

ANIMATED HOLES

An Interview with Naomi Uman

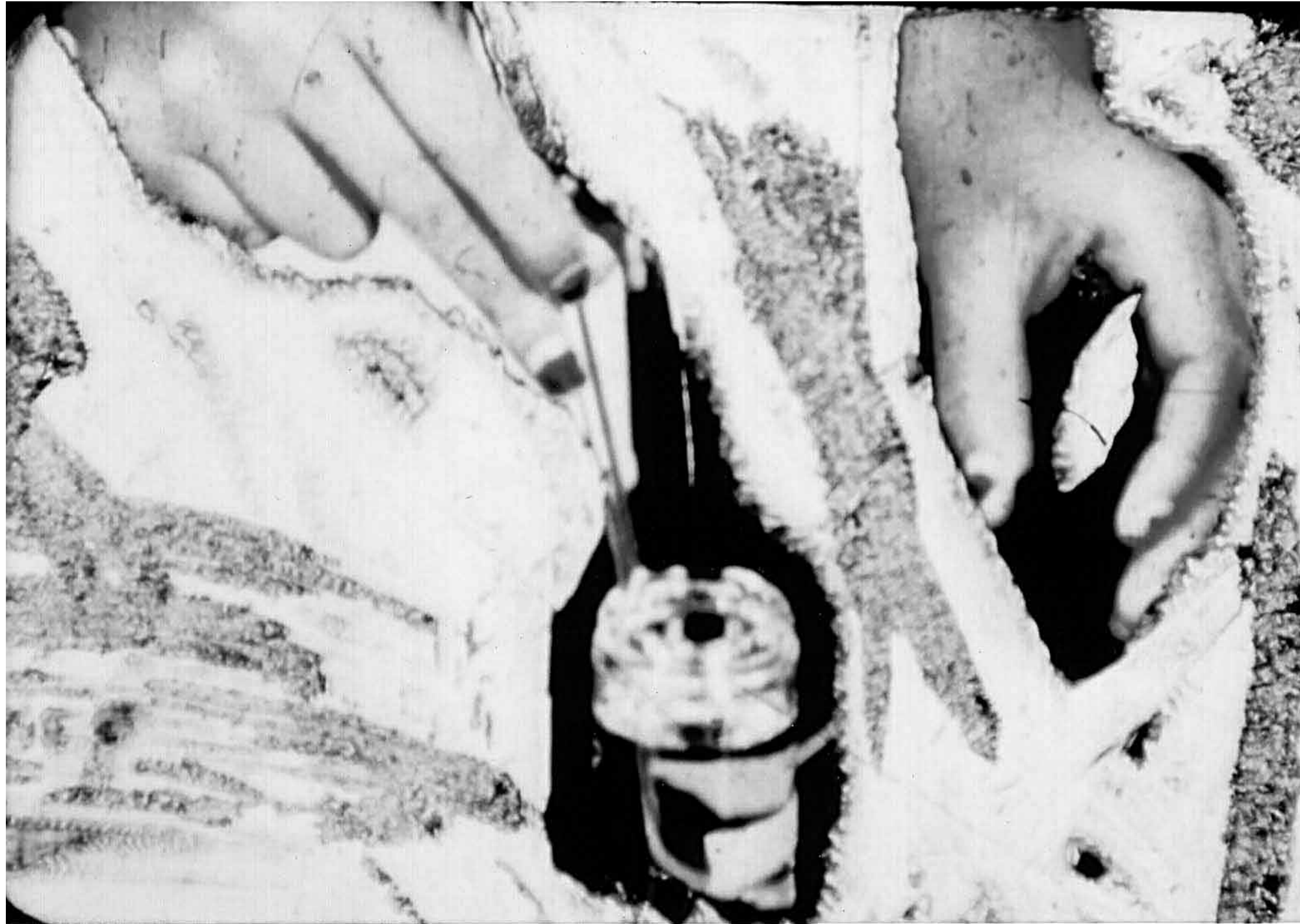
JUSTIN REMES

“Oh, Walter! Tell me what you see.” – A sexually-charged woman, Naomi Uman’s removed (1999)

I’m watching a German porno from the 1970s. Well, not quite. I’m watching a German porno that’s been dubbed into English, which explains why the characters’ mouths are not synchronized with their salacious dialogue (“My God, she’s got a fantastic ass!”). The film is a German porno, once removed.

Actually, twice removed. For what I’m watching is not merely a dubbed version of a German porno, but an avant-garde reworking of that dubbed version, one in which every woman has been erased from the film. I *hear* a woman moaning orgasmically and delivering histrionic lines of dialogue: “Oh yes! Go on! Tell me! Everything! I want to know everything!” But I can’t *see* her. Instead, I see a phantasmatic void, an unstable and jittery white hole.

The film I’m watching is Naomi Uman’s *removed*, a captivating and theoretically rich experimental film. It can be enjoyed as pure camp (in part because of the gloriously bad performances of the German actors and their American voice actor counterparts). It



Naomi Uman, *Hand Eye Coordination* (2002), frame enlargement. All images courtesy the artist.



Naomi Uman, *removed* (1999),
frame enlargement.

can be appreciated as a metacinematic masterpiece, a film that foregrounds its own construction—and destruction. (It's hard to watch *removed* without thinking about the laborious work involved in erasing the women from each and every frame of the filmstrip using nail polish remover and bleach.) And it can be understood as a sophisticated feminist film, one that subverts the male gaze and undermines the goals of traditional pornography. Since the sexy women have been erased, one instead notices elements that might have otherwise gone undetected: a small cup of coffee, some Deutsche marks lying on the bed, a steely-eyed stud's formidable sideburns.

Given *removed's* relative obscurity, I was pleasantly surprised to see the fifth episode of the Amazon TV series *I Love Dick* (an adaptation of Chris Krauss's 1997 novel by the same name), open with about 30 seconds from Uman's film. (The motif of removal recurs throughout the episode: its female characters are periodically erased in an homage to Uman.) For those keeping score, this would be a televisual appropriation of an avant-garde reworking of an English-language dubbing of a German porno. (Incidentally, Uman is pleased to see her work on TV. She told me

that she is "thrilled that [her] appropriated work is being reused in another incarnation.") In fact, the episode—entitled "A Short History of Weird Girls"—also features a clip from Uman's 1998 documentary short, *Leche*, about a Mexican family that lives on a dairy ranch. While I find the series as a whole to be uneven, "A Short of History of Weird Girls" moved me to tears—for reasons that I can't fully articulate. I'm inclined to agree with the *New York Times* theater critic Alexis Soloski, who wrote of the episode, "It is the best 20 minutes of television I've seen in years."

The first season of *I Love Dick* (released on May 12, 2017) is replete with excerpts from cinematic masterpieces by women, including Maya Deren's *At Land* (1946), Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* (1964–66), and Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). (The clips serve as a rebuttal to a claim made by the show's titular character, a handsome and rugged minimalist artist played by Kevin Bacon, who states in the pilot: "Unfortunately, most films made by women aren't. That. Good.") And the show's popularity has increased the visibility of *removed's* invisible women. In addition to the coverage provided by news outlets like the *Times*, *removed*,

Leche, and the other experimental films and video works that appear in *I Love Dick* have recently been screened by International House Philadelphia and Los Angeles Filmforum. (Uman herself appeared at the LA event.)

I'm happy that the LA Filmforum was able to get ahold of Uman, who is notoriously elusive. I had considerable difficulty tracking her down for an interview, in part because of her restless and nomadic lifestyle. (She has lived in the US, Italy, Ukraine, and Mexico, where she currently resides.) Uman was born on Long Island in 1962 and worked as a private chef for a number of wealthy New Yorkers throughout the '80s. In the '90s, she received a BA in medieval studies from Columbia University and an MFA in filmmaking from the California Institute of the Arts. While at CalArts, she took a class on the history of experimental film taught by John Hanhardt, and she was ultimately inspired to make a number of innovative and thought-provoking experimental films of her own, including *removed*, *Leche*, *Private Movie* (2000), and *Hand Eye Coordination* (2002).

Since I'm currently working on a book manuscript about absence in cinema, I was especially interested in learning more about Uman's magnum opus, *removed*. Our e-mail correspondence took place between November 2016 and January 2017.

Justin Remes: What inspired you to make *removed*?

Naomi Uman: I worked in the projection booth at CalArts where the original footage was lying around as a reel of film that we could use to practice loading the 35mm projectors in the booth. At that time I wore long, acrylic nails, and while "projecting" videos (often for classes), I had nothing to do. I always had nail polish to retouch my nails and a light box on the rewind table, and [the experimental filmmaker] Greta Snider had showed me that nail polish would resist the action of bleach. So I started working on the film, covering with nail polish everything that I wanted to preserve and leaving the women "naked" and vulnerable, available to be affected by the bleach, which has a chemical reaction with the emulsion and causes it to be removed from the plastic film base. I wanted to see what a porn film would look like if the women were removed and the absence remarked upon by the accentuating presence of an animated hole.

JR: Were there specific found footage films that you had seen and found especially compelling—works that prompted you to make a found footage film yourself?

NU: Yes. Bruce Conner's *TAKE THE 5:10 TO DREAMLAND* (1976), *VALSE TRISTE* (1977), and *MONGOLOID* (1978); Deborah Stratman's *Untied* (2001); and Len Lye's *Free Radicals* (1958, 1979).

JR: It's interesting that you mention *Free Radicals*. Would you consider that a found footage film? Lye doesn't actually use any preexisting footage for that film, does he? Or do you mention it because it involves directly manipulating the film strip, something that you do in *removed*?

NU: Yes, I mention *Free Radicals* because it's manipulated—and because it's wonderful!

JR: Do you know the name of the original pornographic film that you manipulated? (Also, you don't happen to know the name of the musical composition that's playing at the end, do you? I really love that music.)

NU: I don't know the name of the film, the music, or the actors, but the film is German (you can see Deutsche marks on the bed), and the man smoking the cigarette is apparently a famous actor who was still involved in porn later in life.

JR: Would you consider *removed* to be a feminist film? Was Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in your mind at all? (I'm thinking especially of a passage in which Mulvey talks about the possibility of "destroying" the pleasure of the male gaze in cinema.)

NU: I am aware of Laura Mulvey, but I haven't read "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." I don't believe that I have destroyed pleasure, nor do I believe that the gaze that desires to see the female body is entirely male. What I did was experiment and discover what happens when the focal point of pornography is erased or almost erased. I find that the desire to see, which I

believe to be without gender, is augmented, and the viewer is compelled to look harder, which then enables the spectator to “see” the naked woman even when she only appears on screen for 2 frames or 1/24 of a second.

JR: I agree that you don’t destroy pleasure in *removed*. But haven’t you at least replaced one kind of pleasure with a different kind? While I’m sure most viewers of the original pornographic film viewed it for sexual gratification, it’s hard to imagine that many viewers are watching *removed* for the same reason. (Or, at the very least, if viewers *are* watching *removed* for that reason, I suspect they will become frustrated fairly quickly.) Aren’t you, in some sense, removing porn’s *raison d’être*? Is there something perverse (or perhaps mischievous) about this?

NU: Sure. But the *desire to see* the women is augmented. Can desire for narrative (or desire to complete an image or desire to see a naked woman) be similar to sexual desire? The pornographic film also does not provide sexual gratification, after all. The viewer himself would do that...

JR: Touché. Along similar lines, I’m curious to know if you would categorize *removed* itself as a pornographic film. Does erasing the nude woman drain the film of its eroticism?

NU: I don’t really think of it as pornographic (and we have shown it in audiences with children). There is no nudity, and the point of the film is not to arouse.

JR: But you do give spectators very brief “peeks” at the nude women in *removed*, don’t you? Are you teasing the audience?

NU: No, the original film print had been spliced in several places, and when I bathed the whole thing in bleach, the one frame on either side of the splice would not be erased. That is what you are seeing.

JR: Ah, that’s interesting. Would it be fair to say that your concern in making *removed* was more aesthetic than political? In other words, were you more interested in producing a unique cinematic experience than in making a political statement about, say, feminism or pornography or censorship?

NU: I don’t really think in those ways. I’m interested in cinema. And I’m interested in women’s roles in the world in general. My films explore the work of women gathering walnuts, as well.

The center of attention of all straight porn is women’s bodies. I wanted to experiment with the idea of focusing all eyes on an animated hole: the ultimate distillation of the role of the female in porn. When I *eventually* heard the soundtrack, after I had spent forever working on the image, I realized that there was an internal commentary, as well, where the women in the film are being denied pleasure, either because the man won’t stay on the platform and wave to her (he is removing himself), or because she can’t see the action happening in the two-way mirror. She is removed from the couple behind the mirror. She is trying to take off her makeup and is denied that. And the film ends where it began: with a loop. This is why I used the sound of the woman having an orgasm again at the end: so that the audience has to sit in the dark and give her that space. It is a coda from the beginning of the film.

JR: One final question: I often screen *removed* for my students, and a number of them see the film as a critique of pornography. Are you comfortable with that reading?

NU: It’s definitely not a critique of all pornography, since I’m not anti-porn. I think that porn made with the explicit consent of all adult participants is its own art form. It doesn’t necessarily reduce women to simple recipients or vessels. But my film is an exploration of a time when women’s roles in porn were passive. I’m working with that and recognizing that—and critiquing it. But I do believe that porn has an important role to play in society.