

## Interview of Carolee Schneemann by Duncan White New York, April 2008

- CS: So where do you want to start? You must have some connective tissues here.
- DW: What is your sense of Expanded Cinema as a tradition and how has it been relevant to your work?
- CS: I think it starts in the mid-1960s with slide-projection where I can compact these small intense images and then reconstruct space with them. A space within which I can also activate movement, objects. And I guess by 1965 I can interfere with these projections, with performative actions, where I layered the projections on space with various sheets of paper and then could paint on those and tear them apart so that the image projected could both be absorbed and shifted away. So that begins with a collaboration with USCO at the Cinematheque probably after [19]66 – that's after the initial slide projection configurations.
- DW: So is there a FLUXUS connection there?
- CS: Well we're all friends, but the distinction between FLUXUS and Happenings is very Precise in its way. Happenings is messy, sensuous, kinetic, emotion as in space. Fluxus is initially much more discreet, it focuses on the object, it objects in principle to personality, to nudity to self-display, to elements that Maciunas called 'operatic'. So I went into that unit. There are lots of layers of battle, possessiveness for Fluxus to define itself – whereas Happenings came through Oldenberg, Dine, Whitman and Kaprow and I always felt it was more painterly – it was more expressionistic. So my work generally aligned with Happenings rather than Fluxus. Also Fluxus was a very tight community – we would go into each others work – but Fluxus seemed to have almost like a church of Fluxus.
- DW: So you start with slide projections and mix them with live painting performances.
- CS: Yes but by [19]65 with *Snows* I have film projections that really drive the structure of the performance. *Viet-Flakes* is projected as part of it; also footage of Bavarian skiers, Bavarian sports – this is very creepy a reference to the pleasures beyond the mutilating war which is what *Viet-Flakes* was so concerned with. So *Snows* plays on cold, snow, falling through air – the sublime and the horrific – so there is a metaphor between bombs and snow.
- DW: And whiteness?
- CS: Yes whiteness and bloodiness.
- DW: What was the audience reaction to *Snows*?

CS: It was very intense because most of the images in *Viet-Flakes* had been suppressed – they started showing up in newspapers but not as early as I started working with them – a lot of the images come from European newspapers. And we re-shot with these crazy lenses from the 5 and ten. You probably know that story – when I borrowed somebody’s Bolex to finally shoot the suggestive atrocity imagery collection they didn’t have a close-up lens. It was a moment when I had to compose this and shoot it – so I ran off to a five and ten which was still here in this city and bought the little lenses people use when they need to enlarge the newspaper so I got three of those and put them in front of my camera and moved them and that was part of the dynamic of in and out of focus.

DW: So were you interested in the use of news media and the manipulation of information?

CS: Yes. In some way getting as close as I could so that you’re into the pixel and the illusion that creates the recognisable image gets broken into and also degrading the image. One of my most recent works is a full photographic grid of bodies falling from the World Trade Centre. It’s called *Terminal Velocity*.

DW: Where did you take the images from?

CS: They can only come from newspaper because you can enlarge them and enlarge them and the pixel won’t break up. You can only degrade TV to a very limited extent. This is a huge work. It’s physicalised. The dynamic of these stripes turn into a sinister inversion of the flag when turned on its side.

DW: You’re happy to work in either media?

CS: Yes I’ll work in all sorts of media.

DW: And is that important to your notion of Expanded Cinema?

CS: Yes that’s right. For instance *Venus Vectors* is a sculpture which incorporates video within it. *Venus Vectors* absorbs a video component as part of its visual morphology.

DW: In *Snows* when you’re attempting to disrupt the very material of the images your using – getting into the pixels – how does that relate to the use of live or real bodies in the performance?

CS: The films are always projected onto the people in the performance – they pass through in the projection – but I can’t manipulate them as material as the way I can with images.

DW: What was the genealogy of *Viet-Flakes* and *Snows*?

CS: Well the need to physicalise and concretise energies concerning my sorrow and outrage at the war drove the sense of making the work – the live action, performative work – but the participants didn’t know what it was about until just before we went in front of an audience for the night. I didn’t want them to literalise it. The dragging, the falling, the carrying, the creation of faces, the suffocating wrapping, the aluminium foil, wasn’t specified as connected to an exact moment. It was also a work that was altered

by the audience. The audience had switching systems under their seats which fed into the film projectors – there were three 16mm and three super 8, also fed into a revolving light sculpture – so all our cues were constantly being altered by the audience which made it very tense.

DW: So you had scripts that you were working from?

CS: Yes. Yes I had a sequence – what I call ‘parameters’ – for film, slides, sound, electronic systems where we might be in space and that gets changed.

DW: So the audience didn’t know what they were coming to see.

CS: Well maybe but they had no idea that they were affecting it – they never knew that. The switching system was under their seats – so when they got very quiet what was disturbing them would slow down. If the image was persisting they would get restless – ‘enough of that’. Maybe thirty or two hundred seats had a microphone under them and were connected to the switching system.

DW: So it’s reflex – it’s trying to map or integrate the audience’s response into the fabric of the work.

CS: Yes it was a smart thing to do and it’s never been properly thought about.

DW: I would be interested to hear how you feel about the cinematic aspect of Expanded Cinema. Part of the problem in trying to define Expanded Cinema is this tension between cinema space and other spaces such as the gallery. Obviously you’re using film as a primary material in your work. How important to you is the idea of the cinema?

CS: You mean the cinematic nature of cinema itself?

DW: Yes but also the relationship between the audience and the film that the cinematic as a space presumes?

CS: I think I’m thinking of film as a layer of space. So that it’s transforming and activating the picture plane. And in fact it’s a moving aspect of painting which is why it’s so exciting, and seductive and vitalising because it also corresponds to my need to activate the body and to bring the phoneticism that is implied in abstract expressionism into actual time, lived time. As a sculptural space, in my sense of it.

DW: So a three-dimensional, material space?

CS: Yes. So it’s very different in how expanded cinema might present a multiple projection system in which you are still looking at it as if it is a kind of film. Where as I was always trying to degrade or reposition the surface of the film itself so that it seemed to be dimensionally leaving its projected surface.

DW: Then becoming a part of the space of the audience.

- CS: Yes but the audience can't look at it in the same way as they would a movie. And then I try and spread it around the space I designed these projectors with motors so that the film is moving dimensionally. Then sometimes there's mirrors that hit into the film and break it into increased layers. A kind of Cubism if you like.
- DW: So a huge kind of spectacle.
- CS: No it's subtle. It's not like a spectacle. It's really very optical. It's not theatre. It's film in motion, in increased motion.
- DW: So how would you distinguish it from theatre?
- CS: Yes theatre is programmatic, it's rehearsed, it has a score, it has a script, it's meant to be – usually – polished. All my elements are subject to chance or certain randomising aspects. I don't want perfectibility or predictability. It's contra-theatre.
- DW: In terms of it being anti-theatre, then, what pre-production would there be or did you see the production as happening at the moment it took place.
- CS: Well, I would have been obsessed with the materials and made definitely a score concerning duration, position and then the score would also include the uncertain aspects of how images in projection if they're motorised would overlap but that's not an exactitude there are aspects that roam back and forth into their superimpositions into their locations. And the performance with the participants you don't always know where the participants will be where the film will find them when it's projected into their space, what extent do they staying within the projection frame or are they really doing something in juxtaposition. So it will be changeable. The score will indicate that. But it leaves it open.
- DW: How will they know what to do?
- CS: Because they have rehearsed certain units of configuration together and then they rehearsed and rehearsed and then they can break it up and let it go.
- DW: Are they professional actors?
- CS: No, no, no, no, no. Never, never, never. No, They're people I find on the street; or friends that I feel have an animal clarity about space not about themselves. So I couldn't use even the Judson Dancers. Or regular actors. I didn't want anyone who's trained because they are trained to configure the self as the subject of the material they're going to work with. Whereas with me it is the material, it is not you. You are looking out into the space into your connection with other participants.
- DW: So, they didn't have characters or roles or anything like that?
- CS: No. No. It's not narrative. I don't do character or narrative.
- DW: I was going to ask you whether you are interested in using narrative.

CS: I can't I'm not about that. I'm a painter working in space. And there are certain things I have to tell which might involve language but that will be language that is somehow keenly associated with the image-base. But it's not narrative. Sometimes the language will be functional, someone will have a script and give instructions at certain times, whether we follow them or not. Or permission to say things that are really happening at the moment: 'You're pulling my hair'; 'I can't get out from under here'; 'Who's supposed to be over there?' All of those things.

DW: So they're not preset?

CS: No. If it's happening you can say it. That's a category that we had.

DW: So your use of language had to respond to what was happening?

CS: Yes you could work with your real physical situation.

DW: The language-source for the work.

CS: Yes some. Some not. *Vulva's Morphia* is a solo improvisation that's done within a projection of slides and that text pre-exists.

DW: How important was the documentation?

CS: Oh yes very important and I could never get it done properly it was always very haphazard. It's so hard just to get the work out that the last thing I think of is 'Oh shit is anyone going to photograph this?'

DW: But it's important to you that it's recorded.

CS: Yes for instance this funny work [pointing to book] wouldn't exist if it wasn't for somebody on camera. Oh it's Anthony again – thank goodness.

DW: Did you see a tension between the live act and the record?

CS: Oh of course.

DW: My only access for instance is through the record – do you ever feel the record constructs a different meaning from the event itself?

CS: Oh of course. But the essence of any imagery is so elusive anyway. *Fuses* is just an experiment, an attempt to get close to those sensory qualities that question image capture – can you even get there, how close can you get via flicks? It's always about failure. It's like climbing Everest and maybe you get halfway up and you have to lie down. But without it?

I mean I'm very pleased with the *Snows* footage. Which I couldn't tolerate until a couple months ago but it's brilliantly shot by Alphonse Shilling. He's from Vienna. It was done in 1965 and it's coming back to life. As a single channel DVD, with colour slides, have come into the film material with editing on the computer I can do freeze

frames, I can go into the image, I can pull back. I mean it's not fancied up but it finds the intensity of the original.

DW: So it's a different work?

CS: Of course, unless you were there saturated in the dimensionality of the movement the smells, and even looking at it, it's so complex you can't get half of what the document might capture.

DW: It differentiates it from the performance tradition. Which if you read something like Peggy Phelan – she's very anti-documentation and that the only access to the performance should be through writing.

CS: Yes, Peggy. The same Peggy who wants to make an academic centre for teaching performance. And you do this all through words, through an inheritance of language? But in Kinetic Theatre my premise is that it's beyond language it's in the body, it has to be embodied, you find the language by physicalising energy.

DW: You use the term Kinetic Theatre. I remember early on I think it was the 1970s in the film festival catalogue in London there's a piece of text by you where you use the term 'kinetic theatre'.

CS: That was my description for the activations or performances – I hate the term performance – I was stuck with theatre, I wanted 'kinetic' and I thought it might be strong enough to imbalance 'theatre.'

DW: You prefer that term to 'Expanded Cinema'?

CS: Well I'm not always working with cinema. But I'm always working with the kinetic principle.

DW: But you're always working with images?

CS: Oh yes. It's all image-driven everything starts usually with a set of drawings. If I don't have that visualisation, which is usually from some syneesthesia before waking and sleeping. So the conceptual aspect develops after the initial visualisations.

DW: So they come from dreams?

CS: Often.

DW: In a sense there seems to be these boundaries between the real and the unreal, the represented and the body, or waking and sleeping so these boundaries are...

CS: Permeable. Yes. They're permeable. Someone was asking me, a scholar of ancient history and definitely not a feminist, and he was asking me about when Priestesses were engaged with cats would I be looking at what the cats meant or were doing, and I said no I would be as a cat – I'm not outside of it. Criticality becomes a later discipline. And of course I have to deal and struggle with inverted criticalities most of which as *Vulva's Morphius* makes clear are partial, fragmentary and hurtful for the feminine. So

she goes through St Augustine, Master St Johnson, Kinsley, Lacan (Mr Lack!), she examines Freud and Jung and the Abstract Expressionists. It's quite a sweet analytical piece.

DW: So it tries to explode those inheritances.

CS: It does yes.

DW: Is that why it was so important for you to appear in the films yourself?

CS: Why?

DW: Well, I was interested in this idea of you going from these big performances to more intimate productions like *Fuses* where there is a relationship between how the camera is set up with you in front of and behind the camera as a way of questioning authorship.

CS: Yeah I'm running back to wind out the Bolex every thirty seconds – 'Honey I'm back! Where were we?' Partly I would never want to ask anyone else to do what I think I should do. I don't want to be in the hierarchical position of the director who had that separation between instruction, expectation and demand. That was a folly that I experienced every time I was in a man friend's film and thought this would be a wonderful collaboration and I would find something between us, I was deformed. Every time. They had that power to completely make me experience the self that was depicted in those films as a deformation. So it was just an experiment: what happens if I use myself – because this is coming out of my lived experience and those sensations of it.

And so when I started to train performers I had to develop exercises and ways of moving that I had envisioned that I would teach them and train them. They were often very unhappy and resistant. They didn't want to jump off a ladder; they were concerned with their ankles. So I had to build exercises very slowly which I would inhabit the image of the jumping, or the throwing, or the falling, until I could master it in my [own] body, and then I could teach it to them.

DW: It becomes then a kind of transferable art. Like a martial art.

CS: Yes. Uh huh.

DW: But people were against it?

CS: No. I had an incredible devotion from participants. But when I was first working with them the dancers had justifiable concerns about their ankles and other body parts that they thought might get in trouble. Because they were trained to not abandon, submit release, drop, fall, crash. They had to study that. [Laughs]

DW: They had to learn how to fall.

CS: Yes.

DW: So, you are trying to undo their learning because people are...

CS: No, I won't undo it. I'm giving them something else, because the most of what I'm doing is coming from observing the behaviour of my cats.

DW: Oh I see. OK. So, your instructor was the cat and then you become their instructor.

CS: Yeah, yes. He grabs and falls, that hesitation; that frozen moment before you go for it.

DW: And that always landing on your feet thing.

CS: Or on your back. But you do it so you're OK.

CS: So, I have a few questions for you. Are you doing an essay. A thesis? A book?

DW: I'm hoping it's going to be a book – it's a post-doc. So, I finished my PhD a year ago. And I was employed by [the late] Jackie Hatfield. She set up this post – she recently published a book on experimental film, which was an anthology of various writers and various filmmakers had contributed to. She was very interested in expanded cinema – performance based cinema in particular because as a feminist she saw that as an alternative avant-garde tradition that somehow spoke of the film tradition which was alternative to the male-dominated Sitney-type of arguments. She was interested in resurrecting certain ideas about narrative and theatricality. She investigated how these...

CS: I don't think she ever spoke to me though.

DW: No. I know she visited Bob Whitman.

CS: Oh wonderful.

DW: She was mostly interested in the English tradition really. She wanted to broaden the project, which is why she made this bid for a post-doc. So, I'm supposed to be her assistant.

CS: Oh that will be quite an inheritance. Huh?

DW: Yeah, it was all. I started in September and it's all been under a bit of a cloud. Well, it still is really. But David [Curtis] has now taken on her role. I am based at the Study Collection at St Martins in London. It's a two-year project So, we're hoping to work towards a co-authored book that specifically looks at expanded cinema and the working title is *Narrative Exploration in Expanded Cinema*.

CS: You have to get my interview in my MIT book with Kate Haugh. You have that? It'll be valuable.

DW: So, that's the project.

CS: That's what you're doing. OK. David's wonderful.



- DW: Yeah. He's good.
- CS: He fought single-handedly for such a long time to what was going on to keep experimental cinema alive in London; to help the [London Filmmaker's] Co-Op and work with the National Archive?
- DW: He worked for the Arts Council. He was the Film Officer there. Anyone wanting to make an experimental film and needing funding – which everyone does – would go through him. He built up an incredible list of contacts, which became integral to the whole kind of scene really. And overtime he's built up this wonderful archive of material, which he's now made available through St Martins.
- CS: That's right. That's right. And then who have we lost. A friend who died. Ian [Breakwell]. Yes, he showed with Angela Flowers – remarkable movies. Yeah, it's a whole world that's slightly closed.
- DW: I'm thinking about the narrative in films. Well, the reason work has text in it – some of it does.
- DW: Do you think in a way you were trying to break down inherited narrative themes like femininity?
- CS: Well, there was no female voice and there was no depiction of female sexuality which is why I really had a motive to work on *Fuses* which is where they – as I always say – there was only pornography and medical texts, medical examination of the female which was always mis-proportioned as analogous to the male, instead of investigating and accepting difference – real difference. So, it was a very exclusionary sense of gender position. In the Fifties, Sixties growing up in the mid-Seventies it was fought for like crazy, because everything was masculinised, even Germaine Greer's early feminist tracts describe the person as 'he'. And part of my text in *Kitch's Last Meal* has a text in it – is feminist -based, a lot of it. Then I quote Sitney's description of Maya Deren – in a beautiful still in front of a window: "is truly, a meditative image of a person looking into himself".
- DW: Himself?
- CS: Yes. Give me a fucking break. Yes, into himself because that was the grammar until the mid-Seventies. Man and his images, man and his camera, everyone will move his car, hang up his hat, there was no feminine pronoun. We were there by inclusion. So, that did not sit with me well, ever and I don't know why because I came from a very traditional kind of German farming family, where the girls did not even go to college. It just wasn't expected that you would have an attitude.
- DW: Sure. Where did you grow up?
- CS: Rural Pennsylvania. Mennonite, Hutterite, Hutterhoth, every little sect was there, and you were supposed to walk and breed like a good animal.
- DW: OK. This is the interesting thing. The animal is a kind of continuous theme. Is it a theme or is it something else? And part of this question is why you were interested in

cats, or the movement of cats or imitating – or is it – probably not imitation I suppose but that taking.

CS: It's an affiliation. [Laughs].

DW: Why cats rather than dogs?

CS: I love dogs too, but cats have always had a deeper psychic potential. Not all cats are psychically wonderful and endowed, but all of them have some affiliation with that part of an animal's psyche. I don't know why cats have been so powerful for me. But I tell this story of how I think I remember crawling on the floor before I could stand and falling as a baby and coming upon this rag-like thing also crawling on the floor – whiskers, furry, big eyes. Shrieking with excitement. I found my element.

DW: Yeah. You weren't scared.

CS: No. No, no, no, never, never. No. And so that's been a profound language. It wasn't always remarkable until I had a cat named Tommy the 4th. It was a communicating, a kind of speaking cat. Extremely conscious it would do rituals with me. And I must have been around nine or ten.

DW: Right.

CS: And paying attention and on alternative Wednesdays I let him upstairs into the attic for the trunks and on alternative Wednesdays we went outside and he took me to his special woods where there were holes in the ground and little tunnels. Yeah.

DW: So, it's kind of – it's interesting that you're [describing a] communicating device – do you think of the cat as a kind of a camera somehow?

CS: Hmm.

DW: Leaving these places that you wouldn't otherwise see.

CS: That's nice. Yeah. *Fuses* is based on the shameless observation of Kitch [the cat].

DW: Yeah, yeah. Yes, 'cos it's Kitch sitting at a window watching...

CS: Or sitting on the edge of a bed and watching and purring. This is all good.

DW: So, it's never an indifferent look, which I often associate with cats or animals there's a certain...

CS: No. She was so. She was premeditative. *Kitch's Last Meal* doesn't have anything to do with it. I need to do something else about cats. When she was a kitten we lived in the woods up in Colorado – and the cat was in her kitty litter on her back legs standing up with her paws against the oven. It was under the bottom of an oven range. Sitting doing this – ridiculous, uncanny. She was even watching Jim [Tenny] on two legs piss off the edge of a porch, and then we saw him go out and watch him and do his on the back legs again. So, she was always interesting.

DW: OK. So it's not an indifferent look is it?

CS: That was my cat. You know people say the most horrible, stupid things. They say 'cats don't look you in the eye'. My cat will sit on the edge of the bed and do this kind of breathing trance of staring at each other. "Oh, you're a miracle, oh you're a miracle. And you're a miracle, we're a miracle." Do you have a cat?

DW: No. But I recently had to house-sit for a friend and she had a cat. And the cat was very possessive in a sense. Wouldn't leave us alone. When we were in the house it had to be where we were to the extent that it had to sleep in the same room. It couldn't be anywhere else.

CS: Gosh.

DW: And then it had to sleep on top of us...

CS: Yes, that's normal.

DW: Face to face. It couldn't – and you'd wake up in the middle of the night with this cat breathing at your face.

CS: [Laughs] You weren't used to that.

DW: No. We're not used to it. Well, you got used to it because you had no choice you were in the cat's house. It was her space.

CS: How fun. What colour was this cat?

DW: It was a black cat. Yeah it was quite witch like. She was funny because I think my friend – she'd inherited the cat from a builder who couldn't look after the cat anymore. And I think this builder had found this cat in an old house that he'd been working on and he'd been quite badly treated and he taken it in, but he couldn't keep it. So, he gave it to my friend. But you couldn't touch her anywhere apart from on her head.

CS: OK.

DW: She must have had some trauma from being... So, she'd be perfectly happy with you and then if you accidentally touched her anywhere you'd get fired. I had scratches and bites.

CS: [Laughs]

DW: So, there's a physical awareness but there's memory; [of] this traumatic experience.

CS: In the body, whatever...

DW: Yeah, exactly. And again coming back to this theatrical idea of muscle knowing – you know this idea of muscle memory – you often hear these actors talking about, they learn a way of performing to such an extent that it becomes almost automatic because it's in their muscles – in their muscular gestures somehow.

CS: OK. That's what *Grabs and Falls* does. We practice the faint that cats do with each other that way. That intense concentration, and where is the centre of gravity, and how am I going to get you knocked over. We do that over and over again in my workshops so it becomes completely in the muscular system and you never get hurt, its one of those things – bang! You never get hurt but you have to practice, slow, slow, slow. Gets to the muscle memory with water like, with water like needles – work on the ropes. I didn't realise that you not only had to build muscle memory but calluses. You know my drawings, just hang on these ropes and start moving. Where you've got your weight to proportion to move and drag and you're heavy and the ropes are cutting into you. So, it takes weeks. Before you're effortless. There's a beautiful, beautiful essay by Elaine Siseau, the French philosopher, on the cat within. It's exactly where I go with my cats. It's so beautifully written. Because with some of them, sometimes there's a psychic aspect of great mystery and inspiration, as if you have come from other lives to find one another. It's a powerful book. Not with all cats.

DW: How do you measure that palpability?

CS: It's like falling in love. It's just there. You don't measure it.

DW: How do you think that relates to your kind of expanded cinema work. Is it...

CS: [Laughs]

DW: I don't know. But that sense of palpability is quite interesting. We're talking about these kind of immersive cinematic experiences that appear.

CS: Well, I'm certainly trying to establish that in the new DVD, which functions as film and its origins are, slides. *The Infinity Kisses – the movie*.

DW: [Laughs]

CS: That's perfect for it because it has this strange Hollywood aspect of all these kisses that go on and on and on. And at some point you feel so drenched in them that you don't feel quite – you think it's a cat anymore it's two kissing creatures. It has a final Hollywood feeling to it.

DW: What in that Hollywood tradition of screen intimacy kind of thing?

CS: Yeah.

DW: So, why are you interested in that Hollywood tradition or do you see that as influential?

CS: The narrative films I love are the Hollywood films *Once Were Warriors*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, I think it worked. You know those are brilliant ensemble works where the overt narrative performance structure was overwhelming and convincing. Like some films are like, *Cats Stand Outside and Play*. I remember every frame and the rest of them I see I don't remember a frame at all. I don't even know what I saw.

DW: Yeah. OK.

CS: It was peculiar.

DW: Yeah. So, film is part of – I think that is quite common that film becomes part of someone's identity. I often feel that you learn something about who you are through watching films. That's why they become such a powerful medium aren't they? To an extent, do you think?

CS: Well, learning to see film. I remember the first film I ever saw.

DW: Do you?

CS: Yeah. I can remember being in the movie house with my parents and turning around and thinking it was like church and looking back in the dark at all the people. I remember my parents turning me around and pointing to this kind of big white blustery looking thing and suddenly I saw *Dumbo*. Oh boy was I happy and excited. *Dumbo*!

DW: And that's it. You're in.

CS: You're in. That's what's supposed to happen. You just past that threshold and went through the mirror. Whose film is it where the peasants jump through the projection of the striptease women?

DW: Oh

CS: Is it Godard?

DW: I'm not sure. There are several films like that. I was thinking of those old [Edwin S] Porter films where you have people jumping in through the screen. 1902 or something. And there's a brilliant film called *Uncle Josh Goes to the Movies* that was made in 1902 and he's watching and he can't believe what he's seeing and he ends up tearing the screen down and having a fight with the projectionist.

CS: Oh great.

DW: But it's supposed to be an educational – like you sitting in the cinema not knowing which way to look. And having to have your gaze directed at this fuzzy screen. It's almost as though he's decided as part of his film he's teaching people how to watch film because Uncle Josh is too unsophisticated to understand what is going on in front of him. It's almost a fear though of that audience – the audience rejection of illusion. They're meant to accept this illusionary device.

CS: A suspension of disbelief doesn't happen. In the one that I love. He comes home from the war. It's black and white and he brings a projector and a film and he hangs up a sheet for his village mates and he projects a striptease. Three women doing a striptease thing and the peasant men tear down the screen. They jump through to try to get to the...

DW: It's similar. Is that in the Godard do you think?

CS: You know, I don't know. I'm not sure. If it's *Les Caraïbiniers* something stuck in there.

- DW: But it's not an early film, it's a Sixties...
- CS: I'm not sure now because film does weird things with my memory sometimes.
- DW: Well, it's supposed to.
- CS: Yeah. That's right. So, get back to your questions because I'm drifting away.
- DW: I suppose it's - how do you see your practice - as an art or filmmaking? Or how does it relate to everyday experience? Or how important the relationship with the audience to the event?
- CS: I don't understand the question. I'm afraid it starts with practice. I don't have a practice.
- DW: OK that was...
- CS: No, everybody's saying that, and I jump on them. And it's the same as 'are you still working on it?' Or your product. 'How do you think about your product?' I don't have a product, I don't own a practice. I'm an old visionary. I have a process. So, the slippage in the language is very disturbing to me. For practice to me is what violinists do. A dentist has a practice. A doctor has a practice. The same with performance. Violinists perform, elephants perform. I think we're stuck with it though.
- DW: Well, [let's take] performance. Maybe we could talk about your disagreement with Peggy [Phelan].
- CS: In what regard?
- DW: Just what you were saying earlier when Peggy had this idea of not being able to document. Or being anti-documenting the experience, because it somehow changes the meaning of the performance.
- CS: Well, I don't have enough of her theory in front of me right now. But the photograph changes the meaning. Talking about it changes the meaning. The meaning is illusive, metaphoric. It's a set of equivalences that may or may not have any accuracy in the shared communication of something that we may all have seen. For instance, I just saw a film panel and as part of PS1 Waff exhibit. And a wonderful film historian Younger, Melissa Ugana from Pittsburgh he's very involved in the early Warhol configurations, talk about Willard Maas and Marie Menken, and once again I was lucky enough through [Stan] Brakhage to have been there at Willard and Marie's where I met Warhol, who is supposed to have been seduced as one of the little boy toys of Willard Maas. While Marie was to prepare wine glasses and things to eat, the boys went upstairs to a little balcony and did what was called a Rosy Chain – something like that – and we were quite bewildered Jimmy and I, and Brakhage was supposed to be seduced into this because the gay guys really liked him and he didn't seem to be defined in his sexuality yet. So anyway at the panel Melissa Ugana talks about the founding of Cinema 16 and Willard and describes the late recognition of Marie Menken's films and that she was beautiful. Oh ho, ho, ho wait a minute! So, I had my moment and said that this is correct about all her research but Marie Menken was a very huge, clumsy, bowed down, degraded, abused servant to her gay husband and

his friends. And she was never beautiful. But it's fun, because anybody can invent anything now. But I happen to have been there.

DW: Yeah.

CS: But they can say that I was wrong but not really.

DW: But again, it does become about control of that historical narrative I suppose; if you insist on not having documentation – it's just a question of who is doing the documenting. And that was – it might be interesting to share with the people you had documenting with your films.

CS: My relationship was always pretty random because again it was something that I never had a chance to do. I couldn't pay anybody. So, it was always some kind of friend who believed in the work and wanted to do it and I was always wondering: "Why do they want to do this?" It's generous, it's great but what are we going to do with it, and there's no money around for any of this, but I would always ask for a copy or a print.

DW: You talk about not producing a product and that whole problem of 'how's your product going' or 'what's your practice', how did you think your work related to someone, for instance Warhol and his hyper, kind of commodified form of art making.

CS: First of all, women in the Sixties had no sense of possibility to have a product or a commodification. We were hanging on by our little bare nails on the edge of a very exclusionary aesthetic world. So, when I was accepted into this world it was because of exceptional male artists who valued the work. Poets initially and then my partner Jim. Music. The configuration of musicians around him, very supportive and Brakhage was always in contention. Brakhage a very mixed set of affiliations or concerns. It was my painting, which influenced him to start painting on film. He'd come to stay with us in Vermont and Jim was his best friend. That was a very intense relationship and – which I was often the cog in the wheel standing – I just wanted to be with Jim, smoking all night and drinking – and I would empty the ashtray and find something to eat. Often there was nothing to eat. Brakhage and I revered each other, respected each other and then he was always trying to feel that I was less equal or less active or less participant in our shared concerns because they were shared. That was tough.

DW: How would he do that?

CS: He would just have a terrible stomach ache and lie down on the floor and say that there were forces in the room that were not supporting him. And then when he brought Jane [Wodening, Brakhage's first wife] he would say that she was the earth Goddess and I was beyond the arc and that was not as valuable and important as the earth Goddess. He had a lot of patriarchal junk.



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

University of the  
Arts London  
Central  
Saint Martins



## British Artists' Film & Video Study Collection