

GUNVOR NELSON DOSSIER

“Not Evident When You First See the Object”: An Interview with Gunvor Nelson

Drake Stutesman

This interview took place on October 24, 2006 in New York City during the Museum of Modern Art's retrospective of Nelson's work.

Drake Stutesman: You famously have gone from using film to using video. When did you do that and what are the pluses and minuses of this transfer?

Gunvor Nelson: My films are in 16mm. In Sweden, and probably here too, there are very few 16mm projectors left. Many institutions don't maintain their projectors and don't have people who can run them well. Even at established places. Film's so vulnerable to scraps and dirt and damages to sprocket holes. The beginning of *Red Shift* [US, 1984] was ruined recently. We saw it jump all over the place. The film is showing next in Chicago and I don't know if it's going to go through the projector. I wonder what film I should replace it with. Not long ago I showed a film at the Swedish Film Institute and they ruined it. It goes on and on.

DS: You have negatives of all these films?

GN: My originals are stored at Pacific Film Archive. I'd like to have prints made from the original negative of *Red Shift*, which is falling apart and needs to be mended. It was at Palmer Labs, which doesn't exist anymore, and the film has to be placed at another lab. There you have to go through the whole process of timing again. Timing is the term for going through every scene and correcting the density of lights and darks and the color. It's easier with a black and white film like *Red Shift*. This is all costly plus the costs of making trial

prints. The Pacific Film Archive has made an inter-negative and they use this negative for archival purposes. So that is my situation; I can't make any more prints unless I spend a lot of money and time. At this point I'm very tired of my 16mm films. Because I want them shown I'm dragging my heavy old films around, when I actually want to be at work making new videos. I don't have much grasp of the computer but I can use certain programs for video quite well. The very best thing about video is that it is so much fun and that I can do the whole process myself in the computer, from filming to editing to manipulating the image to the final product. No labs are needed. It's so much easier than film when the computer behaves. Of course both image and sound can go wrong in all kinds of ways. One is during transfers, but video does not get the same kind of scrapes and damages; in certain ways it is not as vulnerable as film.

DS: When did you make that transfer to video?

GN: At first I went to the Royal Academy of Art in Stockholm for a special course in video. I was by far the oldest one and I had never done video.

DS: When was this?

GN: In '98. There was not enough good equipment and people were fighting for time on the equipment. You had to sit at night to edit and this was difficult for me so I went to another workshop and there I more or less taught myself. The workshop had new equipment so things didn't break down so often.

DS: Are there any losses in using video? Is there anything you wish you could retain from film when using video?

GN: Not, it seems, if you have a good camera, a good lens, and good projection. You saw the difference in *Before Need* [US, 1976] and *True to Life* [US, 2006] [shown at MoMA the night before]. It's not that much difference. If you get the projector to have the right ratios of blacks so that you get a distance in the visuals, so that the blacks are black and the whites are white and they have a nice range of colors in between. I don't really see that difference. They say it gets flat but it depends on how you film. I'm not at all against video.

DS: The word "fragmentation" is used a lot about your work. I find it the opposite. I find your films very holistic. Even the little worm that's cut with the fingernail is still one piece, part of the action, or in the stripper film, *Take Off* [US, 1972], she's a body and she comes apart but she remains a body. The films show pieces within a relationship that cohere and stay separate.

GN: Oh, good.

DS: Could you talk about your sense of a whole? How do you put things together?

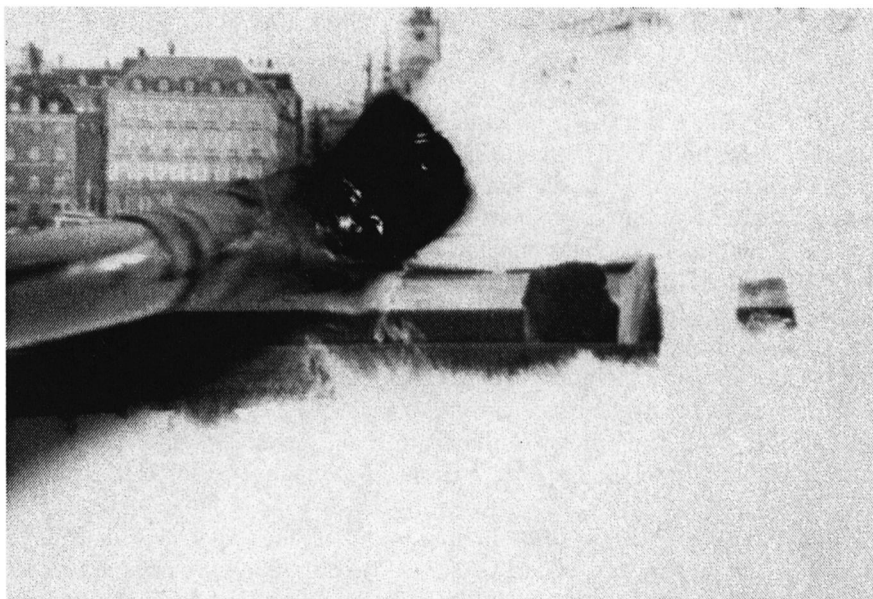
GN: Every film has its own solution. It feels difficult to talk about my film-making as a whole. I trust that if I have an attitude when I go about working on a particular film, it will not stray too much. I'm searching for the world of that particular film and from there diversions can take place, if the same attitude is maintained throughout. Like in *Before Need*, there is a glossy feel to how we filmed things. The objects are very present. We lit or we chose the things that were lit in the same way. Faces, fruits, all the objects had the same straightforward filming. We didn't film down on things, we filmed straight on. We used a tripod, maybe not in every single shot, which created a steady quality. So I go for a style or a feeling with each scene so that it belongs in that film's family. Then it's not so difficult to make diversions and come back because, somehow, it all fits. I don't know if I'm making myself clear?

DS: Yes, very clear. It would be helpful to talk about a specific film. You've said that you let the visuals lead you, that you don't have a storyline beforehand. And then the film leads you into the narrative, which comes through the editing at the end. Could you talk about that?

GN: It's interesting that sometimes when I write for a grant, I just throw ideas out and then somehow they become solidified and when I get the money there's already a lead in. But with *Red Shift*, for example, there were things that I knew already; that it was about the generations as well as having many very close-up shots and, in contrast, shots where you could see distance. It was going to be about women—a mother-and-daughter theme. I also wanted to include Calamity Jane's letters. That was the base. There were lists of things. I listed things like "anger," "jealousy," "love," all kinds of emotions. I wanted those in there somehow, but how they were going to be depicted, I didn't spell out in the beginning. They slowly appeared as I thought about the film.

DS: You talk about the film as a family. Relationships are very dominant in your work: between people, between objects and between you as the camera-person and the thing itself. Can you talk about this concept of family and relationships?

GN: That's a lot [laughs]. When I use "family," I mean it to have an atmosphere or quality specific to a certain film. From this basic atmosphere even very divergent surprises can fit if they belong to that family world. What fits or not is a difficult balance. For instance, I heard that there was a brush factory in my hometown in Sweden. So I asked, "Do you think I can get in to film there?" There was a lot of hassle. They didn't want me to film their technical



#1. *Frameline*. Courtesy of Gunvor Nelson.



#2. *Red Shift*. Courtesy of Gunvor Nelson.

secrets. But I got the scene with the naked brush without bristles and somebody in the film says, "Naked as a frog." People have wondered why I used that in *Red Shift*. I liked it. Somehow it worked for me and it humanized the objects that were in the process of being formed.

DS: Well, *Before Need* has interesting philosophical lines in it. One of them is, "After much practice I have learned to understand the relationship between object to ground." This sounds thematic to your work. What do you think?

GN: I don't have a memory of words like some people do. I couldn't quote you hardly anything that's in my films. I'm much more visual. I might think them up but I can't remember them or why I put them in or what they mean. But they somehow make sense to me. It's very difficult for me to tell you if it's theme or if it's moment in the film.

DS: Last night [at MoMA], when I asked you that question in the Q & A, you said, Yes that does sound right [both laugh]. Obviously, objects have great meaning to you and a human meaning to you. Talk about that. For example, the dead bird [in *Natural Features*, US, 1990] which you paint and then use stop frame, animation, and more painting. You started as a painter.

GN: In that particular film, I was in a good mood. I was in Stockholm and it was summer, and I had the use of Filmverkstan's animation room. They had a stationary camera set up to work underneath. There I built up with glass and filmed objects both underneath and above that glass. I was in a very spirited mood and would bring things I found on the ground on my walks like the dead bird. I bought various toys and a fish that I painted on and had a grand time collecting and filming. I didn't think, "Now I want a fish," but once these things were in the room and I filmed them, they became very much part of that film. The whole film is like that. Anything can happen and be part of it. But because I was doing the animation, four frames a second, in the camera, it all has the same rhythm. As to the objects, it's hard. They do take on some kind of significance once you point to them. But this, for instance [points to recorder], I would have to film so that it meant more than just a tape recorder.

DS: How would you do that?

GN: Ummm, how it was placed and what surrounded it or if you didn't show the whole thing or you started painting on it, or whatever. If it's too mundane and means only one thing, it will need to have reverberations and echoes of meaning, rather than being just plain "tape recorder."

DS: So is that how all this evolution with the painting etc started? Do you see this in a sense—I don't want to pin you down—as reverberations from the

object? You had talked about a film being variations on a theme or expressions of a gesture.

GN: Ripples of unexpected meanings or layers of meaning occur when you can't quite pin it down. I mean a potency of some kind that is not evident when you first see the object. Like the tomato in *Before Need* when a dull knife goes through it. Somehow, to me, it is beautiful, yet other darker things happen. I don't always spell it out for myself but I know that there are other meanings.

DS: Again, that makes me think that "holistic" is a more appropriate word for your films.

GN: I don't know quite what you mean by "holistic."

DS: I don't see the films as in pieces; rather, I see them as if kaleidoscopically cohering together.

GN: Right, that's what I see them as. There are so many different views of the film that add to the whole rather than detract into pieces. I always think of it as a puzzle and as having a kaleidoscopic quality. I repeat a lot but I usually let the same scene return in a different way each time, because the scene advances. This way you might get a more complete whole than if I just let the entire scene have its run.

DS: Other filmmakers came to mind in looking at your work. In *Red Shift* I had a great sense of the Straub/Huillet films with the corridors and figures.

GN: Who are they? I haven't seen their work.

DS: They are a German and French filmmaking team. Of course, Bruce Bailie is another kindred filmmaker.

GN: Yes, before I started filmmaking, I'd seen his films and Brakhage's films and others too. Like Dalí.

DS: The painter?

GN: Yes. And Buñuel. I knew that they were showing me that I, as a single artist, could also use film. Before that I thought I couldn't use film. It was too complicated and you needed whole studios.

DS: You studied as a painter. What kind of painting did you do? Brush, pallet knife?

GN: I'd painted since I was twelve so I went through all kinds of "isms" but I guess Abstract Expressionism. But more realistic, what do you call that "ism"? Figurative Expressionism. I remember as a fifteen-year-old in Holland looking at Franz Hals. It was the very emotional, expressionistic pictures that I reacted to rather than the very staid and careful paintings, although I could appreciate some of those too. Individualistic art impressed me and painters who showed more than the style of the day.

DS: How did you end up seeing Brakhage and the others?

GN: I remember being at a country house in Canyon near Berkeley with Bob Nelson. Was it at Bruce Baillie's parents'? There was a showing of avant-garde films. That's why it's called Canyon Cinema. Bruce Baillie's very lyrical films were shown and I thought, Well, this is it, this is what I want to do. There were Larry Jordan's films also.

DS: When was that?

GN: Dorothy [Wiley] and I started in '65. So it must have been '63, '64. I don't know.

DS: Can you talk about your collaboration with Dorothy Wiley?

GN: She and I worked together on the two early films, *Schmeerguntz* [US, 1966] and *Fog Pumas* [US, 1967]. After that, we made a film called *Five Artists: BillBobBillBob*, a film that Dorothy wanted to make. It is a documentary starting with five artists drawing big drawings together in a studio. The film continues with a section for each artist and ends with a party. Then we made *Before Need*. I usually did the filming as well as much of the editing. Dorothy has a background in literature and writes and she collected dreams for several of the films. She listens to much more music than I do and has that knowledge. So she was adding another dimension. In those days we stole music; we didn't have any rights.

DS: Do you like the diversity of collaboration?

GN: When we first started out we needed each other. We barely had a camera and no knowledge of filmmaking.

DS: You often make films on a reversal print?

GN: In the beginning, it was all reversal. Everyone was using reversal, because with reversal you could cut your own original yourself. Later on I had a light table so I could see exactly how and when I could synchronize the

A, B, C, D rolls. Most of the people I knew making films in the sixties did it themselves. Editing and optical printing were very primitive, so it was what you had at hand or borrowed. You didn't have fancy equipment.

DS: It would be fascinating to hear a sound track of one of your films. It's so rich.

GN: I was surprised how much I liked the sound track for *Natural Features* [US, 1990]. Jytte [Jensen, the MoMA curator of Nelson's retrospective] wanted to run back and turn it down. I didn't think it would hurt hearing it loud for once since it is so sparse. It was full and it was nice because usually a sound track for 16mm film is not as full as for video.

DS: Can you talk about sound in your films? It seemed like a knitting stitch that was constantly knitting into the film, pulling it together. Why is it so important to you?

GN: I do work on my sound, but I don't work on it simultaneously with the image. I find it much more freeing to work on the picture first and the sound later, in video as well. I'm so used to cutting without a worry about the sound and especially in 16mm, it was a drag to have to keep remembering to carry along the sync sound. I very seldom did 16mm sync filming. *Before Need* is synced. Video's different, it's automatically synced, so you can more easily cut it out or leave it in.

DS: You see editing the film as a sculptural process but that's an appropriate word for your sound. How do you approach it? Is it intuitive?

GN: I don't know. Again, every film has to have its own solution. I like to solve problems. I think that's my impetus to work on as complex a thing as sound/image. The more material you have, the harder it is to do the editing. It takes more time. It's not so intuitive; it's more trial and error. I really don't believe that much in intuition, unless you think of intuitive as being accumulated knowledge. I work so long and hard on my films that that knowledge of the film is stored in me. It's something like computer storage that, with a lot of work and time, I've placed in my brain and can draw from. At the beginning of a project I usually write lists to remember.

DS: What do you write?

GN: I have a list in *True to Life* with all the plants. Because I didn't know plants that well I didn't name them. Instead I made little drawings in color and comments about the connecting shot, comments like "from red to blue" or "from light to dark." I have analyzed all these scenes. Is it fast-moving? Is it going



#3. *Natural Features.* Courtesy of Gunvor Nelson.



#4. *Take Off.* Courtesy of Gunvor Nelson.

from right to left? I break down the scene with all these details. So once I did that I knew what I had to work with, it's like a script that you learn. My little drawings are faster to read than descriptions of the same images.

DS: So this is part of what you mean when you say the visuals direct the way you put the film together?

GN: Yes. On top of that is the other content. Like if it's a mother or a daughter. Is it a tender scene? A hitting scene? Each scene has an enormous amount of information. Then it's about combing all the ingredients so that it makes some kind of sense in the kaleidoscopic editing process. Now, for video, I have a keyboard. So I can make my own sounds in video. For *True to Life*, I only altered a few sounds. I amplified the sounds of moving through the plants but not very much. It was the camera and the plants that hit each other, their meeting, that made all the sound.

DS: There's a love of the process and of the object and of the interactions of the world. It's very joyful to watch your films.

GN: As you see when I describe my process, I can't say I have one way of working. Often it's a learning process of what this particular film needs and what this film has in it already.

DS: You have feministic direction in a number of films.

GN: That has come out less from my directing than it has from something existential. I don't like the word "feminist." I never have. I think it's more about humanism. It's for everybody. Equal rights and all that. But the word has drawn it into a different direction for me. It gets interpreted differently than I intend it. I'm very glad for those who are fighting in a more political way because I don't want to do that. I'm coming from an artist's point of view not from a political point of view.

DS: Well, *Schmeerguntz*.

GN: That's more from my own experience of the absurdities of it.

DS: You use fabric a lot. Things that transform. Things that burn. Rather than images of erosion, these are images of transformation. Fabric has that loose and fluid quality. In *Red Shift*, I thought the use of fabric—and I mean this very loosely—had a political tone. Women and fabric is a very ancient relationship.

GN: I'm talking about the sewing. To me these are more her symbols. The huge needle going through the little tiny hole. That has another connotation than the domestic scene.

DS: What connotation is that?

GN: Well, that we are all squeezed through. I mean squeezing through something that doesn't fit. It goes through and it's filled but with difficulty. And it's absurd because it's so huge. Maybe that doesn't show. And then the sewing is zigzagging and it's work. It's all these threads. It's sewing with difficulty or with a result that is not the norm.

DS: You grew up in Sweden. You were about twenty-one when you left. What from your childhood influenced your becoming a filmmaker and using film as you do?

GN: I always wanted to be an artist or an architect. I grew up in a very athletic family. I'm not saying we were stars. My mother was a gymnastics teacher, as was her mother. But in those days, my mother and her mother were also trained as physical therapists. My mother had three sisters and they were gymnastics teachers. We had a summer place and we were in the water and swimming and diving all the time. I dove a lot. It was that physicalness that was very related to dance and gestures. So *My Name is Oona* is a continuation of that somehow. That's my vague understanding of it. You never know how you became something.

DS: That makes sense. There's flow—of one gesture leading into another—and cohesion. Athletics is cohesion of movement, which is certainly how I would describe your films. Can you talk about your filming of *True to Life*? You said that you used two lenses on your camera. It's a fascinating technique. And the close-up is a very dominant feature in all your films.

GN: I guess I want to investigate the world and use whatever I can to get into it. A close-up lens is a great tool for getting to some other place where you haven't been. So that's easy in that sense, and it abstracts. If I view my hand like this, it's a hand. But if I go close here, there are rivers. It's a whole new landscape. The close-up lens allows me to go into a place I can't usually see. It's fun to discover new areas. It takes a portion and enlarges it so we don't connect it so much with the person. It removes certain knowledge so that you can see what is there more clearly.

DS: That's very evident in the films. You're not dehumanizing or fragmenting. Rather, you're doing something more like an attenuation, like pulling something out. It makes me think of *Time Being* [US, 1991]. You're filming

your dying mother and the camera tracks back further and further until we see your own legs. That is a series of removes, as it were, and yet it is a continuous line. But it's meant as a connection from one to the other. You were connected. So it works both ways.

GN: Yes. That's right.

DS: Thanks so much, Gunvor.