



1. Maya Deren (American, born Ukraine. 1917–1961). Alexander Hammid (American, born Austria. 1907–2004). *Meshes of the Afternoon*. 1943. 16mm film (black and white, silent; music by Teiji Ito added 1959), 14 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase from the artist

Three identical women sit at a kitchen table, playing Russian roulette; each tentatively picks up a key and turns it over, and in the hand of the third woman it becomes a knife, transforming her into a murderess. This scene takes place in Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943, no.1), the most well-known American experimental film, which was groundbreaking in its conceptual and expressive use of nonnarrative structure. Deren was a pioneer in experimental cinema from the 1940s through the 1950s, one of a few women working in avant-garde film, influencing future generations of filmmakers and artists and changing the direction of moving-image mediums in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Deren investigated the relationship between film form and themes of ritual, myth, dance, and the individual's place in society; she envisioned experimental cinema as an alternative, low-cost, creative, and ethical medium; and she tirelessly toured, lectured, and distributed her own films, establishing a model for independent film production that is still used today. Despite harsh criticism of her films and theories by male critics in the 1940s and '50s, many filmmakers—women directors, in particular—have been inspired by her films and artistic integrity.¹ Deren's theoretical and practical concepts and the unique shape of her artistic expression have influenced the artists Carolee Schneemann, Barbara Hammer, and Su Friedrich, as far back as their earliest films.

Deren was born Elenora Derenkowsky in Kiev in 1917. Fleeing the Russian Civil War, her family emigrated to Syracuse, New York, in 1922. Her mother had studied music and dance, and, later, language; her father had studied the advanced techniques of neurologist Vladimir Bekhterev at the Psychoneurological Institute in St. Petersburg and became a prominent psychiatrist in Syracuse. As a teenager Deren, with her mother, lived in Europe and studied at the League of Nations' International School in Geneva.

When she returned to the States at the age of sixteen in 1933, worldly from her time abroad, she attended Syracuse University, where she studied journalism and political science, and after two years she married a fellow student, the socialist activist Gregory Bardacke. In 1935 they moved to New York, where she worked for the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL) and completed her bachelor's degree at New York University. By 1937 Deren and Bardacke were separated and, soon thereafter, divorced. Deren continued her studies, earning a master's degree in English Literature at Smith College in 1939, with a thesis on symbolism in French and English poetry; back in New York City, she worked as an editorial assistant and freelance photographer.

Deren's burgeoning interest in dance and anthropology led her to seek an introduction to Katherine Dunham, a pioneering choreographer in American modern dance and an anthropologist of Caribbean culture and dance. She was hired as Dunham's assistant and publicist for nine months in 1941 and traveled with her company to the West Coast when Dunham was performing in the musical *Cabin in the Sky* (1940). Dunham's Caribbean fieldwork inspired Deren's own study of Haitian culture, Voudoun mythology, and the dancelike movements of religious possession, which she wrote about in a series of articles for *Educational Dance* magazine and would later pursue in great depth.² While in Hollywood Deren met and married Alexander (Sasha) Hammid (born Alexander Hackenschmied), an accomplished filmmaker who introduced Deren to the avant-garde film movement. Together they made *Meshes of the Afternoon*.

Set in their Hollywood Hills bungalow, with the directors playing the two protagonists, the silent, black-and-white, fourteen-minute film was shot and completed in two months for a modest budget of \$275, using camera equipment and lights from Hammid's production studio.³

Although made before Deren's theories of filmmaking had been developed or written down, *Meshes of the Afternoon* was the first manifestation of her ideas, featuring several of her most influential tropes and techniques, including simultaneous realities, protofeminist ideas about identity, and filmmaking as time-space manipulation. By visualizing poetic concepts through film, Deren, at the age of twenty-six, had discovered the key to her artistic expression. It was at this same time that she adopted a name befitting her new identity: Maya, the Hindu word for "illusion."

Together, out of their different strengths—Deren's poetic visual expression and Hammid's fluid cinematography—a new, imaginative use of the camera emerged. The first scenes of this tightly structured film set up its uncanny atmosphere.⁴ A mannequin arm descends from the sky, places a white poppy on a roadway, and then vanishes. A woman's shadow covers the flower, and she reaches into her own shadow to pick it up. She runs after a tall, mysterious figure that disappears around a distant bend in the road, then she abruptly gives up the chase and turns toward a cottage door. She reaches for a key, then fumbles, drops, and retrieves it, and enters the house. The mechanical arm, mysterious figure, black-and-white film, and nonverbal scenario reinforce a feeling of mystery and doom.

As the female protagonist enters the house, we are brought into her perspective, seeing, as she sees, newspapers spread on the floor, a knife stuck in a loaf of bread on the kitchen table, a telephone on the stairs with its receiver off the hook. The knife slips onto the table, as if by its own will. The woman ascends the stairs to a bedroom and turns off a record player; she returns downstairs and slips into an armchair near a window, where she sinks into sleep and begins to dream. As her dream world flows into the street below, the story begins to circle in upon itself and external realities enter her dreaming subconscious.

The sleeping woman dreams three times that she chases a figure draped in black robes with a mirrored face and then reenters the house. Slight but disturbing variations occur each time, and the protagonist's deteriorating state

of mind is given emphasis by handheld-camera shots and a moving, tilted frame that drastically shifts perspective. Each time she climbs the stairs to the bedroom, her demeanor and actions alter and the camera frame changes, showing her world becoming topsy-turvy and increasingly fragmented and menacing. She makes her first ascent with a graceful and airy bounce; in the second she appears to float without gravity; in the third she clings to the walls, which fling her from side to side; and in the final trip she marches up as if in a trance. Deren noted of these effects that she wanted the inanimate objects of the house—the phone, the knife, and the staircase—to appear to conspire to disrupt the protagonist's intentions. With a handheld camera Deren and Hammid shifted the image frame in the opposite direction from the woman's movement as she falls against the walls of the staircase: "The movement of the frame, in effect, had been transferred to the objects in the frame."⁵

To suggest "the defiance of normal time . . . and . . . normal space," Deren used a striking editing style that would influence many filmmakers: multiple shifts of geographic location in a single sequence.⁶ The third dreamer, turned murderess, rises from the kitchen table, takes several huge steps, dagger drawn, and is transported from the house into a natural landscape, landing first in sand, then on grass, then on pavement, and then back in the house, with the knife pointed toward the sleeping woman. With these four steps she covers what Deren called a "symbolic statement of the vast psychological distance, which lie between people who may be in close proximity."⁷ Deren later wrote, "What I meant when I planned that sequence was that you have to come a long way—from the very beginning of time—to kill yourself, like the first life emerging from the primeval waters. Those four strides, in my intention, span all time."⁸ The film's final scenes contain a double denouement that mirrors the film's doubling and intertwining of identities. The seated woman, awakened, hurls the knife at the male protagonist, her lover; his face turns into a mirror, which reflects the ocean

and shatters; its shards land not in the house but on the seashore. He then reenters the cottage to find the woman's body on the chair, covered with seaweed and impaled by broken glass.

Meshes of the Afternoon makes plain Deren's interest in the extremes of consciousness and was, at least partially, informed by Gestalt psychology's part-whole relations, which she had studied at Smith, and her research into the build of emotion in trance possession. Her impulse, she said, was to portray "the inner realities of an individual and the way in which the subconscious will develop, interpret and elaborate an apparently simple and casual incident into a critical emotional experience."⁹ But *Meshes of the Afternoon* was widely interpreted, in the years following its release, as Surrealist, because of its use of dream imagery and object/symbols, and as a psychological study. Deren felt that such readings obscured the work's formal construction as well as her intent. When James Agee, writing for *The Nation* in 1946, called the film "pretentious and arty" and derided Deren's acting as emotionally lacking and her style as derivative of the European Surrealists, Deren responded in a letter to the editor: "Whereas the surrealists go to great length to eliminate any conscious censorship from their creative effort, I, on the contrary, impose as rigid a censorship as I can maintain—the censorship of form. . . . The dramatic-psychological inevitability must also be a cinematic inevitability—or the train will jump the tracks, as most surrealistic fantasy does."¹⁰

Although many scholars and contemporaries responded supportively to Deren's films, including George Amberg, a curator in the Department of Dance and Theater Design at The Museum of Modern Art, she also had her detractors. It was widely reported that MoMA's Film Library director, Iris Barry, was more supportive of documentary than of American avant-garde film in general and, like Agee, found *Meshes of the Afternoon* derivative of the French Surrealists.¹¹ *Meshes of the Afternoon* did indeed reside between the European avant-garde of the late 1920s, based in Surrealism and abstraction, and the American avant-

garde filmmakers of the 1930s and '40s, less tied to specific movements. It was more often compared to films such as Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) and Jean Cocteau's *La Sang d'un poète (Blood of a Poet)* (1930) than to the films of the Whitney brothers (in the 1940s) and Mary Ellen Bute (from the 1930s to the 1960s).¹²

Deren's subsequent films built on the theories that emerged in *Meshes of the Afternoon*. *At Land* (1944, no. 2) is more allegorical and visually minimal. It opens with a woman, played by Deren, deposited on the seashore by waves. Emerging from the water like a mermaid, she pulls herself up along the roots of a large piece of driftwood and finds herself in another world, at the center of a formal dining table surrounded by animated society guests who are oblivious to her. As she crawls toward a chess player at the opposite end of the table, her surroundings alternate between the table and an underwater seascape; when she reaches the end, she lunges after one of the pawns and falls into an abyss that leads back to the seashore, like Alice in Wonderland falling down the rabbit hole.

These leaps through time and space are frequent and organic and taken by her entire body; she is no longer fragmented, as was the protagonist of *Meshes of the Afternoon*, and the disorientation is provided by external sources rather than the subconscious. "*At Land* has little to do with the internal world of the protagonist," Deren wrote. "It externalizes the hidden dynamic of the external world, and here the drama results from the activity of the external world."¹³ At one point the protagonist finds herself walking along a country road, in conversation with a male companion; each time she turns to him, he is a different person, although looking disarmingly similar, played in succession by friends of Deren: poet Philip Lamantia, editor Parker Tyler, composer John Cage, and her then-husband, Hammid. Later, once again pursuing the pawn, she joins two women playing chess on the beach. She cunningly distracts them with conversation, snatches the white queen, and runs off triumphantly down the shore,

2. Maya Deren (American, born Ukraine. 1917–1961). *At Land*. 1944. 16mm film (black and white, silent), 15 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase from the Estate of Maya Deren



now at one with the rules of her new environment, with the land as opposed to the sea whence she emerged.

Deren called this work a “mythological voyage of the twentieth century” and an “inverted *Odyssey*.”¹⁴ After *Meshes of the Afternoon*, Deren searched for “the elimination of literary-dramatic lines,” trying to find “a purely cinematic coherence and integrity.”¹⁵ *At Land*, she felt, presented “a relativistic universe—one in which the locations change constantly and distances are contracted or extended; in which the individual goes toward something only to discover upon her arrival that it is now something entirely different; and in which the problem of the individual, as the sole continuous element, is to relate herself to a fluid, apparently incoherent, universe.”¹⁶

In her third film, *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945, no. 3), Deren explored the direct relationship between movement, space, and the camera, with dancer and choreographer Talley Beatty fluidly dancing across place and time, from one location to another in defiance of geographic possibility. Deren used shooting and editing techniques to create the illusion of continuous motion and specific movements that could exist only on film rather than onstage. This idea set the stage for her fourth film, *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946, no. 4), which linked form and meaning to ritual, art, and dance, furthering her exploration of creative geography.

Four main protagonists—played by dancers Rita Christiani and Frank Westbrook, along with Deren and Anaïs Nin—embody different social roles. A young woman (Christiani) is introduced to society, overseen by a silent, disapproving older woman (Nin) and a younger, more animated woman (Deren). On arriving at a party, Christiani’s character, an outsider, floats among the guests, slowly becoming integrated with the group in a mesmerizing dance built out of edits. Deren choreographed this scene by eliding conversations and following the movement from interaction to interaction, so that “the elements of the whole derive their meaning from a pattern which they did not themselves consciously create; just as a ritual—



which depersonalizes by the use of masks, voluminous garments, and homogeneous movement—fuses all individual elements into a transcendent tribal power toward the achievement of some extraordinary grace.”¹⁷ Ultimately Christiani’s character breaks away from a romantic liaison

(Westbrook), merges with Deren’s character, and enters the sea in a gesture of both death and rebirth, a continuation of Deren’s emergence from the sea—perhaps the next phase after symbolic emergence as an artist—in *At Land*.

Between 1945 and 1946 Deren lectured widely about film in venues around the country. In 1946 she published *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film*, her most extensive essay on film theory, in a chapbook published by Alicat Book Shop Press. The essay employs the form of an anagram, made up of individual chapters “so related to every part that whether one reads horizontally, vertically, diagonally or in reverse, the logic of the whole is not disrupted, but remains intact.”¹⁸ Deren used this form to encourage her readers to approach her ideas from a receptive, nonlinear perspective; she wanted to move away from, to transcend the linear dramatic narrative favored by Hollywood films, the kind that moves from point A to

3. Maya Deren (American, born Ukraine, 1917–1961). Talley Beatty (American, 1923–1995). *A Study in Choreography for Camera*. 1945. 16mm film (black and white, silent), 4 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase from the Estate of Maya Deren



4. Maya Deren (American, born Ukraine. 1917–1961). *Ritual in Transfigured Time*. 1946. 16mm film (black and white, silent), 15 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Alexander Hammid

5. Maya Deren (American, born Ukraine. 1917–1961). *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*. 1977. 16mm film (black and white, sound), 52 min. Edited by Teiji Ito and Cheral Ito from original footage by Deren. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase from the Film-Makers' Cooperative

point B to tell a story in a manner she described as “horizontal in attack.” She was more concerned with expressing emotional qualities and depth through a poetic understanding of film composition, a process she described as “vertical investigations.” “A truly creative work of art,” she felt, “creates a new reality.”¹⁹

In February of that year Deren rented the Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village for a series of screenings called “Three Abandoned Films,” of *Meshes of the Afternoon*, *A Study in Choreography for Camera*, and *At Land*.²⁰ The screenings drew a large crowd and quickly sold out. In April of that year she received the first Guggenheim Fellowship awarded “for creative work in the field of motion pictures,” and she put the funds toward previous lab costs and research on Haitian Voudoun, which resulted in a definitive ethnographic study, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, published in 1953, as well as photographs and footage for an unrealized film (no. 5).²¹ Between 1954 and 1961 she continued making films and writing, and she established the Creative Film Foundation to support avant-garde filmmakers with awards of recognition. But there was no precedent for the support of experimental film, and she struggled to find funding for her work as well as for the foundation. Her last completed film, *The Very Eye of Night* (1952–59), took three years to complete and four more years to release. Deren was working on



another film, *Season of Strangers*, and had recently married composer Teiji Ito when she died unexpectedly in 1961, at age forty-four.

It is impossible to know what Deren would have gone on to do as an artist had she lived longer, but her influence continues to be felt through her ideas made manifest in *Meshes of the Afternoon* and in her subsequent films, which laid the groundwork for artists such as Schneemann, Hammer, and Friedrich, all of whom made works that drew direct inspiration from Deren’s life and films. By performing in front of the camera, using semiautobiographical content, and combining literary, psychological, and ethnographic disciplines with rigorous formal technique, Deren inspired future generations of experimental filmmakers.

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN

Carolee Schneemann and James Tenney, a musician, were introduced to Deren in 1958 by Stan Brakhage, who was living with Deren in the West Village. Schneemann later recalled:

I was shocked by Maya's singular struggle, her lack of money and that the attention of three ardent, naïve young artists could have value for her. I was shocked by Stan's expectations that Maya, as the adult woman should feed us, provide care. We smoked her cigarettes, drank her whiskey, and ate bowls of noodles she prepared while she painfully debated if she should project for us her original 16mm footage of Haitian rituals. She had not been able to raise funds for prints of the rhapsodic and fierce shamanic dance entrancements, which she had been invited to join and to film.²²

Schneemann is no stranger to controversy. Since the 1960s her work has focused on the body, sexuality, and gender, using her own body and autobiography as primary resources in painting, performance, film, and installations. She was nineteen when she met Deren and discovered Deren's kindred passion for the exploration of myth, ritual, and female desire, as well as her ability to be both "camera eye and subject" of her films.²³ Deren's influence is evident in Schneemann's performance sequence *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions* (1963), in which Schneemann, using her nude body, sought a trancelike state, becoming "a primal archaic force" or integral element as she moved among and became part of environments made of painted wall panels, glass, and mechanized parts.²⁴ "Maya occupied the creative prefeminist thresholds where I could anticipate the complexities, resistances to my own creative will," Schneemann has said, "and her visual focus on the body and nature was part of an aesthetic we shared."²⁵

Schneemann's first film, *Fuses* (1967, no. 6), bears traces of Deren in its malleable, responsive camera movements and in the artist's role as both image and image-maker. This passionate work was made without grants, using borrowed Bolex cameras and bits of film donated by friends. Schneemann's aim was to depict overt heterosexual erotic pleasure from a woman's point of view, something not represented in art and film at that time; *Fuses* explores the sex life of Schneemann and Tenney as a continuous series of activities at home, with seasonal changes reflected through the bedroom window. In a manner somewhat akin to the party scene in *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, Schneemann edited together scene after scene of sexual play to create a trancelike, rhythmic flow, so that *Fuses* focuses on only one aspect of their domestic lives. There is no backstory and no character development, just a feeling of prolonged desire and a visual exploration of sexuality. The intimacy and privacy is enhanced by the film's having been shot by the lovers themselves, with the camera propped on a chair, hung from a lamp, or held by hand; the film's splices are visible, creating an additional physical quality. Schneemann used a layered method of editing the film influenced by Tenney's complex musical compositions and Brakhage's brilliantly colored film collages; she burned, baked, scratched, and painted on the film footage and then reshot the original film through an optical printer (a machine that combines a projector and camera to achieve special effects) to create a collage of "infinite painterly frames structured in time" that follows an "internal rhythm of gesture and musicality."²⁶

Before *Fuses* Schneemann had been an artists' model and had had roles in other artists' projects, such as Claes Oldenburg's *Store Days* (1962) and Robert Morris's *Site* (1964), in which she played the part of Édouard Manet's *Olympia*; *Fuses*, begun around this time, marks the beginning of her self-representation, in a direct response to Brakhage's *Loving* (1957), *Daybreak* (1957), and *Cat's Cradle* (1959), three films featuring Schneemann and Tenney's relationship.

6. Carolee Schneemann
(American, born 1939). *Fuses*.
Part one of *Autobiographical
Trilogy*. 1964–67. 16mm film
transferred to video (color,
silent), 22 min. The Museum of
Modern Art, New York. Gift of
the Julia Stoschek Foundation,
Düsseldorf, and Committee
on Media Funds

7. Carolee Schneemann
(American, born 1939).
Plumb Line. Part two of
Autobiographical Trilogy. 1971.
Super 8mm film step-printed
to 16mm film (color, sound),
18 min. The Museum of
Modern Art, New York.
Acquired from preservation
work



Schneemann screened *Fuses*, when it was still a work in progress, in her studio for friends and visitors, so that audiences could learn to catch the work's nuances, obscured by its complex layering, and because she felt it was something for women to share: "In some sense I made a gift of my body to other women; giving our bodies back to ourselves."²⁷ As she did so she took note of comments and criticism and responded to questions; she found that the overt sexual content was distancing and overwhelming for some, overriding the work's structure, and for others it was illuminating and gratifying. Many women told her that they had never examined their own bodies or seen such intimate images of a woman's sexuality.

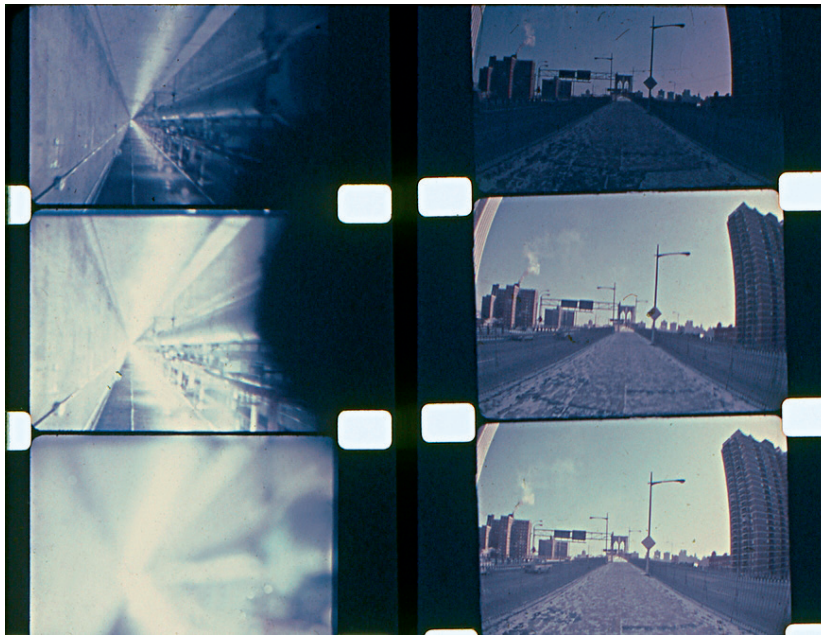
As a young artist in New York, Schneemann had carefully observed other women artists to see how they managed their careers and their personal lives, and in Deren she saw a great talent subsumed by a lack of resources and by the demands of others to be looked after.²⁸ Schneemann's work, especially her autobiographical trilogy, *Fuses*, *Plumb Line* (1971, no. 7), and *Kitch's Last Meal* (1976), deals with her female self and the roles of eroticism, domesticity, and creativity in her life. "Everything I observed in Deren," she has said, "was cautionary and/or inspiring."²⁹



BARBARA HAMMER

In the early 1970s Barbara Hammer was a film student at San Francisco State University, where she and a few other outspoken feminists were looking for women film directors as role models.³⁰ Week after week in their classes they watched films by male directors—Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Jean Cocteau, and François Truffaut—until one day the class featured *Meshes of the Afternoon*, and Hammer experienced a radical shift of "different sensibilities," finding that "[Deren's] ability to show personal feelings in an individual way made me know that there was a place for me in filmmaking. This was work that I wanted to do."³¹

Hammer felt *Meshes of the Afternoon* was a film about "a woman clearing the veil, the fog, the restrictions from her eyes, her being," and it inspired her to make experimental films about her own life and women's issues and to become a pioneer of queer cinema, a choice that had personal echoes for her as a woman changing avocation and lifestyle to become an artist, filmmaker, and lesbian.³² Her first 16mm film, *I Was/I Am* (1973), an homage to *Meshes of the Afternoon*, shows Hammer extracting from her mouth the key to her motorcycle; like Deren's key—which turns into a knife and kills the sleeping woman so that she can wake up, transformed—it is a symbol of freedom and empowerment, although considerably more direct. Soon afterward, Hammer began making films that boldly and sensitively depicted lesbian sexuality and identity, including *Dyketactics* (1974) and *Women I Love* (1976), which brought her renown as the first filmmaker to do so. This autobiographical impulse has continued over the course of her career, including her first feature film, *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), which integrates the story of four same-sex couples with the history of queer identity from the 1920s to contemporary times. Discovering Deren's work in the 1970s inspired Hammer to search for and champion women filmmakers who have been under-recognized, such as Marie Menken, as well as the hidden



8. Barbara Hammer (American, born 1939). *Bent Time*. 1983. 16mm film (color, sound by Pauline Oliveros), 21 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase

histories of lesbian and gay artists and writers. “I guess I was looking for company,” Hammer has said.³³

From the 1960s through the 1980s structural filmmaking, in which the process of shaping a film and its physical cinematic material are foregrounded, became a mainstay of experimental cinema in formal studies by filmmakers such as Paul Sharits, Hollis Frampton, and Michael Snow. During this time Hammer made films following various structural concepts, and in *Bent Time* (1983, no. 8) she employed a version of Deren’s creative geography:

I simulated walking across the United States, from one high-energy location to another. I began in the underground passageway of the linear accelerator lab at Stanford University, continued through the mound culture of indigenous Native Americans in southern Ohio, and ended at the World Trade Center and Brooklyn Bridge in New York City. I simulated one geographic step in time to be one frame of film time. The result is a jittery but continual binding of the nation end to end, held in place by the first North American calendar discovered in the '80s at Chaco Canyon, New Mexico.³⁴

For *Optic Nerve* (1985) Hammer manipulated documentary footage of her grandmother being wheeled into a nursing home. The degenerated images and stuttering motion reveal Hammer’s hesitation and sadness, echoing Deren’s vertical investigations and returning some emotion to structuralism. “The heart had been left behind in these dry analytic works,” Hammer has reflected. “I wanted to return feeling to images, while still showing the processes of film.”³⁵

A Horse Is Not a Metaphor (2008, no. 9), based on Hammer’s experience of surviving cancer, has echoes of *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, flowing from gesture to gesture and showing a transformative death and rebirth. The film evolves over the course of Hammer’s illness and recovery, including footage of chemotherapy and steroid drips, in a work akin to Deren’s “documentary of the interior”:

It was an experiment to start at one edge of the canvas, the beginning of the film, and make my way, day by day editing and layering, to the end of the piece. In the past I have made many densely collaged films, but always I have structured and restructured until the film was “right.” In this case, the meaning became clear as I worked: the feelings, the emotional content, the personal intimacy revealed when health is challenged.³⁶



9. Barbara Hammer (American, born 1939). *A Horse Is Not a Metaphor*. 2008. Digital video (color and black and white, sound by Meredith Monk), 30 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase

SU FRIEDRICH

Su Friedrich was pursuing a career in photography in the mid-1970s when a course in Super 8mm film production led her to research film history and borrow a 16mm print of *Meshes of the Afternoon* from the New York Public Library:

I was absolutely blown away when I watched it the first time, and I then projected it at least two more times; I felt I couldn't get enough of it. At that point a friend came in and pointed out that I had been projecting it on a black wall rather than the screen. I had been too excited to notice, and the film was so powerful that it survived those miserable projection conditions. Needless to say it was even more dazzling when I watched it again properly on the screen. [It] is a flawless work; it has a structure like hardened steel and at the same time uses all the formal devices at hand to describe the convoluted workings of the mind.³⁷

Friedrich's first 16mm film (originally shot on Super 8mm), *Cool Hands, Warm Heart* (1979, no. 10), was the beginning of what would be an ongoing feminist exploration of ordinary women. *Cool Hands*, employing black-and-white film and sensual, rhythmic cinematography and editing to create a dreamlike atmosphere and emotional core, pays homage to the psychological undercurrents and formal tropes of *Meshes of the Afternoon*, focusing on a woman caught between a traditional role and the freedom to make her own choices. The protagonist watches three women enacting private female rituals on a public stage in front of curious onlookers—one shaves her legs, another shaves her underarms, another braids her hair, all of them oblivious to the crowds that surround them and the spectacle they make. Friedrich has taken Deren's three identical women out of their interior domestic sphere and exposed them to the streets, out of a dream world and into the reality of a new feminist era. The protagonist is

ambivalent about what she witnesses, slathering one woman with shaving cream and placing a white flower (a coincidental echo of the poppy in *Meshes of the Afternoon*) in the lap of another. Soon she, too, is onstage, performing a symbolic domestic gesture, peeling the skin from an apple in one long, curling loop. The program notes for *Cool Hands* contain a question that is also at the heart of *Meshes of the Afternoon*: "Can we hold a knife without stabbing ourselves? Can we hold a knife without thinking of stabbing ourselves?"³⁸

Friedrich went on to create films that examine identity through experimental approaches to autobiography and nonfiction, as well as to drama, combining and interweaving forms and techniques in a way that sets her work apart from the conventions of either form but links the two nonetheless. *The Ties That Bind* (1984) sets up a dialogue between past and present, pairing an extended interview with the artist's mother, about growing up in pre-World War II Nazi Germany, and images from her current life in Chicago with footage of protests against the Vietnam War and Friedrich at home in her studio; *Damned If You Don't* (1987) begins with a

10. Su Friedrich (American, born 1954). *Cool Hands, Warm Heart*. 1979. 16mm film (black and white, silent), 16 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase



retelling of Michael Powell's *Black Narcissus* (1947) and then becomes a melodramatic seduction of one woman by another. Friedrich's work, like Deren's, remains uncompromised by the conventions of mainstream cinema and has a strong rhythmic quality; where Deren expresses her ideas through poetic visual structures, Friedrich brings the voice and words of the storyteller into the work, in text, voice-over narration, interviews, and commentary.

Sink or Swim (1990, no. 11) is one such hybrid, unfolding in twenty-six chapters, each labeled with a letter, starting with z (for "zygote") and working back to a (for "Athena/Atalanta/Aphrodite"). A young girl narrates a story that the viewer comes to understand is both mythological and autobiographical, on the collision between daughters and fathers and their different ways of interpreting and experiencing the world. Friedrich, like Deren, depicts an interiority that cannot be directly communicated. Her images and stories evoke childhood events and their ongoing effects in an impressionistic, tactile manner that builds in power, as in the q chapter (for "quicksand"), the story of being taken to a frightening movie and forced to watch it; the chapter is accompanied by an image of a roller-coaster ride, which continues long past the narration, carrying the psychological sensations of the experience into the present. *Sink or Swim*, like all of Friedrich's experimental films, has a complex formal structure that combines structural cinema with Deren's vertical investigations: a framework of autobiographical and fictional narratives, amplified with mythological references and expressive images.

At the end of *Sink or Swim* the narrator, now an adult, continues to behave in ways that please her father until she realizes that she can make her own choices; this is a realization achieved without pleasure, since it comes with the awareness that he will never accept her. Thus, the double ending of *Meshes of the Afternoon* is echoed in a double wounding. Friedrich provides questions without answers, suggesting that it is more important for the viewer to complete the work:

Although Deren gives clues to the viewer, she still leaves certain things open or mysterious or sort of challenging . . . we have to do some work while we're watching, we have to connect the dots in order to get everything that's there. I leave a certain amount of work up to the viewer on the assumption that that makes the film more engaging, makes the experience more of a participatory sport than a passive one.³⁹

Deren wanted to define film as an art form, to create an artist's cinema based on neither Hollywood entertainment nor documentary—the prevailing forms of her time—rather, a kind of film concerned with the "type of perception which characterizes all other art forms, such as poetry, painting, etc., and devoted to the development of a formal idiom as independent of other art forms as they are of each other."⁴⁰ She was not the only woman in search of such a definition: the majority of women directors in MoMA's film collection worked and continue to work in the arena of experimental film. Some of them, such as Bute and Sara Kathryn Arledge, preceded Deren; others, such as Menken, were her contemporaries; still others worked in the 1960s and '70s, when many American and European women had turned to experimental film, including Laura Mulvey, Chantal Akerman, Peggy Ahwesh, Yvonne Rainer, Leslie Thornton, Trinh T. Minh-ha, VALIE EXPORT, and Yoko Ono. And in recent years video art and performance, which are extensions and permutations of what early experimental film began, have become mainstays in the contemporary art landscape; Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Irit Batsry, Abigail Child, Ximena Cuevas, Miranda July, and Jennifer Reeves are just a few of the many women exploring this territory. Directly or obscurely, minimally or to a great extent, anyone who takes interest in film as an art form is touched by Deren's legacy and her advocacy. Her films continue to inspire filmmakers and audiences and set the stage for future works of experimental film and video art.



11. Su Friedrich (American, born 1954). *Sink or Swim*. 1990. 16mm film (black and white, sound), 48 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase

1. This harsh criticism included James Agee, "On Film," *The Nation*, March 2, 1946; reprinted in VèVè A. Clark, Millicent Hodson, and Catrina Neiman, eds., *The Legend of Maya Deren: A Documentary Biography and Collected Works*, vol. 1, part 2, *Chambers, 1942–47* (New York: Anthology Film Archives/Film Culture: New York, 1988), pp. 382–84; and Manny Farber, "Maya Deren's Films," *The New Republic*, October 28, 1946; cited in *The Legend of Maya Deren*, vol. 1, part 2, p. 378. Dylan Thomas, on a panel at a 1953 poetry symposium organized by Amos Vogel's Cinema 16, also dismissed Deren's ideas. Annette Michelson, "Poetics and Savage Thought," in Bill Nichols, ed., *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 22–25.
2. Elenora Deren, "Religious Possession in Dancing," *Educational Dance*, March 1942; reprinted in Clark, Hodson, and Neiman, eds., *The Legend of Maya Deren: A Documentary Biography and Collected Works*, vol. 1, part 1, *Signatures, 1917–42* (New York: Anthology Film Archives/Film Culture, 1984), pp. 477–96.
3. Maya Deren, "Overhead, Production and Distribution: Costs and Income, 1943–46" (submitted to the U. S. Treasury in support of tax-exempt status application for the Creative Film Foundation), June 25, 1957; reprinted in *The Legend of Maya Deren*, vol. 1, part 2, p. 334.
4. Deren added a complementary soundtrack by her companion and musical collaborator Teiji Ito in 1957.
5. Deren, "Adventures in Creative Filmmaking," *Popular Photography* (Home Movie Making Annual), 1960; reprinted in *The Legend of Maya Deren*, vol. 1, part 2, p. 96.
6. Deren, "The Witch's Cradle Program Notes," letter to Sawyer Falk, March 3, 1945; reprinted in *The Legend of Maya Deren*, vol. 1, part 2, p. 149.
7. Deren, "Adventures in Creative Filmmaking," p. 96.
8. Deren, letter to James Card, April 19, 1955; reprinted in *Film Culture*, no. 39, p. 30, and in *The Legend of Maya Deren*, vol. 1, part 2, p. 99.
9. Deren, "Magic Is New," *Mademoiselle*, January 1946; reprinted in Deren, *Essential Deren: Collected Writings on Film by Maya Deren*, ed. Bruce R. McPherson (Kingston, N.Y.: Documentext, 2005), p. 204.
10. See n. 1 for Agee and Farber citations; Deren, letter to the editor, March 3, 1946; reprinted in *The Legend of Maya Deren*, vol. 1, part 2, p. 384.
11. On Iris Barry's views on Deren, see *The Legend of Maya Deren*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 240–41.
12. Deren's work was and continues to be difficult to comprehend or categorize. It was many years before scholars such as Michelson and Renata Jackson, among others published in 2001 in Nichols's volume *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde* (see n. 1), identified her literary influences: nineteenth-century French Symbolism, Imagism, and Roman Jakobson's theories on the structure of language.
13. Deren, letter to James Card, (see n. 8).
14. The first quotation is Deren, quoted in Shelley Rice, ed., *Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), p. 15. The second is Deren, program notes for "Three Abandoned Films," 1946; reprinted in *Essential Deren*, pp. 247–48.
15. Deren, "Magic Is New," *Essential Deren*, p. 205.
16. Ibid.
17. Deren, program notes for "Chamber Films," 1960; reprinted in *Essential Deren*, p. 252.
18. Deren, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film* (Yonkers, N.Y.: Alicat Book Shop Press 1946); reprinted in *Essential Deren*, p. 36.
19. Deren, "Cinema as an Independent Art Form" (brochure), August 1945; reprinted in *Essential Deren*, p. 245.
20. The title came from something critic and poet Paul Valéry is said to have said, that a work is never finished, only abandoned.
21. Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1953; reprint ed. Kingston, N.Y.: McPherson/Documentext, 1970). In her research, Deren consulted with anthropologist Gregory Bateson and author Joseph Campbell; the latter wrote the foreword included in both editions.
22. Carolee Schneemann, interview with the author, March 9, 2009.
23. Ibid.
24. Schneemann, *More than Meat Joy: Performance Works and Selected Writings*, ed. McPherson (New Paltz, N.Y.: Documentext, 1979), p. 52.
25. Schneemann, author interview.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Schneemann, author interview.
29. Ibid.
30. Barbara Hammer, "Maya Deren and Me," in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, pp. 261–65.
31. Hammer, interview with the author, March 1, 2009.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Su Friedrich, interview with the author, March 3, 2009.
38. Friedrich, program notes for *Cool Hands, Warm Heart*, Film Study Archive, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
39. Friedrich, author interview.
40. Deren, "Cinema as an Art Form," *New Directions* 9, 1946; reprinted in *Essential Deren*, p. 19.