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COVER PHOTOS:
[left] Stan Brakhage. Photo: Robert Haller. [right] Marie Menken. Photo: Bill Wood.

much later how people in their daily living imitate the narrative-dramatic materials that infiltrate their lives through the radio, TV, newspapers and, certainly, the movies. We went to the movies at least once a week and to plays, and I read a great deal to the children and they naturally acted out these things in their games ... It was ironic that I who was an anomaly because I was working independently outside the studio system created for myself a situation that was akin to that of a studio. To that extent my work was tied to the whole history of cinema when I thought that wasn't the case. The films weren't free to grow aesthetically but dragged down by their subject matter. Despite all the evolutions of my film grammar and my inclusion of hypnotic and dream vision, they were still tied to the more traditional dramatic-narrative framework. Moreover, while shooting I would ask Jane and the children to keep quiet or be still, very basic things, but that pushed everything back toward drama. And then, although they were used to being photographed, they knew, like most people, when their picture was being taken, and that became a factor in what they did before the camera.

Ganguly: But such moments were also important to your self-reflexive aesthetic.

Brakhage: Yes, I did everything I could to recognize such moments and include them. Very often people look directly at the camera and sometimes even flash a smile. Or I would include references to the fact that it was a film — flares, scratched titles, etc. *Dog Star Man* ends in a flare of sprocket holes ... I believe most artists whose work has any lasting value to a culture put out warning signs like these to say this is not a window into reality but an art work. This is why painters sign their names on front of their paintings, or poets refer to the poem that's being written and to other poets. As Malraux said in *The Voices of Silence*, works of art speak to each other. And so there's a constant speaking to other filmmakers and filmmaking within my body of work.

Ganguly: Was it hard to see those films after their subject — the marriage — collapsed? Did they have the same relevance for you?

Brakhage: At first, I couldn't even bear to see snapshots of my previous life — I'd burst into tears. I was so twisted with agony that I couldn't even hold onto certain household objects, like a bunch of spoons because they reminded me of the destruction of that life. So I had some terrors about those films — that I wouldn't be able to look at them again. But I found I could, and what is more I could watch them with Marilyn — the films had achieved an aesthetic to that extent, and one that was vibrant enough to sustain me.

Ganguly: How did the children react to being filmed?

Brakhage: For some certain films are very bothersome. For example, *Crystal firds Fifteen Song Trails* (1965) in which she is crying, very disturbing, and the fact that I filmed her at that point. I now believe that in photographing the children I was engaging them in a creative process, a trance process that was physically far more demanding than they knew. As a result, their childhoods were distorted in subtle and dangerous ways. I am very aware of this now. Also, when an artist mixes his working process with his daily life then there is a psychological imposition on other people who are involved. The children were not photographed continually — months or even half a year would go by — but there were long periods when there was some photography every day. It was more pervasive and in that sense more invasive of activities within the home which I now feel should be an area of privacy. There was an enormous invasion also of Jane and my privacy as well. So while I certainly achieved a better relationship vis-à-vis the children in the act of making those films than what I had inherited, it didn't go as far as I had hoped — all of which goes to show why that 29-year-old marriage, much celebrated in print and a constant

point of reference within my art-making, finally collapsed.

Ganguly: In the Hollis Frampton interview Jane actually complains of being used ...

Brakhage: Hollis and I were both surprised by that claim. I think she felt used by the process coming through and directed by me, so I took her word for it then and still do now and feel condemned that a part of me couldn't see as well into her condition as it could with regard to the children. I must have been a terrible imposition on her. At the same time, I want to counterbalance this by saying that she always seemed very excited at being involved in the creative process, so I would invite her to look at the first edits and try to include her point of view in what I was making.

Ganguly: Still, it must have been an enormous challenge to be housewife and mother and also face the camera.

Brakhage: I think Jane was very much more a private person than she was permitted to be, not only vis-à-vis within the family, but with respect to the rest of the world. But she also seemed to enjoy the fact that people would come over and give her a lot of attention. Barbara Hammer even made a whole film on her in which Jane said she was a housewife and proud of the fact, so who's to know? There was that side of her which believed very strongly in being mother to her children and keeping house in that idyllic place. And I think what happened finally was that Jane increasingly felt that I was getting all the attention. And as the children began to grow up and she began to feel less enthralled being a mother, this fact began to hurt and disturb her deeply ... After the Frampton interview I tried to represent her in ways she would recognize as being herself, and the first film that succeeded in doing this was *Hymn to Her* (1974). She also felt a close affinity with the last film I made with her — *Jane* (1986). And then there were her appearances in films like

The Loam (1986) that moved her and satisfied her because she didn't feel used in them.

Ganguly: To be fair, did you ever feel used in the process of making those films?

Brakhage: I felt very used — ill-used — being given this burden of responsibility to stage-manage an unusually difficult family living situation at 9000 feet in the mountains, subject to eight months of winter for a man who grew up a city boy. I was being used especially because I was inept in handling all that. It was hard to live there. I think I would have come to things that I have now come to very much sooner with a chance to better fulfill the intricacies of them. But there I had to split my personality ... It's just so hard to live and I think the films show that. But still, it's all a gift — a gift of life and a gift of light, which are really one and the same. So despite it not being my kind of place, I had ecstatic moments up there. I was forced to open myself to the wonders that are available in the most difficult surroundings.

Ganguly: Wasn't it common in those days to refer to Jane as your Muse?

Brakhage: Many people thought she was the Muse and I found that to be utterly repugnant. For me the Muse is a persuasion. It often feels like a force in Nature that moves through certain people, but it should never be appropriated by human beings. At one point in history the Muses were called goddesses, now it would be more appropriate to call them manifestations of the unconscious, or perhaps along the line of Jung's "collective unconscious" to call them genetic manifestations that people shouldn't presume upon. Jane never called herself the Muse except as a joke, but she felt that what came through my work was really her doing although it was I who was mostly photographing and editing.

Ganguly: So whose films are they? In *Metaphors of Vision* you claim the term "by Brakhage"

STAN BRAKHAGE — THE 60TH BIRTHDAY INTERVIEW by Suranjana Ganguly

Perhaps the best birthday gift Brakhage got when he turned sixty last year was the news that the Library of Congress had chosen *Dog Star Man* (1962/64) for inclusion in the National Film Registry. But the gift came complete with price tag. Brakhage was expected to provide the internegative and print at a cost of about \$6,000 which he can't afford. But did that get him down? No. In over forty years of filmmaking that has established him as the world's foremost living avant-garde filmmaker with an oeuvre of over 250 films, Brakhage has suffered all the vicissitudes — bureaucratic and otherwise — that can befall the independent filmmaker. And he's proved himself to be a survivor. Now he's learning to live with a new threat — not being able to even print his new work as costs spiral out of control.

The new work consists of films that Brakhage has made at the rate of six to eight a year since 1987 when his first marriage to Jane Colloom ended in divorce. The break-up was decisive in more than one sense: it altered the very conditions of his filmmaking. Since 1964, for almost thirty years, Brakhage lived at Lump Gulch, 9000 feet up in the Colorado Rockies, where he frequently photographed his family and his daily life in a series of films that celebrated "the glories of an undramatic present." All that changed with the divorce. At fifty-four, living alone in a closet-size room in Boulder (he has been teaching film at the University of Colorado at Boulder since 1981), Brakhage was no longer sure whether he could make a film again. Then, in the same year he met Marilyn Jull, a Canadian, who had studied film at the Ryerson Polytechnic Institute in Toronto. They were married in 1989 and now have two children, Anton and Vaughn.

The films from 1987 are hard to classify, but they can be loosely grouped in relation to certain trends. At a number of points,

seeing, such as hynagogic or closed-eye vision (optic feedback), moving visual thinking (the synapsing of the brain which produces certain abstract shapes) and peripheral vision (what the eyes don't pay close attention to). *Firloop* (1986) and *Lead Visual Notes* (1987) are hand-painted sound films that explore some of these processes. But the most extensive study of this subject resulted in a multiple series which Brakhage began in 1979 and completed in 1990: *The Roman Numeral Series*, *The Arabic Numeral Series*, *The Egyptian Series* and *The Babylon Series*. These films examine the nature of prelinguistic thinking out of which, Brakhage believes, arose the hieroglyphs of ancient cultures. To give some sense of the shapes and colors within this non-verbal, non-pictorial realm, Brakhage photographed with a variety of glasses, prisms, crystal balls and filters, making the films his most intense meditations on light. They also call to mind the structures of music — a visual music of light and color patterns.

Since then, Brakhage has used the camera less and less, preferring to paint on film, but without reference to his own life or his thought process or that of others. As he likes to say, film should be "about nothing at all," and in the very short films that he's now making, sometimes at the rate of four per month, there is a sense of an opening into the ineffable. This may prove to be the ultimate reversion in Brakhage's career: to zero and beyond.

Despite his qualms about video, Brakhage very kindly allowed me to record this interview on video tape. There were about six sessions, over ten hours of tape and a hundred page transcript.

Ganguly: Why have you stopped filming your family?

Brakhage: Only 1/3 of my work while living with Jane was frankly autobiographical. That was fine because if I didn't make those films then we couldn't have held the marriage

together, but in terms of what I've always been searching for, it was a passage through to other things. I don't film my family any more partly because I think autobiography as a form is not good for film. It's very much on the record side of things — far too referential. Besides, I was never very interested in portraiture: very few of my films deal with people other than my immediate family or close friends. The big exceptions are *The Pittsburgh Documents* I made in 1971: *deus ex, eyes and the act of seeing with one's own eyes*; those were my social dramas of that period. But in general I've always tried to get at the qualities of being human. My portraits are often about peoples' blurred motions, or things that are around them. For example, in *Dominion* (1974) you mostly see a man's nervous movements reflected on his desktop.

Ganguly: Isn't it also true that Marilyn doesn't like to be photographed or filmed?

Brakhage: Yes. One of the reasons why Marilyn doesn't like to have her picture taken is because like me she senses some falsification in that process. Now, I could have gone on photographing myself and the children — done a series of self-portraits — she has never forbidden me, but it's just that my sense of the aesthetic has changed, and that's largely due to my conversations with her. Also, after the second marriage I felt a strong desire to have my life rather than photograph it. So now I feel the autobiographical mode is essentially finished in every other sense except that naturally whatever I make will have something of myself in it, but I don't want to be conscious of that — I'd rather just let it happen.

Ganguly: One of the reasons for filming your family and your daily life was to counter the influence of the other arts — especially drama — on film. Do you think you succeeded?

Brakhage: I underestimated the historical fypaper I was stuck in. I didn't realize until

embraces the whole family, not just you.

Brakhage: Yes, and that was well meant. The films were collaborative works, but finally they belong to the Muse — not to me or to Jane or to the children. All of us were used in some evolution. When I associate the Muse with the unconscious I'm referring to the unknown. Those films came through me from the unknown. After we were divorced Jane told two of her friends that it was really she who made the films and that I was very good at following her orders. By that she meant she had been the real inspiration for the films she valued most, and I felt she was complimenting me for being extraordinarily sensitive to her inspiration. But the final result was extrinsic to any of us in as much as none of us could have conceived of them that way. And they came through with my style which is visible regardless of the subject matter or the techniques. I was the maker, for better or worse, and yet I wouldn't have been able to consciously make anything of any significance whatsoever. The only time I like to look at one of my films over and over again is when it is a product of this trance process.

Ganguly: And this trance process would extend to the editing of the film as well?

Brakhage: Yes, I would edit the material hoping to achieve an aesthetic ecology. That was always my intent without ever presuming to know whether I had succeeded or not, and I lent myself to that process in the most traditional ways — what you would naturally expect from poets, painters, or composers — that their work is essentially under trance and largely alone in these final aspects of the making, even if they are working on a mural with people to help them. The impulse that distinguishes one mural from another comes essentially through one human being. I was trying to do that with film which was regarded as a communal art when I was growing up.

Ganguly: But before you would enter into a

trance, you would consciously think about the film you were going to make?

Brakhage: I studied home movies as diligently as I studied the aesthetics of Sergei Eisenstein, and beginning with *Songs* (1964-69) all the way to *Scenes From Under Childhood* (1967-70), I turned to them for inspiration. But my films were different in that they were rooted in daily living rather than in the events that home movies tend to celebrate. What is embarrassing about certain amateurs is that they try to get everybody to jump around and act as if they were making a Hollywood movie which they can't. They are not showing the particularities or the peculiarities of their most mundane — i.e., "earthly" — surroundings and events. They would much rather photograph a staged birthday party than a normal day with their child ... I believe if we don't really focus on where we live, then great dangers arise in human psychology, one of which is to live in a past that is utterly falsified by human thinking and project into a future that is utterly impossible. Or we get bored and need drama. So trying to stop the overwhelming influence of drama in film, I began to concentrate on the wonders that are under and on either side of our noses — more specifically the greatest movie in town if only we would look at it.

Ganguly: But at the same time you were turning that experience into myth, into ...

Brakhage: True. By focusing on the particularities of our daily life I could provide for Jane and the children and myself an alternative to the strictures of traditional family living. So the impulse to make those movies — as practically everything in my work — arose out of a desperate living urgency to transform my sense of the constrictive family life. It was a need that Jane and I shared very vibrantly together. *Dog Star Man* is a good example — a myth which deals with the breadwinner — myself — being photographed by the wife, Jane (for the most part), climbing a moun-

tain to chop down a tree, to bring home some firewood ... That's the human story, spread out, all the way to the stars and down to the microscopy of the man's vascular system, with everything in between metaphorizing various historical stages in this brief climb of a mountain. We needed that metaphorical distance, never photograph.

Ganguly: And yet it all seems magical, the way you photograph the light and the house ...

Brakhage: The films aren't idealized in a simple sense, but they are in the sense that's intrinsic to art. I'm trying to make a form representative of family living which is a little bit off of this earth. And as such those films sit there hanging in air. Looking at them you would think that everything was beautiful to those people ... People who visited the cabin found it to be small, dark and cold, but in the films the house looks bigger and full of light. And that's because those films were inspired by the children and their growing up and having a childhood that was utterly different from mine, and the fact that I could give that childhood to them. I was translating that over into film emotionally. So people were shocked that from this grubby little cabin came a palace of visions.

Ganguly: There are moments in all these films that seem quite trivial and yet uncannily revealing.

Brakhage: I had read Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* where he discusses the verbal slips we make every day, and that was the time when I was intensely involved with representing common everyday occurrences. So I tried to capture those unconscious slips — "errors" — that can divulge hidden truths and tried to weave them into my work.

Ganguly: How did you go about doing this?

Brakhage: Sometimes while shooting I would consciously try to get at certain things that were revelatory, that were true slips. I would

tain to chop down a tree, to bring home some firewood ... That's the human story, spread out, all the way to the stars and down to the microscopy of the man's vascular system, with everything in between metaphorizing various historical stages in this brief climb of a mountain. We needed that metaphorical distance.

Ganguly: But wasn't there a danger of taking that myth too seriously, of losing sight of the commonplace?

Brakhage: In one of her scrapbooks Jane describes herself as an ordinary goddess. She has now changed her name to Jane Woodening — which is the female version of the god, Woden. All this shows a predisposition to the goddess aspect of daily living, so both of us remained entranced by the most traditional, and, for myself, most dangerous presumptions of human existence on earth. All the same, there was a kind of glory and beauty to it. For a certain crowd in society we — the family — were like movie stars. We stood for certain ideals of the 60s ... As an orphan and as a multiply-abandoned child I respected the values of family living, and wished to assert their goodness and subvert what I felt was wrong. I wanted to create and sustain an inspired image of family living, and if those films inspire me today it is because there is a fair and honest representation of that image in them. I believe in those values, and thus run counter to some of the more virulent polemics of our time which would have it that family living is done for.

Ganguly: Whenever people talk about your vision of childhood in these films they go into a sort of rapture and invoke Wordsworth and Blake.

Brakhage: I think it's misleading to relate me to Wordsworth — I who had no childhood at all ... I was after the emotional truth and the spiritual truth. And there was a tiny Weegee aspect to me too — only the bare truth, and sometimes I went out of my way to get that

look for them and then during editing put them in a context where they would reveal something. They crop up all the time in *Scenes From Under Childhood*, and even more in the *Sincerity* series (1973-80) and in the *Songs*. In the *Fifteen Song* *Trails* the footage of Crystal crying was shot when we were in Lexington, Kentucky. The first thing I shot on coming home — a week or a month later — was a caged canary. When the footage came back from the lab and I looked at it, I was astonished by the power of that cut. And it had less to do with the fact that here was a girl feeling like a caged canary than the toning between one shot and the other, and where and how the canary sits in relationship to her face, and so on. That was the beginning of that film, and I then began rummaging among past footage to find other things that I began to put together in editing.

Ganguly: How did some of your contemporaries respond to the family films, for example, the birth films?

Brakhaage: Maya (Deren) was outraged at *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959) when I first showed it in New York because she thought I was intruding, exposing feminine mysteries that were inviolate, etc. I had not intended to do any such thing. In fact, I was in the room during the birth at Jane's insistence that I be present and be true to myself, and I could only be true to myself while working. I.e., filming the birth. But I still worry about what Maya said. I photographed childbirth so that I could be a part of the process which was forbidden to men. In fact, in those days men were absolutely excluded from any kind of participation. So I hoped the film would be a valuable source of inspiration in joining men and women together in the birth process ... I once met a woman on the steps of the Boulder post office who told me that she suffered from a physical condition that made it very hard for her to give birth, but the film gave her courage and she finally did have a child. You can never be given a more meaningful

compliment than that.

Ganguly: Do you think too much has been made of these films to the exclusion of your other work?

Brakhaage: Yes ... I'd like to mention here that people tend to overlook the 2/3's of my work which was not centered on family living and which through the 60s and 70s was prophetic, so to speak, of what I'm now mostly doing with film. The content of my current films is less mimetic and more "at one" with the unique possibilities intrinsic to film. I carried a camera with me and made films during lecture tours, in hotel rooms, in airplanes ... I also made *The Text of Light* (1974) after months of sitting and photographing ashtrays in the office space of a friend, and it is much more pertinent to what I'm doing now than anything I did then when I was autobiographically trying to inspire people with my films about the ideals of the family.

Ganguly: And you were painting directly on film. In fact, your first hand-painted film goes all the way back to *Dog Star Man*. Are you still working in that mode?

Brakhaage: Yes, very much so. I started painting on film primarily to create a corollary of what I could see with my closed-eye vision or hypnagogic vision because there was no way I could get the camera inside my head or create a photographic equivalent of those shapes streaming across my closed eyes ... I tried all kinds of things — scratching on film, even baking it — but paint mixed with chemicals created certain shapes intrinsic to the organic cells of seeing itself. So paint seemed the main thing for me ... Since then I've not only included hand-painted sections in my films but made whole films that are hand-painted to record different aspects of my hypnagogic feedback. And those films are the favorites of all my work. In fact, all I want to do now is paint on film.

Ganguly: What do you mostly paint with?

Brakhaage: Acrylics, India inks, a variety of dyes and household chemicals. I've even done entire films with Magic Markers. I sometimes work with brushes, but it's mostly paint on fingers. I work very fast, applying the paints, then drying them and mixing chemicals to create certain patterns and shapes. To most people it would seem like the famous Montmartre donkey painting with his tail, but before the film is finished, every frame has been painted, and every passage interrelated to every other and an aesthetic ecology achieved.

Ganguly: How long usually are these films?

Brakhaage: They can vary anywhere between nine seconds — *Eye Mobs* (1972) — to twelve minutes — *Interpolations* (1992).

Ganguly: To get a second's worth of film time you have to paint 24 individual frames. For *Interpolations* that amounts to a mind-boggling 17,280 frames! How much do you throw away?

Brakhaage: Some end up in the wastebasket, a few get clipped off into little strips that I frame or send to somebody — I've even sold a few ... Yes, it's a lot of work, but there are people who believe it's all very simple, or it's work that's not important because it has no roots in psychodrama or neurosis ... My biggest worry is: Am I degenerating? The danger with painting on film is that it could turn into decoration and when it does, I throw it away.

Ganguly: You've cited a number of influences on your hand-painting, among them Viking Eggeling, Walter Ruttmann, Len Lye, Oskar Fischinger, Harry Smith and Marie Menken. What about contemporary filmmakers like Gunvor Nelson and Carolee Schneemann who have both painted on film?

Brakhaage: I've known Gunvor since the 60s

and always respected her work, but now it has evolved into an expression of thought processes, and while she doesn't paint on film, she does paint over imagery, working with a frame at a time, and has created a combination of photographed imagery and painting, beginning with *Frameline* and leading to my favorite so far — *Field Study #2* which has affinities with my work being about remembrance which includes hypnagogic vision or moving visual thinking to counterbalance the dangers of nostalgia or sentimentality. I also have a great regard for Carolee who, dissatisfied with the male viewpoint of my *Leaving* (1957) which was about her and James Tenney, made *Fuses* which more than any other hand-painted film is a truly visceral presentation of texture. She was also distressed by my use of paint in *Thigh Line Lye Triangular* (1961) — she's a great oil painter — and I taking this to heart have evolved an aesthetic of paint-on-film which eschews "the painterly." It's like Orpheus in the Cocteau film when asked what is a poet replies, "Someone who writes but is not a writer."

Ganguly: Why are Eggeling and Menken so important to you? After all, they didn't work directly with the film strip.

Brakhaage: Well, take Menken. It's true she didn't directly touch the film in that way, but she was a collage filmmaker, and she would handle her footage as if they were shapes and patterns she had painted, and weave them in according to their lateral motions. That, to me, is "hands-on" work ... I think the more you're physically in touch with the material the more you become aware that you're smuggling the passage of light, altering it by hand, and altering each frame, and every smudge reveals more of the light as you lessen it. And film, after all, is rhythmed light. So what matters finally is if you can give in to the light. That's the integrity of working directly with hands on film, which is also hands on light. I find that very inspiring. I'd like to mention Harry Smith here, Harry, who wanted

to be a black magician in some sense and smudge the light in order to blot it out, came to a stage which can best be described as Jacob and the angel wrestling with the light. And at some point it became clear to him that despite everything he tried, the light was going to win. And Harry had the integrity to back off and put himself at service to humanity by recording with audiotapes and open himself to the phenomenological world and be a pure conduit of what could come through him and what he could put on tape. And he probably would have done the same thing with film if he could afford it. And I really respect that.

Ganguly: Two of your recent hand-painted films in the hypnagogic mode are *The Dante Quartet* and *Untitled Film (For Marilyn)*. What led you to make the Dante film?

Brakhage: Thirty years of reading all the translations in English of Dante's *The Divine Comedy* — I even tried to learn Italian at one point — as well as brooding on the Christian concept of hell, purgatory and heaven. The four parts are *Hell*, *Purgatory* and *Heaven*. The four parts are *Hell*, *Spit*, *Fixation*, *Purgation*, and *Existence* is song, and they appear in that order. It took me seven years to produce this nine minute film, but what is appalling is that you can see it today only in a postage size version.

Ganguly: Why is that so?

Brakhage: I wanted the dimensions of the film to match those of an Imax screen which is about 3 to 4 stories tall and half a city block wide. A film that would be like an enormous mural painting. I painted the four parts on different stocks — *Hell* and *Existence* is song were done directly on IMAX film. *Purgation* on a worn-out 70mm print of *Ima la Duser* and *Hell Spit Fixation* on 35mm. But it proved too expensive to print them for Imax projection. I finally rephotographed the Imax and 70mm strips off a light box to achieve the 35mm and 16mm prints that are now in

distribution. So I view it really as a sketch of the original film I wanted to make.

Ganguly: The real challenge must have been to find the hypnagogic equivalents of Dante's three-fold vision.

Brakhage: I made *Hell* itself during the breakup with Jane and the collapse of my whole life, so I got to know quite well the streaming of the hypnagogic process that's hellish. Now, the body can not only feed back its sense of being in hell but also its sense of getting out of hell, and *Hell Spit Fixation* shows the way out — it's there as a crowbar to lift one out of hell toward the transformatory state — which is the third state — purgatory. And finally there's a fourth hypnagogic state that's fleeting and evanescent — a sort of heavenly feeling. I've called this last part *Existence* is song quoting Rilke, because I don't want to presume upon the after-life and call it "Heaven." So what I tried to do in the quartet was to bring down to earth Dante's vision, inspired by what's on either side of one's nose and right before the eyes, a movie that reflects the nervous system's basic sense of being.

Ganguly: If *The Dante Quartet* contains something of your personal hell, *Untitled Film*, which is dedicated to Marilyn, seems full of that evanescent quality you just described as heavenly.

Brakhage: That's currently my favorite film, and how that happened was ... I've always wanted to go to church with my children but churches don't like young children these days, so I've felt excluded from a full family participation. When I was in Helsinki about two years ago, I went to a Greek Orthodox Church, but its doors were locked, so I photographed through the window, and later began to paint on the film. The more I worked on it, the more I began to feel my church is right here, where I am with my family — the four of us gathered together in the name of something holy. And I believe in that.

Ganguly: Since this too is a quartet, what are the four parts?

Brakhage: The first and last parts have writing mixed with paint. The first one is public or social, a sort of outcry vis-à-vis the church and myself, and dominated by the straight line structures of the church, while the last part is a private invocation of myself and Marilyn, Anton and Vaughn, and then thanks to God. The two parts in between move from the one to the other. I think the hand-painted sections are the ultimate of all the hypnagogic painting I've ever done, and I think this will be my last hand-painted hypnagogic film. There's an intensity of feeling here that I've never achieved before.

Ganguly: What do the scratched words represent?

Brakhage: It's a way of saying thank you. By the end of the fourth part I'm so overwhelmed that I want to give thanks for the peace that has come with my discovery of this film church. At one point I felt so emotional that I wrote — "You" — but that didn't look right, and I felt I needed a small "y" since it was Marilyn whom I was addressing. Then that's followed by hand-painted passages of what I felt hypnagogically at the thought of her, and then I scratched Anton and Vaughn's names, and in the end there didn't seem anything left to do but write "Praise be to God."

Ganguly: Why is this going to be your last hypnagogic hand-painted film?

Brakhage: Well, what I create, after all, is only a corollary of the hypnagogic process and it bears no more relation to the actual thing than a painting does to a landscape. Besides, all my life I've been trying to pry film loose from all forms of usage, whether it's drama, illustration, propaganda, or modes of visual thinking. And now I've come to a point where I believe that if film reflects anything that's nameable, then that limits the fullest possible

aesthetic of film ... it's not film anymore. That's why I was on red alert when I first heard Whitman's praise of Shakespeare as a mirror held up to nature ... Film should not refer to anything in the world, it should be a thing in itself. And my new hand-painted work tries to achieve this.

Ganguly: I now want to shift to the Faust films which were made just after the marriage ended and you were living in Boulder. It was your first collaborative project as well as your first sound film in many years. What made you revert to the dramatic-narrative mode which you had previously shunned?

Brakhage: I think I was seeking ground, going back to my beginnings, to psychodrama, sound and collaboration, which are all aspects of my early filmmaking. In that respect the Faust films certainly resemble the early psychodramatic works, especially *Blue Moses* (1962).

Ganguly: Was there any particular reason for choosing the Faust story?

Brakhage: Faust, for me, is the major legend of Western man. Some thirty five years ago I applied for a grant to do *Joe Faust* — a contemporary version — but I didn't get the money. The film I made in 1987 was about a young Faust who wishes to be old without having to grow old ...

Ganguly: Why the reversal?

Brakhage: It made sense. I didn't want to go back in time nor relive my life, and the young people I knew then had no desire for eternal youth; in fact, they didn't expect to live very long. And no one typified this more than the man who played Faust — Joel Haerling, a composer and filmmaker, who lived in Boulder and had his own power-electronics group, Architect's Office. He was the contemporary Faust I had been looking for.

Ganguly: Who else worked on the film?

Brakhage: When I moved to Boulder, Joel introduced me to some very gifted young people, and we formed a group, "The Sunday Associates" and started an Arts Series with shows every Sunday at the Boulder Art Theater. They were my chief collaborators on *Faust*. By the time I made Part 2, word had got around that the mountain man and the family man was finished — prey to a bunch of Boulder hippies!

Ganguly: To what extent was this a collaboration? Was there a script you created together?

Brakhage: I would come back from a session and write a few lines which usually ended up on the narrative track. Mostly, I relied on the material people were giving me, and occasionally would ask them to do something twice. I was trying my best to draw on my own ideas of *Faust* and at the same time on whatever anyone could offer. I was going through a Godard phase — gathering people together to create the script and create the film ... but despite all this collaboration, it still is a Brakhage film.

Ganguly: But by the time you got to Part 4, there is a falling off, a need to abandon this form ...

Brakhage: By Part 4 I had to work my way out because I knew by then that I had to free myself from psychodrama, and from the dramas of *Faust* itself, and inherit the landscape again. Part 4 is an obliteration by single frame of the memories of the past in the swell of the earth and in the desert. Also, by this time, I had met and fallen in love with Marilyn, and the film resulted from a road trip we took during which I photographed the landscapes of the west and the midwest. So in Part 4 there is no story really — but a going to the desert to rid myself of these "pictures" and encompass the whole spectrum of sky and earth and what lies between the two.

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Ganguly: Another film resulted from that trip — the *Four Visions In Meditation* (1989-91). Is that related to *Faust 4*?

Brakhage: It's a four part film with each part about 17-20 minutes long and it springs directly from *Faust 4* — in fact, the four parts are the fullest possible imaginable extensions of Part 4 — what the mind can do as it turns back on itself.

Ganguly: You've said they were inspired by Gertrude Stein's "Sonzas in Meditation."

Brakhage: The basic inspiration is from the poem in which Stein tries to free words from reference and allows them to exist, each with a life of its own, within the jostling of all the words across the length of the poem. Thus "A" begins to take on a life of its own as the letter "A" or the sound "A" within the poem. You can write a story from the life of "A," or "THE" or whatever word she introduces and repeats. But Stein didn't merely treat words as sounds. They have very live traits as they evolve, and I tried to create a corollary of that by photographing recognizable landscape.

Ganguly: The search for a new aesthetic is already apparent in Marilyn's *Window* which you made the year before and which is the first of a cycle of films inspired by Marilyn.

Brakhage: I think Marilyn's *Window* marks the beginning of everything that my photographic work has now evolved into. It was made when I visited her in Toronto and asked her to marry me. It was also just after my eye operation which had led to a lens implant in my right eye and given me a new sharpened vision ... Marilyn had a room in her brother's apartment, and the view through the window was quite plain: three brick walls, a roof, things like that, but it seemed to me the whole world poured in through them. There's no way I can quite put that into words ... I began to shoot with a flitty feet carriage load camera, and later in the editing the sea

suddenly rushed in. And I added other images, some hand-painted.

Ganguly: You like to call it your most perfect film ...

Brakhage: Yes, it's the most perfect film given to me — in its rhythms, its shapes, but I didn't know it then nor did I aspire toward any such thing. There's no way you can plot or script such a film. And yet life provides these illuminations often in very mundane circumstances, like the view from the window of a room of the woman with whom I was falling deeper and deeper in love, and it's important to open oneself to these moments. Also, it was while making this film that I had a profound sense of how each object, each living thing is utterly unique, and the shapes they make on film are also unique, and so are the compositional relationships between the shapes. That recognition gave me a whole new sense of aesthetics.

Ganguly: And two years later you made *A Child's Garden and the Serious Sea* which, like Marilyn's *Window*, is about seeing the everyday world with new eyes, about discovering it for the first time again.

Brakhage: This is the longest film I've done which is not divided into parts or sections. It's symphonic in nature, but I made it at a time when I was also struggling to keep the consciousness of musical forms out of my work. While visiting Marilyn's parents on Vancouver Island, Victoria, I was deeply moved by her home and garden which hadn't changed much since she was a child. And there was the presence of the sea. I could even smell it from the garden. I had brought my camera hoping to film tide pools, instead I began to shoot the flowers in the garden, and the film grew out of those shots of the garden, the ocean, and a miniature golf course nearby. Anton was then about a year old and there is a brief shot of him crawling along the grass in the distance.

Ganguly: So is the film a child's perspective of the world?

Brakhage: Not a child's perspective but a metaphor of a child's emerging consciousness. In that respect the film goes all the way back to *Anticipation of the Night* (1958) to a major theme in my work: the primal sight of children and their first encounter with the adult world. But unlike *Night* where the loss of that vision is mourned, in *Child's Garden* there is an acceptance. The images of the adult world impinge on those of the garden and the sea, but I treat them as a kind of aberration which doesn't overwhelm the primal gift of the whole phenomenological world.

Ganguly: How was the film received?

Brakhage: Both Marilyn's *Window* and *Garden* have been misunderstood as an attempt to recreate Marilyn's childhood, of trying to see the garden through her eyes as she was growing up when I had no such intention. I have no illusions that people can see through somebody else's eyes except via aesthetics. We do not share each other's visions but a vision when it comes through an artist. To that extent the integrity or the ecology of a work of art can override the intrinsic differences between each of us.

Ganguly: Both films are silent, but around this time you had also begun to experiment with sound. And like so much of the work after the divorce, this too has its roots in *Faust*.

Brakhage: I think what pulled me back into a lot of sound-making was the same impulse, the need to go back to the roots of my film-making which lay in psychodrama. Sound is crucial for psychodrama principally because there's a lack of, what I would call, vision. What is psychodrama after all but the drama that's in the mind, and the extent to which you approach drama, even in the oblique way that I did in *Faust*, involves engaging with picture and continuity as well as a whole

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hierarchy of symbols. In the absence of vision, sound becomes a necessity to stitch the loose threads together and make it all bearable.

Ganguly: So you haven't essentially changed your position about sound being an aesthetic error in film?

Brakhage: No. Film is obviously visual, but proof is that with most movies you can listen to the soundtrack and know what they are about without ever looking at them. For a long time only 2% of my films were sound films because I felt sound interfered with seeing. Moreover, given the complex nature of my films, it was much harder to concentrate if the film had sound. But, at the same time, if I felt a film needed sound, I always included it.

Ganguly: Did you study music?

Brakhage: I was taught piano when I was three years old and living in Winfield, Kansas, and when I was four and a half I was singing solos because I had a high clear voice and could stay on pitch. And then I studied singing in Bisbee, Arizona, with a group of nuns who had taken an interest in my voice.

Ganguly: How did that happen?

Brakhage: There was a man in Bisbee, Arizona, who ran the local movie theater and he would go around photographing local events for a sort of Bisbee "March of Time" which he showed every week. He heard me singing in my backyard, photographed me and arranged a recording session. So I saw myself singing on screen and so did some nuns who felt I should have voice lessons. Later, at eight or nine, I chose to join the St. John's Cathedral Choir at Denver and sang as a boy soprano soloist until my voice began to crack. I also studied the violin briefly and was in choirs all through school, but I was primarily a boy

soprano soloist who sang at weddings and funerals and on the national radio and had quite a life as a musical prodigy.

Ganguly: Did you ever compose music?

Brakhage: No. I was never good with numbers, and composers have to be mathematicians in a sense. The only song I ever composed is a round (stings):

The bear is fur
The fur is bear
The bear is walking everywhere
Here, there, near, far
Bear furrurr ...

Ganguly: But quite early in your filmmaking you began to experiment with electronic music.

Brakhage: I experimented with collage, or what was called "musique concrète," but I never kidded myself that I was a Goldstein or a Cage or a Varèse ... After all, I'm not a painter or a composer — I'm a filmmaker, so when I collaged those sounds, I was creating a corollary of what I was doing in film, and I've never done it except for film. The earliest collage experiments are in *Daybreak and Whiltey* (1957) where I made compound soundtracks with very primitive tape recorders.

Ganguly: What about *Fire of Waters* (1965)?

Brakhage: Yes, that's another early example and perhaps the best since it's really a silent film and the three short sound pieces stand out in a vast sea of silence.

Ganguly: When did you first encounter electronic music?

Brakhage: I was a year out of high school and back from a nervous breakdown at Dartmouth College when I went to a record store, saw a strange label, put on the record and first

mix at a certain point in the room. When I first went to see Varèse he had maps of the Grand Canyon on his walls and was dreaming of a vast symphony of the universe where these slight delays of one sound texture or one pitch over another would converge in certain places and in certain ways ... I was fascinated by that and also with how Varèse would allow a recorded sound into his work to serve as a musical instrument. Take the jackhammer with its electronic echoes in *Poème Électrique* or the waterdrop sounds that resound within the Interpolations in *Deserts*, and consider how these references to the source of the sound are embodied within what is finally a pure sound aesthetic. That has taught me to resist the referent, to take on referential photography and contain it so that the references would not destroy the aesthetic of the film as a film experience.

Ganguly: When you made *Interpolations* last year, were you consciously thinking of Varèse?

Brakhage: They were originally inspired by the Interpolations I just mentioned which were interwoven with the orchestral music of *Deserts* and which Frank Zappa later singled them out and put on a recording. I had first heard them as single pieces, long before *Deserts* was completed, so when I made *Boulder Blues* and *Pearl's* and ... last year — a peripheral vision film about Boulder — I thought of Varèse and of using five of my hand-painted strips as complete pieces or Interpolations within the film's photographed content. I wanted them to exist as a counter-balance to the referential — the photographs of Boulder. I finally ended up with five films that go together so well in 35mm that I have not reduced them to 16mm. What went into Boulder were some hand-painted strips in 16mm, so my *Interpolations* ended up not being really related to Varèse's *Deserts* or to anything I had originally in mind. They exist independently and constitute my longest hand-painted work.

Ganguly: Can you describe how you work with a piece of music?

heard the music of Edgard Varèse. And it transformed my entire life like the instant I first laid eyes on a reproduction by Jackson Pollock. Later I sought Varèse out in New York and he let me sit in on his music lessons at home for free since I couldn't afford to pay for them. At the same time I was incredibly lucky to have met John Cage and to be invited to some of his sessions and music soirees.

Ganguly: What did you learn from Varèse and Cage?

Brakhage: Primarily what I got from them was the inspiration to make silent film. I was especially attracted to the instrumental aspects of their recorded live-sound (for example, the hiss of tires on a wet street) and the fact that the sound could refer to the source of the recording (a passing car). This is a corollary of film because when you turn on the camera you automatically pick up reference. Even if you shoot totally out of focus, there is a certain quality of say a car's movement which even if reduced to a blob of hexagonal lens-reflecting light is usually recognizable as that of an automobile.

What Cage taught me was to recognize the "unscheduled" disturbances in the atmosphere" as airplane pilots say when they hit an air pocket — disturbances that are routine in what we hear around us. And it's terribly important that these ambient sounds be recognized. I edited the *A roll of Dog Star Man* by chance operations inspired by Cage, and then I created superimpositions with the B roll and imposed metaphorical contexts (by conscious choice) in relation to the original chance operations. So I have consistently allowed these unscheduled disturbances to enter my work and exist in relation to the referential images. Cage continues to inspire me in that respect, and a good deal of my painting is based on chance operations.

On the other hand, Varèse was anxious to create sounds within a certain space so carefully that the flute noise which travels faster by a microsecond than the oboe noise would

Brakke: Most people assume that I put on background music and then jam with vision or something! In fact, I never play music when I'm working on a film. I make visual collages of music and once even tried to cut a film exactly to a Bach fugue and the result was a disaster. On the other hand, there is a relationship between Messiaen's organ music and *Serenes From Under Childhood* and you can take *Mothlight* (1963) and see how it is related to a Bach fugue in the sense that the shapes of the wings and the recreated flight of the moth among the flowers has recurring colors which are melodic, and that the shapes themselves with their recurring actions are true to the overall sense of a Bach fugue integrity ... In this sense, these are all pieces of visual music, and so are many of my hand-painted films. But now I very much prefer to set pictures to music, and it's usually the music that inspires me in the first place and the film comes out of that.

Ganguly: Who have you worked with mostly?

Brakke: James Tenney was the first one to compose music for my films. For *Interim* (1952) — the very first film I made — he created a piano soundtrack, inspired by Samuel Barber's *Sonata for Piano*. And we recently worked together again on *Christ Mass, Sex Dance* (1991) which was made in very strange circumstances. I photographed the rehearsals of the Annual Boulder Christmas Nutcracker Suite hoping to make a children's film, but I ended up with imagery that had nothing to do with the Nutcracker. And the instant I got back the film from the lab I thought of Tenney's *Blue Suede Shoes* which is a collage of Elvis Presley's "Blue Suede Shoes" with the words broken up into a kind of sexual grunting, and it seemed perfectly suited to it, so I cut the film to the music.

Ganguly: What was the nature of your collaboration with Architect's Office?

Brakke: Joel's group embodied for me a

certain revitalization of ideals that had gone dead since the 60s. Their music was built around communal ideas, so that musicians could retain their individual signatures while working together. And there was always room for chance operations. There were some extraordinary talents like Rick Corrigan who did the music for *Faust Parts 1* and 4 and with whom I've collaborated on several films since. And there was Joel. I set *Kindering* (1987) to one of his pieces which combined his son's voice with tapes he had picked up at a yard sale — and it was all very beautifully integrated. He evoked for me a quality of childhood that I hadn't really felt for a long time, so I photographed my grandchildren with his music in mind and then edited the pictures directly to the music. I also set *I ... Dreaming* my self-in-crisis portrait, to his collage or "recomposition" of fragments of songs by Stephen Foster.

Ganguly: He also did some very innovative compilation tracks for your films about visual thinking and seeing.

Brakke: Yes. I greatly admired Joel's collage abilities — he did an amazing track for my hand-painted film, *Fireloop*, in which I use fire as a metaphor for the light and sound process that accompanies moving visual thinking. He also did a compilation piece featuring music by groups like Toddlers Do!, Zovief France, Nurse with Wound, and The Hafler Trio for *Loud Visual Noises*, my hand-painted film about optic feedback in response to sound. And he played *Faust*, collaborated on the music, and did the entire track for *Faust 2*.

Ganguly: I want to talk about one last sound film, *Passage Through: A Ritual* (1990). Why did you decide to juxtapose long stretches of black leader with a gamelan soundtrack?

Brakke: The piece is by Philip Corner — *Through the Mysterious Barricades* (After Couperin). After I heard the tape, I began

rummaging through two to three thousand feet of film which I had shot during the break up of the marriage and put away. I was trying to pull out only what I could have shot that day and throw the rest out, and I ended up with about fifty feet ... The film consists of mostly black leader with very brief shots of photographed objects that are usually unrecognizable. And I cut them to the music. So there are these long dark spaces of music with occasional flashes of imagery. It was one of the hardest films to edit since the challenge was to find the exact place where a particular image belonged. If I stretched some of those places ten seconds longer it would become absurd.

Ganguly: What were you really after?

Brakke: I think it's a film about the dark night of the soul with moments of illumination that are intrinsic to my present, where I am now. In that sense, the film is very cathartic.

Ganguly: I noticed how despite the black leader, it's never completely dark.

Brakke: There's a shimmering of light all through and there are little sprocket holes in the black leader that are like stars of light ... The optic nerve-endings of the viewers interact all the time with this ephemera of light. The film proves that even with black leader you can't ever defeat the light.

Ganguly: I want to now change gears and talk about the 60s, and I want to start with the fact that, unlike many of your contemporaries, you've been fairly critical of the rhetoric and ideology of that time.

Brakke: I'll go far as to say that the 60s were very damaging to film as art, because of the assumptions many people had about film to what film is and what film can be, and also because of assumptions of career which cre-

ated an intense competitiveness that destroyed friendships among filmmakers. But more deeply than that, filmmakers went around lecturing so much that Hollis Frampton could quip quite reasonably that at some point the whole American independent film movement must have been up in the air, some were taking off, some were landing, and some were en route to talk about their work. Now the biggest problem lay in that talk, and I certainly did more of it than most, and as I flew into one antagonistic situation after another I naturally became defensive, and what I said very often got twisted and warped. That defensiveness created walls that I'm now beginning to dissolve ... But it is also true that without that 60s' rhetoric none of the filmmakers' cooperatives would exist and their films would not be available for people to see.

Ganguly: There is a popular myth today that in the 60s the battlelines were clearly drawn between Hollywood and the Independents and that each wished the other dead. Was it really that antagonistic?

Brakke: I personally never wanted to bring an end to the movies because I've always enjoyed the movies. That would be like patricide or matricide because I began at the movies, I went to the movies as a child, they were my babysitter, my parents, in fact. So I never had that wish. About Hollywood — it's one of the most powerful industries on earth, a massive shaper of opinion and feeling. You can bring on the independent filmmakers, and it's not David versus Goliath, but an electron on a flea on Goliath. No competition. There are those who suspected we were bacteria or viruses that were going to bring down the movies and they have had their rage ... But during the 60s the Independents had an immense influence on Hollywood, then Hollywood went through a reactionary phase when it ceased being visual for a decade and retreated to the box dramas. But certain pieces of grammar remained because they were intrinsic to filmmaking and someone or

would you describe the current avant-garde film scene?

Brakhage: I have never seen anything like Peter Herwitz's films. There's something in his making that trusts rhythm, and his rhythmic overwrites everything else. Including his dirt speeches and the scratches that record his struggles to be true to himself. He is a constant inspiration to me. I also feel close to John Wier's work which I can't put into words because it is so unique. Then there is Andrew Noren. I feel a deep kinship with his opening to the light and making a whole film trusting the varieties of light and sustaining it for hours. And let me mention James Herbert who manages to photograph in very erotic conjunctions without verging on the pornographic — in that tension his work ceases to be referential and you are left with the aesthetic. And ... Larry Jordan who works in ways similar to Harry Smith — with collage, animated collage figures, etc. His work began with traceries or engravings of lines which made a thin filament net of imagery through which light came. Over the years he has created through a combination of colors an almost direct reference to the sun, or to incandescence, to fire in some sense. I think *Sophie's Place* is one of the great few masterpieces of independent cinema. Larry belongs to my generation and continues to make films — one of the very few. And I'd also like to mention two other people. The first is Phil Solomon, who in the process of working with photographed imagery a frame at a time, not painting but using chemicals to crystallize into various shapes minute patterns along the line of his step-printing, has, like Gurwot Nelson, also created a counterbalance to what could become sentimental and nostalgic. And the second is Christine Noll Brinckmann. There is a quality in her work which is very much like some of Marie Menken's films except that there is much less obvious conscious mastery and more of that kind of trust of emotional continuity that one finds in Joseph Cornell.

Ganguly: These are all filmmakers with whom you share strong affinities. I'm curious about your enthusiasm for the work of someone like Michael Snow who belongs to a very different camp.

Brakhage: I feel a strong vibrancy with not only Michael Snow but also Bruce Elder and Ernie Cehr — in each case their work is distinct from anything I'd want to spend the rest of my life doing. I feel kin to Bruce with his forty hour epic film because it is premised exactly on the opposites of everything in my sense of making. I also feel kin to Michael for all the varieties of ground he has cleared that wasn't at all possible to me. I like *Present* which is a much-despised film — the feminists jumped all over it — a film he made in the midst of his divorce and the rediscovery of his life; I'm in awe of the editing, the way he combined those images and left us a dictionary of the new grammar of independent filmmaking along the line of his own tortured search to find his new life. This is a deeply moving thing to me. But the pure aesthetic experience is *L'Region Centrale* which has no humans in it; even its rocks finally become moving rhythms, and its sky and earth and the whole weave of it ... And there's Ernie because his work leaves me speechless; while I detest the spartan rigidity of his forms, he's infused them with such feeling that his rhythms can be felt not only when there's a shot change, but in shapes and tones — he touches my nervous system at all times.

Ganguly: Given the fact that so many gifted filmmakers are at work, how do you explain the current apathy toward avant-garde film? What has killed the audiences? And where are the writers today?

Brakhage: For the art market it's simple — you can't treat a film as a precious object; anybody's print if it's well-made is equal to anybody else's well-made print. There is no way to corner the market on this, and even if you bought the original, you're buying rights

that can easily be duplicated by other people. And you're saddled with this enormous problem of protecting and storing whatever you've bought and releasing it. You can't make a buck out of this ... that's the problem. No millionaire can hang a film over his fireplace for any purpose whatsoever, so that has shown up the slash business attitude of practically every museum in the world. They're just not interested. Also, you're not going to get a case of whiskey for Christmas for being a critic and writing about a film. You're not even going to get printed because there's no business structure, there's no reward for anyone dealing with film as an art.

Ganguly: What about video? Does that hold out any hope for you?

Brakhage: Where video is an art it is like sand painting — now you see it, now you don't. It has no permanence, there is no way you can preserve it. What makes it even harder to accept it as an art is that the medium for looking at it is intrinsically hypnotic which is perfect for advertising, but lousy if not imposable for an aesthetic ecology. And its luminescent lighting actually sickens people. Then for a colorist like me it cannot hold any interest because it doesn't have any color — it's whatever color the set is when you twiddle the knobs. Where it also differs from film is that film has a base rhythm — a basic beat that can be 8, 16, 24, even 32 with Cinemas, and other rhythms play off against this base beat of still images changing. But video is like a jet quivering variably. However, I will say that there is a kind of pulse to TV, but not a beat, so this doesn't mean it's preclusive of having a rhythmic aesthetic ecology: it does have that but it's a muffled thing which is very off-putting for those who love film. So I really don't want to see a film on TV nor do I want to have anything to do with video filmmaking.

Ganguly: What now? More experiments with putting film to music?

Brakhage: No, I feel now I'll be working in modes where sound won't be needed. I think I've come to the end of my infatuation with music and film, and film being a close corollary of music. I have to now find out what it is that film can do that's purely film ... As I said earlier, the truth of the matter is that I feel an increasing need to make something that has no title, that has no subject matter, that doesn't consciously draw on any of the other arts or even on the cells of the brain and the optic system and the modes in which I've worked for years ... My main problem at sixty and for the last five years has been to get old *Dog Star* Man off my back, so that I can just start fresh and go on with what has been given to me to do. The whole grounds of my making have shifted and furthermore, I think they're shifting even more radically. I'm content with that. I've gone from "Brakhage" to "SB" which could be any old son-of-a-bitch to not signing the films at all. I think more and more I'd like to inhabit with great humility the position of anonymous ... I'm not really that man who made those films in the past in any other sense than the aesthetic: the styles of rhythming that are intrinsic to my being, only now I hope I've cleared a great deal of the usages out of it, and it can just come through me. It has taken me a whole lifetime of hard work to get to the point of just making a film. The irony is that as I get there I don't know what to say about it. I now treasure those works about which people don't write anything or even remember having seen because those are films that exist in a realm which defies the verbal. They are films that are given over wholly to the unconscious.

Ganguly: Films like?

Brakhage: Like *Nodes* (1981) and *Matis* (1988). They are the kinds of films I would like to spend the rest of my life making — films that are, in the ordinary sense of the word, about nothing ... And I'm getting there. I was just dabbling with paint when I made this new unnamed film, and I didn't even

think that I was making a film. And that's very hard to achieve. Since I lost a nerve in my right hand my index and thumb fingers have become weak, so I painted this new film with my left hand and I think it's the best piece I've ever done with this hand. I'm encouraged by that — after all, the left hand is usually neglected; it began to come into its own when I began painting with my fingers, finding them more useful than brushes. Since I didn't use the left hand for my past work, it could be a more direct conduit for the feelings that are now in me — this was certainly the case with this film ... Now and again something like this will slip through me that's got a mysterious, intangible quality to it like some of Cornell's films do, especially the Lorca Series (*A Legend for Fountains: Fragments*) inspired by *Poet in New York*. They have a certain is-ness that no map of the mind can decipher. They simply exist out there in the world, each film with a life of its own.

Ganguly: I'm intrigued by that word you just used — "nothing."

Brakhage: I don't know ... It's very hard to be clear. This will sound like I'm mixing religion with life, but I didn't have a church to go to when several years ago I was stuck in Houston for six weeks. I was ill and at the bottom of my life. But I was able to go to the Rothko Chapel, and I wasn't going to a church but to these great paintings, and to me they were about nothing. They defied verbal description. And what I felt was distinct from a religious experience. They were also very free of any kind of autobiography, integral each in itself and in relation to each other in this surrounding aesthetic, so that I felt a sharpening of everything inside me and the need to survive. What I was having was an experience of *nothing*, and nothing exists — take John Cage's silence or the silence I once heard in a Kansas cornfield ... I heard the dominant fifth in my ears and the beating of my heart. If something out there can be inspiring without manipulating a person without that being with reference to anything else in the world, be a thing in itself,

then that seems to me an epitome of human making and experience.

Ganguly: Are you going to give up titles altogether in the new work?

Brakhage: I'm thinking of grouping some of these films in a series called, *Naughts* and others in a series called *Chartres*. But even that seems an intrusion, so at some point I hope I'll have the good sense to give up titles altogether. And the films will be "things" nobody can categorize verbally ... I think of Michelangelo's "unfinished" sculptures in this respect which are so much more exciting to me than his *David* or *Moses*.

Ganguly: Why "Naughts?"

Brakhage: I don't really know what "naughts" means. When I call these films *Naughts*, I'm very conscious of the pun with "knots" which suggests a crossing of wires and the fact that I haven't quite got to where I hope I will someday.

Ganguly: And why the reference to Chartres?

Brakhage: Those are works that came out absolutely unexpectedly as a result of being at Chartres Cathedral in 1992 ... I think the rest of my life will be profoundly affected by the several hours I spent there. When I was at the Beaubourg Center they even asked me whether I would be interested in coming back to photograph Chartres, and I said, yes, probably in a couple of years. It could happen and if it did then I would take a camera into Chartres and see what I could do, but what is wonderful is that I'm *already* at work on Chartres Cathedral without any grants or even consciously thinking that this is what I'm doing. Now I hope there will be more of these, or there will be more *Naughts*, or there will be something else that I won't be able to fit under either of those categories, and that finally all categories will collapse and I won't know what to do.

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