Sharon Greytak / MATRIX 126
January 28 - April 9, 1995

Sharon Greytak, detail from Hearing Voices, 1989, American Film Institute, USA Independents Showcase film.

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Sharon Greytak/MATRIX 126

During the last fifteen years Sharon Greytak has made an exceptional variety of films from experimental shorts and documentary to feature fiction. Her early work is distinguished by a rigorous examination of the formal properties of film conducted through often emotionally charged subjects. Greytak’s work frequently addresses issues that fall through the cracks not only in mainstream films but even, at times, in experimental and independent film-making. Though her recent works are addressed to a more mainstream audience, she continues to question conventional modes of storytelling, and traditional ways of considering subjects and concepts that are frequently marginalized, such as disability, homosexuality, and unconventional family forms.

For this MATRIX exhibition, Greytak’s films are being shown in video format. It is important for the viewer to bear in mind that film and video have different properties, and the latter medium is representing the former. As spectators become increasingly accustomed to watching films at home on video cassette, they have, for better or worse, learned to accept the discrepancy.

Sleeping (1981) through its subject matter, and its use of a fixed camera and a very long take, evokes thoughts of Andy Warhol’s famous film Sleep (1963), in which the artist filmed poet and Factory denizen John Giorno sleeping for six hours. Greytak’s Sleeping expands the sensory experience that a viewer may expect from a film. The fades in and out on a still photograph of Greytak’s grandmother may at first seem analogous to the opening and closing of the human eye. It soon becomes clear, however, that these camera movements represent the sleeping subject’s breathing. The realization is not just intellectual — given the tender, almost pastoral nature of the image, it is a very emotional one as well. Greytak considers Sleeping “a meditative” film that “attempts to put time back into the photograph.” Yet, because the spectator can never match her own breathing to the film, Greytak feels that Sleeping “is simultaneously beautiful and vicious.” Even though the film is silent, the viewer can almost feel the sound of the subject’s (or the camera’s) breathing.

April 7, 1981 (1981) is also a silent, single take with a fixed camera. In it, a matronly woman in a red dress greets guests with a handshake and other communicative gestures. The movements take place against a stark, black backdrop, offering no specific information about the event or location. Furthermore, unlike what we might see in a mainstream, more conventional representation of such a scene, Greytak shoots the actors from the shoulders
down, eliminating facial expressions, which we usually look to first for meaning. Instead, the body movements, (especially those of the hands) assume a heightened importance, functioning almost as a hieroglyphic language. When the woman is alone and between greetings, Greytak uses a process called step printing, a doubling of each frame which gives a slow motion effect to the actor’s gestures. Thus, time moves at two different rates in April 7, 1981, accentuating the difference between public and private moments, and reminding us that language, including body gestures, is a public phenomenon, and a tacit agreement between and among people.

**Some Pleasure on the Level of the Source** (1982) functions as a virtual lexicon of cinema and its language. Greytak uses still and moving images, silent and sound passages, synchronized and non-synchronized sounds and a variety of transitions between shots. On its surface, therefore, the film is very much in the tradition of American structuralist filmmaking of the 1960s and 1970s, which explored the structure, form and cinematically-specific properties of film with at least a putative de-emphasis on content. There are seven live-action sections and two freeze-frame sections. In the freeze-frame sections the images of a little girl jumping rope and of a red rectangle (which she has drawn) are respectively double- and triple-superimposed over the image of a New England-style white clapboard house. Through the motion sequences, Greytak describes the almost imperceptible steps in the girl’s development, culminating in an unexpectedly womanly gesture as she runs her fingers through her hair. These moments in the film address task performance, temporal duration, and the layering of narrative over suspended time. Other passages thwart our expectations of what film should do, such as scenes whose sound and image move in and out of synchronization. The transitions from scene to scene are achieved either through fades
or dissolves. According to Greytak, “The dissolve in film has historically been a signifier for transition...I am interested in the formation and transmittance of shifting content during that moment within the film; how meaning can be exploited and/or heightened.”

Czechoslovakian Woman (1982), like Sleeping, concerns itself with still photographs and their relationship to the motion picture camera. In addition, it also describes certain relationships between image and text. The camera zooms into and roves across a sequence of eight photographs of an older woman’s death and funeral (photographs of a relative sent to Greytak’s family) while subtitles appear at the bottom of the frame. The sentences are in phonetic English (which is intended to defamiliarize language in order that the spectator realize his or her connections to it) to “force the spectator near speech,” as Greytak describes it. Both the content of the subtitles and the effort required to read them point the viewer toward a realization of how images function. “I gaze. I stare. I devour,” the text says, describing in increasingly frank terms how we look at cinema. For Greytak, our way into the sense and meaning of any visual image is what French sociologist and cultural critic Roland Barthes calls the punctum, that detail of a photograph which is atypical, odd, or off-beat. Elsewhere the text gives the Oxford English Dictionary definition of asymptote, a line which meets zero only at infinity. This draws attention to the way in which a film cannot re-create reality, but can only represent.

Weirded Out and Blown Away (1986) is Greytak’s sole foray into documentary, and her first break from experimental short films. In it, she interviews four subjects — a writer, an actor, a painter, a psychotherapist — and is also interviewed herself. The common link among these five professionals is that each has a visible disability. Greytak employs a traditional “string of interviews” format, which is punctuated by a still camera fixed on different parts of Greytak’s own body — her hands, her torso, her legs — as she descends from a public bus. In constructing this documentary Greytak had strong ideas about what she would not show. She refused to film her subjects “going through their daily lives” because she felt it was exploitative, and that to do so was to succumb to the way that a film camera can intrude on a subject’s life rather than be put in the service of telling that subject’s stories. Rather, Greytak allows the tension between the conventional documentary form and the innovative insertions of non-narrative images to speak about the difference between the disabled subject’s self-perception and the ways in which they are each perceived by others. Moreover, those still images problematize the very notion of any audience member’s desire to
look, which, while being the whole point of film-going, also runs directly counter to most people’s sense that it is impolite to stare. “Film is a distancing device that gives permission to stare, since it’s just human nature to gather information,” says Greytak. In *Weirded Out and Blown Away* this maneuver articulates “the duality of being drawn to something unusual” and of being trained not to look.

Given its straightforward documentary format, the film also has moments of unexpected reflexivity. At one point, actor Clark Middleton, by far the most confrontational and resistant interviewee, says to Greytak, who is off-screen, “A minute ago...you told me you weren’t going to ask me that question and I asked you not to ask the question and you asked it anyway. But since you have asked me the question...”. The specific question is far less important than the fact that Middleton’s recognition of a space and time outside the world of the documentary points to its status as a constructed work, not something that occurs naturally and spontaneously. Ultimately, *Weirded Out and Blown Away* describes the idea of a unified or singular disabled community as a myth, and draws the viewer’s attention to the commonalities between people who have disabilities and those who do not, rather than their differences.

Promotional postcard for *Weirded Out and Blown Away* (1985)
Photo courtesy of Sharon Greytak
Greytak’s study of the split between public and private realms, as well as the friction between the desire to look and the taboo against it, is continued in her first feature fiction film, Hearing Voices (1989). Whereas in Weirded Out and Blown Away the perception of the subjects’ disabilities was both visible and public, in Hearing Voices it is not. Erika (Erika Nagy) must negotiate a delicate balance between her identity as a top hand model and her identity as someone living with the effects of both scoliosis and an ileostomy. In one of the film’s most remarkable moments, Greytak films Nagy in her bathroom emptying and changing her ileostomy bag. The camera is placed at a distance from the action. Far from seeming cold and dispassionate, this brings the spectator into an intimacy with Erika that is “warm and objective.” Greytak consciously works against traditional, Hollywood-style ways of narrating such scenes, which might use frequent cutting and which would probably exile the actual event from the scene. By filming the emptying of the bag in a single long take, however, Greytak shows a respect not only for the subject but also for her audience. “I like forcing the audience to take the same time to watch something that it takes to do something.” Anything else, she feels, “is depriving the audience of the experience.”

Hearing Voices addresses the aestheticization of both the (perfect) model body and the (imperfect) medical body. We tend
to think of models and those with illness as opposite types, but in *Hearing Voices* Greytak emphasizes the points of intersection between the two by centering the narrative on a woman who is both. In so doing she illuminates the usually invisible fact that both models and patients are incessantly observed, and that the identities of both are in part defined by being constantly under scrutiny and not entitled to the same kind of privacy as “normal” people. In each case the person may experience a link between her public and private identities over which she has little control.

Though Greytak’s work has moved from experimental to documentary to feature fiction, the themes she explores are strikingly consistent. Throughout her films there is a preoccupation with the connection between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional, as well as a related concern with the link between moving and non-moving images. In *Some Pleasure on the Level of the Source* the little girl draws a red rectangle and Greytak films the prolonged activity from start to finish in a single take. In filming the coming into being of the two-dimensional red rectangle created by the girl, whom we perceive by convention as a form with volume and depth, Greytak reminds the viewer that film gives only the illusion of three-dimensional representation, an illusion which requires a certain complicity on the part of the spectator. In *Czechoslovakian Woman*, all the images are still photographs into and over which the camera moves, giving the spectator a rare awareness that spatial and temporal motion are not the same, even if (in cinema) they appear to be. In *Weirded Out and Blown Away*, Greytak’s camera, fixed on stationary parts of her own body, not only provides “a privileged time for the audience” but also momentarily suspends the flow of the documentary narrative. In *Hearing Voices*, Greytak films Erika and her boyfriend (Tim Ahearn) in a variety of modeling poses in the same manner that she filmed her own body in *Weirded Out and Blown Away*. On one level of course, this stands for the moment at which the camera clicks and the model’s image is frozen in time; on another, it is about restoring an audience’s ability to contemplate a moment rather than rush through it, as for Greytak most Hollywood films urge the viewer to do.

Greytak’s persistent thematics are not purely formal but social as well. *Some Pleasure* also describes the little girl’s movement from child to woman, and her assumption of a sexual identity, no matter how tentative it might be at that age. In *Weirded Out*, most of the interviews speak extensively about negotiating a sexual identity not only in relation to the subject’s gender and the expected socio-sexual position that that implies, but also in relation to being disabled. In *Hearing Voices*, the issue is complicated still further when what Adrienne Rich has called
"compulsory heterosexuality" is removed from the picture (and its existence at all might come as much from the spectator as from the film itself). Sexual identity is posited as far more fluid than the gay/straight dichotomy, as Erika becomes involved with Lee (Stephen Gatta), her gay doctor's lover. Greytak insists that the unconventional love story is "really just about people who are drawn together." Nevertheless, her last two films have addressed unconventional topics which are unlikely to go unnoticed by the average viewer. Her next film, The Love Lesson, which will be screened at the Wadsworth Atheneum on Thursday, October 5, 1995, is also engaged with provocative issues, centering on an HIV-positive heterosexual teenager and his relationship with his biological and adoptive mothers. What distinguishes Greytak's work is her ability to represent these concerns as already woven into the fabric of daily life, and already embedded in mainstream society, whether that society wants them there or not. For Greytak, this is an essential part of considering her audience, which she hopes will take an active role in viewing her films. "You have to have respect for your audience," she says, "I know they're not empty vessels that come to a film. They bring their own life experiences, and I expect they would want to add something to the work."

Sharon Greytak was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut in 1958. She is a graduate of the Hartford Art School, University of Hartford. (As an undergraduate, she was a MATRIX intern.) She received an M.F.A. from the California Institute of the Arts in 1982. Over the years, she has received many distinguished awards, including an Independent Filmmaker's Award from the American Film Institute in 1994. Ms. Greytak lives and works in New York City.

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1 Artist’s unpublished statement, June 1981, partially quoted in Cineprobe: An Evening with Sharon Greytak Museum of Modern Art, NYC.


3 Artist's unpublished statement, 1982


5 This and all subsequent quotations by Ms. Greytak are from a conversation with Alexandra L.M. Keller, 5 January 1995.

PLEASE NOTE:

Thursday, March 2, 1995
6:30 p.m.
Aetna Theater
The Atheneum will screen two films by Sharon Greytak, Weirded Out and Blown Away (43 minutes) and Hearing Voices (87 minutes). The artist will be present to discuss the films, and a short reception in her honor will take place at the intermission between the screenings.

Thursday, October 5, 1995
6:30 p.m.
Aetna Theater
The Atheneum will screen Ms. Greytak’s new film The Love Lesson (86 minutes). The artist will again be present to discuss her work.

March 21, 1995
Noon
Professor Michael Walsh, Director of Cinema and Theater Studies at the University of Hartford, will give a gallery talk on the work of Sharon Greytak.
Works in MATRIX:

Program 1 (Weeks of January 24-29, February 21-26, March 21-26, 1995)

Sleeping, 1981 (7 minutes) 16mm, color, silent.

April 7, 1981, 1981 (13 minutes) 16mm, color, silent.

Czechoslovakian Women, 1982 (10 minutes) 16mm, black and white printed on color film stock, sound.

Some Pleasure on the Level of the Source, 1982 (13 minutes) 16mm, color, sound.

Weirded Out and Blown Away, 1985 (43 minutes) 16mm, color, sound.

Program 2 (Weeks of January 31-February 5, February 14-19, February 28-March 5, March 14-19, March 28-April 2, April 4-9, 1995)

Weirded Out and Blown Away, 1985 (43 minutes) 16mm color, sound.

Program 3 (Weeks of February 7-12, March 7-12, 1995)

Hearing Voices, 1989 (87 minutes) 35mm, color, sound.

Filmography, all written, produced and directed by Sharon Greytak:

Sleeping (7 minutes) 16mm, color, silent '81.

April 7, 1981 (13 minutes) 16mm, color, silent '81.

Czechoslovakian Woman (10 minutes) 16mm, black and white printed on color film stock, sound '82.

Some Pleasure On the Level of the Source (13 minutes) 16mm, color, sound '82.

The Living Room (12 minutes) 16mm, color, sound '83.

Mastectomy (7 minutes) 16mm, color, sound '84.

Weirded Out and Blown Away (43 minutes) 16mm, color, distributed by the Cinema Guild, NYC, and Jane Balfour Films, London, England '85.

Hearing Voices (87 minutes) 35mm, dramatic feature, color, sound, distributed by Leisure Time Features, NYC, and World Artists Home Video, Los Angeles, CA '89.
The Love Lesson (87 minutes) 35mm, dramatic feature, color, sound, '95 (to be released in 1995). All films distributed by the artist, unless otherwise noted.

Selected One-Person Screenings:

The Millennium Film Workshop, NYC '83,'86,'92; Collective for Living Cinema, NYC '83; Museum of Modern Art, NYC Cineprobe '83,'90; Los Angeles Film Forum '84; University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, WI '85; Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, Buffalo, NY '85; The Funnel, Toronto, Canada '85; University Art Museum, Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA '86,'90; AT&T Bell Laboratories Corporate Headquarters, Murray Hill, NJ '86; Chicago Filmmakers, IL '86; Film in the Cities, Minneapolis, MN '87; Port Washington Public Library, NY '87; International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, NY '91; American Film Institute, John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C. '91.

Theatrical Releases (Hearing Voices):

City Cinemas Village East, NYC '91; Brattle Theatre, Boston, MA '91; Laemmle Monica Theatre, Santa Monica, CA '91; Village Cinema Four, Austin, TX '92; Real Movies, Cincinatti, OH '92; Roxy Theatre, Philadelphia, PA '92; Cinefest Film Theatre, Atlanta, GA '92; Cleveland Cinematheque, OH '93; Clinton Street Theatre, Portland, OR '93.

Selected Festivals, Screenings, and Group Exhibitions:

Amsterdam Women's Film Festival Holland '82; Artist's Space, NYC And His Normal Reaction... '82; Experimental Kurzfilme aus den USA StadtKino, Oberhausen, Germany '83; Junge Filmmacher aus den USA Filmforum, Dusseldorf, Germany '83; New York und Los Angeles Kurzfilme Filmforum, Duisburg, Germany '83; Experimentalfilme Kommunales Kino, Dortmund, Germany '83; New York und Los Angeles Freier Film Aarau, Switzerland '83; Experimental Kurzfilme Houdini Kino, Walche, Switzerland '83; Ann Arbor Film Festival and Tour MI 84; San Francisco Cinematheque CA '84; International Festival of Short Films Krakow, Poland '84; Women in the Director's Chair Film Festival Chicago, IL '84; A.I.R. Gallery, NYC Artist as Filmmaker Series '85; International Festival of Short Films Krakow, Poland '85; Margaret Mead Film Festival NYC '86; WNET-PBS,
NYC Independent Focus Series '86; Joseph Papp Public Theatre, NYC '86; Museum of Modern Art, NYC What's Happening Series '86; 28th American Film and Video Festival NYC '86; Festival Internationale Cinema Giovani Turin, Italy '86; Superfest '86 Los Angeles, CA '86; Chicago International Film Festival IL '86; The Renaissance Society, Chicago, IL Skeptical Belief(s) '87 (traveled also to the Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, CA '88); Council of Foundations Film Festival Atlanta, GA '87; American Psychological Association Conference NYC '87; Filmotsav: International Film Festival of India and Tour New Delhi, India '87; The New Museum of Contemporary Art, NYC Social Studies '87; Snug Harbor Cultural Center, NY Women's Work '86; National Educational Film and Video Festival Oakland, CA '88; Robert Flaherty International Film Seminar Aurora, NY '88; Florence International Film Festival Florence, Italy '89; ON SCREEN: San Francisco Women in Film Festival CA '90; Keene State College Tri-State Film Festival Keene, NH '90; Denver International Film Festival CO '90; Los Angeles International Film Festival CA '90; Film de Femmes: International Festival of Women Directors Creteil, France '90; Houston International Film Festival TX '90; Athens International Film Festival, OH '91; Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH, '92; Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, Inc. NYC '92; Mayor’s Office of the City of New York, '93.

Selected Awards, Grants, and Fellowships:

New York State Council on the Arts, NYC, Production Grant '84, '88, '93; Jerome Foundation, St. Paul, MN, Production Grant '84, '88, '93; Astraea Foundation, NYC, Production Grant '85; Superfest '86, Los Angeles, CA, Best Entry for Culture, History and Folklore '86; Chicago International Film Festival, IL, Certificate of Merit Award '86; 28th American Film and Video Festival, NYC, Red Ribbon Award '86; New York Foundation for the Arts, NYC, Artists’ Fellowship Award in Film '87; The MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, NH, MacDowell Fellow '87, '88, '90, '91, '94; Art Matters, Inc., NYC, Film Production Fellowship '87, '89; American Film Institute, Los Angeles, CA, American Film Institute’s Directing Workshop for Women '87; The Millay Colony, Austerlitz, NY, Millay Fellow '88; INPUT '89, Stockholm, Sweden, Corporation for Public Broadcasting Travel Grant '89; Media Access Awards, Los Angeles, CA, Individual Achievement Award '90; Athens International Film Festival, Ohio, First Prize, Feature Narrative Category ‘91; New York Foundation for the Arts, NYC, Artist’s Fellowship Award in Film '93; Arts International, NYC, Annette Kade Collaborative
Works Fellowship ’93; Ms. Foundation for Women, NYC, Honoree, First Edition Our Daughter’s Collector Card Series ’94; American Film Institute, Los Angeles, CA, Independent Film Maker Award ’94.

**Selected Bibliography about Sharon Greytak:**


Fusco, Maria Pia.”Il fascino povero del film indipendente sie concluso il Florence Festival,” *La Repubblica* (Italy) December 13, 1989.

Young, Deborah.”Pix ‘born outside the profit motive’ unspool at 10th Florence festival,” *Variety Weekly* December 13, 1989.

Allison, Dorothy.”Festival brings women’s film into focus,” *Bay Area Reporter* (San Francisco) January 11, 1990.


Selected Bibliography by Sharon Greytak:

"Films of Malgorzata Potocka," Experimental Film Coalition Journal vol. 2 no. 3 (1985).