

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

Point of View

Rear-Garde

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This year's Whitney "Biennial" testifies to the weakness of the movement.

The American avant-garde cinema remains in a state of crisis. The soaring prices of 16mm production, the decrease in film rentals, the seductions of video, and the ghettoization of screening and discussion in universities and museums are all factors in the current malaise. From a critical perspective, the big shock of the past decade has been the weakness of new filmmakers. The regular appearance of powerful new artists, which characterized the American avant-garde between 1943 and the early seventies, has petered out. There are as many new filmmakers as there ever were, perhaps more, but no one has commanded attention since Yvonne Rainer moved from choreography to cinema. The most important figures in the field are the same figures who were central a decade ago, though those ranks have been diminished by death, and the productivity of almost all has waned.

The recent "1985 Biennial Exhibition" (March 13-June 2) at New York's prestigious Whitney Museum of American Art manifested all the signs of this crisis. The inclusions and exclusions, and the successes and failures of the series as a whole, can tell us a great deal about the current dilemma of the avant-garde cinema and its audience. The Whitney "Biennial" is no ordinary film show: Film and video curator John Hanhardt picks what he thinks are the very best films from the past two years for exhibition as part of a larger biennial of the visual arts (including video) that is inevitably a controversial statement about emerging taste by the one museum with both the power and guts to make such a statement. In the words of *Village Voice* critic J. Hoberman, "Hanhardt is potentially the most important exhibitor of these films in America." It is a prearranged fact that each "Biennial" selection will be distributed by the American Federation



A Woman's Touch: "the finest film of the series."

Whitney Museum of American Art

of Arts.

The four programs of short films dramatized the current crisis most vividly. Hanhardt seems to have grouped them thematically: Peter Hutton and Holly Fisher made portraits of a city and a town; animation dominated the program with Ericka Beckman, Pooh Kaye and Elisabeth Ross, Jane Aaron, and Robert Breer; Morgan Fisher's and Douglas Davis's films were about filmmaking; montage dominated the final program of Warren Sonbert, Sandy Moore (whose work is actually animation), and Larry Gottheim. Surely, Hanhardt could not have intended the polarizing effect of such programming: A case is made for the strength of the films by Hutton, Beckman, Breer, Morgan Fisher, and Sonbert by implicitly comparing them with the appallingly vapid films of Holly Fisher, Kaye and Ross, Aaron, Davis, and Gottheim (Moore is a separate case that I shall treat below).

The three long films that themselves occupy whole programs are neither as formidable as the best of the "Biennial" nor as forgettable as the trash. Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* and Lynne Tillman and Sheila McLaughlin's *Committed* are feature-length dramatic films with political

messages; *Born in Flames* comically depicts the struggle of a women's army of liberation in the period following a humdrum socialist revolution in America; *Committed* retells the life of Frances Farmer as a victim of McCarthyism and male hypocrisy. Both are moving and interesting but marred by novice direction and amateur acting (the males in *Committed* are spectacularly wooden).

There have always been filmmakers in the American independent cinema who try to break away from the traditions of the avant-garde cinema and to create something like the European narrative cinema. The efforts of Shirley Clarke, Robert Frank, and Jonas and Adolfas Mekas,

among others, in the late fifties and early sixties, constituted earlier efforts at filmmaking outside of the major traditions of American feature filmmaking. Despite the occasional production of fascinating films in this middle zone between the genuine avant-garde and Hollywood, there seems to be no possibility of sustaining a career in this mode. The remarkable achievement of Yvonne Rainer has been the invention of her own version of the avant-garde cinema in which the problematics of formal invention coincide with personalized political dilemmas. Both *Born in Flames* and *Committed*, aspiring to challenge the industry on its own terms, look stale when compared with Rainer's *Journeys From Berlin* (1971). At the Whitney they seemed out of place, as if they were welcomed into an alien context only because the world of theatrical distribution had failed them.

Ken Kobland's *The Communists Are Comfortable and 3 Other Stories*, the other long film, is a more interesting and sadder case. It was the great disappointment of the series, if only because Kobland's luminous *Landscape and Desire* had been, for me, the most impressive new

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discovery of the previous "Biennial." Like the unfortunate James Benning earlier, Kobland has turned his back on his considerable talent as a maker and editor of visual images to work in the manner Rainer made so much her own that it has shipwrecked those who tried to follow her. The wretched acting of the three central monologists bares Kobland's weakness as a scriptwriter and banalizes his autobiographical vision, plunging us into the dismal periphery of off-off Broadway theater.

One of the most disastrous myths prevalent in the limbo where filmmakers and academic critics (such as myself) exchange "ideas" is that *narrative* is the name of a new cinematic value that has supplanted the genius for storytelling. There is nothing new or intrinsically important about narration, per se. Borden, Tillman and McLaughlin, and Kobland are merely weak storytellers. The far more abstract filmmakers—Michael Snow, Jonas Mekas, George Landow, Hollis Frampton, Yvonne Rainer—have not only given us more compelling narratives, but they have greatly outdone the younger filmmakers in directing actors (especially nonprofessionals).

The persistence of Erica Beckman compensated for the unfortunate letdown of Kobland's second film. Her *Out of Hand* was one of the reasons for introducing Super 8mm into the "Biennial" two years ago (a progressive move that was dropped this time despite the vitality of Super 8mm filmmaking). Now, in the 16mm *You the Better*, the repetition of hypnotic choral chants, the dollhouse-like sets that reduce human action to the scale of a board game, and the ritualized uses of gestures and monochromatic tones prove that she is the most self-confident and aggressive stylist of the younger generation. In fact, she seems to be the one woman to pick up a fecund continuity with the immensely original work of Maya Deren. Her career should be interesting to observe in the next decade.

The cartoon has always been an embarrassment in the avant-garde cinema. The genuine achievements of animation there are very rare. The pitfalls are apparent in the incomprehensible inclusion of trivialities by Aaron and Kaye and Ross on the same program as Beckman. Programming of this order provides the worst possible context for the tough-minded films of Beckman and of Robert Breer, himself a fixture at the "Biennial," and one of the very few serious artists who use animation. The current *Trial Balloons* may not be among his major works; yet it is another fascinating moment in his bitterly ironic struggle with issues of representation and self-assertion. Had Hanhardt left this film

next to *You the Better* without the cute nonsense with which the April 20–26 program was padded, I would have had to acknowledge the juxtaposition as a brilliant piece of practical criticism.

Both films have an undersong of sexual melancholy: The chorus of *You the Better* ironically offers consolation with the chant "That's OK, that's all right, as long as you can do it once tonight"; Breer eventually deflates his own phallic balloon. The proximity of the two films on the program points up the underlying continuity of the American avant-garde cinema's drive to wrest an intensity of song and to sustain a dynamic rhythm from the most personal and painful of themes. If the programming was as deliberately thematic as I suspect, Sandy Moore's *Luck in Loose Plaster* belonged with these two films, not buffering the shock of the final week's mixing of the finest film of the series, Warren Sonbert's *A Woman's Touch*, with Larry Gottheim's provincial disaster, *Natural Selection*.

Moore's work epitomizes the curious status of the animated film within the American visionary tradition. She has managed to adapt cubist pyrotechnics to animation without academicism or tedium. But she can't help scarring her work with a reading of passages from Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* on the sound track. This naive mistake wrecks everything she had achieved in image and montage: First, Stein's intricately pun-filled poetry does not lend itself to reading aloud with conviction, but even if it did, it would dwarf Moore's own art. All of her films self-destruct on the sound track; her language betrays an ear as dull as her eye is sharp. Again, the prevailing academic inflation of the role of language has taken a heavy toll.

The "Biennial" reminds us once more that the most impressive filmmakers working today are for the most part those who established their reputations at least fifteen years ago. Beckman is the one artist in this series who belongs in the company of Breer, Sonbert, Hutton, and Morgan Fisher. Each of *them* has given us new works strictly in conformity to their earlier enterprises. In fact, precisely what is missing in so much of the work of newer filmmakers is the commitment to an ongoing cinematic project. In these terms, the most egregious omission of this and of the previous "Biennial" would be the new work of Stan Brakhage. In this most difficult time, Brakhage is the paradigm of the undaunted filmmaker. His astounding efflux of work may not always be on his highest level, but it is often enough to confirm his unchallenged preeminence in the field.

One of the peculiarities of Brakhage's art is his eschewal of the sound track (with some important exceptions). Two of the best works that were in the "Biennial" follow this ascetic principle: Peter Hutton's *New York Portrait, Part II* and Warren

Sonbert's *A Woman's Touch*. The former consists of nineteen elegantly composed black-and-white images isolated from one another by a buffer of blackness. Hutton's New York is an oneiric city where a blimp floats across Coney Island and the streets are wondrously flooded.

Sonbert, on the other hand, is an heir to the rhythmic of Soviet montage. As usual, his latest film is an elegant, brightly colored bouquet of images gathered with jet-set abandon from different coasts and even continents. As usual, again, it would be easy to take this Whitmanesque catalog of the beauty, style, and even grotesqueness of the feminine as another benign chapter of the "single endless film" it sometimes seems Sonbert is making. But at the "Biennial" its isolation (instead of being in an all-Sonbert program) helped me to understand its subtle autonomy. Two images that assume the value of cogent metaphors give the film its matrix: young women talking on the telephone and a young man writing notes in the back of a chauffeured limousine. More than ever before in his films, Sonbert seems to be calling into question the psychic limitations of the affluent milieu he portrays so often. That crimp of limitation spreads to his representation of women, whose private conversations he can imaginatively construct by editing shots of two telephoners one after the other; that very act of construction closes him out of their dialogue. In spite of its apparent ebullience, a sadness and a mystery emanates from the film's deep conviction of the "otherness" of the women it fleetingly shows us. So, in the end, it turns out that Sonbert is doing precisely what the very best independent filmmakers must do in this time of crisis: trust that the complexity of their intuitive, formal manipulations will make their films instruments of discovery; knowing that in making such films, they will reveal more of their feelings than even they were aware of in the period of production.

It would make no sense to call *A Woman's Touch* a masterpiece, whatever that means. It has been a very long time since avant-garde films like *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), *The End* (1953), *Anticipation of the Night* (1958), *Pull My Daisy* (1961), *Scorpio Rising* (1963), or *Wavelength* (1968) had great resonance apart from the overall work of their makers. Today, integrity and survival are important dimensions of avant-garde cinema. The most pressing question we can ask of a new filmmaker is whether he or she has found a voice of sufficient urgency to sustain a career. Of the veteran we might ask how the filmmaker weathers the current economical and aesthetic crisis within his or her chosen art. The answers will not be glib or clever formulations, but films that are impacted with thought. ■

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