

Chick Strand:

Now They Call it "Avant-Garde"

By Shea Castleman

Don't take it too seriously.

Chick Strand's advice, whispered at the end of an interview, is one of those phrases that initially sounds like a platitude, but on reflection turns into a wonderfully concise summation. The imperative captures Chick's style—irreverent—and hints at the filmmaking attitude that may have elucidated the compelling stories that make up *Soft Fiction* (1979) or the premise of *Anselmo* (1967), and is probably repeated quarter by quarter to her students at Occidental College, where she currently teaches. However, the suggestion should in no way imply a lack of rigor or complexity in her work; it is perhaps more an admonition against the tyranny of tradition and the "right" way to do things.

Strand initially countered tradition when she refused the rules of ethnography, preferring intimacy and immediacy to the standard rules requiring distance and



Soft Fiction

"objectivity." Writing in *Wide Angle*, Strand notes, "To leave out the spirit of the people presents a thin tapestry of the culture, easy to rent, lacking in strength and depth. I want to know really what it is like to be a breathing, talking, moving, emotional, relating individual in the society. The films [i.e. typical ethnographies] lack intimacy, dimension, heart, and soul, and most of all they are artless." Strand quickly tossed aside the rules, making a series of lyrical documentaries. She gradually segued into narratives, although her anthropological background continued to influence her work.

Strand arrived in Los Angeles in 1966 to attend UCLA. There she concentrated on the more technically oriented classes, learning how to manipulate her footage in a variety of ways. She also began to meet other experimental film enthusiasts. She met Pat O'Neill, for example, by way of a step printer laying around the Art Department. O'Neill taught Strand how to use the printer, and later introduced her to Bill Moritz, Harry Fraser, and others who shared her interests. At the time, Moritz was screening films at his house; this constituted a network that Strand had sought upon her arrival in L.A. As the group solidified, however, Strand became restless. "There was a whole thing about art and technology, and about that time, it sort of lost me. I wasn't really interested in having a big group of people forging ahead with some sort of manifesto. It became too structured, a little too mainline, too much toward the art establishment. I was not really interested in that."

While Strand had aggressively sought a group of peers to work with, she is nevertheless very much a solitary figure. "I think real "alternativeness" is an individual thing. I've always been pretty much of a loner, and I'm not looking to make any art statements. And I don't think so-called alternative cinema is for everybody. My personal involvement is that, well, I'd rather be home making movies—it's as simple as that!"

Strand attended many of the Filmforum events during the Pasadena years. "I swear, the first time I met Terry Cannon I thought he was around 13 or 14 years old—it wasn't the way he acted; he just looked very young. And here he was, this guy running this thing all alone, in a real funky way with no connections to anybody. It was very reminiscent of what we were doing in Berkeley. But I really felt at home there because it was so funky. He had found this old bank building and all the accouterments of the bank were still there—it was totally unpretentious." Strand notes that this shifted as Filmforum grew and the necessity to get grants forced a certain legitimizing. "In order to get grants, you had to look like a non-profit organization. You had to have a board of directors, so that it wasn't one person doing it anymore. There were a lot of voices involved, and they each had different ideas about what this thing should be. And it tended to make it more and more straight."

Continued on page 69

Chick Strand *continued*

Strand's predilection was, and still is, clearly for the wild over the mundane. She describes the Trips Festival—"It was immediately after LSD became illegal. It was before the Love Generation, and it was very, sort of, secret. They thought around 200 people would come but 3000 people showed up and stayed for three or four days. Ken Kesey was handing out his acid Kool-Aid, and it was total freedom and total craziness. It was an alternative culture, in a sense. You know, people put it down, but now we're your mothers and fathers! But I'm hoping that younger people with fire and energy will develop their own alternative, whatever that may be. Only don't forget to groove on your grandmother—that's me! I'll come; I can still boogie!"

Strand has watched the relationship of alternative filmmaking to other cultural practices shift over the last 25 years. "In the '60s, it was 'underground,' or the 'New American Cinema,' or 'experimental'... Now they call it 'avant-garde' and 'alternative.' But then it blew your mind—there weren't toasters. The optical effects that we were doing nobody had ever seen

before. Nobody. And the effects were used in a different way." Strand also notes that experimental film has grown increasingly institutionalized. "It's been a slow evolution, over the years. It's become academic. A lot of us filmmakers are teaching in academic situations, and that takes a lot of the craziness out of it. And I don't think art can be taught. I mean, you teach yourself. But to put anything in an academic context just takes the fire out of it—and here I'm doing it! But as I say to my students, get a gig to earn your living, and then make films on the side. So I guess I'm following my own advice. But the academy spoils the fun of it; the awe, the sense of it being its own thing, outside of academia, and outside the established art world is gone."

Strand's advice to young filmmakers—"Don't read anything, except maybe novels. Get a life. Don't pay attention to art. Just do it. Learn how to use the stuff, and do it. Take risks, and don't worry about making a living from it, 'cause you probably won't. Don't join clubs. Oh, and get as far away as possible from school." And of course, "Don't take it too seriously!"