

FOUND SOUNDS:

A Retrospective of Barbara Meter's Avant-Garde Films

All celluloid program curated by Mónica Savirón, and organized in partnership with EYE Filmmuseum.

Very special thanks to Simona Monizza, Edith van der Heijde, Marleen Labijt, Guy Edmonds, Karel Doing, Jurij Meden, and Barbara Meter.

Program notes by Mónica Savirón.

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 with guests such as Carolee Schneemann, Sally Potter, and Kurt Kren. 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. After many years of work, the EYE Filmmuseum in Amsterdam has preserved Meter's films in all their delicacy and complexity.

Lamento

Remco Campert.

Utrecht, Netherlands | 2012 | 3 minutes | audio file

Audio recording of live performance; in Dutch. From Barbara Meter's *Here Now*; part of the film series, *Ten Songs*.

Ariadne

Barbara Meter

Amsterdam, Netherlands | 2004 | 12 minutes | Super-8 to 35mm

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 rewinders. Shot on Super-8mm 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.

Appearances

Barbara Meter

Amsterdam, Netherlands | 2000 | 21 minutes | Super-8 to 16mm

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 '20s and '30s, 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

Barbara Meter

Amsterdam, Netherlands | 2000 | 3 minutes | Super-8 to 16mm

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 *Convalescening*, 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, *Convalescening* 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

Barbara Meter

Amsterdam, Netherlands | 1970 | 3 minutes | Super-8 to 16mm

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 '50s. 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

Barbara Meter

Amsterdam, Netherlands | 2005 | 6 minutes | Super-8 to 16mm

The word "stretto" is an Italian musical term referred 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. In the film, Meter, by employing dissociative imagery and disconnected musical tunes, 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

Barbara Meter

Amsterdam, Netherlands | 1972 | 6 minutes | Dual projection Super-8 to 16mm

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

Barbara Meter

Amsterdam, Netherlands | 2008 | 13 minutes | 16mm

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.