

\* THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART/  
SAN FRANCISCO CINEMATHEQUE

# Big As Life

AN AMERICAN HISTORY OF 8mm FILMS

TYPE X



# Pieces of Eight: Interviews with 8mm filmmakers

## Donna Cameron

*Between spring 1996 and summer 1997 film/video artist and painter Donna Cameron conducted nearly two dozen interviews with 8mm filmmakers. Space limitations prohibit us from including all of those interviews here; to do so would necessitate the publication of an entirely separate volume. Therefore, I've selected what to my mind are twelve of the most revealing and informative interviews given the range of works included in the exhibition. The interviews are ordered so that they trace, loosely, the historical path of 8mm film art and the concerns of 8mm filmmakers as they've progressed from the late 1950s through the 1990s. I'd like to extend my gratitude to all of the filmmakers who participated in the interview sessions and, of course, to Ms. Cameron, whose enthusiasm for this project nearly surpassed my own. —Ed.*

## George Kuchar & Friends

George: Heyuh, Donna! These are some 8mm film people I'd like you to meet. Jim Brawley here makes 8mm religious pictures. He's doing a whole series now on the Holy Land. New Age Christian tapes. Very soothing on the nerves. And Larry Liebowitz—used to make cannibalism films in 8mm. And you know Floraine Cohen (aka Connors). Floraine was in some of our early pictures.

Larry: I've known the Kuchars since 1942.

George: Larry was from the Bronx and interested in cannibalism.

Larry: No, not really.

George: His mother ate his father or vice versa.

Larry: I made one of the first cannibal movies, before the *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* or *Night of the Living Dead*. I made an 8mm cannibal film back in the early sixties. Unfortunately the audience was grossed out when I showed it there. They ended up getting up and walking out, even though there were some other films that were going to be shown. My film kind of left them like they had just watched some kind of a I-don't-know-what... It was called *The Dark Tunnel*. I had my father in it and my mother only had a small part so she wouldn't come. And my sister's friends and Mike and George were in it—they had multi-parts. George played a tall girl, a drag queen.

DC: Sounds like a real classic.

George: It is. It was a first.

Larry: A cannibalistic "Brady Bunch."

George: "Splatter Bunch."

Larry: It was explicit.

George: Anatomically correct... Wasn't George Romero originally from the Bronx?

Larry: Yeah, he was from the Bronx. A lot of 8mm filmmakers were from the Bronx. Francis Coppola was from the Bronx. In fact he was from the old neighborhood.

George: Where did you read that?

Larry: You *know* that. He did stunts. He threw something off the roof also.

Jim: Yeah, I'm trying to remember...



*George & Mike Kuchar, c.1965*

Larry: Coppola made 8mm films. Allen Ginsberg made 8mm films too. In fact, he gave me my first joint, my first hit of marijuana. I thought, hey, this guy's so big, he can't be giving me poison, but that was the times. And there was another guy there...his name was Abbie. Abbie Hoffman...he wanted me to help him make movies. So I went to his place there on the weekend. And I went over there, you know he had a couple of girls—this was the sixties—and he tried to film and he did lousy openings. The openings there were like supposed to be shot at f6.8 and he took them at something like f1.8 with floodlamps and he took those pictures and they didn't turn out. Then he tried again, we were driving to Rockaway Beach. Ginsberg was there. And I met Ginsberg again about a year ago and I got an autograph from him. He didn't remember me...at that time though, he was wearing his American flag hat. It was a golden era.

DC: Why did you stop making 8mm films?

Larry: I had to take my 8mm projector and my tape recorder—reel-to-reel—and I had to synchronize it whenever I had a showing.

DC: Where did you show these?

Larry: I don't know. Red Grooms saw it.

George : Where did you play that thing? My class, one time... ?

Larry: Yeah, I had a showing there, and I showed somewhere else, where there was a big audience.

George: Where?

Larry: I don't know... there was a big audience. I showed it and it grossed them out and they left.

George: That was the 8mm Motion Picture Club.

Larry: I don't know. It was 1965. All I know is that I

was showing it and all of a sudden the guy moved the projector while the film was showing and all of a sudden the film is on the ceiling because the idiot decided he was going to move the projector, and I'm trying to sync the sound—turn it off, turn it on—I couldn't do nothing about it.

George: Ho! Too bad.

Larry: Yeah. And you know, I had a hard job at the time, you know I was working in a machine shop. I was really tired.

George: Yeah, Larry's mother was a big star in all Larry's pictures. She was a Mom who didn't mind acting in her kids' pictures.

Jim: Yeah. Frances Liebowitz. She was in *A Town Called Tempest* [by the Kuchars].

Larry: She was very willing. She did things there that you wouldn't believe. She played like Shelley Winters there like *Big Bad Mama*, with a machine gun.

George: A Bronx mother...going all out for the pictures. I did my film with the family there, and his cousin also, she was like a shaved Sasquatch, the alien Zelda.

Larry: She was kind of cute there but now she's kind of six feet tall and uh...

George: Big. Big. I just met her in Chicago and I used her as a wind barrier. The wind was coming off the lake and I just walked behind her. She was in our 8mm movies and then she went on to make a 16mm movie with Andrew Meyer, who later directed Lorne Greene in a Japanese disaster movie.

Larry: Yeah, something.

George: Donna, James here did 8mm. Now he does videos on transcendental religion. He uses Christian imagery. He does it out of the kitchen of his housing project in Queens...

Jim: I paint.

George: He put a robe on himself and then he grew the beard.

Jim: I look like Moses in one picture. In another one I look like someone in diapers. You know my face has changed a lot.

George: He went from UFOs to a near-death experience in which Jimmy died, or was close to death and was brought back to life on the operating table: he'd had a heart attack. And now he recreates these transcendental or out-of-body experiences. He was always religious. Now he makes 8mm pictures about it. And he doesn't go to the Holy Land, he does it all in his kitchen.

Larry: What's cooking? Something's cooking.

Jim: Toast. I was making toast.

Floraine: Oh! Something's burning.

DC: Stella [George and Mike's mother] told me that you always liked the movies, that you were crazy to make movies, even when you were little kids, and that you wanted a camera for your twelfth birthday.

George: Yeah, well, that was because I used to get it from my aunt, and my mom and my aunt didn't get along. So that was an important turning point there: I was to get a camera so that I didn't have to get it from my aunt anymore.

Larry: Hey, I brought my camera, so if you want I'll take some pictures.

DC: Take some pictures.

George: The Museum of Modern Art is having an 8mm show. That's where you should show your pictures.

DC: You should show your pictures in the show, Larry.

Larry: I don't want to be in it because I don't want to

have any problems with the synchronization of sound.

George: Oh stop with the worrying about the sound.

DC: You should do it before the sprockets shrink so bad that it won't thread.

Larry: I haven't had any trouble with the films, my films are from the fifties.

DC: Then you're very, very lucky.

Larry: It's just the way I keep them there...maybe it's the conditions. The colors haven't faded...

DC: You're probably right. If you don't ever show them you don't take them out of the can. Then the oxygen won't get to them, and the polluted air doesn't catalyze their disintegration.

George: If anybody wants to preserve them they are welcome to.

Larry: I keep them in a cool place, and I'm trying to get your picture. I'm sorry...

George: It's a double conversation.

DC: I have a camera too, but it only has B&W film in it. It's a Minolta, the last model they made in the 1980s before the camcorders hit. It has an intervalometer...

George: This is really light and streamlined.

DC: Maybe with all these cameras we'll get a picture.

George: I knew a guy in the Bronx and he was making 8mm CinemaScope movies. He had an anamorphic lens...

Larry: Let's see. The best opening here is...

George: John Keel, the science fiction writer, used to make 8mm films and he showed them with us at the 8mm Motion Picture Club in the 1950s. It was a

fuddy-duddy group. But they were renting huge ballrooms in hotels with big chandeliers and they got all dressed up for the event. It was run by a man who used to be named Joe Hollywood. He was a guy in his late sixties...

Larry: A used car salesman.

George: And you used to win a prize at the Mineola fair if you submitted your 8mm movies. I won something there. So 8mm was very big. It took over from 16mm. Floraine has beautiful 16mm movies of her honeymoon...everything's on a tripod.

Floraine: I am really glad that I did that. It's wonderful to look back...

Larry: OK, everybody look over here. I hope I get the right opening. I had to use a blue filter so that the hole will be correct...I don't have a flash, I hate flash...

George: Well, in 8mm, if I brought the film to be processed in a local drugstore in the Bronx, the pictures did not last the decade. The emulsion was greenish and it cracked after about ten years or so. But if you sent it to Kodak and you got it back it lasted for decades. Otherwise it looked like a decaying fresco.

Larry: Well there was something about color films there... they said that any films taken in the fifties, there's no survivors. Whether you kept them in the darkness or the lightness, they changed. They faded out there. And they were asking for any survivors, if there were any pictures left that didn't change, they wanted them. They said please give them to us because they wanted samples of the pictures that were taken in that era...

George: I've got movies from the fifties, that I had sent out to Kodak. But the local processing was crap.

Floraine: There's no way of preserving them?

George: Yes, but it's expensive.

Floraine: Are we going out? Where are we eating?

Larry: I going to have to ask everybody not to move a fraction—I'm at 1/8th of a second, so that the hole will be correct.

Floraine: You have B&W. Do you have color? Do. You. Have..?

Larry: Color? Yes, because I don't have a flash. She has a flash. Is that OK? You're the one who asked me to bring my camera. Do you want to take a self-portrait?

Floraine: No, take. Take of everybody. I have to go to the photographer, anyway. I need pictures for my acting career.

George: Floraine's in a big picture, *Welcome to the Dollhouse*. It's good. It's a big hit.

Floraine: It's at the Plaza. Funny, I never even knew there was a Plaza until they were playing my movie.

Larry: Is it a big role there?

Floraine: It's a cameo. At the end. The director was...wonderful.

George: Hey, we'd better get something to eat. Do you want Chinese or Vietnamese? Or where was that Afghan place, remember?

DC: There's something open around here at this hour?

Floraine: George, you pick. You're the birthday boy. It's George's birthday.

Jim: Happy Birthday, George.

Floraine: Well, not really, but we'll celebrate it anyway. It's a little premature.

DC: Larry, can I move yet? Did you get the picture?

Larry: I got something, I hope....I hate flash...

George: I'm looking up Afghan in the phone book. *A-f-g-h-a-n*. It's on 2nd Avenue.

Larry: I'm ready.

## Mike Kuchar

### **"Insignificant despised mediums...an eternal trend."**

"It was Regular 8mm back in 1956, before Super 8 came in. My mother asked my brother and me what we would like for our twelfth birthday and we said we'd like a movie camera, because we went to the movies a lot. I remember that it was evening and we were under the Third Avenue El in the Bronx. There were a lot of department stores there, and I remember she bought a Dejur metal camera, which we still have. It still works. This is Regular 8mm. Super 8 came in about 15 years later. When Super 8 came in, by that time I'd made so many 8mm movies that I decided that maybe I would change to 16mm which I found out about when I was introduced to the Underground...

"We did narrative, costume epics. *The Wet Destruction of Atlantis* was the first one. We would pull my mother's drapes off the windows and use them as togas, and we would go up on the roof, playing hooky—I was a notorious hooky player—eleven and twelve years old. Also, we would raid my mother's make-up from her bureau. We would put on Egyptian eye make-up and use her lipsticks as rouge. A few times she caught us—she was usually working 9 to 5—and in a total embarrassing panic our friends who played hooky with us scampered away with a scolding. We shot the outdoor scenes—we needed forests and mountains—in the Bronx Park, the Bronx Botanical Gardens and the Bronx Zoo. We used that place for our thirty-minute war picture, *The Naked and The Nude*. We were in high school at that point. We went with friends with surplus army equipment and costumes from an Army-Navy Store. But they were narrative pictures. They are narrative because I was raised on narrative pictures from 20th Century Fox and Warner Brothers. My favorite movies were the science fiction monster movies from the fifties, like *It Came from Beneath the Sea*, also the CinemaScope and romantic adventure pictures were fascinating to me. Movies in general, Biblical

spectacles, Lana Turner in *The Prodigal*, glamorous stuff with full music scores. I guess I learned filmmaking from watching those pictures.

"Hollywood movies inspired us. It was another world operating: a two-dimensional world inhabited by its own people. Of course, they were the stars. But I related to it. It was an alternate world. Full of glamour and things that real life didn't have. In real life we're not underscored with music. But if you go to see a movie the actors would have background music behind them and whenever their emotions would shift, so would this music...all these gimmicks. So that made me conscious of the process of movie-making. I was probably studying it and all the effects you get with certain combinations of angles and music and action and things. So I got my education in filmmaking by watching movies in the movie theater. And then, of course, they were 75 cents for a double feature. That was in the heyday when movie theaters were palaces. That's another reason why movies were fascinating. A lot of movie theaters were built like temples dedicated to the movie stars. They were literally grand palaces, ornate structures. Artistic, with architecture and glamour. It was like being transported into another era; very elegant. Some theaters were built like gardens. They had goldfish ponds in them. This is in the fifties, when movies were the major entertainment. The theaters they were shown in were duly erected in honor of movies with all the glamour and all the fancifulness. It was a fun era. And to encourage people to come, I remember, every Thursday there would be dishes given away. The husbands were out working, and the housewives were in the house. To get them to go to movies...every Thursday they would eventually get a whole dinner table set. Bela Lugosi would have a 'fright' stage show like a 'Fright Night Friday' usually at 8 o'clock, around Halloween. The horror stars would come...there would be a little stage production before a double feature. This was in the Bronx. At one of the most beautiful of the movie theaters, like the Loew's Paradise, the RKO Chester.

"George and I would take turns photographing and directing. We would invent the film while we were

making it. It was never scripted in long hand, it was just sort of invented as we went along. We had an idea of what it would be—perhaps a kind of costume picture or a war picture or a jungle picture. But we never knew what the plot was going to be. We'd invent it as we were making it.

"Twice a month artists and bohemians would get together in a loft because they got away from painting, wanted to see if they could work with another medium. People were beginning to use cameras as tools of expression. This was downtown—way downtown—in lower Manhattan. It was spread by word of mouth. People would bring their 8mm and 16mm films there. They were not travelogues or home movies of relatives. They were actually trying to express themselves, present their visions, putting it on film. Since the camera was a consumer product, people were using it just like they were using other visual mediums. We were invited to go with some friends. They said, 'Why don't you bring your films to this loft?: an open showcase where people sit around and chat and have wine and mingle and share the movies they're making.' So we went and brought a couple of our movies and they made a hit. They asked us to come back. A film critic attended. He heard from word of mouth that our pictures were interesting. He came and wrote a good article in the *Village Voice*. It was Jonas Mekas who wrote the article, and then asked us to show our films at a theater they rented. We had enough to fill a couple of ninety-minute programs. We had a show, a lot of people came, and they really liked our pictures.

"We showed there, at the 'New American Cinema.' Andy Warhol, Kenneth Anger, Allen Ginsberg made movies and acted in them. Warhol came to our shows. Gregory Markopoulos, Jack Smith, Ron Rice—all were in the midst of making their movies and I got to see their work. John Waters—he saw our films. He wrote an introduction to our book, *Reflections on a Cinematic Cesspool*. He said we were an inspiration and gave him the incentive to make his pictures. I didn't know that until about a week after I saw one of his movies, *Pink Flamingos*, and then I met him at a party. He said that my films

gave him the inspiration and incentive to finish *Pink Flamingos*. I feel so happy to know that in some ways I was instrumental in instigating that picture on the world. It's nice when something you do inspires individuals in the audience to make masterpieces themselves to inflict upon this bland world.

"And that's one thing good about filmmaking: how your visions and your attitudes can open gates and possibilities for other people to explore. That's what it's about. It's a kind of conversation, a sharing that lights a spark in other people...a communicating...you never know who sees it, and who's inspired. It can happen in the dumpiest basement theater. You never know what the domino effect will be of somebody seeing it...taking it further. We converse with each other through our work. Somehow we advance and show further possibilities. That's one of the interesting things about working in a medium and exploring your own vision. It might be totally nuts, it might be completely avant-garde, but just go ahead and do it. You never know the consequences. In 8mm the sprocket holes are almost one-third the width of the film. It squeezes the picture off to the other side of the film. Then somebody decided to make the sprocket holes smaller and allow the picture to be larger, to fill up more of the 8mm width. That's o.k. It's still 8mm but it's 'super'-sized. This is good in many ways, but I find that you can't do slow motion as well...the sprocket holes in Super 8 are shrunk down and therefore there's a tendency for them to slip, being pulled very fast by the cameras. They tend to foul up. The alignment is more critical with the smaller holes, it's harder for the prongs of the camera to fit in and pull them. I never minded the smaller 8mm image where the grain is evident and detail is minimal. It's more impressionistic.

"Regular 8mm now is extinct. The joy of working in miniature movies is that they are less expensive than the larger formats. It was inexpensive to produce. If Super 8 goes up in price, the high cost defeats itself. 8mm has been stigmatized—it's despised and considered insignificant; just something for 'home movies' that you make when you go to see Aunt Lily and Uncle Jim. It is miniaturized—but the ideas you

put into it don't have to be small. Mediums come and go. They are things to use. The human spirit will always be around, the human imagination. The mediums might change, but that's just a technicality. It's the human imagination and spirit and what they do with these mediums that counts.

"I'm working in 8mm again. But this time it's 8mm videotape—Hi-8. That's another despised medium, like when I was working in 8mm film. We sort of took it out of the home movie thing and made it into an affordable, storytelling cinema. It's 8mm and it's affordable. It's what I use for what I do because I have to finance it myself.

"My advice to new filmmakers is: Try not to get yourself bankrupt. This way you can be productive. I always use insignificant despised mediums to express myself. Play with the other toys that are available."

## Ken Jacobs

KJ: Hi. Oh, you called just in time. This is perfect.

DC: We had a power outage...

KJ: What's that noise?

DC: FEEDBACK. It took a couple of calls to get through. Maybe it's my turn to postpone the interview.

KJ: Can't you just reduce the screeching noise?

DC: Only if I remove myself in some way...O.K.? I'm detaching the receiver... So just tell me what you're up to, what you're working on, the whole 8mm story...

KJ: Can you hear this, over here?

DC: It sounds like film whirring...

KJ: It is. That's the sound of the original 16mm camera original of *Blonde Cobra*. I'm now going to wash my



hands from the film cleaner—I just cleaned the original camera roll—I'm about to make a new inter-negative from it and I have to take the chemicals off my hands...

You know, here I was working in 16mm, I didn't start out in 8, I started out in 16. I never even thought of 8, originally. When I had the money, which was my mustering out pay in Alaska during my two-year Coast Guard stint, I got a Bell & Howell camera because I wanted a very sturdy tank, a combat camera. I expected to do combat in the streets of America—literally. So I chose to get this chunk of metal rather than a sophisticated Bolex, which was the same price. What got me into 8 was having the 16 stolen. I lent it to Paul Morrissey, who had a little store on the Lower East Side. It was broken into, very likely by a friend of his, Ron Rice. That's what Paul thought, because Ron Rice visited, and Paul said that he was clearly coveting the camera. He was of a mentality which decided that anything he wanted he could just have. Other filmmakers were negligible, except for, probably, Jack Smith.

The 8mm Motion Picture Club—that was a club for amateurs, not artists. This fantasy that there was a club—there was no Jonas Mekas motion picture club. They were merely people who were very startled, and also very consoled to find that there were other people besides themselves working this way...and of course the Film-Makers' Co-op came out of that. Led by Jonas. It's clearly a joke on history to imagine that it was a club....

So, I had my camera stolen, and Paul was able to come up with some money to replace it. I was working as a waiter at the Limelight at the time and decided that I really wanted to work with this new zoom lens that had become available to people. It had come down in price, and one was now able to work with a zoom lens. Now, *Blonde Cobra* had come out and *Little Stabs [at Happiness]* had come out, and a few people knew my name, and I was working as a waiter, and still I had no money.

I was living near the Brooklyn Bridge. My idea was to photograph what I was seeing down there. I was liv-

ing on Ferry Street. It's no longer there. We sometimes held screenings in our loft. Richard Foreman, Amy Taubin came. Bob Cowan. He brought the Kuchars. I got an 8mm Bolex with a Schneider-Variogon zoom lens. The importers were in New Jersey, and they were extraordinary people. I got a lens and I went back because I didn't get exactly what I was seeing in the viewfinder. It was a reflex viewfinder built into the lens. It screwed onto a non-reflex 8mm Bolex camera. The 8mm Bolex was modified for 8mm so that I could put in a 200 ft. roll of film—that's a 100 ft. roll of film exposed on half the width of the film, so then you flipped it around and got another 100 ft. to shoot.

One of the deeper reasons for the 8 was that it was so cheap to work in. The developing was absurdly cheap. I could buy film for a dollar, or a dollar-fifty, and I could get it developed for a dollar for the cartridge. For the 100 ft. roll it was \$4.32, and this would come with expert developing by Kodak. It was the golden age of Kodachrome. Plus there were all kinds of other films around that you could experiment on and get the looniest results from, just freaky film that would show up in 8mm from Japan and what-not—that was mystery film. And you would get avant-garde results from them...

One of the things that happened when the films *Blonde Cobra* and *Little Stabs* came out, and I was trying to get money for *Star Spangled to Death*, was that I became anxious. *Star Spangled to Death* was a long—hours and hours—film that I'd shot in 16mm and collected in 16mm. I wasn't getting any money and by 1963 I was very, very frustrated with a film that was just stalled and I wanted to shoot again. But I recoiled from it. For funding, I found myself in competition with people whom I never knew existed. I found myself vying for attention...or I found myself feted and other people that I respected would become "and others." You know "*Blonde Cobra* and others." And it wasn't my nature. My name wasn't on *Blonde Cobra* and my mother's name was on *Little Stabs*, K.M. Rosenthal. It was a way of insuring, I thought at the time, for an intimate cinema, my obscurity and my mind.

I thought consciously of making films that were chamber works. Composers, I knew, would sometimes take their most personal thoughts and feelings and experimental ideas and work them out in chamber works rather than concert hall ideas. So I was withdrawing from bigness in a way, just trying to maintain my personal life.

My camera had a new lens on it and it had a magnificent reflex. Reflex was really very new to people then in the amateur territory...for me, it was perfect. So I began working on my idea with chamber cinema. In fact, that idea may've inspired Stan Brakhage. I said "chamber works" to Brakhage and off he went. You know, sometimes you're going along the road, driving a car, and someone goes after you so fast, you have to wonder whether or not you are stalled. Stan began to bring out the *Songs* right after that—just *Song* number this, *Song* number 30—you know, an astronomical number, and I'm working in a slow way and it was shocking, shocking to me.

There was a short period when Underground Film was a buzzword. There was the kind of glow of celebrity about some of the people making work. The celebrity made those people crazy and the lack of celebrity made the rest of us crazy. I just had to get out of that. The next thing was making works in 8mm and then discovering that they were almost unshowable. One had these gorgeous 8mm originals and less satisfying prints. It became clear that one actually needed to blow these works up to 16mm. I understood this rather early in the sixties, but I didn't have enough money to do this until later. I did *The Winter Footage*. I also blew up the much more ambitious, feature length *The Sky Socialist*. So these films exist on 16 now, but they have almost no social existence.

There are problems going from 8 to 16. Blowing up from Regular 8, I was able to preserve the entire frame, almost. The ratios are different from Super 8 to 16. And for people who really consider their frame, that's really problematic. My students are still given assignments on Super 8. We do black-and-white, and then we develop it ourselves and keep the price down. Super 8 color, on the other hand, seems to be prohibi-

tive. It's expensive. It takes too long to send the film out and get it back again. I gave a color assignment last semester, and then after a while I just thought it was cruel. Now I'm looking at the little digital video cameras and I really must say that if the department could afford it, I would say that one should only work in 16 now, and work in video. And the digital format now makes me think that in maybe two or more generations of these cameras it's going to deliver the acuity of film. The little digital JVC, which I've got, allows one to pull a camera out of a pocket that nobody reacts to in terror. It doesn't even have that watch ticking. It's utterly silent, it's utterly ready. And it's quite an image. I'm quite impressed. But... Regular 8 film, Super 8 film are miracles of information. It's a miracle how much information could be stored in just that tiny area of film. The best of video today that I've seen does not approach Regular 8 Kodachrome.

One last statement. There are very few true color films being made. I saw one last year at the Berlin Film Festival by a Russian guy—Sokurov—a fabulous color film! So apparently it can still be done... In black-and-white too, we've adapted to an inferior quality of film. I've seen old nitrate prints, the common prints at the turn of the century, and before the turn of the century...its amazing the amount of subtlety and richness of tones and variety of densities and kind of detail one could achieve. There was more silver in the emulsion...

Some form of video is the future of the moving picture. The quality of film image is being degraded and the quality of video image recording is being upgraded. And working in 8 is almost impossible now. There's no saving it. It's actually a technology that will be routed out of history. Let's just hope that there will be people around who care enough to preserve what's been made.



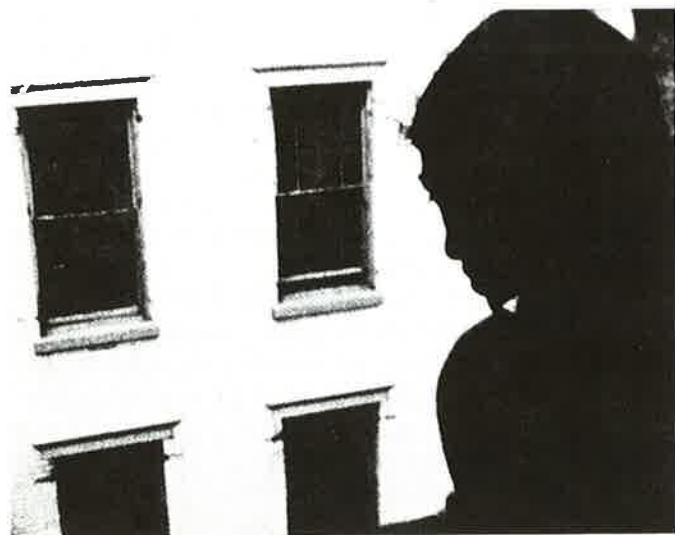
## Stan Brakhage

### "An At-Oneness"

"For me, it doesn't matter what gauge the film is, it's the lightness of the camera equipment which permits an intimacy, an at-oneness with the maker. And that you can carry it in a pocket and that it can be, in some easy way, a constant part of you. I wouldn't care if the images were recording on wires or on digital...but there are things so far that are distinctive and to me unsatisfactory about all other moving-picture mediums...

"Again, it is not the gauge of film, but that the smaller gauges permit a smaller camera and therefore a greater intimacy between the maker and the equipment he or she is using and that you can slip it into a pocket and not be weighed down by it...slip it into a pocket as you do a pencil or a pen.

"I have a recurring dream that you have a thing that you can hold in your hand, that you can pick up images with it. That you can edit them as you stare down into it by working various pressed buttons. And that you could project back and that people can actually speak to each



Ken Jacobs: *Window*

other by moving-visual thinking. But no such thing exists. The closest to it, I suppose, would be some form of video, but the problems for me personally with video are one, it seems to be intrinsically hypnotic—any two people meeting in a room with the TV on know this, because both eyes keep sliding toward the TV—and two, I also know as a colorist that it has no fixity of color. The subtleties of color you've created making it will be transformed to whatever the machine is on and/or whatever anyone watching the machine turns the dials to. So it can't be significant as a color medium. An art cannot be hypnotic—the extent to which it would be hypnotic would be absolutely against all that we understand from the whole previous history of human arts as to an essential, to wit: people have to be left free in the art experience, they have to have a maximum freedom...

"In the 1960s all my 16mm film equipment was stolen out of a car and the insurance wasn't high enough to replace it...I went out to get some groceries and we didn't have a lot of money but as I went I passed, in a store window in a couple of shoe boxes, somebody's discarded home movie 8mm equipment. I really desperately needed to work with film so I thought, well I could pick them up for maybe \$20 and bring home maybe half the groceries. And I almost immediately began making *Song 1*. It was very freeing. There were things that I was missing, that you could do with 16, or a larger gauge, but there were also distinct advantages to being able to carry it with me. By weight I could hold it much more simply and work with it hand-held. Then I got some 16mm equipment again and was able to work with both of them side by side.

"I gave up on it five or six years ago because it became evident that they were going to phase everything out...fifteen years ago I started translating them into 16mm blow-ups because I thought that they were going to be lost otherwise...there weren't very many people using 8mm projectors to project things anymore and so on... In the meantime I had made six or seven Super 8 films. It was a little heavier, a little closer to 16mm, still, its weight was accessible. But 8mm produced a kind of Impressionism intrinsically, because if you blew it up, as Jonas Mekas did for instance when

he screened all the *Songs* in New York (at Anthology Film Archives), you were viewing the actual chemical constituency that was making up the images as well as the images: they really were imbedded in the very crystals that made for a yellow shape as distinct from a red shape and it was quite a spatial experience! If you blew them up large enough you could almost see through the space the various dye levels.

"I don't want to prophesy, but it could be that 8mm will come back through all these people that love it dearly enough. I know people that are buying these old machines so that they can split 16 and continue to work with 8...so, like a harpsichord, it may be kept alive... One of the problems with museums and other institutions preserving things is that too much is bureaucratized and things revolve around committee meetings...what really works in preserving things is that someone loves something so much they preserve that form of it that they can..."

## Saul Levine

"Super 8 films I actually started in 1975. I had been making Regular 8 films since 1963 or '64. I had for a long time been drawn to thinking about making films myself. I was a writer and interested in theater, but with actually very little confidence in any of my abilities in those directions. Like everyone else I was told I was worthless and nothing...especially as a visual artist. I actually thought—this is ironic—that I should get into the business end of it.

"Somehow I was running into a lot of walls as a writer, as a poet, and also in theater. The kind of theater I became more and more interested in had less to do with story and drama. I couldn't see myself making love stories or cops and robbers and cowboy movies, as much as I liked that stuff. I wanted to make films...

I thought: 'There must be something else...' It wasn't until I saw Maya Deren's *At Land*, and Viking Eggeling's *Symphonie Diagonale* in the Yale Library

that I knew there was something else. I also knew that there were people who did stuff outside the industry. There was P. Adams Sitney, George Landow, and other people I knew involved in the New Haven Film Society when they were in high school and I had just gone to college. I was groping towards...the real thing for me... I was involved in culture magazines following what was going on in the avant-garde in New York...in *Kulchur* magazine...like Yoko Ono and other people who were involved in conceptual art... I read La Monte Young's stuff...it was an important source for me. Also reading Mekas' column...I saw Brakhage at Trinity...I went to high school with George Landow...all this stuff was kind of in the air there then...

"My aunt, who used to enter contests, won a Regular 8 movie camera. So, my aunt remembered that I was talking about being a filmmaker. She said, well, would you like it? Of course! I would have killed for it. It was a plastic Kodak camera, just a simple fixed lens Regular 8 camera. That's how I started. I really started thinking I wouldn't be able to use the camera, and got other people to shoot it for me...I started out making a story—an existential suicidal super drama... I never really finished it...I did some animation kinds of things...I was very caught up, right from the beginning. So I got into Regular 8 because it was what I could afford...I got thrown out of Clark and went to BU night school...they taught 16mm and documentary filmmaking...I tried to conform to their way of doing things and I couldn't...when I showed them the films I was doing they said what do you want to be, an interior decorator? At BU I met Andy Meyer who had made *Shades and Drumbeats*...there were a lot of things validating my use of Regular 8... I didn't realize some of the trouble I was getting into. I had this hope that Regular 8 would be more like poetry. That people would be able to see it more individually, see it whenever they felt like it, that it would be more like buying a book or a record...that people would turn each other on to the stuff more informally, rather than follow the movieland apparatus...

"I liked it, it was a very manageable technology for me. I liked how small it was, myself being a not very big person, being a little guy, being able to carry the equipment

around and looking as inconspicuous as you can be with a camera, so that you could do more sneaky things with it—I've got to admit I am saying that—like film someone on a bus for example, and they might not know you were doing it, or that you were just a regular person and that this was not going to be on TV and that they weren't going to make a million dollars, you weren't going to make a million dollars, not with a \$25 camera...and I still think that that's one of the greatest things about small gauge filmmaking is that ability to apply the ideology of *cinéma vérité*, a naturalness...

"I think Super 8 all along had a very unfortunate history with the dynamics of commercial reality. It was very underplayed. Its possibilities as a democratic, very advanced aesthetic media got totally fucked up with the advent of video and people's fascination with the electronic image. Actually Super 8 is a very low capital-intensive medium. Now its become so difficult in the post-production aspects that it does get expensive. But it's still cheaper than making double system prints. Kodak for a time was making sound prints...they stopped doing that in the middle 1980s. Kodak wrote off photo chemistry, and you can see why—there haven't been Super 8 cameras made in a long time...the elimination of sound stripe film is like someone ripping out my tongue... I and Anne Robertson and Joe Gibbons use sound striped film, but I more than Joe or Anne edit it...the sound displacement in Super 8 is a very interesting thing...I really pushed it a lot. The guy who used to be president of Sony said that for profit maximization it's good to have a new media every twenty years. But I would say that for the individual film/media maker, for the culture maker, that's a very destructive scenario.

"It's a real tricky question...Avant-garde film from the beginning has been a jackal around the industry, in some respects we've got to blow the way the industry goes...As somebody who wants to see a more socially democratic world especially in the media world—I tried to teach people Regular 8 and Super 8 filmmaking because I thought it was a way that individuals could express their vision more easily. Not to say that I look down on people who have the capacity to make 35 and 70mm—I appreciate the visual qualities of that...but...



Saul Levine: New Left Note

"There are so many people who have it within them to make good films that I want to see, and not the capacity to get together the organizational production skills that the other formats require. I think that the smaller gauge formats are actually in certain ways more advanced socially because they give people more opportunity of expression. There's a myth about video, that it was cheaper...but the access to equipment to make videos and distribute them beyond a certain point is extremely capital-intensive...so you either have to have money or you have to have ass-kissing skills...or you have to be a person who doesn't get along with anyone but who makes the kind of stuff that people are willing to support. The thing I like about Super 8 and Regular 8 is that people could get all the stuff they needed to shoot, edit and project and make the stuff themselves for about \$1500 or less.

"My goal is to bring collective work of vision and its dialogue in exchange. On the largest level I feel part of this wonderful movement of people who are exploring for the first time...for the first time people are able to exchange globally or with each other works that are made up of sound and light in time. I am very entranced by being able to work with flickering light from the film projector. For me its about being in the room with the

flickering light...it's a way that I can understand the world...it's like a type of...experience and healing... I can figure out what's going on around me...

"When you make a film you are engaging in a very specific and intensive act of cultural production. I'm speaking to the world that's produced by human culture and then to very specific aspects of it. Believe me, I know I'm not speaking to everyone...but through ripple effects I think I am. It's my kick, I feel blessed and driven to do it.

"P. Adams [Sitney] said in his introduction of me at my retrospective [at Anthology Film Archives in New York City, Summer 1996] that I was the leading dissenting filmmaker. I could live without the 'leading,' but I kind of like the 'dissenting'... I am definitely making something other than the industry. That's my aim. I am not trying to be part of the mainstream and would consider myself a failure if I were to be. I do not consider myself in the Hollywood minor league, I consider myself in the major league of film culture (with artists like Menken, Welles, Wieland, etc.). I think some of the greatest films of the twentieth century have been small gauge films—I think Carolee Schneemann's *Kitch's Last Meal* is one of the most important works of the 1970s, certainly one of the most unknown works of the 1970s, and overlooked! And that was [made with] Super 8 and 1/4" audio tape. Most of the feature films that are trying to deal with the same subject—I'd put them on the scale—all of them put together wouldn't come up to *Kitch's Last Meal*. I think that a lot of feature films are saying that they are love movies or about intimate relationships among people and the conflict of love and hate. *Kitch's Last Meal* speaks to these issues in a much more interesting way—sexuality, day-to-day life, eating, food—makes me think about scale and relationship.

[Question: Are there younger artists whose Super 8 films excite you?]

"Now, are there people who are making Super 8 films who are under 25 who I'm excited about? Yes. Do I think they're stupid and just pissing in the wind to make Super 8 films? No. They may be pissing in the wind, but, having done that myself, all that happens is that you get wet—with your own piss. It's very, very severe

that Kodak is giving up the sound stocks—that really impacts people like Anne Robertson and me, people who have a body of work that we've done over time. There are things that I won't be able to do anymore—literally. But it also adapts this problem of memory. You know Anne, myself and other people I know have a huge amount of rolls—if I can't shoot, maybe, you talking in sync, then I can't combine it with Anne talking in sync, which I shot in the past. That kind of discontinuity for me is very troubling. Not being able to combine and work in the small-gauge is an assault on memory.

"I used to be a welfare rights activist, so I'm very troubled about what's happening to poor people in this country...If I were in control we would have sound striped Super 8 film and poor people wouldn't be kicked around the block for being immoral by people who are truly immoral...

"Do I believe Kodak when it says it's not going to discontinue the black-and-white stocks and Kodachrome? [This was the official line at Kodak a year ago, when this interview took place.—Ed.] I'm no prophet. I would say four years for Super 8 sound and maybe another eleven years for silent Super 8. My hope is that Kodachrome and the black-and-white stocks will never stop.

"I am grateful to have been able to work in Regular 8 and Super 8 because they have allowed me to make hours of films without ever receiving grants or financial awards. And I am happy that when I sign my films there is no ruling-class power elite sexist/racist/imperialist organization that I have to thank for a grant."

## Vivienne Dick

### "No-budget film started with Super 8"

"I began shooting Super 8 in 1976. I was living in New York City at the time; I had been going to screenings at Anthology Film Archives. This was the first time I saw any film by independent artists. I joined Millennium and rented a Super 8 camera. My mother was very ill, so I took the camera with me to Ireland because I wanted

to film her at home. That was the first film I made.

"The aspects of Super 8 which appeal to me are the size of the camera and the look of the film—especially Kodachrome. I like that it records sync sound and that the ambient sound is sometimes exaggerated, unexpected and random—there is not the selectiveness and editing which happens when sound is recorded separately. A Super 8 camera is portable and immediate. Just as the Leica changed the look of photography, Super 8 has done the same for film. The camera becomes an extension of the body.

"When I returned to live in Ireland I was advised by Irish filmmaker Bob Quinn to consider getting 'at least a monopod.' The mobile roving camera has since become acceptable in photography and mainstream cinema.

"There has never been any distribution for Super 8 and the prints are often not very good because the original is on reversal stock. It is also very fragile. The sound can be a problem, especially in post-production. Like many others nowadays I usually transfer to video to edit.

"Everyone thought that Super 8 would disappear but it still survives—just about. There are Super 8 festivals in Europe and in London the Viva-8 festival has been running successfully for several years. This festival also screens Hi-8 video, if the work originated on Super 8.

"In recent years I have been shooting on both Super 8 and Hi-8, transferring the Super 8 to video. It has become so plastic now what with digital cameras and non-linear editing. I love it. Hi-8 is obviously the heir to Super 8. I prefer the look of film but I want to be able to record sound which I can work with afterwards. People complain about the poor quality of the video image but this is often because of poor quality video projection. (Millennium is an exception with excellent video screening.)

"16mm and Super 8 are on the way out. The British Film Institute in London has stopped distributing 16mm. Meanwhile, it has become fashionable to open alternative cinemas where this type of work can be shown and where there are discussions with

the audience, etc. The notion of no-budget film started with Super 8. Film and video have become interchangeable. People use the word 'film' when in fact it's a video. A lot of current work is hybrid, in any case. I am not interested in fetishizing Super 8. I like Super 8 and video. Both have advantages. I tend to use video more these days. The technology is improving and becoming less expensive by the month. We can now manipulate images at home and finish on any format. We are in the same position musicians were in during the early eighties with synthesizers and samplers—that is, we can combine sources and formats. Non-linear access of images encourages a stream of consciousness, etc.

"I plan to continue to make work that I shoot and edit myself—either video or Super 8. I want to make work which will be collaborative and more."



Vivienne Dick: Poster for Beauty Becomes the Beast

## Gary Adlestein

### "That kind of lyric intensity..."

"I've been making Super 8 films since 1973. In 1974 I became, and still am, Program Director at Berks Filmmakers, Inc. at Albright College in Reading, PA. I run it with Jerry Orr, the Executive Director, and the two of us and Jerry Tartaglia were the three Berks founders. Just by default—so many centers have had to close—it's become one of the oldest experimental film showcases in the country. We've always been dedicated to Super 8 film, primarily because we ourselves work with it: Jerry and I both. Many of the film showcases never really presented Super 8 properly. You know, very often they'd just haul out some dangerous machine that would damage the work. Even though in terms of their rhetoric they stood for it, when it came down to reality and to showing it they didn't. So we always had a reputation for treating Super 8 with as much care and concern as we did 16mm, and as we do video projection now. We feel that quality presentation should be a very high priority. At Berks we also did quite a few Super 8 self-processing workshops in the 1970s. Tartaglia was interested in 16mm self-processing so we just added Super 8. And we worked with people like him and Jim Hubbard.

"All the time I was working in Super 8, I was simultaneously working in 16mm. Almost all of my 16mm work was done on the JK [optical printer]. I would take imagery from my Super 8 shooting and then rework it, blow it up to 16mm and in the process of blowing it up restructure it. I was engaging both parts of myself, the more spontaneous part with Super 8, working more improvisationally, and then the more obsessive part of myself with the 16mm, on the optical printer.

"Super 8 was a very liberating, energizing medium. When the sun or the fog did something out the window you had the camera in the drawer. A lot of my stuff I shot with sound. I was shooting sync sound right off the camera, single system with the microphone on top. So responding improvisationally to a situation would affect the rhythm of the sound. It's such

a big deal to do sync sound in 16mm. In Super 8 I had it right there—instantaneously. I have always been excited by chance. At times I could follow a sound and turn around and shoot the camera in that direction, follow the sound, and then I could do it the other way, responding to something visually. So all kinds of things happened which were intuitive and spontaneous. It's so different from two frames of this and three frames of that on the JK, that whole other way of working... There I would work with scores...I had graph paper and all kinds of numbers...it was totally off in that other direction, the other side of my brain.

"My goal always was an ecstatic film experience, even though it was agony and plodding at the printer. I feel my most successful works came from that kind of lyric intensity. And sometimes, when the Super 8 was working, it would be in real time and space. The style of my Super 8 films was a bit different than most. In the 1980s, around the time Hoberman did his Super 8 survey, the Punk look, with its low-tech, grungy image and sound (some of it quite exciting) became THE Super 8 look, almost eclipsing any other use of the medium. An emphasis on craft and lyrical beauty—which I picked up early from such artists as Anger, De Hirsch, Tom Chomont and Brakhage (his *Songs*)—has always been an important part of my filmmaking, in or out of fashion.

"For Berks and for myself I'd like to add something at this point...an overlooked person who was almost single-handedly responsible for our devotion to Super 8. You know we all saw Brakhage's *Songs*, and were turned on by those. But the main force [for us] was Storm De Hirsch. She used to come down here in the early 1970s; she was one of the first filmmakers we showed from New York. She herself had just recently gone in to making Super 8 films with her little Minolta silent camera. These just blew us away. It was largely her influence, for me and for a number of people, like Jerry Orr, Jerry Tartaglia and Albert Kilchesty, that led us to this kind of intuitive, spontaneous filmmaking. Sadly, she contracted Alzheimer's disease. She's been out of the world for many years. But what was amazing about her was that she could make magnificent in-camera Super 8 films and not be able to talk about



them critically at all. On some level she went sort of like de Kooning into that phase... She couldn't explain it. She couldn't even say what a camera was at a certain point... But she was rather poetic and mystical and could finesse it. Her films never suffered.

"Due to a kind of sexism or I-don't-know-what in the avant-garde, her work was almost overlooked. It was recognized by Mekas for a while, but she was rather cantankerous, insulting. So I don't know how influential she is... But certainly the early generation knows her work. Yet she was almost missed. Some of her work is available from the Film-Makers' Cooperative and some, I think, from Cecile Starr.

"Now I use Super 8 less and less. Because of the cut-backs in stock and equipment. And because prints became impossible. Working single system sound like I did became ridiculous. They used to sell a pre-stripped print stock. Now there's no more manufacturing of any sound stock...

"The portability and relative affordability of the Hi-8 format works in some ways as an extension of Super 8. It took a while for me to accept the electronic palette and texture, but one of the ways I handle that is that I actually make my video works for projection. My videos are primarily for an audience sitting in a dark room instead of a looking at a monitor in a gallery. Once I accepted the difference in the quality, palette and texture of the image, there's a whole world to explore there. I find myself working against the gimmickry of it...it has such a commercial presence. It's like starting over again to subvert the mechanism and make it responsive to the soul...and Super 8 equipment was once that way. It can be difficult because of that. Not so much the shooting, but the mixing, the blending which I used to do with Super 8 by having several projectors simultaneously projecting on a piece of paper, or I would send the A & B rolls to the lab with the sync sound. My film, *Cinesongs for Storm De Hirsch*, was printed that way. It's sound going in and out and picture going in and out and they're both layered.

"I really miss being able to touch the medium. But I'm

willing to exchange that for real time electronic 'optical printing.' Consumer mixers aren't bad these days with time base correctors and you can feed in several sources and get some interesting layering as long as you fight off the clichés that the instrument wants to give you. I just like the thrill of being able to sit at the monitor and get closer to the experience of responding instantly to what I've done. I find myself not working with scores or programatically like I did with the JK. I haven't been able to get my hand on frame control video yet. I'm looking forward to that digital stuff becoming affordable to the consumer. I love to work with frame clusters, and I'd like to put that into the mix. That is a little frustrating about video: you can get the gesture, but you can't get the precision..."

## Anne Robertson

### Marathon Diary Stylist

"I started in 1976. I had been bouncing in and out of colleges for a number of years. I started up a bachelor's degree mid-stream at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. They offered four film courses that semester in various departments and I took them all...it seemed like a light load. I had never taken a movie course before—I had studied photography but never movies, and I just adored it. I am also a gardener. I developed my marathon diary style in 1981.

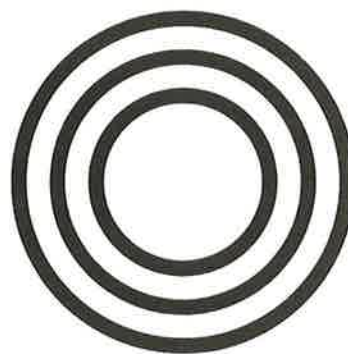
"In 1986, at Eventworks at Massachusetts College of Art, I showed everything I had done. It took eight days. I tend to crowd a lot of things in my garden, I crowd a lot of things in my films—in a diary that's the most realistic attitude to take. Crowd everything in. In a sort of free-form style. Like the less you edit the more it says...I've made about thirty Super 8 films and have about eight in progress.

"The Super 8 Diary [Robertson's major work, *Five Year Diary* (1981 - ) currently totals over thirty-four hours in length] and my other diary films are performance, because there's a narration. Other films, like

*Apologies*, are scripted. In the diary narrations I tend to repeat some stuff, but it's spontaneous, really. I rely on sound stripe Super 8 film in my work. My diaries are both disturbed and disturbing. They're from the core of my life. Right now, it's depressing. Kodak has cut out sound film. We have little caches of film hoarded away. Once that runs out we have to hope that somebody's going to produce it, otherwise there's no sound film, there's no high speed film, so it's really closing down. I just have to wait and see what happens.

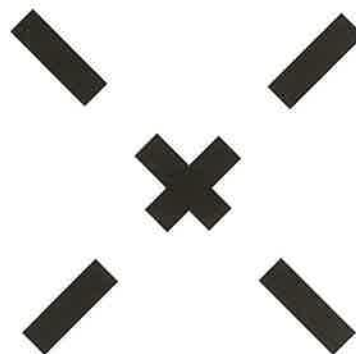
"I make props for my films, which are like broadsides on cardboard... I've done sculpture and crafts. I have a whole room environment in which I can show my entire opus of films. For other showings of my films, I prefer galleries or schools to theaters. But I'll do either. I recently showed my worked in a garden, outdoors. But there was outside lighting so the projection was dim.

"I think of my diaries as a materialization of the present, which is a storehouse. I used to think of them in terms of showing them to a man who would say to me, 'What have you been doing all your life?' and then I'd show them to him. It would be like a trousseau you know, like a home movie made up ahead of time. So, in other words, I represent myself with them. They're my 'true-so.'"



Linda Adlestein

Storm De Hirsch c.1976



"I Want To Keep Truth..."

interview with  
Luther Price

More and more I meet filmmakers who are very excited about hi-8 video, and I'm very excited... but at the same time I feel a lot of filmmakers think we're strange--we super-8 filmmakers--for being so crude, and not taking other options... I have no problem with it, I like super-8, I like it's crudeness, that's sort of why I fell in love with it... very intimate. I think a lot of people who are dealing with a lot more advanced techniques never even sat down and touched film with their own fingers... I feel bad that a lot of people may not have the chance to have the intimacy with film the way I have.

As a sculptor, I very much accepted all mediums in my palette. You look at Derek Jarman and you see that mixing all of these mediums can work. Because its all about visual language. Why restrict yourself? I hope that, at the end of this decade a progression will resolve itself in my own work. I don't claim to be a dinosaur, and I don't want to be a dinosaur either. I've done a lot of things by hand without using an optical printer. At the same time I've sort of created a monster with many of my films the printer (says it can't be printed) or they're gonna charge you twice as much to print it.

"Look at Joe Gibbons, for example. He only shows his originals. I still can't believe that he does this. This is the way he is. He's not cheap. On the other hand, I feel that prints can be beautiful. Saul and I have pretty much the same ideas about prints- each print is its own separate version of the original. I'm not a hard-ass, but I do want a good print. Printing is part of the process. I've seen bad prints. There's something about a bad print--you can see it right away.

"..When I made Sodom-I started this film in 1988 and I soon after showed it in New York--the first version was seven minutes long. the film grew to twenty minutes. made several prints. In 1994 Canyon [Cinema Distribution Co-op] called me, and said 'Hey, Luther, for some reason there's no sound track on this film.' I sat down to put the sound on, but just by looking at it again, not in a setting where I was showing it. I realized I needed to start cutting things out. I was with a friend. I said, 'Do you mind if I cut out loud?' He said, 'No, I don't mind'. So I started cutting out loud in my head. I made 35 cuts to the print--I left them a note. And Steve Anker was horrified when the found out. But the version that I had--I made 55 cuts to it, after the fact. What was really beautiful about it was that I already had the sound on it so that it really has these beautiful crashing moments. If you don't do this, then you're settling for the thing that was..

I went to the ATA gallery and showed Sodom as a double projection and it really worked. It's one of the most beautiful versions because it begins to talk about the landscape.

"I'm going to stick with super-8 until it's gone.. I have lots of friends who make wonderful sound films... Losing the sound stock is cutting off the voice of super-8 filmmakers. It won't affect me that much, but it's chipping away at all of us...

"...To get back, when I was doing sculpture. [redacted] I was getting very involved with the photography of the pieces and where they were going. I started to do xerox art from them. Making these apocalyptic sculpture figures into posters that I'd put up...It was one thing to install the sculpture pieces in these spaces, but then the [redacted] the aesthetics would be ruined by you know, the person in the yellow wind breaker. I [redacted] I felt that in many ways the installation could still be viewed but [redacted]...I was never completely happy...

"I picked up a camera after I finished my last installation piece in 1986. I feel like a lot of things revolve around the fact that I got shot in 1985. I went to Nicaragua during the Sandinista revolution and I got mortally injured there. I went down to see what was going on, with a bunch of artists. On the morning that I was going home I got shot in the hip and stomach by a machine gun. So I pretty much died... in many ways I feel like I stopped aging for a little while too, like a vampire. This past June 29 it was 11 years ago to the day and there hasn't been one week where I haven't been affected by it. I made a film about it called *Meat*, which has only been screened once, in San Francisco, in 1992, as part of a performance. [redacted]

It was so thick with tape that I couldn't get it printed. I was sitting at this bar [redacted] -I was sitting there, sitting there, sitting there thinking, ' [redacted] the show is scheduled.' [redacted] myself looking [redacted] at [redacted] something on the TV [redacted] couldn't stop looking at the monitor. [redacted] I realized that this piece was about being in the hospital. And I thought that if there was any film of mine that would ever exist on video, as an object in the monitor, it would be this one. [redacted] there's always a monitor involved in a hospital room. So I decided to have the [redacted] film made into a video and I built the [redacted] piece around that, [redacted] I did a performance [redacted] the monitors. And [redacted] It just became layered with monitors and screens. [redacted] it doesn't need to be projected.

"...Like I was saying. I got shot. When I was 23, in Nicaragua. My right leg was paralyzed. I had a hole like the size of the bottom of a beer bottle in my stomach, [redacted] I would have to stuff with gauze three times a day. [redacted] when I was in the hospital in August...I said to the nurses, I'm going back to school in September. They said, 'That's nice.' But I did! I got out in late August. I was down to 83 pounds, a skeleton, a paralyzed leg, a huge hole, in complete pain, and I went to school. In crutches. I took that thing called *The Ride*. [redacted] I pretty much locked myself up in a studio and worked. It wasn't until the next year that I began [redacted] film- [redacted] I was a sculpture major, finishing up my critical studies. I made my last installation piece, 11 figures- five animals and six people. It was called *eat fuck live shit want need*. [redacted]

"Two weeks before I'd gone to Nicaragua I'd done a performance piece called *Consume*. It was very strange because it was almost premeditative of what was going to happen to me. I knew I was in danger. One of the people that I was staying with had a paralyzed leg. The night that I arrived to stay with him I stared at his leg all night long, and it sent a shiver up my spine. [redacted]

"...I had just got out of the hammock and moved to a cot. I saw my bodyguard, who was only fourteen years old, disarming his gun. He was five feet away from me, sitting on the floor [redacted] pointing that gun right at me, [redacted] I turned around just in time, if I didn't it would have blown right through the middle of my stomach and through my spine [redacted]

Luther -  
could yw  
clear up  
the  
chronology  
here?

[redacted] had a lot in  
[redacted]

I started thinking about my childhood for some reason, and  
go back [redacted] resolve my past; [redacted] I feel like I went back.  
through film. [redacted] I've been trying to get up to the point where I can say  
I'm right where I'm [redacted]

"I've made over 40 super-8 films to date. [redacted]  
Most of it's found footage stuff- I love found footage. If I find a reel of it [redacted]  
[redacted], it's like finding a chunk of gold. [redacted] whenever I do find something it's exactly what  
I need, exactly what I want, and I know exactly what I want to do with it. [redacted]  
[redacted] the morning and brushing [redacted]

"I like to think about cutting super-8. [redacted]

[redacted], fill up [redacted] sketch books...get myself into different moods [redacted]  
another point of view than just go right for it- [redacted]  
[redacted] I love [redacted] process. The process of filmmaking. [redacted]  
[redacted]. I don't mind the tediousness...

"I never expected to have any recognition as a filmmaker. I just felt that a lot of people really could relate to  
my childhood, [redacted] Warm Broth, for example and say, 'That wasn't my life, but I know, [redacted]  
I told myself that if I were going to make films I would have to be completely honest. Because it's a medium  
where you can lie very easily. And you can change truth. [redacted] what I wanted to [redacted] keep truth. I looked  
[redacted] the Kenneth Anger and thought, 'He's not lying, he's real, he's [redacted] truthful.' And that's what I  
love about Kenneth Anger' [redacted], 'I want to make true films. I don't care if it hurts me [redacted]  
[redacted] people exploit each other anyway. If you exploit yourself you leave no room to be exploited by someone  
else...'

"No one can hurt me, No one can say anything about me because I've already said it. I've already given  
them the dirt. We always have the ability to redeem ourselves...

[redacted] feel like the camellia  
plant. I [redacted] grow, and then I crumble. *I feel.*

"Super-8 really talks about this process. The process never ends. I [redacted]  
[redacted] It's always rediscovering itself. [redacted]

*I sent all interviewed filmmakers a verbatim, unedited transcription of their interviews for  
comment and revision. This is the form in which Luther sent his corrections back to me.  
His method of editing text being quite similar to his filmmaking style, I decided to print  
his "corrected" interview as is.—Ed.*

## Toni Treadway

### 8mm Advocate

"I don't think Super 8 dwindled because of the video element. Most of the Super 8 filmmakers that I knew over the years have stayed pretty faithful. It dwindled because it has not been promoted by Kodak since about 1980. Most people do not know that Super 8 film is available. It's available anywhere! A Kodak dealer can order it for you. They just have to be informed and willing. Also you can order it direct from Kodak. Most camera stores who are worth their weight can get it for you. By and large many dealers don't stock it because they can't afford to. Admittedly, in home movies, the main home-moviemaking public was wooed by video. Most people got home camcorders in the eighties. And that's because they were not thinking or were not informed to think at that time whether or not those images would be around for posterity. And they won't. My feeling is that now that same public would be very open-minded towards Super 8 because of its longevity, if Kodak would only take the time to explain this to them. There are computer aficionados who will try to convince you that eventually everything will be recorded on CD-ROM, and that that will solve the problem, but if you talk to the technicians, discs aren't any more archival a format than video is. I've talked to some technicians and I am sure that I wouldn't recommend it. CD-ROM seems stable because it's between two sheets of plastic, but it's fragile.

"When I came to Super 8, and when I met Bob Brodsky in the mid-1970s, what was really exciting about it was that this was the affordable format for people to make moving images with. There weren't many other options. Even open reel-to-reel 1/2" and then finally 3/4" video tended to exist only in institutions—libraries, universities, beginning cable access stations—but not in individual hands. Even beginning in 1981 with the invasion of the camcorders, even as VHS began to penetrate, that was still true. If you remember, Betamax and then VHS were introduced. And then suddenly you began to hear about people

having VCRs. But not to record. And then very few having the ability to edit. And editing is the key distinction. People in Super 8 could afford to own editing and projection equipment. That gave them a great deal of artistic and editorial control over the moving images. It empowered them in ways that video still hasn't. I don't know many camcorder operators who edit their recordings. They accumulate but they don't edit and they don't make a polished, finished piece. They don't learn the technique of turning off the camcorder to make an in-camera edit. Filmmakers tended to come more from a film appreciation place, or a film playfulness place. And I still think that that's true of people who are attracted to film cameras, even if it's a fifteen-year old who calls me up all excited because he found a Regular 8 camera in a flea market and he wants to know if he can still get film for it. And I know that he can. John Schwind in Dixon, California is the Regular 8 supply person.

"There are certainly clear differences between the trends now and twenty years ago. Super 8 is much more visible. Its form and style (not exactly content and style) certainly, in all appearances, has been co-opted by music video and advertisement, including stills. I think you see a great deal of influence of what I'd call the 1960s and 1970s Super 8 aesthetic in the hands of artists in today's advertising world. Take the back pages of any fashion magazine, including the *NY Times Magazine* Section. A lot of them have a look that is drawn from this kind of Super 8 film style. You see a huge amount of granularity, a using of the graininess, a huge amount of everything from shaky camera on down to deep Kodachrome high-color, using Super 8's aesthetics. Certain kinds of people and looks and models and that sort of thing. It's come around again. So I think that that has a great deal to do with what I'd call artistic uses of Super 8. There's a lot of derivation going on there. Also, look, you've got a major show at the Whitney Museum of American Art [*No Wave Cinema*, 1978-87 ran at the Whitney from October 1996-January 1997. —Ed.], a major show at the Museum of Modern Art... Certainly there are major shows all the time in places like Barcelona, Paris, many cities in Germany, that sort of thing. So it has a certain kind of 'art' acceptance that it did not have twenty

years ago.... It's like a good painter. Some of them aren't discovered until they are forty years old and they have twenty years of painting behind them. It's not just something where the curators wake up one day and say, hey, look at this, isn't this neat...

"On the downside of what's changed from twenty years ago is that I see fewer and fewer finished films made by one person, where the person is actually finishing, editing, making the sound track and showing the film as Super 8 film, which was very much a dominant factor twenty years ago. I think that the audience has grown. Both because you have the audience that grew up with those artists, and you have the students of those artists, and the generation that they influenced, as well as today's young generation. Also, Super 8 has been used well through the 1980s, even if just in bits and drabs. It definitely influenced independent features. Definitely hand-held cameras, a lot of zooming, certain kinds of camera moves: all have a lot to do with the kind of portability that Super 8 and Regular 8 represented in the 1960s. And a lot of those people had grown up... Take for example, Richard Linklater, who in the last ten years has grown up into a significant independent filmmaker. His last film, *Suburbia*, had an Eric Bogosian script and came out at the New York Film Festival on October 10 [1996]...and Bogosian is what I considered to be a Super 8 kid as well. He may not have shot them, but he certainly was in them, on the screen, twenty years ago.

"In documentary, first-person documentary has risen in appreciation. I would attribute this in part to the women's movement and in part due to the rise in understanding of minority groups and diversity in our culture and in part to the unearthing of some really brilliant diaries and journals and things like photographs by heretofore unknown people. There's been a whole understanding on the part of people growing up in my generation that pulling in first-person documents is important in making moving images. For people making documentaries in television and places like that, one of the places they now throw their nets and search is into the sea of the so-called home movie. You can understand that the audience can read this as an authentic voice, or as another new and unique

piece of information. For example, Orlando Bagwell's documentary for PBS on Malcolm X draws in home movies made by people around at that time. A 1960s television documentary on Malcolm X, for example, if one had been made, would have been made by a white male TV correspondent who might have only chosen similarly sourced material. But there's been a whole change in voicing authority. That is really important and has led to a re-evaluation of most materials. Because camera-wise, technology-wise, Super 8 comes from a more accessible format. Don't get me wrong. 8mm was the brainchild of George Eastman who was thinking about ways to make more money with the home movies he'd introduced in 16mm. Everything I've read does not tell me that the man was heartily moved by a cultural tendency to democratize the media. That was a side effect that's happy for the culture. But that was not the intent. Neither was that what Sony was doing with the inception of the camcorder.

"I would argue that the camcorder is less empowering than the Super 8 camera because you become addicted to recording more and more, which gives you less and less time to look at what you are recording. You can't afford the means of editing it, so you don't edit it, so you don't present it in an edited form. So it never gets presented. And you are also pouring it into a medium which is fragile, which is not going to last, so those families are going to end up with nothing in fifty years. It's a frightening thing. Culturally, we've already lost a decade. How many more do we have to lose before people wake up?"





*Jerry Orr: Prayer Wheel*

## Jerry Orr

### **"...mental pictures, so to speak..."**

"I first experienced a 'film art epiphany' in the late sixties, in Pittsburgh, during my years in graduate school. Sally Dixon started programming at the Carnegie Museum, and brought in Mekas, Brakhage, Ken Jacobs, Kubelka, Marie Menken and Willard Maas, and the Kuchars. I started going to the shows and got turned on to what was happening. I got a Super 8 Bolex and just kind of started playing around with it and found that it really captured my imagination. I took off from there..."

"I worked in 16mm for a couple of years. But I found myself always drawn back to Super 8, there was just something very exciting and more personal about the small-gauge stuff. I was always more attracted to it. I just felt that it was more of an immediate dialogue. It didn't feel as intimidating, whereas the 16mm felt like you had to do serious ART...this big thing was a gigantic responsibility...it was a tremendous moral weight...but with this little camera all I needed were a few batteries and film cartridges. I could play and I didn't have to be that serious...and

that was important to me. I did a lot of in-camera editing and single-frame stuff—short bursts—and would then construct a film, like a diary kind of film, of stuff I had initially done and just thought about: my kids, family, friends, stuff like that. Then in the early eighties I began to get into re-photography and multiple-layered films (both sound and image). The possibility of using 'real-life' images to construct interior landscapes—mental pictures, so to speak—fascinated me.

"I've been doing 8mm and Hi-8 video since the late eighties, for economic reasons. But again, I liked the immediacy of being able to shoot and have the imagery right in front of me. In terms of the video image itself, I don't find it quite as visually and aesthetically satisfying as I do the film image...something about the texture of light with film that doesn't happen with video. When I worked with Super 8 I did a lot of layering and crude optical printing with re-photography and I find now, with some Hi-8 consumer editing equipment, I can extend my concerns with imagery and layering and sound. Sometimes I have six or seven layers of imagery and four or five layers of sound. It's just very convenient to work with video, given my current focus. Interestingly, in the last ten or twelve short videos that I've done, all but one has a layer of film imagery. I re-photograph it off the screen, onto video. I still use Super 8 cameras and I have Super 8 stock and I still shoot, not so much in terms of the filming for itself but as raw material for a larger work.

"Initially my concerns were with the physicality of being able to touch the film, holding it up and seeing the image, the particular look of the film, the quality of the light and color and texture. All of that was very important to me, and still is. I find that video has a different kind of light, texture and movement. I'm working more with interior imagery right now, so it's not a question of the medium itself, film versus video. It's more a question of how I can best express what I'm thinking and feeling right now, the way the medium itself is accessible to me.



“Not living in a large metropolitan area and not having access to film and/or digital video facilities has made it necessary to pretty much build my own home studio and purchase all the image- and sound-making equipment myself. It’s important to know that if you feel like working at three o’clock in the morning, you can do it. The very thought of having to go out into the world and having to rent time or to compete for equipment is a horrible one. So, this is the good side of small gauge video. The bad side is, you have to come up with the money for the facility. But, in your own little room everything is possible. These days you can be liberated from the labs...not constrained by other schedules. My own space-time becomes essential for working in the interior.

“The way I work, I usually don’t think ahead of time. Even when I’m shooting I’m not planning towards something. Usually I’m just sort of collecting images. That’s what I like about video—you can just sit down and look at the recording and you can mix stuff together, you can play with it immediately and let ideas emerge in the process of looking at rushes. It’s almost like working on a canvas. A lot of magical things happen that way. I look at my more recent work and I can see a lot of the issues I’ve been struggling with daily emerge. Issues with my own sexuality, my own relationship to people, my own kind of pessimism, a kind of mocking of my struggles... I can see that. A lot of it’s like a self-portrait.

“Video does give more freedom right now for self-expression. It’s not the same kind of freedom as camera work—it’s a different kind of freedom, more to do with real-time improvisation during editing or image processing. In the next couple of years I’m interested in exploring the new digital technology and computers for video editing and mastering. I find my work is composed ideally for video projection. Without projection it loses a certain scale, a certain impact. Because it’s much more of an emotional, sensual experience than an intellectual experience, it actually needs size to manifest itself—to work the room, so to speak.”

## Lewis Klahr

### Why I Did It

“Super 8 at first represented to me a kind of obstinate refusal of the commercial world. A declaration of smallness and the everyday in the face of an overwhelming pop culture. Ironically, towards the end of my work with Super 8, the commercial world discovered it and me. I began to get hired to do TV commercials, music videos and show openings. Super 8 had become a down-and-dirty novelty act and I was grateful because it allowed me to support myself as a working filmmaker instead of by driving limousines. Faced with the exhausting reality of earning a living in my thirties, I let go of some of the anti-commercial idealism I felt as a student and in my twenties. Which isn’t to say that I liked very much of what I created commercially or what other people did with experimental film language in that context. By and large it seemed to reduce a very rich language to a series of empty, debased gestures signifying hipness, cool, or youth. Dirt or countdown leader in an experimental film can work on a lot of different levels of meaning, metaphor and argument. In a music video the notion that form has meaning evaporates or is severely restricted. Consequently, a lot of the novelty of experimental language has been used up by its absorption into the mainstream. What hasn’t been absorbed and probably can’t be is the way this language can be used to create ideas and deep meanings. It seems like there isn’t much appetite on the part of audiences for this kind of experience now—experimental film seems like it’s considered boring, too much work to understand, and obsolete. Recent things I’ve read about the relationship of painting to the contemporary art scene seem to parallel experimental film’s situation.

“I’ve made about sixty Super 8 films. I shot my first roll in February 1977 with a camera rented from Millennium. For me, now, I’ve finished with Super 8. I’ve said what I have to say with it. Originally, when I started working with it, Super 8 was a lot cheaper than 16mm and was supposed to be a stepping

stone to the larger format. However, I wanted to do a lot of work and own my equipment so I could work at home. So I stayed with it and began to love its intimacy, the softness of its light, its deep associations with domesticity which was really important to the meaning of a lot of my work as I started to explore my childhood. As VCRs became popular, Super 8 highlight reels of Hollywood features became obsolete and available for inexpensive resale. I began collecting them and did my first found pieces. Here in NYC there was this great junk store on the south side of Canal Street near Church that had a huge supply.

"Most screening situations didn't have strong projectors or lenses. Xenon projection was rare. It was difficult to project an image large. With more than a twenty foot throw the color drained away and the focus often became soft. By necessity my aesthetic became TV-like—my work was best watched in a small room with a ten foot throw. The intimacy of this setup was great for the themes I was dealing with, memory and history, a kind of autobiography through media images on a machine that was truly a home-movie format. My films transferred to video very well for these reasons. The 16mm blow-ups I made almost never worked—the hardness of the light was so different than Super 8's softness and sensuality. The video transfers I did with Brodsky and Treadway is how my Super 8 work will survive for distribution longer than on film. These transfers are a translation—like all translations they involve compromises and loss but are true to the original spirit of my Super 8 films.

"There are many reasons why I stopped working in Super 8—most involve a high level of frustration. I was very dissatisfied with where I could present my films. The amount of venues that could do a quality presentation was tiny. The limitations of Super 8 printing and sound transfer became too restrictive. The timing of Super 8 by a lab couldn't handle a mixture of daylight and tungsten stocks—you had to balance for one stock or the other, giving you inaccurate color on the other footage. Sound transfer to a finished print was always a nightmare. It was like

making the soundtrack from scratch all over again with each new print. I only had the patience and energy to make one good print of each film. Also, I used a lot of Ektachrome to shoot my animation with and the color was very limited—a narrow palette that wasn't capturing the rich colors of my appropriated source materials accurately. I was happy to make the switch to 16mm although the extra expense is a great hardship.

"A lot of the way I worked with Super 8 was with all the ways things would be on and slightly off. There would be accidents that would occur that were exciting: the way that sync with the sound and image would drift in and out and the way that working with superimposition through re-photography with two projectors that images would hit and not hit. There was a rich randomness that I could harvest when editing. My interest in this randomness arose from the technology itself—working with a tape recorder and variable speed projector, without a sync pulse between the two, resulted in drifting sync. The machines always ran at different speeds, even in the same work session. Working on a Steenbeck now or with Pro Tools I can control precisely where sync events occur and maintain these. But with Super 8 the way I worked allowed the sound to breathe. There would be these big sync points that I would want to hit every time but the sync drift would make the finer details of sound/image relations inconsistent. The sound would go away from the image (the breath I mentioned above), establishing a counter-rhythm that I loved.

"When I finished *Tales of the Forgotten Future*, a twelve-film series of cutout animations which I made over four years, I felt like I'd said what I had to say with Super 8. I couldn't get prints of the final three films of the series because they involved stock mixing and black-and-white print stock had been phased out already by Kodak.

I had and still have to project the originals of these films so I guess these films will just eventually wear out. Recently, I've been thinking about doing a test re-photographing of these films in 16mm to see whether that might be closer to the Super 8 experience, although



*Lewis Klahr: Elevator Music*

there would be a lot of flicker. This method might capture a softness that isn't there in an optical blow-up.

"Super 8 was very exciting in the 1980s for me. There was a wonderful dialogue happening with my contemporaries—Peter Herwitz, Peggy Ahwesh, Mark Lapore, Phil Solomon, Scott Stark, and Nina Fonoroff. Everybody was doing something different but there was also a lot of cross-influence on a deeper level—an agreement about approach. Tom Gunning's article printed in *Motion Picture* about "The Minor Cinema" is a great description of this approach. I'm happy with my representation in this exhibition. It's not just my cutout animation which people tend to think is the only thing I do at this point. There's earlier found footage work like *Pulls* and *City Film* which intercuts cutouts with live action street observation.

"Super 8 is clearly on the way out. Brodsky and Treadway in the early '90s, I think, encouraged Kodak to do market research that proves that the use of Super 8 was actually rising in part due to its use commercially. Kodak accepted this was true, but still decided to keep phasing Super 8 out and discontinuing stocks. Super 8 was profitable but not enough so.

This bottom line mentality is very prevalent all through America right now, even in the arts. I find it quite disheartening but it's important to remember that something like Super 8 is primarily targeted for consumers, not us artists. And video is easier for the consumer and offers more immediate gratification (i.e., no developing). Most consumers are not going to be sensitive to the difference between the way film and video look—they don't consider it much with Hollywood features either. But Super 8's been around for thirty years and there were a lot of great things done with it. It's had a very full life, so I don't feel sad about its passing anymore. Eventually I'll probably feel nostalgic for it, but there isn't much I don't feel nostalgic about. If there's one thing about life that I keep experiencing over and over—it's especially poignant in times of great technological change and transition like we're in now—is that no matter how hard you try, you can't hold on to these things. You can't hold on to anything...nothing's going to last.

[ *N.B.* In mid-December 1997, Kodak announced that it was discontinuing domestic processing of S8 Kodachrome.—Ed ]