

NEW YORK CONVERSATIONS Filmmakers talk to Barbara Meter



As long as experimental film has existed, it has been struggling to find a place of its own. Its audience has never grown sufficiently to guarantee it a constant and independent position, it has never been truly accepted by the art-world or by the film-world. It exists as a small but international community of filmmakers whose work is still controversial even in this age of cultural diversity and overwhelming visual information. The work is fragile and prone to being crushed and/or made invisible by other, more dominant visual art or film forms. In recent years, film as a medium is increasingly used by artists who exhibit in museums and galleries. Meanwhile, the art-world has shifted towards art-as-commodity and art-as-entertainment. In this way film is beginning to obtain commodity status in the art-world. However an unsellable and 'difficult' art-form like experimental film, still remains excluded and unrecognized.

It must be clear that I am speaking specifically about film rather than video. As a member of this small international community of experimental filmmakers, I have been wondering what the future holds for us in this digital age. In the USA the position of experimental film has always been different from that in Europe. It emerged in the forties through the work, theory and activism of Maya Deren and developed strongly in the fifties, sixties and seventies through influential filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage, Andy Warhol, Hollis Frampton, Carolee Schneeman, Paul Sharits, Ken Jacobs. Not only was there a consistent body of work but that work was represented, strengthened and spread through substantial theoretical and critical writings in the form of books and periodicals. Filmmakers were appointed as teachers in universities and art-schools and a constant flow of new generations of filmmakers emerged. In the USA, there are still many filmmakers and academics teaching experimental film in higher education. New books about the subject have been published¹ and there is constant debate and information circulating on the Internet (Frameworks²).

In New York there are many opportunities for seeing experimental film, at the Robert Beck Memorial Centre, La Vista or the Ocularis in Brooklyn. Several small cinemas show experimental work now and then. And there are still the older institutions like Millennium and Anthology Film Archives who receive hardly any funding but show experimental films on a regular basis. Millennium has been run for decades by Howard Guttenplan and includes studios and workshops where filmmakers can work relatively cheaply. The Millennium Film Journal has been published for more than 30 years, with articles, debates and biographies of filmmakers, contributing towards a wealth of information about experimental film. Established museums like the

Whitney and Museum Of Modern Art also take an interest through frequent screenings. The exhibition *Into the Light* has just opened at the Whitney and charts early experimental work. During a recent visit, having screened films in a number of New York venues, I interviewed several filmmakers about my concerns. I asked what they thought of the position of experimental film today, especially in relation to the art-world, and solicited their views about the future.

Peggy Ahwesh – The makers of experimental film have always been a small, hardy, disciplined cadre - in every generation. I see that the younger people who are active in the field have lots of the same intensive, quirky, obsessive stalwart qualities that I appreciated in the first experimentalists that I met when I was in college in the 1970s. Of course now the position of the marginal ones is different. It's acknowledged that to be into obsolescence as a style, or to be into marginalia (like Duchamp or Corneli) or to run amok with popular cultural detritus and to live on the electronic margins has a decided cache. So there's a new context for the activity. The critical mass at the end of the millennium and of the end of film has brought forth some really good filmmakers.

Brian Frye – The situation of experimental film is different in the sense that filmmakers are now realizing they are part of the art-world and not part of the film-world. Before, people still thought they had a foot in the commercial cinema or the so-called independent cinema. Now, nobody believes that experimental film can function in a commercial context or even in a standard theatre concept. The model of distribution is still the rental of the film per show. But the gallery model is the only model for monetary compensation of film artists. It is already happening with people like Sharon Lockhart.

Barbara Meter – Sharon Lockhart already has a position within the art world and she also makes installations.

Brian – What's the difference? I've seen a film installation that was just a 20 minute film projected as a loop on a wall... if that's an installation, anything can be an installation. All I mean to say is that the art-world is going to be the context in which experimental film will be recognised as a commercial art form.

Bradley Eros – Sharon Lockhart makes limited editions of her work - there has always been that tradition. The history of that goes back to Hans Richter and Duchamp, Man Ray, later Richard Serra, and Broodthaers, Bruce Naumann, Vito Acconci; they sold their videowork and sold it for thousands of dollars. Sharon Lockhart does not do that, but she

does quite well by it. I think filmmakers just have to re-position themselves and seriously approach it as an art-world project. I have a project myself that is a multiple. It includes a limited edition film as well as a book, a text and images. It has to do with the kind of relationship you have with the collector or the gallery-owner.

Barbara – Most filmmakers do not have a relationship with a collector or a gallery-owner. You would have to establish yourself within the art-world first.

Brian – I'll tell you something: if it does not happen before he dies, as soon as he dies Stan Brakhage's films will sell for a lot of money. It takes a big shot artist to start a market. Then you have collectors, people get interested, they start looking at other artists. They'll say its not valuable now, but it will be. Its the same as trading in commodities, in bonds. Capitalism is a very open-minded form, the only terms on which things are judged are whether they are profitable or not.

Vincent Grenier – Maybe it will go that way, but it remains marginalized at the moment. With video-installations it is different of course. A video cassette can wind itself back, nobody has to be present. I think it is as simple as that, those practical things. Even single screen videos are not doing so well because you have to build a little room. People like Bill Viola and Gary Hill make their money with the installations. It takes a lot of money to put these things out - you have to buy all those projectors and monitors, and you have to have ways to play them back in an automatic way which is often very complex, and you need some engineering.

Barbara – In the Whitney Museum exhibition there are films, by Michael Snow and others, which have been made into projected loops turning in a box.

Vincent – Yes, but it is not expensive enough! You know, you make more money with a bigger canvas than with a small one. You can charge a much higher price with expensive video-installations, the differential is higher. It has to do with how the market price is being manipulated. It coincided with museums seeking more money from sponsors and wanting a higher profile. Video-installations provided that. It is also entertainment, it's high tech and shows the museum is up to date and with it. There is also an element of the fun-fair. Experimental film is not doing that. It is not so easy to walk in and out of this dark room. It takes some investment and character for someone to say I am going to sit for two hours and there will be some moments where I really am lost and even get bored. Some films will give you an extraordinary experience but you must make that investment. Most people who go into the museum on a Sunday will not be prepared to do this.

Martin Arnold – For many young video and filmmakers there is this gallery situation going on and they know very well that there is some money involved, which is what attracts them. But many filmmakers actually do not want to show in a gallery. Peter Kubelka insists on a theatre, a dark room and you have to be there at the very beginning, you cannot just come and go when you like. On the other hand, in the past filmmakers would say their work needed to be watched more than once. Here the gallery is ideal. You can go there at 9 o'clock in the morning and watch it five times, have a coffee, come back, in the past the possibilities were restricted to movie theatres. Now we are watching things on the internet and on the computer monitor, so there is a diversification. Many young people now show their 'visuals' on dance-floors.

Barbara – But that is a different kind of film, I guess, than the personal film as we know it.

Martin – Yes, it depends on the work you make. If one makes rhythmical pieces which go with music, one does not need a cinema.

Vincent – For a while in NY City there was a club with good musicians, like John Zorn, or jazz, they had a section where they showed film and video, different kind of films - old films, and experimental films - a popular part was where the musicians played to a film.

In universities there is a fantastic growth in audiences. At our university the students don't know that something like experimental film ever existed. There are students who suddenly discover and appreciate the kinds of demands it makes and the issues it raises and their level of experience is therefore expanded. There is excitement and wonderment and discovery. These films can effect individuals in a very deep way, in a deeper way than other cinema can. Even structural film can do that.

Martin – The teaching situation here in the USA is really strong and keeps experimental filmmaking alive. In Europe there are a few lecturers in film, but it is under threat from video and computer art. And what if the professor retires? The film-department will easily get erased.

MM Serra – Yes, it is a shame because video does not have the quality to bring the viewer that sensuality. The emulsion, the saturation, the texture is not there on video. You can add the grain with the computer, you can even randomize it but it will not have the same spontaneity. Where I teach at the New School in NYC, there is a lot of interest in film now, even for 8mm.

Martin – One of the reasons experimental film has such an impact is that it is a medium of reproduction. It becomes interesting because it is a translation. It is asking the question, what is 'reality'? It's an examination of not only what is being photographed but how it is being photographed. It questions things that were taken for granted on film. It's like suddenly realising you never saw anything in your life. You never noticed it, you never appreciated the world. The act of seeing. It is such an enormous part of our senses.

Brian Frye and Bradley Eros are filmmakers and founders of the Robert Beck Memorial Centre, a meeting place for filmmakers, students, curators and one of the liveliest screening venues in New York City. Vincent Grenier is a film and videomaker and the head of the film department of Binghamton College, NY MM Serra is a filmmaker and teaches at the New School, NY She also runs the Film-Makers Co-op in New York. Martin Arnold is an Austrian filmmaker and was Visiting Artist at Bard College, NY at the time. Peggy Ahwesh is a film-and videomaker and also teaches at Bard College.

1. e.g. *Recycled Images* William Wees, Anthology Film Archive NY City, 1993; *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order* James Peterson, Wayne State University Press Detroit, 1992; *Critical Cinema 3* interviews with experimental filmmakers, Scott MacDonald, University of California Press, 1998

2. Frameworks Film Archive: www.hi-beam.net

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