

# MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

## FOUND SOUNDS: A Retrospective of Barbara Meter's Avant-Garde Films

SUNDAY, APRIL 30, 2017, 4:30 P.M.

Program notes by guest curator Mónica Savirón

Presented with the support of the Consulate General of the Kingdom of the Netherlands

In the early 1970s, in need of a critical response to the commercialization of film production and programming, Barbara Meter (Netherlands, b. 1939) co-founded the Electric Cinema. Run by members of the Amsterdamse Film Coop, and STOFF (the Studio for the Development of Film and Film Manifestations), the theater became the epicenter of Dutch independent and avant-garde filmmaking. At the Electric Cinema, Meter curated international avant-garde and expanded cinema programs. After that, she co-created POLKIN (Political Kinema) and made documentaries as part of activist and feminist movements. In her avant-garde films, she pushes the cinematic medium forward with her unique way of repurposing documents and audio recordings, utilizing an innovative, masterful application of optical printing techniques. Meter manipulates images and reworks found sounds to create a personal expressive mode. Her essay "Looked for and Found: On Archival and Found Footage Film", was written in 1995 for the London School of Printing, and continues to be of radical importance. After many years of work, the EYE Filmmuseum in Amsterdam, working closely with the artist, has preserved Meter's films in all their complexity. *Found Sounds* is the first comprehensive retrospective of Barbara Meter's avant-garde films in the United States and in Spain.

This is an all-celluloid touring program taking place at the Milwaukee Underground Film Festival in Wisconsin (April 22), Museum of the Moving Image in New York (April 30), and (S8) Mostra de Cinema Periférico in A Coruña, Spain (June 2).

In partnership with EYE Filmmuseum, Amsterdam; Milwaukee Underground Film Festival; and (S8) Mostra de Cinema Periférico.



### Ariadne

2004. 35mm (from Super-8). Color. Sound. 12 mins.

In Greek mythology, Ariadne, granddaughter of the sun, plays a significant role in labyrinths, mazes, and circumstances in which sacrifices and reparations need to be made. In Meter's work, a woman's hands lay on knitting wheels and vinyl records that turn just as restlessly as the artist's film rewinds. Shot on Super-8 film, reworked and blown up to 16mm with the optical printer, and enlarged to 35mm, the blurred, soft grain purposefully becomes an homage to the quality of cinema as both weaving craft and relentless labor of love. Looped sounds of horses, albatrosses, trains, ocean waves, and archival sounds of war planes roaming through the air alternate with Kathleen Ferrier's and Gerald Moore's recordings of Franz Schubert's *Gretchen am Spinnrade*. Characteristic of the German *lied* or *lit*, which sets poems to music, this song cycle incorporates text from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's tragic play, *Faust*. Other added sounds are of Italian Cecilia Bartoli, with Hungarian György Fischer at the piano, singing in search of peace of heart in *Selve Amiche* by Antonio Caldara, and in *Amarilli, mia bella* by Giulio Caccini. One of Caccini's achievements was to think of musical composition as recitative expression: music as speech.

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## Lamento

2012. Written and performed by Remco Campert.

Audio recording of live performance. In Dutch. 3 mins.

From Barbara Meter's *Here Now*; part of the film series, *Ten Songs*.

### LAMENTO

Hier nu langs het lange diepe water  
dat ik dacht dat ik dacht dat je altijd maar  
dat je altijd maar

hier nu langs het lange diepe water  
waar achter oeverriet achter oeverriet de zon  
dat ik dacht dat je altijd maar altijd

dat altijd maar je ogen je ogen en de lucht  
altijd maar je ogen en de lucht  
altijd maar rimpelend in het water rimpelend

dat altijd in levende stilte  
dat ik altijd zou leven in levende stilte  
dat je altijd maar dat wuivend oeverriet altijd maar

langs het lange diepe water dat altijd maar je huid  
dat altijd maar in de middag je huid  
altijd maar in de zomer in de middag je huid

dat altijd maar je ogen zouden breken  
dat altijd van geluk je ogen zouden breken  
altijd maar in de roerloze middag

langs het lange diepe water dat ik dacht  
dat ik dacht dat je altijd maar  
dat ik dacht dat geluk altijd maar

dat altijd maar het licht roerloos in de middag  
dat altijd maar het middaglicht je okeren schouder  
je okeren schouder altijd in het middaglicht

dat altijd maar je kreet hangend  
altijd maar je vogelkreet hangend  
in de middag in de zomer in de lucht

dat altijd maar de levende lucht dat altijd maar  
altijd maar het rimpelende water de middag je huid  
ik dacht dat alles altijd maar ik dacht dat nooit

hier nu langs het lange diepe water dat nooit  
ik dacht dat altijd dat nooit dat je nooit  
dat nooit vorst dat geen ijs ooit het water

hier nu langs het lange diepe water dacht ik nooit  
dat sneeuw ooit de cipres dacht ik nooit  
dat sneeuw nooit de cipres dat je nooit meer

### LAMENT

Here now along the long deep water  
that I thought that I thought that you always  
that you always

here now along the long deep water  
where behind the rushes behind the rushes the sun  
that I thought that you always but always

that always your eyes your eyes and the breeze  
your eyes and the breeze  
always ruffling ruffling the water

that always in a trembling silence  
that I would always live in a trembling silence  
that you always those waving rushes always

along the long deep water that your skin would always  
that always in the afternoon your skin  
always in the summer in the afternoon your skin

that always your eyes would melt  
that your eyes would always melt in happiness  
always in the motionless afternoon

along the long deep water that I thought  
that I thought you would always  
that I thought that happiness would always

that always the light motionless in the afternoon  
that always the afternoon light your ochre-coloured shoulder  
your ochre-coloured shoulder always in the afternoon light

that always your cry hanging  
always your bird's cry hanging  
in the afternoon in the summer in the breeze

that always the breeze trembling that always but  
always the ruffled water the afternoon your skin  
I thought that everything would always I did not think that ever

here now along the long deep water that ever  
I thought that always that never that you would never  
that frost would never that no ice would ever the water

here now along the long deep water I never thought  
that snow would ever the cypress I never thought  
that snow that the cypress would never that you would never more

## Appearances

**2000. 16mm (from Super-8). Black-and-white.**

**Sound. 21 mins.**

In this film, Meter listens to found images that never produced any sound. She writes: "Independently of each other, my father and my mother fled from Germany in 1934. They met the same year in Amsterdam. This film is made from



photographs they left me, all of which were taken before I was born." Through slow, hand-held movements of the camera, fades, and dissolves by the artist, the collage of images becomes a journey through the Weimar Republic of the 1920s and 1930s, a time when the government organized the railroad system, and of Hitler's Germany. Meter explains: "This film hesitates between photography and film: static yet in motion, the portraits seem as if between life and death." The closer Meter gets to these portraits with her lenses, the more inscrutable they become. The music transitions in this film go through what seems to be an intermediate state of dubitative silence, only to be interrupted by sound effects of strangers' voices played backwards, German radio, magpies' calls, and a continuous undercurrent, flapping, pounding beat. With sounds of that era, Johann Sebastian Bach, and Marlene Dietrich, Meter takes these images from their native dark period to try to understand them and reflect this darkness back. The book *Letters to Barbara* (Gertraud Middlehauve Verlag, 1988; translated to English by James Agee, The Overlook Press, 1995) is a compendium of the scanned letters and drawings that Leo Meter, the artist's father, sent her when she was a child, once he was separated from his family and recruited by the Germans as a soldier. He died at age 35. These letters, and the memories they provoke, have served of inspiration to several of Meter's films.

## Convalescing

**2000. 16mm (from Super-8). Color. Silent. 3 mins.**

Meter treats her footage as if it were found, creating her own personal archive, re-shooting and manipulating it as if it had been given to her, trying to figure out what it is and what lays behind it. The silence of her films speaks volumes: it is a conscious and loud way of expressing herself. In 2012, Meter made another radically silent film, *Little Stabs*, edited in-camera, and consisting of politically charged images from newspapers that she had been gathering over the years. In *Convalescing*, Meter brings the attention towards the one who reads, looks, and listens. The film breaks away from explanations to take

solace in the mood created by the natural and the electric light coming through the windows and the television set. In a way, it refers to Meter's first experimental film, *From the Exterior* (1970), in which she shot different residential windows from the street—lives as seen from the other side. In *Convalescing*, Meter reflects on those moments of distancing oneself from the world, and writes: "... the blue, the light of the television, the blue, the book, the patterns, the light, the blue. Time to appreciate how much that really is." In her films, sometimes we



are able to glimpse these words from poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: "Over all the hilltops there is quiet." Taking place inside a room, *Convalescing* is both contemplative and self-reflective, as well as the one film by Meter that allows us to take an intimate pause—with just the sound of the film projector, and our very, inner, own.

## Song for Four Hands

**1970. 16mm (from Super-8). Color. Sound. 3 mins.**

This is a shot, counter-shot film that creates a conversation without words between a woman, Barbara Meter, and a man, experimental filmmaker, Jos Schoffelen. The film proposes a dialogue deafened by a chord from a Mahler symphony. These tunes are played through two reel-to-reel tape recorders, looped and reedited. The unsuccessful delivery of words leaves room to another kind of language—the cinematic expression. Juxtapositions, light flares, rapid zooms, and overall movement transmit a series of feelings that would have been buried otherwise by words. Breaking away from narrative rules, leaning towards image and sound abstractions, and exposing the materiality of celluloid, the film gets closer to the core of what the artist hopes to communicate. As a stylistic counterpoint, in 1994, Meter made *Penelope*, where the voice of a woman, who we never get to see, talks to an invisible man about the



frustrations of their lack of understanding. The woman's voice was taken from a Hollywood film from the 1950s. Meter manipulated this recording, repeating it, fading it in and out, and varying its volume to denote the different degrees of female acceptance towards imposed roles of waiting and longing.

## ***Stretto***

**2005. 16mm. Color. Sound. 6 mins.**

The word "stretto" is an Italian musical term referring to the final section of a fugue, characterized by interweaving melodies. The musical theme gets repeated at different pitches and timbres before those notes reach their end. This way, the notations appear superimposed, contrapuntally, and gaining in textural intensity. It sums up several, temporally off-set, statements. These accumulations occur in fast tempo. By employing dissociative imagery and disconnected musical tunes, Meter builds on the polyphonic patterns of history and identity. The soundtrack is John Cage's *Music For Prepared Piano 2*, a



percussion-like piece conceived as a dance accompaniment. Meter defies the storyline standard of beginning, middle, and end, and translates the world, one of death and immigration, by suspending its images and sonorities in a temporality than moves backwards rather than forwards. It is not the meaning of these sounds what is important, but their unsettling emotionality and intensity.

## ***Portraits***

**1972. 16mm (from Super-8). Dual projection + Audio recording.**

**Color. Sound. 6 mins.**

Alternating one, two, and four screens, Meter features close-ups of artists Sally Potter, Mattijn Seip, Pim van Isveldt, and Mike Dunford from different angles and at fast speed. At the end, a wide, complex portrait may be created by accumulation of layers in the viewer's mind. What these artists are and what they do become the same thing thanks to the highlighted presence of the grain, color filters, light, framing and reframing, flickering, scratches, and juxtapositions. *Portraits*, as well as ...And a Table, made in 1970, are examples of films influenced by structuralist/formalist art that explores the nature of film as a medium.

Steve Reich's *Four Organs* gives final shape to this film. As with



the image, the sound composition for four electronic organs and maraca dissects the minimalist main chord by its playing parts, the harmonics uneasily pulling and pushing in different directions. Barbara Meter: "What I usually hope to achieve is that image and sound follow their own path, but often connect, after which they distance themselves again—and then connect again."

## ***A Touch***

**2008. 16mm. Color. Sound. 13 mins.**

With sound effects of passing trains, running water, and wind, plus an exquisite imagery manipulation with the optical printer, Meter pays homage to the fragility of celluloid, as well as of our own vulnerable materiality. She treats emulsion as if she were touching skin, with the same attention, permissions, and apprehensions, actions and reactions. Meter's camera attempts to delicately interact, somehow connect, with the images, and with the light and movement that emanate from them. *A Touch* commences with a sequence of flakes whirling in the wind, just as the particles of the film emulsion attract our vision. The richness of the color and the grain reinforce the emotional



capabilities of film. Human silhouettes fade, and images of Guy Sherwin appear and disappear for fractions of seconds. In *A Touch*, light and shadows, perceptions, and flashes of memory come and go as a moving landscape. Reminiscent of Armenian filmmaker Artavazd Peleshian's distrust for the spoken word, there are no statements in this film, but fragments of music, including Francesco Tuma's *Stabat Mater*, a Latin hymn on the depths and weights of human suffering and sorrow.

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