTRAK

Makalah ini meneliti semula filem-filem eksperimental Marie Menken (1909-1970), seorang pembikin filem Amerika Lithuania yang aktif di New York pascaperang, sebagai amalan kesejahteraan queer dan penentangan budaya. Walaupun karya Menken telah dibincangkan dalam sejarah filem feminis dan sinema avant-garde Amerika, karyanya jarang dianalisis sebagai amalan hubungan dan komuniti yang tertanam dalam rangkaian queer di bawah penindasan era Perang Dingin. Bersandarkan teori queer, kritikan filem feminis, dan analisis sejarah, kajian ini menempatkan pembikinan filem Menken dalam aktiviti kolaboratif Gryphon Group, sebuah kolektif filem eksperimental yang sebahagian besarnya terdiri daripada artis queer. Dalam keadaan yang dicirikan oleh norma jantina heteronormatif, pengawasan negara, dan peminggiran kehidupan queer, sinema eksperimental berfungsi bukan sahaja sebagai amalan estetik tetapi juga sebagai infrastruktur kelangsungan hidup, penjagaan, dan solidariti. Makalah ini mentakrifkan kesejahteraan bukan sebagai keadaan psikologi individu, tetapi sebagai keadaan hubungan dan budaya yang dipelihara melalui amalan seni kolektif, ruang bersama, dan rangkaian sokongan bersama. Dengan meneliti produksi kolaboratif Menken, hubungan sosialnya, dan penglibatannya dalam budaya tayangan bawah tanah, kajian ini berhujah bahawa filem-filemnya menyumbang kepada pemeliharaan kesejahteraan queer dalam persekitaran sosiopolitik yang bermusuhan. Melalui kerangka ini, sinema eksperimental Menken ditafsir semula sebagai tapak penentangan budaya yang mendahului perkembangan kemudian dalam budaya filem queer, termasuk New Queer Cinema. Analisis ini menekankan kepentingan kolaborasi artistik dan amalan berasaskan komuniti dalam memahami peranan sinema eksperimental dalam sejarah kesejahteraan dan solidariti queer.

Kata Kunci: Queer, Kesejahteraan, Feminisme, Komuniti, Sinema Eksperimental, Amerika Syarikat semasa Perang Dingin

INTRODUCTION

This study aims to reexamine the aesthetic practices of Marie Menken (1909-1970), a Lithuanian American experimental filmmaker active in New York from the 1940s to the 1960s, from a queer perspective. Although her works were deeply intertwined with multiple forms of marginality which are queerness, gender, and immigrant identity, they have not been sufficiently addressed within conventional film historiography.

Previous research on Menken can be broadly divided into some strands, those are criticism that situates her within the history of American avant-garde cinema (Sitney 2002), feminist studies that examine her authorship (Ragona 2007, Trim 2023), and analyses that position Menken within queer communities (Suarez 2009). While Menken has been discussed from those views, her films have rarely been examined as queer practices embedded in communal forms of cultural resistance and wellbeing. This study therefore aims to reconstruct Menken's work and practice as "queer expression" by traversing multiple dimensions that are authorship, community and relationality, and historical context. This paper approaches wellbeing not as an individual psychological state, but as a relational and cultural condition sustained through artistic practices.

METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon queer theory, understanding queerness not as limited to sexual orientation but as a broad field of visual, corporeal, and relational non-normativity. The meaning of queerness is clearly captured in Eve Sedgwick's formulation (Sedgwick, 7). Drawing on Eve Sedgwick's formulation of queerness as non-monolithic meaning, this paper applies queer theory to Menken's temporal, relational and communal practices. Also, this study referenced these theoretical frameworks. Jack Halberstam's "queer time /queer temporality" addresses nonlinear time and the fragmented or sensory temporalities experienced by marginalized subjects. It is applied here to analyse Menken's repetitions, fluctuations, and bodily rhythms. B. Ruby Rich's *New Queer Cinema* (NQC) situated at the intersection of queer theory and film culture studies. It is used to position Menken's films as pre-NQC queer visual practice. Moreover, feminist film criticism (Mulvey, Trim, Ragona) is also consulted to reconsider Menken's authorship outside the male-dominated canon.

Historical, Social Context

This study integrates the contexts of U.S. cultural policy during the Cold War, the institutional marginalization of women artists, Menken's identity as a second-generation Lithuanian American, comparison with Jonas Mekas, a Lithuanian filmmaker and poet, and queer networks in mid-century New York and the position of the Gryphon Group. By synthesizing these perspectives, the study examines how Menken's marginal social position manifests in her films in queer forms. This interdisciplinary approach connects cultural studies, avant-garde movements, and queer history.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Who is Marie Menken?

In this section, I will briefly discuss Marie Menken's life and her career. Marie Menken (1910-1970) was a Lithuanian American filmmaker whose short experimental films, made with a hand-held 16mm Bolex camera, were dynamic and highly influential. She was often cited as an important precursor for figures such as Andy Warhol, Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas (Trim 20).

Menken was born to Lithuanian immigrant parents in Brooklyn in 1910 (Ragona 21). She has a Lithuanian name, Marie Menkevicius, was a so-called second-generation immigrant. Menken's interest was not in films at first. She started to draw oil paintings in her early twenties. Menken studied at the New York School of Fine and Industrial Arts and The Art Students' League. To support herself as a painter, Menken worked as a secretary of Hilla Rebay, the first director and curator of the Gallery of Non-Object Painting (later known as the Guggenheim Museum). During this period, Menken attended many film screenings of "Concert of Non-Objectivity," organized by Rebay and she was possibly influenced those moving images. (Starr 7).

In the mid-1930s, Menken received a residency-grant at Yaddo, an art colony in upstate New York. There Menken met the poet and filmmaker Willard Maas, another resident artist, and they got married in 1937 (Brakhage 34). During World War II, Menken and Maas worked for the U.S. military and this experience helped prepare her transition from painting to filmmaking. Alongside her visual experiments, according to Ragona, Menken exhibited small shows at Tibor de Nagy Gallery and Betty Parsons galleries in New York. Although Menken's early paintings are not much known, they already displayed her interest

in combining media that includes sand, collage, assembling, and installation (Ragona 21). Ragona notes that film allowed Menken to move beyond the static materiality of Abstract Expressionism and to explore more kinetic and experimental arrangements in her works (23).

With Maas, Menken became a core member of a collaborative group of filmmakers, the Gryphon Group. The group did not exist formally until the mid-1950s, when Menken registered Gryphon Production on her Christmas bonus from Time-Life (Maas 46). They shoot films, *The Geography of the Body* (1943) together first, and gradually Menken switched to shoot by herself. While Maas was well known as a filmmaker, poet, and a member of Wagner College's English department faculty (Key), Menken had to had double work. From the mid-1940s until the time of her death in 1970, Menken worked as a night-time manager of the Foreign News Department at Time-Life in New York (Ragona 21). During her lifetime, it seems that Menken was not widely regarded as a successful filmmaker.

Menken's oeuvre reflects her multiple interests. The most noticeable feature of Menken's works is fervent interest in objects and materiality, which originates from her background in abstract painting. Finding the limitation of traditional abstract paintings, she sought to extend painterly abstraction into the moving image. Her films can be separated into several features: (1) films that focus on shapes of objects, such as sculptures, decoration and patterns of architecture; (2) works that try to go beyond solid abstract paintings and by adding motion; (3) films that show her interests in light and movement. She uses light as if it were paint, and fast motion enables her to capture scenery that looks like abstract pictures. Also, from (1) to (3) all have rhythm and temporality. Her handheld camera conveys her body movement directly to the viewer, (4) works with macro lens. Using macro lens in filmmaking was rare at that time and it reveals Menken's experimental attempts (fig.1); (5) Films that were created in the relationship between Menken and her friends. In multiple works, Menken titled her friends or partner, Isamu Noguchi, Willard Mass, Kenneth Anger, and Andy Warhol. Moreover, she shoots her friends' works and the garden sometimes. It shows that Menken cherishes the relation between her friends and its connection with filmmaking.

The Gryphon Group and Its Wellbeing Practice

The Gryphon Group, a prominent collective within the experimental film world, gained considerable acclaim

from the midpoint of its activities. Active from the 1940s until the late 1960s, it subsequently declined over the following decades, though signs of a revival have begun to emerge in recent publications, academic conferences, and film works. The core members of this group were Marie Menken and her husband, Willard Maas (Suarez 59).

This Group was established as an experimental film group sharing materials and collaborating on production. It is said that the catalyst was Maas's homosexual feelings for the filmmaker Norman McLaren. Influenced by him, Maas began to engage seriously in film production. After parting ways with McLaren, he established the group, while forming relationships with male lovers, continued to live with Menken without divorcing. Their lovers and friends gathered, and Menken and Maas's apartment became a party venue every weekend, forming a queer community where artists interacted. According to Maas' account, the method of artistic production for Gryphon collective is "out of and with one's own friends." This is a common practice within avant-garde art circles, where works are frequently co-created and inspired by personal bonds (Suarez 60). This tendency is particularly pronounced in the case of Maas and Menken, whose films often emerge from friendships or romantic relationships. One example of a collaborative work is *Geography of the Body* (1943), jointly produced by Maas, Menken, and George Barker, whom Maas had affection, within a triangular relationship (Gunning 273). This work, which transformed the form of Menken's bodily organs through close-ups, is one of the famous experimental films released after the war (Suarez 62). Furthermore, Menken's representative work *Glimpse of the Garden* (1957) is considered to be an indirect representation of her friend, the artist Dwight Ripley (Suarez 63). He financed Gryphon's activities and Menken inserted the title card "Thanks for the Garden and the Romaine" in this work. Maas collaborated with and was indirectly influenced by numerous other artists whom he falls in love, yet Menken maintained friendly relations with Maas's lovers, with these connections often outlasting those with Maas himself (Brakhage 36). This queer relation shows that Menken was influenced by her friends/colleagues as Maas was. This communal dynamic proved more fluid than heteronormative familial or production environments, constituting a departure from normative frameworks. Experimental filmmaking operated not only as artistic expression but as a collective practice that fostered resilience and mutual care.



FIGURE1. Zoom up of the flower in *Glimpse of the Garden* (1957). Courtesy of Marie Menken. <https://film-makerscoop.com/filmmakers/marie-menken>

Moreover, the Gryphon Group maintained an extensive network of significant experimental artists. Interactions with pioneers such as Norman McLaren in animation and sculptor Isamu Noguchi fostered stimulating cross-disciplinary exchanges. Kenneth Anger, known for provocative films such as *Scorpio Rising* (1963) and *Fireworks* (1947), explored queer desire and occult themes, and Menken created *Arabesque for Kenneth Anger* (1961) as an homage to his work that focuses on the interplay of water and light in fountain, *Eaux d'Artifice* (1953). She also collaborated with Andy Warhol, teaching him handheld camera techniques and appearing in several of his works. Jonas Mekas, also from Lithuania, was a friend and advocate of Menken. These interactions indicate that the Gryphon Group was not an isolated entity but situated within a broader queer and avant-garde artistic network.

Menken's personal life reflected a queer way of living that influenced her artistic practice. Her relationship with Maas, considered as a "friendship marriage" or an open non-normative partnership, deviated from contemporary models of romance and family. This relationship influenced characters in the play *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) by Edward Albee, portraying non-traditional partnerships that challenged social norms. In daily life, Menken and Maas demonstrated queer practices.

This play was created into a movie by Hollywood. The plot is that one unfriendly old couple who invites another younger couple to their house, but they gradually start to insult each other, and it becomes a huge couple's quarrel. As Suarez pointed out, Menken and Maas were the source of inspiration for this couple, Martha and George. Albee, a common friend of two, who participated in parties which were

held in the apartment of the couple. Menken and Maas were drunk often and had been battled at those parties (Suarez 84-85). According to Menken, Albee "used to come here every time to eat and just sit and listen while Willard and I argued. Then he wrote 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf.' That's supposed to be me and Willard arguing about my miscarriage" (Jacoby 122). It also argued that Albee criticized the figure of core family and the marriage system itself through depicting this couple (Nakanishi 7-12). It is possible that Albee found that the limit of marriage in the relationship between Menken and Maas. Moreover, the characters were attracted to parties who is not their partners (it concludes homosexual relationship) in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, it constructs a queer relationship. The fact that Menken and Maas are the couple whose relationship was opened for rather than the relationship of one to one, shows that their queerness influenced the play, in the point of the old couple spend a marriage life in a deviant manner.

The artistic practices of the Gryphon Group also embodied queer relationality. Collaborative production went beyond technical work to include discussions, networks, and the creation of shared spaces, producing a setting where experimental expression and queer identity coexisted. Screenings, discussions, and informal performances fostered a protective and creative collective, prefiguring New Queer Cinema by balancing visibility, experimentation, and solidarity.

Menken's approach was particularly experimental, integrating personal, sexual, and artistic networks. The Gryphon Group's activities demonstrate that experimental film functioned not only as an artistic medium but also as a means of practicing and sustaining a queer community, providing a foundation for political and experimental methods in later New Queer



FIGURE 2. Marie Menken and Willard Maas at home in Brooklyn, 1948. Courtesy of Frank Polach. <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/willard-maas-marie-menken-residence/>

Cinema. Menken's involvement with the Gryphon Group illustrates how queer communities offered support, collaboration, and a site for experimental practice. Within the group, her films participated in broader dialogues concerning desire, identity, and solidarity, beyond mere personal artistic expression. This position cannot be disentangled from her personal and social background. As a woman and a second-generation Lithuanian immigrant, Menken occupied a dual marginality, which profoundly influenced her perspective, creative approach, and engagement with queer communities. The next chapter further examines Menken's minority status, exploring how gender, ethnicity, and social position shaped her experimental filmmaking and solidarity with queer communities.

Women in Experimental Cinema

Experimental cinema in postwar America developed as a counterpoint to mainstream Hollywood production. Unlike the large-scale, commercially oriented Hollywood system, experimental and underground films emphasized individual expression, formal experimentation, and material exploration. Women and queer individual filmmakers, often marginalized by the industrial and cultural canon, found in experimental cinema a space for creative agency.

An experimental film is a work that challenges conventional cinematic norms and explores the medium in innovative ways. The spectrum of experimental

films is broad, encompassing diverse lengths, styles, and objectives. Often low-budget and intended for niche audiences, experimental films frequently deviate from traditional narrative forms, allowing freedom in structure, rhythm, and visual expression. In this sense, experimental cinema itself can be considered inherently queer, as it subverts normative expectations of the medium. As film scholar Susan Hayward notes, avant-garde and underground cinema including works by Jean Cocteau, Jean Genet, Ulrike Ottinger, Chantal Akerman, and Pratibha Parmar - can be understood as part of the queer cinematic lineage, existing decades before the formal recognition of "Queer Cinema" (Hayward 307). Experimental cinema thus not only resisted industrial conventions but also opened space for the expression of queer desire, embodiment, and marginal subjectivities.

Institutions such as the Anthology Film Archives, founded by Jonas Mekas and others (1970), played a crucial role in preserving and exhibiting those experimental films. By collecting and screening works that were otherwise ephemeral or overlooked, these archives defended a mode of cinema that resisted commodification. However, archival practices were often male-dominated, and works by female filmmakers were underrepresented. For example, in the 1970s, when Anthology Film Archives selected "Essential Cinema" very few female-directed works were included, highlighting persistent gender disparities. Even if women have prominent talent in experimental

cinema, they were underestimated or valued within “female sensitivity” by male scholars and critiques.

Although women gained nationwide suffrage in the 1920s, their professional opportunities remained limited, particularly in physically demanding roles such as cinematography or lighting. Positions that required less physical labour, such as editing, script supervision, costume, and hair/makeup, were more accessible, providing entry points into filmmaking. Mekas notes that the advent of portable handheld cameras also enabled greater participation by women in film production. Experimental cinema, with its emphasis on small-scale, low-budget productions, offered particularly shelters for female filmmakers. The advent of handheld cameras, combined with the small-scale production model, expanded women’s access to filmmaking. Furthermore, Mekas is pleased with these new attendances that bring a fresh and new sensitivity to cinema (Mekas *Movie Journal* 89).

Menken is placed in an early part of this feminist filmmaker stream, such as Maya Deren (1917-1961), a Ukrainian American experimental filmmaker, and Chantal Akerman (1950-2015) similarly produced queer and feminist experimental films. It illustrates how experimental cinema offered a relative space for women and queer directors to flourish (Hayward 307). Her abstract aesthetics accepted the notion of “female sensitivity” often imposed by male critics, but Menken’s practice is beyond the limited framework. Ragona and other feminist film researchers criticized the male-dominated idea to grasp Menken’s works more accurately. She also uses the handheld camera that made her explore the new expression in art. Menken was the artist of abstraction painting, but she could not afford to buy expensive painting tools (Haller et al.). This limited her freedom, and she turned to shooting with the new low-cost technology. It motivated her to seek new ways of expression, but she had not received enough reviews. Now some feminist scholars examine Marie Menken and other female experimental filmmakers in the context of feminism cinema (Blaetz etc.), it shows that experimental cinema is halfway to rethinking the patriarchal, conventional structure.

New York Queer Culture and Its Suppression During Cold War

The period from the 1940s to the 1970s was marked by heightened political conservatism and social control, particularly under the influence of McCarthyism. Anti-communist sentiment extended across Hollywood, academia, and public service, and queer individuals were frequently targeted as subversive or morally

corrupt or politically subversive. Homosexuality was often conflated with communism under the rhetoric national security, and gay men and lesbians were subject to increased scrutiny and arrests. During Lavender Scare, federal departments began to expel queer individuals from public office intensified. They searched for potentially queer staff members commenced, with those suspected of being queer subsequently losing their jobs (Pohlen 46). Under existing sodomy laws, police surveillance, arrests, and widespread homophobia constrained the visibility and expression of non-normative sexualities, creating both tangible and psychological threats.

Simultaneously, federal and state governments reinforced heteronormative gender roles. Women, particularly white middle-class, were idealized as wives, mothers, and consumers in postwar domestic culture (May 15). Employment opportunities were limited and often constrained to roles considered suitable for women, such as teachers, typists, and household workers. Also, it has increased that the number of women who worked in Service Department, often labelled as “pink” jobs (DuBois 586). The idealization of the home as a shelter and conservative gender roles in the 1950s was, to some extent, deliberately and politically orchestrated. As Christina Catalano analyses, the Cold War emphasized family unity as a defence against communism, making the role of women as wives and mothers highly significant in protecting the United States and its democratic ideals (45-55). May referred to these Cold War-era American policies as domestic version of containment. Furthermore, she stated that in this “containment,” the sphere of influence was the home, “potentially dangerous social forces of the new age might be tamed, so they could contribute to the secure and fulfilling life to which postwar women and men aspired” (May 16). In this way, under the concept of “femininity” or “feminine mystique”, every woman into this box (DuBois 570). It also happened to Menken. Even though Menken’s pursuit of painting and filmmaking which was unconstrained by motherhood, can be interpreted as a subtle form of resistance against postwar gender normativity, her works are evaluated with feminine sensitivity by Mekas and other male critics.

Queer Resistance for Wellbeing

In Cold War America, political oppression and social normativity were reinforced. In these situations, it can be divided into two types of activities. One is action which sought to fight regally, such as homophile movement, and the other is smuggling underground like

illegally operated gay (queer) bars or porn theatres to find queer joy.

Early homophile movements sought legal recognition through assimilationist strategies, while underground cultural spaces enabled everyday survival and connection. In situations where homosexuals being known as posed dangers, they identified themselves as organizations interested in homosexuality not to come out their homosexuality (Kawaguchi 14). The Homophile movement was trying to adapt themselves into conventional society. In the contrast, there were underground queer spaces, including gay bars and porn theatres, functioned as sites of refuge and identity formation. Even though there was terrify to some of the regular patrons, it was a common and expected occurrence. These spaces enabled limited visibility and community-building while balancing the risks of police surveillance and social persecution.

In response to social and legal oppression, experimental cinema offered a parallel form of countercultural practice. It situates in an underground stream. Filmmakers such as Willard Maas navigated the tension between visibility and safety by encoding queer desire and identity in ways intelligible to select audiences. He utilized mythological imagery intelligible primarily to audience familiar with queer interpretive codes. In *Image in the Snow* (1952), Maas implies his personal and homosexual struggles after returning from the army. The film portrays a journey from an idealized realm, through trials in a depressed urban environment, to a cemetery in heavy snowfall, where religious imagery suggests spiritual consolation and self-reflection (Suarez 65-66). The dreamlike sequences highlight the tension between pagan sensuality and Christian asceticism, ultimately siding with myth and the ideal (Durgnat 252). Menken assisted Maas and played the mother of the protagonist. She fried egg for her son, who declined to eat and went out home. She cried for her son who was going away. This scene implies that the conflict between mother and son, heteronormative and homosexual. The son has gayness from how he watches men's body. The Gryphon Group function as an alternative support network that sustained queer artists' social and emotional wellbeing under Cold War repression Screening venues and archival institutions also contributed to the sustenance of queer networks. Cinemas, private screenings, and organizations allowed marginalized audiences to witness alternative expressions, supporting the development of queer artistic communities. In this sense, experimental cinema functioned as a medium for negotiating concealment and expression, and for asserting the presence of queer identities within a hostile sociopolitical environment.

Moreover, many members of the Griffin Group, to which Menken belonged, were predominantly queer (gay men). In this context, they would have gathered discreetly in gay bars. Menken's work *Hurry! Hurry!* indirectly depicts these gay men gathering in such bars. Thus, even within a conservative environment where queer people and women faced oppression, they did not simply resign themselves to it but sought ways to survive within society. This movement became the seed that would prepare the ground for the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, and queer activism of the 1960s. Furthermore, the "obscure" nature of experimental film, its abstraction, metaphor, and limited circulation allowed queer filmmakers like Maas and Menken encode personal or political meanings that escaped mainstream censorship.

Cinema as Queer Spaces

Amid these social and legal constraints, film screenings and experimental cinema served not only as artistic endeavours but also as critical spaces where queer individuals could meet, express themselves, and sustain community networks. Experimental films and screenings functioned not only as artistic expressions but also as community-building practices for queer people. The acts of producing, exhibiting, and viewing films constituted an archive of queer existence, validating experiences and desires otherwise socially and legally suppressed. Film Screening also provided opportunities for social interaction. Audiences could meet like-minded individuals, form friendships and networks, and share collective experiences that reinforced communal identity. Queer gather at movie theatre or other relatively closed places to find lovers or sex partners. As Delany notes, porn theatres are the place for cruising (90).

Watching gay films, with sharing same space, especially porn, often became meeting places for gay men. For example, attendees of film screening of Derek Jarman, gay and created many queer films, were likely gay themselves. The dark, enclosed spaces of the theatres created intensely queer atmospheres. Such activities preserved not only films but also cultural and social networks supporting them. Considering that homosexual acts were illegal at the time, theatres operated as spaces of both concealment and release. Furthermore, screening of the Gryphon Group's works fostered discussion and networks that supported Menken and other experimental filmmakers in their queer solidarity. Queer film production and exhibition also had the function of affirming existence. *The Celluloid Closet* (1995), a documentary about how

queer audiences received and found queerness in Hollywood's works, which is based on the Vito Russo's book. In this movie, one person says that even when gays were depicted as murderers or as objects of ridicule, or when transgender people were doomed to die in movies, seeing queer presence on screen validated viewers' own existence and self-recognition. These examples show that cinemas were not merely entertainment spaces but spaces where queer people could "breathe." Contemporary queer film festivals continue this legacy, offering relatively safe spaces for queer audiences to meet, watch films together, feel solidarity, resistance, and celebrate queer life. These communal and affective dimensions of cinema as a queer space did not end with the underground screenings of the 1960s. Rather, they provided the groundwork for later political and aesthetic developments in queer filmmaking. The practices of gathering, sharing, and collectively witnessing films nurtured a sense of solidarity that would later transform into overt activism. As the sociopolitical climate shifted—with the rise of the civil rights and feminist movements, and later, the AIDS crisis, queer filmmakers turned the intimate and subcultural energy of experimental cinema into a medium of political resistance and self-representation. It is within this transformation that the movement now known as New Queer Cinema began to emerge. Such screening spaces operated as infrastructures of queer wellbeing rather than more sites of consumption.

CONCLUSION

This paper situated Menken's filmic practice within a queer collaborative work of the Gryphon Group. Menken's films demonstrate how experimental cinema functioned as a cultural infrastructure of queer wellbeing and solidarity. Under Cold War America, which reinforced conservative gender and sexual norms, Menken's filmmaking can be seen as the resistance practice for seeking their wellbeing. Such relational models remain relevant in contemporary discussions of queer cultural production and solidarity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank to all who involved in my writing. Especially, thank Professor Shuhei Kimura, who encouraged the author to write this paper. The author also would like to express her gratitude to her adviser, professor Yukari Yoshihara, who advised her in multiple perspectives.

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