Some very quick responses, written as I am coming out of a general anaesthetic (having had to skip the screening of 23rd Psalm Branch). Let me know if you need anything more specific.

Bruce

Hi Bruce,

I've been putting this off way too long, but I have a few things to ask you about for the *Take One* article. The piece is coming together, though it has been a bit of a struggle (especially since I've had to work on it away from the comforts and resources of home, not to mention the distractions of New York).

(1) I was wondering if you could summarize your overall concept/vision for *The Book of Praise*. I've never heard you talk about it; I've only seen a few passing references to it. All I know is that *A Man Whose Life Was Full of Woe* is the first film in the cycle. And since I haven't seen "A Man Whose Life Was Full of Woe" I was hoping you could give me a very brief description of the film (one or two lines would be fine). I read the film description on the CFMDC website (their website, by the way, has the length of "The Book of all the Dead" incorrectly listed at 240 minutes) but I'm struggling to get a visual sense of it. I assume from the language that it's in part your response to finishing the first Book.

The Book of Praise is a film cycle that is based on the Protestant tradition of spirituality.(I hope I don't have to tell you that the term "Book" relates the title of the central document in Western culture.) *The Book of All the Dead* is, for the most, a work embedded in a deeply Catholic cosmology and spirituality – I suppose that the young feel very strongly the appeal of aesthetics of the Catholic ritual and the Catholic cosmology; I also suppose that it was that led me to take courses in Medieval philosophy at the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies.

Moreover, some of figures from whom I learned the most about art, figures such as T. S. Eliot, themselves were deeply Catholic. And so, in a sense, was Kenneth Rexroth, probably the poet from whom, after Ezra Pound I learned the most about poetry. George Grant was another central influence, and Grant outlook was very "Church of England"; moreover Grant introduced to me to the work of Simone Weil (who, as you know. presides over Consolations (Love is an Art of Time)). I was a young man when I began work on The Book of All the Dead (I conceived it around the age of 23, finished mapping it out around the age of 25, and by 27 had done the first pieces), and felt deeply the appeal of Catholic spirituality. Thus, Catholic iconography, and a Catholic metaphysic, would dominate the work (though Protestant elements do keep cropping up – and in particular with the role the work accords the Mennonites).

Around the time I was completing *The Book of All the Dead*, my mother died (that is marked by the film *Burying the Dead (Into the Light)*, one of the films in the *Exultations* region).. My mother was a very pious person, whose life revolved the church, the local

Presbyterian congregation . (My sister is ordained in the Presbyterian Church of Canada.) When my mother died, I began to consider what why I had separated myself from that particular form of spirituality. I had always felt called to defend this form of spiritual – while I think that McLuhan is a profound thinker, a great reader of modernist literature, and extends Pound's literary ideas to commentary on media in an absolutely brilliant manner, I have been, and remain, a critic of McLuhan's ideas. The basis of my difference with McLuhan is that I am convinced that the evolution of the Protestant subject – a subject that, quite sensibly, he associates with the spread of the printing press; the printing press created a space of interiority in which the subject can withdraw from the pressures of the alien material realm, and establish relations with one's deeper self, and through that deeper self with the Divine. These are ideas that McLuhan attacks when he deliberates on reading and the disturbances that reading has created in the relations amongst the different sensory modalities; and they are ideas I embrace. Contemplating my differences with McLuhan, attending more deeply to the writings of Northrop Frye, realizing more and more what makes Bach's music Lutheran/Protestant (I think you know that published my opinion that J.S. Bach is simply the greatest artist the West has produced), and deliberating on the faith that first nurtured my imagine convinced me that I wanted to work my way back to my Protestant roots. I decided to make a "Book of Praise" – just in case you don't know (this is only one of its significances), "The Book of Praise" is the name of the Presbyterian Church of Canada's hymnal (in other words, it is a book of songs that sung every week, all from the time I was a small boy to the time I was young adult – and in fact, still worship from at times.)

This is a Protestant work – this means place of the subject has shifted in this work. The work is more deeply interior – less looking outward at the glory of His creation. What a marvellous accident/dispensation, that when I came to need interior imagery, the digital image was upon us! Of course too the issue of guilt, of wretchedness had to be confronted head on (*Crack, Brutal Grief*).

Yet, I didn't really exploit the possibilities of the digital image in the first of the works that make up *The Book of Praise* – I suspect I knew that I would be backed into working with digital images (as I had in the *Exultations* regions of *The Book of All the Dead*). But I was exhausted by the studies in mathematics and computer science I had undertaken to do that work, and I wanted none of it. I don't think that very many people have realized how hard I have worked at this; I wish they go and take a course in differential geometry and see what it's like – I get a sense that people think I have unusual genes, already coded with information about Riemannian surfaces, just like think that my genes came coded with ideas about modernist literature. (One member of the professoriate, who shall, out of the goodness of my heart, remain nameless, actually stated publically that I was fortunate person who can finish texts – he referred, I believe, to my scholarly writing – in a single draft, and mostly out of my memory; that was evident my the amount of writing I have produced. Well, the opposite is true: I work very hard at my scholarly works, and I write and rewrite them – though the creative writings are another matter, and like the texts for *Surprised by Joy*, *Crack, Brutal Grief* and *Eros and Wonder*, are usually produced at white heat, in a single, hours long trance – unabetted, I might add, by any psychotropic agent save that which the physiology produces in moments of afflatus).

Anyway, *A Man Whose Life was Full of Woe* was made with a rear-screen optical printer that my friend Jimmy Smith (the fellow whose suicide impelled me to make *Crack, Brutal*

Grief) and I constructed for *1857: Fool's Gold*. It is my most baroque work (shades of Bach!) – extravagantly baroque – and combines multiple images using mattes that were cut with scissors from construction paper. (Like real low-tech!) The narration for the work, and the titles, are in a style that some might be tempted to call surrealistic. Though it was written very much following the manner that Breton and Soupault used to write *Les Champs Magnétiques* (and, I suppose, exhibits some stylistic mannerisms that one associates with automatic writing), it is really far too interior for that.

(2) I also have a more general question regarding the way you shape your film cycles. What is the relationship from one film to another as you're making them? Is each film you make a continuation and/or response to the previous film? What is the through-line? If I remember correctly, when we showed The Book of All the Dead at the antechamber, the films weren't in chronological order.

I did not make the films that the *Book of All the Dead* includes in the order that they would be shown. The template for the work came from Dante's *Commedia* and Pound's *Cantos*: the three regions in *The Book of All the Dead* correspond (roughly) to the three cantiche of the *Commedia*. I laid out a chart that indicated the relations between various parts of the cycle that I wanted to make (that was the work that occupied me between the ages 25 and 27), largely following the charts and diagrams that every edition of the Commedia includes in its back pages. I did this however, with a clear sense, derived from Pound, that the work would be an open work, subject to vagaries of the process of its compositions and the accidents of my life. I read the *Commedia* as a work about becoming the poet who can write the *Commedia*. (It should be clear from my Brakhage book that I a committed to open form poetics, and so it should not be surprising that Duncan's *The Sweetness and Greatness of Dante's **Divine Comedy*** should be one of my guides to reading Dante's *magnum opus*.) So it is with *The Book of All the Dead*: I undertook it with the faith that I could become the person who is capable of making *The Book of All the Dead*. (When I abandoned the project for time, after completing the *Consolations* region, I did so because I was mired in a bog of despond, totally convinced that I could never become the sort of person who could tell of Paradise; the solution was staring me in the face, of course, but I refused to notice. The solution, that any reader of Pound would tell you about straight-off, is that the work had to become a work about the failure to become the person who can speak of Paradise – but a work that can talk about the struggle to become that person.)

I started out making the films that I was able to make – I have not the same training that most of my colleagues in experimental filmmaking have, so I had to teach myself filmmaking in the course of making the work. As my skills developed, I undertook the longer pieces.

Yes, each new project arises in response to the previous film(s) in the cycle, but also to life experiences. A project begins as a declaration of faith about maker that one would like to become, and inkling about the form of blessedness that would entail. (I have an inkling of what sort of humility I would like to cultivate, and what acknowledgements might be required – I hope you realize that my reading Cage has been to acquire lessons in humility.) One gets an inkling of the destination to which, one hopes, the journey one undertakes will carry him. Then one prays and works. Ora et labora. I

suppose there is very little new under the sun.

I am hoping that films that make up *The Book of Praise* will be done in the order they are too be show. I have just undertaken the fourth in the cycle.

(3) In an interview you did with Lianne McLarty in the late-80s [?] you mentioned that if you were just beginning to make work [at that time] you'd probably be more interested in digital and electronic arts than in cinema. Now that you have worked in both areas for some time now, have you ever thought of making work that didn't combine the two, work which was purely digital/electronic. I'm thinking of all the time and expense that Snow went thru to finish "Corpus Callosum" on film only to screen it as a video in the end. I'm sure that was difficult for him.

I am fighting like hell against whatever promptings I feel my drive my work out of the cinema hall, and into galleries, or (ugh!) exhibitions spaces for interactive or installation art. I love the fact that the cinema hall is a space consecrated for focusing our senses upon a work – a dark space that we enter to take off our everyday bodies, and to establish some special relation with the screen. Gallery exhibition doesn't interest me in the least. However wonderful many experiences I have been, galleries invite us "stroll," to move through space, rather than to settle. Indeed, the best experiences I have had in galleries provoke a transformation of our ordinary mode of attention into something that is similar in important respects to the type of experience that the cinema, because of its nature, so often elicits: an experience when one is still, arrested in front of an image, half-way towards becoming discorporate. That's happens in galleries, often even to keep drawing one back, but still with lesser frequency than in the cinema hall. (It happens least often, surely, with installation work!) I cherish the cinema's viewing conditions – it's beyond me why people want to escape!

I am especially skeptical about the possibilities of interactive work: what interests me about a work of art is its capacity to speak from another place – the form of the work engenders a contemplative state: into the opening that contemplation creates, enters something alien, remote, bizarre, strange, wondrous, something that destroys our perceptual set and occupies our attention with something very troubling, odd, and glorious. (If you find this strange – certainly the cultural theory professors are appalled by this ideas, think about them while you are next watching a long film by Brakhage.) I find it hard to conceive how one might create, when demanding physical activity on the part of the view, a stillness can serve as an opening – that is, can serve effectively as an invocation of this alien reality. It seems to me axiomatic that it is utterly impossible to foster that quite attention when one is holding some remote control device and being challenged to figure out where to click next (or when walking around a room, trying to figure out what to touch next). Click! Click! Click! – is that physical activity, and the activity of mind that accompanies it, really conducive to the stillness that invites mystery?

Still, I realize now, as soon as have written this, that someone will show me to be a fool – and come up with some wonder form of installation that I cannot dream of – one that will serve the functions to still the mind and open us towards wonder.

(I do suppose that someday I will be forced to create a work that will be shown on an

electronic/digital project. Right now, while I can still – sort of – afford it, I prefer to work with film. The light is different. Being in hall where a film is shown is more like being in a cathedral, with light streaming in through stained-glass windows.)

(4) Could you elaborate a little on your new book? I know that it addresses twentieth-century art, but I'd like to include a more detailed line about it in the article.

The topic of the cinema's relation to vanguard movements in twentieth-century art has received a great deal of attention. Most writing on this topic has concerned the influence that vanguard art movements had on the cinema – its become almost standard, when introducing experimental film history to the young, to speak of the influence of Cubism on the films of Murphy/Léger and Sergej Ezenstejn, to speak of the influence of Surrealism on the films of Luis Buñuel and Man Ray, Dada on films by René Clair, Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp (in the case of the last two, we can even speak of Dada cinema), etc. Rather than considering the influence of movements in the visual arts (and poetry) on film, I am approaching the question from the opposite direction – considering the influence that the cinema had on shaping the ideals of Futurism, Constructivism, Dada, Surrealism, and Cubism. In the course of working out this influence, I have had to confront ideas about the occult character of the cinema (and the esoteric interests that helped shape early understandings of the cinema). [You may recall I mentioned this aspect of the manuscript when I presented Eros and Wonder at the Cinematheque.]

(5) Did you have any involvement with LIFT in its early stages?

I had been involved in trying to rescue LIFT's predecessor organization, the Toronto Filmmaker's Co-op (Canada's first film co-operative, and an organization that I had a very small hand in forming). The Toronto Filmmaker's Co-op had started out as organization dedicated to the personal cinema, but it was soon taken over by the guys (they were mostly guys) who wanted to make tedious feature movies and needed a place to produce a "calling card" film. When they ran the organization into financial troubles, they all jumped ship. Along with a few others, I came back to try and rescue it. (I was already a professor, and working for any institution, one picks up a smattering of legal information.) It soon became apparent that it was impossible. I spoke to the Canada Council film officer of the time, a wonderful woman by the name Francoyse Picard, and she agreed that Toronto needed a independent film organization.

At the time, I had grown beyond the need for the organization – the combination of my home studio and the facilities at Ryerson (which, to be sure, at this time were pretty much off limits to "personal work" but I insisted on using anyway, something for which I was frequently punished) – guaranteed that, at least for the time being, I could pursue my work. But I wanted a facility for what we now call "emerging filmmakers" – preposterously, I considered myself already an old man (I had been teaching for nearly a decade and was in my early thirties) – and wanted to be of help. A couple of us expended a lot of effort at folding the Co-op up properly, so we (and the Councils) would be left with no legal liabilities. Then, using the facilities of the Distribution Centre, I called a meeting to explore setting up another co-op. There was real interest – we got an

executive in place, and people like Bruce MacDonald took over from there. I went back to my own studio.

How is Images' Brakhage Retrospective (a retrospective you curated) going?

Brakhage's films are extraordinary. Farocki is interesting (I have paid attention to his work for some years.) Most everything else is ugly and silly – the sort of thing no one past the age of thirteen should pay any attention to. (Really they have the same sort of "appeal" that a Christine Aguillera – is that the correct spelling? – tape has.) I was recently treated to a solicitation from an Images fundraiser, appealing to my sense of duty as a teacher of "experimental" film – I might want to take out a supporting membership to Images, it was suggested, since Images provides me with opportunity to see new work that I might want to teach. Bloody likely! I am endlessly impressed with the fact that the organizers of such events hold us in such contempt that they think we do not understand that what they are up to is a total attack on everything that I (and the best students in my classes) hold dear – art that is spiritually enriching.

I do expect something good will come of the Brakhage Memorial. I have emphasized the photographed films in my program. Many young people are unaware what an incredible cinematographer the man was. They're getting a sense of it now – and at least one from the group that you mentioned says he/she (I'm deliberating not giving any clues about this individual's identity) will henceforth only work with photographed images.

best, Brett