

The Great DuArt Film Rescue

How The Academy – with associated archives – still seeks ‘homes’ for thousands of unclaimed films

Ed Carter, Academy Documentary Curator, on a US co-operation that has already unearthed award-winning originals



Ed Carter checks films on the shelves at DuArt.

With the phasing out of motion picture film stock in all areas of the moving image business over the last few years, every company and institution involved has had to deal with this seismic change. For film archives such as the Academy Film Archive where I work, this means several things. One of the most significant is the shifting away from photo-chemical to digital preservation. Another is being prepared to accept very large quantities of film materials from various sources, including film labs that can no longer store most or all of their holdings. One such lab the Academy has been working with is DuArt in New York City.

DuArt Film & Video, which began operating in Manhattan in 1922, was a pioneer in processing technology (including continuous 35mm developing, Eastmancolor negative; 3-D; and Super 16mm), but also a supporter of independent filmmakers for decades. Their client list ran the gamut, from student filmmakers (including those who later went on to big success) to well-known narrative and documentary filmmakers such as Spike Lee, Woody Allen, the Coen Brothers, Andy Warhol and Fred Wiseman, and notable women directors, including Susan Seidelman, Leslie Harris, and Yoko Ono.

DuArt worked on shorts, animation, industrials, news, sports, and foreign films. DuArt has been renowned for helping young filmmakers and those on tight budgets. Yes, it's a business, but DuArt's Chairman, Irwin Young, always believed in supporting indie filmmakers. DuArt won an Oscar® in 1979 for Frame Count Cueing System and Irwin received the Academy's Gordon Sawyer Award®, for lifetime film technical achievements, in 2000.

A key player in this endeavor is Sandra Schulberg, who has a long relationship with DuArt and the Young family (she's worked many times with Irwin's brother Robert M. Young, the noted independent film director.) Sandra and I have been working on various projects since 2004, and talking about the situation at DuArt for several years. Sandra, an independent producer and founder of the Independent Feature Project in 1979, has created a new organization, IndieCollect, whose mission is to save and preserve American independent films. (www.indiecollect.org)

DuArt ceased film processing in 2010, and Steve Blakely worked to find the rights-holders of the films on its shelves. Like many film labs, DuArt had held, often for decades, original and printing negatives of films they had processed, acting as a de facto storage vault for filmmakers. Over time, many filmmakers forgot their materials were stored there.

Though DuArt had been storing these materials for decades, they had not charged filmmakers any storage fees. However, when returning the materials, they did request modest fees to offset some of their costs, in many cases greatly discounted. But even fees of a few hundred dollars were beyond the budgets of many filmmakers, and sadly some had no choice but to tell DuArt to dispose of their materials.

What was DuArt to do? A one-way ticket to the landfill was not an option. In addition to the legal liability, this act of destruction was just not something the DuArt people could stomach. But we in the film archives offered our help.

No database

In early 2013, DuArt decided it would have to empty its vaults as quickly as possible. Since it had no accessible database of its holdings, DuArt could not provide a list of its holdings to the archives. Therefore, we had to go to DuArt and check the shelves in person. In April, my Academy colleague Brian Drischell and I co-ordinated with representatives of several American film archives – the Museum of Modern Art, George Eastman House, the UCLA Film and Television Archive, Anthology Film Archives and the Library of Congress (Harvard Film Archive would join later) to organize a “field trip” to the DuArt vaults to see what was there. Teams of archivists, programmers and curators spent several days looking through the vaults, selecting films that fitted their existing collections. Each archive would make every effort to contact the owners or filmmakers of each of the titles brought into its collection.

With Brian, I organized a panel discussion at the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) convention in Richmond, Virginia in November 2013, called *The Great DuArt Film Rescue*, with panelists Sandra Schulberg, Katie Trainor from MoMA and Deb Stoiber from George Eastman House.

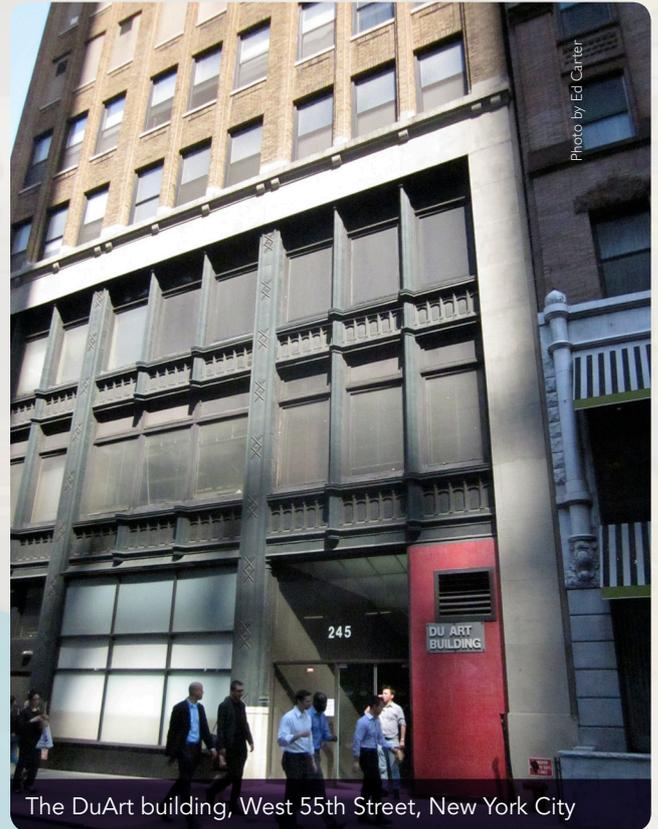
The archives agreed with DuArt that if any owners contacted either DuArt or the archives about the films, the materials could be returned to them, or the archive would work out an acquisition agreement with the owner. Almost all the owners contacted

have chosen to keep their materials with the archives, which is no surprise: few independent filmmakers have the financial means to pay for long-term storage, and it makes sense for their materials to be cared for in the climate-controlled vaults of film archives.

In August of 2013, DuArt shipped 196 boxes of films to the Academy. In April of 2014, it shipped an additional 450 boxes. The Academy has contacted and signed acquisition agreements with over 120 filmmakers so far in this project. I completely processed the first set of boxes in six months, and am tackling the second set. As I am the Academy's Documentary Curator, I was delighted to find the original or printing negatives of more than a dozen Oscar®-nominated and Oscar®-winning docs, including *Down and Out in America*, *Beyond Imagining*, *Soldiers in Hiding*, *Eight Minutes to Midnight* and *Music for the Movies*.

DuArt is shipping hundreds more boxes to the other American film archives involved in the project, but they still have hundreds, perhaps thousands of films still unclaimed. Sandra Schulberg and IndieCollect are working hard to save these other 'orphans.' But many other labs are 'de-accessioning' their film holdings as well, and it remains to be seen how much of these materials can be taken on by the Academy and other film archives.

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