

STAN BRAKHAGE

ABOUT TIME: FOUR LATE STAN BRAKHAGE FILMS

PROGRAM - *Kinderling* (1987), *Loud Visual Noises* (1987), *Christ Mass Sex Dance* (1991), *Crack Glass Eulogy* (1992) - shown as a 16mm projection. Loop time: 20 minutes

Stan Brakhage's three hundred and eighty films constitute one of the monuments of 20th century art. His films from the 1950s were key documents in the liberation of cinema, releasing the medium from its quasi-theatrical limitations as well as liberating filmmakers by allowing independent art film to revisit basic, eternal subjects such as family, cosmology and the broad mysteries of form. Brakhage worked in the full knowledge that other art forms had had their fields expanded by artists who realized the need for a contemporary epic art, whether it be epic poets such as Charles Olson or Louis Zukofsky or epic filmmakers such as D.W. Griffith or, later in Brakhage's life, Andrei Tarkovsky. Music, which found its epic form in masses and symphonic works, was also a major influence on Stan Brakhage's thinking about film. His understanding, for instance, of the meaning of music's evolution from baroque to romantic would find a mirror in his films, even if they could not be categorized in the same typology as the music that preceded them. While most of his work is intentionally silent, it would not be a mistake to view a Brakhage film a second or third time thinking about musical terms – forte, pizzicato, adagio, andante. Further to this, the four films in this exhibition explore Brakhage's ideas on the cinematic possibilities of sound.

Brakhage realized as early as the mid-1950s that cinema had been operating within a restricted range of the medium's possibilities. He reacted to the fact that the possibilities of cinema were not being explored. Early Brakhage films, from *Desistfilm* (1954) to *Dog Star Man* (1961-64), were so much at odds with mainstream films of the period that they effectively inhabited a different cinematic universe. In a sense his break with the history of cinema was integral to his bringing cinema itself into its next phase of modernity. Brakhage's iconoclasm was consistent with several aspects of visual art modernism, including his respect for historical precursors in many fields, his spirit of research and experimentation, his emphasis on form and his profound analysis of the materials of the medium. Not coincidentally, many of these elements were also explored by the painters whose work influenced him, including Pollock, Rothko, Diebenkorn and Riopelle.

In the early 1980s, just before the four films in this exhibition were made, Brakhage laid out his ideas on the future of film for an audience at the Telluride Film Festival: "I personally think that the three greatest tasks for film in the 20th century are 1.) To make the epic, that is, to tell the tales of the tribes of the world. 2.) To keep it personal, because only in the eccentricities of our personal lives do we have any chance at the truth. 3.) To do the dream work, that is to illuminate the borders of the unconscious." These points can be read as a prescription, but they are also a short summary of Brakhage's personal approach to filmmaking over almost five decades. Brakhage worked very hard, in letters, talks and publications, from *Metaphors on Vision* forward, to develop, or even control, the critical vocabulary that might be applied to his work. To the extent

that he did this, or succeeded in doing it, I think there is a valid comparison with the Conceptual practice of the 1960s that tried to do exactly the same thing. Certainly aspects of "the conceptual" lurk everywhere in the Brakhage oeuvre, even if he did claim at one point to be "the most documentary of filmmakers". His films teach us what he meant by documentary, even though he was so unlike other documentary filmmakers, because he told us about the scope of his expanded vision for 'document' as an idea. He was actually quite critical of the standard documentary form in cinema. As a result, he worked to prise the 'document' from documentary, proposing that document shared something definitive with the Latin 'documentum,' which he felt addressed the weak rhetoric implied by the 'airy' in documentary. Yet, just to keep us guessing and regardless of the film, he saw what he did in his art as being related to the idea that his films were "morsels of actual life."

The liberation that occurred was political, social, sexual and aesthetic, and has had a profound and somewhat unacknowledged effect on the world we inhabit today. As Robert Kelly once said of Brakhage, "What we loved about him back then remains a permanent liberation in the medium: he broke the illusion of personned narrative."

The opportunity presented here to view a small selection of Brakhage films in the context of a recent work by Carolee Schneemann provides an occasion to reflect on the dedicated and revolutionary work of liberation that artists undertook, especially in the 1960s. Looking at later work by these artists side by side, we can see how they remain influenced by their pasts and by the range of 'liberations' that they discussed in their letters for several decades, letters that must be published if we truly want a window into the latter 20th century cultural zeitgeist. P. Adams Sitney once used the term visionary in the title of a book about the independent film of the 1950s and 1960s; Stan Brakhage was one of the visionaries, and his art, as with much of the best art produced today, had and continues to have an elusive visionary quality that we would do well to try to understand.

Brakhage's idea that film and photography occupied different aesthetic worlds did not prevent his films from exploring problems that were photographic as well as cinematic. Film, he thought, should exist "free of photographic animation . . . of the outright fakery of the illusion of movie pictures." He implied what is now a commonplace – by working to the limitations of a medium, attacking its shortcomings, art will advance. Brakhage did this, intuitively and consciously, in a fifty-year adventure documenting the contents of consciousness.

Bill Jeffries

This exhibition of Stan Brakhage films was organized by Bill Jeffries in collaboration with Marilyn Brakhage, to Bill Jeffries extends his thanks for her help with all aspects of the realization of this exhibition.