

Interview Transcript

Jane Wodening – Stan Brakhage’s Former Wife, Artist, and Author

Interview conducted on 5/25/2019

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JANE WODENING: I'm Jane Wodening. Used to be Brakhage long, long years ago. I didn't start writing until I was nearly 40. I found it hard to talk. I was shy and...and the-the proper...answer to a question didn't come to me for maybe weeks. So I was just sort of silent most of the time. And people didn't know what to do with me. And...I didn't either.

EARLY WRITING

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JANE WODENING: At around 40, I finally broke down and started writing. I had been writing some journals, and I did write a bird journal. It all started after having written journals. There was a story that came along, and that was the death of my friend Barbara, and I got very involved with- with her dying, and how she and I had always said to each other, "We're going to write, so you're going to write and I'm going to write and let me know when you're- when you start." And so she was dying. And I went to visit her at her deathbed, and we didn't have much to say to each other. And I was too shy to say anything. And- and I left kicking myself like "I can't even talk to her because she looks so funny. Being dying like that." And that night, I... I had a...nightmare. I leaped up and- My head on the pillow was her head on the pillow. And I could not lay my head back down on the pillow at midnight or whatever time it was. I had to get up and start. What? Writing. That was the moment that I started writing something besides what happened today.

LOVE FOR FAIRY TALES

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JANE WODENING: I've always loved fairy tales. And The Mabinogion is, which is a Welsh fairy tale book, is my favorite book all the way, although I couldn't tell you any of the stories from it. It still has an influence on me. So I even wrote another fairy tale book about people that were part of our group, but I didn't hardly know them. I just knew what was said about them. I knew the gossip. I had heard the gossip. And so that one is called "From the Book of Legends." It's quite short, but, uh, there's, uh, there's three or four people in there that are written up in fairy tale form as-as legendary characters. And they certainly were.

LIFE WITH STAN BRAKHAGE

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JANE WODENING: Me being a silent person was just what Stan needed, because he loved to do a monologue more than anything, you know, he just wanted to talk and talk and talk and talk and talk. And-and often I've thought, you know, "There are so many people that would-would love the opportunity to be sitting here listening to this stuff. But I've heard it like every day for 8 hours a day, for- [laughs] for a week and a half now. And I'm kind of, you know, weary of it," or, you know...But I did...I did have the freedom to walk in the woods, and I would take my animals and walk in the woods, the ones that could go on walks. I didn't take the chickens or the ducks, but...the goats and the dogs would come with me, and the donkey...So...I got to go on walks. And that was great. Then really, it was...There was no talking.

WRITING BRAKHAGE'S LIFE

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JANE WODENING: I would write about my life. I didn't write about *our* lives. In the 1980s, towards the end of our marriage, and I think that it may have stirred him to-to leave me. [laughs] But he...I had-I had written about...I had written...I had written short stories, I'd done *Lump Gulch Tales*, I had-had written...the story of-of the last wolf of Colorado, a whole book. And I had done a lot of-of of writing, and I thought, "I've run out of stories. What am I going to do?" And so I went to Stan and I said, "You have all these wonderful stories of your childhood, but I don't- I'd like to have it in order. I'd like to know what happened first and what happened next. And-and so on...Can I interview you about your childhood?" And he said, "Give me a month." And so he, I guess, was thinking, "Okay, where'll we start?" You know? "Let's start with your birth." Which was...difficult and problematic. And he didn't know a thing, you know, about it except that he was adopted at a certain age and-and...and what his feelings about that were and the discussions that had happened. Then-then, you know, to just start with the next chapter and...he wanted a month each time. So...I had to write other things in between. After the divorce I was thinking, "Well, I can't do this as Stan, it'll have to be somebody else." So I changed his name and other people's names. And I'm just going to present it as psychological-psychologically interesting childhood. But...uh, of course, I couldn't figure out how to sell it, so that didn't work. [laughs] Anyways...So it took a couple of years to collect the information and to get- to collect the stories and the chapters. And then it was collected. In the meantime, it was being serialized by P. Adams Sitney's wife.

BRAKHAGE'S CHILDHOOD

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JANE WODENING: He didn't connect much with his parents. I think neither one of them knew quite how to be a parent and...and didn't...didn't connect well with him. Didn't-didn't...didn't do it right. They tried and...and his mother...Give her some credit for staying with him all her life. One thing he did feel was he felt like he was superior to everyone. And-and that...surely his real parents were better than-*than* what he had. He-he felt...abandoned. He was very crabby about it. He never forgave his mother. But also then he was photographing me having babies and in a way, he transferred that to me. I don't know. [laughs] So I was not forgiven, for I don't know

what. [laughs] But I didn't abandon him. He would abandon me often, but not-not the other way around.

LIFE AT LUMP GULCH

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JANE WODENING: He had put his fist down just when we got married, like, "I don't want you to work. You have to be at home." So I was happy with that. I never got a job, never learned a skill, or anything. [laughs] He wanted me to be sure to be there, to be there for the kids. And this was, I mean, before I was pregnant for the first time that he said that, you know, so...that was just his sense, like it wasn't- he wasn't the kind of guy that had a wife that worked. We'd been traveling, we'd been driving around the country for seven years and-and having babies. And I was pregnant for the fifth time, and it was getting crowded in the car, and we came and dumped ourselves on my parents again, which was definitely a burden. So then we were looking for a place to live, a place to buy, you know, and I think...my parents found that place up in Lump Gulch. We had been saying, "Well, it has to be close to Boulder, because Stan has to be close to Boulder because he's, you know, doing things at the university all the time and stuff." So...But that was, like, really cheap. That little cabin that we bought...was really cheap, and my parents bought it and we paid them off, you know, across the years. And just mainly to get us out of the house, I think. [laughs] Lump Gulch was, it was a great thing. We, we could have animals there, and that was...that was my joy.

JANE'S CHILDHOOD

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JANE WODENING: I love animals. Obviously. I was lonely as a child...and animals- dogs-dogs liked me. I was so shy with people that I didn't act right. I didn't...I didn't smile when I was, you know, when...if they said, "Well, you're a pretty little girl!" I'd, you know, listen to that. "Oh,

well, I'm a pretty little girl. That's interesting." [laughs] I wouldn't smile. "Oh, Thank you." You know, I didn't say it right. I didn't-didn't respond properly.

MOUNTAIN LIFE

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JANE WODENING: I think the first thought was- it was-it was cheap and [laughs]...and...my second thought was that it was- that I could have animals. And I think Stan was feeling, well, he could, he could drive down that canyon. It was- he could do it. I think, you know, I did love the idea of living in the country, in the mountains. The mountains- I'm a mountain girl. Of course I've been called other things. Not ever a city chick. Never. 1964. I was pregnant with my youngest child. I was pregnant. And the-the whole county noticed that a pregnant woman moved in and sent...the county nurse to visit. It was a- it's a small town, small town kind of thing to do.

THE AVANT-GARDE COMMUNITY

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JANE WODENING: In the mid-sixties, there was...a thing that happened that I...chronicled in three scrapbooks that are at Yale now. It was a time in which it wasn't only filmmakers. It was poets, it was composers. There were these people that were-that were creative...techies, people that understood how to run a camera, and-and yet they were creative. And I looked at each one, you know, and I could rattle off a lot of names, and each one did a different thing. Jonas Mekas was more into journalism, but journals, writing, journal-writing. But Ken Jacobs would-would make a magic show and, you know, James Broughton was-was dancing. He was a dancer. And, I don't know, they were just all doing something else. Stan was doing what he saw inside his...head. Each one of them was- was viable. And I found it very interesting to see, like, that...different artists are doing totally different things. Each one of them is doing him or herself. Known Carolee since I- like, since I got married. She and her husband at that time, Jim Tenney, the composer, were-were good friends of Stan when I arrived. And...they accepted me pretty

well. That was, that was a-that was a great, great time. And I was...I really felt that I had found my people.

SALLY DIXON'S WORK

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JANE WODENING: Sally was...was happy to serve. She...she wanted to be of use and the thought of being of use to the experimental film around the world. The thing that always struck me about her was she was just like Mary Poppins. She was magical and-and...always...of service. Always of service. She wasn't, like, working on her own creativity so much. I mean, she was...drawings kind of secretly, and did very well. But it wasn't that she had a-she was an artist. She was...she was a helper. She was a...she took care of things. She could talk to important people. That is, you know, the heads of-of departments and-and the, you know, the...whoever was running the museum, and have, like, an argument with them. And in a very gracious and charming sort of way, she was very charming. She could just- she was a diplomat too. But I-I just always looked at her as Mary Poppins, partly because of her upbeat, I don't know, kind of flowery way of talking. She didn't talk in a 19th century flowery way. I mean, she was like a bouquet.

DIXON'S DEPARTURE FROM CMOA

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JANE WODENING: She came here...after- on the occasion of losing the job at- in Pittsburgh. And we never did- At least I never found out what that was about. She had to go. And I assume that she had overstepped some-something. She was being slapped down, I think, and couldn't, like, run a film show and-and invite filmmakers. And so she just had to go. Then she was really confused because she had been building this-this world and achieving great things there. She could get a cameraman into the autopsy room, for God's sake. How-how could you do that? She was magic. She brought a kind of energy into the avant-garde, and actually I think it's still there.

I think she brought this energy into the avant-garde, the film field, and-and somehow without even doing things, she-she kept it going. It was really...good medicine for-for the- for experimental film. She didn't...succeed in making such a big splash anywhere else. She had little things going, but she would-she would then-I think she did a lot of things, like, under the table. She would, like, make connections that-that maybe nobody heard about but the connection would be there. She...she was a spokesperson for-for-for the film. And she wanted to be of help, and she was, she continued to be of help, but it wasn't like the glorious explosion that happened in Carnegie.

DIXON'S LIFE IN COLORADO

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JANE WODENING: Some of the people who owned houses in Lump Gulch would go and live in Central City or something more civilized for the winter, where it was warmer and closer to the grocery store and stuff...And Molly Ball, who-Sally reminded me of Molly Ball. I thought they were the same kind of people, although I didn't know Molly very well, and she was much older, but...she-she did that. She would spend the winter down in Central City and...So she- that-that winter she had an opportunity. Somebody wanted to rent her place out, it was-it was Sally. I don't know how Sally found her, but Sally was able to find people like Molly Ball. The kids would visit, would go up and see her, but we didn't see a lot or we- I think we were in communication with her. I went and saw her, I don't know how many times. Not very many. She was awfully good with the kids [laughs], so I was glad of that, for them to have another influence. I think she came to...live there, for one thing, to get the hell away from everything. But to have Stan, whom she adored. If she'd obeyed his guidance, she'd have stayed in Pittsburgh. [laughs] But...I remember him yelling at her on the phone, "You got to stay there! We need you there!" At Carnegie. Carnegie Institute's...but she couldn't do it.

DIXON & BRAKHAGE'S COLLABORATIONS

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JANE WODENING: She must have called upon him to come and do a show. And-and that was at the time that she had a film series she wanted to start or she was-she was going with it. I think she just wanted to start, and she wanted to start with him, because she adored him already. And then when he was there doing his show, she said, "How would you like to do an autopsy?" [laughs] And he was blown away. He was so excited. He called me up and said, "I'm going to be late coming back. I have got this thing, this autopsy. I'm going to do an autopsy. It's really exciting." And I was thinking, "eugh!" [laughs] but you know, to each his own. He was very excited about being able to do those things. And then Hollis Frampton wanted to play, and he... So Stan, you know, told Sally "Well, Hollis Frampton wants to play." And she said, "Oh, that's fine, I'll do it." I mean, she was so...Oh, upbeat. And so...she just...whatever she was presented with to do, she would say, "I'll do it!" If I'd have been asked to do anything like that, I'd have said, "Uhhh, I don't, you know, I don't... know how!" But she knew how, she knew how to get things done. She knew how to pull strings. If Stan wanted to do the president of the United States, she would have set that up.

THE PITTSBURGH TRILOGY

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JANE WODENING: The Trilogies are more documentary than-than his other work. You know, he did work, do-do jobs to make money. He made some films for the state of Colorado. Oh, he did some...Back in Princeton, he did work at a place called On Film that was...where he totally transformed the...possibilities of-of TV...advertising...commercials. He added, like, slow fades and fast cuts and-and all kinds of fast movement. And since then, TV commercials have had that and...shamed-shamed Hollywood! [laughs] They're more documentary to my mind, because...well, I think he was...I...Again, if you get back to what I said before, like you deal with what you're given and that's what you-that's what you make a film out of. He had to face that he was not alone. He had, like, the-the doctors that were cutting up the cadaver and...he...so he was given permission to make this shot or that shot. "You can stand there. It's all right. You can stand

there. It's all right. Okay." "Do you- May I see over-over there?" "Oh, yes. Okay, sure. After I'm done," you know. And so they were...they were kind of in charge. And so he didn't feel like, you know, dancing around or doing anything...crazy. He had to look like he was a sensible person making a film. That means documentary.

BRAKHAGE'S WORK & STRUGGLES

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JANE WODENING: He just...didn't have a touch with narrative. He didn't really have... He didn't like to mess with it. It was not his thing. It's not where he lived. It wasn't-it wasn't that he was opposed to a story. As a matter of fact, he- he loved to read aloud. He was very good at reading. He would read even- When we first married, he-he read to me the entire *Remembrance of Things Past*. It took a year and a half, two years to do it. What he was after in-in making a film was to recognize it or, I'm not sure, make music out of it. It was visual music. But the reason he got into film, in a way, he was making those films as a teenager with his high school buds. And then he went to California and somehow contacted...Robert Duncan and actually...lived in their basement for a while. And so got to know Duncan and Jess Collins very well. And wanted...Duncan's expression that he could be a poet, because that's what he really, really, really wanted to be. And Duncan said, "If you are a poet, you're going to be a minor poet." [laughs] And it was a very rude thing to say to a guy, but he actually quoted that and said- Well, he didn't quote it. He just said it to a number of young poets, aspiring poets, and broke their hearts, too. And he jumped into the smaller pond, you know, he was a big frog in a smaller pond. And-and that worked out very well. Then he got a name in that field and really had a lot- He and a number of other people worked, not together, but separately to make that field a viable art form.