

NARCISA HIRSCH

“Philosophy is a Useless Passion,” SF Cinematheque,
and “On the Barricades,” Microscope Gallery, New York,
October 24 to December 7, 2024 (extended)

Narcisa Hirsch, who died last year at 96, had much in common with her generation of experimental filmmakers. She worked at a small scale with practically no money, shooting what was around her, declining to engage professional actors or to write treatments or scripts. Yet her work is remarkable for the way it diverges from the spare, cerebral style associated with film and performance of the 1970s. A friend who attended her recent retrospective at Microscope Gallery mentioned to me a certain “warmth” in her films, and I knew immediately what he meant. I’d noticed the work’s emphatic sensuality and expressiveness while attending a concurrent program, “Philosophy is a Useless Passion,” at the Lab in San Francisco.

Naturally, I am hesitant to begin this piece with talk of Hirsch’s spirit or tone, which tell us little about her life—her emigration, from Germany, in 1937, her decades in Argentina, her collaborations with other artists, like Carolee Schneemann, with whom she staged the public performance *Muñecos* (1972). Nor would it be wise to read Hirsch’s sensibility as a comment on events in her adopted country; she’s said that her work was too opaque for the military junta to regard as political. But attention to what is tender and convivial about the films does help to place Hirsch in counterpoint with her avowed influence, Michael Snow, whose work she discovered while traveling to New York: “It’s not going to last forever,” she remembers thinking as she watched Snow’s structuralist watershed *Wavelength* (1967) at the Museum of Modern Art.

Hirsch’s early short *Taller (Workshop)* (1974) is immediately recognizable as an answer of sorts to Snow. The 16mm film consists of a single ten-minute shot of a wall in her studio, which she describes in voiceover—she is talking to a friend and fellow artist, Leopoldo Maier. Fixed to the wall is a clipped photo of a chimpanzee beside some black-and-white pictures of seascapes in Patagonia, where she spent her summers. The space is lit by a small incandescent lamp and by daylight from an unseen window, and the palate, full of reds and oranges, changes slightly as the sun recedes.

I did feel warm and even cozy (the Lab was selling glasses of Alsatian riesling) as I listened to Hirsch offering her guest a cup of tea, then eating a piece of toast—chewing as she talks—then lighting a cigarette and digressing into more conceptual but no less lived and embodied matters, stating her belief in an “on-the-ground,” rather than “underground,” cinema, for example, before resuming her tour of the little atelier. She mentions an exhibition poster, a few more photos, a view of some pigeons doddering on a drainpipe, though we never see any of these, transfixed as we are on the original and sole tableau.

The slow descent into darkness which concludes Hirsch’s film might be a reference to the glacial 45-minute zoom which comprises the totality of *Wavelength*, delivering the audience to a single postcard, tacked to the wall of an office in Manhattan—a not-dissimilar premise. The filmmakers obviously shared an interest in spaces and objects, and the phenomenology of the camera. But while Snow’s films can be alienating, even unseemly—*Wavelength* scored by a piercing sound—Hirsch’s are lyrical and evocative, literally so in the case of *Taller*, since it is Hirsch’s wonderful narration that keeps us company. In Snow’s *A Casing Shelved* (1970), a perhaps more obvious source material, we do hear from the filmmaker, but it is Snow’s voice alone, and the topic is, for me, unappealing: a utility closet full of lightbulbs and turpentine.

Hirsch, by contrast, is talking with someone we know is actually there, in the room, rattling his spoon against the porcelain. How enveloping is this sense of physical presence. I think of all the hours passed in artists’ studios, sipping Constant Comment, and realize that much of what I like about any artwork is the feeling of spending time with the person who made it. My first association watching *Taller* was, in fact, not Snow’s work, but an essay by John Ashbery, describing the clutter on painter Brice Marden’s mantelpiece—photos of Kafka and Bob Dylan. Readers could imagine a real person behind Marden’s truly abstract (Ashbery says “uninflected”) monochromes, and start to grasp at “the complexities hidden in what we thought to



Narcisa Hirsch, *Taller (Workshop)* (1974), 16mm film to digital, color, sound, 10 minutes. Edition of 5 + 2 APs. Courtesy Microscope Gallery. Copyright the artist’s estate.

be elemental.” Hirsch would herself write of “the luminosity of images, the images that, once projected, make visible the others, the internal, the kept ones, the dark and forgotten ones.”

I wonder, then, if the concise and formally constricted *Taller* can teach us something about Hirsch’s greater oeuvre, or about the kind of artist she was. The film is intimate, certainly, with all the comforts of an afternoon indoors, while Hirsch’s other works (those which appeared in the two shows) are extraverted, dreamy, her camera panning anything that strikes her, or which is beautiful: sun-drenched beaches, a mare’s white eyelashes. She wasn’t afraid to embrace a kind of aestheticism—sampling Gluck’s *Orfeo*, for instance, in one of her travelogues—which makes the experience of watching her films a great luxury, even when the effect is somewhat overbearing, as in her war allegory

A Dios (1989), or slightly pitiful: the subject of several films was Hirsch’s former lover, the painter Rafael Maino, a “man who loved other men,” she confesses in voiceover. Often, in her early, soundless Super 8 films, she edits in-camera, using the Super 8’s dials to slow and reverse or to cut in short bursts.

All of the expansive sky and salt and breaking waves can indeed be sensed in *Taller*—in the photos she’s pinned to the wall, but also in the world she creates, there, around the table, talking idly and waiting for the kettle to boil.

NICHOLAS GAMSO