

MoMA EXHIBITION ILLUMINATES THE LEGACY OF VISIONARY EXPERIMENTAL FILMMAKER MAYA DEREN

Exhibition Showcases Deren's Films of the 1940s and 1950s Along with Films by Artists She Influenced: Carolee Schneemann, Barbara Hammer, and Su Friedrich

Maya Deren's Legacy: Women and Experimental Film

May 14–October 4, 2010

The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater Galleries and Theaters 1 and 2

New York, April 20, 2010—The legacy of Maya Deren, considered America's first prominent avant-garde filmmaker, film theorist, and visionary of experimental cinema, is explored in the exhibition *Maya Deren's Legacy: Women and Experimental Film*, a five-month film series and video installation in The Roy and Niuta Titus Theaters and lobby galleries, from May 14 through October 4, 2010. Deren's innovations—performing in front of the camera, using semi-autobiographical content, and meshing literary, psychological, and ethnographic approaches with rigorous technique—laid the groundwork for future generations of experimental filmmakers, bridging film, performance, and conceptual ideas. In the 1940s and 1950s, Deren (b. Ukraine, 1917–1961) was a pioneer of experimental cinema as an art form, independent and distinct from Hollywood production values or the dramatic narrative, closer to the modernist and avant-garde art practices of her generation. This exhibition looks at Deren's legacy through her own work and that of a trio of women directors upon whom she had an indelible influence—Carolee Schneemann, Barbara Hammer, and Su Friedrich. It is organized by Sally Berger, Assistant Curator, Department of Film, The Museum of Modern Art.

Maya Deren's Legacy: Women and Experimental Film coincides with the publication by MoMA of *Modern Women: Women Artists at The Museum of Modern Art* (June 2010), which includes an essay by Ms. Berger that explores Deren's aesthetic theories, her films, and her methods of promotion and self-distribution. It also includes interviews by Ms. Berger with Schneemann, Hammer, and Friedrich, who discuss Deren's impact on their work, revealing how Deren helped to pave the way for future women to enter the field of experimental cinema.

This exhibition provides an opportunity to study the complex layers and seamless qualities of Deren's work, which influenced other filmmakers. Three of her earliest films—*Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), *At Land* (1944), and *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946)—are shown as projections on the walls of the Roy and Niuta Titus 1 Gallery, juxtaposed with three works by Schneemann (*Meat Joy*, 1964), Hammer (*Bent Time*, 1983), and Friedrich (*Cool Hands, Warm Heart*, 1979). Two choreographic works by Deren—*A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945) and *Meditation on Violence* (1948)—point to Deren's specific interest in using film to explore dance, physical movement, and space, creating scenarios that can only exist on film. To express the

concept of ultimate form practiced in the Chinese martial art of Tai-chi chuan (performed as a constant, fluid motion), Deren created a continuous loop in *Meditation on Violence* by reversing the first half of the film.

Schneemann, Hammer, and Friedrich discovered Deren's work as emerging artists in the 1960s and 1970s. Schneemann found a kindred spirit in a woman artist working in a pre-feminist world, interested in the body and nature; Hammer identified with Deren's ideas of "creative geography," using motion and editing to connect different geographic locations and metaphysical concepts; and Friedrich was profoundly impacted by how the formal structure of Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* perfectly articulated the psychology of the human condition. The effect Deren had on these directors reflects a larger phenomenon of Deren's legacy—many artists continue to be inspired by her work, and are drawn to experimental film as an intimate and expressive form.

Originally from Kiev, Russia, Deren immigrated with her parents at the age of six to the United States where they soon after settled in Syracuse, New York. A precocious student, she studied poetry and literature at New York University and Smith College, where she became interested in the arts. While working for modern dance choreographer Katherine Dunham on the West coast, she met her husband, Czech émigré filmmaker Alexander Hammid (née Hackenschmied), who introduced her to European avant-garde film. In 1943, they collaborated on *Meshes of the Afternoon*, a film which has become a classic in the experimental film canon, and one of the most widely influential of all American avant-garde films.

Deren continued making films, developed comprehensive theoretical concepts about avant-garde cinema, and was a tireless advocate of experimental filmmaking throughout her lifetime. She wrote about, lectured, and promoted experimental cinema at universities and in private and public screenings throughout the United States, helping to spur the growth of cinema societies. One of only a few women working in experimental film in the 1940s, she became an inspiration to succeeding generations of artists. In 1946, she was the first person to receive the art world's prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship in the field of motion pictures. She formed the Creative Film Foundation to bring recognition and support to experimental filmmakers. By her untimely death at the age of 44, she had made six films, was working on several film projects, and had written numerous articles on film as well as a definitive ethnographic book on Haitian Vodoun (*Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, 1953.)

This exhibition is presented in conjunction with MoMA's publication of *Modern Women: Women Artists at The Museum of Modern Art* (June 2010), and is made possible by the Modern Women's Fund.

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For downloadable images, please visit www.moma.org/press.

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- Public Information:** The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, New York, NY 10019
- Hours:** Films are screened Wednesday-Monday. For screening schedules, please visit www.moma.org.
- Film Admission:** \$10 adults; \$8 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D. \$6 full-time students with current I.D. (For admittance to film programs only.) The price of a film ticket may be applied toward the price of a Museum admission ticket when a film ticket stub is presented at the Lobby Information Desk within 30 days of the date on the stub (does not apply during Target Free Friday Nights, 4:00–8:00 p.m.). Admission is free for Museum members and for Museum ticketholders.

The public may call (212) 708-9400 for detailed Museum information. Visit us at www.moma.org

Screening Schedule

Maya Deren's Legacy: Women and Experimental Film

May 14–October 4, 2010

Saturday, May 15

8:00 Deren, Schneemann, Friedrich and Hammer Program

Meshes of the Afternoon. 1943. USA. Directed by Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid. This first film in Deren's legacy was unique for its time in that it investigated the interior life of a woman, identity, and performance in front of a camera using the technology of film to create new cinematic realities. Soundtrack by Teiji Ito added in 1959. 14 min.

Fuses. 1964-66. Directed by Carolee Schneemann.

Schneemann's first film of her autobiographical trilogy depicts sexual intimacy and pleasure from a woman's point of view. *Fuses* bears traces of Deren in its malleable, responsive camera movements and in the artist's role as both image and image-maker. Silent. 18 min.

Cool Hands, Warm Heart. 1979. Directed by Su Friedrich.

This first 16mm film (transferred from S8 footage) is the beginning of Friedrich's lifetime exploration of issues and subjects concerning women's identity. There are many echoes of Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* in this film including its focus on ritual and the interior landscape of the female. Silent. 16 min.

I Was/I Am. 1973. Directed by Barbara Hammer.

In her first 16mm film, a homage to Maya Deren, Hammer proudly extracts the key to a motorcycle from her mouth. As *Meshes* was Deren's key to her life as a filmmaker; *I Was/I Am* is Hammer's proclamation as a filmmaker and an independent woman. 7 min.

Followed by a conversation with Schneemann, Friedrich and Hammer, moderated by Berger.

Monday, May 17

4:00 Maya Deren Program I

Meshes of the Afternoon. 1943. Directed by Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid. (See Saturday. May 15, 8:00.)

At Land. 1944. Directed by Maya Deren.

When a woman, played by Deren, is washed ashore, she begins a journey, an "inverted Odyssey" in this film that references both Ulysses and Alice in Wonderland. Deren's art

world contemporaries John Cage, Alexander Hammid and others appear in the film. 14 min.

Ritual in Transfigured Time. 1946. Directed by Maya Deren. With Rita Christiani, Frank Westbrook, Anais Nin and Deren.

A young woman (Christiani) is introduced to society by a sophisticated older woman (Nin). In a pivotal party scene, the young woman goes through multiple transformations as she moves among the partygoers and meets a young man (Westbrook). Deren edits out the conversations to create the effect of an extended choreographic movement and societal ritual. Deren appears in the film in the role of muse. 15 min.

A Study in Choreography for Camera. 1945. Directed by Maya Deren. With choreographer and dancer Talley Beatty.

In this work, Beatty moves from one position to another like one does in dreams, naturalistically, but without being aware of all the transitions. Deren synchronizes the tempos of his spiral movements with the tempos of the turning camera. Silent. 4 min.

The Very Eye of Night. 1952–59. Directed by Maya Deren, with choreographer Antony Tudor. Music by Teiji Ito.

Deren's last completed film is based on the constellations of the night sky and the mystery of the universe. "The sleepwalker travels in three directions at once: down into the abyss, up into the heavens, and inwards to the self." 14 min.

Friday, May 21

5:30 *Maya Deren Program II*

Meditation on Violence. 1948. Directed by Maya Deren. Music arranged by Maya Deren. Using the traditional training movements of the Wu-Tang and Shaolin schools of Chinese Boxing, a martial arts dancer (Chao-Li Chi) moves to the sound of a flute and drums. The camera follows his controlled flowing movements to express the metaphysical concepts of metamorphosis, and the idea of contained, not actual violence. The film is reversed halfway through to create a film loop. 12 min.

Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti. 1977. Compiled and organized by Teiji and Chere Ito from original footage shot by Deren in Haiti from 1947-51.

The film is centered on the Voudoun dance-like movements and rituals Deren filmed, and her field notes. The film provides a document of her recordings and studies of Voudoun, which she made into a book, but was never successful at making into a film. 52 min.

8:00 *Carolee Schneemann Program*

Viet Flakes. 1965. Directed by Carolee Schneemann.

This dense and aggressive work consists of war images from Vietnam accompanied by a sound collage. The images were gathered by Schneemann from foreign magazines and newspapers over a five year period. Visual fractures created by the way she shoots within the photographs are heightened by James Tenney's sound track with Vietnamese religious chants and fragments of classical and rock 'n roll music. 11 min.

Fuses. 1964–66. Directed by Carolee Schneemann.
(See Saturday, May 15, 8:00.)

Plumb Line. 1971. Directed by Carolee Schneemann.

Part two of her autobiographical trilogy depicts the dissolution of a relationship unraveling through visual and aural equivalences. Schneemann splits and recomposes actions of the lovers in a streaming montage of disruptive permutations until the film bursts into flames, consuming its own substance. 18 min.

Saturday, June 19

1:30 **Su Friedrich Program I**

Cool Hands, Warm Heart. 1979. Directed by Su Friedrich.
(See Saturday, May 15, 8:00.)

Damned If You Don't. 1987. Directed by Su Friedrich.

This film begins with the retelling of Michael Powell's *Black Narcissus* (1947) and becomes a melodramatic seduction of one woman by another. 42 min.

4:00 **Su Friedrich Program II**

The Ties that Bind. 1984. Directed by Su Friedrich.

An exploration of the relationship between memory and history is experienced through expressionistic footage and the retelling of Friedrich's mother's young adulthood in Germany during WWII. 55 min.

Sink or Swim. 1990. Directed by Su Friedrich.

This hybrid documentary/dramatic work, is narrated by a young girl who uses mythological references to relate an autobiographical story about the relationship between fathers and daughters. 48 min.

7:30 **Barbara Hammer Program**

I Was/I Am. 1973. Directed by Barbara Hammer.
(See Saturday, May 18, 8:00.)

Bent Time. 1983. Directed by Barbara Hammer.

This simulation of walking across the United States from one high energy location to another, begins in the underground passageway of the linear accelerator lab at Stanford University and ends at the World Trade Center and Brooklyn Bridge in New York City, making one geographic step in time to one frame of film time. 18 min.

Optic Nerve. 1985. Directed by Barbara Hammer. Soundtrack by Helen Thorington.

Hammer manipulated footage of her grandmother being wheeled into a nursing home. She uses degenerated and stuttering images to express and reflect her sadness and hesitation, echoing Deren's interest in revealing emotional depth through image and structure. 16 min.

A Horse Is Not a Metaphor. 2008. Directed by Barbara Hammer. Soundtrack by Meredith Monk.

With this film, based on the director's experience of surviving cancer, Hammer evokes Deren's methodologies, flowing from gesture to gesture and showing a transformative death and rebirth. 30 min.

Sunday, June 20

2:00 **Maya Deren Program I** (See Monday, May 17, 4:00.)

5:00 **Maya Deren Program II** (See Friday, May 21, 5:30.)

Monday, June 21

4:00 **Carolee Schneemann Program: *Viet Flakes.*** (See Friday, May 21, 8:00.)

Fuses. (See Friday, May 21, 8:00.)

Plumb Line. (See Friday, May 21, 8:00.)

7:00 **Su Friedrich Program I** (See Saturday, June 19, 1:30.)

Wednesday, June 23

4:00 Su Friedrich Program II (See Saturday, June 19, 4:00.)

7:00 Barbara Hammer Program (See Saturday, June 19, 7:30.)