

Docs in Orbit / Masters Episode LYNNE SACHS PART 1 Transcript

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DOCS IN ORBIT - INTRO

Welcome to another Masters Edition episode of Docs in Orbit, where we feature conversations with filmmakers who have made exceptional contributions to documentary film.

In this episode, we feature part one of a two part conversation with the remarkable and highly acclaimed feminist, experimental filmmaker and poet, Lynne Sachs.

Lynne Sachs is a Memphis-born, Brooklyn-based artist who has made over 35 films. Her work explores the intricate relationship between personal observations and broader historical experiences by weaving together text, collage, painting, politics and a layered sound design.

Strongly committed to a dialogue between cinematic theory and practice, she searches for a rigorous play between image and sound, pushing the visual and aural textures in her work with every new project.

Sachs' films have been screened all over the world, including New York Film Festival, Sundance, Oberhausen, BAMCinemaFest, DocLisboa and many others.

Her work has also been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, Walker Art Center, and other venues, including retrospectives in Argentina, Cuba, and China.

She's also received a 2014 Guggenheim Fellowship in the Arts and in 2019, Tender Buttons Press published Lynne's first collection of poetry, **Year by Year Poems**.

Lynne Sachs is currently one of the artists in focus at Sheffield Doc Fest where her most recent feature documentary film, **FILM ABOUT A FATHER WHO** is presented alongside a curated selection of five of her earlier films.

I caught up with Sachs recently to discuss the many aspects of her work, including feminist film theory, experimental filmmaking, and her collaborative approach. We also discuss her short film, **A MONTH OF SINGLE FRAMES (FOR BARBRA HAMMER)**, which is currently available at Dokufest until August 25th.

Christina:

I'm just so grateful to have you here today. I have to first say that I'm emerging from this journey of reviewing many of your films and your work over the past 30 years, as well as a video lecture, **MY BODY YOUR BODY OUR BODIES: SOMATIC CINEMA AT HOME AND IN THE WORLD**, which is a fascinating guide through your work and evolution as a filmmaker. And it's also available online. I'll include links to all of this on the website so that our listeners are able to easily find it.

You know, it's kind of very difficult to figure out where to start after reviewing so much of your work, but I figured maybe it would be nice to just kind of start off with what has shaped you as a filmmaker?

Lynne:

First of all, I wanted to say that it's very interesting to talk to someone who has taken that journey through my work, because one of the things that I think is very much an aspect of my way of making films is that they are so interconnected with my own life.

So if you saw my film, **THE HOUSE OF SCIENCE**, you'd see that I write within it. I keep journals within it. And I talk a lot about the day that I left for college and I had this male gynecologist, I went to check in with him and get some birth control, but I wasn't even sure where my cervix cervix was.

And then you all the way to my more recent films from 20 years ago, and they were a lot about having children. And then in between that there's films that include a lot of travel and a kind of exploration as a young filmmaker.

And then, I have a whole group of films that I made usually in the town where I lived. So partially in Baltimore and a lot in New York. And that was maybe because I didn't believe that documentary film had to come with a big, expensive airplane ticket. And also I had young children at a certain point.

So there's a kind of way that each film, whether in subject or in execution, reflects what was going on in my life, in those decades.

Christina:

There is this very personal aspect of your work as well. This link of what's happening historically in the world around you, but then also through the lens of how it connects to something that you're experiencing.

And I love that you mentioned this notion of going to your gynecologist, because there is also another element of your work that is very much exploring feminism. In a lot of your previous lectures of when you were talking about or writing about what has been influential, you mentioned feminist film theories in your work, and I would love to hear from you- I know it's a big topic - but what feminist film and feminist filmmaking means to you and why it's still important today.

Lynne:

I think that in the world of that it has built up around the film industry. There's been an enormous emphasis on access to the means of production. Are women able to break into the hierarchy and even climb or be given the opportunity to access the top.

So there's this idea that you become a director and therefore you have accomplished what any other woman would want to do.

But unfortunately that does not necessarily come with what maybe you or I would call a feminist sensibility. So there is this breaking of the glass ceiling on the level of job opportunities, but then once you're there, you're still replicating what the men have already done.

So important filmmakers and thinkers around film who've really shaken me up on the level of image making and encouraged or compelled me to, to bring a feminist commitment to my work would probably start with **Mia Darren**.

She's probably the best known grandmother. And I say that in this very broad way. She was a grandmother to many men also. But this person who believed in the possibility for personal filmmaking to break through, to be accessible to many people and in the process to speak to her own experience, which was a woman's experience.

And then thinking about theory, I would say, **Laura Mulvey's article on Visual Pleasure**, because I think even putting those two things together, visual pleasure - and she was writing about narrative cinema. We look at art for pleasure. Yes, we eat food for pleasure, and we travel for pleasure, and we do many things, but art also offers that.

But if the visual pleasure is replicating the desires of a male cinematographer or director, then what she is asking us. And she did this in the early seventies. What she's asking is, is that really progress?

So Mia Darren, Laura Mulvey, and then I think other people writing on film, who demanded that we not only talk about women's experiences, but be very vulnerable in our openness to talking about the body, because that's what distinguishes us from men.

I think a kind of hero in that respect would be **Carolee Schneemann**, who was a great performance artist, conceptual thinker and filmmaker.

Christina:

Yeah, so it's not just about being able to give a woman a camera and access to making a film, but it's about actually putting on screen, the way that a woman sees the world, the way that a woman sees her body and it not being through the lens of this male perspective

Lynne:

Yeah.. How the body is framed and how we articulate a point of view and being really thoughtful about that. And eventually, maybe there's the, there will come a time where we don't have to be as self-conscious, it will just happen. But I think right now we have to investigate that.

And I think particularly in the year, 2020, we also have to look at how the articulation or the expression is also open to a kind of freedom around race too. A freedom of expression that's not tied down to stereotypes and tied down the burden of what, what cinema has done for so long in terms of how women and women of color have been represented.

Christina:

Yeah, and I was going to ask about this because this feminist movement in cinema, as you had mentioned, has been around since the seventies. And you were exploring that when you were in college as well in the eighties, and reading about these theories and then taking your camera up to the roof and exploring the way bodies were represented in film. But how about today? What more can you say about how this is still important?

Lynne:

I think one of the people who kind of broke through our, our way of thinking would be **bell hooks**. She writes a great deal about those forms of representation. I personally have been very influenced by **Kara Walker's** work, and by the imagery that she boldly has presented to the world of art.

Then there's a few filmmakers whose work has been very influential to me. These Black women filmmakers. **Cauleen Smith** is a super interesting filmmaker. Her work is very much about Afro surrealism.

I actually really liked the way **Ja'Tovia Gary** integrates these interview processes. She takes a kind of a convention of the reporter on the street, but she has this intimacy at the same time, which I find very empowering as a woman, you know, like let's do it the old fashioned way with this phallic thing, the microphone, but let's do it in this way that's like female bonding. So I love, I really love her work.

Christina:

Yeah, I do too. It was one of the delights to discover at Hot Docs this year. I think it's been around for a while, that short film, but I had only come to see it when it was on display at Hot Docs.

So another thing that you're known for ... I'm trying to pull the threads of how to describe you as a filmmaker and the adjectives that are most commonly used and the word feminist always comes up, but then also experimental filmmaker.

For me, this is very visible in your work and how you play with textures in your films. I would describe your work as being very idea centric, not so much plot driven, but it's very much that there's a thought in the center that you're exploring and you're using film as a way to bring that to life.

So can you speak a little bit about this idea of experimental filmmaking and what that means for you?

Lynne:

I really appreciate your saying that because I actually do think the kernel, the seed is a thought and there's an expectation in documentary film that we start with a story. And that I feel a bit resentful of because story also applies to plot also applies to the whole condition or expectations of literature as in you have a protagonist or character, and everything is revolving around that character.

And I find that to be kind of derivative. So if you, with an idea, as you've suggested, then the aesthetics have to build up around that and they have to take on a more complex approach.

So, if I have an idea or a curiosity or something I want to investigate, then I have to think about how I will hold the camera? You were talking about texture, how will I hold the camera to make that evident?

Or sometimes it goes the other way. Does the fact that the camera shook give you the sense that we have doubt? So there's a give and take between process instead of always judging what you did.

Like if you did something all by yourself, the production values are often let's say disappointing on first view.

But if the idea rises to the top, the idea says to you, well those obstacles, those production value obstacles actually lead us to something more real. Revealed something about the situation, for example, that you were shooting in a place where you felt scared.

Those things can come through the texture, but the problem with, what I think a conventional approach to documentary is there's always this expectation that you're going for something that's perfect that follows a template that is beautiful in the most obvious ways.

But sometimes beautiful is opaque and not so beautiful adds a transparency of process that actually can be very stimulating to the viewer.

I mean, I really believe we're sick of looking at the perfect image.

And actually you were asking about theory, and I would say another big influence is the German theorist and filmmaker, **Hito Steyerl**. She definitely identifies as highly conceptual and highly committed to the documentary impulse.

She wrote this article about **the perfect image versus the degraded image**. She sort of thinks it's really interesting to look at the degraded image, the one that you find on the internet and how it moves from hand to hand, and that we become aware of its demise and we see all like all its wrinkles. Instead of thinking it has to be like fresh out of the camera and unaffected by its life journey.

Christina:

Another aspect of your work that really drew me / collaboration is a really important element in your process. Somewhere I read that there's a point in your career as a filmmaker where you note this shift in your approach, as you begin to consider your subject as a collaborator. Can you speak a little bit about this and how it shaped sort of where that insight kind of came from and how it shaped the work that you do now?

Lynne:

I've had this notion that historically in filmmaking, that actors are, have been treated like props, especially women. So if you allow those participants to become creatively involved, I actually think they feel more, there's more gratitude.

Maybe that's part of a kind of feminist resistance to the power that comes with being a director that's never about listening? Like in my film **TIP OF MY TOUNGE**, I wanted that film to be a lot about listening - my listening to the people in the film and they're listening to each other and not just about my directing.

Christina:

I think, for me, that's very resonant in your work. So I want to talk a little bit about that film also, but within the context of collaboration, because I'm really intrigued by the nature of your collaborations, because there's always a degree of it and it's really interesting to look at, I'll just pick three -

Tip of My Tongue, and then **Film About a Father Who**, and **A Month of Single Frames**. So I think these three films, maybe we can just talk about these three films and the collaborative nature of them?

LYNNE:

I also thought about **Which Way is East**, which I made with my sister. Yeah, this could be interesting, like in a curatorial way, I hadn't thought about it.

In **TIP OF MY TONGUE**, it's a film that started off with a collection of poems that I wrote for every year of my life, between 1961 and 2011, 2011 was the year I turned 50, but it took me about five years to write all those poems.

And then I started to think about, well, why do I just want to know about my own experience, this sort of documentary maker in me reared its head and said, well, how would other people who lived in Iran or lived in Australia or lived in the Netherlands - how would they have seen those years from very distinct different points of view?

So I am the director of it, but a big part of it was bringing this group of people together. And I didn't say I was making a movie, I just said I'm looking for people to collaborate on a project and I'm looking for people who were born between 1958 and 64.

A couple of them were friends, but others had been recommended like, Oh, I know a woman from Iran and she lived those exact years. And, you know, so I figured, okay, when I was graduating from high school and worrying about whether I was going to go to the prom, she was dealing with a revolution.

And we spent three days basically living together and talking to each other and I filmed it. And then I tried to, in a sense, collaborate with the city of New York, which was the only thing all of us have in common. We all lived in New York at that point, and so New York also becomes a collaborator with us as a backdrop and also as unifying aspect of our lives.

And so, what I did was I got together with them and I did an audio interview and I asked them to pick five moments in their lives where a public event affected something very personal or transformed or allowed them to understand something very intimate in their own lives.

So that was the prompt. That became a way by which they could think about Richard Nixon, or they could think about the first moon landing or they could think about 9-11. Some of those are more obvious than others.

So we processed that and filtered those mate, those big events through our own lenses and experiences.

Once I had those interviews, then I started to see intersections between the stories. And then I came back to them and acted a little bit more like Director.

So I have all this openness, anything goes, and then when we actually shot everything was storyboarded.

I think there's an interesting connection between something you brought up earlier, which is the idea. I think the link between the idea and the aesthetics has to do with finding formal strategies that resonate

both conceptually and visually. That's what I spend all my time thinking about it in the shower. Or dare I say it, driving my car on the subway. Or I'll wake up in the middle of the night. I think I need a strategy that works on both of those levels. And I'm very rigorous about that. And if it doesn't work on both of those levels, then I kind of reject it. And sometimes that takes them years to figure it out.

Christina:

Right. And there's different, I imagine, drafts of strategies that you're trying and trying and trying until you finally find one that does work.

Lynne:

Yeah, sure. So that's the process for that film. So maybe I'll go on to **A Month of Single Frames?**

Christina:

Yes! Please!

Lynne:

So **A Month of Single Frames** is a film I made with **Barbara Hammer** who was a renowned lesbian, experimental filmmaker. And she always said intersectional; lesbian, experimental, and filmmaker, all all once! Woman.

So, I have known her for about 30 years - she had been a mentor of mine back in San Francisco, which was very formulated for both of us and then we both came to New York.

Then, just about two years ago, when she knew that she was dying, she came to four different artists and asked, would we like to work with material that she had?

The material she gave me was uncut, 16 millimeter film that she shot in 1998 of an artist residency.

And I said to her immediately, Barbara, why didn't you make this? You've been so prolific, why didn't make it? She said, well, it was too much about me. Which is funny because she made a lot of films about herself. But my feeling was maybe she thought the material was too beautiful. It didn't have an edge to it.

So I was faced with its absolute beauty. Cape Cod, and the dunes, and the sunset. The sound effects of the waves and the insects, and all that.

And so there, I was in a sense collaborating with her work just by editing it. And that didn't seem like enough.

So I thought I needed to talk through the material to her and to audiences and even to a more epistemological engagement with cinema. Like, what is cinema? What is it in terms of the way it looks at time at place as it once was and now what has changed? And how does cinema allow two people to be in the same space and not in the same space?

And then I'm in the same space with Barbara, with you as viewer, with anyone who watches the film people. Total strangers. We're all in the same space.

So that actually came to me and I just started writing, as you've seen, in a lot of my films writing can find its way as voiceover or on the screen.

So the collaboration in a sense for me didn't really happen until I was able to create my own place in it. Otherwise it was, it was more like, hagiography, and I didn't want it to just be a portrait of a woman who had recently died. I needed to engage deeper in the deeper way.

Christina:

You said it's about cinema. It's also about the making of cinema too and on that level, it resonated with me. It's very clear from the beginning, when we hear you setting up the interviews, there's a very reflexive mode in there. "I'm setting out to collaborate with this filmmaker and make a new creation out of her work".

I found it very moving, not just because the images were incredibly beautiful and the soundscape and the way that those worked so well together, but I found it really balanced in terms of the space you gave yourself in the film while you're paying an homage to Barbara Hammer and her work during that residency.

Lynne:

One of the things that comes about when you're making a work that uses this word, "about". Or we talk about the elevator pitch, like, how can you describe your film in the 20 seconds that you're on an elevator with someone? And the word that always comes in is "about".

That's the preposition, right? If the object of the preposition is only the name of someone, then I think it's very reductive.

But if you can say the about, can become more expanded and more reflective that about is also within, and it can be multiple prepositions, within or underneath or behind or with, like all of those things.

Then we start to think about our engagement as being more fluid, more unpredictable, and more about point of view.

So, if I had just said, this is a film about a woman who had cancer, or this is a film about a woman who was a lesbian experimental filmmaker, then you would enter those 14 minutes and you'd come out knowing more like in an educational experience.

Like I know more about Barbara Hammer. Or in, **Film About A Father Who**, I know more about this filmmaker's father. But I didn't want either of those films to function on that narrow a level. I wanted it to be about process and about failure.

That's why with **A Month of Single Frames**, you hear us setting up and you actually hear a place where, Barbara and I are talking about looking through her journal and she kind of gets a little irritated with me cause I don't find the right part that she should read.

Normally you would cut that out, because it sort of shows my failures or that I felt pressured, or I really didn't know what I was doing.

But if you leave it in, it becomes more human.

That's like the calling card of all essay films is those moments where the attempt to do one thing leads to something else and so you go one direction and then you find a kind of obstacle and you go another direction.

There's another part of **A Month of Single Frames** that you might not have noticed, but I almost took it out and it also shows failure. Barbara wanted to animate these little toys and she wanted to film them, but she was there all by herself in this remote shack in Cape Cod.

So she'd wind up the toys and then she kind of like run back to her camera. But by the time she got your camera, these wind up toys didn't move anymore. So you actually see her hand and so called "good animators" wouldn't include the hand moving the toys. They would only include the success. But I actually thought what was more interesting was her attempt to do something which basically failed.

Christina:

I do remember that. I do remember that bit, but I wasn't, to me, it was just playful.

Just to see somebody that is so renowned that, you know, it's it's, but at the same time, so devoted to the work as well and seeing how playful she is with her environment, it was just very nice to see.

Lynne:

Well, I think one of the things about that film that's so extraordinary is that her situation while beautiful is also quite basic.

And there's a way that the film validates movie production on a budget. It doesn't elevate access to funds and to locations. It just sort of says what the barest of tools you can make a movie. And I think that also is super validating and important to remember in our high tech and quite money oriented - our industry is a lot about money.

So when you see someone who's working in this very austere way, I think it's quite (inaudible)

You asked earlier what makes for an experimental film. I think it's the notion that work can be play and play can be work. That if you allow yourself to play for a while, rather than judging yourself immediately, which we all do, especially when we call it work, we call it work and we don't think it's good enough, then we pretty much stop. We censor ourselves and stop.

But if we move into a realm of play, then I think we often end up in a place of discovery.

And Barbara was always doing that. And so she was most definitely a kind of role model for me.

CHRISTINA:

What was it like when you first received this set of archives and watching and hearing them for the first time?

Lynne:

You know, I had a student about three years ago who asked me, why do I make movies? And I guess I kind of gave her an answer. And then I asked her because she was learning to make films. And she said to me, I think I make films because I want to give gifts.

And I really loved that. I really loved that you do it because you're sharing something or that you do have an experience that you want someone else to be able to engage with. And might give them joy. Or might make them feel about the world in a deeper way.

So, when Barbara gave me this imagery that she had, and she is giving me the gift of witnessing her solitude. So I felt that I needed to enter that experience of solitude and that was a gift that was from her to me.

So I needed to find a way to give back to her and I knew that it would be posthumous. So I needed to give to her legacy, not just to her. There's a real exchange between the two of us.

And it's interesting to find that I'm referring to her so much now that she's not with us. I have this very profound belief that when we lose someone, someone who dies, that as much as we don't want to say their names because it reminds us of them, that each time we say their name, we get to be with them a bit longer.

I really love when I dream about someone who's died. And so the film is a little bit like my dream of Barbara that I keep getting to have.

Because, as you know with anyone who has died in life, you dream a lot about them, and you're chit chatting with them and having dinner with them and all of that. When they appear in your dream, you feel wistful. And so the film was a little bit like that.

Christina:

That's wonderful. It's actually a really wonderful way to close on, on the film too.

DOCS IN ORBIT - OUTRO

Thanks for listening. And make sure to subscribe to the podcast so you don't miss part two of the conversation where we discuss more of Lynne's work, including her feature film, FILM ABOUT A FATHER WHO.

Also, head over to our website, www.docsinorbit.com, for our show notes that include links to films and articles referenced in this episode.

This podcast was produced by Panda Ray Productions.

With music by Nayeem Mahbub in Stockholm. And Produced by Christina Zachariades in Brooklyn.
Special thanks to Sylvia Savadjian.

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