

Filmwax Radio - Ep 807

Adam Schartoff

Well, once again, I am pleased to welcome you, the filmmaker Lynne Sachs, to film wax. Lynne, I, I think you are the most... What's the word? Way to describe it... The most frequent female guest I see. I don't know why I draw a distinction, but you're in the top 2 or 3 guests I've had in terms of coming on, over the years. It's like, I think you're the one.

Lynne Sachs

Well, I think it's a testimony to our shared passions and to our continued curiosity about the way one another thinks.

Adam Schartoff

I like that a lot. We'll go with that. Yeah. Yeah. And you're frankly really, you know, you're prolific. You're engaged in the film, you know, space in New York.

Adam Schartoff

You're, you know, you, I think you're a big collaborator, so all these things are why I don't.. I almost never have to really make an effort to find a reason to bring you on. You, you have always something to announce or some project that's coming out or, you know, and it's fantastic.

Lynne Sachs

Well, I mean, I will say that I think that in New York as a community, it can be very overwhelming to many people, but it's also so much more supportive than people realize that, that, you know, the, the, the kind of stereotype or paradigm is that you have to make it here, but it's actually that you come here and you find a lot of kindred spirits who are or who are very excited about some of the same things you are, and that I don't find it to be a place, at least in, in the community in which I exist, that we're fighting for a few places, but that we're kind of, assisting each other or clapping for one another or, you know, I...

Adam Schartoff

Rooting.

Lynne Sachs

Yes, rooting. I really feel that. And I felt that from, from people who are a generation older than I am. And I really do my best to be that way for the younger generation.

Adam Schartoff

I come back to my feelings a little bit more about this exact thing that we're talking about in one moment, but I do also want to insert at the top and not bury the lead, as they say in journalism, that, the main reason we are gotten here today is because DCTV, one of my favorite arts and culture organizations in New York City many, many years led them are doing a, or hosting a retrospective of your of your film career starting. Well, it's going to take place June 7th through

the 11th. Acts from the outside in. We'll talk more about it momentarily, but I do want to put that right out there.

Lynne Sachs

And, well I'm really glad to hear you say that DCTV has been a presence in your life. It has been for 40 years for me. And when I first walked in the door, it was called Downtown Community Television. And it was this idea that television could be embraced by all and that television was not very different from video art. It was different from film. But now it's all kind of thrown together. 40 years later. We just call it all film. We call it, it's it's the moving image and we use it in whatever way we want. But I was definitely experimenting in DCTV. So it's a it's really an honor and really exciting to take the time to take my work back there.

Adam Schartoff

Yeah. They took you. I think they just only in the last few years celebrated 40 years. Right. They're probably coming up to 50 in the next.

Lynne Sachs

Yeah. Something like that. Right.

Adam Schartoff

Because yeah, I remember that. And so you really kind of connected with them pretty early on. It sounds like.

Adam Schartoff

Well, it's, you know, DCTV was always an outgrowth of John Alpert and his partner-wife Keiko. But he was, at the time when I was there, was a war photographer, and he was going down to El Salvador, Guatemala. He was very much involved in that, that independent spirit that was both parallel to broadcast TV, but also, autonomous at times. And I think that's how he supported the, the, the organization in the early years.

Adam Schartoff

Interesting. Because it kind of in a vague way, what what would they do there and what John Alpert has done there and Keiko is, is kind of, you know, similar to what I was going to say next about how we started the conversation in terms of the community of, supportive community, that is that some community in New York and then part of that is the other side of the edge of the sword, which is how there is no real, you know, major industry with, with cash flow in office. So we are where they are. You are forced, in a sense, to create a, your own industry, your own foundation, your own structure for each other, because there's no Hollywood. And what kind of, you know, there's just it's just not there for a lot of creative minded people, who are trying to do something different than the mainstream, let's call it. And likewise, I think TV, you know, he could have gone and and maybe you really did. I know some of his, John's work has been on HBO.

Lynne Sachs
Right.

Adam Scharoff

In the early days of HBO. But I also wonder, you know, he could have been a more mainstream war photographer shooting for, you know, ABC or something. Maybe he did do that, but, you know, he went in a different way and wanted to do his own thing and not have that, you know? So DCTV created this alternative, like the film community in New York has created an alternative structure.

Lynne Sachs

You know, it's so unbelievable that an organization of that distinction has kept the same building in a firehouse. They've not only remained, near Chinatown, near near, so many different neighborhoods, but yet sort of they're in the center of it all without being in one or the other. It's right off of Canal Street. It's near the financial district, near the government center. The government, like, people can literally walk there or get on. I mean, you know, I've made films in Chinatown, which, you know, I've made films in other parts of Soho, I've made films, you know, in other parts of the world, but it seems like it's at the vortex of so many things. So, then they opened this firehouse cinema, which is so fantastic and so well-equipped and, and it's really a celebration of documentary film in all its aspects. No, not not a conventional interpretation of that word at all. So, that's been a real gift to New York City.

Adam Scharoff

And for more about the Firehouse Cinema and DC TV in recent times, you can... people can actually, look up my conversation with Dara Messenger. Messenger. who I spoke to a couple of years ago when they were finally opening the doors to the cinema, which, you know, like, it's just fantastic that something like that can happen. you know, even during, in a sense, the pandemic, you know, I always it's a great thing. And to have, documentary cinema. In New York City. Great. We need to, you there are going to be. So that's where your retrospective is taking place.

Lynne Sachs
Yeah.

Adam Scharoff
Of course. Right.

Lynne Sachs

Yeah. So there's seven programs, ranging there's, so the first program is Performing the Real, and I'll be talking to, Sam Green after the films, and we chose certain people to be in conversation because we think they they have a passion for this, a certain approach, so I've done a lot of expanded cinema work, and we'll be talking about that, that play between, hybrid work, work that plays with fiction and documentary and, I'll be showing my film, The Washing Society and a couple of other films, Swerve and my very, very first expanded cinema piece and one of my first films of all, which is called Fossil, which I made and started making in around

1984. Long time ago. And, it's a film that uses dance as, as a way of interpreting documentary material. So interpreting through your body, not just through your intellect. And so it's amazing to me because it's the first time I've shown the film since I made it. And I'll be showing it, in, in the place where it was created. So that's kind of exciting to me. It was probably shot on three quarter inch video. Actually, and then, there's a program, called it's a Hell of a Town, which is all about the, like, challenge and of living in New York City, which includes another film I had never shown in public film I made with my brother, called Ladies Wear. And he and I are both putting on fingernail polish in a very graffitied subway, in 1983. And for a guy to be putting on fingernail polish, I guess back then would have been a little surprising, but also to do it in the subway. So we were playing around with gender back in the day. My brother... Yeah.

Adam Schartoff

You were in, cutting edge.

Lynne Sachs

Yes. And, and, then we'll be showing a really new film called Contractions.

Adam Schartoff

Yeah. I wanted to talk about that. because, this is I, you know, I probably... either haven't seen all of your work. I know that comes as a shock to you or possibly a percentage of it. It has faded from memory, but I don't remember quite such a... This is a short work on the topic of, a very, is as contemporary a topic as one can make a film about, but it's about, the, about women's health. What is health... with women's health issues specifically, of course, about the most significant part of that conversation, which is on abortion, access and, and, this is the most in the way, direct type of subject matter I've seen you make a film about, in memory.

Lynne Sachs

That be would be a relatively interesting way to put it?

Adam Schartoff

So, so topical, I guess. So very topical.

Lynne Sachs

About a year ago, a group of filmmakers got together, and we decided that we wanted to make films that explored the repercussions of the 2022 Dobb's decision, which ended Roe versus Wade. Roe versus Wade as a platform by which we could look at reproductive justice in the United States, and we could say women had the right to make decisions about their bodies. That was ended on June 24th, 2022. So a year later, a woman named Kristy Rivera Flanagan, a documentary maker.

Adam Schartoff

I know her well, yeah.

Lynne Sachs
Oh. You do?

Adam Scharoff

I mean, I have known her for some years and met her a number of times.

Lynne Sachs

You. Oh, you might know her in person better than I do, but we have gotten to know each other very well as a collective across the country. And she was calling other filmmakers to make work that looked at place communities where abortion clinics had been closed, or where women's health clinics were no longer offering those services, medical services. So one person made a film in North Dakota, another person made a film in Arizona, another person made a film in Tennessee, a different part of Tennessee. And I made a film in my own hometown, Memphis, Tennessee. And I went back to a clinic that is now closed, where, women had once gone to to in pregnancies they didn't want, for whatever reason, maybe their own health, maybe there had been a rape, maybe it had been an incest, maybe they couldn't afford to have another child, which is usually the case. Most it's I've read and or most women who make decisions to end pregnancies already have children, and they know they cannot spread themselves any thinner. It's very considered. So I wanted to look at the situation in Memphis, but I also wanted to do it in a way that would leave the people in the film with a certain level of anonymity. And so as an experimental filmmaker, the fact that I said, I'm going to just show the back of people's bodies was kind of an interesting restriction. It actually became liberating because people weren't worried about how they looked. They just wanted to be there in body to speak and, and in some sense to speak in a with the language of their bodies rather than just with their words.

And then, of course, as you heard, I included conversations with a woman who drives people from Memphis to Illinois because you have to drive a long way to get an abortion. Yes. from Memphis and from Tennessee, anywhere in Tennessee. and then I talked to a doctor who, also articulates quite beautifully, I think, what has happened to to women in the state of Tennessee, at least, which reflects women in 21 other states, too, where the, the, the, the, the right to to make choices about your own body has been changed. So...

Adam Scharoff

Eliminated. Eliminated.

Lynne Sachs

Yes. Eliminated.

Adam Scharoff

What happened has a now feel or what it was? What's the experience like for you making a because typically there's this, you have your process... You know, I don't I don't really know too much about it, but how you come to make a film about whatever the most recent 1 or 1 of the most recent ones, I should say, is a Film about a Father Who, which is this remarkable story about your family and, you know, your siblings, many of whom you discovered over the course

of making the film, in fact. So this one is really topical, like we said. And, and I'm just wondering from somebody who I wouldn't say avoids making topical films. But you don't set out to do it.

Lynne Sachs

You know, that is what really hits at one of the key issues in working with reality. What is your intention? Who is your audience? What do you want as a result of the film? Is it there a result or is it just a feeling? I wanted to explore, what what would it be like to work with a group of people in one morning? I shot the whole film in a few hours because we actually had to get together in a not surreptitiously, but we couldn't even announce where we'd be shooting to the group of people who were involved till one day before. Because it's hard to imagine being here in New York how charged this issue is. And in some ways it was probably the most precarious, filmmaking experience of my life. One of the people involved in producing the film, meaning helping to find participants to be in this film, arranged for 14 volunteer marshals to be there to watch over us in case there was any trouble, which there was not. So we had to be kind of in and out within of a public... It wasn't public— but a parking lot in front of an empty building within about four hours. The cars were already starting to slow down and watch us, and we just didn't want any problems. It's it's very, it's a very alienating world to be in as a woman, to be somewhere where people are going to practically assault you for making decisions strictly about your own body.

Adam Scharoff

Well, I, I would say I wouldn't even couch it like I would. I wouldn't even, what's the word? Kind of, you know, soften it. I would say that it is an assault.

Lynne Sachs

It is an assault. Yeah. And it but even in New York, I was just in front of a Planned Parenthood building in Syracuse. And you had to walk through a crowd of, of, some protest...

Adam Scharoff

Assaulters.

Lynne Sachs

So, yeah, you know, I didn't I really didn't know. The big question was trying to convince people I didn't think anybody would watch this who didn't already agree with us. But we premiered the film at the True False Film Festival. And it was so affirming. After the film festival, which was in Missouri, Columbia, Missouri, to be walking around the town with my cousin Laura, who helped me produce the movie. Her name is Laura Goodman. Ryan. we were walking around and women would run across the street to talk to us and say, thank you. You're the Tennessee filmmakers, right? Thank you for making that movie. And we were just exhilarated and we thought, this is why we made it. The film is actually going to be on the New York Times website beginning the week of the two year anniversary. That seems like a troubling word. Two year anniversary of the Dobbs decision in June. and so in a few weeks, we're we're we're prepared.

Adam Schartoff

Yes. Okay. Very exciting. What's the name of that? that online.

Lynne Sachs

It's called off Op Docs.

Adam Schartoff

Op Docs yes, that's right.

Lynne Sachs

Yeah. And I never imagined showing a film there, but I think they're actually starting to show more experimental films. And they told me that one of the most popular films is a very experimental film.

Adam Schartoff

Very cool. So, yeah. That's fantastic. Well, again, the series, though, the retrospective, we should call it, rather than a series. It will be a DCTV, that's on Lafayette, just south of Canal Street. I mean, I should by now know the address. They've actually collaborated with them over the years, so many times. 87 Lafayette Street is. Thank you for mentioning that, of course. Which is, you know, like we said, it's in the firehouse, which is where it's been for over 40 years. And, the name of this retrospective is called From the Outside In.

Lynne Sachs

And actually the the curator, Dara Messenger, who's just amazing and so enthusiastic you were mentioning earlier, I do, I do, yeah, she came up with the title and because she was thinking about films that I've made that are very much about communities that I may not know very well, but I'm trying to explore. And then down to the kind of micro study of my own family. So in and so she was looking at that trajectory as a, as a kind of journey that many artists are trying to grapple with how you whether you ever come inside or whether you just stay outside your own life, your domestic universe, will also be, having a conversation with, the filmmaker and the deep conceptual thinker or, Naima Hyman, who teaches at Columbia University, will be talking about protest films because I've made quite a few that deal with that. I will be showing the film where you are one of the featured performers, tip of my tongue. And I'll be in conversation with Tabitha Jackson, who's a great supporter and advocate for documentary film. And so it's a whole...

Adam Schartoff

That's not the Tabitha from Sundance, right?

Lynne Sachs

Yes it is.

Adam Schartoff

Oh, it is her. Okay. Yeah. Wow. Some heavy, heavy duty folks there. That's great.

Lynne Sachs
She's not at Sundance anymore, by the way.

Adam Scharoff
Oh, she isn't that okay?

Lynne Sachs
She's moved on.

Adam Scharoff
And, of course, we wish her nothing but success. She's already making very good choices about her career. Obviously, if she's involved in this retrospective, that's for sure. Wonderful. And she's right because she's, Oh, right. You know, her through, also, of course. Kristen. Right.

Lynne Sachs
Exactly.

Adam Scharoff
Sure. Right. it all starts. The synapses start kicking in, even at 930 in the morning. I mean, well, I'm very excited. Oh, so you're showing Tip of my Tongue. You're showing kind of just about everything. I mean, well, I can

Lynne Sachs
I'm showing half the film because I've made about 50...

Adam Scharoff
Because you're kinda relying that they'll do a part two. Because people will be so hungry for Lynne Sachs.

Lynne Sachs
Oh, maybe. But, you know, I make a lot of short films. So 50 is not that hard when you make... I even have one film that's 90 seconds and I'm perfectly happy with that length. It's from 90... 84 minutes is my longest film.

Adam Scharoff
Is that true? Which one is that?

Lynne Sachs
Tip of my Tongue, the one you're in.

Adam Scharoff
That's your longest film?

Lynne Sachs
Yes.

Adam Scharoff
See if you, if you edited me out, you know, it would be back in the, in the middle of a... So you might want to think about that.

Lynne Sachs
Yeah. Yeah. And I wanted to say that about my brother Ira Sachs and my sister Dana Sachs will be at the screening on June 11th for the conversation around Film About a Father Who. So I actually have had a really good time, inviting certain people to come and be in conversation. And Dara and I worked hard on that. And they're actually also creating a monograph. A little small book...

Adam Scharoff
Oh, nice. Yeah, I want to get that. So what day is Film About? What day is...

Lynne Sachs
Film about a Father Who is June 11th.

Adam Scharoff
Okay. And the Tip of my Tongue, just for personal

Lynne Sachs
Is June 10th. Maybe you'll come down! If you think you'll come to Accra Shep will be there. And I'm really thrilled about that. I'll just say now, if you come down, I would love for you to be a special guest and be in conversation with us, with Tabitha.

Adam Scharoff
Oh my gosh. Well, I'm very excited for you. And I think, you know, finally, I mean it well, it makes sense with DCTV because it even says in the description here that it's about 40 years ago where you were, taking these film classes, at DCTV, where are you taking them there? Or were you giving them?

Lynne Sachs
Oh no, no, no taking. Still had plenty to learn,

Adam Scharoff
Right. Well, people should check out and then they can check out more of your short works that aren't in the retrospective. Probably on your I'm guessing either on your website or...

Lynne Sachs
Website. I have seven films on the Criterion Channel so people can look around.

Adam Schartoff
Um, congratulations.

Lynne Sachs
Thank you.

Adam Schartoff
And, let's just keep the conversation going. It's my suggestion.

Lynne Sachs
Thank you. Thank you. So much for doing this for filmwax, Adam. And for your constant, I'll say it again, your constant curiosity and enthusiasm.

Adam Schartoff
Aw, thank you. And, you know, an affection.

Lynne Sachs
Affection.

Adam Schartoff
I have a lot of affection for, for yourself and your family and, Yeah, I will I, you know, shout out a shout from the rooftops about this retrospective. So good luck with it.

Lynne Sachs
Thank you.

Adam Schartoff
And we'll do it again real soon. All right.