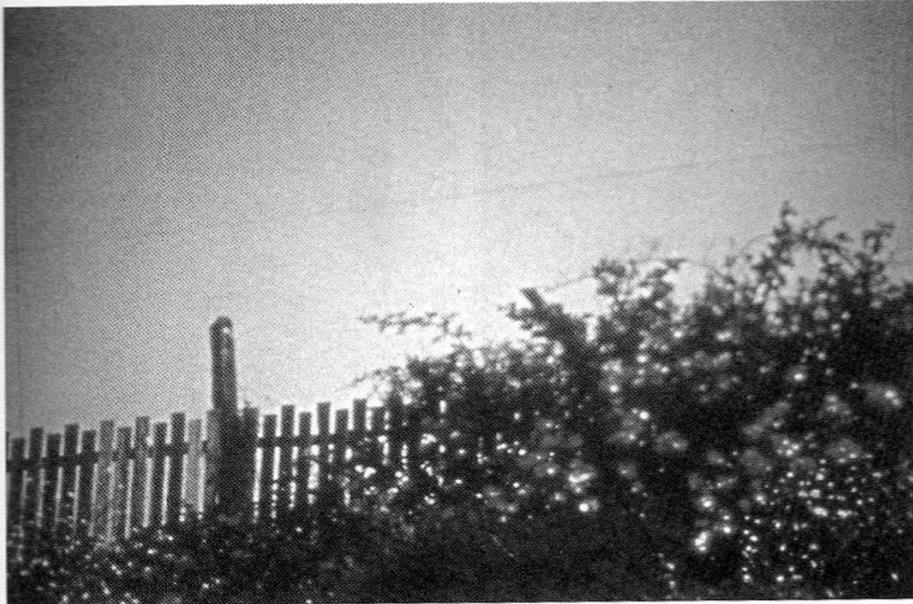


FILM ART PHENOMENA

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Chapter 9 - "SPACE" pages 126-128



All My Life, Bruce Baillie

across a telephone wire, into the sky. The film lasts about three minutes, the same length as it takes Ella Fitzgerald to sing the title song.

A seemingly simple film, easily described, but an extremely difficult film to decipher. Because the fence is overgrown with roses, it is almost impossible to judge its geometry: is it rectangular or circular? Does the camera track and pan, or just pan? One has to study the way the fence appears to approach and recede to try to work these things out, but the kinds of clues which might confirm the assumption of a rectangular configuration, such as a corner, where two straight runs of fencing would meet and which would therefore recede visually, are crucially obscured by rose bushes.

Finally, when the camera tilts up at the end, another conundrum of a different kind makes its entry. Once the camera has cleared the ground, it is the telegraph wire which appears to move through the frame, rather than the camera moving across it. Then, finally, the camera hits clear sky, so that its movement is no longer discernible. Given, however, that the camera has moved for the entire film, we are entitled to assume that it is still moving, or are we, given that we can't confirm this visually? Thus the film takes us to a place of epistemological doubt, where habitual patterns of assumption are brought into question.

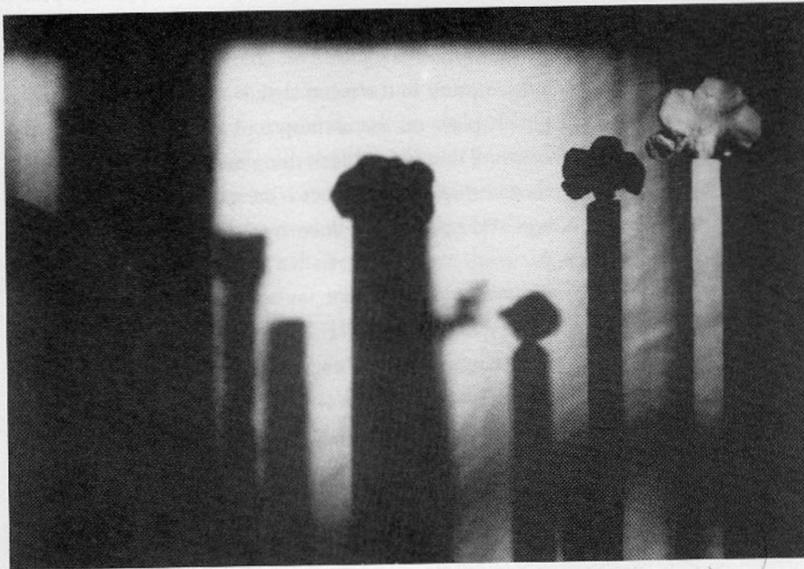
In *Sculptures for a Windless Space* (1995) the Dutch film-maker Barbara Meter uses the documentation of a roomful of sculptures by fellow artist Anneke Walvoort as the starting point for an exploration of figure/ground relationships within a confined

space. In this film the camera interacts choreographically with the objects, rather than simply recording them, so that the work animates the interrelationships between the various sculptures, creating a quasi-dance film.

The dance analogy is strengthened by the fact that the sculptures resemble a group of figures. Each work consists of an object atop a tall, slender pedestal whose breadth and depth is approximately that of the sculpture itself. In some cases the sculpture grows out of the pedestal and in many of the works the distinction between object and pedestal is eroded in various ways.

The sculptures are almost all white, as is the space. They appear small, but since there are no familiar objects in the room with which to compare them, there is actually no way of judging their size. The scene is similar to a desert where, in the absence of references, one soon loses all sense of scale and distance. This can make deserts seem limitless, but although Meter's room is obviously not so, there are often moments when the texture of the walls blends with the film's grain movement, so that the walls cease to function as enclosures, or even discernible, locatable surfaces, because they appear to move into the same plane as the grain. (This plane is defined not so much by the grainy surface, although grain is highly visible, as by the orientation of forms in relation to the vertical and horizontal edges of the frame.)

In a desert everything can become reduced to light and shade – that is, texture – and here there are further similarities to *Sculptures*, with its coarse-grained surface and absence of colour. Yet in automatically assigning 'whiteness' to the objects and



Sculptures for a Windless Space, Barbara Meter

surfaces of the space, we temporarily blind ourselves to the colour-cast of the image. To remind us of the bluish colour-cast and to reinvigorate it for the spectator subjectively, Meter inserts a vivid flash of complementary orange into the film after a minute or so. This is followed by further inserts of varying hues.

The similarity of tone between sculptures and wall creates a number of perceptual puzzles which reinforce the film's reflexivity over its documentary function. The objects are lit from one side so that the shaded faces of the pedestals blend into the darker wall areas in the background. Thus the dichotomy between object and space, on which the very existence of sculpture depends, partly breaks down. In two-dimensional terms this dichotomy is one of figure and ground, and in *Sculptures* the breakdown manifests itself as a blurring into modulated surface. The alcoves and chimney breasts of the room, and the shadows they cast, create additional vertical features which interact with the pedestals. This interaction, which compounds the confusion of figure and ground, is again facilitated by the very grainy texture of the film.

Camera and sound strategies also stress the primacy of the medium. Meter frequently animates the scene by moving across a foreground object to reveal a more distant one. Thus static objects come to life, effectively dancing in relation to one another through the agency of the camera. Focus-pulls are also employed, but here, strikingly, they change the disposition of lights and shadows, more than merely bringing parts of a scene into focus. Camera movement and grain movement interact, and also form one of a number of complementary relations within the film; the sculptures retain a notional solidity, even as they pulsate and threaten to merge with their surroundings.

The one black-pedastalled sculpture in the room signals the difference between two kinds of absence of light. It plays on the assumptions of the viewer who has assumed that in a roomful of white things this black thing must be a cast shadow. It is soon revealed, however, as a non-reflecting object – the only such to be defined, negatively, by its surroundings and not by its reflectivity, as is the case with all the other objects in the space.

Tracking shots

Linear tracking shots, where the camera is fixed relative to the dolly, especially if at 90 degrees, straighten out space. This is evident in examples like the car pile-up scene in Godard's *Week End* (1967) or the supermarket tracking shot in *British Sounds* (1969). This is Godard at his most spectacular and uninteresting, since the relationship between camera and subject is not problematised in any way: the camera tracks smoothly, and at a comfortable rate, allowing it to disappear, so that the viewer is focused entirely on the profilmic events, which in themselves are not disrupted as representations. Although *Week End* and *British Sounds* as a whole offer a critique of