

**THE SECOND NEW YORK LESBIAN
AND GAY EXPERIMENTAL FILM FESTIVAL**

SEPTEMBER 13-18, 1988 HELD AT MILLENNIUM

STATEMENT BY THE ORGANIZERS

We organized this festival because we believe that lesbian and gay people can have an especially rich relationship to experimental film. Both avant-garde film and gay consciousness must be resolutely created in a world that insists on a homogeneous sexuality and narrowly-defined aesthetic enforced through a stiflingly limited media. The experimental process mirrors, in many ways, the process of understanding a gay identity. Both demand an endless re-imagining of the self and the world in order to envision and create what the mainstream believes should not and must not exist.

We are presenting 62 films by 58 filmmakers, many of whom have rarely or never been shown before. The films we chose had to have significant gay presence or perspective and they had to engage the medium in some interesting way. In most cases, what constituted a gay presence became fairly obvious, but in some cases it simply meant a stance separate from and critical of the heterosexual hegemony. By *experimental* or *avant-garde* films, we mean films that view film as a philosophical and aesthetic medium and not merely as entertainment. Thus, film remains an essentially and primarily visual art form that does not enforce a simple story or narrative line, and explores light, chemistry, the lens, the splice, and the whole physical notion of gay avant garde, a wide range of approaches and visions flourishes, so we tried at all times to be inclusive rather than exclusive.

We believe that by concentrating on the personal aspect of cinema we present a truer, more complex, more interesting and more diverse view of gay and lesbian lives than do those few examples of commercial movies that include gay characters.

For one event of the festival, Barbara Hammer invited four other filmmakers to present papers addressing the questions "Does Radical Content Deserve Radical Form?" Their essays follow.

RADICAL FORM: RADICAL CONTENT

The theme for this panel was originally “Radical Content Requires Radical Form,” although recently Barbara seems to have broadened the parameters of the discussion. But since I’ve been worrying over the original thesis for the last month or so, I’d rather try to address it . . . which I find to be almost impossible for several reasons, the first of which is the use of the term “radical.” It tempts me to start using phrases like, “When I was younger . . .” However, if I were to proceed along those lines, I’d soon be admitting that even back then I wouldn’t have used the term to define myself. It always conjured up actions which were far more extreme than my own (such as making posters, publishing magazines, going to demonstrations, and taking photographs). And although I was much more willing then than I am now to take absolute positions about issues concerning, for example, sex or sex-role stereotyping, I was still more interested in finding the nuances, the subtle points which would undermine or recast those absolute feelings. I was always somewhat afraid of, and intimidated by, those who were willing to assert the most radical positions: that lesbian relationships are inherently better than heterosexual ones, that women are better (morally or otherwise) than men, that collectives are preferable to hierarchies, that experimental film is superior to narrative, that monogamy is oppressive, etc.

I agree that it can be bracing or clarifying to have certain patterns described in their most extreme manifestations (e.g., that marriage is legalized prostitution, that narrative is inherently reactionary) and that this has allowed us to see the skeletal structure of certain social institutions or cultural practices; but I think we have to be careful and allow for the countless shades of gray that exist between the black and white of those radical formulations. Saying this makes me very anxious because I don’t want to appear as an apologist either for the oppressive characteristics of the nuclear family or of narrative filmmaking, but I must admit that I’m still invested in certain aspects of both those traditions, and I find it more fruitful to analyze and work—albeit cautiously—with those traditions and save the good of them, than to throw them out entirely in the interests of being a “pure” radical. And then again there’s the dreadfully predictable scenario of people who were once considered radical but are no longer able to live with the extremity of their position and flee back to the opposite extreme. Like Catholics who become rabidly anti-spiritual (and I come very close to

that myself), or junkies who clean up and move to the suburbs, or leftists who join the political machine, or experimental filmmakers

BY SU FRIEDRICH

who end up making Pepsodent commercials (although those are the rarest converts, it appears).

This brings me (somehow) to the question of content, radical or otherwise. If I try to apply the requisite formula to the broad range of experimental films that have been made in the past thirty years, I would be hard pressed to find many that live up to that standard. I don’t think the

content of even half the films could qualify as radical, if one defines that as something which argues for the drastic overhaul of some aspect of society. Certainly a lot of experimental films have portrayed alternative ways of living and have asserted that there's more to perception or experience than can be conveyed through a linear narrative—and indeed there's a great freedom to be had in seeing those films. But equally often they portray, if through a radical use of the medium, things which are fairly mundane or familiar.

Stan Brakhage is a good case in point. His use of the medium has been truly radical; he has forced us to see through a lens as few others have, to move with his camera and in his editing in a way that few others did before him. But I couldn't say the same for his content. He's made a few too many films about his family, his wife as Muse, and himself as the artist-as-genius. I've felt as aggravated and oppressed watching some of his films as I feel watching a sitcom, even though that feeling was often mitigated by my interest in his formal devices. Therefore, if I were to apply the aforementioned formula to his work, he would have to be relegated to the trash heap—and I have done that with a few of his films. But in the long run, I appreciate the risks he's taken with form enough to allow, somewhat grudgingly, for his conservative sexual politics and his self-mythologizing. He's one example among many in the field, and I've gone to countless screenings hoping to find that synthesis of radical form and content only to be disappointed. After many experiences of the kind, I've come to feel that it's necessary to wrest at least some good from the work, to appreciate it if the person has managed to take some risks whether in form or content, even if they haven't formed a perfect synthesis. It isn't easy for me to do that, and now I must confess that I constantly hope to see realized in the world of film the marriage of those two radical acts. But having admitted that, I want to proceed with my defense of those films which fail to meet the standards of this formula.

Stan Brakhage and many others stand as good examples of the split between radical form and content, defending—by the very nature of their genre—the superiority of a radical approach to form. On the other half of that divide exist many fine documentary and narrative filmmakers. It's hard for me to choose an example, but suffice it to say that I've seen innumerable films during the past fifteen years which have exposed me to the lives of people with whom I might never be in direct contact. I've been taught about how others live, think, and feel, and that experience has made me reevaluate my own prejudices, taught me the narrowness of my own thinking and my own experiences, and compelled me to put my life in the context of all those other lives out there. I'm grateful to those films for giving me so much.

Yet, just as I feel after many experimental film shows, I've come away from these other films distressed by the inconsistency in them; distressed by the fact that they would push me so hard, work such a transformation in my thinking without even beginning to address, let alone challenge, my sense of narrative structure or the alleged veracity of film as

SU FRIEDRICH



a “realistic” medium. It’s such a weird feeling to sit at one of those films and watch myself be worked on, watch as the film gradually feeds me all the familiar narrative hooks, pulls me in and keeps me going until we arrive together, breathlessly, at the long-awaited conclusion. If that sounds a bit like having sex, it’s no coincidence . . . but enough on that subject for the moment.

I go away from the films again with a sense of loss, a sense of potential only half realized, and I continue to imagine that the combination of a transformative experience through the content and a radical approach to form would take me halfway to heaven. But unfortunately we live on earth, and I still believe in the separation of church and state. Hence I’ve come to accept, albeit reluctantly, that there are, and will be, many good films made that do provide a fairly radical content without giving the least hint of a radical form. And so it goes.

Being a natural pessimist, I have to force myself at this point to acknowledge that there are a number of film and video makers who come pretty close to synthesizing the two elements, who are willing and able to go beyond the limits set by an earlier generation of experimental filmmakers, who don’t insist that a film must only be silent or elliptical or structural or geometric or non-narrative or apolitical or diaristic or whatever else to be considered “really” experimental. In fact, most people I know can barely define the term “experimental” anymore, which I think is a healthy sign. And now I feel completely confused: because I was trying to say that there is some work which manages to be fairly radical both in its form and content, but on the other hand I celebrate the fact that we can’t really define the terms that we’re using. I guess the problem for me is that making art is a matter of being in a constant state of evolution—which means that I feel on pretty shaky ground most of the time. I’m always stunned by people who talk about their work with utter confidence and clarity, who seem to have a single, purposeful theory underlying their work. I can’t imagine thinking that way, and whatever yardstick I use to measure my work or someone else’s on one day may be entirely different from what I use on the next. Hence my reservation about claiming that anyone is actually achieving that synthesis of form and content, and my misgivings about the formula altogether.

If I’m torturing you with my indecisiveness, let me spend a few minutes saying something about my own work; that might clarify why I refuse these days to plant a flag.

I started out making films when I was quite estranged from narrative films, although Fassbinder was one of the few exceptions that proved the rule of my contempt. I was bound and determined to use the medium for all its most extreme potential: to speak about states of mind and being that I didn’t see in most other films, and to force the viewer to be constantly aware of, and sensitive to, the medium as such. I didn’t want to use realism, plot, sound or many other devices which are normally employed to keep the audience mollified or mesmerized. And I did do that, as well as I could, and made a few films which were black & white not only in look but in their



DAMNED IF YOU DON'T, 1988

The work is a cross-stitch on a piece of fabric, depicting a face with a wide, toothy grin. The hands are shown stitching the pattern, which is a well-known internet meme. The work is a commentary on the impact of digital culture and the way it has changed the way we communicate and share information. The artist, SU Friedrich, is a German artist who has been active since the late 1980s. He is known for his work in various media, including painting, sculpture, and video. His work often explores themes of identity, culture, and the relationship between the individual and the collective. The piece 'DAMNED IF YOU DON'T' is a prime example of his interest in the intersection of art and digital culture.

feeling, and were silent as well (although some included written texts). But then the mysterious and less tangible gray areas started to interest me, and I changed—primarily with my last two films, *The Ties That Bind* and *Damned If You Don't*.

In making *The Ties That Bind*, I realized that I had a narrative on my hands: I had my mother's story of her life during World War II, full of personal and political conflict, and although I wanted to explode it, to work simultaneously from many angles, I had to accept the responsibility of presenting it in a way which would be relatively accessible. One simple choice was to have the story unfold chronologically, and as I slowly developed the soundtrack, a moral tale began to emerge. Or, rather, my sense of a moral purpose in making the film emerged. Throughout the editing, I often had to discard formal strategies because they seemed to have no place in a film "like this." At the time, it made me think that I was going to end up with a fairly conventional documentary—and at moments I still fear that that happened. But those of you who've seen the film know that the result is a far cry from a talking heads documentary, and I'm glad of that. Maybe some would even feel that it's a somewhat successful synthesis of radical content and form, but I think that might only be the case when considered in the context of more conventional work. And maybe "context is all," but I'm not satisfied with that excuse. This notion, this formula, seems to exist in some absolute realm above and beyond what most of us are capable of producing, and it's an absolute against which, or with which, I've struggled for many years. And back to the problem of defining what's radical—I could never claim that the film's content is truly radical: it's simply the story of an ordinary woman living through extraordinary times. If that's radical, then what isn't?

But then again with *Damned If You Don't*, I found myself wanting to tell a story, and again one which I thought of as a moral tale. I was ready and, I thought, able to crucify once and for all the Catholic Church, and rescue a poor nun from its clutches. But I found myself unable to be as censorious as I'd imagined; I wanted some of the characters and places and objects to function as a tribute to certain sensual aspects of Catholicism. When I'd forced myself up against the wall, I had to admit that there were some experiences growing up Catholic which I still valued. Perhaps the most subtle manifestation of that is simply in the way the film is shot and edited. It isn't easy for me to articulate how that works, but I'm convinced

DAMNED IF YOU

DON'T, 1988



that my upbringing, with all its repression, idealism, and sense of an unrequited desire for the sublime, has had a direct effect on my way of shooting and editing. So the good and bad were inseparable, and all I could do was use that fact to craft the film as carefully, or perhaps I should say as faithfully, as possible.

The other glitch that appeared, after my initial thrill at the idea of using a radical form to speak of a radical subject, was that I found myself wanting desperately to create a dramatic narrative with, god forbid, a happy ending. And that's what I did, although I fought my impulses all the way, chastising myself for yielding to what I saw as some of the worst devices of that most loathsome film form, the dramatic narrative. Granted, the narrative is interrupted, the story doesn't rely on dialogue, and again, if the context is the world of traditional narrative, the film might be seen as radical. But, if I consider it in the context of my own work, I'm left with mixed feelings. By that measure, I indeed made many concessions to the medium which I wouldn't have borne a few years earlier. And as much as that frightened or worried me, it also gave me a feeling of freedom. Because I really think that the most oppressive situation is one in which we feel we *must* work in a particular way, and that other ways of working are wrong, revisionist, conservative, etc.

When I was first making films, I felt immense freedom in the idea of making films which were drastically different from anything I'd seen before in narrative or documentary films. And it *was* important to look out the back door, so to speak, to turn my back on film tradition. I still do, for the most part. But it always boils down to how one needs to work in order to say what needs to be said in a given film. As I've gone along, it seems more important to allow myself even more freedom: to look out both the front and back doors, as well as all the windows; to still assume that there are infinite possibilities in how a film can be made, and what it can say.

I still ask myself whether I'm being as truthful as possible when I speak in a film, and whether I'm making as many demands as possible on the medium, which is clearly a language that's still evolving. But I just can't abide by a slogan like "radical content requires radical form," because it's too oppressive and too abstract. I don't think anyone sits down to work in order to be radical; one works in order to say something about how it feels to be alive. To put a prescription on that endeavor is one sure way to stifle or discredit most voices, and to ignore the fact that there are so many, many voices in the world. I'm sure we can learn more by respecting each voice as an individual one (of course I'm talking about relatively independent voices, not those of Hollywood), rather than trying to ensure that we all speak the same language. If someone feels deeply moved by the plight of an oppressed group, and thinks that their message should be delivered in a rational, linear, accessible voice, then so be it. If someone else is a gifted storyteller and believes in the efficacy of narrative devices for presenting that story, more power to her or him. And if someone else wants to make a film about walls and floors and sunlight, then I hope he or she does it so that I see those floors as I've never seen them before.