

The Museum of Modern Art

The Experimental Narratives of Warren Sonbert

May 11–19, 2023

The Roy and Niuta Titus Theaters

In a career that spanned the American experimental film world from New York City to San Francisco, filmmaker Warren Sonbert (1947–1995) was driven by the belief that “independent film...is the only avenue for those who want to take risks and satisfy their own self-imposed demands.” This retrospective of a seminal figure in experimental film encompasses Sonbert’s complete body of work from its beginning in 1966. Comprising seven programs screened almost entirely in 16mm, the series opens on the theme of queer identity, and goes on to focus on Sonbert’s early flirtation with Andy Warhol’s Factory scene, his travel diaries, the evolving styles, strategies, and poetics of his 16mm film work, and much more. Jon Gartenberg, curator of Sonbert’s creative legacy, remarks, “Sonbert’s film *Carriage Trade* was first shown in 1971 in the MoMA Cineprobe series, and it has been nearly two decades since the last retrospective of his films in New York City. This series can be considered a capstone to Warren Sonbert’s creative career.”

Organized by Ron Magliozzi, Curator, Department of Film and Guest Curator Jon Gartenberg, with Carson Parish, Associate Producer, Department of Film.

SCREENING SCHEDULE

All films will be screened in 16mm, except where indicated.

Warren Sonbert Program 1: Sonbert’s Whirl through Warhol’s World

Sonbert began making films in 1966, as a student at New York University’s film school. His earliest films, in which he captured the spirit of his generation, were inspired first by the university milieu and then by the denizens of the Andy Warhol art scene.

Where Did Our Love Go? 1966. USA. Directed by Warren Sonbert. 15 min. 16mm.

Sonbert recalled, “Warhol Factory days...serendipity visits, Janis and Caselli and Bellevue glances...Malanga at work...glances at *Le Mépris* and *North by Northwest*.... Girl rock groups and a disco opening...a romp through the Modern.”

Hall of Mirrors. 1966. USA. Directed by Warren Sonbert. 7 min. 16mm.

In an outgrowth of Sonbert’s film classes at NYU, he re-edits outtakes from a Hollywood film (starring Fredric March and Florence Eldridge), adding found footage with scenes of Warhol superstar René Ricard in reflective moments, and Gerard Malanga in public view at an art gallery. The film has a sophisticated circular structure, beginning and ending with the protagonists’ movements enmeshed within multiple reflecting mirrors.

The Tenth Legion. 1967. USA. Directed by Warren Sonbert. 30 min. 16mm.

The Tenth Legion exemplifies Sonbert’s use of a constantly moving handheld camera as it trails the college-age protagonists in choreographed fashion, with chiaroscuro lighting effects in interior scenes. His attention to capturing the minutiae of daily existence is a precursor to his mature montage films, in which he melded diverse human gestures into a unified global vision.

Program: 52 min.

Thursday, May 11, 4:30 p.m., T2; Sunday, May 14, 4:30 p.m., T2

Warren Sonbert Program 2: Queer Identity

Of the many creative and cultural universes inhabited by Sonbert, none was perhaps more acutely experienced—and less publicly acknowledged—than his homosexual identity and affliction with AIDS. This program examines his relationship to the gay universe.

Amphetamine. 1966. USA. Directed by Warren Sonbert, Wendy Appel. 10 min. 16mm.

In his provocative, playful first film, Sonbert depicts young men shooting amphetamines and making love in the era of sex, drugs, and rock and roll.

Noblesse Oblige. 1981. USA. Directed by Warren Sonbert. 25 min. 16mm.

This masterfully edited work features imagery Sonbert filmed of protests in San Francisco following the murders of Mayor George Moscone and Councilman Harvey Milk at the hands of Dan White. He modeled the structure of this film on Douglas Sirk's *Tarnished Angels* (1957).

Short Fuse. 1992. USA. Directed by Warren Sonbert. 37 min. 16mm.

Made following Sonbert's AIDS diagnosis, the film is a turbulent expression of his heightened emotional state, collaging images of war, protest, and rest with shifting musical passages from Sergei Prokofiev's First Piano Concerto.

Whiplash. 1995/1997. USA. Directed by Warren Sonbert. 20 min. 16mm.

Preceding his death from AIDS, Sonbert channeled all of his energy into making his final work, *Whiplash*, which was completed posthumously by filmmaker Jeff Scher. A multilayered portrayal of Sonbert's struggle to maintain his physical equilibrium, his perceptual reality, and the world of friends and family around him, the film articulates the ideas and values for which he intended to be remembered.

Warren. 1991. USA Directed by Jeff Scher. 3 min. 16mm.

In *Warren*, Scher turns the tables on his former teacher and mentor, creating an intimate dialogue between friends as well as a battle of directorial wills, at a moment when Scher recognized that Sonbert was becoming ill.

Program: 95 min.

Thursday, May 11, 6:30 p.m., T2; Sunday, May 14, 2:00 p.m., T2

Warren Sonbert Program 3: From Mise-en-Scène to Montage

One of the most profound themes throughout Sonbert's work is that of love between couples in all its pitfalls and perfect moments. He expresses this theme not only between his protagonists onscreen, but also in the relationship between his ever-roving handheld camera and the human subjects within his field of vision.

The Bad and the Beautiful. 1967. USA. Directed by Warren Sonbert. 34 min. 16mm.

The Bad and the Beautiful is noteworthy for Sonbert's use of in-camera editing, in which he assembled together individual 100-inch camera rolls he shot into a series of mini-narratives. Each camera roll sequence captures an individual couple in unusually intimate, quotidian moments: eating, making love, dancing, and whiling away the time.

***Tuxedo Theatre*. 1969. USA. Directed by Warren Sonbert. 21 min. 16mm.**

In 1968, Sonbert began using his handheld Bolex camera to enlarge his field of vision beyond New York, recording footage as he traveled around the world. He wrote, "once you've got all those variations in one country it multiplies itself in conjunction with the neighbor next door, and after that the comparisons of continents is limitless...you get what is unique about wherever you are, but most important, how everything is really alike...how things extend from one another." *Tuxedo Theatre* offers evidence of Sonbert's first steps in developing his unique style of montage, which subsequently resulted in his magnum opus, *Carriage Trade*.

Program: 55 min.

Friday, May 12, 4:30 p.m., T2; Wednesday, May 17, 6:30 p.m., T2

Warren Sonbert Program 4: Travel Diary

In both lectures and writings about his own style of editing, Sonbert described *Carriage Trade* as "a jig-saw puzzle of postcards to produce varied displaced effects." He believed this approach ultimately affords the viewer multifaceted readings of the connections between individual shots. This occurs through the spectator's assimilation of "the changing relations of the movement of objects, the gestures of figures, familiar worldwide icons, rituals and reactions, rhythm, spacing and density of images".

***Carriage Trade*. 1972. USA. Directed by Warren Sonbert. 61 min. 16mm.**

Sonbert interweaves footage taken from his journeys throughout Europe, Africa, Asia, and the United States with shots he removed from the camera originals of a number of his earlier films. *Carriage Trade* was an evolving work-in-progress, and this 61-minute version is the definitive form in which Sonbert realized it, preserved intact from the camera original. With the film, Sonbert began to challenge the theories espoused by the great Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s; he particularly disliked the "knee-jerk" reaction produced by Sergei Eisenstein's montage.

***Postcards from Warren*. 1991. USA. Directed by Jeff Scher. 1 min. 16mm.**

Jeff Scher explains, "The postcards in this film were all sent to me by my friend and filmmaking mentor, Warren Sonbert.... While assembling these postcards, I almost felt as though I was making a posthumous self-portrait for him...his short but splendid life.... One of the last things Warren said to me was, 'I'll send you a postcard.'"

Program: 62 min.

Friday, May 12, 6:30 p.m., T2; Wednesday, May 17, 4:30 p.m., T2

Warren Sonbert Program 5: Narrative Strategies through Polyvalent Montage

Sonbert's montage works were meticulously constructed in the selection and sequencing of individual shots. Language poet Alan Bernheimer wrote, "Narrative concerns pervade his films on at least three levels, all working with and against each other: nano narrative within the shot, 'collisional' montage, and the metanarratives or themes running through each film." Film theorist Noël Carroll gave the term "polyvalent montage" to Sonbert's working style, in which each shot "can be combined with surrounding shots along potentially many dimensions." Sonbert himself wrote that "the ambition might be seen as an attempt to hold finely balanced series of tensions in which one can read images a variety of ways, sometimes in contradictory stances so that there are many possibilities of interaction."

Rude Awakening. 1976. USA. Directed by Warren Sonbert. 36 min. 16mm.
Sonbert said *Rude Awakening* is about “Western civilization and its work; activity ethic and the viability of performing functions and activities.” His vivid color palette enhances the ritualistic nature of each action observed. Set against this lush panorama, he subverts the expectation of classic cinematography with a liberal sprinkling of avant-garde techniques.”

Honor and Obey. 1981. USA. Directed by Warren Sonbert. 21 min. 16mm.
The film questions all forms of male-dominated authority, particularly familial, religious, political, and military. Critic Caryn James wrote, “In Warren Sonbert’s *Honor and Obey* soldiers march in formation, a tiger stalks through the snow, religious processions wind through the streets, and palm trees wave in a tropical breeze. As brightly colored images of authority figures blend into scenes of cocktail parties, this...silent film flows along with the grace of a musical score.... ‘Whose authority will you obey?’ the film seems to ask, as it deftly avoids simple-mined juxtapositions.”

14 STANDARD 8mm REELS, 1981–1988. 2018. USA. Directed by Jeff Preiss. 10 min. DCP.
Jeff Preiss had the rare chance to salvage a selection of 8mm reels from his archive; 30 years after it was first shot, this lovingly refashioned material returns as a luminescent ode to the friends, filmmakers, and artists with whom Preiss lived and worked during this time.

Program: 67 min.

Saturday, May 13, 2:30 p.m., T2; Thursday, May 18, 4:30 p.m., T2

Warren Sonbert Program 6: Poetics

Sonbert’s filmmaking has been said to have had an influence on the avant-garde Language poets movement. In an interview, Carla Harryman wrote, “Let me digress and offer again a bit of literary biography. Throughout the ’70s, I was working very actively with the sentence and the paragraph. But I also worked a bit with the line, and that work with the line actually was, in several instances, quite influenced by my viewing of experimental film. The poem ‘Obstacle,’ published in my first book *Percentage*, for example, was dedicated to the filmmaker Warren Sonbert, because it was written in the dark of a movie house in the Mission District of San Francisco while I was watching his film, *Divided Loyalties*.”

Divided Loyalties. 1978. USA. Directed by Warren Sonbert. 22 min. 16mm. Silent.
Sonbert said of the film, “So, again, the ambition might be seen as an attempt to hold finely balanced series of tensions in which one can read images a variety of ways, sometimes in contradictory stances so that there are many possibilities of interaction...there is somehow a link, a chain, by the very act of editing, of putting shots/images next to one another, that says our pleasure is somehow at the expense of another’s suffering...the filmmaker being both callous and opportunistic, sharing in the guilt, taking advantage just as much as the audience of other people’s misfortune to build his argument...the artist is cool and detached, but the reason is to shake up and disturb.”

A Woman’s Touch. 1983. USA. Directed by Warren Sonbert. 22 min. 16mm.
Sonbert modeled *A Woman’s Touch* after Alfred Hitchcock’s *Marnie* (1964), in which Tippi Hedren is subsumed by the dominating presence in her life of Sean Connery. Sonbert recreates this tension between male domination and female (in)dependence. Men are shown primarily in commanding positions of business, whereas women are shown in more domestic roles. He cuts between these modes of existence, interspersing them with abstract images of flowers, landscapes, lights at night, fireworks, and flows of water (think Stan Brakhage, Marie Menken, and other experimental filmmakers) that provide visual and

mental respites. In Sonbert's own words, "These neutral shots...are, like after-dinner sherbets, there to cleanse the palate before the next, more highly charged image."

Surface Noise. 2000. USA. Directed by Abigail Child. 13 min. 16mm.

Cobbled from found footage that Child describes as "outtakes of outtakes," the film is a dense collage of images with a John Zorn-like soundtrack. Sometimes the images synch with the noise; the flailing of a salmon swimming upstream is coupled with a rimshot, and home-movie footage of a man laughing is paired with a female opera singer. In most of *Surface Noise*, however, sound and image follow their own dialectical paths, creating a density which is Child's tribute (as a dedication at the end of the film makes clear) to the equally complex films of Warren Sonbert.

Program: 57 min.

Saturday, May 13, 4:30 p.m., T2; Friday, May 19, 6:30 p.m., T1

Warren Sonbert Program 7: Silent Rhythms. Sound Symphonies

After 20 years of making silent films, in 1989, with *Friendly Witness*, Sonbert returned to incorporating music tracks into his filmmaking practice. In doing so, he selected specific recordings from his firsthand knowledge of a vast repertoire of classical, pop, and world music idioms. Musician and experimental filmmaker Luke Fowler observed, "Sonbert...lived for music as much as film and would go to great lengths to contrive tours for his films in order to catch whatever appealing new opera premiere he wished to see in Europe at that time."

The Cup and the Lip. 1986. USA. Directed by Warren Sonbert. 20 min. 16mm.

Sonbert considered *The Cup and the Lip* one of his best films: "complete, succinct and time proof." Film critic David Sterritt wrote that "the film appears to be a regretful and perhaps sardonic essay on human frailty—and on the effort to stave off chaos by means of political and religious institutions, which carry their own dangers of social control and mental manipulation."

Friendly Witness. 1989. USA. Directed by Warren Sonbert. 22 min. 16mm.

Friendly Witness prompts the viewer to contemplate, in analogous fashion, the tension between the music and the images. Critic Fred Camper has noted that the first section of *Friendly Witness* is "suggestive of loves gained and love lost"—to the tunes of four rock and roll songs. Sonbert accompanied the closing imagery with a music underscore from Christoph Willibald Gluck's operatic overture to *Iphigénie en Aulide*.

***Divided Loyalties* [screened with original sound composition by Luke Fowler]**. 1978.

USA. Directed by Warren Sonbert. 22 min. 16mm.

Describing the film as "about art vs. industry and their various crossovers," Sonbert said "the job of editing is to balance a series of ambiguities in a tension-filled framework." Interpreting a multiple-shot sequence in which a close-up of a Cézanne painting is being cleaned, he elaborated that "the image of art naturally refers back to the artist-filmmaker, saying that art is both objective and merciless, the filmmaker being both callous and opportunistic...art is being revealed in the causal link of images...nothing has a valid reality outside of the whole chain of images...." For the 2016 Glasgow International, a biennial festival of contemporary art, Luke Fowler and Richard McMaster composed and performed an original, live score to Warren Sonbert's silent film *Divided Loyalties*.

“With Liberties and Latitude for All (for Warren Sonbert)” [original music composition by The Fictive Five]. 2019. USA. 19 min. Sound-only composition.

In 2019, musician Larry Ochs composed, and his jazz group the Fictive Five recorded, a 19-minute work titled “With Liberties and Latitude for All (for Warren Sonbert).” Grounded in an intelligible narrative context, the tune grants enthralling counterpoint between sax and trumpet, an array of percussive configurations coordinated with a timbral hook, and even a jazzy passage composed of jittery brushwork, trumpet digressions, and an eccentric coexistence of grinding bowed bass and swinging pizzicato.

Program: 83 min.

Saturday, May 13, 6:00 p.m., T2; Thursday, May 18, 6:30 p.m., T1

SPONSORSHIP:

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