

EXPERIENCE IS BEING THROWN INTO UNCHARTED TERRITORY, THEN YOU DISCOVER THINGS

Interview with Ernie Gehr
MARTIJN VAN BOVEN / ARIE ALTENA

Early in November 2007, the American experimental filmmaker Ernie Gehr visited Amsterdam, where Filmmuseum had programmed two nights of his work. On Tuesday 6th November, Sonic Acts spoke with him about his films. Martijn van Boven began by mentioning the difficulty in getting to see Gehr's work. A filmmaker himself, Martijn was deeply impressed with the work Gehr had presented a few years ago at the International Filmfestival Rotterdam, and had subsequently tried to lay his hands on other films, which turned out to be extremely difficult. The easiest way to access Gehr's work now is to go online and view the low-resolution clips available at ubu.com – something the artist is less than happy with.

EG: My impulse upon hearing that some of my films were available on ubu.com was to get in touch with them and ask them to take them offline. It was too painful, seeing my films in such a state. Someone who contributes to ubu.com had told me that if I contacted them, they would take the clips off immediately. But the representation of my work there is so poor that I felt I had better leave it, before somebody puts clips online which look a bit more representative, because that would be even more painful. For certain kinds of information, like getting the idea behind the film, they might be useful. But if you would like to get the experience of my films, I would advise you not to look at those online representations. I work on a certain scale. Also, in my studio, I project what I am working

on, to see how it works. To see it on a computer monitor is quite something else. I am interested in the experience of the work, not necessarily in the outline, or the idea behind it. Otherwise I could have just put the idea on a piece of paper, it is cheaper, and it takes less time to consume. You should look at a film in time. You can get the idea from a couple of sentences on paper.

MvB In our publication and festival we are trying to define the field of the cinematic experience. To begin with, can I ask where you would place your work in relation to conventional, narrative cinema? Is there a relationship between your films and cinema as we know it?

We both use either a camera or a camcorder. The work is either put on film or on tape, or some other medium. And quite often for public presentations we use projectors of some kind or another. There are certain other affinities I guess. I don't really think about the relationship that much. In an ideal world, I would like to see a broad spectrum of cinematic possibilities, all existing on the same plane. However that is not the reality we find ourselves in. The industry is very protective of its territory. People are very conditioned. As soon as they walk into a place showing moving images, whether it is in the cinema or on their television, the first thing they lock into is the story. What's the story? What's going on? Where are the players? Who are the characters? What's the plot? That is a result of conditioning and makes it very difficult for most people to appreciate a different cinema.

Instead of the usual labels, I would prefer 'works by', with no definition of whether it is abstract or experimental, narrative or anything else. Without using those definitions, people should just take their chances and see new and different things. I would like to see programs that show a variety of things reflecting the world in which we live. When you walk down the street in any major city – well, in any western city that I know – you come across all these different people from different cultures. Why can't we have a cinema that reflects this? We have narrative films from India, narrative films from Brazil, another one from China and another one from the Netherlands. That is the idea of multicultural cinema. And to me that is not a diversity of cinematic approaches, because it is showing the same thing. It's just made here or somewhere else, with people from one culture or from another culture.

The medium itself is neutral. It doesn't say that it can only be used to tell stories, or to make documentaries. Unfortunately there is an investment to showing only that. To some degree it is an economic thing. If non-narrative film were to be shown in cinema theaters, it would take away part of the income to the film studios.

Given the conditioning which has taken place, I do not mind that my work is being shown in specialized venues. It is the only way it can exist. Putting my work under the term 'experimental' or 'avant-garde', canonizes it in a way. But hopefully it also means that people who do see the work understand what they are going into, although they might not know the specific pieces being shown. I tend to appreciate that.

MvB Can you imagine a sort of cinematic experience without a didactic cinematic language in which you have one shot, a consecutive shot and another shot; a cinematic experience that has a direct effect on your senses?

Yeah, that's possible, sure. But all these terms are quite loose. It is so nebulous these days. Sometimes that's a problem because it is so generic when someone uses the term 'cinematic'.

Narrative film is created by a team. It is very hard to assign the word 'maker' to a specific person because it is a collaborative process with many individuals, some of whom are 'creative' contributors, others are 'technical'. If their work does not fit together, the project may fail on some level. But the directors are always credited with the work. I do not see all of them as filmmakers. They are supervisors, they tell others what to do. The editors actually make sense out of the chaotic material.

In my view a filmmaker is a person who actually involved with most of the levels of production and also considers the materials he or she works with, be it film or digital media, in a dynamic creative manner. Filmmaker refers really to film, but the terms are loose. Therefore nowadays I quite often just use the word 'work'. It is more neutral. But people still use all these other terms. I think it is useful sometimes to bring up the issue of how ambiguous these terms happen to be.

MvB Could you then say a filmmaker is researching the intrinsic elements of film? The material, editing, the use of space and time?

Sometimes. Even in so-called experimental avant-garde work people's approaches run from A to Z. Some people are interested in the material and plasticity of film. When you talk about cinematic phenomena what are we talking about? People have different approaches to that. To me, cinematic means something which cannot be done in any other way but through the medium of film. I am willing to extend it to video, but I think we need another term, especially for digital work with its own intrinsic qualities. But we might need another five to ten years before we can establish a different language that is unique to digital work.

Earlier you mentioned computer art, which is not coming out of mechanics, is not indebted to industrial revolution. Film is a child of the industrial revolution. To make film you use a machine. Film did not come from outer space. There were all these developments before celluloid was invented that were used to make moving pictures, and all that cued to film, was swallowed up. The same happens with

digital media and the way in which it employs quite a lot of film language and tradition.

AA For the past few years you have predominantly worked with digital film. Do you now work differently in that medium compared with before?

Before I started to work with digital video I worked with film for over 35 years, and you carry that luggage, that culture with you. I come with an experience of film and carry over some of those concerns, whether I like it or not. But my method in working with digital video is different. It is more tentative than when I was working with film. I have never been able to quite stick with one thing. Quite often after I finish one work I feel that I need to change stylistically, or in terms of interest. Still, one can see how certain themes, ideas and ways of seeing connect from one work to another. Once you have the distance of time you can see those connections.

MvB My experience your works, like *Side/Walk/Shuttle* and *Shift*, is that all seem to deal with your interest in public space, the city and its Cartesian grid. There is a certain personal perspective present that you can only have if you have a camera. So there's the city, the Cartesian coordinates and the filmic pulse – are these films about your personal view on the city? Is this your interest?

Part of it is to do with having lived in cities for most of my life. I like the city. I see urban spaces as archeological canyons of human histories, we have built these mountains and valleys where we exist, and they register with us in different ways. They affect us and mould human lives and character, they either enrich or impoverish our existence. Most of the time I film spaces that have some meaning in my personal life.

There is no way to actually convey the complexity of any place or any situation. Normally you are working with media that record surfaces and that have limitations. They are evocative of possibilities, they are not the real thing in any way. There is a rectangle, there are colors that have nothing to do with the colors of life. You can see the filmed space, but you can't move around it as you can in life. You are also making a decision when to film and when to stop. So as a filmmaker you are creating this utterly bizarre whole thing – and where is it all taking place? On a flat-screen.

I like to be able to step back in different ways, and acknowledge the limitations of the medium, pick up on certain aspects of so-called reality, of fragments of reality that I am paying attention to. Through the medium, I try to articulate certain things or forces that I sense are taking place. Sometimes the movement of a camera will articulate something that the image itself might not. For example, in *Side/Walk/Shuttle*, there are these constant turns so that the viewer never really reaches the ground.



Side/Walk/Shuttle, Ernie Gehr, 1991

MvB As a spectator, you lose the sense of perspective. When I was watching the film, many people in the audience were tilting their heads to find a focal point. It seems that you are disrupting the time-space relationships in film.

In some senses I was trying to convey cinematically the feeling of being a displaced person, someone who has not found a grounding for a place that you might call home. To some degree, what prompted me to make the film was moving to San Francisco from New York, which I thought of as home. Even though I found San Francisco a very beautiful and pleasant place to live – and definitely nicer than New York – I could not ground myself there.

MvB To some extent, it surprises me that there is this deep personal motivation, because the movie is such a formal exercise.

What prompts the making of a film is usually some experience that you either understand before the making, or that you can only figure out through the making. Mostly the problem is clarified in the making of the film. But as a viewer you do not have to know about that. If you have seen a number of my works, you will know that some of them are quite abstract, and that the relationship with everyday life can be quite tenuous. Some of the time I am interested in what an image represents. At the same time I am also interested in an awareness of the medium that I work with, to acknowledge it is not a picture-window, but a work that is coming to you by means of a technology. To me, acknowledging the materials, be it film or something else, is important. It is a way of savoring the character of the medium and the intrinsic possibilities that it has to offer. I am also interested in creative works that can exist in their own right vis a vis the plasticity of the medium I use. At the same time I do not want to create a dream world, that is not so interesting to me.

MvB Can you imagine what would happen if film were to disappear? What would we miss if the interaction between the lens, the object and the celluloid were to vanish? Would a certain way we reflect on the world disappear too? What would be the difference with digital media? Is there something we cannot report or record with a digital camera that we could with film?

I do not feel that film is going to disappear all that quickly. There are archives and museums that preserve the work, and as long as they show it as film in one way or another, there will be some trace of its uniqueness. Hopefully, prints will still be available fifty or even hundred years down the road from now. Unfortunately for the general public, film is going to become a more rarified creature. Already most people get their film histories and their film aesthetics from watching film on a television or laptop.

AA The new technologies also change the relationship between experimental cinema and the viewing behavior of the public. Through all the digital technology we use in our daily lives, our viewing behavior and the way we deal with culture has changed dramatically. Imagine people watching a Stan Brakhage movie, downloaded from Youtube, on their iPods.

When I work with film, I do work with scale. When I work on a film, I look forward to seeing it on a certain scale. The minimal size is not a monitor. To me, even the largest monitor is too small, it won't work. The first or the second public screening of *Side/Walk/Shuttle* was in a New York cinema with a large screen for 35-mm film. I was sitting fairly close to the screen and it was wonderful to see these buildings flying through space. It was so strong, I could not believe it.

The scale is so important. When I edit I use a flatbed or a viewer, but I project my films to see the result. I only use the viewer for the cuts, to find the frame and where I want to cut. After I make my cut I splice the film together and I project it. It is not a big image, but it is a projected image. I need to see it in that way. With digital media I have 14-inch monitor, but I do not have a beamer. I hope to buy one eventually but I haven't got one yet. So I make all my decisions on this little image in a rectangle. That is a difference. I know you can now put films in your pocket and look at them anytime. That is the future. When I ask my son if he wants to go to the movies, he says he'd rather watch it on the computer. There are all kind of changes taking place. I do not feel that my own work is going to be effected that much by not being able to be seen by a lot of people together. Commercial cinema is much more dependent on the communal aspect.

AA Perhaps this situation also creates a real desire in a small number of people to go out somewhere and immerse oneself in the experience of moving images in the perfect setting?

As long as there are possibilities, places to see things the way they were meant to be seen, people ought to seek them out. Just like contemporary computer art, certain works have to be seen in the context in which they were created. But a lot of work will have to survive in some sort of transitory medium in order to survive at all. Some will survive and others won't. A hundred years ago, people were still working with magic lanterns and slides. You can transfer that to film or to digital media, but it is not the same thing. So occasionally seeing an actual

magic lantern show, however poor and embarrassing the performance might be, is important to understand the potential that might have been there. I personally would not like my work to survive on an iPod – I'd rather be unknown.

MvB I can understand why you would not want to see your work survive on an iPod, but can you explain what it is that would be lost when viewing your work in such a way?

The experience of the nuances of the work. I have made decisions, based upon my response to the scale, to the texture and feel of it on film as well as being able to see it in time, and through being a captive viewer in certain conditions. I am willing to have work presented differently, but the scale with my films is very precious to me, especially with my early work. I do not know what they would mean in some other medium.

For example, take my work *History*. It basically consists of film grain. It works in this strange way where something is going to happen after a while, when you have looked at the screen for long enough. *History* goes on for what seems like forever, and film grain is all that is projected on screen. I have no idea what you would make of it on a television, or a monitor, or an iPod. You have to see that work projected on a screen.

MvB An iPod image cannot change the consciousness?

Not with film history. Films offers an alternative vision of the world. The world is complex, you can see it in different ways, you can connect to other configurations of the world, other possibilities of existence, of consciousness.

MvB I have quite often experienced what you are describing when watching abstract avant-garde movies. There is a sort of transformation from one state to another. You enter into a stage that Stan Brakhage would say is that of the untutored eye, where you have lost the habit of how you have to see things.

And where you have to start to explore. It is like being lost in a jungle. There are no 'this way out' signs. You just have to start looking where you are and see where that exploration will take you. You have to go through the experience of moving through that space, until you find and discover something.

In 1971, I was editing a film. It was around midnight, and there was a black-out. I was in the basement of the building, a large lecture hall in the State of New York University, and I had to make my way out. There were no lights whatsoever. This was before they were required to have generators for all these exit signs. It was quite an experience walking through these hallways with the wind blowing through, touching the skin and all around the cheeks and ears. I was going through darkness, until I was able to see a few glimpses of the outside. It was an experience of space unlike anything I'd ever had before.

I still remember it. The next day I walked through that space and everything was as usual. But on the occasion of the black-out the space was activated. It was quite an experience. But that is what experience is: being thrown into uncharted territory is how you discover things. You do not want that all the time. But in certain moments it can be very pleasurable, or very painful. It can be rewarding in either case. It opens things up.

Thanks to the Filmmuseum Amsterdam for inviting Ernie Gehr, and giving us the opportunity for the interview.

Ernie Gehr made his debut as a filmmaker in 1968 with the short 16-mm films *Wait and Morning*. His early work such as *Serene Velocity* was often related to Structuralist Film and his oeuvre consists of over twenty works. Gehr has taught at the San Francisco Art Institute and has been awarded the prestigious Maya Deren Award by the American Film Institute.

FILMOGRAPHY

Morning (1968)
Wait (1968)
Reverberation (1969)
Transparency (1969)
Field (1970)
Serene Velocity (1970)
Three (1970)
Still (1969-1971)
History (1970)
Shift (1972-1974)
Eureka (1974)
Behind the Scenes (1975)
Table (1976)
Untitled (1977)
Hotel (1979)

Mirage (1981)
Untitled: Part One 1981 (1981)
Signal - Germany on the Air (1982-1985)
Side/Walk/Shuttle (1991)
Rear Window (1986/1991)
Listen (1986-1991)
This Side of Paradise (1991)
Glider (2001)
Cotton Candy (2001)
Passage (2003)
Carte de Visite (2003)
Precarious Garden (2004)
Before The Olympics (2005)
The Morse Code Operator
(or *The Monkey Wrench*) (2006)