

who is soon to become her lover, watches from the audience. The song defines her as a femme fatale, a destructive force who draws men like "moths to a flame". At the same time, in her role as cabaret singer, Dietrich obviously portrays the woman as spectacle, as unattainable other. **The Blue Angel** is about a relationship between a sexual woman and a rigid, over-intellectual professor who is locked in by acceptance of the codes of his society. This could also be seen as a description of the relationship portrayed in the film. The filmmaker/author seems to be struggling with a dichotomy in himself, a conflict between the emotional self and the intellectual self. This scene also contains perceptual-conceptual game-playing: the camera appears to be directly attached to the typewriter and moves across the screen in small jarring motions dictated by the typing, while on each return the shot gets tighter and tighter on the face of the man who is typing. The typing (supposedly of the screenplay of **The Blue Angel** which we hear on the voice-over track) dictates Gallagher's unusual shot by shot breakdown in a literal mechanical sense, just as the voice-over describes the breakdown of the German film playing on the video monitor. The two films are linked in Gallagher's innovative manner, and the audience is cued to look closer for the subtextual connections to his emotional themes.

In another scene, the neon sign of a running horse is juxtaposed with a voice-over narration which recounts the story of Muybridge, the photographer who was a seminal force in the investigation of motion by the use of several still camera images. Muybridge can be seen as trying to pin down a natural phenomenon through intellectual means, but in the end we learn that he was put on trial for the murder of his wife's lover and even though he was acquitted the suspicion remains that he was incapable of controlling his own nature.

In this respect the filmmaker's handling of the scene where the couple make love is one of the most interesting for its many reverberations of meaning. The scene starts with an overhead shot of Niagara Falls, as the camera pulls back it reveals a woman reading a book held over the falls. The voice-over is a doubled voice, male and female, reciting these words: "I look into his eyes and he looks back. Who are you and what do you mean?" There are more shots of the falls and as the camera goes into a close-up of the rushing water, we hear the sound of a woman's voice during the sexual act. The speed of the rushing water is manipulated (slower & faster) until it becomes an abstract, electronic light play – an apparent linking of the natural and conceptual. Next we see a woman walking over a bridge and then an out-of-focus image of two bodies making love, so abstract as to become almost unrecognizable. The previous doubled-voice-over text is played backwards and eventually a small spotlight appears caressing the bodies and revealing certain parts more clearly and sharply than in the overall image. The spotlight is a very suggestive device, implying the eye of the camera, the peephole gaze of the viewer and the objectification of the bodies. But the shots of the

woman walking over the bridge, which are intercut into this scene, do suggest that the dichotomy between male and female, intellectual and natural, can be bridged. In the out-of-focus shots of the two bodies making love, the viewer is not able to clearly define what is happening, but the emotion inherent in two bodies melting into each other is clearly conveyed. Repeatedly Gallagher uses what can only be called an abstract expressionist style of filmmaking, as in the previously described shots, which seem to refer to an alliance between art, nature and the emotions. As in Lacanian psychology, the unity of the self is linked to a pre-language, pre-signification stage of awareness. To emphasize this the sex scenes are followed by shots of a paintbrush merrily dancing over a blank page, to the tattoo beat on a paintcan drum, flowing in red and blue.

It seems to us that in this film, society as a whole is seen as a system of signs which bars the male/filmmaker from the bliss of union with the other, be it woman or nature. Indeed, the beginning of the film is a series of revolving signs for modern day commodities; gas, fried chicken, cigarettes, etc... The ending of the film then becomes a clearer statement of the impossibility of a relationship between men and women. Gallagher presents the intellectually active man, destroying, eating and burying himself in books, imprisoned behind a fence, cut off from the natural woman, presented as the unattainable 'other' in a shot of a female nude, seen upside-down, in the groundglass of a photographer's camera.

There are some problems with the film. **Undivided Attention** is essentially a postmodernist work where Gallagher tries to imbue notions of subjectivity, emotion, and narrativity in a film that on its first and most striking level works mostly as a series of perceptual plays. The question is, how effective is this mix? Are there enough clues to the emotional and psychological meanings? For an unadvised audience, the film could become an enjoyable visual experience but perhaps no more. Several viewings might be needed to decipher the complexity of the work. The overwhelming length of the film can also become a deterrent to its enjoyment and if some of the repetition could be cut out it would make for a tighter and more powerful statement. However, overall **Undivided Attention** is a highly ambitious, complex and successful work.

Don Terry •  
Mary Alemany-Galway •

**UNDIVIDED ATTENTION** p.w./d./d.o.p. Chris Gallagher add. photog. Georg Ladanyi sd. rec. Chris Gallagher add. sd. rec. Scott Jacques, Tom Turnbull ed. Chris Gallagher add. sd. cut. Angelos Hatzitolios m. Chris Gallagher add. m. Tom Kondziewski Persian drum Orang Nowkhah pipe band Victoria park Pipe Band, Regina "Ich Bin Von Kopf Bis Fuss Auf Liebe Eigesteelt", and "Lili Marleen" sung by Marlene Dietrich voice over Dawn Kasdorf, R.J.W. Swales, John Turek, Michelle Turek Thanks to the following for their assistance Harald Berwald, Peg Campbell, Michael Decourcy, Spyro Egarhos, Wren Jackson, Barrie Jones, Se Kohane, Marc Lafay, Peter Lipski, Nancy More, Susan Roth, Wayne Selby, Somkiat Vithurani, Randy Zimmer, Elizabeth Zmetana, The University of Regina — Department of Film and Video lab. Alpha Cine financial assistance Canada Council Film Production Section I.p. Barrie Jones, Merika Talve, Chris Gallagher, Wren Jackson, Georg Ladanyi, Wren Jackson, Alan Brandoli, Tomasz Pbjpg-Malinowski, Al Egum, The 15th Field Artillery Regiment, RCA, Roy Cross, Dana Taffelmyer, Spyro Egarhos, Carlyn Swartz, Georg Ladanyi, Lisa Daum, Don Hall.

## Kay Armatage's **Artist on Fire**

The first thing you see in Kay Armatage's **Artist on Fire** is a joke. Joyce Wieland – avant-garde filmmaker, Canada's officially-sanctioned radical woman artist, our Joyce – sits in a stuffed chair putting the finishing touches on a portrait of a young man in ancient Greek costume. The model stands posed with two other ersatz Olympians before a background of rich draperies, soft lighting and still-life. The whole thing sends up the genteel male tradition of salon painting – its stasis, its borrowed mythology, and, most importantly, its exclusion of women artists – in one sharp jab. This documentary about Wieland makes its first point quickly and definitely: the boy's clubhouse is a farce; it just plain looks silly. But our Joyce is in a tricky position because she's just been invited in.

**Artist on Fire** arrives as Joyce Wieland finds herself being celebrated on several fronts as "Canada's foremost woman artist." After decades of working on the fringes of recognition, working in a variety of media, working with and against traditional notions of women's work and women's art, Wieland has come in from the margins (or the centre has expanded to meet her). Her work is currently the subject of a major Art Gallery of Ontario retrospective, and both the popular and the art press have been writing about her lately with unprecedented interest and urgency. **Artist on Fire** arrives at the same time as all of this, but it stands to one side of it.

Armatage's film was conceived in 1983, stemming from an initial interest in Wieland's 'formalist/feminist' films of the '60s and '70s, and an amazement at the lack of informed critical writing about them. Both a film scholar and a filmmaker, Armatage makes documentaries that usually approach 'women's' issues – abortion in **Speak Body**, objectification and economy in **Striptease** – from a grounding in theory. **Artist on Fire**, as she saw it, would attempt to place Wieland's films within the larger

• Joyce Wieland gets ready for the jab



context of her work – canvases, drawings, sculptures, quilts, etc.; it would demonstrate the richness of (and in) Wieland's work as a whole, and rescue her films from the confining structuralist designation. Traditionally, films such as **Reason Over Passion**, **Handtinting**, and **A and B in Ontario** have been looked at (when they were looked at at all) as experiments with the medium, formal play. **Artist on Fire** views them in the context of Wieland's personal concerns: feminism, the environment, the Canadian political and geographical body, to name some.

The film works by intercutting interviews with Wieland – she addresses the camera directly – with examples of her work, scenes of her at work, and staged scenes which 'quote' her work. We see Wieland swimming in a lake, reprising a scene from her feature film **The Far Shore**. We see Wieland aiming a handheld camera at the camera, quoting **A and B in Ontario**. Armatage's technique is to blend her text with Wieland's texts, insinuating commentary into art. She's able to do this partly by not identifying shots from Wieland's films when they appear. They simply form a part of the text, given no more weight than Armatage's own images. In fact, the film's editing style insists on erasing the lines between what is secondary and what is primary material, on knitting a seamless join between Wieland's life (or performed life) and her art: associative cuts may take the viewer from an object in Wieland's home to a similar object in a film of hers, to a canvas, to a new sequence. This is not a distanced, 'objective' documentary; Armatage has called it an ode.

Or perhaps a chorus. Armatage's use of voice in **Artist on Fire** is characteristic of her work. She blends the commentaries of Denis Reid, Joyce Zemans, Judy Steed and Michael Snow, which include both personal and critical statements, into a polyvalent voice, speaking around Wieland and her work, overlapping and intersecting one another, working by addition to fill in the picture. Armatage has used this strategy before, most effectively in **Speak Body**, where the common personal experience of the women and the emotional resonance of the subject combined to give the voices an irresistible rhetorical force.

The effect isn't as strong here, but the voices do convince, and that causes some problems. Interweaving voices would seem to solve the problem of the 'authority' of the traditional documenta-

ry voice-over, but whether or not they diffuse the sight of knowledge within the film, the cumulative effect of voices speaking in complement is still authority, perhaps even more authority, because the voices cover more ground. And as in *Speak Body*, they *are* just voices; it is not until the end of the film that they are identified. By not identifying them Armatage avoids the specificity that would allow the viewer to place and evaluate what the voices say. As it is, we are forced to accept their words unquestioningly: they have the power of anonymity; they have authority.

But the film never claims to be a cold-eyed appraisal of Wieland's art; it intends to persuade. It echoes the excess that characterizes Wieland's most powerful

work with a little purposeful obsessiveness of its own. You don't need to be familiar with theories of the body, or excess, or feminist discursive practice to appreciate *Artist on Fire*, but it is another way into the film. Armatage works with an awareness of current theoretical discussions of physicality and expression, and that knowledge lies behind her approach to Wieland. In its use of colour, and in its unwillingness to be 'proper', the film follows Wieland's sensuous, vivid canvases. Armatage is gifted with an eye for composition that many 'objective' documentary filmmakers lack; she has Wieland's talent for producing erotic, tactile images, and she does it in the same way: by paying close attention to the detail of a thing, by waiting.

In a sequence near the end of the film, she records Wieland and a friend making a peach pie: the camera roves over the kitchen table (looking like a Flemish painting with refreshingly playful sexual symbols scattered here and there) luxuriating in rich colours and sheer *moistness*. All the while Wieland and friend chat about art over the soundtrack for the sequence, a Lester Bowie instrumental version of "Blueberry Hill". But the critical commentary does not stop: the sequence is intercut with examples of Wieland's erotic art, and the voices' discussion of its place in her work. The dominant element in the sequence, though, is pleasure. So is Armatage working within a 'libidinal economy' here, or is she just having fun?

**Artist on Fire** is a response to Joyce Wieland – to what she means to Canadian artists, to Canadian women artists, to Kay Armatage. It's not the film one might envisage Wieland making about herself (it's not nearly relentless enough, for one thing), but it goes one better: it is a strong, original engagement with Wieland's work that meets the challenge of its subject. And it does it with wit.

Cameron Bailey •

d. Kay Armatage p. Barbara Tranter cam. Babette Mangolte. Peter Mettler sd. Aerlynn Weissman film ed. Petra Valier sd. ed. Michelle Moses mixer George Novotny music O Yuki Conjugate, Jon Hassell, Steven Rich, Alexina Louey, Germaine Tailleferre, Marcelle Deschenes, Harry Freudman, Amadeus Mozart, Lester Bowie p.c. Dominion Pictures colour 16mm running time: 54 min.

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