
Arlene Elster Papers

Collection number: 2002-11

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society
San Francisco, California

Processed by:

Rebekah Eppley

Date Completed:

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Encoded by:

Rebekah Eppley

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Descriptive Summary

Title: Arlene Elster papers

Dates: 1970 -- 1976

Bulk Dates: 1970 -- 1972

Collection number: 2002-11

Creator: Elster, Arlene

Collection Size: 2 manuscript boxes 15 1/2W x 10 1/2 H x 5D

Repository: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society
San Francisco, California 94105

Abstract: The bulk of the collection contains newspaper clippings and articles about the porn industry in general during the 1970's and Elster's Sutter Cinema in particular. Also included in the collection are advertisements for the theater and films produced by Leo Productions, documents related to the Erotic Film Festival, and materials from sexual liberation groups such as COYOTE, The Sexual Freedom League, the Psychedelic Venus Church, and the Adult Film Association of America. The collection provides a history of the politics surrounding pornography in San Francisco, with an emphasis on San Francisco's adult film industry, during the 1970's.

Physical location: Stored at the Archives of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society in San Francisco, California

Languages: Languages represented in the collection: English

Access

Collection open for research.

Publication Rights

Copyright to unpublished manuscript materials has been transferred to the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.

Preferred Citation

Arlene Elster papers, 2002-11, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.

Acquisition Information

Donated to the Library by Arlene Elster in 2002.

Biography / Administrative History

Arlene Elster owned and operated the Sutter Cinema in San Francisco between 1970 and 1975. She was the first, and possibly only, woman to operate an adult theater. Elster was trained as a medical technologist and holds a degree in Biological Science from the University of Texas. She grew up in Port Arthur Texas, eventually making her way to San Francisco where she worked in the research department of the

Irwin Memorial Blood Bank. She met Lowell Pickett while doing volunteer lab work at the Haight Ashbury Clinic where Pickett was an administrator. During this time she began exploring creative endeavors, including photography and eventually partnered with Pickett in the adult film business.

In December 1970 Elster and Pickett hosted the first International Erotic Film Festival at the Presidio Theater. They opened the Sutter Cinema together in 1971 and produced "soft core" porn films for the theater through their company, Leo Productions. After ending their business association, Elster operated the theater alone.

Elster was arrested on 311.2 Exhibiting Obscenity to Others in 1970 and was convicted in 1971. She appealed the conviction to the Supreme Court, with her attorney, Carol Hughes, asking for a clear definition of obscenity. The Supreme Court declined and Elster received a fine of \$1,000 but no jail time.

Between 1970-1974 Elster was arrested on obscenity charges 14 times. During this time, the San Francisco police, supported by the Mayor and Board of Supervisors, continually arrested adult theater owners. Although the owners were rarely convicted, the strategy was to put the theater owners out of business with legal hassels and fees. At the time, obscenity was defined as "Appealing to a sick interest in sex, far beyond community standards, and without any social value." Elster and Pickett were committed to creating films that were appealing to both men and women and many considered their style to be more artistic than the films shown at other adult theaters. The November 15, 1970 issue of The Sunday Oregonian reported that "The Sutter Cinema takes small ads, features a delicate, feminine drawing in an 18th century style and offers simply erotic films." The theater closed in the early 1980's.

Elster was active in a number of sexual liberation organizations including COYOTE, the Sexual Freedom League and the Psychedelic Venus Church.

More information about Elster may be found in the June 27, 1973 issue of The San Francisco Examiner and the February 9-22, 1972 issue of The Night Times, Volume 2, Number 3 (Issue 12).

Scope and Content of Collection

The Arlene Elster Papers capture the climate of San Francisco during the 1970's when the City was prominent in the adult film industry. Most of the collection is comprised of Elster's papers from the Sutter Cinema and the First International Erotic Film Festival and newspaper articles and clippings chronicling the struggle between adult filmmakers and legislators who were trying to close the theaters. The majority of articles and clippings within the collection are from the San Francisco Chronicle and the San Francisco Examiner, but the Berkeley Barb, Daily Californian, Enterprise Record, Independent, LA Times, and Washington Post are also represented.

People, organizations, and institutions represented in the collection include Marilyn Chambers, Dianne Feinstein, Maurice Girodias, Paul Lawrence, Tom Lynch, Phyllis Lyon, the Mitchell Brothers, Lowell Pickett, Mary Rexroth, Margo St. James, the Adult Film Association of America, COYOTE, Olympia Press, the Psychedelic Venus Church, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, and the Sexual Freedom League.

Arrangement

The collection is divided into 4 series:

- 1. Clippings
- 2. Sutter Cinema
- 3. Organizations
- 4. Miscellaneous

Indexing Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the library's online public access catalog.

Adult films (Pornographic films)

Adult movie theaters

Obscenity (Law)

San Francisco

Separated Material

First Erotic Film Festival Posters (2) removed to Oversize papers from Manuscripts Collections Box E.

Clippings 1970 -- 1974

Physical Description: 2 Folders

Series Scope and Content Summary

This series contains articles collected by Elster representing both positive and negative attitudes toward pornography and adult films, primarily in San Francisco during the 1970's, and sets the tone for the conditions and environment in which Elster operated the Sutter. The Sex News folder contains articles about Elster and the Sutter Cinema as well as the politics surrounding pornography. Articles about particular films and actresses such as The Green Door and Marilyn Chambers are also included. The bulk of the articles are from the San Francisco Chronicle and the San Francisco Examiner. Within the Sex Smitters folder are San Francisco Chronicle and Examiner articles relating to police arrests and legislation aimed at outlawing pornography, including Dianne Feinstein's attempts to outlaw obscenity and pornography in San Francisco.

folder 1/1-2

Sex News 1970 -- 1974

Physical Description: 1 Folder

folder 1/2-2

Smut Smitters 1971 -- 1972

Physical Description: 1 Folder

Sutter Cinema, 1970-1972 1970 -- 1972

Physical Description: 7 Folders

Series Scope and Content Summary

This series contains papers relating to the Sutter Cinema. Documents concerning Elster's obscenity charges, including the petition for a writ of certiorari in the Supreme Court case, are included. Press and publicity for the Erotic Film festival; Sutter Cinema ads and negatives, including the Sutter Fables comic strip developed as an advertisement for the theater; a catalog listing films produced by Leo Productions; and a press kit for Intersection, a film by Jann Berner starring Mary Rexroth also make up the series. The Erotic Film Festival Planning folder contains some Olympia Press materials including biographical information about Maurice Girodias who served as a judge for the Festival.

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| folder 1/3 | Obscenity Charges 1971 -- 1972
Physical Description: 1 Folder |
| folder 1/4 | Erotic Film Festival Planning 1970
Physical Description: 1 Folder |
| folder 1/5 | Erotic Film Festival Press 1970
Physical Description: 1 Folder |
| folder 1/6 | Advertising Paste-Up 1970 -- ?
Physical Description: 1 Folder |
| folder 1/7 | Advertising Negatives 1970 -- 1971
Physical Description: 1 Folder |
| folder 2/8 | Leo Productions ?
Physical Description: 1 Folder |
| folder 2/9 | "Intersection" Press Kit 1971
Physical Description: 1 Folder |

Organizations 1970 -- 1975

Physical Description: 4 Folders

Series Scope and Content Summary

This series is comprised of organizational newsletters, membership information, bylaws, and related materials. One folder, containing membership lists, is restricted.

Access Note

One folder, RESTRICTED Membership Lists, is restricted.

- folder 2/10 **Adult Film Association of America 1974 -- 1975**
Physical Description: 1 Folder
- folder 2/11 **COYOTE 1974 -- 1975**
folder 2/12 **Sexual Freedom League and Psychedelic Venus Church 1971 -- 1973**
Physical Description: 1 Folder
- folder 2/13 **RESTRICTED Membership Lists 1970 -- 1972**
Physical Description: 1 Folder

Miscellaneous 1971 -- 1974

Physical Description: 1 Folder

Series Scope and Content Summary

This series consists of California pornography surveys and reports, including the Statewide Survey of Public Opinion About the Public Display of Pornographic Materials, a copy of A Treasury of Filth porn magazine, an ordering catalog for The Print Mint comic publisher, and flyers and brochures for the San Francisco Museum of Art Film Series and Amsterdam's Wet Dream Film Festival.

folder 2/14

Miscellaneous Items 1971 -- 1974

Physical Description: 1 Folder