ERNIE GEHR IN CONVERSATION WITH ADRIANO APRÀ AND THE PARIS SPRING SCHOOL

Ernie Gehr: The first thing I would like to do, as part of this introduction, is to talk about formats that someone who works with the moving image needs to be concerned with. If you are a painter, for example (to talk of another visual medium), you have many options in terms of the format in which you can present your image, or images. It might be a square, a rectangle – and when we say rectangle, it could be a horizontal rectangle, an upright rectangle, a diagonal rectangle… – or it may be a circle, a round format, a triangle or some other shape. If you work in painting, you have some freedom to choose the shape of your canvas based upon the content of the work or your intuition of how the work should be presented, how best to articulate what you want to articulate through the form that you choose. If you are a filmmaker, on the other hand, or a video-maker, you do not have those choices. Yes, you can use a matte to reshape the image within the rectangle, and that was sometimes done in early cinema, and that possibly come out of 19th century magic lantern practices of using different masking shapes. But the use of mattes in cinema largely disappeared by the early 1920s, when it became somewhat of a no-no. The reason for that is that it called attention to the artifice being employed. However, some filmmakers continued to use them. Griffith, for example, in spite of the fact that he was very much interested in narrative filmmaking, still used different formats to emphasize, to dramatize situations. If he wanted to show you someone walking down a long flight of stairs to emphasize a descent, he would block out the sides, and you would have this narrow upright rectangle with emphasis being placed on the character's descent. Whether you are a maker, or an appreciator of cinema, reflecting upon cinematic formats and how they might or might not affect the content and character of a work can be very useful, especially if you are interested in non-narrative works. Generally speaking, much of early cinema tended to use a format which was almost square-like. Later on, it became more horizontal in shape, and then in recent history, from the 1950s onwards with Cinemascope, then Cinerama, etc., it's very common to see movies within these elongated horizontal formats, a format then carried over to contemporary digital media. What does this format feel like? And how does someone make use of it in an effective way? 16mm film, which is what I work with most of the time when I work with film, is more square-like; one often refers to it as a three-by-four rectangle, and it has a different feeling than a elongated horizontal rectangle.

Adriano Aprà: You talked about the format: you, as most of the so-called experimental filmmakers, have worked with the 16mm and only in the 4:3 ratio format. A kind of format we don't see anymore in regular cinemas. Since it is important, as you said, to be attentive to the entire image, what about the difference between what you film with the camera mask and what is projected with the projector mask, which is a little narrower than the camera format? I'm looking

all the time at the border of the screen. Here, I could see a little dotted frame line, not like the straight line in video, which is different from film where it is impossible, I think, to have a straight line, which gives you the idea that film is something concrete.

E.G.: The dotted line appears because of the transfer, but it was not intended to be there. Actually, with video more than with film, images are cropped to various degrees. I have a digital camera, and what I see through the viewer is not necessarily what people will see later on, when the work is projected or seen on another monitor. With video then, more than with film, it becomes difficult to have compositional considerations near the borders. On one occasion, images at the borders may be visible, on another they may not.

This leads to other related considerations, such as projection conditions under which we end up seeing films. Here, for example, the lights above us are always on when films are projected, and if you sit in the middle of the auditorium or in the back, the lights and all the stuff around us lessens the intensity of the work presented. They pull something away from you. When the work has what we may call traditional content, you focus on the story and can ignore some interferences as much as possible, often without much of a problem. But with some non-narrative work, especially work focused on, say, light and darkness as immediate sensual experience, that becomes difficult. I bring that up not as a criticism of this space, but as something that you need to keep in mind in judging non-narrative cinematic works. Let me put it this way… even on a busy street, with much sound all around, it is not difficult to enjoy a song through its lyrics, but a quiet chamber piece, may require a different setting. Likewise, when you see certain cinematic or digital works, it is important to see them under the best of conditions for their full realization, which again, is often not possible.

What I am advocating in these remarks is not only a responsiveness to a larger spectrum of cinematic possibilities that one is normally accustomed to, but also to a conscious consideration under which works are presented and how those conditions may have a bearing on your experience of a work, especially when it is not a traditional narrative or documentary work.

A.A.: In my experience, I've never seen a perfect projection, and I think it is physically impossible. I remember the *Invisible Cinema* in New York, conceived by Peter Kubelka, which was completely dark, and you couldn't know if there were other people around you because you had panels around you. But it was built over a subway, so, since most of the films were silent, from time to time the room vibrated. It's correct to say that cinema is conceived in a way but fabricated in another way. It is conceived as a virtual or mental experience: looking to images that don't exist if not as light and sounds. It's an art of the 21st century, which refers to virtual images, but with a technology of the 19th century, just like the projector is a machine to destroy films. Film has noises, and video has apparently no noises. Here, there was a hair in the margins of the image: it is the proof that the matter of the world is coming into this virtual image. So, I think you are working inside cinema's contradiction between an idea of virtual perfection and the chance of the world. In my opinion, many of your films are built on this point of convergence. For example, *Serene Velocity* (Fig. 1) is a film that in a sense abolishes chance, like a mathematical structure, except for the light of the morning that comes at the end of the film, if you are still thinking that you are still looking at something real. In the films you have made and I've seen, the frame is always limiting, in the sense that it defines the shape, but inside this mental geometry, inside this object which is like a "sculpture in time", you have chance coming in, something that you cannot control. To me, the most similar filmmakers are Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet: you are working on a similar idea of control and freedom at the same time.

Fig. 1 – *Serene Velocity* (Ernie Gehr, 1970).

Or you reject experimental films, or these films belong to each viewer. In narrative fictional film with actors, there's a path industry invented to make the spectator follow. Here, it's impossible to follow all the things because you have to follow everything that is happening, and there are a lot of things… you cannot see them all. Cinema is an art of memory, and each time I see your films I see a different film, and I find it very difficult to talk about them. To me, there is a religious way, a "meditational" tendency in your cinema. You made *History*, which is just nothing, or everything, it is just the grain of film: it is an experience I have with some of Rothko's paintings. It is just something to meditate on, it is a painting about perhaps myself: some of your extreme films are films about ourselves, we can see whatever we want.

E.G.: You said a lot of truthful things. What you said about *History* is quite accurate, and very touching. Thank you. *History* is not about me or about a situation that we may encounter in our daily life, but on the other hand, in a way, in an indirect way, in part, however, it does inform you about my mental life. In some other works of mine I may be more focused on my history, or my response to particular situations, or spaces, but definitely not on *History*.

Speaking about the material of film: re-instating its character relates to a consideration of the representation of a three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional frame. It's bringing you back here, to this room, to the work taking place on the surface of the screen: you're not somewhere else, you're not in the corridor where I filmed *Serene Velocity*, you're here and now. In some respect then, acknowledging the materiality of film might be considered as a parallel to acknowledging a person: I mean, these works were not made in a vacuum, they were made by a human creature working with physical materials. The acknowledgment of those things brings to the foreground the life and character of film itself, and its dynamic, yet also its fragile and precarious existence. I liked what you said about *Serene Velocity*. Thank you.

About screening conditions: when I'm editing, I project my films on a wall. I don't have a screen. I hear the projector running and that brings in all kind of rhythmic things. The projector is running at a different rate my heartbeat is, so it is working counter to that. And often counter to the rhythm of the film being put together as well. To look at silent works that way often presents problems, and you have to block them out. Sometimes it is very difficult to do that. I'm also interested in chance, in accidents, very much.

Video is a different world. Film is tactile, physical. Many filmmakers, especially those who work in more traditional ways, try to ignore or suppress film's physical attributes, but in terms of most of the filmmakers that I'm in touch with, we are always aware, sensitive and responsive to the physicality of film, yet also not denying that there are other possibilities, either within film or other media. In comparison to film, the digital medium is so clean! You know, I live in New York and I have to clean our place every week. There's a lot of industrial dust that accumulates all the time in urban environments, and we inhale it, too.

I try not to make works that have a message: I'm interested in observation and to some degree in indirect statements. Also something that cannot be translated, something that you say within this language that you use, and that needs to be experienced. It's like someone touching you, just the physical feeling of touch, or you watch the sun rising or the sun setting: what does it mean? Scientifically, you know what is taking place, but there's something poetic about it, and it fills you in a certain way, be it pleasurable, painful or otherwise. You taste some foods: first, perhaps you respond to the colors, textures, and aroma. Then you touch it, and you put it in your mouth and your taste buds start to activate… and of course, you hope that what you are taking in is nourishing, good for your being. The process and experience can be wonderful, and I'm interested in that. I read poetry, and I'm interested in what happens between words, in the sound, and the play that takes place between words as well as the spaces between words. In titling a film, I try not to be very pointed about what I am pursuing in a particular work. For example, *Rear Window* (Fig. 2) is the first film where I worked with negative film. Before that I worked only with reversal film, where colors often have a more saturated and harsher look. Negative film offered me opportunities to work with pastel and mid-range colors, and I was very interested in that. I was also interested in working with light as something absent and something present, so when the screen goes to black, you realize that suddenly the image is wiped off the screen, and then it reappears, and then it is wiped off again. The film was made after my father died.
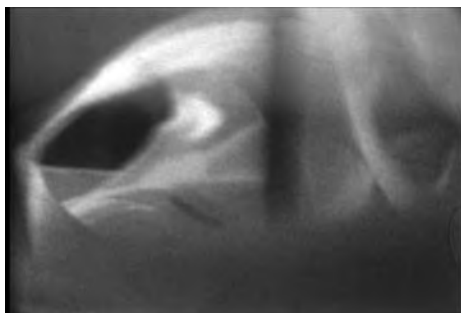

Fig. 2 – *Rear Window* (Ernie Gehr, 1986-1991).

Question: In *Rear Window*, you hold the lens in your hand, and there's a feeling of touching the light. I was wondering about what kind of movement you were doing, what feeling you had doing that.

E.G.: Most of the time I was holding the lens in my hand, it wasn't screwed onto the camera. The shifting of colors and also the distortions are all filtered through the skin of my fingers. I just allowed more or less light to come through my skin, so I made the colors shift, and also made them blurring or dissolving. Light is something you can't grasp with your hand as you can a solid object. To attempt that is a hopeless gesture, trying to touch something that is not possible to touch. In that sense the image on screen – any image on a screen – is a phantasmagoric projection. It is composed of molded colored light and shadow. The images you see in the film are of towels, bed sheets, underwear, stuff that you wear next to your body or use to remove dirt. You wash yourself and what you wear, and after washing you dry them somehow. I used to live in a Italian neighborhood in Brooklyn, where it's very common for people to just hang their clothes outside to dry them. I hope it is possible to have a worthwhile experience of the film without any knowledge of what prompted the making of it. However, the film came into being as a meditation and an emotional response, by way of light, color, the medium I work with in an interplay with the idea of a "window" and the clothes blowing in the wind, to the passing of my father.

Question: Are there any relations with some contemporary artists? To me, *Serene Velocity* recalled *Green Corridor* by Bruce Nauman.

E.G.: I am not familiar with the work you mention. However, I do look at work in various mediums, including painting, and I am a creature of my time and environment, so I would not be surprised if my work has some affinities with the work of some other contemporary artists. With *Serene Velocity*… what prompted me to make this film: one day I was examining a piece of film, and as I was going back and forth from one frame to the next, I noticed that I had a greater experience of motion as well as a more interesting experience of motion when I shifted back and forth between two frames than if that little strip of film I was holding had just been projected in a straight forward manner. That started me to reflect upon ideas and concepts of motion in cinema as well as the role intervals between frames play in that respect. *Serene Velocity* is also a work which confronts the issue of space and its realization on a two dimensional plane. In some ways the work goes back to my first and second 16mm films (*Morning* and *Wait*). In these two earlier works, I changed the exposure from frame to frame. In *Serene Velocity*, I chose to change the image by changing the millimeter of the lens. For example, going from 50mm to 55, then from 45 to 60, until I got to the two extreme positions of the lens. It opened up possibilities that I could not have predicted. And I was interested in pursuing that further, but part of my everyday life at the time made it very difficult, and then I began to see other people working with that option, and I moved away from it, except in a work I completed a few years later, *Table*.

Question: This way to work seems similar to minimalism in music or in sculpture, isn't it? I think of Sol LeWitt.

E.G.: Certain ideas about art were in the air then. I was also familiar with the music of Philip Glass and Steve Reich as well as the theatre work of Richard Foreman, and on some level you then begin to feel a kinship with other artists, some working with film, some with painting, music, etc. However, works that you may be thinking of as well as works by artists like Foreman, Glass or Reich I only became familiar with after I began to work along certain lines. Except for Foreman and Reich, the individuals I felt closest to were mainly filmmakers. Co-incidentally, some of us were living within a radius of ten city blocks. We didn't think of ourselves as a school, or a movement. We just thought of ourselves as artists, sharing certain values, certain aesthetics,

certain interests. And then an article came out and we were called "structuralists". We said: "Structuralists? What is that?" We tried to change it, but it was too late, it caught on rapidly, like a fire. That's the way things sometimes happen. Think about Picasso, who said he'd never heard of "cubism". Talking about labels: my idea of labeling this cinema would be simply to say: "films by", followed by the name of the filmmaker.

A.A.: I could suggest a label: "elementary cinema". It's cooler, like in Italian "scuola elementare" (primary school)…

Question: I would like to ask you to comment with more detail on the editing phase. What struck me, particularly in the Berlin film (*Passage*, Fig. 4) is that there are patterns that you might describe with musical metaphors, like repetition, variation on certain themes; all of a sudden there is a shot of the bus stop that you don't expect by your previous material. So, my approach in trying to comprehend the structure of the film would be by bringing up musical metaphors, but they don't necessarily have to be the key or the cue you bring to the people who are able to grasp it.

E.G.: In general, it varies from work to work. Sometimes I may follow a pre-conceived structure, as with *Serene Velocity.* When I work with film (as opposed to digital media), and I have to finance the work with my own savings, which is most of the time, I try to figure things out in advance: why do I want to film this particular image or series of images, and what do I want to do? So, I keep the shooting ratio as close to 1:1 as possible. But then, when I get the footage back, I have to look at it, and quite often I have to throw out the initial ideas, and the work is restructured, sometimes dramatically. The initial, core intention may still be there at the end, but how to get to that may have to be rerouted by the character of the material that I get back from the lab. It is a conscious, yet also very intuitive and felt-out process that is continuously being modified. I don't have any formulas. Each work presents its own set of issues. And I like that. It makes working on a new piece challenging and exciting. I'm interested in an art that opens you up to new possibilities, which makes you a little more conscious, aware of the possibilities of a new aesthetic experience, and perhaps that on some level may also inform about some matters in the world. Perhaps the best guide may be to take a cue from my working process: instead of projecting forward, respond intuitively and see as much as possible from moment to moment. That is what I generally try to do when I look at works as well as when I am editing.

As for *Passage*, it was originally conceived in 1976, on my first visit to Berlin. At that time I intended to make a work which I thought would end up being about one hour long. It never materialized that way. The conception of the work was prompted by a train ride in the middle of the night into East Berlin and then back to West Berlin. It was quite a moving experience. My parents were German, and in an alternative history, Berlin would most likely have been where I would have grown up. For me, that train ride was very much grounded in the present, at the same time, some of images for me were incredibly evocative of another time and other developments then the ones in front of my eyes. Those were the factors that drew me to the making of this film. Part of the work was not only the train but also going to my might once have been "home". To make this film I felt I needed to film in East Berlin, but when I attempted to do that in 1982 I was not able to obtain permission from the East German authorities. In 1991 I was back in Berlin to show some works. One evening, over dinner with some friends I mentioned how easy it would now be to make this film now that Berlin was no longer divided. My friend offered me the use of his camera. First I hesitated, especially as I was there only for a short time, but then I took up his offer; purchased some film and began to record sounds and images. Except for a few shots

recorded on the streets of East Berlin, on that occasion I did record the footage that I thought at one time would be part of the center of the film. I didn't think I was ready for that, so I started to film from the S-Bahn, the elevated train. And then of course, I had to return to the U.S. Some years later I returned to Berlin to finish recording the necessary footage, but by then things had changed too much and the equipment wasn't working properly either. For a couple of years, the footage sat on the shelf. Then, around 2002, I went back to the footage I had accumulated and shaped it into its present form.

Question: It is also a film about frames, and the holes between them.

E.G.: Yes. That is a very nice way to put it. In addition, the work is constantly shifting from surface to depth and then back to surface. Looking into, or at least attempting to look into windows, streets, alleys, courtyards, and then back to the brick wall, which among other things then re-enforces the picture frame.

Fig. 3 – *Before the Olympics* (Ernie Gehr, 2006).   Fig. 4 – *Passage* (Ernie Gehr, 2003).

ERNIE GEHR

Filmography

Morning (1967), 16mm, 4'30'' (at 16fps), color, silent.
Wait (1967), 16mm, 7' (at 16fps), color, silent.
Reverberation (1969), 16mm, 23' (at 16fps), B&W, sound.
Transparency (1969), 16mm, 11', color, silent.
Field (1970), 16mm, 19' (at 16fps), B&W, silent.
Field (Short Version) (1970), 16mm, 9'30'' (at 16fps), B&W, silent.
History (1970), 16mm, 40' (at 16fps), B&W, silent.
Serene Velocity (1970), 16mm, 23' (at 16fps), color, silent.
Three (1970), 16mm, 4', B&W, silent.
Still (1971), 16mm, 55', color, sound.
Eureka (initially known as *Geography*) (1974), 16mm, 30', B&W, silent.
Shift (1974), 16mm, 9', color, sound.
Behind the Scenes (1975), 16mm, 4'15'', color, sound.
Table (1976), 16mm, 16' (at 16fps), color, silent.
Untitled [1977] (1977), 16mm, 5' (at 16fps), color, silent.
Mirage (1981), 16mm, 8', color, silent.
Untitled: Part One, 1981 (1981), 16mm, 29', color, silent.
Signal – Germany on the Air (1982-1985), 16mm, 35', color, sound.
Rear Window (1991), 16mm, 10', color, sound.
Side/Walk/Shuttle (1991), 16mm, 41', color, sound.
This Side of Paradise (1991), 16mm, 14', color, sound.
For Daniel (1996), 16mm, 72', color, silent.
Cotton Candy (2001), Digital Video, 54', color, sound.
Glider (2001), Digital Video, 37', color, silent.
Crystal Palace (2002), Digital Video (now on HD/Blue-Ray), 27', color, sound.
City (2002), Digital Video, 35', color, sound (withdrawn).
Passage (2003), 16mm, 13', color, sound.
City (revised version, 2003), Digital Video, 27', color, sound (withdrawn).
Precarious Garden (2004), 16mm, 13', color, silent.
The Collector (2003), Digital Video, 18', color/B&W, sound.
The Astronomer's Dream (2004), Digital Video, 15', B&W, sound.
Essex Street Market (2004), Digital Video, 29', B&W. silent.
Noon Time Activities (2004), Digital Video, 21', B&W, silent.
Workers Leaving the Factory (After Lumière) (2004), Digital Video, 12', B&W, silent.
Greene Street (2004), Digital Video, 5', color, silent.
Before the Olympics (2006), Digital Video, 15', color, sound.
The Morse Code Operator (or The Monkey Wrench) (2006), Digital Video, 28 min, color/B&W, sound.
Shadow (2007), Digital Video, 9', color, silent.
Cinematic Fertilizer 1 (2007), Digital Video, 5', color, silent.
Cinematic Fertilizer 2 (2007), Digital Video, 8', color, silent.
10th Avenue (2007), Digital Video, 57', color, sound (subsequently re-edited into a 35' work and re-titled *Work in Progress*).
The Dutch Arrive in New York (2007), Digital Video, 33', color, sound.
Daily Commute (2007), Digital Video, 10', color, sound.

Ocean Avenue (2008), Digital Video, 11', color, sound.
Whispers (2008), Digital Video, 5', B&W/color, silent.
New York Lantern (2008), Digital Video, 15', color/B&W, sound.
Waterfront Follies (2008), Digital Video, 39', color, sound.
Urban Sightseeing (2009), Digital Video, 14', color, silent.
Hurry Up Henrietta (2009), Digital Video, 12', color, silent/sound.
Abracadabra (2009), Digital Video, 29', color/B&W, silent/sound.
Turn-of-the-Century (2009), Digital Video, 10', color, silent.
Full Moon (2009), Digital Video, 9', color, sound.

Installations

Brother, Can You Spare Some Time? (1995), Multimedia installation.
MoMA on Wheels (2001), Digital Video, Single-Channel projection. MoMA June-November 2001.
Navigation (2001), Digital Video, 2-Channel projection, MoMA June-November 2001.
Panoramas of the Moving Image: 19th Century Mechanical Slides and Dissolving Views (2005), Digital Video, 5-Channel projection, MoMA September 2007-March 2008.
Crossing The Bowery (2006), Digital Video, 4-Channel projection.
Untitled (Silhouettes), Digital Video, 4-Channel projection.
Ocean Avenue (2007), Digital Video, 4-Channel projection.
Water Series 1 (2008-09), Digital Video, 32 Single-Channel pieces.
Water Series 2 (2009), Digital Video, 13 Single-Channel pieces.