

Heinz Emigholz

Onwards and don't forget...

The fact that I suffer from flights of fancy has been well established since my film *NORMALSATZ* in 1981. After all, they were analyzed in that film. The film also documented my attempts to work against them by using memorization and recording techniques. Later, forgetting was added in, which also extended to the artifacts that I had collected by using these techniques. There was no time to scour through them, especially since a certain obsession with production got in the way of any kind of reflection. If you look back, society will take revenge on you, so just look forward as long as you can. Always be a few blocks further along and always where you're not expected, and don't let the spectators get ahead of you on your way. Who or what falls by the wayside is clear. In the context of Living Archive – Archive Work as a Contemporary Artistic and Curatorial Practice, a project by Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art I wondered where and at what point in time I might have been able to change courses, or even should have.

The first change of course was a good one: The filmmaker Larry Gottheim had seen my film *SCHENECTADY* in 1973 at the Hamburger Filmschau and invited me to the US, where I lived in NYC starting in the middle of 1974. The core of my circle of friends consisted of students and exstudents of Larry Gottheim and Ken Jacobs, who had founded the Collective for Living Cinema there in 1973. This was to become a crystallization point for artistic work with film over the next ten years, at various locations. Even back then, Anthology Film Archives had become something of a fossil under Jonas Mekas, primarily concentrated on protecting and maintaining the heroic status of the stale New American Cinema. There was very little living to be expected there.

Second change of course, 1977: For me, the film *DEMON* designates the end of a fundamental, experimental engagement with the energetic possibilities of film form and the transition to very open, even documentary, quasinarative constructs, in which I wanted to thematize my own existence and its garbled conditions and entanglements. The film *NORMALSATZ*, produced from 1978 to 1981 in Manhattan and Hamburg, was

such a film. The fact that I would continue the epistemological cinematographic interests that I had begun in previous films holds for me to this day.

NORMALSATZ would not have come to be at all without the interaction with American friends. The filmmaker and actress Sheila McLaughlin and the writer Lynne Tillman acted in it, as did Marcia Bronstein, Peter Blegvad, Carla Liss, David Marc, John Erdman, Martha Wilson, and others. One sequence of the film is based on Lynne Tillman's text *The Interpretation of Facts*, another sequence, the one on soaps and sitcoms, is based on the text *Specimen of Table-Model Talk* which David Marc und Daniel Czitrom had written especially for the film. The poet Hannes Hatje, the film's main actor, later translated Lynne Tillman's first novel *Haunted Houses* for the same German publisher for which I had translated Art Spiegelman's *Break-downs*.

The loose, free production form of NORMALSATZ also inspired the beginnings of COMMITTED by Lynne Tillman and Sheila McLaughlin and the ensemble film MACUMBA by Elfi Mikesch. NORMALSATZ and MACUMBA were both premiered in 1982 at the 12th International Forum of New Cinema. The bourgeois press, which had fallen in love with impact films to the point of idiocy, criticized us as "bourgeois flâneurs." Sheila McLaughlin then also acted in films by Elfi Mikesch. Elfi in turn took over for me at the camera in COMMITTED during the scenes where I was acting. I had dismounted the quartz from a blimped Bolex Pro camera that I'd brought from Hamburg, which added to the period look that Jim Hoberman praised so much. For Sheila McLaughlin, the film, which premiered at the Berlinale Forum in 1984, got her contacts at the Kleines Fernsehspiel, which at the time was not yet suffering from its self-inflicted provincialism. And the American Independent Film was not yet the idolized scene that it later degenerated into, with the aid of West German production support.

Third change of course, 1985: Lynne Tillman had written a script after Jane Bowles's novel *Two Serious Ladies*, which she wanted to shoot with Carola Regnier and Magdalena Montezuma in the lead roles. I was supposed to do the camera-work and I would have liked to. Unfortunately the project fell through, despite Paul Bowles's support with the rights, because a German production company had in the meantime raised funds for a

film by Sara Driver based on the same novel. The film was never realized. Lizzie Borden, who had acted in Sheila McLaughlin's *INSIDE OUT*, was planning the film *WORKING GIRLS* with Miramax, after the success of her 1983 film *BORN IN FLAMES*, in which Sheila McLaughlin and Kathryn Bigelow had participated, and I was supposed to be director of photography. "Going pro" was being talked about. At this point I had to make a decision. The laws of the division of labor and the reigning practice in the US, as opposed to West Germany, of a strict division between "professional" and "experimental" cinema, meant that deciding for a career as a cameraman in the US would have impeded any possibility of me making my own films there. The experience of John Erdman, who had been refused a role in a feature film by the "industry" because he'd worked in films by Yvonne Rainer, was warning enough for me. So I declined and worked in Germany on *DIE BASIS DES MAKE-UP* (with John Erdman in the lead role) and on *DIE WIESE DER SACHEN*. Then I took on doing the camerawork for the "film in a film" in Sheila McLaughlin's 1987 film *SHE MUST BE SEEING THINGS*, in which Kyle deCamp plays "Catalina." Kyle, in turn, acted with John Erdman in my film *THE HOLY BUNCH* in 1990.

Petra and Uwe Nettelbeck published a text about working on *SHE MUST BE SEEING THINGS* in September 1986 in *Die Republik* Nr. 76-78 that begins: "Camera, on May 16, 1986. Woke up in the afternoon in a windowless room. The night before I had almost continuously had the handheld camera in front of my right eye, while the left one was blocked by a patch. And now I couldn't get my head around the furniture in the room. The work from the day before seemed to me like a state of trance, a cavern of dreams, in which I only existed as a person in the function of the eye in the geometrical space that it projected into the landscape. Communication with the film team, based more or less on descriptions of images, had broken down because of the handheld camera, which shut everyone else out from seeing. The team no longer knew what I was doing. The production floated in darkness. The images on the retina shot their invisible rays of construction into the artificially lit shooting location. This process cannot be conveyed in the moment when it is emerging. Usually this fact is hidden by the production lie that images are something that you can securely store away in the camera. Everyone knows those images where nothing is reflected but the desk of the one who thought them up..." It was the scene where Catalina duels with a man in the night. Here is the sketch of the

breakdown of the scene that I found in my copy of the script.

My original idea for Living Archive was to bring out the films COMMITTED and NORMALSATZ on a double DVD as an example of a 30-year-old, transatlantic cooperation. Now it seems more pertinent to provide access to the three films by Sheila McLaughlin and Lynne Tillman, together with the video interview that Stefanie Schulte Strathaus and I recorded with Sheila McLaughlin at the Arsenal on December 21, 2012, and the interview that I carried out by email with Lynne Tillman in January 2013. In our project, the films stand for a development of experimental film that took place in the 70s and 80s – away from a radical, material-oriented, self-reflexive film form and towards a narrative strategy of Independent Film, in which new forms of film representation and documentation were worked out.

My *Trilogy of the Seventies*, which includes NORMALSATZ and appeared due to a similar impetus, will appear with Filmgalerie 451 shortly thereafter.

April 2013

About COMMITTED

Talk between Heinz Emigholz and Lynne Tillman, January 2013

Heinz Emigholz: How did you come up with the topic “Frances Farmer”, was her life story of general interest in those days?

Lynne Tillman: In the late 1970s, because, in part, of feminism and feminist theory, many of us were seeking out women in history who had been under the radar or forgotten. In 1978, I saw a photograph of Frances Farmer in a film or in actuality – in any case, it was a framed picture of Frances Farmer that sat on filmmaker Bette Gordon’s mantelpiece. I wondered what had happened to Frances. I suppose I’d read some salacious material about her years before, in Kenneth Anger’s *Hollywood* book, and it surfaced again, seeing her picture.

How did you develop the story with Sheila McLaughlin, why did you want to work on the project together?

I wanted to make a Super 8mm sound movie with Sheila, because I liked her first film, *INSIDE OUT*. It had a quality I felt would work with the extreme circumstances of Farmer's life. Also, Sheila and I both were very engaged in issues about mothers and daughters, and in a very basic sense, *COMMITTED* is a film about a daughter and a mother.

I was and am a novelist, a writer, it's who I am, what I do. But I had a background in experimental film; I had made a few short films, nothing terrific, but had also shown experimental films. I knew its history, too. I thought that Sheila and I could combine our talents and make a compelling film, an experimental narrative. My initial thought was to make a short film, in Super 8mm sound. There were a lot of people in downtown Manhattan in the late 70s into the 80s who'd taken up the technology. I thought Sheila and I could have fun making it. But Sheila wanted to do it in 16mm, and that changed the nature of the project, into something more serious which took a lot of time.

Was the script done before the first shooting period or did you develop it further during the years of production?

I think much of the script was done before we began filming. I know that changes were made, additions were made, over the five years it took to make. The first thing we filmed was about ten or 15 minutes of the film, the beginning, and we made it to show to grant-giving organizations. Sheila and I worked on the story together, then I wrote it, then showed it to her, then there were changes. The usual process.

How did you find these great media inserts – psychiatrist's convention, educational film, radio play? Did you plan to include them in the film from the beginning?

I'm not sure how we found everything we used. We wanted Frances and her mother to listen to the radio when they sat in the living room, and we went to record stores and sought out records of radio plays. As for the Congress on Mental Hygiene, I think Sheila found out there was such a thing, and we tracked down the two volumes from that

Congress, which had been held in Washington, DC. The volumes were in a small library branch, a branch of the New York Public Library, on West 43rd street, I think. That material was a treasure, and all quite insane. We used as much as we could, by having the radio announcer speak it.

COMMITTED seems to be the first independent movie filmed as a “period” piece, or am I wrong?

We made a “period film,” although I don’t think we began by saying that to each other. As it came together, as it was about to be shot, our choices were shaped by keeping period, and I think it does. Or anyway, it doesn’t feel contemporary.

We were aware of using time, slowing everything down, and both of us liked that. For instance, the mental hospital scene, in which the women are sitting around, sluggish, doing nothing. Time for inmates is painfully hard and slow, filled with doing nothing much at all. Also, the slowness seemed a part of its time, film then was slower, scenes longer, and there was more talking.

Your cinematography, Heinz, was crucial, essential to the film. I suppose that is obvious, but I want to underscore it. Your eye. The look of the film depended on that eye. There were three major shoots over a period of several years. Because of that continuity, your coming from Germany to shoot the majority of it, the film maintained its integrity.

The movie is quite didactic. Is that a sign of those times? Do you still like it?

It is a didactic film, which has a number of causes or reasons. One, Sheila and I were concerned about telling Frances’s story, because people wouldn’t know it or her. Though a biography had recently come out, William Arnold’s *Shadowland*, Frances Farmer was not on people’s minds. Most thought she was the American candymaker, *Frances Farmer Chocolates*. So, we thought the audience needed to be informed. Looking back, I think less would have been more, and I, as the scriptwriter, made a mistake. There are scenes that just don’t work, because I’m obviously writing lines to explain events of the time. Also, I got it into my head to write soliloquies or monologues for Frances and her mother, as in a Shakespearean play. In retrospect, I think that, though we came up with some amazingly

unusual scenes, performing monologues or soliloquies is extremely taxing on the actor, trained or untrained. But with all its defects, I still like COMMITTED, and think there's nothing else like it.

Another cause or reason for the didacticism: it was part of experimental film then. Not all of experimental film. Peter Wollen, in his essay *The Two Avant-Gardes*, clearly showed the differences between, say, a Godard, Frampton, and a Brakhage. But there were many filmmakers working with the idea of teaching and telling in a rather direct way. Yvonne Rainer's films, *JOURNEYS TO BERLIN*, for one, is a great example.

How did the Avant-garde establishment react to the movie?

I don't think COMMITTED made much headway in the avant-garde, certainly not then. It first showed in the States in 1985, and by then a certain kind of feminist filmmaking, of which we were a part, was dying. Also, the fact that it was a narrative film would immediately exclude it from certain readings of what avant-garde is. I think by now narrative is not seen that way. But back then! From my point of view, its renunciation was ridiculous. And of course shortsighted. I've written often about the importance of narrative, what it can do. An early line of mine that gets quoted now: "Stories are a way to think." I think that's true. #

Was the film included in film collections? If not, why not, what do you think?

I don't know if it's in film collections, I hope so. Recently, I was on a panel about Cindy Sherman's work at the *Walker Art Center*. I represented writing, Tom Kalin, filmmaking, et al. Tom told me later that, to him and other filmmakers, COMMITTED, when it came out, was very important because it was the first experimental film of that time to merge narrative and experimental techniques. I was really happy to learn that.

Did you work on other films after COMMITTED?

After COMMITTED, I finished my novel *Haunted Houses* and wrote a script for Jane Bowles' novel, *Two Serious Ladies*. I wanted to direct it. I got two grants to make it,

from NYSCA and the Jerome Foundation. The script was based closely on the novel, using its dialogue as much as possible. But I was stopped, legally, from making it. A long, sad story. After a year of trying, including going to Tangiers to speak with Paul Bowles, I gave up. And I returned the money to the Jerome Foundation. They were startled. Then, since being a fiction writer was my first priority, and always had been, I gave up the idea of directing films altogether. But in the early 90s, I wrote a script for Jane Weinstock. And with it, she got into Sundance's Director's Lab (1993). But Jane finally shelved it, and went on to make a different feature, working on the script with Gloria Norris. It's called EASY. I'm glad that I couldn't make *Two Serious Ladies*. I thought I could do everything, but actually writing a novel, which is my first and most precious love, takes everything from me. I learned I can't do everything.

I liked that we exchanged "jobs" (acting, writing, camera) for each other in those days. I say that in regard to NORMALSATZ in which I used your text *The Interpretation of Facts* for a sequence, and my camera work on COMMITTED.

Working on NORMALSATZ was a huge amount of fun. It was a crazy time. But you took care of everything and made sure all of us were fed and housed. NORMALSATZ, as a record of time, and the movements back and forth among a group of people, is very dear to me. I'm very glad you made it and included me, though I'm a terrible actor.