

SHAKING THE ARCHIVE*

My paper archive is a special place. It is a repository of years of film screening playbills, posters, flyers, journals, reviews and criticisms, stills, production prints, and now, printed e-mails in a special folder marked "Personal Thank-You's" that I've printed out from letters and notes of appreciation. There are countless typed legal sheets of script that I wrote in the '60's and have no idea of their content as there has been no time to scan them.

This past year I have organized the papers, putting them into file crates, dividing by decades the paperwork into a variety of labeled folders. I began this process of opening the multitude of cardboard boxes, paper and plastic bags that I've carted around for years because I think we filmmakers who work independently need to preserve our own histories for those who come after us. I may be naïve here given the state of world events, but until a disaster happens that destroys the work, it is ours to preserve and conserve.

Oh yes, the films ! Of course, the films had priority and they were the first to be sniffed and examined for the fatal "vinegar syndrome", the smell that marks film deterioration. These 16 mm film elements, A/B rolls, magnetic tape of A/B and sound mixed rolls, optical negative sound tracks, inter negatives were each placed in a separate metal can with paper printing instructions attached to the outside of the can. This was the best I could do at present given the fact that I could possibly need these

materials to strike new prints before beginning the process that would lead to quality DVDs.

During the organizing of the archive I began reading about the ideology of archiving, the construction of archives. It was fascinating but also a bit discouraging, especially when I came across Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* and his forecast that it is impossible to archive memory of intense feeling and traumatic events due to the absence of memory. Sometimes emotional states were the very basis and inspiration for my filmmaking: the relationship break-up in *Double Strength*, the placement of my grandmother in a nursing home in *Optic Nerve*, and now, my own experience of cancer and chemotherapy in my new digital film *A Horse Is Not A Metaphor*. The paper documents from these traumatic events could not hold the emotional content, but I was sure there were other ways. Poetry, for example, held deep feeling. Maya Deren wrote about the verticality of emotional meaning in her films. Viewers could feel the struggle of Stan Brakhage walking up the mountain with his axe in *Dog Star Man*. Had Derrida ever seen experimental film, I wondered?

In contrast, Ann Cvetkovich in her book *An Archive of Feelings, Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Culture* refers to 'films and videos archiving capacity to create fantasy and facilitate memory and mourning by aiming for affective power rather than factual truth'. When sorting the film cans, I began revisiting my emotional and intellectual strategies for making this archive of 80+ films

and videos from 1968 to the present and I found myself aligned with Cvetkovich rather than Derrida. My first films were Super 8 expressions of living in heterosexual community and then with the dawn of my feminist consciousness, I made Schizy in 1968 about the interior state of what it felt like to be a woman filmmaker living in a man's world. My strategy then was to share an emotional awareness with an audience. Sitting in a darkened room with an appreciative and seemingly emotionally moved audience of about 50 people watching my film projected as the Honorable Mention film in the first Sonoma State Super 8mm Film Festival, I thought 'this is it' I'm going to continue to make film.

After coming out as a lesbian in 1970, I was even more excited about putting this newly-found physical, kinesthetic and emotional sense of being on the screen. This desire was only heightened after receiving my Masters degree in film, for in my film history class we saw only one film by a woman, Maya Deren's Meshes in the Afternoon. My strategy then and throughout the seventies was to put a "lesbian" body on the screen, to bring a lesbian subjectivity to film, to question hetero-normative experimental film. This strategy worked for me but not always for a lesbian audience who hungered for a representation they could identify with, a Hollywood-type narrative. Thus began my struggle to introduce an audience of newly-emerged peoples of 'out' lesbian identity to experimental film in hopes that they would appreciate it. I know I was successful in individual cases, but until experimental, avant-garde, underground film is introduced in elementary school, studied in high school, and seen on public television, the visual and aural language of this most

expressive of moving image forms will not be seen, let alone embraced by the majority of the world's population.

Representation and layered, textured, complex juxtapositions were not enough for political change leading to acceptance and celebration of difference. And so, another strategy was born. I would *engage* with the audiences and bring a physicality to the projections that I hoped would move them into another space. In retrospect, I believe the goal of this work is to achieve an interactive populism where the audience would participate in creative social processes in what is now called "relational aesthetics" by Nicolas Bourriaud.

AVAILABLE SPACE, 16 mm, 12 minutes, col/sound, 1979.

I had a dream of Pyramid Lake, Nevada, of space, of freeing the rectangular film screen to a more liberated space, of escaping the confines of the frame, the "domestic house." In AVAILABLE SPACE, 1979, I push the limits of restriction in eight different sections and eight different ways. When I perform this film, it is projected from a rotary projection table and the eight sections are projected on eight different surfaces of the "available space" from ceilings to walls, to floors and outside windows onto snow or garage doors. The audience must move to see the images. This was the beginning film in a series of attempts to empower, activate, "make blood rush through the veins" of the viewing public.

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In the seventies I used 16 mm films, slides, and audio tape in performances that I created or made with Terry Sendgraff under the name of Double Strength. I had the dream that is described above while living with Terry in a small one bedroom Berkeley apartment. I needed more space so after the dream I went to Pyramid Lake on my

motorcycle with a 16mm camera, tripod and 30 foot cable release. Once there, I began to film images of myself tethered to the camera but exploring what space I could find within the 30 foot range the cable allowed. On the way back I saw several dilapidated houses that drew my attention. I went inside and set up my camera and still with the release intact crawled into the rectangular space of a window frame. As I filmed myself, I pushed the edges of the frame, top, bottom and sides, in a metaphoric struggle to find some shape other than the proscriptive rectangle of the camera shutter and the rectangular screen because we are still ruled by the mechanics and engineering of the film industry.

I had a wooden rotary projector table top with wheels built for the performance of the film. I could roll the table through the space, I could twirl the projector, I could tilt up or down the image. I projected the film on the walls, the floors, the ceilings, and at New Langton Arts in San Francisco on a corrugated metal garage door across the street from the gallery. In A Space, Toronto I projected out the door onto a bank of snow. The film is broken into 8 segments with different sounds and images. Black leader between the sections allowed me time to move the projector and prepare it for the following section. The last one was projected onto rectangular paper and was the image of me cutting through the paper. Then, I actually did cut through the paper walking toward the projector and absorbed the light on my body until no image, no light could be seen.

My strategy with Available Space was to make the audience move their bodies while watching film. The thought behind this concept is that an active audience leads to an active politics. By viewing outside the box we might begin to see outside the box, see other possibilities, and try something new ourselves. As we move, twist and turn, to see the projection there is more blood circulating, more oxygen pumping, more brain activity in our bodies. When art stimulates us internally, we can learn to make better political and social judgments in the external world.**

BAMBOO XEROX, 16 mm, B/W, silent, 1983, 3 minute version.

Behind my desire to 'activate' the audience lies a distaste for a sutured, hegemonic cinema. By that I mean a cinema dominated by both narrative and documentary traditions, a cinema that hypnotizes its audience by leading it into some other world, a cinema that directs the way one feels and thinks through a variety of what have become requirements of filmmaking: sutured editing, illusionist sound, and 3D perspective. With Bamboo Xerox I found another strategy to move my audience and break illusion. Bamboo is my favorite grass and I had some in my backyard. I photographed the bamboo then xeroxed both bamboo and the photographs. After editing the film, I had the entire 6 minute film blueprinted as a black and white scroll of the 16mm film. I attached the scroll around the theater space so that the audience could see the film frame by frame, as a scroll, or as the projection. Perhaps the audience could break the

illusionist ritual required of them for viewing, or at the very least see a different way of "showing" film. We live in a hetero-normative society where difference is more condemned than celebrated and by showing the same film in two different ways (there could be more, too) I hope the audience will embrace a multi-level view of the world.

In 2005 I had an artist residency at Alfred University in upstate New York where I continued this project of printing the frames of film as a strip. This time I turned a 6 inch piece of 16 mm film that I had hand painted, scratched and treated with acids and salt crystals, into a 2 ' x 23' scroll. With both of these strips I hoped to break down the 'mystique' of film. I wanted the film to lose its 'aura', the customary role as Walter Benjamin tells us, where art plays a ritual function to legitimate traditional social formations. I do not want to legitimize a war or any other ritual form that injures people, plants or animals. I can only hope through these anti-illusionist strategies to part the curtains and lift the veils that obscure multi-realities and the truths of difference.

SANCTUS, 16 mm, col/sound by Neil Rolnick, 19 minutes, 1990.

In Sanctus, 1990, I refigured with my optical printer moving x-rays of the human body shot by Dr. James Sibley Watson and his colleagues in Rochester,

New York in the 1950's. I hoped, again, to return the audience to their bodies while at the same time activating their minds. These precious x-ray images were made by damaging rays of light. Not only could we see our inner fragility as fluids and tissues swimming together in hollow internal places, but we could also sense the danger involved in making these pictures. To the credit of Dr. Watson and the three men who worked with him, their invention of cine radiography, where the camera shutter was closed when the x-rays were on, and open when the x-rays were turned off, was a brilliant, but not good enough solution. All of the men died of cancer.

The clinical x-rays shift in meaning according to the use of the medical gaze, a 19th century phenomenon that privileged pathological anatomy. Not only were the cinefluorographic process and the resulting x-rays not the result of one man's work as is often thought, but also the manner in which the x-rays were 'read' was limited to a singular, rather than a multi-perceptual approach. In my reworking of the footage through multiple passes in the optical printer and the juxtapositions of varied textual fragments within the image (medical, scientific, philosophical text), I am attempting to use a language of multiplicity to question the unitary concept of creation as well as the epistemology of knowledge and the scientific method.

My goal with all these films is to activate the cinema audience through

physical movement (*Available Space*), contrasting artifice with material reality (*Bamboo Xerox* and the film strips), and presenting dense, multilayered images requiring mental consideration of their problematic origins (*Sanctus*). By making films that challenge through new physical projection systems or intellectual inquiry and by unrolling the film that you see on the screen, I hope my audiences will leave the theater reinvigorated to question the status quo.

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** I also made films to be projected on 12' inflated and suspended weather balloons. The audience would walk around or lie under the balloon seeing curved and sometimes doubled images (*Moon Goddess*, 16 mm, col/sound made with Gloria Churchman, 19??) and *Pond and Waterfall*, 16 mm, col/silent, 12 minutes, 1980.