

SALLY GROSS - THE PLEASURE OF STILLNESS

a film by Albert Maysles and Kristen Nutile

press book



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SUMMARY

“All of my dance is autobiographical, I don't think I've left any of my history out.”
Sally Gross

SALLY GROSS - THE PLEASURE OF STILLNESS is a 60 min. documentary about the critically acclaimed New York-based modern dancer and choreographer, Sally Gross. Called 'the most poetic of minimalist modern-dance choreographers' by New York Times dance critic Jennifer Dunning, Sally has been dancing for more than fifty years. Now in her seventies, Sally continues to perform every year. **SALLY GROSS - THE PLEASURE OF STILLNESS** is an intimate film about the life and times of this remarkable and charismatic true New York artist who continues to create experimental work with an unwavering and gentle determination.

Sally Gross was born and grew up in the Lower East Side of New York City during the late 1930's and 1940's. Her first language was Yiddish. She was the last of eight children born to a Polish-Jewish immigrant family with little money and often helped her father sell fruit and vegetables from a horse-drawn wagon as well as acting as a translator for her parents who hardly spoke any English.

Sally's life was very much shaped by the history of the Jewish Settlements in the Lower East Side. At the age of 13, Sally discovered dance during summer camp, sponsored by the local settlement house The Educational Alliance, which to this day has a commitment to fostering connecting and invigorating Jewish life. She then went on to study dance at Henry Street Settlement Playhouse located in the Lower East Side where she studied with celebrated choreographer Alwin Nikolais. There she discovered improvisation, one of the foundations for her dance style.

In the 1950's she became affiliated with the so-called Beat Generation and appeared in the cult avant-garde classic film *PULL MY DAISY* by Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie (1959). Early in the 1960's she was part of the Judson Dance Theater, a group of choreographers, visual artists, musicians and writers considered one of the founders of Post Modern Dance. All the while, she remained living in the Lower East Side of New York City.

All through her creative life, Sally has stayed close to her Lower East Side roots. Her past experiences very much inform her choreography. A lot of her dances, specifically her solos, are autobiographical and touch upon themes like her parents' immigrant experience, motherhood, the mother-daughter relationship, mysticism and general meditations on life.

SALLY GROSS - THE PLEASURE OF STILLNESS - a film by Albert Maysles and Kristen Nutile

During the late 1970's and well into the 1990's she has choreographed and performed with her own daughter Sidonia Gross. In her dances like ROPE (1975) or PETITE AIR (1982) she subtly explored the very special bond between mother and daughter. In 2000, Sally performed her most autobiographical piece, WHERE IS JAKE? which captured her experience working with her father selling produce on the streets of Manhattan. As a mature dancer she has been examining the themes of loss, departure and death, inspired by tape recordings of Beckett readings by the famous theater director Joe Chaikin.

Filmed in the captivating cinema verite style that Albert Maysles is renowned for, **SALLY GROSS - THE PLEASURE OF STILLNESS** follows this charismatic artist during the unpredictable journey of creating a new work for her annual performance season in New York City. We accompany her as she gathers inspiration from the visual arts, discusses her life and art, and interacts with her dancers in rehearsals. Interwoven throughout, the film presents significant dances from her rich body of work, as well as interviews with dance critics, collaborators and friends.

Sally Gross is a true New York artist. A daughter of Jewish immigrants, she is part of the first generation of New Yorkers who came to be artists at a time that was revolutionary. As a part of the American Avant Garde of the 50's and 60's, Sally was able to synthesize and bridge her Jewish ancestry with the American art and culture. These influences continue to inform her intricate, intense and intimate work up until today.

SALLY GROSS - THE PLEASURE OF STILLNESS - a film by Albert Maysles and Kristen Nutile

MAIN CREDITS

a film by	Albert Maysles and Kristen Nutile
produced by	Tanja Meding
filmed by	Albert Maysles
edited by	Kristen Nutile
music by	Robert Poss
audio edit and mix	Timothy J. Anderson
postproduction	Steven Rutt Renée Forbes
creative consultant	Jon Else
additional camera	Anne Alvergue Andres Arredondo Peter Goodman Michael Hosenfeld Kristen Nutile Greg Vanderveer Nelson Walker III Sean Williams
assistant editing	Greg Vanderveer Reid Koster
publicity	Claudia Tomassini

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Year of production: 2007
Language: English
Length: 56 min.
Format: DigiBeta PAL
Aspect Ratio: 4:3
Sound: Stereo

SALLY GROSS - THE PLEASURE OF STILLNESS - a film by Albert Maysles and Kristen Nutile

PRODUCTION NOTES

A few years ago, Albert was approached by Jon Else documentary filmmaker and professor of the Graduate School of Journalism at University of California, Berkeley to take part in a project called LOW COST- HIGH QUALITY.

The task was to produce a documentary film using the new available digital technology and demonstrate that you can make a high quality film with a small budget.

In 2004, Al found the perfect project when he attended a performance by dance and choreographer Sally Gross.

Backstage, Sally peaked out into the audience and all she could see was a person in the front row that looked as if he was reading a book.

She got quite upset and tried to find out who that person was - sitting in the front row.

To her great surprise, it turned out that it was Al sitting there filming. As usual, he had brought his small camera with him and unbeknownst to anyone he had started filming during the performance.

Al has been intrigued by filming dance for a long time. Throughout his over 50 year career he has filmed numerous dancers, choreographers, dance performances modern, classical as well as traditional. Al says about filming dance: 'As an expert of the hand-held camerawork that comes from my heart, dance gives me the most satisfying opportunity to create something most engaging and heart moving.'

Fascinated by Sally's very intimate and intricate work, Al continued to film her performances for the next two years. And together with producer Tanja Meding, they decided that this footage would be the beginning of their film.

In 2006, after two years of occasional filming, Kristen Nutile was brought aboard as co-filmmaker and editor.

An alumni of the prestigious Stanford Documentary Program, Kristen is an award winning editor and had a good number of short films under her belt before she started working with Al.

SALLY GROSS - THE PLEASURE OF STILLNESS - a film by Albert Maysles and Kristen Nutile

Kristen and Al had previously worked together on a short film, the precursor for his autobiographical film **HAND-HELD AND FROM THE HEART**.

SALLY GROSS - THE PLEASURE OF STILLNESS was to be her first feature length documentary as a filmmaker/editor.

Once Kristen came aboard and reviewed the existing material, she suggested capturing the unique process of Sally creating a new piece of work and use this as the backbone of the film around which to tell Sally's life and career. So the film team became a regular guest during the next 9 months of rehearsal.

Sally started rehearsals with her company for the new piece in July 2006 and ran until March 2007 when she had her annual season at the Joyce Soho Theater.

The team - just like with all Maysles productions - became a natural part of the creative process. In addition to capturing the rehearsal process, a number of Sally's friends and collaborators were interviewed or filmed sharing time with Sally visiting museums, galleries and other important places from Sally's life.

Not only is Sally a meticulous and concise choreographer, she also has a wonderfully complete archive, so the production team was able to access recordings of her choreography reaching as far back as 1975.

Thanks to the Donnell Media Library, the production team discovered fantastic archival footage of the Lower East Side from the 1930's depicting the neighborhood as it was when Sally was growing up there.

A real gem surfaced, when filmmaker friend Gene Friedman, whom Sally has known since the Judson days, went into his basement and retrieved footage he shot for a 1964 performance by Judith Dunn, wife of the founding father of the Judson Dance Theater, Robert Dunn.

Filmed on the steps of the 34th Street Farley Post Office in New York City, this material shows how avant garde and groundbreaking choreography was at the time. As one watches the dancers perform on the steps of an official building, using every day movements, one is transported back to a time in New York that was revolutionary in the arts world.

SALLY GROSS - THE PLEASURE OF STILLNESS - a film by Albert Maysles and Kristen Nutile

Unfortunately, not all that was filmed made it into the final film.

Sally's weekly Tai-Chi class, her City College classes with undergraduates, the children's movement classes she teaches were beautiful material, but there was just not enough time left to include all of this in the film.

Sally was most gracious and gave the filmmakers access to her archive and made every effort to contact friends and collaborators to help the production with archival materials and interview requests. And she very patiently waited to see the film until it was ready to be shown to her.

As the edit moved along, a screening with Sally was scheduled. And everyone was thrilled when she reviewed the film and encouraged and trusted the filmmakers to move ahead and finish it.

FILMMAKERS' STATEMENTS

Albert Maysles

Filming dance is not just a technical feat of cinematic gymnastics, but most of all an emotionally engaging experience, a poetic expression, of what dancers go through. I love that challenge and take great satisfaction in accomplishing what I set out to do.

I have been interested in filming and documenting dance for a long time. Together with my brother David we produced our first dancer's portrait in 1964 titled ANASTASIA. This was a short 10 min. portrait of the American dancer Anastasia Stevens who trained and performed with the Bolshoi Ballet. In the 1960's David and myself also made a film about Paul Taylor and his company. Later in the 1990's together with Susan Froemke and Deborah Dickson, I filmed New York City Ballet Ballet Master in Chief Peter Martins' collaborating with jazz musician and composer Wynton Marsalis, in the film titled ACCENT ON THE OFF BEAT.

However, I am just as well fascinated by other kinds for dancing besides classical.

Filming more and more of Sally Gross's dances made me really appreciate the beauty of small, intricate and quiet movements as opposed to large, sweeping and fast ones.

All along the process I was intrigued to see how Sally is affected by everyday events, movements and occurrences and how she incorporates these as well as other artistic expressions in her work.

Just like myself, Sally continues to be inspired and energized by the creative process. We both come from an immigrant Jewish background and were in New York during important political and artistic times. So Sally and myself share a lot of common ground. We both have an undying love for our respective craft and art which I believe the audience will come to appreciate when watching this film.

During the production I completely trusted the artistic talents of my co-filmmaker and editor Kristen Nutile, whom I had the pleasure of working with before. She took my footage and over the course of a year weaved it into an intricate tapestry that resulted in a most poetic and intimate portrait of a true New York artist.

Kristen Nutile

In 2005 I attended my first dance performance by Sally Gross and was mesmerized by her choreography as well as her performance. So, when producer Tanja Meding approached me to collaborate with Albert and her on a short film about Sally, I jumped at the chance.

I had previously worked with Albert and Tanja on the editing of a short film titled **HAND -HELD AND FROM THE HEART**, a precursor to a feature length film on his life and career, which I enjoyed tremendously.

Once I reviewed some of the stunning footage that had been previously filmed over two years by legendary filmmaker, Albert Maysles, and learned more about Sally's unique background, together with Al and Tanja we decided that a short film was not enough to really tell her story. As she continues to choreograph important works, we decided to follow her creative process over a year as she prepared for an upcoming performance and use this process as the backbone of the film.

Over the course of making this film, I not only learned more about choreographing and dancing, but I also became inspired by Sally, the person and her artistic process. Sally Gross is a role model of an artist with an uncompromising vision of her work. I believe that she is an inspiration to everyone as she proves that not only can you stay true to your vision and pursue your creativity, but you can do so well into your later years.

In the process I was also struck by the parallels of editing a cinema verité documentary with that of Sally's choreography. Similar to filmmaking, Sally pays particular care to rhythm and flow, and also places tremendous importance on transitions and structure. Just as it took several months to shape this film, it takes Sally several months to find the final structure of a piece. Ultimately, we tried to craft a film that reflects and showcases the beauty of Sally's work.

FILMMAKERS' BIOGRAPHIES

ALBERT MAYSLES, Filmmaker and Cinematographer

'The dean of documentary filmmakers, Albert Maysles.'

NY Times, May 6, 2002

Albert Maysles is a pioneer of Direct Cinema who with his brother David were the first to make nonfiction feature films where the drama of life unfolds as is without scripts, sets, interviews or narration.

With his first film, **PSYCHIATRY IN RUSSIA** (1955) Albert made the transition from working as a psychologist to documentary filmmaker. In 1960 he served as co-filmmaker of **PRIMARY**. Together with his brother David, he made over 36 films, including **WHAT'S HAPPENING? THE BEATLES IN THE USA** (1964), **MEET MARLON BRANDO** (1965) **SALESMAN** (1968) , **GIMME SHELTER**(1970), **GREY GARDENS**(1976), as well as the Academy Award Nominated **VALLEY CURTAIN** (1973) plus five other films on the projects of artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude. He has also worked on three documentaries for HBO of which **LALEE'S KIN** was nominated for Academy Award in 2001. His latest work **THE GATES** about Christo and Jeanne-Claude's 2005 New York City Central Park project premiered at the 2007 Tribeca Film Festival.

Albert has received a Guggenheim Fellowship (1965), a Peabody, an Emmy, numerous Lifetime Achievement Awards, the award for best cinematography at Sundance (2002) for **LALEE'S KIN** which also received the Dupont-Columbia Award in 2004. In 1999 Eastman Kodak saluted him as one of the 100 world's finest cinematographers.

selected filmography

SALLY GROSS - THE PLEASURE OF STILLNESS © 2007 a film by Albert Maysles, Kristen Nutile, DV, color, 56mins

THE GATES © 2007 a film by Antonio Ferrera, David and Albert Maysles, HD, color 95 mins

THE BEALES OF GREY GARDENS © 2006, a film by Albert Maysles, David Maysles and Ian Markiewicz, Beta SP, color, 90 mins

LALEE'S KIN: THE LEGACY OF COTTON © 2000, a film by Susan Froemke, Deborah Dickson, Albert Maysles, 88 mins, Academy Award Nomination

CONCERT OF WILLS: MAKING THE GETTY CENTER © 1997, a film by Susan Froemke, Bob Eisenhardt, Albert Maysles, 100 mins

LETTING GO: A HOSPICE JOURNEY © 1996, a film by Susan Froemke, Deborah Dickson, Albert Maysles, 90 mins

SALLY GROSS - THE PLEASURE OF STILLNESS - a film by Albert Maysles and Kristen Nutile

UMBRELLAS © 1995, a film by Henry Corra, Grahame Weinbren, Albert Maysles, Susan Froemke, 16mm, color, 81 mins

ACCENT ON THE OFFBEAT © 1994, a film by Susan Froemke, Deborah Dickson, Albert Maysles, 56 mins

BAROQUE DUET © 1992, a film by Susan Froemke, Peter Gelb, Albert Maysles, Pat Jaffe, 78 mins

ABORTION: DESPERATE CHOICES © 1992, a film by Susan Froemke, Deborah Dickson and Albert Maysles, 67 mins

SOLDIERS OF MUSIC: ROSTROPOVICH RETURNS TO RUSSIA © 1991, a film by Susan Froemke, Peter Gelb, Albert Maysles, Bob Eisenhardt, 88 mins

CHRISTO IN PARIS © 1990 a film by David Maysles, Albert Maysles, Deborah Dickson, Susan Froemke, 16mm, color, 58 mins

JESSYE NORMAN SINGS CARMEN © 1989, a film by Susan Froemke and Albert Maysles, 57 mins

THE MET IN JAPAN © 1989, a film by Susan Froemke and Albert Maysles, 21 mins

HOROWITZ PLAYS MOZART © 1987, a film by Albert and David Maysles, Susan Froemke, Charlotte Zwerin, 50 mins

ISLANDS © 1986, a film by Albert Maysles, David Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin, 16mm, color, 57 mins

VLADIMIR HOROWITZ - THE LAST ROMANTIC © 1985, a film by Albert and David Maysles, Susan Froemke, Deborah Dickson, Pat Jaffe, 88 mins

OZAWA © 1985, a film by David Maysles, Albert Maysles, Ellen Hovde, Susan Froemke, Deborah Dickson, 16mm, color, 57 mins

MUHAMMAD AND LARRY © 1980, a film by Albert and David Maysles, 16mm, color, 26 mins

RUNNING FENCE © 1978, a film by David Maysles, Albert Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin, 16mm, color, 58 mins

GREY GARDENS © 1976, a film by David Maysles, Albert Maysles, Ellen Hovde, Muffie Meyer, Susan Froemke, 16mm, color, 94 mins

THE BURKS OF GEORGIA © 1974, a film by David Maysles, Albert Maysles, Ellen Hovde, Muffie Meyer, 16mm, color, 53 mins

VALLEY CURTAIN © 1973, a film by Albert Maysles, David Maysles and Ellen Hovde, 16mm, color, 28 mins, Academy Award Nomination

GIMME SHELTER © 1970, a film by David Maysles, Albert Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin, 16mm, color, 90 mins

SALESMAN © 1968, a film by Albert Maysles, David Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin, 16mm, 91 mins

JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM © 1968, produced by Michael Mindlin, Jr., filmmakers the Maysles Brothers, 35mm, color, 86 mins

WITH LOVE FROM TRUMAN © 1966, a film by Albert Maysles, David Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin, 16mm, b/w, 29 mins

MEET MARLON BRANDO © 1965, a film by Albert Maysles, David Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin, 16mm, b/w, 29 mins

SALLY GROSS - THE PLEASURE OF STILLNESS - a film by Albert Maysles and Kristen Nutile

CUT PIECE © 1965, a film by Albert and David Maysles, 16mm, b/w, 8 mins
IBM - A SELF PORTRAIT © 1964, a film by Albert and David Maysles, 16mm, b/w, 35 mins
WHAT'S HAPPENING © 1964, a film by Albert and David Maysles, 16mm, b/w, 81 mins
ORSON WELLES IN SPAIN © 1963, a film by Albert and David Maysles, 16mm, color, 10 mins
SHOWMAN © 1963, a film by Albert and David Maysles, 16mm, b/w, 53 mins
ANASTASIA © 1962, a film by Albert and David Maysles, 16mm, b/w, 8 mins
SAFARI YA GARI © 1961, a film by Albert Maysles, USA/Kenya, 16mm, b&w, 10 mins
RUSSIAN CLOSE UP © 1957, a film by Albert Maysles, 16mm, b/w, 33 mins
PSYCHIATRY IN RUSSIA © 1955, a film by Albert Maysles, 16mm, b/w, 14 mins

SALLY GROSS - THE PLEASURE OF STILLNESS - a film by Albert Maysles and Kristen Nutile

KRISTEN NUTILE, Filmmaker and Editor

Kristen Nutile is an independent documentary filmmaker and editor based in New York City. Kristen has produced, directed and edited eight documentary shorts, which have shown all over the world including the Sundance Film Festival and the Tribeca Film Festival. She is the 2006 recipient of the Albert Maysles Award for Excellence in Documentary Filmmaking and has received two grants from the Jerome Foundation.

selected filmography

SALLY GROSS - THE PLEASURE OF STILLNESS © 2007, a film by Albert Maysles and Kristen Nutile, DV, color, 56 mins

ALBERT MAYSLES TALKS ABOUT MARLON BRANDO © 2007, a film by Kristen Nutile, DV, color and b/w, 15 mins

LOSS © 2006, a film by Kristen Nutile, 16mm, color, 19 mins

POLICE BLOTTER © 2004, a film by Kristen Nutile, 16mm, color, 4 mins

SECRET MECHANISMS © 2002, a film by Kristen Nutile, 16mm, color, 10 mins

THE CORNER STORE © 2000, a film by Kristen Nutile, 16mm, color, 15 mins

SYNCHRO © 2000, a film by Kristen Nutile, 16mm, color, 7 mins

OFFSHORE © 1998, a film by Kristen Nutile, 16mm, b/w 3 mins

selected editor work

WRIT WRITER (Co-Editor) © 2007, a film by Susanne Mason, 16mm, color/b/w, 60 mins

FROM PRISON TO HOME © 2006, a film by Adam Blank, DV, color, 70 mins

BRINGING CHARLES TAYLOR TO JUSTICE © 2006, a film by Kerstin Park-Labella and Buddy Squires, DV, color, 10 mins

SPEAK OUT: I HAD AN ABORTION © 2006, a film by Gillian Aldrich, DV, color 60 mins

MASSACRE IN UZBEKISTAN: EXPOSING THE TRUTH © 2005, a film by Kerstin Park-Labella and Buddy Squires, DV, color, 10 mins

HAND-HELD AND FROM THE HEART © 2004, a film trailer by Albert Maysles and Nell Cox, DV, color, 10 mins

SALLY GROSS - THE PLEASURE OF STILLNESS - a film by Albert Maysles and Kristen Nutile

TANJA MEDING, Producer

In 1996, Tanja started working in the film industry in her native Germany with the Munich-Berlin based media company TiMe. From 1998 until 2003 she was the associate producer for a world-traveled short feature collection at Ziegler Film, Berlin, where she worked with well known filmmakers from around the world. Her move into the documentary world started when she worked as the production manager on a 2-part TV documentary about the German politician Willy Brandt, directed by Peter Merseburger and aired on ARTE and ARD in Germany. Since moving to New York in 2003, Tanja Meding has worked as a producer for Maysles Films as well as an independent producer and consultant.

selected filmography

SALLY GROSS - THE PLEASURE OF STILLNESS (producer) © 2007, a film by Albert Maysles and Kristen Nutile, DV, color, 56 mins

ALBERT MAYSLES TALKS ABOUT MARLON BRANDO (producer) © 2007, a film by Kristen Nutile, DV, color and b&w, 15 mins

LL (associate producer) © 2007, a film by Amos Kollek, HD, color, 90 mins

THE GATES (associate producer) © 2007, a film by Albert and David Maysles and Antonio Ferrera, HD, color, 95 mins

SEEING SALLY - A PSYCHIC'S TALE (associate producer) © 2007, a film by Peter Goodman, DV, color, 86 mins

THE BEALES OF GREY GARDENS (producer) © 2006, a film by David and Albert Maysles, 16mm, color, 90 mins

MAYSLES FILMS CHRISTO AND JEANNE-CLAUDE (producer) © 2005, a film by Maysles Films, color, 30 mins

HAND-HELD AND FROM THE HEART (producer) © 2004, a film trailer by Albert Maysles and Nell Cox, DV, color, 10 mins

WILLY BRANDT - EINE JAHRUNDERTGESTALT (production manager) © 2003, a film by Peter Merseburger, DigiBeta, color, 90 mins

THE GALLERY (associate producer) © 2003, a film by Jos Stelling, 16mm, color, 30mins

AN EROTIC TALE (associate producer) © 2003, a film by Dito Tsintsadze, 16 mm, color, 30 mins

PORN.COM (associate producer) © 2002, a film by Bob Rafelson, DV, color, 30 mins

ANGELA (associate producer) © 2000, a film by Amos Kollek, 35mm, color, 30 mins

KIMONO (associate producer) © 2000, a film by Hal Hartley, 35mm, color, 30 mins

ON TOP DOWN UNDER (associate producer) © 2000, a film by Fridrik Thor Fridriksson, 35mm, color, 30 mins

POWERS (associate producer) © 2000, a film by Petr Zelenka, 35mm, color, 30 mins

CAN I BE YOUR BRATWURST, PLEASE (associate producer) © 1999, a film by Rosa von Praunheim, 35mm, color, 30 mins

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JON ELSE, Creative Consultant

Jon Else is a documentary filmmaker and cinematographer. He served as cinematographer on hundreds of documentaries, several independent feature films, as well as numerous commercials and MTV music videos. Else directs the documentary program at the Center for New Documentary at the Graduate School Of Journalism at U. C. Berkeley. From 1993 to 1999, he was consulting professor in the Department of Communication at Stanford, and served on the board of the Flaherty International Film Seminars. Else was a MacArthur Fellow from 1988 to 1993, and has won four national Emmys (for writing, producing, directing and cinematography), several Columbia-DuPont and Peabody Awards as well as several Academy Award nominations, the Prix Italia, and the Sundance Special Jury Prize and Sundance Filmmaker's Trophy.

selected filmography

WONDERS ARE MANY (filmmaker) © 2007, a film by Jon Else, color, 94 mins
OPEN OUTCRY (filmmaker,producer) © 2001, a film by Jon Else, color, 60 mins
SING FASTER: THE STAGEHANDS' RING CYCLE (filmmaker) © 1999, a film by Jon Else, color, 55 mins
CADILLAC DESERT (filmmaker, producer) © 1997, a film by Jon Else, color, 60 mins
THE GREAT DEPRESSION (filmmaker) © 1993, a film by Jon Else, b/w, 7 hour mini series
YOSEMITE: THE FATE OF HEAVEN (filmmaker) © 1989, a film by Jon Else, color, 58 mins
THE DAY AFTER TRINITY (filmmaker) © 1981, a film by Jon Else, color, 60 mins,
Academy Award Nomination 1981
ARTHUR AND LILLIE (filmmaker, producer) © 1975, a film by Jon Else, color, 29 mins,
Academy Award Nomination 1976

SALLY GROSS - THE PLEASURE OF STILLNESS - a film by Albert Maysles and Kristen Nutile

SALLY GROSS, Choreographer

Sally Gross began her professional dance career in the 1950's when she studied with Alwin Nikolais at the famous Henry Street Settlement House on the Lower East Side of New York. In the early 1960's she was a performer and choreographer with the Judson Dance Theater, the group whose experiments initiated postmodern dance. Her solos and group works have been presented by the Joyce Theater, The Whitney Museum of American Art, the Neuberger Museum at SUNY Purchase, Lincoln Center Out-Of-Doors, Central Park Summer Stage, the Dia Center for the Arts and are regularly performed in alternative spaces. Ms. Gross' work, including collaborations with painters, sculptors, writers, filmmakers and composers has been described as unique within modern dance. She received funding from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1981 and 1984 for her dance/film work and was a NEA Choreography Fellow between 1986-1988 and 1995-1996. Furthermore her work has been supported by fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, The Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, The Harkness Foundation for Dance and the Mary Flager Cary Charitable Trust/Live Music for Dance. She received an NEA/US Japan Creative Artist Fellowship in 1998, a Tanne Foundation Award in 2000 and in 2001 a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship.

selected filmography

SALLY GROSS - THE PLEASURE OF STILLNESS (featured artist) © 2007, a film by Albert Maysles and Kristen Nutile DV, color, 56 mins

A LIFE IN DANCE (featured artist) © 2002, a film by Michael Blackwood, DV, color, 36 mins

SALLY GROSS – A PORTRAIT (featured artist) © 2004, a film by Bryan Hayes, DV, color, 15 mins

RAW MATERIALS (choreographer, co-filmmaker) © 1995, a film by Sally Gross, Bryan Hayes and Phill Niblock, DV, color, 8 mins

EYE ON DANCE (featured artist) © 1990, a film by Celia Ipionis, DV, color, 29 mins

MAMALUSCHEN (actress, choreographer) © 1982, a film by Josh Blum, 16mm, color,

BLACK AND WHITE (choreographer, co-filmmaker) © 1985, a film by Josh Blum, 16mm, b/w, 7 mins

LEE'S FERRY (choreographer, co-filmmaker) © 1982, a film by Susan Brockman and Sally Gross, 16mm, color, 8 mins

STOPPED IN HER TRACKS (choreographer, co-filmmaker) © 1978, a film by Susan Brockman and Sally Gross, 16mm, color, 6 mins

PULL MY DAISY (actress) © 1959, a film by Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie, 16mm, b/w, 29 mins

INTERVIEW WITH THE FILMMAKERS

conducted by Michael Chaiken

Michael Chaiken is the Program Director for Film and New Media at the Maysles Institute, NYC. He is a contributor to Film Comment magazine and co-editor with Sara Maysles and Steven Kasher of 'Albert Maysles: Photographs/Cinematographs/Documents' (Steidl, 2007)

MC Michael Chaiken

KN Kristen Nutile

AM Albert Maysles

SG Sally Gross

MC - Kristen, this is your first feature length documentary. Can you talk about how the project came about?

KN - I had been working as a freelance editor and had the privilege of editing Albert's trailer for his forthcoming autobiographical film **HAND HELD AND FROM THE HEAR**. I had met (Maysles producer) Tanja Meding around that time and started attending some of her dance performances that were choreographed by Sally. I really enjoyed watching her perform and soon after she approached me about directing a film about Sally. For the last few years, Al had already been shooting footage of her so I jumped at the chance to make the film.

MC - How much material had already been shot when you came to the project?

KN - At the point I came on I would say that there was maybe fifteen hours of footage. I think we initially had something like twenty tapes and now we have close to 200 tapes.

MC - The editing process must have been a bit daunting. How long did it take to get it down to its present length?

KN - The editing took place over six months, but I tend to work differently with every film. In this would start out much longer. A two and a half hour rehearsal would get cut down to forty minutes before I finally arrived at a usable 20 minutes. It was definitely a weeding process. Then within all of this I had to find the narrative arc. Of course, working with Al's footage made that much easier since he edits in camera. There's something about him where he can just put people at ease which allows them to open up. Somehow he really gains the trust of his subjects. I still don't know what his secret is.

SALLY GROSS - THE PLEASURE OF STILLNESS - a film by Albert Maysles and Kristen Nutile

MC - Can you talk about the archival footage in the film and how you were able to strike a balance between this footage and the new material that you shot? When dealing with so much material I imagine finding the balance can be difficult.

KN - We were interested in making a portrait about Sally, but in an hour I knew I couldn't capture her life completely. What I tried to do was capture part of her spirit. The archival material was a way of marking time and showing the breadth and longevity of her career. Sally is still so very active -- we knew we wanted to follow her over the course of a single year. There were certain dances that really spoke to me and that I felt were also reflective of what was going on in Sally's life at the time. For me, what was more difficult than dealing with the archival material was striking a balance between a biography and more of a strictly verite film.

MC - I was struck by how much the film is about the creative process-- the stern demands of work, practice, and concentration that lead up to the final performance.

KN - One of the things that I most admire about Al's work is that he has this incredible ability to film the creative process in such a way that it becomes as vital and alive as the finished performance itself. I did my best to try and achieve that in this film. The piece started out as a straight portrait and then after a few months of filming we decided that a process film would be the way to go.

AM - Well, with any documentary film, you try in the editing process to draw out what's best and most characteristic and you certainly have done that with this film. The editing is equally important to the filming. I appreciate the beautiful way that you've put it all together.

MC - Sally, what is more important for you-- the process leading up to the performance or the performance itself?

SG - The process is more interesting than the final performance for me as a choreographer. I have always been more interested in working with the dancers and the rehearsal process. I sometimes wish that would never end because when the piece is finally done I feel like there's always more and that it's been edited, just like film has been edited, and sometimes you're not so sure if you've made the right decisions. Because my process is so improvisational and the dancers have so many options and openings there are countless uncontrolled variables within each performance.

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AM - Sounds like you're describing the process by which we make a movie. A documentary film depends on all these random, uncontrolled, activities.

SG - That's why it was easy to work with Al as a cinematographer. In no way was I ever troubled by the camera being there. It just never even occurred to me. Sometimes I would say "Oh, they're back again" but you know, once we were working it never disturbed me in any way. It was just there and it was present. What also made it relatively easy was that Tanja is one of the dancers in the film and she is also the producer. I trust her as a dancer which made it very easy to know that if I'm going to let someone make a film about my life, I was in the hands of someone I could trust. That doesn't bar from this discussion for one minute that I had seen many of Al's films so knowing his work through the years that also made it easy.

MC - How was it working with Kristen? Did you supervise any of the editing?

SG - When I initially met Kristen, she showed me her latest short film LOSS and I was totally moved by it-- and I don't get moved very easily. I've been around for such a long time and I'm very discriminating. I don't like anything anymore (laughs). I saw this film and I found myself crying. I've watched it several times since and still the tears come, and I keep saying, "why am I always crying in the same place?" But there are the tears. I simply turned to Kristen at one point and said, "I'm going to trust you with this and I really don't want to be involved. I hope at some point you'll show it to me for accuracy in terms of dates and times and places and maybe if you need a little bit of input and you ask me, maybe I'll say something." So I thank all three of them for their interest in what I think is a film about my life— not just about one dance performance. I also feel like it's not just my film, I feel like it's their film, they've made it. So, thank you.

MC - Albert, The Judson Church Group and Maysles Films were both founded in 1962. One of the first projects that you and David worked on was Anastasia (1962) a portrait of an American ballerina in the Bolshoi Ballet. Since that film, you've filmed dance and music performance throughout your entire career. As a cinematographer, is there a different approach in filming performance?

AM - Well, it's very important to establish a trust with the people who are performing so you have open access to them no matter where you position yourself. I remember someone pointing

out in filming dance, be sure that a great deal of it is full body. I'm so used to filming people and being straight into their faces so that was a bit of an adjustment for me. Even a large part of the whole body isn't enough sometimes. Does that make sense?

SG - It makes sense. It's interesting because I recall watching you film and sitting there thinking, "Move the camera over there because here comes a dramatic moment, you're going to miss it!" There were moments when I wanted to be in charge of everything: "Al, please move your camera!" "Al, look what's happening, somebody's going to leap into the air and you're going to miss it!" So that was the only limitation I felt because of knowing what was about to happen as a choreographer.

MC - One of the things the film makes very clear is the close relationship between the worlds of film, dance, theater and literature in New York in the 60s and 70s. I'm wondering if you feel that this shared influence, this cross-pollination of ideas, is still present today in New York City?

SG - Well that's kind of a hard one for me answer, because although I still go to a lot of different performances, I don't know how the younger people are relating to each other. I know that there is more multimedia these days. The progress that has been made technically has made things very different so they can have monitors in the room, and they can have all kinds of things that weren't done then. I don't think there will ever be a time when artists in different mediums stop collaborating and sharing ideas.

MC - Sally, could we talk specifically about film? Since the beginning of your career, film has played a central role in your work, not only in terms of documenting your performances, but also in helping to expand upon them. Could you comment on your use of film?

SG - The films I co-directed were made as dance for camera. Even though I had worked on some of the material and used some of the material in a performance they were not a documentation of a specific dance per se. I chose to do them for camera and we had a full set up. They were all 16mm mm which meant that we certainly weren't shooting a lot of footage. There was always an editor and a composer so some of what went on in live dance went on in making the film itself.

MC - What was your motivation for joining the Judson Group? Were you consciously reacting against certain trends in modern dance or was it a more inductive attempt to push dance into untried territory?

SG - I think, the second half of how you described it is really more like the way it was. Everything was really moving along in the early sixties and it wasn't just dance of course. Merce Cunningham had pushed things forward in the 1950s and 1960s. By the early sixties, there was a new avant-garde coming into being influenced by people like John Cage with his ideas about chance and indeterminacy. We were all looking for new ways to make pieces, then came the Judson workshop, and out of the workshop came these new choreographers and their first performances. Some of their pieces were still very formal, but some of them were very different and new. Of course, the results weren't equally good, but they were all interesting because they broke all the rules. Forms were disappearing.

MC - Sally, in allowing yourself to be filmed in this way, what do you hope an audience might take away from seeing the film?

SG - I have to hope that since they're just showing excerpts of my pieces, that people might want to see the whole dance someday. That's what excites me about the film. The idea that an audience might be encountering my work for the first time.

AM - I didn't know anything of your work when I started filming and I was astounded at how little movement there was, but I eventually grew to understand and truly appreciate it. There are choreographers and dancers who know the techniques and who know the mechanics of it, and sadly to say, there is no soul to it. Its so astounding how soulful Sally's dances are. It really grabs you by the heart, and that's not always the case. Its true in other artistic forms: there are some architects who know everything about architecture but the building just doesn't have a life of its own.

KN - You had said something really beautiful before about appreciating the stillness in the work?

AM - Yes, yes.

KN - And how one doesn't think of dance as having moments of stillness.

AM - Well, in a sense, its like photography. A still photograph can be more powerful than an entire movie.

MC - Kristen are there any other film projects that you're currently working on and what do you hope for audiences to take away from this film?

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KN - At the moment, I don't have a film project in the works. I'm expecting a baby girl in July so that'll keep me busy. I think I'd like to make a short black and white film almost like a little poem. With this film, ultimately I wanted to make a film that appeals to both dancers and to general audiences. I'm really hoping that people take away from this film just how amazing and strong an artist Sally is; someone who has stuck true to her vision over many, many years.

SG - That's exactly what I hoped the film would have done-- that it would reflect all the time I spent involved in dance, never compromising and doing my job the way I wanted to do it. It didn't become international, I never traveled much, but here I am in one the biggest cities in the world, the big dance mecca, and I am in the middle of all of it-- just this independent artist working in this small space in this uncompromising studio. I'm still so proud of all of this - that I've stuck to this singular vision and on occasion I can move it from here to there.