

## INTERVIEW

## Seeing (Oneself) Looking Into the Camera: An Interview with Narcisa Hirsch

Alejandra Torres

[This interview was published in 2010 in a catalogue for an exhibition/homage that celebrated Narcisa Hirsch's work as part of the Argentinean Bicentennial, at the recently opened cultural center *La Casa del Bicentenario* ("The House of The Bicentennial"). The occasion constituted a first celebration of Hirsch's contribution to Argentinian film, as well as a first step in serious academic and social recognition of the '70s Experimental Film Group of which Hirsch was a member. This group of artists had been in the shadows for a long time; since 2010, however, documentary films, retrospective screenings, books, and DVDs, as well as other celebratory initiatives, have taken place. The interview shows the role that Werner Nekes played in bringing Maya Deren's work to Argentina and gives an impression of the debates and tensions in the Argentinian filmmaking community, addressing questions such as the relation between poetry, film, and language, and between self, mobility, and the image.

The interview was done by Alejandra Torres, a writer based in Buenos Aires, and has been translated from the original Spanish by Mariana di Silverio for this issue of *The International Journal of Screendance*.]

**Narcisa Hirsch:** Alejandra, before we start I would like to tell you that there are going to be lots of gaps, because when my work started, that is in the '60s and '70s, there did not exist the proper recording of artworks made by curators and critics that there is nowadays.

I was, along with the Experimental Film Group, which appeared later, someone who used to work at the margins of everything. I was like a somnambulist. Therefore it was not so important when, where, or who you worked with; it was all like a game.

Most of our work remains forgotten, except some maybe, thanks to Claudio Caldini. He was, and still is, the most organized person in our group. Thanks to him our work can be partially rescued now. The Experimental Film Group was Marie Louise Alemann, Claudio Caldini, Juan Villola, Horacio Vallereggi, Juan José Mugni, and me.

**Alejandra Torres:** Since you are talking about the Experimental Film Group, I would like to ask you about the workshop you did with Werner Nekes when he came to Argentina in the '80s. What was that experience like?

**NH:** Yes, it was at the Goethe Institute. He came along with a sound technician. At that time Nekes was a well-known filmmaker in Germany. He was making good experimental films, very theoretical films. He is a collector of vintage film equipment, projectors, and cameras and has also written a book about cinema, cinema in its purest form. He was a very inspiring





Top and Lower Left: *Rumi*. 28:00 min., 16 mm and video, Argentina, 1999. Courtesy of the artist.

Above: *Marabunta* 7:55 min., 16 mm, Argentina, 1967. Courtesy of the artist.

Below: *Aída*. 6:41min., 8 mm and video, Argentina, 1976–2012. Courtesy of the artist.



man. His wife Dore O also made films. We did a workshop with him; we filmed with him. That was all funded by the Goethe Institute. He stayed for about two weeks and then he took all the material away with him. He said he was going to edit it but he never did, so we do not have that material now. Each one of us made a little film in 16mm with him. We did filmmaking exercises. It was great because we watched all his films.

**AT:** Which one of his films did you like the most? Which one had the biggest impact on you?

**NH:** I cannot remember the names very well. He is a man who works almost scientifically. At that time, his work was very different from what we used to do; we were not so professional. I liked his work, then. I thought it was very original, very interesting. And it showed the trends of the experimental film movement.

**AT:** Even now, Nekes still considers it very important for young people to be in contact with old technical film equipment, so they can see, in this technological era, what the early beginnings were like...

**NH:** Yes, I do not know how he got on with video, because when he came to Argentina we were still working on experimental film. In the '80s, video appeared and Super 8 disappeared, physically. When Nekes came he said, "You cannot film in Super 8, you have to film in 16mm, because the medium is too fragile." It seemed like a terrible, unsustainable, underdeveloped medium to him, and he said, "You have to make films, but you have to film in 16mm so you have a negative and you can work in a different way, the sound is different." And in fact, my Super 8 films are in poor condition now, the sound can barely be heard. So he was right, but as a group, we were in a precarious economic situation. Claudio and his friends were young men, they did not have any money, and filming in 16mm was not a possibility for us.

**AT:** Did you organize that workshop?

**NH:** No. The Goethe Institute did, through Marie Louise Alemann. She was closer to the Institute than me, so she got them to give us a space to show our films. At that time nobody knew about the experimental film movement. There was the so-called American Experimental Cinema, New York's underground film movement, under the leadership of Jonas Mekas. The Di Tella Institute had brought some films of the New American Cinema to Buenos Aires, and that was what we used to watch. Otherwise if you did not go to the USA you did not have the opportunity to watch those films here. And from Germany and Europe there was very little material available, because the experimental film movement was not as strong there as it was in the USA.

**AT:** In your opinion, what is the difference between underground cinema, experimental cinema, and independent cinema?

**NH:** Experimental and underground cinema are the same thing. Independent cinema... just to be clear, I am not a theorist at all, contrary to Werner Nekes, I am someone who works deaf and blind, absolutely, do not ask me anything. The theorists who come after my work is done are the ones who find things I have never seen or heard in it before. But, I think that the term independent cinema refers to narrative films, like commercial ones but made on a lower budget, as if they were made by a couple of friends who get together

and make a film at minimum cost. I think that in the beginning there was a very strong independent film movement in the USA and they used to make that kind of film, but they worked with actors and a screenplay. On the other hand, the underground film movement, experimental cinema, avant-garde films like the ones made by Dalí or Buñuel in Europe, they are not conventional films, they break out of the mold. Those are not the films we are used to watching in the cinema. The term experimental cinema may refer to a wide range of pieces, from the one performed by the American filmmaker Carolee Schneemann, in which she pulled a scroll out of her vagina on stage, to a film loop passing through a light that throws shadows over a wall. These kinds of pieces have very little to do with what we call cinema; when you have to explain to someone, “Well, I make films...”, it is impossible.

**AT:** What is it to be an experimental filmmaker? Silvestre Byrón states that experimental filmmakers identify themselves with poetic intuition, is that true?

**NH:** Yes, I think it is true. When I want to explain to someone that I make experimental films, I often use a metaphor. The films we make are different from the ones that people watch in the cinema because those ones have a narrative structure like a novel, while the ones we make are more similar to a poem. They do not have a visible narrative like the one in the novel and they do not have a formal rigor like the common films. An experimental film can be one minute long like *The Aleph* [2005] or twenty-four hours long like *Empire State Building* [1964] by Andy Warhol.

**AT:** Nekes states that the rules of grammar determine what we can think, so if our thoughts are influenced by grammar, then the thing is to find another language, a language that allows us to communicate, to go through the platform of perception...

**NH:** Yes, for example Nietzsche also said the same thing, that we are determined by the rules of grammar. But prior to the rules of grammar—I say this, not him—we are determined by language, which is limited, and that is the reason why we have other languages. Photography is another language; cinema is another language, music... But grammar determines us to a large extent. Jalfen, a friend of mine who was a philosopher, said a nice phrase: “If we say, ‘Allah is the only god,’ that is one thing, but if we say, ‘Allah is the only god, in Islam,’ the sense of the word entirely changes.” So here it is a matter of a comma and it is a matter of grammar.

**AT:** I go back to Nekes, who takes up Apollinaire again when he says that you have to get used to understanding in a synthetic-ideographic way rather than in an analytic, discursive way. He even talks about Chinese ideograms. You write a lot of haiku poems. This also has a lot to do with experimental cinema.

**NH:** Nekes used to say something that I think is very characteristic of him: “Things happened frame by frame.” It means that things happen in the gap, the adjacent intervals, and for me that is a *topos*, a place, a very interesting topology. I worked with this in *The Myth of Narcissus* [2005], the film about women, because the possibility of creating a space between the “I” and oneself, between the image and the self-image, generates a tension. And this is where novel spaces appear, spaces that are not yet colonized by us. It is also strange, because when you divide yourself in two selves, an idea which is not new since psychoanalysis has always talked about the different selves, you do not know “who is the self who asks who,” as Derrida writes.

Rilke says a very nice thing: "Only plants and animals are able to feel that they are in this world, whereas man is always before the world, except for brief instants of love and mystic fusion with God." In that split we have because of our being before the world, which is our ability to think, we also have the possibility of being before ourselves, and at the same time we can observe ourselves watching the world, as if seeing our own backs. This idea of a self that is a witness stretches to infinity, because I can think that I am watching the world and I can think that I am seeing myself watching the world, and then that I am seeing this witness, and then seeing the witness of the witness. It creates a labyrinth of mirrors with no exit. In fact, we are eccentric, because we are both inside and outside the world simultaneously.

**AT:** What is the riskiest thing you did regarding the technical aspect of experimental film?

**NH:** Regarding the technical aspect, I used to work with the resources that were available at that time. I had a good Super 8 camera with plenty of bells and whistles but I also had a little camera that was like a box, it was not a reflex camera, you just looked through a hole. I used to carry it in my pocket during my journeys and I filmed, for example, through a cookie, whatever was to hand. I have burnt, drawn, and scratched on the celluloid. I have built filters to put in front of the lens; these were things you could not buy commercially so you had to make them. We projected onto anything, smoke, dry ice, and once we also projected onto a live white rabbit in an art gallery. We also used to debate a lot, because we were always attacked.

**AT:** Who did you debate with? Did you talk with the people from UNCIPAR?

**NH:** Yes, we used to discuss things with them. I met Claudio Caldini at UNCIPAR, *Unión de Cineastas de Paso Reducido*. It was a place where they showed Super 8 films, and the people who attended the screenings were filmmakers who made independent films, but not experimental films. So when we showed our films, the other people were offended, they felt personally attacked. They said, "My five year old son can make something better than this." This was a common attitude in those days. I come from the '60s, the famous '60s that were very polemic. At that time there was an artistic, political, and religious avant-garde, and you had to be on one side or on the other.

**AT:** Which side were you on?

**NH:** Of course I was on the side of the avant-garde, because making experimental films was being avant-garde. There were also other artists who made more traditional films. But you had to choose, it was not like nowadays where young people can navigate between everything that is available and can appropriate what they want without having any ideologies. This would have been impossible at that time. Then there were lots of arguments. The people from UNCIPAR were not on the side of the avant-garde; they were emerging filmmakers who wanted to be successful and eventually show their films in big cinemas on Laval Street or Corrientes Avenue; that was their goal. So at that time there was a lot of fighting at all levels. The most groundbreaking and remarkable thing then was the Di Tella Institute—how long did it last? Six years, I think. A very short period of time and then it had to close.

**AT:** What was your relationship with the people from the Di Tella Institute like?

**NH:** It was hard, because I admired Romero Brest very much. He was an important man at that time, a very intelligent man coming from the field of philosophy, and he did not like

me, so mine was a frustrated love. I do not know why he did not like me, possibly because of, we could say, functional reasons. His object of desire was primarily Marta Minujin, and then Edgardo Giménez, Dalila Puzovio, and some other people. This group of young people was patronized and protected by Romero Brest, and the truth is that they were much more committed to this work than me, because I had some kind of double life. I was a lady who was married and had children, living in Vicente Lopez, leading a bourgeois life, and at the same time I had my workshop in the center of Buenos Aires where I used to make my events, the *happenings*.

**AT:** Narcisa, did you feel excluded precisely because of this double life you led? Did you feel there was something about you that did not fit in with what they expected from an artist?

**NH:** Actually, I never got to that point; I always felt that I could do whatever I wanted, I never felt excluded. I felt marginalized, but that was what I had chosen.

**AT:** If Romero Brest did not like you, as you say, did you become a pariah?

**NH:** I was like *off-off Broadway*, doubly off. Now I think that the situation has reverted and it is better for me not having been part of the Di Tella Institute because, in a way, all those artists were patronized by the Establishment. Di Tella was a corporation which funded Marta Minujin and Romero Brest, so they were supported by businessmen who liked contemporary art. I did not have anyone. I just had a husband who supported me, that is to say, I did not have to work, so I could film. He used to buy cameras for me, and at the same time he used to criticize me a lot. So it was a strange situation because he felt that my work was not recognized. He was a very cultured man—I want to defend him in that sense—but he came from the fields of music and literature, and not from the visual arts. He was not confident in my work; it looked very suspicious to him.

**AT:** And, did you get together with other artists who legitimized themselves? What was it like?

**NH:** Marie Louise's situation was similar to mine; she was married to Ernesto Alemann, a man who was very important in those days. He was the creator of the Pestalozzi Schule. He was a descendant of Swiss journalists who defended the Jewish immigration.

**AT:** We were talking about your self-legitimization with a group of friends...

**NH:** Well, it started before the filmmaking. I came from the field of painting, which I had inherited from my father, whose letter you read and thought was nice. But my relationship with painting was not very happy, even though I loved painting and I still love it.

**AT:** Why? Could it be because of your father?

**NH:** I do not know, I have never thought about that. Maybe that is because I am a rather visual person, but I certainly picked painting up from my father; it was a way to get close to him, wasn't it? I do not know.

**AT:** And which materials did you work with, oil painting...?

**NH:** No, I started drawing and then I worked with different materials such as paste, sand, and cement. I used to make relief paintings.

**AT:** And what about watercolor, pastel, Indian ink...?

**NH:** I worked with Indian ink, but not with watercolor. My father used to work with watercolor and pastel, but I did not use any of those materials.

**AT:** You got close to him but in a different way...

**NH:** I always had the feeling that I needed movement, maybe that is the reason why I eventually made the *happenings* and after that started making films.

**AT:** Tell me about the *happenings*.

**NH:** So-called *happenings*. The biggest one was *Marabunta* in 1967. Before that, we distributed apples and baby dolls in the streets. We also made some orange posters with the words "Color, by Narcisa Hirsch" printed on them and we stuck them all over the city. One of us would also beg in the streets disguised as a blind person. We performed lots of actions. I sometimes forget about them. This all happened at the end of the '60s.

**AT:** Raymundo Gleyzer was the camera operator for *Marabunta*, did you already know him?

**NH:** I was a very close friend of Aldo Sessa, who was the owner of Alex Laboratories, and one day I told him, "Well, I am going to make a film and I need a camera operator," and he said, "Ok." So he phoned Raymundo, and then Raymundo came. After that we found out that he was a political activist.

**AT:** The camera in *Marabunta* is excellent, how did he do it?

**NH:** Oh, poor man, he managed to film this huge event with only one camera. He should have worked with several cameras. However he found some way to film it. Then we went to his house. I remember he was a gloomy person. And we edited the material together.

**AT:** And what about the filmmaker Gerardo Vallejo? He was the camera operator for *The Apples* ...

**NH:** Gerardo Vallejo had been in my workshop, and we had been talking. He was a political activist too. I knew that because he had told me. But he had conflicts, not with me personally, I imagine that he liked me, but he was conflicted about the fact that I came from the other side. Because to those who were politically engaged, I was a bourgeois lady who was married to a businessman. And to the businessmen, I was a hippie, a bohemian who hung out with the other side.

**AT:** When did you film with Vallejo?

**NH:** *The Apples* was before *Marabunta*. He came from Tucumán. He had made a film that I had seen, *Viejo Reales' Long Way Journey to Death* [1974]. I liked it very much.

**AT:** Narcisa, what happened to the experimental film movement during the military dictatorship? How did you manage to film? Several studies have been done on this subject...

**NH:** Experimental films would have been made, and were made, with or without dictatorships all over the world.



**AT:** Yes, sure. I am asking because I would like to know what it was like for you...

**NH:** Young people often ask me this question. At least in my case, I was not making films as a resistance against the military dictatorship, because my work was equally resisted by the right and the left.

Art, when it is art, is subversive, because as [Paul] Klee would say, it makes the invisible visible, and that is what people generally cannot see or do not want to see.<sup>1</sup>

**AT:** Let's talk about *The Myth of Narcissus*. There is a film that predates the autobiography. You started it in 1974 in 16mm, black and white, and then you continued it in Super 8, color, and after that in video.

**NH:** Yes, but it was purely a documentary; it was not intended to be a piece of art.

**AT:** How did you start working on this documentary film with the stories of these women? Were they your friends?

**NH:** In those days there were lots of women's workshops. I was a close friend of a psychologist called Susana Balán and she organized a workshop for women. At the end of it she said, "Why don't we make a documentary so that we do not lose all the material?—Because we do not have many recordings—You are a filmmaker so you can film the women who have attended the workshop." Then she had the idea of filming the women looking at the camera, almost not speaking, and then projecting the images for the same women and asking them to talk to their own images. That was a very interesting splitting of the personality. They talked to their own images. So this was the first film, in 16mm, black and white, made in 1974. And after that, five years later, I organized a couple of meetings with some other women, without Susana, and we filmed in Super 8 and color.

**AT:** Did you film it in video in 2005?

**NH:** Yes, when I decided to make an autobiographical piece, I said, "Ok, I have two images of my face at different ages; I am going to add a third one which is the image of my face at present." And the autobiography ends with the image of that face.

**AT:** And in this last film, do you return to the work that started in 1974?

**NH:** No, in the autobiography I return to life and I use all my films, because I have filmed my very life. Everything I filmed was related to my life, to existence; it is an existential self-assertion, as Heidegger would say.

**AT:** And also it is called *The Myth of Narcissus*...

**NH:** Yes, I am just capitalizing on the name; it is a strategy, since my parents gave me such a bad name...

**AT:** Why do you say they gave you a bad name? Don't you like it?

**NH:** No, it is a family naming tradition. My mother was named Narcisa, after a Creole lady, who lived in the time of Juan Manuel de Rosas. This lady was called Narcisa Pérez Millán and she was my great-great-grandmother.

**AT:** And what do you know about this lady?

**NH:** This lady...she was a very bad person and she married a German man who came from Hannover. He was a trader, he stayed here in Buenos Aires and he married Narcisa Pérez Millán who was the widow of Rauch. Rauch was also German, Colonel Rauch. Narcisa became a widow when she was very young, she had no children, and then she married this German man named Stegmann, who came from Hannover, and they had ten children. She lived nearby...

**AT:** Do you mean here in San Telmo?

**NH:** The house was at 700 Alsina Street, it is not there anymore...So the Narcisas descend from my mother's side, a bunch of Narcisas.

**AT:** Narcisa, what was your mother like? Because you wrote a *Letter to my father* but there is no letter to your mother. Why is that?

**NH:** Because the letters are directed to all men.<sup>2</sup>

**AT:** I thought that was very interesting and I would like to ask you...

**NH:** It started with *To God* [1989] and then it went down through the ranks.

**AT:** Did your father make films?

**NH:** No, he was a painter, and at first the still image was my thing too. Later on, as I am part of a generation in which the image started to move, I guess I jumped on that bus...

**AT:** Were you interested in photography?

**NH:** For some time I did quite a lot of photography; I had a darkroom, I developed the photographs myself. I really liked to get my hands dirty. Because in cinema everything was very hands-on.

Everyone, not just me—we used to do everything. We filmed, then we cut the film, and then I hung the pieces on a line, as if they were clothes; then I added the sound, everything in-house, very workmanlike. And the one who had incredible skill for this was, obviously, Claudio Caldini. Besides having a sensibility and a talent for the image, he was a very good craftsman, a very meticulous person.

**AT:** So you also had a photographic laboratory...

**NH:** I had a lab for a while, for some years.

**AT:** So working with the fixed image was not enough for you? Why did you need the moving image?

**NH:** It is difficult to answer because all this comes from the invisible-invisible concept I mentioned before, a place to which we do not have access, something we call the unconscious. I think that the twentieth century, to which I belong, has a lot to do with movement and I still feel that I need to achieve a certain mobility, I need to unleash certain things. I have never thought about this before, but I think that, actually, it is related to the spirit of a century that unleashed almost everything. The fall of fixed values, truth, reality, all we have been carrying since Modernity in philosophical and metaphysical terms, all this is in ruins now.

**AT:** What do you mean by “unleash”...?

**NH:** During these last years, I have been working on a line of thought that is related to the idea that we all have a hook and we hang our opinions and values on it. This line of thought holds that we, through the mind and reason, and if we make an effort and we search, we read lots of books, we listen to many masters—if we are very cultured, if we understand what we need to understand, and we do what we need to do—then the will is enough. When Nietzsche talks about “the will to power,” he says that once it is understood and therefore acquired, the will to power gives us power by through the simple fact of understanding it. But I think that clearly this does not occur. What happens is that we are at the mercy of preverbal and prenatal forces that are completely invisible, and the gurus of justice, education, science, religion, morality, and psychoanalysis expect to control, or at least to interpret, this dimension which is unembraceable. But that is a different thing...

**AT:** As you said before, you started *The Myth of Narcissus*, the documentary film, with a gallery of women, your friends. I am interested in the idea of seeing (oneself) looking into the camera. What do you find when you see yourself watching? What happens with the technical mediation? What image does it show you?

**NH:** When we filmed—it was not video, it was film, so we had to wait until it was developed—once the film was developed, we projected it for these women. They were alone, by themselves; they had a tape recorder and they talked to their own images. And the result was that they were pretty surprised by their own images, all of them saying that they did not recognize themselves. And these were women who supposedly looked at themselves in the mirror every day; they were always looking at their reflections; but they were all very surprised and they talked a lot about the interior—they said they were able to see something internal in the films. I also made a film about men, but men are different. Their speech is different.

**AT:** In what sense?

**NH:** I think that men have a less “fabricated” self-image. Looking at oneself in the mirror is different from looking at oneself filmed. We adapt ourselves to the mirror, the camera is not there, and our eyes are the ones that see. The camera is a different thing. I myself felt like this: my face seemed stranger to me than the other women’s faces. The other women’s faces looked familiar to me when I saw them filmed, but my face was unrecognizable to me...

**AT:** There is something monstrous or strange in this; what does the image show you?

**NH:** I think it is more related to estrangement. I cannot explain it. In my case—we should ask the other women too—the encounter with myself was strange. It is something strange because when you stand in front of a mirror you adapt yourself to an expected reflection, to something you want to see and you do see, while on the contrary, in the filmed image there is a self that appears from that invisibility I mentioned before.

**AT:** In your films there are lots of female and male naked bodies. This is something new...

**NH:** Well, the tradition says that, in general, the male artist is the one who looks at the female body. We, the women, do not have a view yet. This is something new, the idea of looking outward, like men do.

**AT:** And what does Narcisa see when she looks at men?

**NH:** For women, I think—I can only speak for myself—eroticism is more focused on the body than on sexuality. We are more interested in the sensuality, in something more inclusive: sounds, textures, smells, colors. The female gaze does not end in the body; it also includes what surrounds the body. I think that sensuality is rather feminine, and when it exists, it is focused on everything. We are pan-erotic.

**AT:** In one of your books, *Aigokeros*, which I like very much, you raise the question about perception and the search for a language. I find it very similar to [Clarice] Lispector's viewpoint. I would like to ask you: when you read her books, what impressed you about her writing?

**NH:** I discovered Clarice Lispector rather late; up until ten years ago I did not even know she existed. One day a friend brought a text by Clarice to our philosophy class and we all liked it a lot, it was a great discovery. Since then I have read her work and actually I like her very much. I think that what I like about her writing is the possibility that thoughts might converge with literature. There is not a conventional narrative; Clarice works with the organic, the animal, the feminine. I think that she represents what you can call not the womanly but the feminine condition. This idea is very clear in her work.

**AT:** There is also a search for what is inexpressible. In your case, it consists of experimentation with a new language that traverses the technical form. But all your questions are fundamentally about the human condition, and these are questions that Lispector also raised...

**NH:** Yes, the existential question.

**AT:** And also the animal question. There is a text called *A Breath of Life* [2012] by Lispector that is related to this characteristic theme of Lispector, and which is also related to what Nekes says, about this gap in which something imperceptible happens and unleashes the thought. And this also appears in your texts and films.

**NH:** Yes. Clarice was searching for a language of the invisible-invisible things. The fact that she did not compose music or make films, being a woman who lived in the twentieth century; the fact that she struggled so much against language; it makes one think that she might have wanted to force something there. That is also interesting.

**AT:** Maybe there is something about language related to the fact that the word has a limit. The limit of the verb, the crisis of the verb we are experiencing takes on a new life and a new force in experimental cinema. I think that is the reason why nowadays it is being rethought and reviewed.

**NH:** I am surprised because now, young people between twenty and thirty years old are trying to do something about this. When we did it nobody was aware of it, because there were so many things happening with ideologies—I mean, political, artistic, religious, and scientific ideologies, new gurus coming from the East and alternative theologies—so that our activity used to go absolutely unnoticed even though we were on the barricades, but as I already said, they were not the ones that were known. I am surprised that young people are inquiring into that place; maybe this is because nowadays everything is so calm, while

in the past there was some kind of effervescence and being on the barricades produced adrenaline. Now that the new generation sees it from a distance and the blood is virtual, it looks like an attractive spectacle to them.

**AT:** Concentrating on the old techniques also helps you to revise issues concerning seeing and producing...

**NH:** When Super 8 disappeared, physically, like a person who died, we had to film in video or 16mm, which I did for a while. And video offered so many possibilities; it was so “easy” that in a way that simplicity turned against itself. When we wanted to make video art, it was something completely unknown to me, so I did two things: first I started writing, I wrote a book with Luis Jalfen, who was a philosopher. We wrote *The Oblivion of Being* [1995] and I wrote by myself *Aigokeros*, which was a book of essays, mainly written in the south of Argentina. And then I went back to work in 16mm and I made some attempts to make narrative films. I worked with a screenplay—Dalmiro Saenz helped me. I worked with professional actors, I became a member of the trade union, and I made what at that time was called independent cinema. That was a different experience, but I felt that it was not my thing. Anyway, it was a good experience because I learned other things and I ended up making *RUMI* [1999], a film about, and with, the poems by the thirteenth-century Sufi poet. The importance of text emerged, as well as the need to work with text as an image.

**AT:** In connection to the work of women-artists, I also wanted to ask you about the photographer Sophie Calle. In your case there is a “passion” for recording everything: the body, the everyday events, and I connect this to the recording of Sophie Calle.

**NH:** Yes, Sophie Calle does it more consciously than me. She is a professional, she focuses her work on that aspect and she is very clear. What I did was never so clear or so defined. Things happened more vaguely. I think that what Sophie Calle does is a very interesting way of capitalizing on experience for the work of art. She says directly and explicitly, something happens to her and from that she makes another thing. When a man leaves her she takes one photograph a day for pain number one, pain number two, and she takes three hundred and sixty-five pain photographs, and one can see that pain number one is more intense than pain number three hundred and sixty-five. Then at the end of the year, the pain is gone and she has a work of art, which is, we could say, more important than the man she lost. It is a transubstantiation. She is the only person I know who does this and I think it is fantastic.

**AT:** What do you think of feminism?

**NH:** I have never been a feminist; I have never been keen on any -ism. It is not my thing.

**AT:** Don't you think that attitude was necessary when the struggles started?

**NH:** I think it was meant to happen, it was necessary for women to have, in a purely functional aspect, a social protection, as well as the possibility to work on a par with men, having the things that a person needs when she works, when she works as a mother, for example. And that was meant to happen, also because in an overpopulated world, suddenly there was a very vertiginous turn of events. Until a few years ago, the mandate for women was to have as many children as they could. Until the nineteenth century, women had to give birth, and nothing else apart from that, ten, twenty children and suddenly, in the twentieth century, we found ourselves in a

world that was too populated and we had to reverse that process. And when women started to have fewer children, they were left with empty wombs and longer lives, because suddenly we were all living longer. Then women had an empty space, a new space, and they had to do something about that. And well, we are doing something, we will see what happens.

**AT:** Among your films, there is one I like very much, and you take it up again in *The Myth of Narcissus*. This film is the one you made about *The King of Patagonia* [1983]. How did you start working on this film? What interested you about this story?

**NH:** It was an idea of Juan Fresan, a friend of mine who died; he was the father of Rodrigo. He was an artist, a very talented painter; he was crazy. He lived just at the time of the Di Tella Institute, in the '60s. Juan would paint and draw. He was also a publicist. Well, at some point Juan decided to make films and he said, "I am going to make a film about 'The King of Patagonia.'" He had this idea and then he said, "I am going to go to Paris, because the heir to the 'throne' lives there and I want to make a very domestic film, between experimental and independent." We wanted to make the film together and then he said, "I think I cannot work with women..." and he excluded me from the film. Then he left the film half-finished, he completely forgot about his idea of making a domestic film, he started to work in 35mm, with professional actors and he had to leave the work halfway through. He never finished it. Then he moved to Venezuela and I lost contact with him. So I said, "I am going to make this film" and I made it with a man from Bariloche who looked like the original king. He was called Eduardo Lauría, he was a friend of mine, and for me it was a way of being in Patagonia, which is my kind of place.

**AT:** And what exactly interests you about Antoine? In my case, there are several things in the film that attract my attention, the landscapes, the colors...

**NH:** Yes, it was an attractive theme, then several other people made films on this subject, there are at least two versions of *Orly Antoine*; there is even a French one.

**AT:** Yes, but Narcisa's Antoine is related to the love of the land of Patagonia...

**NH:** I guess it is a sort of identification, when he arrives and he wants to conquer the kingdom, he wanders around not knowing where to go, and he is arrested, they cut his hair and he carries on, he keeps on coming back and failing in his attempt to conquer, walking through the hard and cold grasslands.

**AT:** In a land with no footprints...

**NH:** Yes, in the time of Antoine there were no footprints. I have also wandered a lot around Patagonia with no pretensions to be crowned (laughs).

**AT:** Did the film have any repercussions?

**NH:** No, nothing at all. Neither is it a film I like very much. I do not think it is a good film. I do not know what happened with that. I refloated it now for the autobiography; in fact the film ends with the scene of the king dancing in Patagonia. So in a way it had an impact on me.

**AT:** Which one of your films do you like the most?

**NH:** I think that one has a difficult relationship with your own work; this probably happens to you with your writing. Taste is also related to a time in your life; suddenly you see some

old work and you say, "Oh, this was pretty good!," or you see some new work and you think it is rubbish, affinities change. I like *To God* [1989] very much, and maybe *The Aleph* [2005], but the "box office successes" are *Come Out* [1971] and *Workshop* [1975], they are both conceptual films, very different one from the other.

**AT:** And which is the best one?

**NH:** People should decide that for themselves.

**AT:** Narcisa, what are the concerns of *Ama-zone* [2001]? How did that start? I would like you to tell me something about this work.

**NH:** It is about the woman who cuts her breast off and in this way she loses her traditional feminine and maternal attributes. In the case of my Amazon, when she cuts her breast off she is naked, then she puts some other clothes on, the clothes a woman has to wear to take the bow and shoot the arrow. She dresses like an Amazon warrior and she becomes that warrior. It is like a striptease that includes the breasts, the most radical nudity.

**AT:** The image is very strong because there is a mutilation of the body...

**NH:** We, I mean women, are more organic beings. We produce liquids, tears, menstrual blood, and milk comes out of our breasts. We are more biological than men. We are always aware of that biology. This idea is very nicely expressed by Simone de Beauvoir in the text that appears in *The Myth of Narcissus*, where she says that man sees himself as a necessary being, completely separated from worldly things, always aspiring to a bright heaven and not fallen into the chaos and darkness of his mother's womb.<sup>3</sup>

**AT:** I am very impressed by your devotion to and passion for your work, the way you review, rethink, and refloat, in this permanent connection with your whole experience, all these films are fragments of your life...

**NH:** Yes, I am very focused, but not in the strictly working sense, because I have never worked like those writers who say, "I sit at my desk at nine in the morning and I work until one."

**AT:** And how do you work?

**NH:** I work very randomly, in a disorganized way, very impulsively, and with no discipline. Now, belatedly, I have a very good assistant, a talented video maker, Daniela Muttis, who helps me with my work and with my life.

**AT:** Narcisa, do you still consider yourself a perpetually unknown artist?

**NH:** No, not now, because there are several people interested in my work now. But for many years I was completely unknown. But that was attractive too. I had total freedom. As I did not have to sell anything, and there were no possibilities of my selling anything, I could film whenever I wanted, at my own rhythm, with no pressures and that was fantastic. At the end of the '70s we had some rooms for exhibitions like the Goethe Institute or the CAYC (Art and Communication Center), but in general when I finished a film, I used to show it in some foul basement or I gathered some people in my studio and showed them my work "straight from the oven."

Once a friend of mine got really angry, and he said, "Why do I come here to see those films that nobody else watches?"

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## Media

*The Aleph* (2005). Dir. Narcisa Hirsch. 1:00 min. 16mm. Argentina.

*El mito de Narciso [The Myth of Narcissus]* (2005). Dir. Narcisa Hirsch. 20:00 min., 16mm, 8mm and video. Argentina.

*Empire State Building*, (1964) Dir. Andy Warhol. B&W, silent, 485:00 min. Raro Video (2004). DVD. Italy.

*Manzanas, Apples* (1973). Dir. Narcisa Hirsch. 10:00 min., 16 mm. Argentina.

*Marabunta* (1967). Dir. Narcisa Hirsch. 7:55 min., 16mm. Argentina.

*Viejo Reales' Long Way Journey to Death [El camino de la muerte del viejo Reales]* (1974). Dir. Gerardo Vallejo. 90:00 min. 35mm. Argentina.

*A Dios, To God* (1989). Dir. Narcisa Hirsch. 22:00 min., Super 8mm. Argentina.

*Rumi* (1999). Dir. Narcisa Hirsch. 28:00 min., 16 mm and video. Argentina.

*Orly Antoine, Rey de Patagonia [The King of Patagonia]* (1983). Dir. Narcisa Hirsch. 26:00 min., 16 mm. Argentina.

*Comeout* (1971). Dir. Narcisa Hirsch. 10:00 min., 8mm. Argentina.

*Taller [Workshop]* (1975). Dir. Narcisa Hirsch. 11:00 min., 16 mm. Argentina.

*Ama-zona* (2001). Dir. Narcisa Hirsch. 11:00 min., Super 8mm, Argentina.

*Señales de Vida ["Signs of Life"]* (1979). Dir. Narcisa Hirsch. 10:00 min., Super 8mm, Argentina.

## Notes

1. See Paul Klee, *Notebooks*, 76.

2. "letter to my father" is part of a collection of letters addressed to men in a chapter entitled: "Cartas a los hombres" [Letters to the Men], in Narcisa Hirsch, *Aigokeros*.

3. See Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 710.