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Gunvor Nelson Interview

Interviewed in 1993

Lynne Sachs: We're going to start with a really obvious question: why did you first move from painting to film, and in some ways back to painting again (which is part of film, but still painting)?

Gunvor Nelson: Well, Bob and I built a house in Muir Beach, and he borrowed a camera from John Collier-a 16 mm camera-to record a little bit of what we were doing, and Una was little. So we sent that little film to Sweden, and in the meantime we were editing it a little bit, and it seemed like a lot of fun. So then we did a few more films that were not-I mean that was just on the side, not really to make films. Then Bob made films with Wiley and Demitru, and then Dorothy and I thought that it would be interesting to make a film of our own. That was *Schmeerguntz*. So it wasn't something that was going to be taking over from painting at all; it was more like, you try different things. And then we made another film, and after that it sort of took over, I guess. It wasn't intentional.

Kathy Geritz: Were you still painting at that time?

GN Well you see we were building a house, and also Una, so there wasn't that much artwork going on the first-yeah, I was working a little bit, we both were. But if I hadn't gotten really into film, of course painting would have been what I would do more and more. Having a child really takes you away for a few years from artwork, and slowly you can get back into it. So it wasn't intentional to go into film.

LS When you said having a child takes you away from your artwork, in some ways it seems like it also became very integrated, it changed your palette, not necessarily enlarged it, or narrowed it, but it became-

GN Part of, yeah-

LS So instead of saying 'I have to cut this off, and this off'-

GN So *Schmeerguntz* was very much a reaction to having a child, and Dorothy having two then. And so when they all say make art about what you know, or write about what you know, or something, we didn't even think about that phrase-that just was natural.

KG Just in terms of the other part of what Lynne was asking, do you think of the work in *Light Years* and *Light Years Expanding* and the new work as painting? Or as returning to painting, or is it more animating it, like you said when people were asking you questions?

GN Well, painting now is so far away from me, you know. What is interesting is you can relax because it is so small, or such a small area, and I can cut it away if I really wanted. Yes, I think of it as very related, if not painting. Very related. So, and then you can have it as big as you want to when you project. So that's interesting, you can have a scale, and yah.

LS What was it about film- I don't mean that we have to move chronologically, but I think about that time, and all three of us started off in painting-

[KG That's true.

GN Oh yah? You did too?

KG Yeah, for years.]

LS And it's like none of us were necessarily movie buffs as younger people, people who had to see every movie, and when I saw films when I was a teenager, I didn't think, 'oh, I'm gonna go make that'. Because the kind of films that I saw didn't interest me in that way. But what was it about film that took you in in a different way?

GN Well, I think when I was in grammar school, I and a group of people did theater. We wrote our own little plays. I don't know what they were at this point, or we talked our way through- we never wrote them down. So we went around to other classes in first and second and third and fourth grade-it was more second and third, or third and fourth, I'm not sure-and we were allowed to do some performances like that in some classrooms. I think that theater part was not that related to the films I eventually made, but still they had some background, in that it was something in **time**. Maybe. I don't know. And also being a gymnast and also-in a very limited way-a diver (I dove as a teenager) had a physical quality to it and a choreography that I liked. The physical thing of choreographing movement in time.

[KG In time, that's so interesting.]

GN Uh-huh, I think it connects. Also being, just loving swimming underwater, and seeing other kids swim underwater, and their movements

also connected for me in some strange way. I think all we do somehow gets into our choices later on.

LS Many of your films have water in them-still, that swimming quality, especially the last two.

GN Mmmhmm. I think of the flowing quality through time that I wanted before which now layers { } flowing things in and out. Whereas now since { } most of the films have been straight cuts, but still thinking about that flow, but also interrupting that flow, and having that interest.

KG And there's things which suggest flow-like the river, the car driving, the shots from cars...

GN Yah, I like motion. Yes, and then stopping that motion, and then as a surprise.

KG I thought that was so interesting in the new film-from another way, that idea of stopping the motion-where because you have a series that was collaged of still images, there would be a shot where perceptually I would be ready for another still image, then it would move. So, it was the opposite; suddenly there was flow again. Like there's the figure of the old man, and suddenly you realize he's in film, not in a still. The back-and-forth between that-thinking it was still, thinking it was moving-was very interesting.

GN I also try and figure out ways to make the stills move-yah, right. So that they have a flow to them, or motion in some way. And then play with that back and forth..

KG Yeah, and then it becomes unexpected.

GN Right.

LS I have a question. You talked about theater--

GN But that was very way back.

LS Oh, I know; but when I saw *Red Shift* again, it seemed very much to have theater all going through it, and I was wondering why it worked.

Could you talk about that? About setting that up, and your process in working on that film?

GN Well, I don't know if I set--yes, I knew that it wasn't going to be a documentary of my parents (or mother) and Una. They were going to act, or move around in the film, that's not quite acting I guess. But I had an idea that started actually in *Before Need* which I hadn't seen so much, now I see it more, and that is to have further away shots and then cut to either close-ups of the people involved or sort of symbolic close-ups. You know like in *Red Shoes*, where I cut all of a sudden to close-up of milk being spilled, you know all these things that I cut in, and then having sometimes rather wide-angle shots, or far-distant shots, to have that jump, that real jump. Then I used that of course in other films afterwards, but it started in *Before Need*, { } and then cut to that close-up, that abstract close-up, or that symbolic close-up.

LS That's really nice; I hadn't thought of it, and I like the way it works.

GV Right, and then making the distance further and further in some of it I have the long-well, in some shots of *Red Shift* there are four rooms, one after the other, and having that distance, and then close-up. Or, two effects or whatever it would be. Now in *Light Years*, that becomes even further because the distances of the landscape that you travel by, and then close-up.

KG Do you see that also metaphorically-the distance and nearness of memory, or any other way? Or was it mainly a visual idea for you?

GN Well it seemed like the close-ups, if I had put them mid-distance, they would have a distance to the idea, or whatever it would represent, rather than having it so close that it felt like it was maybe internal, or went beyond what was described in the shot. So it wasn't just an apple in decay it had emotional content because it was so close, and also it had more universal content, or not just that particular apple, but it represented all apples or something.

KG I can see that really easily with the apple and the worms and things like the

{ 156 }and then I was thinking about things like your lawn with the crumbs and all, that are sort of personal memories, and how sometimes memory is also close-up and in detail.

GN So it was mixed in that way that I used the close-ups for the faces,so that in a way they were more than the situation at hand.

KG In some ways that was the case with the sound also in *Red Shift*, both the use of the sayings-

GN Right, well what I saw in the film was the heritage that we all had, whether the sayings and heritage that we get from generation to generation;and are they meaningful or not, or are they just phrases that we remember, or how much do they sink in, how much are they true or not true. Whatever, I don'tknow, everybody has to take that in.

KG But there's also that scale thing, of sayings that travel from far,as you say from generations, but then also the conversation with your daughter on the phone. the particular and the shift, but in sound instead of with visuals.

GN Right, right. Yah, they're anonymous in that sense that you can't quite pin down where it comes from. And then, like you say, the particular; although I think that particular conversation between us on the phone also stands for that situation, it's sort of a universal non-understanding, or caring, or whatever it is,whatever it becomes.

KG That's what's so interesting about those shifts from the general to the specific.

GN Right, even within something, it has shifts. I don't remember the original question to this-oh yeah, theater. So it was not supposed to represent Una's relationship, it was supposed to be more universal relationships. So we were acting in there in that sense; we were following what I had written down to do, but it wasn't-except for my sister having a very hard time hitting her knees, it was one of those-it was just sitting there typing ,it was not not acting; it was tableaux. And somebody asked me 'did my mother know what I was doing in terms of the filming of that particular undressing'-oh very much so. I asked her if that was okay, and she knew how close-up I was with the camera, and she didn't care.

KG That one, and then the one where your father-

GN Oh right, I saw him do that as I walked by, so in that sense it was recreating of what I had seen. I went to the bathroom, and I saw he had the door open and I saw him do that as she walked by, so I asked him to re-do that.

KG Actually, that's what I wondered-whether they were tableaux of things that you remembered or a present-of like your mother in the present dressing, or this sense of--

GN Well it was between. I had my sister represent my mother- I don't know if anybody understands, it doesn't matter-so it was many generations. So my sister was supposed to-when she was typing and she was vacuuming and whatever else-she wasn't representing my mother exactly; it was my mother's character she was playing, because I didn't see my mother vacuuming very many times (laughs). So typing and writing I saw my mother do a lot. So it was rejection; the girl was coming, wanting the mother's attention, and the mother was just sitting there working away. And that was the idea of that one, and the saying underneath there was about making a fool of yourself because you wanted too much. I don't know if it was exactly that, but that is my interpretation of it.

KG: Yeah, and that is such a different intention from when she's inside.

GN: Right, so it's--I had an attitude towards how to do it before, you know you had to be consistent. So one was to have it either close-up or like a thing that you saw without them being seen-like theater in that sense that you're not at an angle, you usually stood straight ahead towards it.

LS I wanted to ask you about houses, and how you have this interest in a lot of your work, from that film that's all inside the house, and then the more recent films which are about houses, but there's a kind of distance, or outside the house swishing by, and even *Schmeergunst* has this "oh no, the house can be a prison". I mean not really, but if you're talking about traditional pictures, and it seems like it's been an interest of yours. And also this line between is a house a home or is it just a building.

GN Well, I happen to like Europe because-you know the old Europe, now things are going too fast--where people have created in the landscape, and with the landscape in the farms and the houses, there is an interchange between people and the land, and you can stand on the land and know that so many generations and thousands of years things have happened. Here, it's the Indians, but you don't see very much left of that. And there's a beauty that is astounding to me between what happens between what the humans have exchanged with the landscape. Now the last century that has accelerated so much that natural building between landscape and what human does in the landscape has been too fast so that it's not

that balanced anymore. So therefore the Swedish landscape where it has that tradition, I'm very, very interested in that. And when you travel in France and Germany, wherever you are, it's just astounding to me how beautiful it is. And because I am a human, I do identify a lot and there's a romance that I have with that. Now the specific red that's on these old buildings, the Swedish red, now they don't have it in Germany, they don't have it in Norway. It's a different red. There is a red that I don't think I captured for people, but it's what I created, and that is that it can grow old so beautifully, you know with the different colors within the red, and so on. It's not a flat red, it just lives. And so the beautiful landscape with the beautiful-the landscape which is eye-of-the-beholder of course, it's pretty flat in many places in Sweden, so Norwegians think it's a little uneventful, for instance, because they have high mountains. So the relationship that I have to that landscape with what people have created together with the landscape takes my breath away. And also there's also-I feel warm towards all the Buddhist thing I imagine to be inside of those houses and culture and family tradition. And you know I don't know what is going on, it could be good and bad, but still, a lot of stuff. And so if you see a building, you also know that there is not only the outside, but also a human being. And I think that I enjoy spatial things, and when I was a teenager I vacillated a little bit thinking that an architect would be a nice thing, so I had a special interest in that. And the remnants of human-like going the woods in Sweden when I was 10,12 years old and we were traveling in the woods beside our old summer place, and as we came upon an old chimney that was left or some fruit trees that were left, it just sparked a romance within me, or interest or something-that triggered imagination to what had happened here. *Old Digs* has --and the film *Kristina's Harbor* has that quality too, because they're torn down. You saw all those steps down to the river? They were all houses along there when I grew up and they tore all those down and were going to build this huge building like a community center, but they never really had enough money to do that so now it's just vacant lots, but it's in a way nice. So there is a vacant quality for me there, but it's now grown over so much that it has been--nature has recaptured it, but still it is the leftovers of, you know, the steps.

KG Of course on the other side of that kind of change, there's those machines-what are they called?

GN Digging machines, I don't know what they are

KG At the time I saw it as taking away something; they talk a little about the changing { 374 } on the wall, but then there's the way you're saying, too: you get remnants of something that had been there, and I was only seeing it in the sense of something new taking the place. But as you said there are those sort of traces.

GN And memories of those-even if they're traces are not there, while in certain parts I have where I weave in runestones. There's one outside the town that has rune letters on there. And I wove that into -there was some snazzy fifties car or so, purple color on it.. And then I had my own picture filming the runestone and then after that it was the sign on the wall which says { 403 } Do you remember that?

KG I remember the sign, but-

LS Oh with the graffiti?

GN Right, right. Now I wove all those things in there with rock-and-roll track from a car going by. So I enjoyed that kind of combination of the centuries, and graffiti and runestones, you know all together, it was all woven into one little section there.

LS Do you think of your way of working to be filming something that you know? Like if you were to make *Kristina's Harbor* but it wasn't a place that you knew as much about--I can't imagine your ever making that film about Sausalito even though you know Sausalito very, very well; it's a different kind of layering. I mean there's only one layer; maybe you're not that interested in what happened there fifty years ago (or maybe you are). But there's that-we were talking about this earlier-that sense of place; but there's only a few places in the world that trigger that, that inspire you.

GN Well I make films here too. I think that in a way-and I've said this before-and that is, we create our own vocabulary, or something, our own symbols, landscape feelings (END of side one, first tape)

(START of side two, first tape)

GN Whatever those landscapes are that we have each one of us, and they are influenced by where we are, but they're also very much influenced by our own fantasy world or whatever it is we have that's unique as each person. And then we take-or I, and I think it's more than me-we take them out in the world, and then find similar moods or clouds or whatever it is, and pick and choose. It's easier where you grew up but you can go very much to another country I think, like to France to paint, if it inspires you in bringing out those images that you had before.

KG I find that really interesting- the way you talk about it, the way you can sort of pick and choose things, because in your films-at least the later ones-there are these objects that are taken out of context, and then you find them again in context. Clearly that happens all the time in the last film- where you draw something or you take a still and later we see it in the imagery, like *Twigs*, or *The Monument*, but even in *Light Years Expanding* and { *Frameline* }, that kind of going forth and finding something and it's painted or created or collaged and then putting it back in

context. And so is what you're finding, or when you say you're picking and choosing, a meshing with something that is emotional?

GN: Well, it's all, it could be any and all. In for instance, in *Natural Features* I mean, there because I'm walking in Sweden alot, that's why I look around alot and find things like birds that are dead. And so I found this bird that was dead right outside the animation studio where I was working in Stockholm and I brought it in, and because I was painting everything else I started painting that one too. And its a little shocking, I guess at first, but it seemed natural somehow to do that. And if that is a play but its also sad to have a, I mean its absurd to do- so it doesnt' t have only one thing as a content for meaning it just has a lot of layering. Its very stupid to do, its interesting to do, its surprising to do and you know, maybe, I don't know.

KG: But, yeah, that's what I was saying. It's not just a symbol, its not this process of some...

GN: Well, and then what it becomes after the process, you know. Although, I in those films I did use the process as part of the film.

KG: In some ways it reminds me of what you said about going around and walking in the forest, you know- and that thing of when you see something and then the act of imagination will help you recreate it. Its the same thing in the walks where you pull something out and then it comes back. Because I felt like as a viewer thats what happens to us alot as we see these objects, in the last film, as we see these objects like a box or the painting, you know the hand, and you're sort of filling in how you think of it and then you see it again later in a different context and it puts you through that act of conjuring.

GV: Well, if you just showed new stuff all the time, it would be a little too much. I mean ,I have thought of a film where there was no context with what had happened before. I thought that would have been an interesting film.

LS: Where there is no image repeating ...

GN: Right, no images repeating. It just goes moment forward and change, and its a natural outgrowth but nothing, or as possible as you can do that, like repeating or having creating a world that you refer back to.. But just to go forward all the time. But its a little tiring ,or maybe a little too much of a trick or something. I never did it ,so --because I do enjoy that referring back.

LS: The way that I always think of it is, that its like a language and people don't speak the language in the beginning of the film and hopefully by the end they will. Obviously that's the plan of a really good ?????? ,but if you don't repeat the word

then you've given them this glossary and this dictionary, but they don't need to use it because the word never comes back. If it comes back, and it has more weight than it did in the beginning, then they learned what you're trying to talk about.

GV: Yeah, that's more or less how I explain things too. But, it would be also interesting to- I mean I'm thinking of ideas of structure that I never do, sometimes, but this is one that would be interesting to live that way too, in a way, where everything is new every time you turn around, every second, you know. In one sense, it would have been an interesting experience to live a little bit like that, but its a little tiring too.

KG: Yeah, and scary.

GV: Right.

KG: I mean it could be the [magic?] that can also???? the person.

GV: Right. So dreams is where we can do those things.

LS: Can you talk about this word process? Let's- you're about to start a new film, where do you start?

GV: It's a very scary time with a new film, you know- because you don't know where you're going and you don't know if you can trust where you think you might go-- if it would interest your work, or whatever, or how to go about getting there. So, and also I am not very happy with filming. I don't like filming, exactly. Does that surprise you?

KG: Yeah.

LS: What about, I'm just, let's say someone is listening to or reading this.