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becoming known as a lesbian filmmaker, though I thought of myself as a film artist wasn’t being seen in that way. That was always the most important thing to me. When I was young and took up painting, it was to move away from being an English teacher and a housewife in the world of color and form and perception. I came back to film and letting the content be the means of making the film, then finding the form within it. There are a lot of things that come together at the same time. There’s the end of ten years of feminism, the end of the big wave where we all worked very hard and found that it was going to take much longer than we thought; there was the fact that a lot of women who had been my lovers didn’t want to be in my films and be part of a list of names. But primarily there was a need to make a film that would be seen as a film, not as a “lesbian film.” The film wouldn’t focus on women’s bodies or a woman trying to break out of the frame, but would make you see where the concern was with the frame or the film stocks. So the next thing that interested me was seeing underwater. I was swimming for exercise in a pool that Julia Morgan designed and I was intrigued by the light underwater, the captured air in bubbles, the person kicking ahead of me, and the reflection on the marble walls. Just seeing an empty pool excited me. There is some sense of, I guess, to me, symbolism or mythology. I wanted to use the pool of water with nobody in it in the film [Pools, co-made with Barbara Krutinis] because to me it holds lots of meanings that aren’t meanings that you can say in words. So after a certain amount of work, you have a background, you’re not fighting to make a statement, you have some recognition already, and then you’re able to do...

Bruce Elder

Interviewed by Lianne McLarty

Lianne McLarty:
In her article in Cine-Tracts No. 17, Carol Zucker points out that 1857 (Fool’s Gold) makes use of aleatory devices within a controlled structure. Could you expand on these concepts — chance and structure — as they relate to your work generally?

Bruce Elder:
I have used various aleatory procedures — those Zucker described in her article on 1857, and a randomization algorithm in Illuminated Texts to dictate the three categories of imagery that will begin each section of that film — as a means of avoiding having the work shaped solely by human consciousness, for human consciousness is, after all, a very limited thing. I want nature itself and those mathematical principles which express its order — perhaps even give it its order — to inform, even produce, the work. By and
large, all these efforts I count as failures. Western Culture demands there be an individual in control of a work of art; I, on the other hand, long to create artwork which is not the product of a man but of nature and so attempt to concoct strategies for realizing that dream. But I always fail; the tradition of creative artmaking is something too large to slip out from under easily.

M: How do you situate yourself as an artist within nature?

E: Large parts of us belong wholly to nature; our physical being belongs entirely to the physical realm. That’s one of the things that interests me about sexuality — thus the role of sexual imagery in works like The Art of Worldly Wisdom, Illuminated Texts, Sweet Love Remembered, and Lamentations. A commonplace phenomenon which always elicits wonder from me is the experience of feeling taken over by forces that are much older and grander than we are. Still, these beliefs and desires are products of consciousness, and it must be admitted by all reasonable people that the ideas and feelings our minds harbor, including the kinds of desires we feel, are mediated by culture. We’re not natural beings; we exist within a culture. And nature must surely view consciousness as an abomination because it allows us to know our destiny and our destiny is a sad and solitary end.

M: That seems pretty well to sum up what Illuminated Texts is all about. It starts off idyllically in a natural landscape unadulterated by Man and proceeds to images of “civilization” spreading over the landscape and ends with apocalyptic images.

E: I am absolutely convinced that the view that consciousness is isolated from nature and that it can control and regulate nature is what has led Western Culture into the difficulties that it’s experienced in the last one hundred to two hundred years. The Navaho weren’t so convinced that each man possesses a completely autonomous and isolated consciousness. For them, thought belonged to the wind; they were — and are — an “inspired” race of people.

M: Your work, especially The Art of Worldly Wisdom, suggests to me that you see humankind as essentially isolated. I’m thinking of the scenes of masturbation in that film that are isolated at the bottom of the screen. Illuminated Texts, by the very way it is structured, also suggests isolation. There are segments which involve you as an artist and as an actor and there are also the scenes which are essentially collage; the fact that there is a very clear demarcation between these two types of segments suggests you feel separation between you and the broader world you depict.

E: Self-consciousness, by its very nature, produces feelings of isolation. The knowledge that we will be alone in our end sets our thinking upon a solitary path — to thinking about solitude, in a very solitary way. An animal that only responds to the signals that nature gives it probably does not feel one bit isolated or removed from nature; it is our capacity for self-reflection that makes us feel so alone.

M: What do you see as your responsibility as an avant-garde filmmaker to the sociopolitical context in which you work?

E: I work in film because I’m interested in reflecting on what features characterized consciousness’ relation to its context in the mid to late 19th century that created the demand that called cinema into being. I believe at the end of
the 19th century a crisis occurred in the development of consciousness that led to the development of that form of representation we know as cinema. I’m eager to understand the nature of that crisis and how the conditions of representation embedded in the cinematic apparatus responded to that crisis. In that sense, my endeavors are those of an historian of ideas, or perhaps an archeologist of ideas, for that period which brought forth the cinema, The Age of the Machine, is surely past and I think its essence is already, only a couple of decades after its end, unrecoverable. Even now we can only construct a fiction about it by assembling what we discover in its middens, amongst its leavings. This is what makes the work of my friend Jim Smith — who plays the loony inventor in Illuminated Texts and Liszt in Lamentations — so interesting. Be that as it may, I think that if I were beginning to work today, I’d be more intrigued by digital and electronic arts than I am by the cinema. At present, another change in the condition of consciousness is occurring that’s producing a profound revolution in the way that we think and fundamentally altering the way that we construct representations of “the world.” This changed consciousness expresses itself most readily in the digital arts. This is what it means to say that digital arts are the arts of our time.

M: Could you say more about the notion of responsibility?

E: One traditional role of the artist — one which I believe is more important now than ever — is to expand awareness. Twentieth century Western “Man’s” view of consciousness is very incomplete; there are huge areas of experience which we deny, of which we refuse to become aware. We’re inattentive to dreams, to some sorts of imagery that precede verbal thinking, and to certain forms of awareness with which no imagery is associated and for which no verbal expression can be found. These are important forms of thinking but, for reasons that result from the nature of life in Western liberal, technological culture, we choose not to practice them. Artwork can and, I believe, should deal with these areas of experience, with experiences that exist prior to verbalization and with forms of imagistic representation for which our culture finds no use and so neglects. And I’m not one bit convinced that such areas of experience are completely determined by ideology. Hence, I don’t believe that artmaking is restricted to transmitting the prevailing ideology; I harbor no such doubts about the importance of the role of the artist. And I don’t believe the Marxists’ — or, for that matter, the Social Democrats’ — claims that the artist should respond to limited forms of awareness on its own terms.

M: Your films, and especially films such as 1857, The Art of Worldly Wisdom, and Illuminated Texts, elicit an emotional response that, for some reason or another, people can’t deal with. Strong feelings are provoked by a screen that bombards the viewer with four images at one time in The Art of Worldly Wisdom, or by the conflict created by the tension between wanting to read the text that we see and wanting to listen to the text on the soundtrack of 1857. In Illuminated Texts, we have the same sort of thing: the image, a text over the image, and a soundtrack that sometimes muffles the voice-over narration. I find the experience of these films disconcerting — in fact, an emotional drain. But it must be said the experience is a highly charged one. One is required to respond
Bruce Elder
to your work on an intellectual and on an emotional level at the same time.

E: The dominant cinema constructs a viewer who feels in control. It usually employs a narrative that operates by first eliciting and then satisfying a desire; that desire can be the desire to see or to learn or to possess. People in the audience are presented with a scene that, for some reason, they find intriguing and want to learn more about; they want to see the heroine who piqued their interest. The narrator will satisfy that desire by providing us with a close-up. This process of arousing then satisfying desire can proceed on an intellectual level too — at least on the level of desire for knowledge; films can elicit the desire to know what, for example, motivated a certain incident, or who it was who performed a certain action and, after arousing that desire, can then satisfy it. That the film satisfies the viewer's demands makes the viewer feel that he is in control. Furthermore, that viewer is safely positioned outside the narrative — he looks in upon it but never really enters into it — and yet, at the same time, he feels he actually regulates the flow of information that it provides. So he is both inviolate and powerful. Now this image of the viewer is consistent with the liberal, technological view of the individual as autonomous, private, with a being that is God-given, natural, and whose parts are wholly harmonious with one another. The viewer of 1857, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, or of *Illuminated Texts* is a viewer whose various parts are not congruent with one another. His intellective faculties are controlled by different events than are his sensory faculties, his auditory faculties by different events than are his visual faculties. The viewer of my films is constructed partly by language, partly by visual images, partly by what he hears; his various parts are not congruent with one another. Such a fractured viewer feels he has lost control and is threatened by this loss. In such a condition, one experiences two reactions of which, though they trouble our viewer, he is, nevertheless, unaware. What psychoanalysis terms secondary process thinking involves making distinctions between fantasy and reality; between what is now, what was before, and what will be after; between foreground and background; between one element within the spatial field and another. Now it is demonstrable that people who are psychotically regressed make these distinctions in unorthodox ways or fail to make them at all; they represent space to themselves differently than most people of our culture do, for example. It is likewise demonstrable that people from different cultures have differing mental representations of space. These findings, among others, have led me to conclude that the spatial system founded on Western “Renaissance” perspective is highly arbitrary; there is nothing “scientific” or “natural” in the so-called naturalistic, perspectival system that we’ve inherited from the Renaissance. It’s just one among many systems of spatial representation — all of them quite arbitrary — and is no more true to the world than any other system. We pretend that it’s a scientific system of representations that describes the world as it really is, justifying our belief by noting that such scientific devices as lenses and cameras obscura and pinholes produce similar images and that the structure of such images can be expressed in terms derived from Cartesian geometry. I believe that if you were to examine the spatial field of a “regressive perception,” you would discover that
its spatial field contains objects which are not sorted into background objects, mid-ground objects, and foreground objects; which are not distinguished as being important or unimportant; in which all objects have an equal claim for attention; in which there is no focusing that selects objects and places them at the center of attention and relegates other objects to the periphery. A perception of this sort is not an organized gestalt; it is, rather, a perception created by scanning a number of elements, giving all an equal weight. I believe this is what an infant's perceptual field is like. Through the use of structures which contain a number of elements and give none of them priority, I have, in The Art of Worldly Wisdom, 1857 (Fool's Gold), Illuminated Texts and Lamentations tried to evoke such a “scanning perception.” To use language reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari, this schizophrenizes the spectator/auditor/reader and induces in him (to use appropriate mechanistic terminology) experiences for which no means of representation can be found. This, by the way, is why I reject arguments that Michael Cartmell has raised about the nature of my work. I don’t think the appropriate model to use in analyzing my work is that of paranoia; the structures of my films operate by evoking schizoid responses. I must admit, though, he did have some interesting things to say — but that’s off the topic. The spectator/auditor/reader of the films I just mentioned is invited to attend to sounds and images that are not arranged into background/foreground relationships, for the various elements all have an equal weight. The perception elicited resembles “primary process perception.”

M: I think that has a lot to do with the feeling a viewer of your work has that these structures are highly arbitrary and that you, the maker, are in complete control. The opening of Illuminated Texts I find particularly interesting in this regard; it depicts you and your assistant, that is, the filmmaker and his assistant. Thus it articulates an allusion to the process of filmmaking. To take the idea to another level, it depicts a teacher and a student — there’s an element of self-reference to that. Finally, there’s the reference to your control over the action; the film won’t begin until you give the go-ahead, by clapping your hands. When you get up to answer the door, the camera just goes astray and crashes into things. The implication is that without your physical presence, the creative process “goes off the rails.” It needs you, and without your presence, becomes destructive rather than creative. Too, a high degree of control over your image-material is evident in 1857. Likewise, The Art of Worldly Wisdom foregrounds the notion of the construction of imagery by using multiple images.

E: Nearly everyone has pointed out that the three films you have just mentioned are apocalyptic films. And they really are consistent with the traditional view of apocalypse as the denial of the world around us and the accession to the realm of the imagination. Now this denial of the ordinary reality and the accession to the realm of the imaginary the Romantics saw as fundamental to the creative process. So, agreeing with what you say, I find these aspects of my films so distressingly traditional. My ideal film, however, would be one in which imagination plays no part at all; it would be a film made solely by nature herself. I have tried to find strategies that would afford the opportunity for such films to come
into being, but I always end up meddling in the process.

M: To this date, at any rate, I see your films as being compatible with that Romantic notion of the artist as the Lamp. According to this notion of the artist, the artist takes nature and transforms it; he casts his light on the world and thereby reinterprets it. Do you agree?

E: Unfortunately, yes.

M: An interest in light and photographic representation is evident in your work. You stress the materials with which you work, highlight the use of light, and foreground the nature of photographic representation. I believe these “materialist issues” are modified by your interest in the traditional concerns of the Visionary. Your interest in light seems to hook up with the notion of the artist as the Lamp. Similarly, you discuss the photographic image as being something that represents an Absence, and, like all Romantics, you aspire to fill up such lacks, to create a whole, an “all-encompassing One” that has no divisions, absences, or lacks. This seems to me to relate to the absence dealt with in She Is Away. Do you think it’s fair to say that in your works materialist issues inform your visionary concerns?

E: The artist as bricoleur and the artist as visionary are the only two traditions our culture provides artists to work within. Yet neither is sufficient in itself, nor is any merging of the two really possible. In that sense, in our culture, the artistic endeavor is a tragic one. There’s no way to reconcile those limiting traditions; one must deny both of them and attempt to go on to something else. The potential of this “something else” is established by the nature of the photograph. One miraculous feature of the photograph is that it is composed of light. Light is an ideal image for consciousness because consciousness, when well developed, isn’t isolated and localized; it spills out all over. It’s as though consciousness were like a globe of light — an all-seeing globe of light that sees things from many different vantage points, all at once. Furthermore, photography mediates between consciousness and nature. A photograph is produced by natural forces, yet many of its characteristics it has in common with conscious imagery. In the photograph, consciousness and nature merge — the self merges with that which is photographed. I should like to find a way in which I could convey the feeling of belonging to what I photograph, of becoming one with it. But everyone knows that a photograph always embodies a dyadic relation, and so, as soon as they see an object in a photograph on the screen, they think of the person who makes the picture. Ideally, through photography, one could merge with people and things and could convey the bliss that results with the imagery he makes. Making a photograph would be a way of transforming oneself into the light that emanates from other people and other objects in nature — or more exactly, that constitutes their being. (You’ll remember, I’m sure, that comment of Duns Scotus, “Everything that is, is light.”)

M: Your shorter films use predominantly female forms. Females are the subject of Breath/Light/Birth, Barbara, and Look! We Have Come Through! There is the suggestion of a female presence in She Is Away. And of course, there is the woman whose form appears frequently in Illuminated Texts and Lamentations. What do you see as the significance of this?

E: Well, for the male, the female is the Other — the
its spatial field contains objects which are not sorted into background objects, mid-ground objects, and foreground objects; which are not distinguished as being important or unimportant; in which all objects have an equal claim for attention; in which there is no focusing that selects objects and places them at the center of attention and relegates other objects to the periphery. A perception of this sort is not an organized gestalt; it is, rather, a perception created by scanning a number of elements, giving all an equal weight. I believe this is what an infant's perceptual field is like. Through the use of structures which contain a number of elements and give none of them priority, I have, in The Art of Worldly Wisdom, 1857 (Fool's Gold), Illuminated Texts and Lamentations tried to evoke such a "scanning perception." To use language reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari, this schizophrenizes the spectator/auditor/reader and induces in him (to use appropriate mechanistic terminology) experiences for which no means of representation can be found. This, by the way, is why I reject arguments that Michael Cartmell has raised about the nature of my work. I don't think the appropriate model to use in analyzing my work is that of paranoia; the structures of my films operate by evoking schizoid responses. I must admit, though, he did have some interesting things to say — but that's off the topic. The spectator/auditor/reader of the films I just mentioned is invited to attend to sounds and images that are not arranged into background/foreground relationships, for the various elements all have an equal weight. The perception elicited resembles "primary process perception."

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