

A Programmer's Chronicles 10

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By Gertjan Zuilhof

Marie Losier and Jenny Perlin had never met. At least, not that they are aware of. There are only a few places in New York City where you can buy double-perforated adhesive tape to stick strips of 16mm film together. So one could imagine that they have probably stood together waiting in line in the small audiovisual-materials shop in the arts department of the NYU (New York University), but that's just an supposition. Losier and Perlin have a lot more in common than you would think. They both live and work in New York. They are female avant-garde film makers from the same generation. Perlin is from 1970 and Losier is from 1972. You could say they were granddaughters of Marie Menken and Maya Deren. Great granddaughters of Germaine Dulac.

And they work on 16mm. They still do. And each in their very own special way. That is why they are prominently present in Still 16, the Rotterdam 2007 programme section that pays homage to the dying film format 16mm in a select and topical way. They are present with their own latest films and in addition, at my request, they have put together compilation programmes with new 16mm work by colleague film makers. They are very different programmes, because alongside so many similarities you can also find enough differences. Or maybe in this case you can primarily find differences.

The work of Losier is characterised by insanity and historic consciousness. Her latest short film FLYING SAUCEY! is basically a contemporary variation on age-old silent-film farces like the ones that live on in programmes such as Comedy Capers. An enormous pan of spaghetti lands on the roof in New York. Cheerfully dressed damsels crawl out of the pan, probably portraying extra terrestrials on a festive visit. It's pure slapstick. There is no doubt that crew and actors had a hilarious and crazy afternoon. And it isn't just craziness. Losier knows her classics. She made films about and with the famous underground masters, the Kuchar Brothers and her film THE ONTOLOGICAL COWBOY focuses on theatre phenomenon Richard Foreman. Her nonsense is not nonsense but Dada worthy of respect. Although worthy of respect may not be the right term for so much clever pleasure.

Sweet Sixteen!, the 16mm programme put together by Losier, is populated by whimsical and fantastic films with bats (by Jo Dery), contrite animals (by Jim Trainor) and coloured gods (by Ben Russell). They have an unbridled imagination and also like to see that in other people's work.

The work of Perlin is characterised by irony and an analytic political consciousness. Her films are occasionally deceptively simple. Even occasionally apparently clumsy. For a long time, her films were characterised by an alarming flashing in the image as a result of a dysfunctional 16mm camera. To her great regret, she recently had to have the camera repaired, as a result of which the beloved dysfunctionality disappeared. A beautiful example of Perlin's refined awkwardness is her latest film NOTES. At first it looks like a primitive animation of thoughtless scribbling. Clumsy corkscrew lines jolt across the image. Only towards the end does the film reveal its secret and significance. Perlin found the scribbles in an archive and they were made in the middle of the Cold War by a condemned nuclear spy. Made during an interrogation that was not covered by the Geneva Convention. As a result of today's terrorism paranoia and un-authorized interrogation techniques, this short film with scribbling acquires a cutting significance and an overwhelming context. And the film is not alone. Perlin is working on a series of eight entitled Perlin Papers.

Typical of the historic irony of Perlin is the film THE LAST SLIDE PROJECTOR by Paige Sarlin in her programme. The slide projector has disappeared for good and no one seems to mourn its passing. That fate has so far not overtaken 16mm even though we don't know for how long. In the case of a small film by Deborah Stratman, THE MAGICIAN'S HOUSE, the maker herself wrote in the programme that it's probably the last film she will edit on 16mm.

The programme compiled by Perlin does not share any works with that of Losier. Apparently New York and the rest of the United States are still so well endowed with humorous and ingenious 16mm film makers that more topical programmes could be made.

The work selected by curator Mark McElhatten confirms this. Every year he brings a small treasure trove of short American avant-garde films with him to Rotterdam and this also includes works by incurable 16mm users such as David Gatten and Mark LaPore.

Despite the disappearance of 16mm, there are still enough tenacious film makers left to keep the material alive. And maybe you should say that it's even thanks to the disappearance of 16mm material, because the scarcity automatically makes the format special and maybe even romantic. Of course the New York ladies Losier and Perlin have their own websites where people can find further information. Marie Losier: <http://marielosier.net/main.html>. Jenny Perlin: <http://www.nilrep.net/>.