

Maya Deren: Choreographed for Camera Presented by San Francisco Cinematheque June 18, 2023.
Gray Area/Grand Theater
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Maya Deren's first film screening in the San Francisco Bay Area dates back to November 1st, 1946 ¹, and was presented as a part of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's (SFMOMA) Art in Cinema series. The curated film series not only laid the groundwork for developing an audience for experimental and avant-garde film but also catalyzed the creation of similar work in the Bay Area. Artists such as James Broughton, Stan Brakhage and Sidney Peterson cite Deren as an inspiration in the creation of their work, further aided by lectures and handouts of writing on the films that accompanied her screenings. These artists not only incorporated Deren's ideas into their own work, but were also key to implementing these ideas into higher education curricula, inspiring new generations of artists in the process. One of these students, Mark Alice Durant, recalled his fascination upon seeing Deren's work.

Durant relayed this anecdote during his introductory speech for the San Francisco leg of the launch of *Maya Deren : Choreographed for Camera*, a book that he purports is the first official biography of the artist ². Presented by San Francisco Cinematheque, an organization that cultivates and presents experimental and avant-garde film in the San Francisco Bay Area, the event was comprised of a screening of three of Deren's films - *Meshes of the Afternoon*, *At Land*, and *Ritual in Transfigured Time* - with Durant reading excerpts from his book concerning each film preceding its screening.

From the beginning of the event, Durant acknowledged that much of the book's content (and introductions of the films by extension) was derived from speculative treatments based on Deren's notes and images, framing her life in a manner similar to the way Deren framed her work; the events of Deren's life are conveyed chronologically but images and text from Deren's work and moments in her life are imaginarily elaborated. This frank admission from Durant offered the audience an inspired frame through which to view Deren's work and sowed the seeds of key provocations that were revisited later during the event.

The three films shown span the years 1943-1946, covering Deren's transformation from an unknown poet to an internationally renowned artist. Durant's introductions to the film painted a picture of an artist in pursuit of developing a visual language spurred by curiosity and enthusiasm, her relationships with collaborators and their roles in the work. It also illuminated how Deren's ambitions began to press against her resources, resulting in many incomplete (or as Deren termed, "abandoned") films. As such, it is worth bearing in mind that the most circulated of Deren's work came during a short (and certainly formative) time in her practice, one that would expand to modes of research and writing, but whose completed output was limited in the decade and a half that followed.

The films themselves, screened from reels jokingly described as "well-loved", offered a sense of what Deren's work was like to watch when it was first created. Deren's work is not particularly difficult to find,

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one can simply look up both films (completed or not) on YouTube and watch technically competent restorations of her work, some of which are complete with interpretive sound scores. However, the experience of sitting with Deren's work in a dedicated screening space accompanied only by the sound of the projector rolling allowed for a clearer and more resonant reception of the work. As is the case with other "silent" work, the mechanism of the screening machinery provides a rhythmic layer of a sound score with which the images interact.

Furthermore, the print of *Meshes of the Afternoon*, while still screened without additional accompaniment, featured a music credit for Teiji Ito referring to the music he composed for the film a decade after its release. Following the screening of the films, Durant noted that Deren was partial to reworking her films to reflect shifting tastes and incorporated Ito's score into *Meshes* in the mid-1950s in order to make the work more contemporary to the era. Considering this, the reorientation of Deren's work to online environments, complete with reworked scores, can be seen as extensions of Deren's curiosities and interests.

Indeed, some of the more resonant provocations emerged following a question-and-answer session following the screenings of the film. There have already been discussion in the screendance community on the minimization of Katherine Dunham's influence on Deren's work, especially considered in relation to Deren's participation in Dunham's research in Haiti, as well as the casting of two of Dunham's dancers (Talley Beatty and Rita Christiani) in her film work. Durant's screening postscript placed this omission in focus as a "personal and professional lapse" on Deren's part and noted his attempts to rectify this by devoting an entire chapter to Dunham. Furthermore, Durant's mention of the many artists in Deren's orbit places a pall on discussions of Deren's work as auteur films and places her writing into question. Indeed, much of the emphasis placed on Deren in terms of her role as a major figure in both experimental film and screendance needs reevaluation, which could allow for new histories and lineages of film to emerge.

While presenting the films provided the event with a rich contextual lens, the approach to curating the films resembled approaches taken by multiple screendance festivals in that it highlighted Deren's work, but did not connect how it contributed to the development of screendance or experimental film. Presumably, it is up to the viewer/audience to explore these connections on their own (or read the accompanying book and make those connections), but the result is an inadvertent siloing of Deren's work and reduction (or even total loss) of that which resulted.

However, it's clear that the work must have a continued presence via screenings and the enthused responses of the audience members showed the value in its presentation. The Cinematheque's director Steve Polta noted in his introduction to the program that this event constituted the first screening of Deren's work in 20 years in the Bay Area. Granted, the screening served a somewhat utilitarian purpose in service to a book release, but it also raised the idea that more showings of the work are necessary.

Furthermore, the situation of preservation and archival access is nearing a state of crisis, particularly in the San Francisco Bay Area. In 2021, SF MOMA terminated its film screening program after almost 75 years of presenting experimental film work. Mills College, one of the US's first dance programs and home to early multidisciplinary dance & film collaborations, was acquired by Northeastern University which

eliminated the arts degrees at the school. In addition to this, the San Francisco Art's Institute (SFAI), home to one of the country's first experimental film programs, closed in 2021. Several SFAI alumni started a non-profit organization to manage the archives, but the buyers of the SFAI grounds are in the process of contesting their ownership.

With educational institutions and archival initiatives struggling, the onus is on independent organizations (with limited funds & personnel) to curate and educate audiences.

Biography

A native of the San Francisco Bay Area, Clare Schweitzer (she/they) is a wearer of many hats at the intersection of dance and film. Clare graduated from Mount Holyoke College with a B.A. in Dance and Mathematics, then moved to London and completed an M.A in contemporary dance in 2015 at London Contemporary Dance School, focusing her dissertation research on screendance festivals and the cultural production of screendance through its presentation. Now based in Oakland, Clare has performed as a dancer around the SF Bay Area and her films have screened at festivals worldwide. She has also presented research at events such as the Light Moves Festival of Screendance and the Screendance State of the Art Symposium. She currently works as a Programming Assistant with Dance Film SF (which presents the annual San Francisco Dance Film Festival), as a videographer/editor for Rapt Productions and as a co-host on the podcast Frameform, a podcast that discusses the intersections of dance and film.

Notes

1- The screening was the West Coast premiere of *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, which took place a little over ten days since the film's world premiere in New York

2-Other authors have produced biographical work on Deren's life, such as *The Legend of Maya Deren* from VeVe Clark, Millicent Hodson and Catrina Newman, as well as the documentary *In the Mirror of Maya Deren* directed by Martina Kudlacek which features interviews with many of her collaborators. An addition title to consider is Barbara Hammer's hybrid documentary *Maya Deren's Sink*, using Deren's film locations and personal spaces as frames through which to view her work.

References

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