3

Maelstrom

Larry Gottheim: The question had come up, if a department can't be just two people, who's going to be the third? Some of the people we considered, like Ernie Gehr who had already taught at Binghamton, didn't have academic credentials; later on, Ernie did come as a full-time faculty member, but at this earlier point he didn't seem a possibility. We went through the whole list of the people we knew or knew of, but no one seemed right to Ken.

During this time, I remember getting an issue of *Film Culture* that had to do with the Hollywood 10 [*Film Culture* 50–51 (1970)]. I happened to be looking through it, and in a footnote there was something about Nick Ray—I don't remember the details.* Ken and I shared a love for early American cinema and for odd corners of cinema; and one film we both liked was *They Live by Night* [1948], Nick Ray's first feature. Maybe because the article said that Nick Ray, who had been an important Hollywood director, was making a film about the Chicago Seven, we said, "What about Nick Ray?" I called Tom Luddy, or whoever had written the article, and he gave me Nick's number and we invited him to come for several days, which turned out to be a major event.

Susan Ray: I met Nick in the fall of 1969, when he was already, career-wise, on something of a downward slide. He had been living primarily in

*In "Two Film Books on Joseph Losey" an anonymous reviewer mentions "James Leahy, who now teaches film at Northwestern University in Illinois and is assisting Nicholas Ray in organizing a film on the Chicago Seven trial." This is the only reference to Ray I could find in *Film Culture*, no. 50–51.

Europe for ten years, trying to get films done there, and already had a wild and woolly reputation. It would be simplistic to attribute this to drink and drugs—and I certainly wouldn't underestimate their influence—but I couldn't say it was exclusively that. There was a certain self-destructive thing in him, but also, he was so bloody ahead of his time that usually people just didn't get him. All that said, in the winter of 1970–71, Nick bumped into Dennis Hopper, which led to a night of carousing, and in the spring of 1971 he went out to Taos to Dennis's ranch—I met him there a few weeks later, and we stayed with Dennis for a while.

Sometime during that stay, Nick was invited to speak at SUNY-Binghamton. I didn't go with him, but apparently it was an extraordinary visit: he inspired these people very quickly and out of that appearance came an offer of a job. Nick was a gifted teacher and gave teaching a great deal of thought.

Dennis claimed some credit—I'm not sure it's due—for Nick's getting the Binghamton job; I don't know whether it was for writing a letter of recommendation or whether he made the initial contact for the speaking engagement. But Dennis should have credit for other things: he was a very generous host to us, perhaps more generous than he intended to be. (See fig. 16.)

Larry Gottheim: Of course, lots of people came to see Nick when he visited campus that first time. He got all of the equipment we had around and

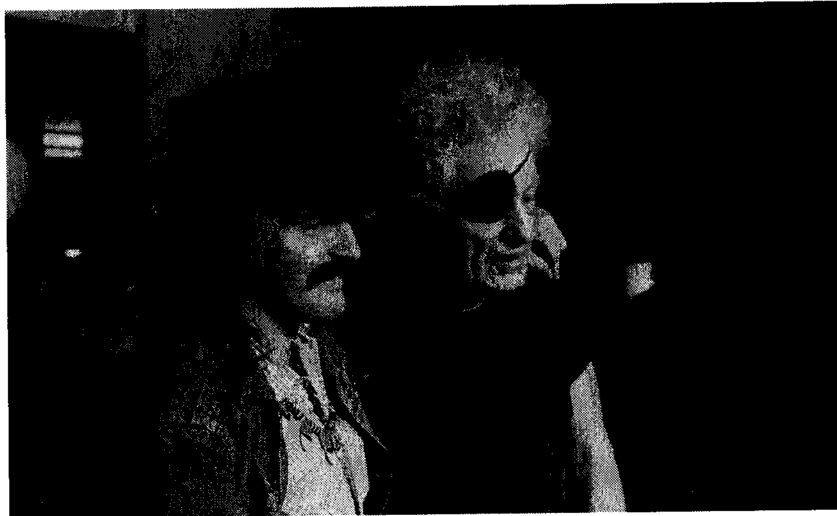


Figure 16. Dennis Hopper and Nick Ray in Binghamton. Courtesy Mark Goldstein.

created a big, outrageous, but really fascinating event—and we decided that he would be our next colleague. We envisioned that Nick would have the kind of freedom with us that he wouldn't have anywhere else; he wouldn't have the constraints of Hollywood and money, and we imagined that he would become an experimental filmmaker. Nick seemed attracted to the idea of the department, and, this being that moment when the administration was being adventurous, we were able to hire him for three years.

Nick's being around was very heady for me. He stayed at my place during the summer before he started teaching, and that was a delirious time. I remember coming into the City and filming something with Ernie and Nick. It was exciting to be working with somebody from the movies, somebody whose work we respected.

Nick loved *Harmonica* [1971], and he drove the car for one of the shots in *Barn Rushes* [1972]. And he was filling my head with ideas. Nick was an incredibly successful manipulator because he seemed to believe so much in what he was doing. He could make everybody working with him crazy in some strange good way, and infuse actors with the force of his own personality, driving them into a state where they would outdo themselves. It could be dangerous, but it was also amazing.

At the end of the summer, before classes began, Nick (and Sue when she came up from New York) moved into the guest apartment in the Infirmary, and once classes began, Nick attracted a large group of students—he had conceived of a complicated narrative where the secretary of the department played a nurse and there was an ambulance—all very elaborately choreographed like in a Hollywood movie. I was the assistant director; it was my job to say, "Roll!" Like most people, I had a lingering dream of getting involved with Hollywood, and during this moment the possibility seemed *so* close. But I was also saying to myself, "I'm outa here; this is definitely *not* what I'm into"—being manipulative with people wasn't me.

That sudden feeling of resistance was very influential in the transformation of my own work. *Horizons* [1973] could have been just another short, pure film like *Barn Rushes*, but it grew to be feature length, and the beginning of a kind of epic—though I didn't yet know how *Elective Affinities* was going to evolve.* Having Nick around helped me develop the idea of something large-scale *and* embrace a way of working that was an alternative to what Nick was doing.

Ken Ross: I arrived in the fall of 1969; I went to Binghamton because it was a school in the SUNY system known for liberal arts and it was a place

*In the end Gottheim's *Elective Affinities* series included four films: *Horizons* (1973), part 1; *Mouches Volantes* (1976), part 2; *Four Shadows* (1978), part 3; and *Tree of Knowledge* (1980), part 4.

I could afford. I began by studying theater, don't quite know why—and Russian. I would also nose around to see what was happening. I knew there were films on campus, and one day I was in the Lecture Hall building and happened to see a sign that a filmmaker was having a screening. I popped in and what I saw was completely bewildering: the theater was silent and the screen was full of little dots of light, and an audience was watching in rapt attention. I felt I was in a church, and I was completely enthralled.

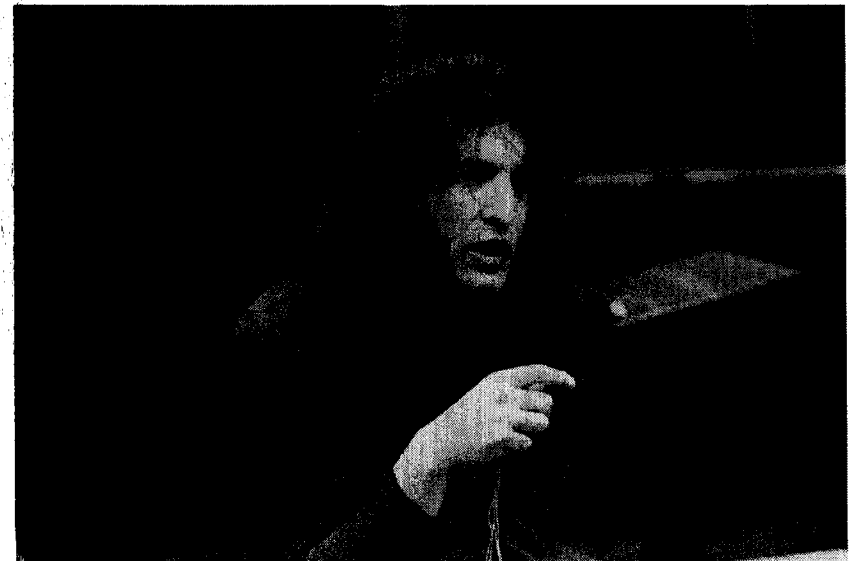
When the lights came on, I found out it was a film by Ernie Gehr, called *History* [1970]. It was my first experience seeing an avant-garde film, and it related very much to my early childhood love of going to the movies, where I was as much involved with looking at the light beam and the projector as I was with what was happening on the screen. I decided I wanted to find out more about this, and so I enrolled in Cinema 101, with Larry Gottheim.

From then on, I was a full-time cinema student, and for the next three and a half years my other coursework tended to fade into the background—I don't remember much of anything except making films and going to screenings. Then, of course, when Nick Ray arrived on the scene, I was part of that experience as well. Working with him on *We Can't Go Home Again* was pretty incredible. It felt like Binghamton was the epicenter of cinema.

In his production class, Ken Jacobs treated students as great-filmmakers-to-be. He would respond to some of our first films with, "This should be shown at Anthology," so we had an elevated sense of our work, tremendous excitement, and very high expectations.

But being at Binghamton wasn't just studying with Ken and Larry and Nick; it was studying with the entire independent film world; it seemed like there wasn't a weekend when somebody wasn't visiting. Thinking back, I don't know how they got the funding, but it was Paul Sharits; Hollis Frampton for a week; it was Brakhage and Kubelka and Hermann Nitsch and on and on and on. To see films is one thing, but to see the films of these filmmakers and then actually be in their presence and hear what they had to say—an unbelievable environment for a young student, for *anybody*. It reminded some of us of what it must have been like to be in France in the 1920s: the pulse of art was throbbing around us and we were living it; we were eating, sleeping (and not sleeping) art—working with Nick we could be up for weeks on end. (See figs. 17 a and b.)

Philip Sykas: The cinema sphere was one mainstay of my undergraduate world, but this was overlapped by other important spheres. One of these was Off Campus College [OCC]. I moved six times during my stay at university, always living off campus. I didn't wish to live in campus dor-



Figures 17a, b. Paul Sharits performing at Binghamton, and lecturing. Courtesy Mark Goldstein.

mitories and couldn't have afforded them anyway. So in August 1970, my brother and I rented a flat at 1282 Vestal Avenue in Binghamton. Upstairs lived three female students: Karen Voight, whose boyfriend at the time was Jan Hacha of the Starry Night Puppet Theatre; Julie Coutts; and a third, whose name my memory refuses to unlock. They were a friendly and welcoming group and introduced me to a wider circle of people and to the seeming sophistication of New York City Jewish culture—I was a provincial boy, brought up in rural Vestal, New York, with little exposure to cultural activity beyond what was available on television and in paperback editions of the classics.

Another social circle was formed around students in drawing and printmaking classes, and especially those in contact with the dedicated and dynamic printmaking teacher, Linda Robinson Sokolowski, who was the first female to teach in the Art Department. Sharp as a burin, hair pulled back exposing large eyes out of proportion to her tiny figure, with unquenchable enthusiasm, she was quick to smile and had a warm, earthy laughter. I took my first drawing course in summer 1971, and began printmaking with Linda in fall 1972. It was within these classes that my closest friendships arose. I especially admired the work of Karen Dauler (who later went on to work in the field of architecture), and David Harvey and Cecily Dunham (who later married, with David eventually pursuing a career in museum design and Cecily in book illustration). My memories of Binghamton are strongly infused with the smell of burned linseed oil, asphaltum, stop-out varnish and nitric acid from the print studio.

There was also the Gay Liberation Front (GLF). This title now seems aggressively confrontational, but it must be remembered that at the time homosexual activity was still a felony in New York State. With trepidation, I attended an inaugural meeting of the group, spearheaded by the tall, curly-haired, boyishly handsome, flamboyant Martin Levine, whose other passion was the black music scene. It was Marty who arranged for the Gaduntz to play at the first GLF dance. He had many friends in the black community at SUNY-Binghamton, bringing together two unlikely minorities that might otherwise have shunned each other.

It might have been at a GLF meeting that I first saw Arnie Zane and Bill Jones, but we were to meet again somewhat later through a mutual friend, the musician Charles Seltzer. All my social circles were to coincide in my friendship with Arnie and Bill: both of them modeled for drawing sessions, sat in on Cinema Department classes, and participated in OCC activities. When I first encountered them, they were still bathed in the aura of Amsterdam where Arnie had fledged his career in photography. Their flat had a European sense of style, with bare floorboards and beautiful decorative objects acquired from charity shops. Arnie and Bill were both strong personalities, but there was not yet a sense of steel rubbing flint, just great warmth.

Daile Kaplan: Visiting filmmakers Hollis Frampton (a most erudite man); Andrew Noren (who featured Stephanie Sarokin and me in the film originally called *Kodak Ghost Poems* [1968; now called *Huge Pupils*, part 1 of *The Adventures of the Exquisite Corpse*]); Stan Brakhage (so emotionally complex!); Ernie Gehr (a delicate sensibility and a giant of filmmaking); and Paul Sharits (very artsy) embodied the quintessential early seventies liberal arts education—daring, and interdisciplinary in thought. It was an incredible time, and these guys demonstrated a new (visual) way of thinking.

Larry Gottheim: Though different universities within the New York State system were developing different kinds of cinema departments, in those days there was a program within the system to bring people together from across the state so there would be cross-fertilization among the campuses. We hosted two of those statewide events, the first in the spring of 1972.

Ricky Leacock was at the first of these. The new possibilities of portable sync-sound recording were his big thing, of course, so he came as a celebrity for his use of sound—and here we were showing all these silent films! He was furious. (See fig. 18.)

Figure 18. Audience possibly on second night university-wide Film Symposium; in foreground is Susan Ray (lighting a cigarette), Nick Ray, and (behind tripod) Larry Gottheim. Courtesy Mark Goldstein.

The second event was a year or so later, when Nick had assembled a version of the film he'd been shooting in Binghamton (it came to be called *We Can't Go Home Again*), using different media: he had bought a surplus 35mm camera, so there were some things in 35 mm, some things in 8mm.

One of the amazing things about the Cinema Department was that even though there was total turbulence from the first minute to the last, whenever we had visitors from the outside—another department, the administration, people from another university—we bonded together. In some way we all knew that we had something special, and even if we were always fighting over what it should be, we all *loved* it and our lives were completely entrenched in it.

My house in the country outside of Binghamton was becoming a center for visiting artists and for department events. Students were always hanging out there. On the day of the second university-wide film symposium that we hosted, Nick and Ken came out to my place (I remember giving the remains of my marijuana crop to Nick), and I recorded a moment from that afternoon and used it in *Horizons*.

Peter Kubelka: In 1970 I brought Hermann Nitsch to America—to Cincinnati, to New York, and to Binghamton. In Cincinnati Barry Zelikovsky was the director of programming at the university, and he lost his job as a consequence of the Nitsch appearance. The event in New York, which Jonas Mekas had vouched for, also caused a scandal.

Harvey L. Silver: Because I was already a photographer (I grew up with photography: my father managed a photography store in Manhattan and Garry Winogrand, W. Eugene Smith, Duane Michals, and many other well-known photographers were his customers), I recorded a lot of what was going on in Binghamton, including the blood-orgy performance by Hermann Nitsch.

For that performance the college cafeteria was covered in sheets of plastic, and the organs of various animals were arranged on tables. The focus of the performance was the crucifixion of a dead lamb. Nitsch, a little guy who looked like Beethoven, worked himself into a frenzy and sliced open the lamb and pulled the insides out. During this, there was a student lying *underneath* the crucifixion; and other people had jugs of blood that they poured down on the poor guy. Still other students formed a noise band providing a soundtrack for the event (in my photographs, the kids in the noise band, covered in blood, all look stunned). Later the lamb was cooked and served.

It was an antiwar, anti-Vietnam performance—one of the more interesting happenings of that period. I was there the whole time, photographing in both color and black-and-white—sometimes the camera is a good excuse for being in a place you don't really want to be! I think the event was designed to take you to the point where you're immersed in so much blood that you reach an epiphany and are cleansed.

That event became controversial, not so much because it was performance art gone bad or because Nitsch used animal body parts and blood: what was controversial was what the performance *meant* politically. There were very right-wing, pro–Vietnam War legislators in Albany.

I handed over my Nitsch-event photographs to Ken before I left Binghamton—he needed them because the department was being investigated by the state legislature. In the end, I lost touch, and with a couple exceptions never got the negatives back—some of the few negatives I've ever lost!

Philip Sykas: When Hermann Nitsch brought his *Orgien Mysterien Theater* to campus in October 1970, cinema students were invited to participate. I went along to a rehearsal and was selected for the part of the ritual sacrifice, possibly because I was of slight build and easy to carry. It was not a demanding role, requiring mainly passivity. At the time, we took Nitsch's art lightheartedly, delighting in his Austrian accent and quirky pronunciation of the word "scaffolding." The dry rehearsals were fairly straightforward, marking out the basic movements. On the day of the performance, Larry Gottheim and Nitsch collected a lamb carcass and large quantities of animal blood and organs from a local abattoir that were to be used in the theatrical event in a ritualistic way.

Amy Halpern-Lebrun: We were rehearsing in the gymnasium and I'd never screamed in my life, literally—yelled but never screamed—and during this rehearsal I let out a classic, female, blood-curdling scream on cue and scared the fuck out of myself. That scream was part of what made that very shocking, weird, amazing piece so powerful.

At one point, there were two people under the sacrificial lamb, a boy and a girl—I was the girl. I was covered with blood, and looked like Kent State or something, which of course was part of the larger context of that performance. (See figs. 19 a, b, c on pages 78 and 79.)

Phil Sykas: During the performance I was dressed in white, blindfolded, and at one point quantities of animal blood and organs were heaped over me before I was dragged away screaming. Nitsch thought deeply

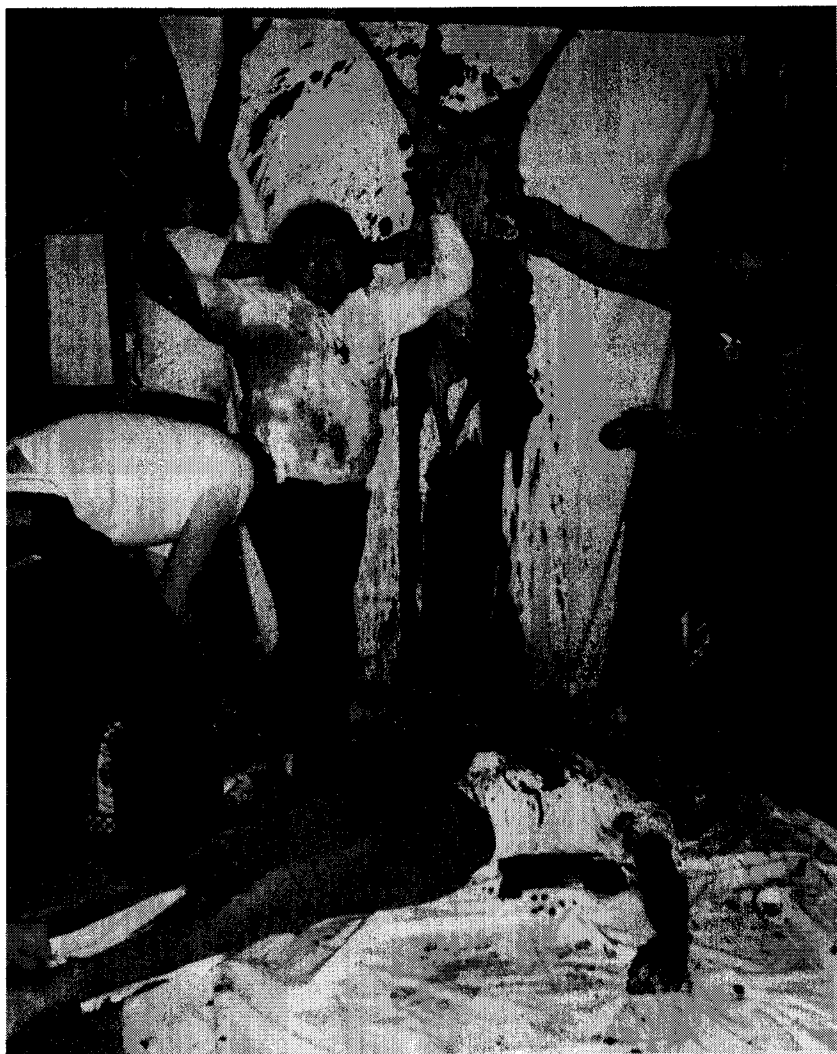


Figure 19a. Hermann Nitsch performing his *Orgien Mysterien Theater* at Binghamton; Philip Sykas is the person lying on the floor. Photograph by Harvey L. Silver. Image available at Corbis Images, New York, NY.

Figure 19b. Philip Sykas during Herman Nitsch performance. Courtesy Mark Goldstein.

Figure 19c. The audience at the Herman Nitsch performance. Courtesy Mark Goldstein.

not only about the meaning of his theater, but about practicalities. The blood was warmed so that the experience was sensual and pleasant rather than cold and clammy. The smells and sensations were primal and evoked thoughts of ancient rites. Having been brought up in the Greek Orthodox Church, I was accustomed to ritual, and none of this seemed unduly extraordinary to me. But it did upset quite a few others, perhaps most of all the university janitorial staff.

Some time later, Larry Gottheim showed me a copy of one of Nitsch's books, which gathered together rare archival images of criminal acts linked to the realm of sacrifice, and this helped me realize the depth of study that went into Nitsch's work.

Steve Anker: The most notorious event during my years at Binghamton was when Peter Kubelka brought Hermann Nitsch to campus to do an Actionist performance. I wasn't involved in the early preparations. I know that Nitsch spent the day gathering the various parts of the animals, the blood and the entrails, that were going to be part of this event. It was a ritualistic experience, a kind of abandoning yourself to your senses: the people involved in the performance were almost hypnotically engaged in very repetitive physical gestures interacting with the different parts of the animals.

The Student Center, a sprawling new building with many wings, was the site of the Action. I remember on the afternoon of the show, opening the door into the part of the building where the radio station was and walking into what felt like a bank of odor; the smell of blood had permeated the entire building. The people in the radio station were gagging, and the station's general manager said to me, "Anker, if you had *anything* to do with this, I'm never going to speak to you again!"

I had helped set up the sound system, and that evening, I spent most of the performance holding the wire to one of the speakers because somebody had ripped it out as they moved about in a frenzy. But I was blown away by the whole experience, and I didn't begin to make sense of it for days. The event led to repercussions, beginning with an outraged article in the local press, and later, a state Senate subcommittee investigation and a big article in the *New York Times* (see facing page). My parents and relatives, who read the story, were horrified. I heard that Ken and Larry were warned that if anything like that happened again, the department would be shut down.

Larry Gottheim: Nitsch involved many students whose lives were transformed by working with him. The event involved a lot of mess and much attention to the details of cleaning up after the event, but it became a scandal that had national reach: I was interviewed by Pacifica Radio.

HARPUR 'EXHIBIT' STIRS CRITICISM

Dismemberment of a Lamb on Stage Is Protested

Special to *The New York Times.*

BINGHAMTON, N.Y., Nov. 28 [1970]—A controversy has started here and in surrounding Broome County over an "orgies mystery theater" performance during which a slaughtered lamb was opened and disemboweled in the student union at Harpur College here last month.

The local city council and the Broome County Legislature have begun considering resolutions to curb such practices and open a complete study of the administrative policies of the college, a unit of the State University of New York at Binghamton.

The exhibition in question took place October 14 and was conducted by Hermann Nitsch, a young German [Nitsch is Austrian], who says the dismemberment is art. The "exhibition," as it was also dubbed, was observed at first by about 300 students, but after the actual work on the carcass began, the number dwindled to barely half that figure.

During the show, several students became ill. Some of the girls in the crowd were sobbing.

"It was a corruption," a youth said softly outside the room.

Indignation Mounts

Rumors spread through the community the next day that a live lamb had been sacrificed during the show. And although newspaper accounts of the presentation emphasized that a conventionally slaughtered lamb had been used, indignation quickly mounted.

As letters and telephone calls denouncing the event and its sponsors poured into the college and local newspaper offices, the city council and county Legislature quickly became involved.

The Legislature named a committee to meet with university officials in an effort to develop a "mutual understanding." The city council adopted a resolution calling for a study of the university's administrative policies.

Dr. S. Steward Gordon, acting president of the State University of New York at Binghamton, told the city council in a letter: "In my view it was distasteful, and if I did not believe the university should make it possible for students to experience all forms of art and to hear all shades of political opinion, I would be inclined to condemn those who permitted this presentation to be made."

Basically faculty members, who were not there and who I guess hated the Cinema Department anyway, complained that we were killing animals.

Even the local government got involved. When Brakhage was visiting, Ken, Stan, and I appeared before the Broome County Legislature to defend the event. Finally, the Legislature asked the Binghamton Council of Churches to investigate, and they became if not supportive, at least convinced that this was a serious artistic work.*

The Nitsch performance was a great event, and afterward, we went to my place in the country where we cooked the lamb and had a feast together that lasted all night.

Jim Hoberman: The Hermann Nitsch event took place in the new Student Center. The space, which was used for dances and performances (Ginsburg chanted there), totally reeked of blood. I can smell it now! There was noise, music, and hysteria—at least inside. Outside, life went on with amazing indifference. You could walk back and forth from an antiseptic study lounge full of dozing students into this truly crazy bacchanal. It was a fabulous disconnect.

The feast that Kubelka prepared at Larry's afterward was great. Amy Halpern [Lebrun], one of the maenads under the cross, was pissed at me because, snot that I was, I teased that she had finally found her "nitsch." The rumors afterward were fantastic. You'd hitch a ride to campus and the driver would say, "I hear they crucified a giraffe up there at the college."

Helene Kaplan Wright: The teaching environment in those days was amazing, and seems even more amazing now as I look back. Here's an example: Ken brought Peter Kubelka, who spent a week not only showing his films and talking about them, but cooking these incredible feasts and lecturing about cooking. We'd all go to Larry's house, and Peter would bring a giant roast out of the oven, with Bach playing on the stereo. We were all so sensitized to aesthetics. In retrospect you could make *New Yorker* cartoons out of all this, but back then we all took it incredibly seriously and were moved and excited by the idea of having art be part of our everyday lives.

I had had art history teachers who showed slide after slide of incredible works, providing the *dullest* explanations of what you were looking at. With Ken and the visiting filmmakers, we were seeing, *really seeing*, with new eyes, *experiencing* art, and it was a whole new world.

*Anthology Film Archives has made available a portion of the discussion between Gottheim, Jacobs, and Brakhage (some students seem also to have been in attendance) and members of the Binghamton Council of Churches: www.ubu.com/sound/afa.html.

Phil Weisman: I got to Binghamton in 1969, as a transfer from Syracuse University. I'd known Steve Anker since we were children—we went to the same sleep-away camp! When I told him I wanted to get out of Syracuse, Steve said, "Come to Binghamton and be in the Theater Department." By the time I got there, Steve was already working with Ken Jacobs. I spent one semester in the Theater Department, where I met Ken Ross: we were both in a graduate production of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Then we both took Cinema 101 with Larry Gottheim and transferred into the Cinema Department.

Larry's an excellent teacher and he was introducing us to great films: European and world cinema, as well as the avant-garde. I didn't really know Ken Jacobs at first, but I knew Larry and Ken were bringing major artists to campus—Brakhage and Ernie Gehr, whoever had something to premiere. The euphoria in the Cinema Department was that we recognized that we were getting things *from the source*, all the time.

Looking back, I think the big sixties thing was starting to pass, and a lot of the filmmakers who came to Binghamton—Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, Brakhage, Ken himself—were finding their way into colleges as a way of trying to keep a community together.

Helene Kaplan Wright: I met Hollis Frampton at the Flaherty Seminar in 1970, which turned out to be a very frustrating experience for me—not because of Hollis, but because Jonas Mekas was there and wrote a column about one of Ken's students filming in the middle of the night and how that was what the Flaherty Film Seminar was really about.* *I* was

*Mekas: "There we were, at the Flaherty Film Seminar, trying to learn something about cinema, talking until 1 A.M. It was after 1 when we were walking to the dormitories. It was pitch dark. One could see stars, but all around us was an impenetrable blackness. As we were walking so, and looking at the sky and the barely visible silhouette of the lake, suddenly there was a dark figure sitting by the roadside, in almost complete darkness, I almost stepped on it.

I leaned over, and I recognized the figure of a girl, from Harpur College, one of Ken Jacobs' students. She was sitting on the ground in the dark, and she had a Bolex in her hands, and she was sitting there motionless and silent and an inseparable part of night and occasionally she clicked her camera: She was filming. I looked into the distance—there was some kind of light there. There was nothing else. I had no real idea what she was filming, nor how. But there she was, completely involved in her work, at 1 A.M., and it was clear, as I leaned and looked into her, that she knew completely what she was after, although to us it was a total mystery—so we stood for a moment, and continued walking. Soon her dark silhouette disappeared in the darkness, she merged with the night: a filmmaker at work, in the deep darkness of the Connecticut night. That's where the cinema is born, talk or no talk, books or no books: the creative process is continuing in its own night of privacy"—Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959–1971* (New York: Collier, 1972): 399.

that person, but was never identified; it was the first of many instances where we were stereotyped as "Ken's students" and didn't have our own identities. Of course, this wasn't Ken's fault.

Phil Weisman: The experience at Binghamton changed our lives. Both Larry and Ken were/are extremely articulate, really good teachers—and in their own ways, deeply introspective. From a student's point of view, they seemed to have things down—though, looking back, it's obvious that they were experiencing these new films with us, and struggling, often in class, to grapple with the issues around them—rather than presenting the kinds of prepared lectures you might get in a normal college setting.

At Binghamton, education was freewheeling. I don't remember ever getting a syllabus. I don't remember tests—there must have been projects or something, but I have no memory of them.

Now, another aspect of this is that the teachers were very exacting, and at times, not great to be around. I don't fault them for this; they were into their own work, like good artists are—plus they were on a steep learning curve in terms of teaching. People skills, in our current sense, were not a priority. Both Ken and Nick Ray were extremely strong-willed individuals, with tempers. If you could bear up against that or if you could push back—I pushed back many times—you could learn a lot. (See fig. 20.)

Figure 20: Ken Jacobs raising his hand during a talk by Nick Ray. Courtesy Mark Goldstein. (p. 81)

I was *totally* involved in Nick Ray's project, and I was *totally* involved in Ken's Apparition Theater of New York, and I went regularly to Larry's classes. We were inundated and didn't mind it. We didn't think there had to be a limitation on class time; we would stay for hours; we'd stay into the night—happily.

If we hadn't been twenty, I don't know if we'd have gone through all we went through, and not everybody lasted. As tempers flared, some people dropped out. You had to be extremely committed to Cinema as a higher calling in order to stay with either Ken or Nick.

Richard Herskowitz: When I decided to go to Binghamton, I had no idea I was going to a school where the emphasis was going to be experimental film. I got to Binghamton in 1971 and when I enrolled in Cinema 101, I was assigned to Ken Jacobs (he and Larry Gottheim alternated years). You could take a two-year sequence. I had Cinema 101 and 102, then Cinema 201 and 202, four semesters in a row with Ken. If you came in the year before me or the year after me, you were assigned to Larry and would have your two-year sequence with him. And who you got assigned to became a major influence. By the spring of 1972, I was a convert and wanted to make experimental films.

Jacobs's personality was *so* strong that my first reaction was extreme aversion. He was just oppressively intimidating. I *hated* him for the first semester. When I think back, I wonder if he was more intimidating during the first semester as a way of trying to slim down the class. So many students would register for Cinema 101; they figured it was going to be a gut. The second semester, Ken was still intimidating, but he was less obnoxiously authoritarian than he'd been the first semester.

Ken was a dictator in the classroom; you had to sign in both before and after the break, so that he could make sure you didn't escape—these were three-hour sessions, three days a week: Wednesday through Friday, 4:00 to 7:00 p.m. *And*, during that time, *only* Ken spoke. He was not the kind of professor who engaged students in dialogue. I may have said a total of four sentences in the course of the four semesters that I was his student.

After intimidation and anger, the next phase was to be in complete thrall. Ken was fascinating to listen to on almost any topic, and I was learning so much. He was one of a number of experimental filmmakers—Stan Brakhage was another—who were *great* talkers. It was a different kind of education than I had gotten from anybody else. By the end of the second semester, I'd realized that this was an extraordinary experience.

An unforgettable moment was the day Ken walked into the classroom carrying a pile of books. He stopped midway down the stairs and

turned to us: "You idiots! I had a forty-seven average in high school and am still trying to catch up on all the education I missed. You're in college and just messing around!" I swear my attitude changed at that moment and I started taking research and scholarship seriously.

I began keeping a kind of diary by writing to my parents about what was going on with me in this class, and I've just recently discovered they kept those letters. [See pages 87–88 for an early letter from Herskowitz to his parents, probably written in 1972.]

During the two years when I was taking that four-semester sequence, Ken brought in a lot of guests, a lot of his friends. There was an intimacy to these presentations because Ken treated the classroom like it was his living room. It was a big lecture hall, but at the back sat Flo nursing Azazel; and four-year-old Nisi would be running up and down the stairs playing. Occasionally Ken would turn and say, "Nisi, cut it out."

I remember a moment when Ken was talking to Jonas Mekas. He turned the lights down low and got really personal; he said something like, "Jonas, you never got over the woman you left in Lithuania." Jonas's eyes widened, and it was like, "Ken, this is something you and I talk about, not something for a class!" But Ken looked at him, "No, no, don't worry—they're fine." *Anything* could be talked about, and part of what made me embrace experimental film was how much the films were an extension of these people's lives and experiences.

I found that knowing the difficulties these filmmakers had experienced, whether it was the poverty of 1950s New York or escaping from Nazi Lithuania, was valuable for understanding what was going on in these films.

Peer Bode: By the time I got to Binghamton, I'd been a fairly stable, if alienated person for a long time and didn't need to be part of a crowd. I tried to develop my own relationships with the faculty. Things didn't always go as I planned. Ken threw me out of his apartment one time! I'd brought over some stuff to show him and then made some comments about his class: I told him I didn't understand why he felt he needed to make people cry. He became angry, packed me up (I had my two speakers and amplifier in hand and whatever on top of that—I could barely see: Flo looked very concerned) and backed me out the door, which was, as if to finish a scene, slammed in my face.

Helene Kaplan Wright: I've heard recently that P. Adams Sitney has said that when visiting filmmakers would come to Binghamton, women students were expected to sleep with them. P. Adams's take on things is exaggerated. I don't think there was an *expectation*, but I do think that's

Dear Mom and Dad,

Very strange weather we're having. Yesterday it was 62°, people were going to classes in shirtsleeves, the snow was melted completely. This morning I woke up to 18°, the campus covered with 5 inches of snow, and all morning classes cancelled. Last night it was beautiful here. When I got out of Cinema it was just about to pour. It was the meanest looking sky you ever saw, and it was throwing shadows over the campus. There was a wind starting that added to the effect, which was something like Kansas before the tornado in "The Wizard of Oz." It was getting darker and darker as I walked to the dorm, so by the time I got back I couldn't take pictures.

It's crazy how fast the weeks go. I'm amazed when it's Sunday and I feel like I called you yesterday, it's why I don't write letters, I really have no conception of time. My weekend really runs through Tuesday, you know my schedule, and I usually leave my work for Monday & Tuesday while I keep Saturday & Sunday for myself. Because I never seem to finish all I wanted to, Tuesday night comes really fast. Wednesday thru Friday I'm packed with classes, but more than half of that is seeing movies and a lot of it is gym, so that part of the week is over before I know it.

That Cinema class is becoming more & more the greatest thing happening to me here. They have just added another three hours to the nine I go a week. On Wednesday the class runs from 4–10 p.m. with a break to eat. On that day, all three cinema teachers conduct a forum, usually on a Nicholas Ray film we'd see in the beginning of the class. I see in the Times that Ray's films are on at least two or three late shows a week. The movie we're studying now, his first *They Live by Night* is remarkable. One scene, which was exquisitely shot and cut, drove Jacobs to scream "This is Beethoven!" The change in Jacobs is astounding, almost as astounding as the change in me in relation to Jacobs. I'm learning more from him than I can handle, but I really try. The fact is he knows so much, has done so much, him with his 47 high school average can compete with Cantor [distinguished history professor Norman Cantor with whom Herskowitz was taking a course] in scholarship. His mind digests everything then he spits it out at us, sarcastically, first, defensively, but we get all this information. It's taking too many words to explain that his class is the only time I have to work my mind to its capacity, and I find out that capacity isn't enough. Jacobs has control of the class' emotions. I have come out of that class shivering, I've seen a girl crying after he yelled once, he makes everyone see how lacking we are in perception. This class is not training us to understand movies, it is training us to put up a mind-block against the bombardment of media outside. We don't just study films now, we study commercials, men's and women's magazines, newspapers, all information media. Understand he's not claiming to be doing any of this, it's taken me a long time to understand the class' direction. Jacobs chose Cinema because he sees it as the most volatile media, people don't realize the subliminal power of Cinema, the media which throws information at you which you have no time to reflect on, you can't turn back the page and re-read, you have to accept it all as it's coming at

continued on next page

you. It's taking all my effort to keep my distance from Jacobs. He's a sad person, he has very little hope for anything. He is not the type of person you want to idolize, but it's taking effort. I still do not want to make his kind of movies. He has tried hard to convince us that personal cinema of the underground variety is what's important now. It's funny that in his Cinema class what I buy the least are his opinions on Cinema.

What I want is to "learn" Jacobs' kind of perception. Right now I'm sarcastic and critical without any direction. I told you that I get depressed because I've got too much to think about. Watching Jacobs, I'm learning how to think in his way, which is about the only way possible to stay sane.

Finally, I'm writing again. I've had to do a movie review and a composition "The Movies, Sex, and Me" so far. They're both the kind of smart alecky clever writing I used to do. I just haven't done it in so long, I'd thought I lost it. Because I don't practice, the writing, I feel, is not much more mature than what it was in high school. The only time I write is when I'm forced to, when I'm given a title and forced to be creative. Jacobs is the only one doing that now. I'm not going to take creative writing. Ask me to explain why sometime. I'm going to try to write, though, especially this summer.

I've got to end the letter because I've got a class, Cinema. This is going to be a good weekend—five movies and a concert. Whatever else I have to say I said yesterday when I called. Dad, you can write too.

Love, Richie

what happened. Ken and Larry brought a constant flow of filmmakers, and my memory is that there was a lot of interaction.

In those days if you were an unattached young woman and there were unattached filmmakers around, people kind of wound up in bed together. I certainly was very guilty of sleeping around; I slept with Hollis Frampton at the Flaherty Seminar (*not* when he came to Binghamton), but with lots of other people too, not just filmmakers. William Kunstler, the guy who defended the Chicago Seven, had a partner who came to speak in Binghamton, and my roommate told me she slept with him. When I was a freshman in Binghamton, there was no Cinema Department; I was in the English Department, and when visiting poets came, *they* slept with students too. And when Nick Ray brought Dennis Hopper to Binghamton, Dennis wanted to sleep with everyone!

We were starry-eyed nuts about the work these talented guys were making, so for us girls it made perfect sense to sleep with them—I say "girls" because we really didn't think of ourselves as *women*; it was early for making those distinctions.

But basically, all this had nothing to do with the Cinema Department, but with the fact that sex was very casual then (as was marijuana). And I don't think it meant all that much; these were just one-night or two-night or four-night stands. Nobody was *expected* to sleep with anyone; they just did. I think Ken knew this was happening, but nobody said anything; it was all done very discretely and privately.

Jim Hoberman: I finished my class work in the spring of 1970, which was when everything shut down because of Kent State, and I stayed another semester, working on my film. I was gone by May 1971. Ken and I parted on bad terms. I wanted to do some refilming as part of my movie, and a student monitor checked out the Kalart-Victor for me (I wasn't a gangster: I went through the department procedures). I took it home and did my thing. Apparently Ken had wanted to use the Kalart-Victor and I guess he thought all the projectors were *his*, even though this one was the department's. Or maybe he didn't like the idea of my doing refilming. Of course, after sitting in his class for two years watching films on the Kalart-Victor, it wouldn't have been *so* strange if I'd had some ideas along this line.

Anyway, Ken got furious at me, accused me of *stealing* the projector. It's a little hard to remember clearly because it was so disturbing. I was outraged and lost my temper. The student who checked out the projector was intimidated by Ken and said I'd not followed procedures, and nobody, not even Larry, stood up for me. I was the first student in the Cinema Department to make a movie as a senior project, and suddenly I was eighty-sixed, wasn't allowed to use any of the department equipment.

Ralph Hocking, who'd created his own little fiefdom in the basement with two-inch video technology, those early clunky Portapaks, was someone I still got along with, and I switched to video to finish this movie [*Customs & Immigration*, 1971]. I felt *horribly* mistreated by Ken and the others; they were shits. Even thinking about it now, I'm being like Ken—*reliving* it. I managed to finish the movie, editing in my parents' apartment in New York, and graduated, then went off to Mexico.

I thought then and still think that Ken was horribly competitive with his students. And why? As a teacher, it's madness to compete with your students. I mean if a student of yours does well, it's partly *you*!

Marsha Bronstein was also at Binghamton, and she took it on herself to get me back to show my film. Ken still has never commented on it, but I guess in the end I accepted that, and we became friendly again. After I graduated, Bob Schneider and I got involved with something that *wasn't* filmmaking—we called it the Theater of Gibberish: performances

with slide shows and drama—and maybe because this *wasn't* film, Ken could love it. I revisited the school a number of times in the early seventies as a guest artist with the Theater of Gibberish, so in that sense Ken was very generous.

Lloyd Bruce Holman: I had just returned from making documentary films in India for the New York Department of Education. Before departing for India, I'd resigned my position as director of Graphic and Photographic Production at the Sperry Learning Resources Center at SUNY-Cortland, so upon my return I needed to find employment. At that time I was writing and illustrating articles for *Filmmakers Newsletter*, and stopped at the office in New York to drop off that month's piece. I mentioned to Suni Mallow, the editor, that I was looking for a job, and Suni said an advertisement had just come in from SUNY-Binghamton: they were seeking a tech person for the Cinema Department.

I called and talked with Larry Gottheim, who was a little surprised at getting such a quick response, and on my way back home, I stopped at Binghamton. Larry explained that the Cinema Department was focused on developing appreciation for film as an art form. He also pointed out that I appeared overqualified for the position; the job could actually be filled by a nuts-and-bolts guy who could repair equipment. Larry mused over this, then said he would look into having the position upgraded so it could also fill a teaching line they hadn't been able to get approved.

A couple of days later Larry drove up to my place in Labrador Valley. He was pleased to tell me that he'd been able to get a better salary for the position and student workers to help with the equipment. But best of all, he asked if I would be interested in teaching classes in animation and advanced film production. I said yes, and served in the Cinema Department for the next three years.

Richard Herskowitz: My generation of students were aware of the fact that the generation who had come through Binghamton before us were already stars in the making. Hoberman came back with Bob Schneider; together they had formed the Theater of Gibberish—this is before Jim became a critic. And Ken Ross and Phil Weisman soon went on to form the Collective for Living Cinema.

Amazingly, I later fell into programming by getting the job as director of Cornell Cinema in 1982, the perfect role for me. At Cornell Cinema I could do a collage of all kinds of film exhibition: commercial films as well as avant-garde films, along with art films—a temperament I had developed during the four semesters of Ken's film appreciation classes,

which included Frank Capra films, *The Wizard of Oz* [1939], *The Big Sleep* [1946], *and* experimental films *and* home movies *and* industrial films. *Everything* was thrown into the blender. I came to call it the "School of Experimental Film Viewing" because what I learned at Binghamton was less about making experimental films than about teaching people to watch films experimentally. I think the importance of Ken's teaching and found-footage filmmaking was that it taught me how to look at mainstream commercial products experimentally, how to open up their closed systems.

Ken would stop *The Big Sleep* and shout, "You're falling into the film!" I remember him once tilting the projector up and showing a film on the ceiling because we were getting too absorbed. It wasn't like he was trying to deny pleasure; he was trying to get us to think critically, think politically, think formally, to *think*.

I remember an amazing session when he brought Nick Ray into the class. This was going to be a series of classes during which the two of them would go through Nick's films. During that first three-hour session Ken was talking about *Knock on Any Door* [1949] or maybe it was *In a Lonely Place* [1950], about the rectangular shape of the newspaper bundles that were thrown onto the screen and how rectangular shapes played out in many of Nick's films (Nick, by the way, was incredulous).

Anyway, Ken was fundamentally an education in watching all kinds of films experimentally, and I took that as my mission as a programmer for the rest of my life. A lot of Binghamton graduates became programmers; more seem to have become programmers than filmmakers, and I'm surprised that most of them—Mark McElhatten, Steve Anker—have tended to program experimental film more exclusively than I do.

Larry Gottheim: In time I think Ken and I took it for granted that Hollis Frampton would be the next tenure-track person we would hire (the program at Buffalo didn't exist yet). Hollis had taught at Hunter College with Bob Huot, who got him that job and, later on, got him interested in living in Central New York State. (See fig. 21.)

In the Cinema Department it was always true, at least to some extent, that we were more like friends working together than like typical faculty and students; we were our own little world. For example, to make *Harmonica* [1971], the first sound film in the series of single-shot films I'd been working on, I needed a car. Barbara DiBenedetto had a car and loaned it to me. Frank Albetta was the guy with the sound recorder, recording Shelley Berde playing the harmonica.

Figure 21. Hollis Frampton in class at Binghamton in February 1971. Courtesy Mark Goldstein.

. . On one of his visits Hollis said that he had an idea for a film, and it seemed as if he was working in more or less the same way I was: let's see what will happen if I do *this*. He wanted to get some people together, and I suggested Barbara and Frank. We all went into this room with the tape recorder and the camera, and Hollis made the shots he needed. (See fig. 22.)

Hollis Frampton: I spent several days in Binghamton at screenings and workshops. At that time Binghamton consisted of thirty typical state university specimens of immaculate penal modern rising from a sea of mud. I had an idea of what I wanted to do and asked around the Cinema Department, which was well populated by volatile personalities, for the names of the two people, the man and the woman, most likely to fly off the handle. There was virtual unanimity that Barbara DiBenedetto and Frank Albetta were my two best bets. I asked them if they would be willing to perform and gave them a set of conditions—namely, that they had been living together for about six months, that he had disappeared for a weekend and refused to offer any explanation. I let them stew in that juice over night. We shot the following evening. It was one take, the

Figure 22. Frank Albetta and Barbara DiBenedetto at the shoot of what became Hollis Frampton's *Critical Mass* (1971). Damaged photograph. Courtesy Mark Goldstein.

first time and the only instance in a film I had made to that point where I used lip sync.* Larry Gottheim crewed on the job as sound recordist: at the time I didn't know a Nagra from my elbow.

By the end of the shooting—it was 10 minutes at the most—everyone in the room was absolutely limp. We filmed in March 1971, but it was October before I had anything like a clear notion of how I would edit what I'd shot. I didn't spend much time looking at the footage, which is fairly blank, but I spent a great deal of time listening to the tape, which became a source of references to the way the film itself behaves: lines like "This is getting us absolutely no place" came forward in high relief.

Larry Gottheim: Hollis came back to show the film, *Critical Mass* [1971], on March 11, 1972, his birthday. He and Marion Faller were staying with Debbie and me. Hollis was also going to show *(nostalgia)* [1971].

*In his notes on *Critical Mass* for the Criterion DVD of Frampton's work ("A Hollis Frampton Odyssey") Ken Eisenstein explains that actually, Frampton shot "two hundred-foot rolls (less than three minutes each) of the improvised argument."

We decided to have a birthday celebration at an Italian restaurant before the screening, with Nick and Susan Ray, and Ken and Flo.

We'd planned to meet at six for dinner, assuming the program would start at seven thirty or so, and we're waiting and waiting for Ken and Flo to show up. Everybody is starving, and at long last, Ken and Flo arrive—the celebratory mood now dampened.

At that time, the students in the Cinema Department—and there were a *lot* of students: hundreds were taking our classes—were into the idea that there were no strict rules about time. Finally we get to campus and, even though we're an hour late, the lecture hall is filled.

The first thing on the program was a new version of *(nostalgia)*. In this version Hollis used Michael Snow's voice (I think there was an early version in which the text was spoken by Hollis). "Do you see what I see?" is the final line of the narration, which is followed by Hollis's then-new logo; and as soon as the screening is over and the lights come on, Ken says something really inflammatory, something like, "You ruined the film! Why did you do *that*?" and Hollis immediately gets like, "Who are *you* to tell *me* what to do!?"

Ken Jacobs: We'd invited Hollis to show films, and it happened to be his birthday. The films were *very* good, but each one would end, and—Ow!—there'd be this HF. And the damned thing resembled a swastika; the *H* and the *F* were joined in a way that evoked a swastika.

Flo Jacobs: Less a signature, more like a brand name.

Ken Jacobs: He wanted to brand your fucking mind with this *HF*! At that time, I did not defer to persons or situations, and felt it was my obligation to speak up, especially with a lot of my students there. So I said how much I appreciated the work but that I deplored that the films were setting people up to have this *HF* thing imprinted on their brains. Hollis took umbrage and didn't speak to me for a year.

Flo Jacobs: More than a year.

Ken Jacobs: More than a year.

Hollis was like Stan in the sense that he had a private and a public persona; his private persona was very endearing, and humorous. But in public he would be the most pompous, bloated, nineteenth-century ass. I couldn't stand that. I don't think he was that way in classrooms, but you know, he was developing that pompous persona more and more—and

at the same time his work was deteriorating. I think that, as with Jack Smith, public acclaim did not do Hollis a lot of good.

Larry Gottheim: Hollis's challenge back to Ken was extremely rare, even unique. Ken often dominated the presentations by our frequent visiting artists. He would immediately raise issues that would tend to deflect the discussion toward issues that the visiting artist hadn't expected to talk about. Generally the visitor would have to endure the direction of the discussion, or accept it as flattery.

Then Hollis shows *Critical Mass*. Barbara DiBenedetto is standing in the back of the lecture hall, seeing herself for the first time in the way she comes across in that film—because in fact something really strange and completely unexpected had happened during the filming: this little improvisation of a conflict between Barbara and Frank had transformed, in some amazing way, into a real thing between them. It was no longer *acting*; it became some kind of totally unexpected *reality*. And Barbara was now seeing this improvisation, heightened by Hollis's great disjunctive editing. She completely freaked out and started shouting, "You *can't* show this; if you dare to show this, I'm gonna sue you!"—another horrible moment on top of everything else that had happened that evening.

Steve Anker: I was good friends with Barbara DiBenedetto at that point and the roommate of Frank Albetta, and if I remember correctly, they had just finished an affair. When Barbara saw the film, she hit the roof in a way that I still remember vividly; I thought she was going to have apoplexy. I don't agree with her reaction, but I think she was sensitive about seeing herself on screen in that histrionic way, with that voice, and so cut up in the editing and in the middle of an altercation with somebody who, on top of everything else, she probably had real feelings about. Of course, Hollis was looking for true chemistry and he got it.

I remember Nick Ray saying that it was the funniest film since Lubitsch.

Hollis Frampton: Barbara was a volcano of energy, a young woman with astounding powers of projection. When she saw the film, she was, to my regret, deeply troubled by it. I don't know why. Had I delivered myself of an interlude of that magnitude, under conditions of such sanity and control, I would consider it one of the grand achievements of my life. Barbara's was a Mediterranean rage. My own bad tempers are essentially Celtic, which means that they go off like Roman candles and are immediately spent.

Ken Jacobs: Afterward, Hollis said that he wouldn't work in Binghamton: I had insulted him on his birthday *in public*—what I had said was the kind of thing you say to someone in private.

Flo Jacobs: Everybody had expected him to be teaching at Binghamton until this thing with the HF occurred.

Ken Jacobs: Larry must not have been happy with me over the loss of Hollis.

Larry Gottheim: In the end, Hollis's visit created a rupture that made it impossible for him to be our fourth faculty person. Somewhere, I still have a letter from Brakhage where he tries to patch up the rift, but it had become impossible: Ken wouldn't have supported Hollis coming, and Hollis wouldn't have wanted to come—and at that exact moment the whole thing at Buffalo opened up and Hollis ended up there. It was a big loss for us, but we had to move on. (See fig. 23.)

Figure 23. Hollis Frampton, Larry Gottheim, and Ken Jacobs. Courtesy Mark Goldstein.

4

Collision

Larry Gottheim: Even before Nick Ray arrived, it was clear that to be a student in the Cinema Department was a twenty-four-hour-a-day involvement, virtually a life commitment. I'm not sure it was that way in other departments. In fact, now it seems a little embarrassing.

Once Nick had arrived, the department changed character, partly because of Nick's own emotional issues (there was a lot of drug involvement that was driving him more and more fully off the edge). Of course, ours was an explosive mixture of people who all had their own psychological issues and dynamisms. Instead of us all wanting to be part of this relatively harmonious thing, everybody began to have their own particular vision; and especially with Nick and Ken, it had to do with a need for control and for loyalty.

Of course, it was always true that the cinema students tended to be separated from all the other students, in their own world; and within the department we each had our own group of students. From the beginning to the end, there was rivalry about who would receive students' primary allegiance. I think many of them would now say that part of what they're grateful for is having had to wend their way through these different aesthetic and personal allegiances.

In time it became clear that Nick wanted to take over *all* of the equipment, *all* the facilities, *all* the students. This was a really tough thing for me as the chair—a job I always *hated*, at least after the beginning flush of getting the thing moving. I didn't enjoy having to hold all of this explosive stuff together. The students whose aesthetic and personal allegiance was to Nick's group were so committed to what Nick was doing that they could no longer be part of the personal filmmaking thing