

**Radical Light
Women of the West
'70s Bay Area Experimentalists**
Wednesday, November 3 at 7:30 pm — Artists' Television Access
presented in association with Pacific Film Archive
curated and Introduced by Janis Crystal Lipzin
Jane Dobson and Caroline Savage In Person

Describing characters in his new book *Mary Ann in Autumn*, Armistead Maupin said recently (paraphrasing) that “San Francisco in 2010 isn’t nearly as interesting as it was in the 1970s. Everybody back then was ‘becoming’ and now most everybody just ‘is’. ‘Is’ is never as much fun as ‘becoming.’” In the 1970s I was, in Maupin’s sense, “becoming” a film artist, educator, and curator. Thus tonight’s program developed out of my perspective as a central participant in the lively experimental film scene of that period and profits from the knowledge I acquired from teaching classes in the history of women filmmakers at San Francisco Art Institute and Antioch College.

The decade of the ‘70s was characterized by strident manifestos and polemics in political, social, and aesthetic arenas. And artist-made films were hardly immune from this general state of engagement in controversy. For many people the women’s movement had become the most important social event of the decade. Although this heightened consciousness empowered more women to make film art, at the same time surprising pressures arose to categorize, define and delineate film and other forms of art made by women. Furthermore, publications that arose to champion art work by women created their own hurdles regarding what was acceptable content and how that should be expressed to forward feminist art goals. Doctrinaire demarcations in such influential publications as *Heresies*, *Camera Obscura*, and *JumpCut* often led to exclusion even as they promoted advocacy.

Michael Fox’s notes about tonight’s show in the *SF Weekly* (October 27–Nov. 2, 2010) characterized San Francisco and its environs in the 1970s as “particularly welcoming to female filmmakers on the fringe.” Yet, in my experience, most women working during that time still found that there were numerous obstacles to surmount. Film labs were male strongholds. Many women film artists experienced dismissive attitudes on the part of the laboratory staff on whom we had to depend to process and print our films. Some of tonight’s artists found ways to work around the sexist attitudes that confronted them. Gunvor Nelson taught herself to time her own films—that meant she gave the lab instructions on how to adjust color and exposure for every shot in her films—permitting her a control over her artistic vision virtually unknown to any film artist of the time, male or female. Barbara Linkevitch achieved such a high level of technical expertise when she was still a grad student with me at SFAI that she was quickly known as the go-to person when male or female students had a technical problem to solve. Despite the much heralded Feminist Art Conference held in the summer of 1975 at SFAI, Anne Severson remembers, “SFAI was such a macho place then”—even though “the filmmaking department was where the action was.”¹

Tonight’s films both resist and embody the archetypes that critics assigned to art created by women of the time. Some of these makers turned their cameras on their daily lives, bodies, and relationships for subject matter while others were attracted to an analytic or mathematical methodology that challenged the oversimplified image of women’s art of the day. (Janis Crystal Lipzin)

¹ Severson quoted in “You Can’t Do That: Portraits of Three Feminists in Film” by Kathy Geritz, included in *Radical Light: Alternative Film & Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945–2000*. Steve Anker, Kathy Geritz and Steve Seid, eds.

Our Trip (1980) by Barbara Hammer; 16mm, color/b&w, sound, 4 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

This disarmingly romantic account of a hiking trip to the Andes with Corky Wick provides a humorous vehicle for Hammer to transform mountains and valleys into parts of the female body via hand-painted animation. Notably she expands her earlier focus on lesbian identity into wordplay citing words that start with “inca” as in *Inca Trail*, incalculable, incandescent. Hammer currently lives in New York and teaches regularly at the European Graduate School in Switzerland. She recently published her memoir, *HAMMER: Making It in Sex and Movies*.



Folly (1972) by Freude (Bartlett); 16mm, color, sound, 3 minutes

Although Freude was most instrumental in the Bay Area film community through her company Serious Business (1972–83) which rented and sold films by women, especially animation, she made a few films that spoke authentically to women’s experience. Often interpreted as a film that forefronts the repetitive and futile nature of traditional women’s circumscribed activities, the sound track carries the real message: “I won’t stop trying till I create a disturbance in your mind.” Freude died in 2008 in Oakland.

Traces (1973) by Barbara Linkevitch (Pettitt); 16mm, color, sound, 12 minutes, print from the maker

Traces is a carefully crafted and seductive examination of conflicted female identity in which Linkevitch presents stylized tensions and conflicts of the process of growing up. She appears briefly in the last scene. Recently she recalled her time in San Francisco in the ‘70s like this: “I am proud of the fact that I have been able to support myself as an artist. But, as I look forward to creative adventures to come, I sometimes think that nothing, creatively, has been as exquisite as my time making films in San Francisco.” Linkevitch now lives in Los Angeles where she shoots, writes and produces *A Luna Blued*, a photographic web novel about food, sex and death in The City of Angels. www.alunablue.com/blog

Cabbage (1972) by Dorothy Wiley; 16mm, color, sound, 9 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

Cabbage and other Wiley films exemplify the notion of women’s art growing out of domestic experience. The immediacy of her sensual portrayal of kitchen actions speaks to viewers in the personal voice. In Wiley’s words: “I like to film ordinary things I do and see everyday because film makes it so easy to see the immense cosmic fearsomeness and beauty of everything.” (*Canyon Cinema Catalog*, 1976.) In a 1972 article in *Film Quarterly*—“An Interview with Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley”—Brenda Richardson described *Cabbage* and other of Wiley’s films as “filmic prose poems” that integrated her life with her work. In 1978 Diane Nelson credited Wiley with “a particular genius for the enactment of the actual and the revealing power of the commonplace... we are reminded of just how close the erotic, the disgusting, the humorous, and the sublime can often be.” Wiley collaborated with Gunvor Nelson on the classic film *Schmeerguntz* in 1965 and most recently again on *Before Need Redressed* in 1995. Wiley lives in Marin County, California.

Moon's Pool (1973) by Gunvor Grundel Nelson; 16mm, color, sound, 15 minutes

This description by Freude appeared in the Canyon Cinema catalog when the film was first released: "A masterful and lyrical use of the film medium to portray the search for identity and resolution of self. Photographed under water, live bodies are intercut with natural landscapes creating powerful mood changes and images surfaced from the unconscious." The synopsis in Freude's Serious Business catalog called the film "a dive into the unconscious where a world takes form in reverie and reverie liberates the dreamer." (D. Marie Grieco)

The filmmaker is featured both on the screen and on the soundtrack creating an intense cinematic self-portrait. Nelson's voice says, "I don't know why we were given these bodies to care for anyway," "I see you see me through my body" and "I saw in the sky the moon shining on my face." Nelson was raised in Sweden, lived in the Bay Area for thirty years, taught at SFAI for twenty years and returned to Sweden in 1993 where she now lives making digital video, installations, prints and paintings.

Valley Fever (1979) by Stephanie Beroes; 16mm, color, sound, 20 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

As the only sync sound film on the program, *Valley Fever* positions itself among the early west coast artist's films whose concerns shifted to linguistic analytical content. Inspired by Merleau-Ponty's statement, "there is a perpetual uneasiness in the state of being conscious," the text alternates between a commentary about the symptoms of a lung infection—valley fever, prevalent in the desert Southwest, which Beroes encountered while living briefly in New Mexico—and questions of perception. The sensuous and the structured coexist and create a bridge. After teaching college in the '80s and producing and editing independent features and documentaries in New York City, she programmed for the Hamptons and Prague Film Festivals. Beroes continues to edit short works and lives in Sag Harbor, New York.

Struggle of the Meat (1974) by Anne Severson (Alice Anne Parker); 16mm, color, sound, 4 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

The maker described her intentions in the notes for the renowned 5th International Festival of Experimental Film at Knokke, Belgium: "My intentions were to create an experience of accumulating tension and release. I wanted the images to be visually recognizable, but abstracted in order to present a cooler, more open form. I want the film to be an invitation to the viewer to hear sounds not recorded, to see images other than those represented." The film is constructed around a unit of 39–40 frames, the length of the sound loop of the words "the struggle of the meat"—the phrase came from the maker's 1973 journal written in Spain and was chosen for its evocative quality. Her decision to loop the sound was inspired by John Lilly's dolphin research where he reported that when exposed to a repeating loop in a relaxed environment, a subject would begin to hear sounds other than those recorded. Severson edited the film from footage appropriated from the Royal Belgium Film Archive while living in England, optically printed in San Francisco. Alice Anne Parker now lives in Hawaii and has returned to filmmaking as a screenwriter as she continues her career as a psychic.

Voyeur (1977) by Caroline Savage (Lee); 16mm, color/b&w, silent, 7 minutes, print from the maker

Illusionism and two-dimensionality collide in this film influenced by British filmmaker/theorist Malcolm LeGrice's notions of repetition and pre-determined strategy. In addition Savage credits Gunvor Nelson as an influence in the timing of her editing *Voyeur* is an uncommon example of a film that consciously alters the shape of the screen's traditional rectangle by using "wipes" drawn from the subject matter. Note: the blacks in the film are now tinged with purple from age but originally merged



seamlessly with the black space around the image. Her work embodies James Broughton's adage: "It is not we who play with cinema. The nature of cinema plays with us." Savage enlivened San Francisco in the 1970s as an influential curator working with the early microcinema Eye Music, the artists' space 80 Langton Street and the Exploratorium. Savage continues to explore flickering light as a film/photo/video artist in Philadelphia. She is former Executive Director of San Francisco Cinematheque, a media arts educator, consultant and strategist, and Coordinating Director at the Philadelphia Film and Video Association.

Stained Picture (1973–1982) by Jane Dobson; 16mm, color/b&w, silent, 4 minutes, print from the maker

This film was originally shot with unusual Fuji single 8mm film and developed from the maker's experiments with unconventional projection speeds that were made possible with the Bolex "toaster" projector. By incorporating a serendipitous laboratory event, the resulting film emerged from the maker's submission to a constructed accident. She ultimately rephotographed, enlarged and altered the small gauge footage using an optical printer. Dobson began making films in New York, where she worked at MoMA, and with the 1st International Women's Film Festival. In 1975 she returned to the Bay Area where she had been raised and worked at Mills College Center for Contemporary Music. Dobson currently lives in Davis, California.

Curating this show was a cross between engaging in an archaeological dig and detective work. Some of the makers are no longer active in filmmaking circles; some—a condition still peculiar to women—had changed their names making it a challenge to locate them and their films. Only one print has been restored—Moon's Pool by Gunvor Nelson. The others are rare vintage prints in unrestored condition— the majority were made more than thirty years ago-bearing the marks of the passage of time with visible scratches and somewhat altered color photographic dyes.

Furthermore, other influential women film artists of the '70s have been included in earlier programs in the Radical Light series and so it was not possible to show their work here including work by Abigail Child and other films by Gunvor Nelson, Dorothy Wiley, Freude, Barbara Linkevitch and Alice Anne Parker (Anne Severson).

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All Program Notes by Janis Crystal Lipzin