Gunvor Nelson Tribute
By Lynne Sachs
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This knit cap sparks a profound reverie in my mind. The cap has certain qualities that absolutely cannot be ignored. Gunvor Nelson made it in 1995 for our daughter Maya on the occasion of her birth, the hat has not only kept her warm but also grown – magically - with her head. Each time that Maya wears it gives me the chance to talk about the person who made it - my teacher, friend and inspiration.

Let's go back.

In the mid 1980s, I moved from the east to the west coast to begin graduate studies in the Film Department at the San Francisco Art Institute where I was able to work with some of the greatest filmmakers of the Avant-Garde: Ernie Gehr, Larry Jordan, George Kuchar, Carolee Schneemann (where Mark and I met), Gunvor Nelson. She was the person who called me on the phone to say congratulations.

For two years, I sat with her f in front of a 16mm editing machine watching my films in ***process*** (Note the word "process" not "progress", as we never knew if the films were getting better, only that they were evolving).

Gunvor taught me to pay special attention to the **energy** that happens between two shots. Through the visualization acceptance of this shift from one image to another, the spectator creates a particularly cinematic space that seems to exist within the cut itself.

One of the most lasting suggestions Gunvor made to me was that a filmmaker should always return to her outtakes just before she completes the edit of a film. Here, for example, you find the moments when the film roll is just about to run out and beautiful fire-like orange flashes burst across the frame. I remember the time when my camera almost fell off the tripod during a shoot and so the film recorded what I originally saw as an ugly, embarrassing accident. According to Gunvor, these "mistakes" that were initially disregarded become extremely useful punctuations – like a period or an exclamation mark – that assist an editor in finding ways to a complete a visual thought.

"Study … negative space."

Like Cézanne, Gunvor compelled her students to see the shapes that surround and transform objects. She wanted us to be aware of the way that the frame interacted with the things that moved in and out of the image. Whether we were

filming a human being performing a role, a beautiful glass bottle on a table, or a windmill on a hill, we had to be as aware of what was not there as what was there. After working with Gunvor, I distinctly remember looking at a cloud formation in the sky one day. Most people search for animal shapes when they look up, but I could only stand in awe of the negative space.

"Pay attention to what kinds of colors are present … in what proportion do the colors exist and play off of each other?"

I learned so much about color from Gunvor. She taught me to look at the world I had created in my images as a series of hues and intensities that could bounce against each other in the most stimulating of ways. Who cares about other content when you have color!

"How dark or light is the shot? Notice how sharp or soft an image is focused and also how the contrast gives feeling to the photography."

Eventually, while working with Gunvor, I realized that the editing schematic was often so important to her that it really did not matter what was actually on screen as long as I was able to construct a film with Nelson-approved visual integrity. Throughout the process, Gunvor taught me how to trace the shifts from dark to light and back to dark within and between shots so as to build a complex, unspoken, non-narrative cinematic universe.

After months or years of editing, the last step to making a 16mm film print requires the artist to communicate with a laboratory technician. Most filmmakers are completely baffled by the science of color and, therefore, have a difficult time articulating their desires in terms of the numerical changes in the cyan, magenta, yellow and black chromatic palette of each shot. Not so, Gunvor. She walked into Monaco laboratory with a precise list of timing-light numbers. I remember hearing from several technicians that she understood the science of color printing better than any filmmaker they had ever met.

The first time I saw Gunvor's brash, feminist 1966 moving image carnival "Schmeerguntz", I was about 25 years old, still too young (I thought) to identify with her funky discourse on motherhood and domesticity. In a sense, I watched Gunvor's cinematic collaboration with her friend Dorothy Wiley (which we will also do tonight) as a child might furtively read her mother's journals. Much more was revealed than I wanted to know, and so I felt like turning my head from the chaotic clutter of home-life and parenthood that Gunvor had splashed across her screen. I wanted to close my eyes, and yet I never did. Her wild, hilarious, courageously "vulgar" images seeped directly into my burgeoning artist's psyche. Just a few years later I made "The House of Science" (1991) and "A Biography of

Lilith", my own two filmic discourses on my body and becoming a mother. Only now, in writing this essay, am I beginning to come to terms with the powerful influence that "Schmeerguntz" had on these two works.

One spring afternoon in 2001, I was standing in my backyard watching Maya play in the grass. As I stared intently at her, I realized that my relationship to her fleeting youth was now somehow similar to Gunvor's with her own daughter in her film "My Name is Oona" (1969). In this film, Gunvor stares at Oona who is riding with blissful abandon on a horse at the beach. Oona is free to run with the animal wherever she may choose, and yet she is somehow lovingly reined in by the gaze and concern of her mother. Through the fabric of the celluloid in both its clarity and its obscurity Gunvor weaves an intimate, oneiric homage to her daughter. On the soundtrack, she creates a musical litany made of the sound of Oona speaking her name over and over. Perhaps it was seeing this film that compelled me to pull out my 16mm camera to film my daughter running as many circles as she could before falling dizzily to the ground. I called this short cine-poem "Photograph of Wind" (2001). I would later update the film as Maya grew older, with "Same Stream Twice" in 2016 and "Maya at 24" in 2021.

In the early 1980s, Gunvor completed another cinematic meditation on the fraught, exhilarating dynamic between mothers and daughters. In "Red Shift" (1984), Gunvor produced a remarkably complex, exquisitely observed rumination on the small gestures – both physical and emotional – that transpire between women of different generations. This film was on my mind when I made my film Carolee, Barbara and Gunvor in 2018.

In 1991, as she was beginning her move back to Sweden, Gunvor completed "Time
Being" (1991), the most wrought, candid film on the act of dying that I have ever seen. "Dying" is a verb, it is alive, it is part of the cycle of life. In this film, Gunvor stares intently at her mother, a woman whose body has been devastated by the challenges of her last days on this earth. In three astute shots, Gunvor looks with honesty rather than awe at a woman whose spirit has somehow flown away but whose body still demands a share of our time and our space. Through the film she is still "there" and "here" in the ways that only cinema can manage to do. In watching my own father dying in 20122, I realized that I had come full circle with Gunvor.

Through her work, I have watched all the phases of existence.

"When you are really immersed, you, yourself, are totally interested in solving the 'problem' of the film, then you forget how much work you are giving to it, then the film emerges. Why did I not see it before?"

As Gunvor once explained to me, when you finish editing your beloved film, you will be ecstatic. Then the next morning you will feel a profound sense of loss. To be inside the editing of a film is an incredibly consuming fusion of the intellectual and the artistic. No matter what is going on in your home or in the world beyond, you have your film, and that, sometimes, is enough.