

I first learned of Fred Camper's unfinished, seldom seen epic film *SN*, which was begun in 1976 and abandoned in 1984, by chance while searching the Internet for uses of the word "aleatory." The film is prominently featured in the Wikipedia entry for that term, as an example of a work of film art composed using chance operations. Prior to screenings, sections of the multi-part film, which was shot in Super 8, are randomly chosen from a cache of reels. Screenings of the film are infrequent and have with one exception been small and private, generally held in classrooms at the University of Chicago or in Camper's own home. The Robert Beck Memorial Cinema in New York presented the single formal public screening of the work in 2002.

For the past several years, I have been collecting information about invisible works of visual art. Often the individuals who make such work are on the margins of mainstream contemporary art and/or deliberately absent themselves from conventional discourses. Camper's case is unique in this respect. Long one of Chicago's best known art and film critics, he for years withheld his own creative work from view while advocating for (and occasionally against) the visibility of others' art. During a phone interview in June 2007 we discussed *SN*, film art, and art criticism. The minimally edited transcript below provided the raw material for a much shorter interview published in *BAT* #5. – John Neff

John Neff: *Many readers, especially those in Chicago, will be aware of your work as a freelance art critic frequently contributing to the Chicago Reader. Others will be aware of your writing and lecturing on experimental film, particularly on the work of Stan Brakhage.*

Fred Camper: And others including Rossellini, Von Sternberg and classical Hollywood narrative filmmakers.

JN: *Yes. I think that it is safe to say that few, however, are aware of your own work as an experimental filmmaker from the late 60s through the early 80s. Could you provide a brief outline of your entry into the world of film art and discuss how that work brought you back to Chicago, the city of your birth, after a youth spent on the East Coast?*

FC: I was born in Chicago, but we moved to New York when I was three, so I think most people would say I'm in New Yorker. We lived in Queens until I was eleven and then we moved to Manhattan, and that proved to be crucial. By the age of fifteen my main aesthetic interests were poetry and classical music. In classical music I liked Bach and Beethoven but I was also getting aware of people like John Cage... At age fifteen, I did not go to movies: movies were beneath me. I was kind of a snob.

You were raised with or without television?

Without, and that was a good thing. I was around fourteen when *Gone With the Wind* was playing, and this was considered a really big movie, so I went and I thought it was ridiculous – an opinion I confirmed about eight years ago. But a friend of mine named Robert Edelstein said he'd seen an "experimental" film – I think that was the word he used – that Jonas Mekas had praised in the *Village Voice*. He'd thought it was good and wondered if I'd like to go. Ron had been a big movie fan since he is a child – *Gunga Din* and things like that – so I didn't take it very seriously. But when he said "experimental" I guess my interest was piqued. That must have been from people like John Cage: I had some idea of what it was going to be like.

The film that Robert was recommending was called *Twice A Man* by Gregory Markopoulos. At the time Markopoulos was trying to raise money for the soundtrack, so it was silent. It's very rapidly edited: flash frames are included. It's a narrative: a kind of poetic, gay coming out film. I completely loved it and it was what I expected. I mean, I didn't know exactly what I was going to get, but I knew I wasn't going to get a straight narrative – that is, a linear narrative. The main thing I loved about the film was the sensuousness of the color. As a child, I'd taken great pleasure in just looking, in the sort of sensual colors of the world. And this seemed to organize it aesthetically. And it also seemed to do so in a way worthy of music and poetry.

There was actually a short Brakhage film before it.

Oh, which one?

Blue Moses, I think. Which at the time I didn't like. It's black and white and has lip-sync: it's an unusual Brakhage film. To my adolescent self it was my idea of a bad underground film: people walking around talking nonsense. I didn't know how to understand it.

Do you think that not having been a film-goer as a child made you more receptive to Twice A Man, more receptive than you would have been had you been watching Technicolor films throughout the 50s?

It might have, because I certainly wasn't judging of by the standards of entertainment movies. I don't know if going to Technicolor films would have changed that. If I enjoyed movies for their stories... But that never stopped Brakhage: he was a constant movie-goer for escapist reasons. An addict. But he never said the stuff was art. So I don't know if there's any rule there. The main point is that it seemed formally, visually, in terms of rhythm and color to be worthy of music and poetry. And that remains my standard today. I half-humorously refer to the "Bach test." Which is something like: are the compositions, the light, the movement and the spaces of the film organized in a way that's analogous to the arrangement of sounds in Bach?

Is your sense of what is formally beautiful or what attains the level of "high art" consistent over time not just for you personally but for works of art as well? Do the same qualities that make Bach great make a contemporary film great?

Well, partly, but not entirely. One of the things that 20th century art taught us is that there are no consistent rules. To take the history of Western fine art, I might argue that from Giotto to Cezanne to Pollock there is a common thread. But I don't think that works for Duchamp's ready-mades, which are important at the very least. That doesn't work for lot of the work subsequently influenced by Duchamp.

But you don't exclude that work from the canon of high art?

Oh, no. My whole point is that there is no rule for what makes a work a work of "High Art." It could be anything.

Were you becoming acquainted with contemporary visual arts during the 1960s in the same way that you were with experimental film art?

No, not at all. I had a lot of trouble understanding painting. I used to joke that I didn't know what to do with my eyes. I liked Cezanne and El Greco, by I didn't know what to do with most painting. I'd look at it, and it didn't do anything for me, and I didn't try very hard. But that was then. Interestingly, I encountered some Warhols on the walls of a gallery where there was an underground film show – I think Castelli-Sonnabend let Mekas use their space to show some films. There were these green collisions and so on . . . And they were great! I remember thinking that they were formally amazing, really good. Why I didn't pursue that interest I don't know, maybe I was just too involved in film.

Back to our previous thread: when I was sixteen, I went to MIT . . .

To study. . . ?

I eventually got a degree in physics. I was there for a seven years, which included a period of having dropped out. I lived there from '65 to '71, moved to New York in '71, and lived there until 1976 doing my graduate studies and hoping to become a film professor.

When you were a student at MIT and later when you were doing your graduate studies at NYU, you were making short films, correct?

Well, it's a bit complicated. I saw *Twice A Man* in the fall of '63. Right away I wanted to make films. Soon after, in the summer of '64, I found a regular 8 camera and was photographing this old church in Manhattan that I liked a lot. By the summer of '65 I had a 16-millimeter camera and that's when I started photographing the church more seriously for a many-hour-long film that was going to be called *The Church*.

That film was going to cut images of the church with things like people on the street, the zoo, a bunch of different things. It was supposed to give, I suppose, a synoptic view of the world. Probably influenced by *The Art of Vision*, which is the long version of *Dog Star Man*. But I had no interest for myself in painting on film or any of the abstracting techniques that Brakhage used.

Your interest in certain subjects is remarkably consistent over time: now you're photographing churches again.

My current work is very much return to the grounds of *The Church*.

The work you're doing now is based on digital photographs that you've taken which are printed in sequence across many sheets of paper.

The *Permutations*. There are now some that are one page only.

Would you exhibit them separately or do you imagine them being exhibited the only in series?

I'll exhibit them anyplace that will exhibit them. It's complicated. With the *Permutations* only one of them can be shown and that would be fine. I think the multi-page pieces that are sold separately will be formatted a little differently. For example, the title on the bottom of the sheet will be in italics and will say, for example, sheet 4, so that you know you're only getting a part of something. It's economically necessary and I've started to like the idea of letting these fragments out into the world as signs of the fragmented art world with its interest in single objects.

There seems to be a tension in your work between a desire to create a total artwork and an intense interest in the visual qualities of unique objects. There will always something that escapes your scrutiny . . .

Sure, and that's part of the work: what's left out . . .

But we left the thread of my early filmmaking. At a certain point, I tried editing *The Church*, and I didn't really know how to edit. I mean, I knew how to make a splice,

but everything else was beyond me. I had no idea how to handle the material. I was struggling with that, and not really getting anywhere, when a local TV station . . . At the time “underground film” was sort of bursting on the scene . . .

There was a popular fascination with “underground film” in the mid 60s . . .

And this was winter of '66-'67. They were looking for in Boston underground filmmaker to have on their program and they couldn't find one. So somebody told me about them, because they were calling everybody in town, and also they were going to pay seventy-five dollars. I was making that much in one week working as a lab technician, analyzing radioactive samples. So seventy-five bucks was a big deal. I called them up, and told them that I hadn't finished any films, but I was definitely an underground filmmaker. They said, “That's fine, send something over.” So I sent over some footage and they said they liked it and they had me on a show called *The Al Capp Show*, whose host was the cartoonist creator of *L'il Abner*. He was an obnoxious right-winger whose format consisted of a comedian, an entertainer a nut.

And you were . . . ?

Well, I wasn't the comedian and I wasn't the entertainer. It was a kind of a lively discussion I had with them. I don't remember it in detail, but they liked me.

So Al wanted to have me on again. This time he commissioned a film about misery. So I found an actor through a friend of mine and made this story, which was somewhat autobiographical, of a woman who finds an apartment, goes into it and pigs out on cakes and cookies while reading the newspaper. They cut out the middle part of it, which was understandable since they said it had to be only four minutes. But they did give it back to me spliced back together. This time the comedian and Al Capp did a routine during the film. I wasn't really prepared for that. I guess they wanted me to get angry, and I just sort of clamed up. In fact, this was my first finished film. The pressure of having to finish it – you know, I edited it in one all-nighter – was a big help. The deadline. That was in the spring of '67.

Over the next two years I made four more films without any commission or deadline pressure. Varying lengths from three minutes to thirty-nine minutes. Then I tried to make an eight- or ten- hour narrative film.

Oh really, I've never seen any mention of that . . .

I never even had a title for it. I'd jokingly call it *The Life of Joe Schmo*. SCHMO! I shot a lot, many hours with actors and . . .

A script?

Yeah, I wrote a script. The acting was, I guess, terrible. I wasn't very sensitive to acting. I probably shot enough for about four hours of a ten-hour film. I shot many hours, it was black and white, my earlier films had all been in color. Then the lead actor quit. That was a huge setback. And now having shot all this, I was running out of money anyway. I wanted to restart and I didn't know what to do... I edited two sections of it as kind of an exercise. In hindsight, maybe I could have done made something out of the whole thing but I didn't want to partially realize my conception. In any case, the idea of a very long film was part of this thing. I wanted to make something that wasn't so easily consumable. In fact, I later wanted to make a sixty-hour film.

Was this all a reaction to Al Capp's four-minute movie?

I should say no, but perhaps it was because at the end of the second show, when I'd screened my film . . .

Misery?

It was called *Joan Goes to Misery*. Al asked what I was going to do next and I said, "Well, I have an idea for very short film based on a song." Which was true. And he said, "That's good, Fred. Keep 'em short, just keep 'em short." I don't say this as an aggrieved artist. He was a humorist and that was pretty funny. But obviously I wasn't going to follow his advice, either. Then next film I finished was in fact four minutes long. Then there were others: three minutes, thirty-nine minutes. And then there was *SN*.

Could to talk a little bit about SN, its genesis, its subject and its structure?

After moving to New York there were a couple of years of shooting footage for what might have been short films that I didn't finish. It's kind of complicated: there are secret aspects to *SN* that I guess I don't want to divulge.

That's a very provocative thing to tell a questioner. You say on your website that you won't say what "SN" means . . .

Whether the title stands for anything... I'm not saying it does: I'm not saying it doesn't. It arose out of a personal crisis – I'll say that much. I was walking around New York in the spring of 1976 and the idea came to me out of nowhere. I'm not sure there was a single incident that precipitated it. The idea came to me and it came in two ways. One way was the idea of a multi-part work of a somewhat indeterminate form with

each part being on a separate reel. Another was of these densely packed urban images of filled and occupied space. The film as it now exists was shot mostly in Manhattan. It's partly a portrait of Manhattan and partly a personal, psychological journey.

It's interesting that you worked on a long and narrative film prior to starting SN. Is SN a narrative film? Is it, like Dog Star Man, a first-person film?

It's absolutely a first-person film. Even more so than *Dog Star Man*. I don't mean that it's better: maybe it's a first person film more narrowly than that film. Which might make it more restricted, less huge than *Dog Star Man*. Every section looks as if, or is meant to look as if, it's being seen through the eyes of an unseen protagonist. There is no other narrative. There are no actors. I'll run through some of the sections. The first section was shot in Herald square – most of the sections were shot in '76.

This is the current first section? There was to have been a different first section, right?

Yes, yes. The film originally was going to be in eighteen sections and each section was going to be selected by chance from one of eighteen reels. Eighteen by eighteen. There would have been six sets of footage for each section. All edited from the same footage in different ways. On the eighteen reels there would have been six sets of footage edited three different ways. Later the planning got more baroque: some sections were going to be on multiple reels, etcetera.

I'm sorry to keep referring to Brakhage, but it seems sort of like the structure of The Art of Vision.

I'm sure *The Art of Vision* hugely influenced it. I saw *The Art of Vision* six times in two years. Which wasn't easy . . .

Yes, it's a very long film!

Also, it wasn't shown very often. The first time I saw it was at its world premiere in New Haven; the next three times were in New York on trips that I made to see it; and the last two times were in Cambridge, when we rented it and showed it.

There is something about SN that seems very different from of The Art of Vision, and it has to do with your use of chance. It seems to me that in the late '50s and in the '60s chance was used in one of two ways – maybe you'll disagree with this characterization. On the one hand are Cagean uses of chance to remove the ego from the construction of the work. These chance operations tend to determine the final presented to shape of the work. On the other hand, there is the way in which the

Abstract Expressionists or Brakhage used chance: at the beginning of a work as a spur to personal vision.

I'm with number two.

The strange thing is that SN is a first-person film and strives to express a particular subjectivity but the form in which a viewer experiences the film is out of your control.

No, it was never meant to be out of my control. First of all, my grand plan obviously wasn't realized. What emerged instead was a film in ten sections, one of which is on three reels. Those three reels are very short and are selected from sixteen short reels using random numbers. The order is also selected at random. Originally I did it with binary code: by coin flipping. Lately I've been using random.org.

The original idea was this huge thing that would be very different on each viewing but would always, in some sort of fascinating and possibly deadly way, have the same effect and tell the same story.

Deadly?

Because you would get these different threadings, but in the end it would be the same personal vision that you were stuck with. For instance, the opening section, which is crowds of people on Herald Square intruding into the camera and passing in front of it. There were going to be five other subjects, and several of them were going to be crowds – I even shot one. I actually have enough footage to do a second set if I ever wanted to: then I could re-institute the chance thing on a permanent basis . . .

Do you ever foresee returning to production work on SN?

The idea of editing my second set and getting somewhat closer to the original idea is appealing. But there are so many problems with that, including the death of Super 8, that I don't know when and if . . . I mean, even what I have isn't really show-able. I've shown it, but it consists of edited original and edited work print.

Your original plan had been to do an A and B roll printed to hide the splices?

Right. So at the very least the edited the work print should be replaced with the edited original, which looks a lot better. But finding that, and conforming it...my God, this would be of very long project. And I'm not one of those filmmakers who enjoys reeling through reels of film and handling film . . . I was never one of those.

Based on your writing about your own and others films, though, you do seem to become very immersed in the process of viewing.

Yeah, I love cinema and the great things you can do with it. But the process of actually editing film is very tedious. People who have done digital video often don't realize this. You're reeling through film endlessly, looking for this shot or that shot. That was always a disincentive to return to *SN*. And now, I don't even have space and storage . . . if I ever have the time and money, perhaps I'll return to it to the extent of doing a second set.

In any case, the idea was always to use chance to close down rather than open up. Open up at first, but then to show it as a false opening up. Can't escape the self: that was what this film was.

The film was a closing down of your career as a filmmaker, too.

I guess it was. When Kodachrome was going extinct three or four years ago I thought about buying a few rolls and shooting some. I had an idea for something but it didn't seem... But let me finish with the scenarios of *SN*. This second one, which is a fairly long one shot in my mother's then-living room, is about interior decoration of a certain kind. The third section was shot in Connecticut. It could be mistaken for a New York suburb. It's very short and kind of montage oriented, with the shapes of houses and other such things. With that one, and to a certain the extent with this second one, I started getting interested in little secret editing procedures, which would not be visible.

Like what?

Never having two identical shots. I decided to make each shot a different length in terms of number of frames. Few viewers will likely be able to discern the difference between fifty-six frames and fifty-seven frames, so it became a kind of secret that might have an impact on your experience but would not be immediately apparent.

The process seems obsessive: all of the counting, the patterning and the repetition.

If somebody saw the film and wrote that it was obsessive, I wouldn't write a letter to the editor complaining, whereas I might if they said it was a structural film or something. Obsession to me is a strange word: it has unhealthy connotations. A work of art, if it's a work of art, often requires a huge investment of time and thought. It's not like making a model of the Vatican out of toothpicks – which could be a great work of art, too, but assuming that it's just a craft trick. Now Liza Lou, her work is really good: that's producing something amazing.

Is it a question of context? The crafter working alone at home with matchsticks is outside of the presentational system of art, the idea of public presentation might not be a part of the production of the work in the way that it probably is with Lou.

Well, I think she worked on those pieces for years before she showed them. The reason that I wouldn't call Liza Lou's work obsessive in that it did something for me aesthetically. It didn't seem to me like she was fixed on repetition. In other words, she was trying to go beyond her materials, whereas an obsessive can't escape the process.

With SN, were you willing to discard aspects of the formal structure if you thought that the film might benefit aesthetically?

Yeah, although the overall chance rule I couldn't have discarded. And the rule that's now in effect of selecting at any two of sixteen . . . I get better selections with chance . . . It's not that interesting a part of the film, actually, but I'm glad that it's in there as a kind of residue of the original plan.

No, if I had made the rule that I'm making one out of every eighteen reels by chance then I'd have to live with the results of that. The idea was to design a film that would, in fact, sustain these differences.

What I'm doing now with *Permutations* is similar. In the first one, the river, the idea is to use all possible permutations of six images. Once I've selected the two three four five or six images there's a lot of freedom in how to orient them. With the two's its either horizontal or vertical, but with the three's there's already a half-dozen different ways of doing it. So that part is fairly controlled, and I work in response to the images for the aesthetic effect that I think is going to work best. With the next set of *Permutations* – that's the old door, the old wood – I'm already up to 12 parts. There, the more images you have the harder it is to organize them, but the more different ways you have to organize them.

One of the things they you haven't done in these photographs – and one of the things you didn't do in your film work – is alter the images themselves.

That isn't quite right. And this is where I differ from Brakhage. I'm not interested in abstraction – he didn't like to call it that, by the way. In *SN* there are no fancy effects: the goal in the printing it was to get it to look as much like the original as possible. In the photos that I'm doing now I absolutely do alter the color, contrast, and saturation.

Are you balancing them to one another?

Mostly. A couple of times I've cropped, but very rarely. Aside from one work where a bunch of images were cropped because the lens was vignettted, I think I have cropped a total of two images. I'm hesitant to do that unless it seems necessary. I definitely have not inserted things: no cutting and pasting.

You're always working to enhance the level of detail, the image's crispness and its visibility?

That's right. You know, in my most recent statement I've named my two main masters: one is a composer but the other is Jan Van Eyck. The incredible power of his surfaces and textures. I want to do much more than that, but that's one element . . .

Hyperprecision?

Yes, precision and detail. A sense that the world is pregnant with something more than seems at first to be the case. In Van Eyck there is spirituality pervading the whole image: its not just dry facts. I wouldn't mind if somebody thought I had done that too.

Van Eyck's paintings don't have any consistent vanishing points: if you map out the perspective over the surface of the Arnolfini Portrait it is completely willy-nilly. Presumably, that comes in part from the depiction's arising out of observation rather than formula.

And presumably he wasn't using a camera obscura and presumably they hadn't completely got perspective figured out yet. Of course, unless I do manipulations that I don't want to do I'm stuck with the camera's perspective. But that's all right... One reason for using multiple images is that I don't think all of my work is being done through composition.

Permutation is the other aspect of it, which is, I suppose, where the interest in music enters. One of the things that I find interesting in relation to the photographs is that so many of the subjects you depict are buildings in decay, entropic landscapes. That pulls against the mathematical quality of the work's structuring principles.

I've had a fair number of profoundly visionary experiences in life. I don't mean angels or anything. In other words, not hallucinations. One of them, which might speak to your observation, occurred while I was helping my friend Ernie Gehr move in 1989. He was moving from Brooklyn to San Francisco, and I've always wanted to do the whole thing, so to speak, so I agreed to move him. We packed up the truck in Brooklyn and I made a point of driving through Manhattan on the way out, to experience the full power of New York traffic or something. I don't know...

To give yourself the feeling that you'd escaped something once you made it onto the highway, maybe. . . ?

The whole intensity of it. I was driving up Madison Avenue one block every two minutes. Anyway, in a motel that night I heard the tail end of a television report as I was eating dinner. The only phrase I caught was "six point nine earthquake in San Francisco." I rushed back to my room. This was the first and probably last time I was really thankful for CNN, because it was the first channel that I could pick up that had anything. They had a camera set up showing the whole city and immediately you could see two things: one that it was pretty bad, the lights were out there were a few fires; two that the city was still intact and there were only a few fires.

When I got there I went, perhaps a bit ghoulishly, to Oakland to look at the collapsed freeway. I walked the whole length of it over a couple of hours. It was totally amazing experience because what you could see was the Euclidean forms of the freeway being pierced by the chaotic forms of the earth. Every place that the freeway collapsed or broke reminded me of mountains or hills. It was the earth asserting itself.

We should remind ourselves that civilization is returning to ruin. *Permutations 3*, by the way, is Pompeii. The footage I have. . . "Footage": you know I keep saying footage, so maybe I should allow myself to do that . . . but it's still . . . There will be more ruined houses or ruined buildings.

Do you see that as a reminder of materiality? I know you have an antipathy toward electronic reproduction because you feel it obscures the physicality of media.

I don't think I have an antipathy to electronic reproduction, where do you . . . ?

One of the reasons why many people have probably not seen SN is that it's not available on video...

Don't confuse that with an antipathy to electronic reproduction. You could look at a page on my site under "Writing on Film," about a video-maker named Canterbury. It's one of the few pages on my site that wasn't published elsewhere, and it's an appreciation of video works.

Oh, yes. He lives in Michigan?

The fact that everybody remarks on is that he was sixteen when he began making work. He started writing to me about film because of my criticism. I was pleasantly surprised when I finally saw his videos. I don't necessarily assume that someone. . . I mean, the ability to make good art is independent of many other indications. If

somebody has good taste and I like him or her, that doesn't necessarily mean that his or her art is going to be good. And vice versa, as we all know.

You seem to be a believer in the "innocent eye."

How so?

I recall from one of your statements something about the desire to return to a childlike vision.

Oh, yeah: that's cribbed from Brakhage. I don't really believe it. It's an impulse, and Brakhage says this too, a motivating impulse that you can never really realize. One thing that people may not realize about the *Permutations* is that in every case, I have to construct and solve the quadratic equations in order to get the image sizes right because the area is always predetermined. It's not higher math or anything; it's not complicated. But if there are four or five variables to solve it can take me a while to set up the equations.

To come back to . . . The point is I don't have an antipathy to video at all . . . Maybe I should clarify: I have an antipathy for film exhibited on videotape, videodisc or DVD. Another way to put it is that I have a preference for original media rather than reproductions. I've listened to enough classical music on CD and heard enough bad performances to not agree with the people who say you have to hear it live. But I've also seen enough film on video to know how much is lost, and I've seen enough paintings in art books and pictures of architecture to know how much is lost. So that's the antipathy.

The idea of reducing *SN* and releasing *SN* on video doesn't occur to me. But on the other hand, I'm open to looking at what Blue Ray or HD discs can do with home DLP projectors. How much closer they might be to the look of film. DLP projection is more film-like than other forms of video certainly.

I suppose you get a lot of questions about your aversion to screening film on video. I can imagine people are constantly asking you about it.

Well, not that constantly. It comes up from time to time.

*It definitely seems like an important consideration when talking about a film like *SN*, for example, and film art generally.*

And that's why I haven't totally ruled out putting *SN* in some other form. Super 8 projection is dying: who knows how long people will be able to keep the projectors

maintained. Very few places show it anymore. You can't get it printed hardly at all. So I do watch film on video sometimes.

You do? That was a question I had for you.

Well I didn't for a long time, but I did in the early years when there was no other way to see certain things. And I have again recently. My rule is if it's a film by a filmmaker whose work I love and I recognize his style from the video then I think I'm probably getting it. However, if I don't like the film from seeing it only on video, I don't necessarily feel that I can make a final and well-informed judgment.

That's an interesting distinction.

In either case I don't really assume that I've seen it. I've never in all my years of writing for the Reader planned to write a film review from a video. It happened, but not with the idea that that's what I was going to do. I've lost income from refusing review video copies.

It's reaching the point where it's an impossible to see some films on film. Or there's an ambiguity about whether a work exists conclusively within a single medium.

Well, yeah, that's where I've also let my guard down a bit. There are cases where the filmmaker only made one print and now she's showing it only on video. And the current showing in Chicago is going to be on video. So do I write about it from the video? Usually I do. Because I'm also writing about the showing in Chicago, so it seems fair.

What do you think about YouTube?

Well, I've watched some people singing and dancing. I haven't watched film art on it, but I understand people are using it for that.

Some people might see it as analogous to the cinematheques of the late '60s, as a way of distributing work that's just not available in conventional venues.

Somebody posted Kubelka's *Unsere Afrikareise* on ubu.com. Later it got taken down. This is a film that's never been authorized for video distribution by Kubelka. I looked at it online. I've seen it dozens of times on film. Now I wonder if I should've saved it: not to view again, but as a record if I ever wanted to check a cut or a sound or something. You know, it might have been useful to have. I didn't think it was the film at all, though. If people are making things for the video format of YouTube . . . you

know, Great! But they're making something *for* that format. You know my friend Kyle Canterbury would not allow his stuff to be put on the web that way.

That's one of the reasons that I wanted to ask about YouTube. Here's somebody who lives in Michigan, not a hotbed of experimental video by any . . .

He just moved to Chicago, by the way. He looked at YouTube and it didn't change his mind. He doesn't think it would survive in this little crappy box and I agree with him. I guess I'm a believer in the unique qualities of particular media. Something that's very unfashionable today, when people are now talking about artists who are media independent.

Does that go hand in hand with some conception of originality or authenticity as being in a particular body of the work, that is to say, in an object of the work . . . ?

Of any artist's work?

Yes, in this print or this page of paper . . .

I don't believe in it in a mystical way. In other words, I think all the mystical things that happen are parts of human psychology, not some spirit of art that's floating around and invests itself miraculously in things. I'm an atheist.

When I told my *Reader* editor that I was an atheist, she didn't believe it. And I was sort of pleased with that actually.

Why?

Why was I pleased? Or why didn't she believe it?

Both I guess.

I think she thought from my work that I believed in some kind of spirituality.

It does seem that way.

Well, I do, but I think it's a product of human psychology. It's not a product of the spirit in the sky that we're all going to when we die.

So is the ability of a "Great" filmmaker or artist a superior analytical ability? Are these artists better able to determine what's going to trigger particular psychological or physiological responses exploit those mechanisms?

I hope not. And I don't think so. I mean, having said that I'm an atheist, it is true that I'm a believer in the idea of a great work of art, and the power of a great work of art to seize you in a visionary way and transform you.

I don't want to exclude the fascinating work of Sol Lewitt from art or from great art because it doesn't do that for me. Because I like it and I think it's interesting. I don't want one paradigm for what art should do. What seems to have happened in the current po-mo environment is that people are actually doing that – they're excluding the transformative, visionary possibilities.

Brakhage or Robert Bresson or Bach or Georges de la Tour (to take a favorite painter) or the architects of Chartres were working out of deep faith, and their work reflects that. Their work is the vision: that's its power. To not want to see that . . .

One of my favorite poets is Gerard Manly Hopkins. This is worth talking about, too, because it goes back to works that aren't seen. Do you know him?

I know that he existed.

He was a late 19th century British poet who was also a Jesuit priest, a convert to Catholicism . . . His work was almost totally rejected in his lifetime. His closest friend, Robert Bridges, who later became Poet Laureate of England, didn't like it for the most part. Bridges refused to reread Hopkins' great long poem, "The Wreck of the Deutschland." Somebody who was basically never published in his lifetime. And his best friend didn't like his poetry – didn't like it and he didn't understand it. But Hopkins kept writing, hoping that some day his work would find its audience.

When I first got interested in film, cinema was deeply misunderstood. You know, "film art" in the U.S. might mean Bergman, Fellini, maybe *Citizen Kane* but not other Welles. Basically a very sterile concept. And I don't think people understood how film worked visually very well. They still don't, but they get it better than they used to. I quickly acquired a love for makers of film art that no one was paying much attention to, but also for the great neglected auteurs of classical Hollywood. As I often say, I remember what it was to be laughed at for having written on Douglas Sirk: laughed at literally. So this helped me realize in a very direct way that you can't trust the tastes of alleged aesthetes. Whereas if my interest was in Dutch Baroque painting – Rembrandt and Vermeer – the consensus wasn't that far off. In other words, if you read a book on Dutch Baroque painting, the great painters who get the most emphasis are probably the best ones. It sorted itself out. It hadn't with film and it still hasn't.

And there's the case of Cezanne, a favorite of mine, who was misunderstood until very late in his life, hardly ever shown. And then of Hopkins, an even more extreme case from the same period as Cezanne. You just have to work for yourself and you can't worry about what other people think. A lack of recognition has no predictive value one way or the other. There are plenty of terrible artists whose work everybody hates, but there are also some great ones who are unappreciated.

A problem with a film like SN is the instability of the material of the art itself. That gets back to the question of reproduction.

Well, we know now what we didn't know back then, which is that even so-called safety film is unstable. It was always said that the nitrate film that 35mm was printed on through '51 was unstable, but it turns out that acetate is just as unstable. It turns to vinegar.

You know, I have shown *SN* over the years.

Mostly privately, though, right?

Right, I'll make a list of the people who've requested it. In a couple of very special cases I've done single screenings for friends. The screening in New York (in 2002 at the Robert Beck Memorial Cinema) was sort of anticlimactic because there were 25 people there and about a third of them were people that I knew. It was typical of avant-garde film screening. I didn't see anyone writhing in ecstasy at the end like you're supposed to. *(Laughs)* One or two people said things that implied that they thought it was really good. There was one guy who made a comment that made me think he thought it was tremendous, but then I never heard from him after that.

What was his comment?

"This was an amazing experience: I'm going to write you about it." It could be he meant amazing-horrible, but he had a smile on his face.

*Some films survive primarily through writing. Getting back to the idea of a film that's unseen and the longevity of a work—or maybe the delayed or renewed appreciation of a work—I was reading the other day your article on Warhol's *Sleep*, a film that has not been screened often, and certainly not very often as film, but has been much discussed. It has a life through that discourse, in a way.*

Life?

I actually contributed to the early ignorant discussion of the film by people who hadn't seen it. Before I had seen the film Al Capp said to me, "I saw an underground film once, Andy Warhol's *Sleep*, eight hours of a man sleeping." I said, "Well, did you stay to the end?" And he said, "No, I must admit I didn't." So I said, "Well at the end he wakes up." I think I'd read that somewhere, but of course he doesn't wake up at the end. That amused Al Capp. It's a film... I'm sorry what was the question?

I suppose I want your opinion about the kind of work that does have a life—a discursive life—separate from its exhibition history. There are plenty of works of modern and contemporary art that are seldom seen but are tremendously influential.

But usually that separate life they have is based on a complete misunderstanding of the work. And that was the point I was trying to argue about *Sleep*, that in its separate life it was seen as a Dada gesture, some comment on the art world. I don't like Arthur Danto's view that Andy Warhol is important for redefining "Art," for example. Warhol is more traditional than that, I think. *Sleep* is a love poem by a fetishist to this untouchable object; it's a poem to the beauty of grain and bad black and white. And the length reflects Warhol's sense of time. He stayed up all night watching *Giorno* sleeping. He was just capturing his own eyesight.

*I was watching an interview with Bresson the other day and one of his questioners asked whether he considered his preferred acting style "abstract." He said no, that it represented a form of automatic movement common in our daily lives. Most of the time, he said, we are walking around unaware of being seen, slack-jawed and with glazed expressions. This seems to relate to what you're saying about Warhol's own vision being represented in *Sleep*. That he literally saw that way. It seems to be a very typical avant-gardist claim, that what might seem to the uneducated viewer, the fresh viewer, appear incredibly abstract or difficult is in fact a form of realism.*

Yup, that was Brakhage's big claim for all his abstracting techniques, at least up to the early 80s. Before about 1979 or 80, he said that he was just capturing his own eyesight: the spots that he saw before his eyes, closed eye vision. I don't really buy Bresson there because I think if you're on trial, if your name is Joan of Arc and you're on trial for your life, you're probably going to answer some questions with a bit more emotion than the Joan of Arc does in his film. But you know, great artists often use realism as a justification.

Do you agree with that is, I guess, is my question?

Well, the word realism is really troubled. I believe that what Brakhage says is true, that he was capturing his own eyesight. But there's a difference between showing an object in a way that all of us can recognize and showing an object in the idiosyncratic

way he sees, which can destroy the visibility of the object in favor of other things that may or may not be greater. In some films they're much greater than the ordinary object would be. I don't think I agree with Bresson for the reason I just gave. Artists tend to justify their art based on realism because that's the way the world looks to them, but that doesn't mean that realism has to be what we all agree the world is.

But that justification can be one argument for experiencing the work in itself rather than through reproduction or a discursive framework that's arisen around it over time.

Yeah, yeah, the justification is important. If one is going to talk about Brakhage one needs to say that *he* thought he was just representing his own eyesight the best he could. That's very important.

But the other thing we were talking about was artists' personalities . . . visions, whatever. I want to get back to that. I don't want to say that an artwork is the expression of an artist's personality. And I don't want to require that all art be deeply personal and certainly not that it be psychological. But I do believe, because you were asking about originality, that most of the great art that I love represents a unique way of seeing and thinking. Seeing and/or thinking unique to that artist. The people who try to attack the notion of the author, an attack that's now forty years old, how do they handle someone like Bach? Or Shakespeare or Rembrandt or Vermeer? They have unique bodies of work. Clearly those paintings don't have auras because of the hierarchical or social structures of museums; they have auras because they're incredibly great. Their greatness goes beyond what you can physically see. The same is true of Durer, El Greco and all my favorite painters. Art is unique . . . what's important about art is that there are unique, great artists, expressive of particular visions of the world through particular aesthetic forms. I don't see the point of abandoning that.

Who apprehends that uniqueness? It seems, based on what you've said, that your critical work is about identifying those unique artworks that deserve attention and bringing them to attention . . . And maybe recommending against artworks that don't merit scrutiny. Would you agree with that characterization of the role of the critic, especially the critic whose writing appears in a column or in a newspaper review?

Yup. Do you have more? I can elaborate.

Sure. I sense a paradox in the relationship of your criticism to your work as a filmmaker. While you're known, at least to a Chicago audience, as somebody who recommends for or against artworks' being seen, you've also got a large body of work that's essentially invisible.

Well, I don't want to push my own work. If the most important museum curators had

come to the show of *SN* and thought it was the greatest thing since sliced bread and had wanted to mount some exhibit, I'd have talked to them about DLP projection and high definition video transfers. But you know, I've seen enough artists pushing their own work that I have not wanted to do that.

The problem when you push your work is that you tend to confuse other's opinions, positive or negative, with questions of value. The other point is that with avant-garde film nobody has ever been able to make a living at it, not even Brakhage. Now that I'm making these prints, which are in a domain that people a few people have made a living at, I'm getting a little pushier. I don't, however, think the artist should be pushy if he or she can avoid it.

How does that opinion coexist with your having been for so long somebody who was – on whatever level and to whatever degree – a part of the system of “pushing it”?

The motivation behind my writing was to bring people work I believed in. My film writing started when nobody appreciated the stuff. When I started writing about art for the *Reader* in 1993, it was definitely in part an attempt to make a living. One of the things I realized was that I'd be writing about things that weren't that great, and I had to ask myself, “do I want to do that?” I found that I did. There's a case to be made for a whole lot of art that may not be groundbreaking, but also isn't derivative and does do stuff for you. I've tried to get out of myself, to see through my own biases as much as possible. You can't do that completely, and there are threads in my critical writing that reflect my biases. It's tricky. I think readers who are reading you often have a right to know what you like. But if Sarah Jones's flower paintings at a gallery you've never heard of aren't very good, is that really news? Among the hundred painting exhibits that might be in Chicago at any one time? So most of my negative reviews have been of art stars that I thought were really bad.

Do you see that as being not only a way of elaborating your taste for regular readers but also as a kind of corrective within the art system?

As a corrective and as a way of pointing to things that are good by showing what's bad.

A negative example?

Yeah. My best case of that was Norman Rockwell. That's the negative review I'm proudest of . . . That review ended with something I'm especially proud of, a comparison of a Rockwell painting with a great painting by Louis Le Nain that is in the Hermitage. I was looking for this. At the same time I knew I was going to write about Rockwell, I had a six-week trip across Europe that started in the Louvre and ended in

the Hermitage. I was looking for something to compare to Rockwell. There are many Louis Le Nains in the Louvre, but none of them worked. And there was one in the Hermitage that was just perfect. Louis Le Nain was doing something much tougher than Rockwell was.

Are we back to some kind of truth?

Well, truth is one of those troubled words I like to use. I mean truth as opposed to canned ideas that are easy to digest and aren't even true. Rather than truth, I'd say that's Louis Le Nain presents some aspect of humanity that is the opposite of Rockwell. It helps that he's at the beginning of genre painting. Often the originators are the best . . . There was something else about Hopkins and art and belief.

Oh. I was asking about longevity and in the case of film its relationship to reproduction.

There isn't much more to say because film can't be preserved. What we'll have is bits and bytes if the computers of the future can even read those. And we'll have displays that may or may not look anything like film and we won't even know. It's already happened that film . . . If you looked at an original Technicolor released print of a '50s film, and I say Technicolor released print because Technicolor at the time had a process that was pretty stable in terms of color. It's usually called IB Technicolor. If you compare an original IB print to a recently restored print, either the restored print is a big botch or it looks pretty good and fairly close but not the same. There are a lot of big botches, too. It's pretty sad. That's only fifty years later. Lots of films are already lost and can't be restored.

Chris Marker has declared the death of cinema.

Well, he's making videos now. And what is video going to do? It's very dependent on how it's displayed. Brakhage said, incorrectly I think, "Video can't be an art because of that little knob that turns it from green to yellow." That's not a reason it can't be art but it is a big problem. And it's not just that little knob, I mean the differences between LCD and plasma and CRT and DLP are huge. Those differences will be more important to some than others...

Do those differences make the future of the kind of work that you appreciate, that is to say cinematic abstraction, more tenuous than the future of narrative cinema?

Well, I love narrative cinema too, remember. John Ford. But the qualities that I love in their work are abstract qualities. I mean what I never understood was why the art world couldn't even make the basic leap that painting was about paint and canvas to

understanding that film is at least in part about space and light and time. And so instead you get appreciations of—unless I’m missing something—a total fraud like Matthew Barney as a filmmaker. He’s almost only appreciated by people who have no understanding of Brakhage, Breer, Gehr, Frampton, and Bruce Baillie. People who understand their work hate Barney’s films because they know how cinema can work as a medium. It isn’t just a presentation of a lot of Chryslers in a big space crashing each other up. There’s more than just spectacle. You know this is what I try to talk about in all my writing, the effect of particular kinds of cinematic space and time. And those things don’t translate as well to video, but in a lot of cases they *do* translate. You’re just losing a lot.

Well, maybe we should wrap it up since my tape is about to run out. But I have one question that I’d like to finish up with, and it does relate to the question of the original experience of the work, seeing the work in reproduction and the work’s visibility or invisibility. I read a web post about an encounter that you had with a film critic named Greg Taylor regarding Hollis Frampton’s Lemon . . .

Is this on “A Film by . . .”?

I think so. You took Taylor to task for writing about Lemon without ever having seen it.

Yeah, and for discounting an interpretation of it that sounds ridiculous if you haven’t seen the film, but that if you *have* seen it is really only a plot synopsis. I mean it was obvious that Frampton wanted the lemon to look like a breast, and it was obvious that he was referencing the rotation of planets. What of it?

I wondered what you thought about my interest in SN, a film I’ve never seen.

Oh. [*long silence*] I didn’t really question it. Your questions have been, although of a theoretical nature . . . You haven’t tried to ask me why I think the film is good.

Should I ask you that?

Well you could. I’m not objecting that you haven’t. In other words, as I saw it, reading about the film raised some issues for you of a more general nature than just the film.

That’s true.

And you wanted to talk about those issues. I would have found it obnoxious if you were acting like you’d seen it. Or you were acting like it was totally unimportant for anyone to see it. Those would be the two extreme poles, but I don’t really mind . . . It’s a film that a friend of mine said he thinks is going to have a problem because it’s the

kind of film that could only be appreciated by someone who likes both Brakhage and John Ford.

As I see it, most people don't know how to look at cinema very well. So I'd be a little worried that if you did see it, you'd hate it. Which would be okay.

Fred Camper will exhibit his photo works in two recent shows: a group exhibition at Chicago's Flat File gallery and his first solo show of photographic work at Beyond Baroque in Los Angeles. For more information about Camper's work in film, photography and writing visit www.FredCamper.com.

John Neff has, since 2004, been restoring and transferring to digital video Marshall Weber's unfinished, fire damaged 1984 Super 8 feature *Joan of Arc: Or, Why I Hate Men*. Neff's completed restoration will include video glosses on the original footage shot and edited digitally.