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Trans* film festivals: An interview with Eliza Steinbock

by *Skadi Loist and Marijke de Valck*

On a sunny August afternoon in Amsterdam, Marijke de Valck and Skadi Loist of the Film Festival Research Network met cultural analyst, festival programmer, and filmmaker Eliza Steinbock (currently working as a lecturer and researcher at Maastricht University). The discussion ranged from Amsterdam-based transgender film festivals to issues of precarity in activist film festivals and the politics of representation in trans*^[1] cinema culture.

Loist & de Valck: How did you get involved with the Netherlands Transgender Film Festival (NTGF)?

Steinbock: I moved to the Netherlands in December 2002 for my study abroad program, which was the Gender and Sexuality program at the School for International Training. My partner at the time knew Kam Wai Kui, the director of the Netherlands Transgender Film Festival, via another festival in Vancouver. I contacted him to say I'd like to work on trans* representation and particularly around sexuality. He wrote back and stated 'fantastic, but I don't know much about that because there is so little, however, I do know a lot about documentaries and talk shows that have been made in the Netherlands'. We became friends and I volunteered at the next edition of the festival. I worked at the information booth. Kam Wai also programmed a film essay that I made called *Pull-in* that was about trans* relationships and immigration.

Because it is a biannual festival, the next event was not until 2005. During that time I was in England for graduate studies, writing about representations of intimacy and on trans sexuality in feature films. I started to volunteer earlier, and not just during the festival. I was the volunteer coordinator and I roped in a lot of my friends to work at the festival. That year I think we had the best attendance, something like 2,500 people. At that point I knew I wanted to pursue doctoral studies and I was already starting to develop my ideas about what that project would look like. Working for the festival helped me select films for my corpus and also to get a feeling for the pulse of the community, what issues people want to talk about, and so on.

In 2007 I was a programmer, and therefore involved for two years in developing the thematics of what we would screen. I was also in charge of a sex-positive program and I delivered a film-clip lecture titled 'Trans Erotixxx Retrospective', which was sold out. I was completely overwhelmed with how much people

wanted to talk about these issues. In 2011 I was introducing trans porn for the new festival TranScreen – things just got more and more explicit. I became a kind of spokesperson for issues of sex-positivity in the trans* community. In 2011 I also defended my thesis,[\[2\]](#) just a few weeks after the festival. So it really has been a kind of biannual marking of my research and my work as a scholar.

Loist & de Valck: Between 2009 and 2011 the platform for your trans* cinema work has changed. In 2011 it was not the Netherlands Transgender Film Festival anymore, but rather TranScreen: Amsterdam Transgender Film Festival. What happened?

Steinbock: The Netherlands Transgender Film Festival[\[3\]](#) ran consecutively for five editions. Kam Wai Kui was the director and he was also the person who initiated the foundation T-Image. One of the reasons the festival organisation changed is due to funding, because there is more funding available for new initiatives and very little funding available for sustaining institutions. We could no longer access the same level of funding. TranScreen: Amsterdam Transgender Film Festival[\[4\]](#) was formed with a group of around eight people (with a foundation called TransMotion). Kam Wai and I gave a workshop essentially to conduct a transfer of knowledge. In that workshop we explained everything that we had done and what needed to happen. Kam Wai was really careful to make sure that they could go on. In fact, they had very good success with the funding and they were able to put on the festival at De Balie, the countercultural film and theater organisation in Amsterdam, which is where it had been held throughout its history. It made for good continuity to have it in the same place. People were familiar with it. But at the same time there was a change in programming and they made their own vision statement.



Loist & de Valck: What was the difference in programming?

Steinbock: What was similar is that it was about empowerment through providing a diversity of representation. The diversity that Kam Wai had been very sensitive to was about including programming from Asia and Africa, also to generational conversations amongst youth and elders. At least in the first run, TranScreen seemed very keen to include a diversity of gendered experiences. The NTGF experience of a genderqueer program with panel discussions was that people fight this kind of ‘splintering’ language. Shortly after, it shifted into a dominant conversation exploding with all kinds of identity markers. TranScreen was very clearly more of an activist than professional organisation, in terms of who made up the programmers. So the capacities were different, as were the energies and impulses for what they wanted to program.

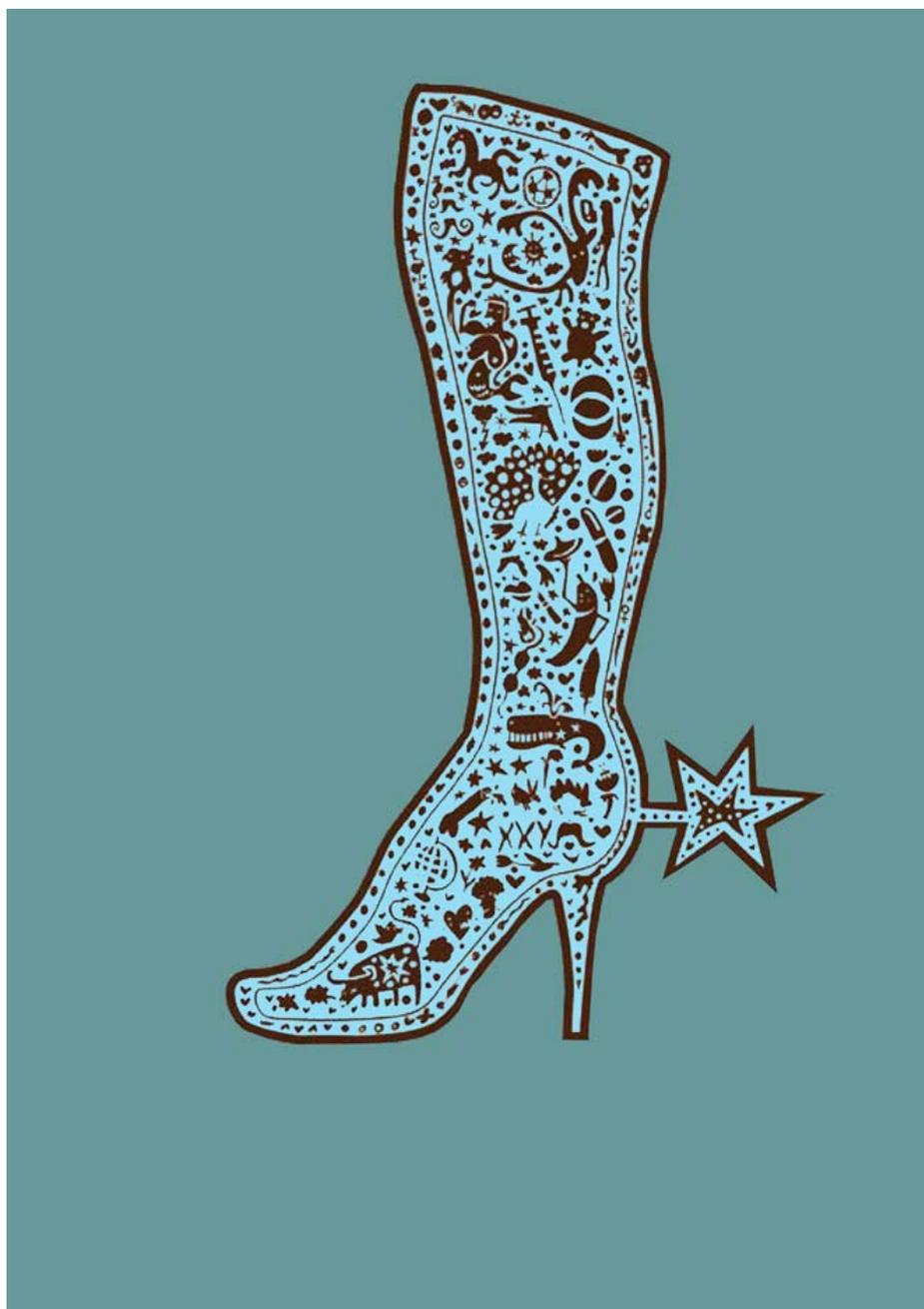
Loist & de Valck: When you mention the discourse around what the term trans* can incorporate, as in what can be programmed at a trans* festival, would you say that has changed over time? Does this also have to do with what kinds of representations are available?

Steinbock: It always has to do with what's actually available, and that is in part dependent on what kind of funds [are available] and which particular filmmakers have access to making a film. We have now moved to using Vimeo and YouTube, so that diminishes the cost, but you have to have the technical capacity to be able to do that. There is a kind of proliferation of digitising throughout the different processes that has helped make a lot of things widely available, but as a programmer you have to decide about the quality. The quantity has increased for sure, but the quality has been very slow in catching up. By 2013 I saw much more interesting fiction films and story-telling that included a trans* character, but that wasn't used as a device of either the deceptive person or somebody who has to be revealed: their trans*ness was not the plot problem to be solved. Whereas before, even in *Transamerica*, which was our opening film in 2007, that [device] is integral. Getting her surgery actually moves the storyline along. And the main character is played by a ciswoman!

Loist & de Valck: You mentioned a couple of times that funding plays a pivotal role in your experience with these two festivals. You started telling us that when transferring from NTGF to TranScreen, and the transfer from T-Image Foundation to TransMotion, one of the reasons for having a new organisation was that funding would have become really difficult. Can you explain why?

Steinbock: Amsterdam is a city with how many film festivals? Maybe three a month? Of course IDFA is the biggest one. One of the problems that NTGF identified was pinpointing what kind of festival it was. There is one banner that is basically for helping minority voices in taking cultural space, but it is primarily about an identity of a people. So you have, for instance, Filmisreal [the festival for new Israeli cinema] or CinemAsia Film Festival. We are struggling to not just be about trans* people, which is a limited fund, but also to be a cultural organisation, because we do art programming. Our funding came from the city of Amsterdam and organisations such as VSB fonds, Prins Bernard Cultuurfonds, and Filmfonds. We would often get feedback like 'you have such a limited audience, because how many trans people are there?' You would always have to justify the size of your audience and the interest of the theme – and then also justify the quality of the films as films, not just as a vehicle for story-telling and representation, in order to get out of this minority ghetto. They would say, 'why don't you do the Roze Filmdagen? They have some trans* films.' We actually got that feedback as a way to say 'we are not going to give you money because the Roze Filmdagen: Amsterdam Gay & Lesbian Film Festival[5] already programs trans* films'.

Let's be honest. Some trans* films are very mainstream. With regards to the kind of popular films versus the quality films in our applications, we were trying to explain how the films themselves were strong enough to be of interest to general cinephiles. It has taken a very long time to build that general interest. What we have managed to do is explain that trans* people are people who have partners, family, children, friends, allies, colleagues, and to show that their life is not only about transitioning. So it is really about also trying to demonstrate the trans* person is not only surgeries, sad narratives, or murder. Show them as complex protagonists, move beyond these stereotypes. We think that this is of interest to society at large because everybody has to confront gender.



TranScreen: Amsterdam Transgender Film Festival

Loist & de Valck: So what happened between 2009 and 2011?

Steinbock: I think it is partly the recession. Also, there is more funding available for start-up festivals. So after three years you are no longer considered a start-up. That made it very difficult to acquire funds for the fourth and the fifth year.

Loist & de Valck: So the public funding idea is that you have to become self-sustaining through ticket sales?

Steinbock: Yes, that is the idea. You are supposed to become self-sustaining. And of course, one of the paradoxes is that this is basically impossible. We scratched our heads for a little while trying to figure out whether the self-sustaining fiction could become ours – but there is no big sugar mama who can suddenly step in. Also, because of the relationship to theaters. Not only do we pay them to be there, but they take the ticket sales as well. Where are we supposed to earn a profit?

Loist & de Valck: Many festivals work with volunteers. Can you say something about how that works in the specific context of these transgender film festivals and what the impact is?

Steinbock: Anyone can volunteer for TranScreen. We have a very open policy. However, there is a core group. This year there were six core members. There were also four members on the board of the foundation and I counted around five helpers.

Loist & de Valck: The festival does not have any paid staff?

Steinbock: No, there is no paid staff. There never has been, in the previous incarnation as well. So people are working a full or part-time job, hopefully, but many people are unemployed. I think it is important to know that in the context of transgender issues, trans* is already considered a precarious at-risk identity. So they will often suffer significantly more from stigmatisation and discrimination that doubly impacts on their ability to have gainful employment. So it is not just about being precarious workers[6] but also about precarious lives.[7] That makes it very difficult, I think, to deal with this tension between grass-roots activism, which is really focused on good representation, and the overarching need for funders to have organisations professionalise themselves. So here I come in as somebody who is straddling that line because I have a PhD, I am highly educated, I have been doing research on this and I do have employment. So I have both frameworks of a slightly less precarious employment – although we could talk about precarious academic work for sure – but at least in many different economic schemes I am certainly less precarious than somebody who is transgender and has been fired because of being transgender.

What does that mean, though, that you have a volunteer-run organisation by people who are struggling? It means that you have a huge drop-out rate. But also, that the people who are coming in are very dedicated because the festival is very personal to them. That can make for an extremely energising experience, because it means a lot to them to have it happen and that we build a community that goes beyond the actual five-day festival. There are spin-offs as well. But of course, having capacities for becoming more professionalised is always a problem – and I can tell you that no one really feels comfortable doing PR, making the budget, or even writing grants. Everybody wants to be a part of the arts and performance program. They want to watch the films and they want to invite their guests and their friends. Who you invite is a very political issue, because it is about giving what we take from our funders and passing it on. People feel very strongly about how we spend our budget.



Poster designed by Jan Boeijink

Loist & de Valck: If you say everybody can become a volunteer, it seems like those people who are at the core group of volunteers have the capacity to make decisions. Is that a type of position that many people would want to have?

Steinbock: It might seem a little bit glamorous but in fact when people learn about the reality of how many meetings you have to go to, how long are they, and how many unpaid hours of labor it includes, most of it is impossible for people who are living paycheck to paycheck or who otherwise have a lot of things that they have to deal with because they have mental health issues, or their lives are in turmoil in some way or another. But it does place a lot of pressure on the core group to make good decisions. It seems very serious – let me put it that way. Not only do we take it serious, but it is serious, because you know the effects it can have for people! This year at our evaluation meeting we were talking about how many people have started to transition during or after the festival and we knew of five or six people. It is a major life decision! People come and they get inspired and they start making films. Between 2011 and now, one organiser decided after almost 20 years to actually start making art again, and then she came to do a huge art program with me.

Loist & de Valck: The transition of the well-known NRC [Dutch quality newspaper] columnist Maxim

Februari [formerly Marjolijn Februari] was covered widely in the Dutch mainstream press. Did you collaborate with him?

Steinbock: Shortly before the festival he came out in public as trans* after he transitioned for six months. He decided to personally address transitioning in the public eye by writing a book called *De Maakbare man* (2013). We reached out to Maxim and he agreed to be on a panel. The panel was a part of the arts program. It took place at the public library and was called Trans in the Dutch Mediascape. There are a number of reasons why I wanted this to take place. The first one is that as a film festival it is important to ask how this event can contribute to helping lives flourish, how does culture in some way counteract lives that are under threat of perishing, and also how can we support justice for all gender non-conforming people. The responses to Maxim were not all supportive. So it also created a kind of backlash for trans* people. We wanted to have this talk about what the media does to trans* people who are made into spectacles, and how we can respond. It was an open event in Dutch and in the end it was kind of agenda-setting, making it clear that media representation is the backbone of keeping alive all of those damaging stereotypes. From our perspective as a film festival, when we do PR we are also doing media representation. We are making our own stories, so we wanted to be aware of the very thin membrane between media and culture. As a festival we feel some responsibility to support people in the Netherlands and abroad.

Loist & de Valck: Did you specifically invite the press?

Steinbock: No, because we wanted to have an internal conversation first. Also, Maxim had recently said that he was done with public speaking. He decided that this was actually an internal conversation that he wanted to be a part of. So he did it for free. No one got paid, except with festival tickets.

Loist & de Valck: Can you talk a little about how your academic work informs the work at the festival and vice versa?

Steinbock: At one stage in my dissertation I felt the need to define what trans* cinema is. It is difficult, because you are not only talking about genres, although that is a discussion you can draw on. But you might want to talk about a certain politics, a time period, a locality. Is it in the director, is it in the content? Being involved in these festivals made me wonder as a programmer what it is I am actually looking for. What do I decide can be screened under this moniker, this label? In 2009, I decided to organise an event at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA) that was called the International Symposium on Trans Cinema Studies. That is one very obvious and direct way how as an academic my research has become interwoven with actual festival happenings. I also think I have a very luxurious position as a researcher being on a programming committee because I am able to access a much larger archive than is even shown at the festival. So I have a good overview of what people are making, the issues that are being brought up, new styles, trends, aesthetics. I also see the persistence of some stereotypes and recurring narratives. As frustrating as they may be, there seems to be a few chestnuts that won't die, that keep coming back.

My approach as a researcher is trying to have a feeling for the bigger frames – the framing of the frame, which I am taking from Judith Butler's *Frames of War* (2009). Framing the frames are norms, larger structuring norms that are invisible. But they have the ability to construct these kinds of discourses that are in the photographs or the films. Another way that I have talked about it in my dissertation is as a question of what is visible and what are the statements that are actually allowed. What is sayable and what is seeable. So when I program, what I am actually trying to get a feeling for is if any shifts exist in what is now more sayable or more seeable. It is less about how the films themselves have changed stylistically. My training as an academic is to understand what actually structures the space that allows this kind of a public to take shape.

Loist & de Valck: Is this particular academic approach something that resonates well with the other people working for the festival, or does it sometimes clash with people who have a more activist approach?

Steinbock: I can imagine that it seems awfully removed – and this is an age-old problem of perceiving

activism as a kind of anti-intellectual project, because it feels like ‘stop thinking, we have to do something’. In fact, in certain instances that has probably been the clash. The urgency to act is so great, and in particular for trans* lives that are precarious. I think that gets passed on to these precarious cultural workers who feel an urgency to make this space happen and basically say ‘screw identifying the frames, we don’t need them anyway’. I think maybe what I bring to the table when I program is that I can analyse how an issue became sayable because of something shifting in culture. I do have an insistence on being aware of larger political discourses that are moving, shaking, and making things possible. That is not something that I am getting shut down for. It is more of a reflective moment when you say it is not just about doing something, but about acknowledging that not everything is possible and that there are certain ways that we can press within these discourses to make certain things said or to present them in a certain way. So I was very careful in coming up with themes. For instance, one of the themes is called Feeling Community because I am interested in how community is not only structured by identity but by empathy, and how people relate to and have an affinity for one another. This was coming up in a lot of films as a very interesting diversion from identity politics. That is maybe one instance in which my labeling of what it was that I was programming came out of my awareness as a researcher. That does not mean that other people were not aware, but that I could say in certain terms what it was that was going on.

The bottom line for this kind of a festival is that we are very conscientious that what appears is taken by the public to be a possible reality. So, to use Benedict Anderson’s catch phrase, we are contributing to the ‘imagined community’.^[8] I think that is where the political complexity comes flooding in. What we put out there as the festival, we cannot know in advance how that will be taken. It is a wish and a prayer that it resonates with our audience, that they get something out of it. But it is also an exciting moment before it opens, to not be able to know in advance what will occur. You can never predetermine these kinds of moments through programming. Our kind of cultural and arts institution, it will always be political, because the next experimental step is taken by the participants themselves. We just try to make such a futurity possible.

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[1] Trans* with an asterisk is a way to denote the widest possible meaning of who is included under the trans banner. It comes from search engine functionality, in which the wildcard * placed after a word will show everything related to it. While this is somewhat specialised knowledge, only noted in writing or code, it has been taken up fairly widely in scholarly writing and by activists. Otherwise, when spoken, ‘trans’ is still heard. Both seek to include all noncisgender gender identities, such as transgender, transsexual, transvestite, genderqueer, genderfluid, non-binary, genderless, non-gendered, third gendered, trans man, trans woman.

[2] Steinbock 2011.

[3] www.transgenderfilmfestival.com/about/

[4] www.transcreen.org

[5] www.rozefilmdagen.nl

[6] Loist 2011.

[7] Butler 2009.

[8] Anderson 2006.

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