

DESIRE IN RUINS
I N D E P E N D E N T

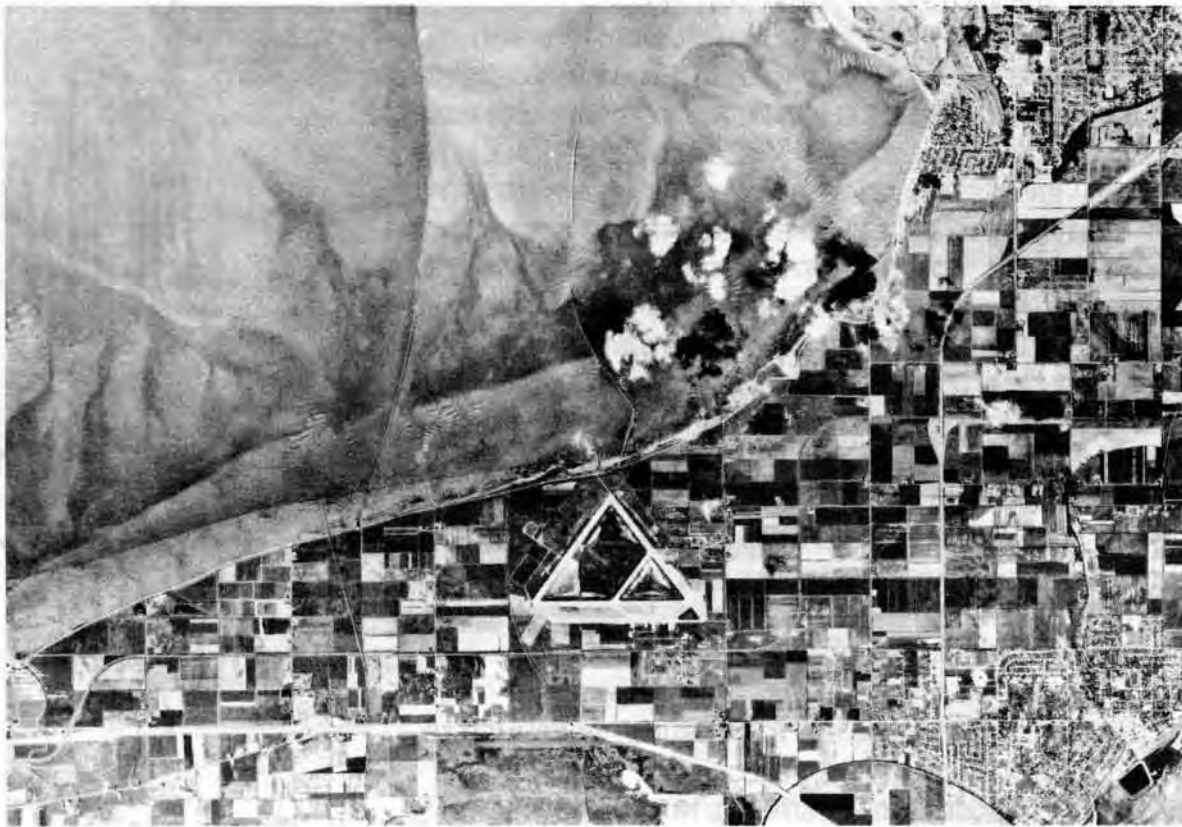
EYE



THE INDEPENDENT EYE

DESIRE IN RUINS

AL
RAZUTIS:



UNDER THE SIGN OF THE

BEAST

D E S I R E I N R U I N S



WHAT FOLLOWS IS AN INTERVIEW COLLAGE. ALL QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS IN STANDARD TYPE ARE FROM A 1984 INTERVIEW WITH DAVID BRYANT. ALL QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS IN *ITALICS* ARE FROM A 1989 INTERVIEW WITH MIKE HOOLBOOM AND INCLUDES FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON THE 1984 MATERIAL. IN ADDITION THERE IS A SMALL SECTION IN **BOLD** FROM A 1985 LETTER TO THE EDITORS OF CINEMA CANADA.

Q: How have you managed to make your films and how do you intend to continue in the future? Has all your work been produced in Canada? How has this affected your output?

AR: My earliest films were produced in California (1966-68) and afterwards I moved to Vancouver (and all of the subsequent work has been produced there). Living in Canada, first as an American expatriate, divorced from the 'American film scene' and not accepted by the 'Canadian film scene' presented a lot of problems initially. (I compounded these problems by withdrawing my films from US film co-ops in the 70's after I was disgusted by what happened in Chicago at the Democratic Convention). The Canadian arts scene in the early 70's was dominated by anti-American chauvinism (doubling as a kind of 'nationalism' and promoted by artists themselves who were trying to advance their own position in the arts) and this has continued in experimental film even into the 80's.

In 1982, after 14 years of making films, teaching and participating in the creation of a number of Vancouver film organizations, I found myself "excommunicated" from the Canadian avant-garde by a person I had (foolishly) considered to be an ally: R. Bruce Elder. This arose on the occasion of his published essay (Parachute #27, Summer 1982), "Redefining Experimental Film: Postmodernist Practice in Canada", an essay which sought to create a theoretical paradigm (as invention) for Canadian avant-garde

cinema. In this essay, Bruce maintained that "Canadian avant-garde cinema is postmodernist cinema precisely because of its commitment to analyzing the nature of the photograph". Well, I thought, he (as anyone) is entitled to theorize and valorize...but it was only in the concluding paragraphs that I realized why my work had been excluded by Elder for so many years in national and international exhibitions. Elder offered: "The contrast between Rimmer's manner of reworking historical footage and that of Al Razutis is a measure of the distance separating Canadian avant-garde filmmaking from its American counterpart". His observations were that I was "American-born" (which is false) and share "with American Pop artists an interest in visual forms which lie outside the acknowledged Fine Art tradition" (Since when is "Pop Art" outside of Fine Art?) In sum, Elder sought to rationalize why my work should be excluded from "Canadian" context (to quote him earlier: "Many of our key experimental filmmakers - filmmakers belonging to our central tradition of filmmaking - have explored issues associated with photographic representation".) The films comprising Visual Essays, short films such as Portrait, and much of Amerika dealt precisely with photographic representation, media and interpretation (as history, as myth, as meaning and construction). Yet, here, and his views were, I believe, pivotal in my exclusion from future Canadian retrospectives, I was declared "un-Canadian" (once again)...

As for Bruce, his impact on creating a false view of the diversity of experimental work, work which included feminist,

political, media-oriented films has been considerable. I think, more than any other individual, he has strangled experimental film in Canada to the point that many filmmakers now will only imitate his call for 'landscape and alienation' films as true Canadian works. Byron Black, Peter Lipskis, and a number of other filmmakers have been 'sacrificed' (ignored) in favor of consolidating the 'official' Canadian version of history and film.

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(from a letter to the editors of Cinema Canada 1985):

Elder's cinematic pronouncements concerning the 'true Canadian cinema' are based on an ontological idealism rather than a practice as it exists in fact. He contends that 'the history of the avant-garde cinema reflects changes in the conception of the nature of self' as superceding other concerns (ie. the political, social, cultural contexts of the time) and by definition applies this to his

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select filmmakers. By definition he excludes the impact of technology, of media (surely he must have heard of McLuhan?), historical and socio-political determinants and contexts...Elder's 'post-modernism', if we wish to join the bandwagon, is ahistorical and apolitical - it resides with the muses, with Platonic Ideals, with the immigrants and their identity crises, and is of the past. His theoretical writings have continually celebrated the cinema no longer in focus: Snow, Chambers, Wieland, Rimmer...a cinema that belongs either in the museums or in the academic old folks home at the college. Nowhere has Elder curated or supported anything resembling the plural cinemas that exist or the cinema that he proposes 'we need'. From Berlin to Canadian Images to Festival of Festivals, his programs are essentially the same one. The avant-garde of contemporary thinking is in fact completely deleted from his agenda, as is feminist cinema, as is any attempt at 'new narrative'.

A) ARTIST'S WERE TOO**INSULAR TO CARE****B) THEY WERE TOO****POOR TO RESIST THE****TEMPTATION OF THE****MEAGER HANDOUT****AND MANY WERE HOR-****RIFIED BY BOYCOTT****STRATEGIES****C) MANY ARE GREEDY****FOR INDIVIDUAL FAME****AND FORTUNE AT THE****EXPENSE OF EVERYONE****ELSE**

In April of 1989, in Los Angeles, I talked with Bruce (after a lapse of 5 years). The occasion was the L.A. premiere of his 14 hour epic Consolations (Love is an Art of Time). We talked about his film - a film which I consider to be not only important in international contexts but also a significant challenge to today's postmodern dilemmas as well as to a political avant-garde - the Catholic church, criticism and theory in Canada, Bruce's influence on what I maintained as 'singularizing' theory by the invention of 'strategic paradigms' (theories), and other topics. This was a warm and friendly conversation, in spite of our severe political and cultural differences. (I must resist the temptation to offer comments on his latest film, but will say that his filmmaking poses both a challenge to the 'left' and embraces some very important issues in terms of philosophy and culture.) I have a lot of respect for Elder's dedication to his 'mission' and I think that any criticisms of his position must engage with the scope of his accomplishments (both in film and writing). I also find his moral conceit, and what I term his fanaticism as evidenced in his filmic excesses, alarming. For example, consider this extract from his film program:

"Ours is a time that has experienced the darkening of the world, a spiritual decline that results from our having broken with both the earthly and the divine... The radical theology of the Enlightenment put us in the hands of the devil who has lured us with 'truths' that are utterly at odds with our own nature and the nature of the world. We did his bidding and became guilty of moral offenses against the Order of Things, and this has happened primarily because we lack the understanding that there is knowledge that we should not possess... We have been deformed by closing ourselves off from the Divine in existence." (Bruce Elder, exhibition notes for Anthology Film Archives 1988 'The Book of All The Dead')

Elder's mission is clearly to set the times right, to replace the immoral, the evil ('in the hands of the devil'), with the moral, righteous, good that is an aspect of what he terms "the Divine". And of course, Bart Testa, is always there to lend a helping hand, proclaiming Bruce (in the

very same publication) as "heir to the visionary film tradition" and "the leading theoretical writer on Canadian avant-garde film". What is alarming to me is precisely the extreme that Elder's moralizing has gone to, the extreme that his conception of good/evil, truth/lies, vulgar/divine has taken him, and by implication, the 'Canadian avant-garde'. (I need not worry about myself, I have been excommunicated long ago and condemned for 'evil knowledge'.)

Elder is, by his own admission, a 'modernist' and obviously disdainful of postmodernism (and its avant gardes). This point he made quite clearly during our last discussion and implicated Brakhage (not Snow) as one of his prime influences. Of course, Elder's position is somewhat contradicted by his obsessive use of quotation, stock footage (de-historicized atrocity footage), the collapsing of all discourse (and genres of discourse) into one philosophical (romantic) quest. He has skimmed the 'surface' along with the best of postmodernists. But if one is to take his assertions for the purpose of argument, then a question immediately arises: is not Elder's modernist disdain for postmodernism placing him directly in opposition to what he has valorized as Canada's only legitimate experimental cinema, the postmodern one? I think so. And my observations are supported in some of his 86/87 claims (including 'The Cinema We Need') that he does not consider himself part of what he has been supporting, or attacking.

So, all of the above reminds me of what happened in the 70's in terms of xenophobia, nationalism and the privileging of marginal talent. Canadians (and yes, I am still a Canadian citizen) tend to offer themselves up to what I term 'the cancer ward of suffering romanticism' where they wish to introject the 'good' and expel the 'bad' (usually American). This situation is completely in keeping with what Melanie Klein described as a 'paranoid-schizoid position' wherein the infant child introjects the 'good object' and projects 'the bad object', or vice versa, and keeps good and bad miles apart. (This of course is the foundation of Metz's 'Imaginary Signifier'). This is precisely what Elder and Bart Testa practice in their theorizing and attacks,

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and this dilemma of the 'imaginary' is quite outside politics and social analysis. The mirror that Canadian culture, and in particular the experimental film culture in Canada, has held up to itself and promoted through curating and rationalized in anthologies, has been one of self-censorship. This is why it tolerates the hegemony of singularization (the myth of true Canada) and acts in complete denial of plurality, difference, digression and play...And this is one of the reasons that I can no longer work or live in a climate dominated by apologists and amnesiacs.

Q: What about alternative screenings, collective bargaining and especially, with the emergence of cable, the possibility of broadcast as a method of direct access to audiences?

AR: Alternative screenings are a necessity if the avant-garde is to resist being institutionalized by the government, grant agencies, commercial interests, etc...including the university! Collective bargaining at the level of an open shot (not closed, you're in you're out!) where boycott, if necessary, is implemented in the case of exhibition houses not paying artists...we tried this in Canada several years ago when I attempted to create a Canadian Film-Artists Association with members of the Funnel in Toronto. We discussed basic rates for screening, a pay scale similar to that of Canadian Artist's Representation which has succeeded in negotiating at least reasonable exhibiton fees for artists (the basic wage as it were). We discussed boycott, we discussed all kinds of political and economical things and the whole notion and organization collapsed because a) artist's were too insular to care, b) they were too poor to resist the temptation of the meager handout and many were horrified by boycott strategies, c) many are greedy for individual fame and fortune at the expense of everyone else...it was a sorry sight.

Cable and television (contrary to the paranoia exhibited by many experimental film purists) is a legitimate and important venue for experimental films...most distributors are slow in moving in to it and most artists are too obsessed with their own work to figure out a means of entry into this market that may be both

business-like and beneficial to others...

Q(Hoolboom): At the 1989 Film Studies Conference Martin Rumsby, an avant-garde film enthusiast, collector and curator, urged the collected membership to begin to buy artist's films. Many people are, at present, developing collections of videotapes because of cost and accessibility. He argued that similar collections should be developed in film. In the discussion that followed Seth Feldman, professor of film at York University, argued that the relation between distribution and production was not an innocent one. One need look no further than to those arts whose works are bought and sold (painting, print-making, etc.) to evidence this effect. The question of the relationship between distribution and production is especially apt given the North American avant garde's dependence on universities/colleges. 90% of the avant garde screenings in Canada are not held in the Cinematheques or film coops but universities like Concordia, Regina, Ryerson and Sheridan College. So you have to wonder: how is this effecting the kind of films made in Canada?

A: When I left Canada in 1977 and lived in Samoa, I thought that was the end for me as far as teaching and making film. Then, in the middle of the rains, a letter arrived from Simon Fraser University offering me a position to teach. I pondered the consequences for at least two weeks and decided to return to Vancouver. I have always (post 1977) argued for avant-gardes of disruption (of norm), ones that are dedicated to social and cultural change. So what the hell was I going to a university for? Well, I thought it would be possible to operate in this position from a university even if it meant that I had to play ball with the administration and assume the tasks of curriculum development, scheduling, grading and departmental politics. For a while it worked: I used university funds to bring in visitors, films, used university facilities



to make my own films (after the student work was completed), encouraged the production and study of experimental and avant-garde film and worked to increase faculty numbers. I also was there because I loved teaching and the kind of creative interaction that is possible between student and faculty. In the end, after nine years I gave up and the program was taken over by more shrewd political types. What did this mean for avant-garde film? During this time period (1978-1987), a marked increase in experimental and avant-garde filmmaking occurred in Vancouver, a number of screenings were held, graffiti everywhere, publications and debates, Cineworks was created, CFDW was created as a result of Toronto's centrist policies, and a lot of new ideas and expressions were seen. Before '78 a lot of experimental filmmakers stopped making film and a kind of vacuum was developing...after 1987 we have also had

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a lull. I'm not taking credit for everything but in all honesty must say that my strategy of turning to a university (for all of its shortcomings and conservative attitudes it still has most of the \$\$) as a base of support was a necessary decision-move. As Gass noted in his article on avant-garde: 'every decision to prolong an avant-garde beyond a certain point becomes suspicious'.

Q: Perhaps I am being idealistic but it seems to me that an increased reliance upon film and video institutions as a source of recognition for the artist has arisen (the syndrome of getting your work in the right places in order to be recognized by the right funding organizations, and thereby becoming a perpetuated artist). This situation leads to several problems, the most outstanding

in my opinion being the creation of an economical rift between filmmakers where everyone fights only for themselves. An additional problem has been described to me by a filmmaker as a closed ring, where National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funded institutions show and promote NEA funded films which creates a stasis of NEA funded artists. To further pinpoint the issue, it seems the 'end' could be described as a situation where national media arts centers assume their presence as essential, vital to the furtherance of the arts, to the point of becoming detrimental to the filmmaker and artist. Whereas in actuality, they increasingly play the role of middleman in an economic chain. The resulting effect is that the artist moves from producer to commodity. The film is no longer the sole commodity; now the filmmaker must be saleable as well.

AR: The NEA example is an excellent one, paralleled in Canada by our own Canada Council... CC funds films, funds exhibition houses, funds advertising for these films and may as well fund cab fare for people to go and see them...does this improve (aside from the simple economic matter of keeping some people from starving) the art or does it (as Mekas asserted in the recent Experimental Film Coalition newsletter) support trivialization and conformism...I think it does both, depending on many factors: who's picking the juries, who they are, what kind of grant funding is in place, how does the institution exert its influence (ideological and unconscious) on the art...In Canada in film and video we have seen during the 70's the erasure of videosynthesis by the regressive policies of video officers, a generation of 16mm film/craft/industry masquerading as 'art', the inability of the CC to support experimental film in spite of some good intentions, and generally a fiasco not conducive to 'develop and support' film as art. Political cinema has fared even worse, and the National Film Board in the seventies turned out to be a bureaucratic and overfed animal that benefited primarily the executive process and in-house people and stifled, frustrated and compromised any good works (with the exception of some feminist lobbies). Once again it killed the very offspring that it was mandated to support...and most people are so cowardly that no



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criticism of any public kind (a lot of apologists, waiting their next turn at the decision making level) was visible for years, only rumors, allegations, and silence... and this kind of crap has now made its way into the infrastructure of most bureaucracies and government agencies. This is where many artists are motivated (if they are going to survive) to play politics with these agencies...this is why a lot of people give up...this is why nothing changes...

Q: It has seemed to me that in the past several years a significant number of media institutions in the United States have avoided taking part in an organized (or even disorganized) investigation of film theory, history and/or practice (as opposed to a random sampling, or greatest hits approach to curation) which has resulted in a situation where no questions are being asked in an effective manner about what is being exhibited. How does this position bode for the future of any investigative or avant-garde approach to filmmaking, and what sort of strategies are available to a filmmaker (or group) confronted by such obstacles?

AR: Filmmakers and theorists have to communicate, not prescribe or hide and divide into their own cliques (as has happened with the theorists, all friends of a feather attending conferences on 'new narrative' and prescribing from this vantage point what is desirable, healthy, important and useful in cinema (i.e. films which illustrate their own points well eg. Bette Gordon etc.) Filmmakers have to read and write more...there is no profit in avoiding the curator, academic, critic and theorist - this is what happened in the underground cinema of the 60's and 70's: here we had people producing at a phenomenal level of energy, expanding the range of film and refusing to theorize about it or 'academicize' it or even 'read' (as if that were ever an impediment to vision!)...and across the Atlantic in France you had the development of the most reductive theories of 'the cinema' imaginable based on linguistics, semiotics, marxism and ultimately on theory itself. Like I said, theory and practice have to come together, to inform each other, and to get rid of the ridiculous and paranoid binarism that separates one from the other...

The 60's (Vietnam, drugs, hippies, new philosophies, an explosion of experimental filmmaking, counter-culture in the true sense of the word) have been absorbed by TV, ad agencies, art curators and government grant agencies - not just absorbed, but TAKEN OVER AND INSTITUTIONALIZED, PUT TO A PURPOSE OF SELLING ENTERTAINMENT, DIVERSION, DISINFORMATION, A LIFESTYLE OF SENSUOUS HYSTERIA where even 'facts' are media contrivances...who's to know the difference?

This is why it is so DIFFICULT to say SOMETHING of SUBSTANCE and IMAGINATION...and to be POLITICALLY ACTIVE...in an age of simulation. This is why it is IMPORTANT for filmmakers (if they dare call themselves avant-garde) to strive for that which will amaze them and us, if not scare the hell out of them and us...

But TV and the postmod junkyard are not the only reasons why difficulty exists...there is also the 'church of the experimental cinema' of the kind found in most urban centres. These grant funded institutions are like passive prayer meeting halls where touring 'experimental filmmakers' show their work and answer a few questions (to demonstrate that they are in fact 'there')...like passive audiences attending a sermon on 'culture'...in these contexts even the most outrageous insults to intelligence go (usually) unchallenged...or conversely, even the most sensitive work can go unappreciated.

Example: Birgit and Wilhelm Hein, always on the Goethe hand-out tours, come to Los Angeles a few years ago to show their version of 'political avant-garde': porno home movies of Birgit and Wilhelm fucking, masturbating and trying to be 'outrageous' via obesity and genitalia. I'm sitting in the audience and I can't believe my ears: Birgit is actually saying that these home movies (un-watchable bullshit) is a 'political statement' directed at a culture which can't take eroticism and sexuality. I can't restrain myself and publicly protest calling this nothing but political bullshit, and suggest that they go down to Western Ave. in Hollywood and check out the porno scene there for 'political

content'. End of farce, until they take it to the next stop...one thing I know for sure: I'll never get invited to Germany.

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*Example: Chris Gallagher screens **Undivided Attention** in L.A. to a small audience. This film is impressive, formally eloquent and an amazing example of innovation in form induced content. Gallagher is relatively self-effacing and yet the film's impact is so strong that the filmmaker need not even be there. His film expresses imagination, it doesn't prescribe or preach to the viewer what the viewer 'ought to think', 'ought to do' and neither is he riding high on a nationalist (Canadian) banner...The questions are meaningless, the impact of the film lingers...however, there is no possibility of seeing it again. Filmmaker goes off to the next stop on the tour.*

These churches of experimental film, these simulations of Platonic classrooms don't work and should be abandoned. They draw only a few people and are only 'precious' in the minds of a few. In the meantime, the postmod junkyard is filling up with more 'art'. And you know, it is really ok because in this 'junkyard' one can play. And then of course, there is the

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'avant-garde morality squad' telling everyone what they should see, who is important, what is good, what is evil, but we have already covered that ground...

Q: How do you feel about the term 'avant-garde'? Where does it place the avant-garde filmmaker; why is there such a distinction and what purpose does it serve?

AR: I use the term avant-garde instead of experimental because I think it better identifies the kind of cinema that I refer to (the political, the transformational, the artistic, and those historically linked to the other avant-gardes); I don't believe it is 'dead' (Kramer) or has outlived its usefulness in shaking up the status quo. If ever there was a time where shaking up is necessary it is now, in the age of mass communication, mass propaganda, mass conformist lifestyles, an age that is dangerously close to a holocaust...An art for this age is an art that responds, in part or in toto, or is at least conscious of the context, to these world-wide issues. 'Experimental' to me connotes apolitical isolation, applied work.

Peter Lipskis, some time ago, sent me a xerox of an article on the avant-garde, titled 'Vicissitudes of the Avant-Garde' by William Gass. It provoked more than a few thoughts, memories and more than idle curiosity on my part as I thought once again about the 'experimental film scene' in search of its 'avant-garde' be it in Canada or elsewhere.

'Avant-gardes are fragile affairs', he writes. 'The moment they become established, they cease to be - success as well as failure finishes them off'. I have said many times that there are MANY avant-gardes in film, and all have been specific to a particular epoch whether it be the 20's in France or Russia or the 60's in the US, Canada, etc. The 60's avant-gardes are largely dead, exhausted and the various perpetrators have either abandoned film, settled into university teaching positions or changed over to other filmic endeavours (commercial, documentary, video or new avant-gardes). Those that hang on to the past must necessarily do

so in a CONSERVATIVE environment (the art gallery, museum, university, library); it is rare to see someone from the 60's still practising their avant-gardism intact today. Rare, but not impossible, as Brakhage and others of his ilk will remind us. To succeed in maintaining a backward looking view on culture (a romanticism of past dimensions), requires a legion of like-minded and reactionary critics, historians to constantly reinsert this past into the present with a force that many of us would rightly identify with academia and its 'conserving' interests. This is why historicizing arguments which proceed from a paradigm (modernism, post-modernism, structuralism, idealism, etc.) occur in tandem with the re-presentation of the old, the dead, the expired. Even the speculators (of \$) in art require a 'handle' on which to hang their inflated valuations of artists and art.

More Gass: 'every effort to prolong an avant-garde beyond a certain point becomes suspicious' and he further states that with regards an avant-garde which is anti-establishment (the avant-garde of refusal, the 'no'), 'society's methods of cooptation and disarmament will, in general, be effective; their (the artists') anger will be softened by success and their aims divided, their attentions distracted; the institutions set up by most Establishments, even if assaulted, will take longer dying than most avant-gardes can expect to live...' I agree with these points, points which should be driven home, and hard, to the 'avant-garde panelists' which, by way of success, university appointments or by virtue of having been 'around the scene long enough to be successful name-droppers', arrogantly make pronouncements as to their 'present tense' views of 'what is happening now' in avant-garde cinema. As for those of us previously involved in refusal and counter-culture the options are clear: give up the past (the battles have been waged, whether they were won or lost!), be honest about the present...and let us worry less about how the future will treat us, after all we know what happened to Vincent Van Gogh and our many friends...

(INSERT: I turn on the tube: Brian Wilson, burned out Beachboy mumbles

something and calls himself an 'artist'; cut to his drugged-out producer who calls Brian a 'great artist'; cut to a blonde beachgirl agent who describes Brian as a 'unique artist'; switch channels to MTV: the words 'artist', 'avant-garde', 'postmodern' ooze out from trendy British dj's...isn't culture anything you wanna call it? Make it up. Borrow, mix it all, genre after genre...everyone's doing 'it' and the terms are meaningless, blurred, trendy sales slips, and even academic conferences are organized around 'it' and 'what is happening now'...only now they term it 'the play of surfaces...in an endless propagation of texts...discourses...simulations...blurred...empty'...here comes the avant garde?)

Gass' final challenge to the avant-garde is interesting. In today's postmodern cultural circus he says "at the present time one can only practice silence, exile, and cunning" and concludes "that now there is nothing that a group once honestly did...nevertheless, there is one thing...that throughout all common connivances cannot hang its head...if painters refused to show, composers and poets to publish, and every dance were danced in the dark. That would be a worthy 'no'."

As far as my work is concerned, there is an early interest in pop-culture and political agitation (late 60's), non-oriental mysticism (alchemy) in the early 70's, hybrid media in the mid-70's, openly political and anarchist strategems in the late-70's and early 80's, with a heightened dedication to political avant-garde practice in the current phase...I think it is important to see avant-garde film generally as occupying a relationship to the era and culture within which it exists and that each form of the 'avant-garde' is but a moment in a larger process of perceptual change and perpetual revolution which derives its legitimacy from engagement rather than fixity and essential qualities.