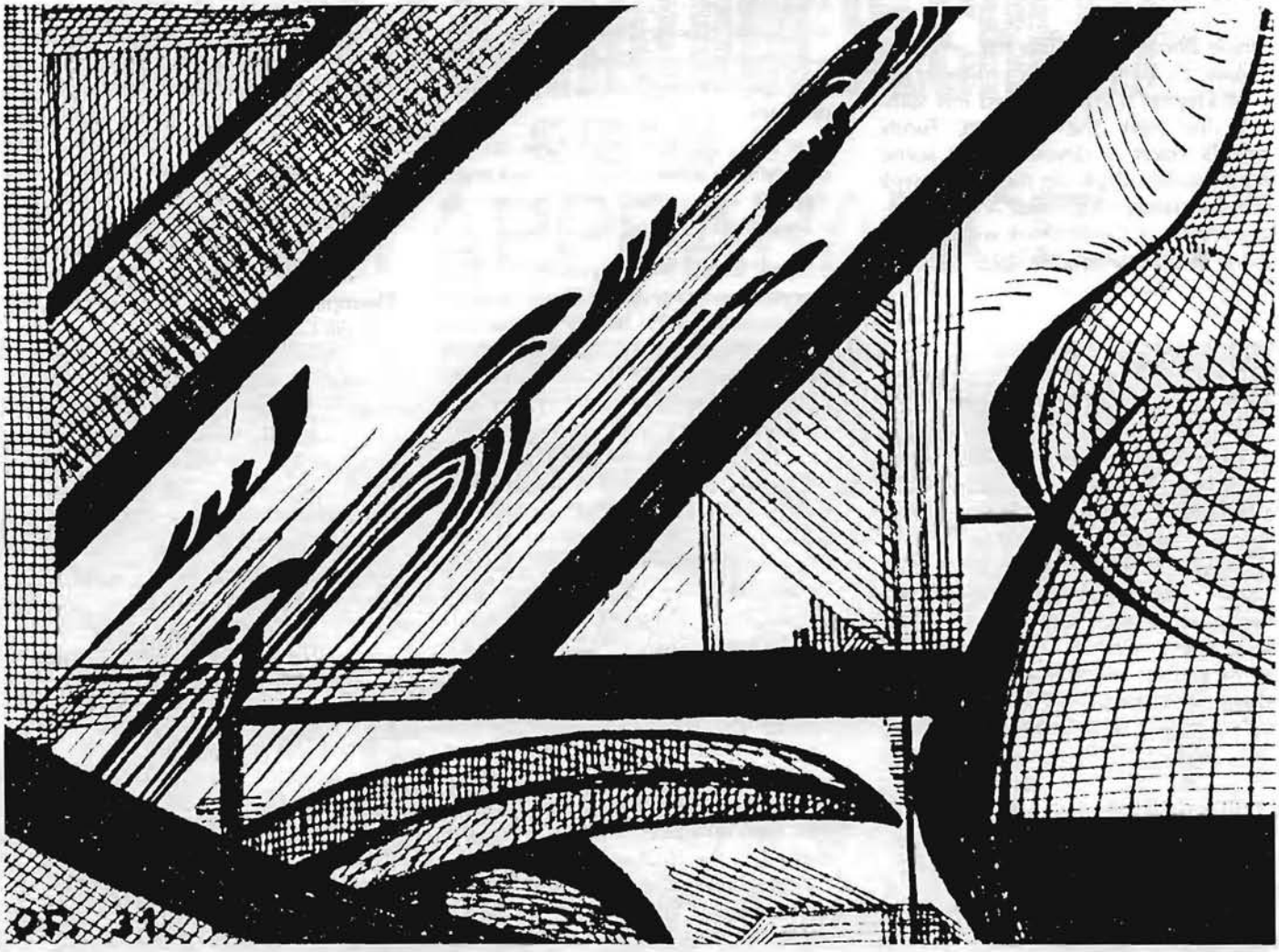

*An "abstract" love letter mailed from Oskar to Elfriede in 1931.*

# Elfriede!

## On the Road with Mrs. Oskar Fischinger

**By JOHN CANEMAKER**

*January 13, 1977.* Elfriede settled down in the back seat of the taxi that was hurtling through the late-afternoon Manhattan traffic. The sun was winter-bright and unusually warm and so she unbuttoned an outercoat made of what looked like blond yak curls, revealing her beloved traveling pants-suit of purple corduroy.

Even with our crazed Israeli cabdriver attempting to leap over the cars on the Triborough Bridge, the trip to Kennedy Airport would take almost half an hour, cutting dangerously close to Elfriede's scheduled departure time for Hollywood and home. But, surrounded by several large canvas bags of heavy film cans and reels, and portfolios of dozens of valuable drawings and paintings — all created by her late husband, Oskar Fischinger — Elfriede sat there, relaxed, grinning like a jolly Teutonic Buddha and with characteristic ebullience talking a mile a minute in a German accent as tasty as sauerbraten.

"Oh, Chawn! I'm tso gladt you could come oudt to Kenned-tee wit mee. I have been pushzing this ball und itz sznow-balling. Budt, itz sznowballing because Oskar's work is Oskar's work — it is goodt! And what is goodt, after all, stays."

The great and good artistic legacy of Oskar Fischinger, fiercely independent champion of the absolute film of abstract experimentation, might not have reached as many young people, or it might have built its new audience much more slowly in a less dynamic way — it would not have "snowballed" — were it not for the passionate promotion of the work by Fischinger's 66-year-old widow, Elfriede.

She was in New York this one particular day lining up 1977 lecture/screening dates for what would prove to be a banner year in the public's awareness of Oskar Fischinger and his art. The day before, I had picked her up at Kennedy

after a mutual friend phoned and read to me a terse nightletter from Elfriede in Europe: "Please advise John Canemaker of my arrival."

"I think she wants you to meet her plane," said the friend.

Part of Elfriede's considerable charm is her aggressive belief that people, even casual acquaintances (as I was at that time) will provide help when she needs it — and she is not afraid to ask for it by direct or indirect means.

She *needed* help. Her baggage was, as always, considerable. Film cans, portfolios of press clippings, photos, and artwork, as well as her personal luggage, were her only traveling companions to the "Second Festival International Du Film Abstract," held December 2-5, 1976, in Montpellier, France. She attended a special tribute to Oskar Fischinger and while there she managed to book her husband's films into the Melkweg Cinema in Amsterdam on January 7-9.

"Tzey went wild over Oskar," she reported jubilantly, as she dove into the bags to pull out posters and program brochures.

Another triumph, but Elfriede being Elfriede, it was not without problems. Bad luck always seemed to run parallel with the good in Oskar's life and the same goes for his widow. On this European trip Elfriede's purse was stolen in Amsterdam; in the purse were gold medals awarded at Montpellier and original negatives of stills of Oskar at the Disney studio in 1939. Irreplaceable and now gone.

She also tripped, fell, and chipped her front tooth in France. "I can never szmile again," she giggled, grinning ear-to-ear and pushing her chubby cheeks into crinkled masses that pressed her impish eyes into slits, making her face look like the theatrical mask of comedy.

"Well is as well is," she waxed philosophically about the yin and yang of her colorful life. "Life goes on satisfactorily, when you are content to accept it and hail every day that is given to you."

Elfriede's formidable energy is of the happy variety at the moment; depending on circumstances, however, she can channel that energy immediately into one of several different directions. Jealousy, suspicion, fear or despair, among other feelings, can come pouring forth in Wagnerian proportions as absolute and uncompromising as her late husband's films. Her anger is especially striking, particularly when she is defending a point about Oskar and/or his work. Elfriede loves a good fight! As with all of her chameleon-like changes of temperament, her anger is a *pure* distillation of emotion — an angry defense worthy of the valkyrie who carried slain heroes to Valhalla.

Since Oskar Fischinger's death in 1967, Mrs. Fischinger has collected, catalogued and preserved material related to Oskar's work in film and painting. In 1970, she met filmmaker/poet/critic William Moritz, who has been of enormous help with the material, which includes over 200 cans of film and hundreds of letters and notes, as well as still photographs and press clippings, most of the drawings and cels for his animated abstract films, nearly 700 oil and pastel paintings, and various inventions and camera and film apparatus.

It is a Herculean task that continues at the "Fischinger Archives," which is what she calls her house in the Hollywood hills. ("You should come out and see the Archives, Chawn. Der is so-o-o much!") When she is not picking through the chronicles of Oskar, Elfriede picks and chooses which film festivals, universities, or museums will screen a Fischinger retrospecive.

She selects the best offer in terms of showcasing Oskar's work and in terms of financial arrangements; for, sadly, Oskar's legacy did not include financial support for his widow and five children. The last 15 years of the artist's life were marked by sporadic film and painting commissions and deteriorating health, with the attendant doctor and hospital bills. Elfriede, in a letter to me, once compared Oskar with one of his peers: "How much money and/or glory must have meant to him and how little it always meant to Oskar. (Much too little, sorry to say.)"

She always charges a fee for screening the films, she told me recently, because she believes "institutions are there for artists, artists are not there for institutions!" In 1972, when La Cinematheque Francaise in Paris extended an invitation to Mrs. Fischinger-and-films, she was warned not to ask the institute's founder Henri Langlois for a fee.

"Then he will not have Oskar Fischinger. I'm not making any exceptions," was her reply. A private meeting between Elfriede and the stout Langlois was hastily arranged.

Langlois' greeting to her was, "Madame Fischinger, business *c'est la guerre*?

"Yep," Elfriede smiled. "Business *c'est la guerre*!"

"How much do you want?"

"Fifty dollars. And you can give it to me in any currency or you can pay my hotel bill. I don't care."

Langlois pulled five ten-dollar bills out of his pocket, gave them to Elfriede and said, "Please don't tell anybody I paid for your show."

Another source of income is generated by the sales and rental of over 30 Fischinger films which can be obtained through Elfriede herself or through distributors such as Pyramid Films, Creative Film Society, and the Museum of Modern Art. She also put together a small "film-flip booklet" made from copies of 72 drawings, or six seconds, from Oskar's *Mutoscope Reel No. 1* (1945). The booklet of starbursts and swirling comets sells for a couple of dollars wherever Elfriede appears. It helps, as the lectures, film sales and rentals have helped her to get by in the last 10 years. ("People should know it is difficult to live and save films with no money. I have never gotten a grant from the A. F. I., or anybody else, to do this work.")

The taxi was now inching through homeward-bound rush-hour traffic on the Grand Central Parkway, past dreary row houses near Flushing Meadow Park, site of the 1964 New York World's Fair. To pass the time, I asked Elfriede about her background, where she comes from and how she met Oskar. She seemed genuinely surprised that I would want to know such things. Usually people want to know just about Oskar.

"I was born in Gelnhausen, near Frankfurt," she began slowly. "In the same house as Oskar. In the same bedroom, but not in the same furniture because Oskar was born there 10 years earlier, in 1900."

Elfriede and Oskar, it turns out, were first cousins; her father and his father were the brothers Fischinger and both men worked as pharmacists. "Oskar remembered me as a baby," said Elfriede, "but I only have a recollection of him when he was 19. He wrote a very

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*John Canemaker is the author of* The Animated Raggedy Ann & Andy, *published by Bobbs-Merrill, and the producer/distributor of the films* Remembering Winsor McCay *and* Otto Messmer and Felix the Cat.

*Oskar's family, c. 1922. In the top row, left to right, are Oskar, Joseph, Maria, Otto, and Karl; in the front row are Hans and the Fischinger parents.*

idealistic poem in my school album and I still have it."

By 1919 Oskar had been educated with a scientific-technical training. He loved music and had worked as an organ-builder's apprentice. After World War I he became an architectural draftsman and then an engineer in a turbine factory.

In 1920, Oskar attended a literary club in Frankfurt and met Dr. Bernhard Diebold, who was impressed with Fischinger's abstract drawings of the emotional dynamics of Shakespeare's dramas and encouraged the young man to experiment with abstract filmmaking. Fischinger's films, even his experiments, were extraordinary from the first. He tested abstract cut-outs moving in rhythmic patterns and he tried animating representational figures evolving into fantastic shapes lit from below the animation stand; his earliest experimental films were "wax experiments" created on a wax-slicing machine of his invention which allowed successive slices of a block of mixed multi-colored wax to be photographed frame-by-frame.

In August 1922 Fischinger moved to Munich and full-time filmmaking. In order to finance his personal films, he produced with partners several representational cartoons as well as multiple-projection light shows. Financial and personal troubles forced Fischinger to leave Munich; in June 1927 he walked to Berlin carrying his heavy 35mm camera and taking single-frame shots of the German countryside and its farmers and shepherds along the way.

He had trouble finding work at first in Berlin but eventually, in July 1928, he went to work on Fritz Lang's science fiction feature, *Frau Im Mond,* creating special effects animation and rocket models.

Over the next three years Fischinger produced a brilliant series of black and white *Studies* — abstract animation tightly synchronized to jazz and classical music — which played throughout Europe, Japan, and America. These short films were extremely successful and made Oskar famous and a filmmaker in demand.

Meanwhile, back in Gelnhausen, Elfriede attended a lyceum, studied the lute and the piano, learned to read and speak English, and attended two and a half years of art school. Some of her art work was published and exhibited in Berlin, and a group of art students was invited to the exhibition.

"My father gave me a letter and said I should visit this cousin in Berlin," Elfriede recalled. "We already knew Oskar had worked on the Fritz Lang film, but I should see what he was making, what his studio was like because he didn't answer anybody's letters and I should report back and tell his mother what he was doing. So that was how I came to see the 'Wizard of Friederichstrasse' as he was becoming known in the Berlin film industry. If my father had known *what would happen,* he would never have given me that letter, that's for su-u-u-rrre," she laughs.

"Things" happened, as things sometimes do between dewy-eyed, volatile 19-year-old art students and dynamic, volatile 29-year-old wizards. "Within four days, I decided my whole life. I couldn't think Oskar out of my life. Even so after four days I had to go back. They all noticed. They couldn't understand that I liked Berlin so much that I would shed tears over it."

Elfriede corresponded with Oskar through letters he sent to one of her school chums. After some months Oskar phoned Elfriede's father and asked if she could come to work at his studio in Berlin as the demand for the *Studies* was such that he needed a small staff to help prepare them. Permission was granted by Elfriede's unsuspecting parents and the lovers were reunited.

"Today nobody minds any more. But in those days it was outrageous! I think we lived together almost three years and I became pregnant." When their parents found out what had been going on, Elfriede remembered, "That's when the ceiling came down!"

Elfriede consulted a geneticist who told her that marriage between first cousins meant risking the health of their future children. But it was discovered that the odds were in their favor because no chronic diseases could be found in the family genealogy. Oskar and Elfriede were married in a civil ceremony on November 30, 1932, and, for their parents, in a church ceremony in late January the next year. (All of their five children were subsequently born healthy and normal.)

For the little girl from Gelnhausen it was quite an adjustment learning to live with the mercurial Oskar; his reputation was steadily growing, and eventually he would be thought of as one of the major figures in the great European avant garde of the 1920's and early '30's. At times he genuinely enjoyed the domestic joys of *frau, kind* and *heim;* but it was also true that for the most part, for Oskar Fischinger there was his work, which came first and foremost, and then there was everything — and everybody — else.

"There were days when he locked himself in. That usually was weekends when I pestered him. I maybe wanted to go to a lake swimming or to do this or that — you know how wives are! He

would lock himself in. I could do anything but I knew after two or three tries it was absolutely of no avail. So I occupied myself or went by myself, and later with the children, and let Oskar work. He kept that pattern up all throughout his life, even in Hollywood. Sundays he was perfectly happy when we would all go away and leave him alone."

Oskar's regimen was once described by William Moritz as demonstrating a "profound mysticism":

> . . . He lived constantly by some sort of astrological principles — working and abstaining according to moon cycles and other portents. For certain periods he stayed awake only at nights, sitting on hilltops in meditation contemplating the moon. He locked himself away . . . for hours to practice yoga. He moved his bed around periodically to compensate for magnetic currents in the earth, and to realign his own energy flow in various relationships with it. He may have been somewhat psychic . . . he believed in the validity of his visions . . . he studied Ms. Blavatsky's theosophy and Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy and Yogananda's vendanta . . . Because of several tragic experiences with friendly rivals and collaborators . . . Fischinger developed an almost paranoid suspicion of other artists . . . he rarely went to other artists' shows . . . he seems to have been relatively blind to the possible merits of work different from his own . . . He was relatively shy and reserved in personal relationships, but he could also be a brilliant and witty conversationalist among friends . . . he seems to have behaved radically differently to various people and to the same people at different times . . .

No, life with Oskar "was not easy" even from the beginning. Elfriede looked out the taxi's window. "Anybody who is a creative genius, I believe, you cannot tie them down to hours. I kept hours, I got up regularly, but Oskar would sometimes work into the night, all night long and you just had to let him sleep. And sometimes he would be way ahead of the girls who filled in the charcoal on the drawings."

Elfriede also worked filling in the dark surfaces on the animation drawings used in the *Studies* and she supervised the work of three young women and Oskar's brother, Hans. "When I came to stay I started to organize and clean the studio. Berlin Friederichstrasse was all old buildings, infested with bedbugs and stuff. We were on the fourth floor so there was a lot there. I painted and lacquered the wooden floor. I really worked hard because I'm a Virgo. I had to have it just to my liking. I painted the whole studio in soft lilac and yellow hues. Very beautiful. I also switched the filling in of the drawings from charcoal to watercolors because my knuckles got raw from the charcoal dust.

"Sometimes Oskar would get behind and there wouldn't be enough work in the morning for the girls and this was a problem for me. I had to keep them busy, so I would push Oskar, 'Would you please? . . . ' Sometimes he 'Please wouldn't, period!' "

It seems to have been a marriage between a determinedly domestic *hausfrau* and an intuitive mystic, a match not exactly made in *Himmel.* Well, Elfriede loved Oskar and that, to her, was that. She would support him in his work during his best-of-times in Berlin and during the worst-of-times that came soon enough in America. Tenacious and doughty, Elfriede would adjust to Oskar's artistic temperament *and* she would make for him a home and a family, too.

With money coming in from screenings of the *Studies,* Fischinger began experimenting with drawn synthetic sound, and he collaborated with Bela Gaspar on a three-color film and camera. His first color film using this process (named Gasparcolor) was *Kreise (Circles),* completed in December, 1933; this film and his two subsequent color films, *Muratti Marches On* (1934) and *Composition in Blue* (1935) won Fischinger extravagant popular and critical acclaim.

Elfriede participated in the making of each of these films: she painted tempera colors (and helped choose hues) on the 1,000-plus animation drawings in *Kreise;* on the advertising film for Muratti, which featured platoons of marching cigarettes, she inserted straight pins into wooden cigarettes that were stuck into a turntable of kaolin-wax and loose, dyed sawdust and were moved frame-by-frame by Oskar; on *Composition in Blue,* another three-dimensional pixillation film, Elfriede again assisted Oskar and she declared, "It was our real baby together — we worked both on that. Oskar's inventiveness, together with mine — we did a lot!"

*Composition in Blue* won major prizes at Brussels and Venice in 1935, attracting world-wide attention. One day Elfriede took a phone call from Paris. "It was the Paramount Studio branch. They asked if Oskar was *the* Fischinger who made the cigarette film and *Composition in Blue.* Oskar then got other phone calls from the Berlin Paramount people.

"And then, there was New Year's evening when we were home. And his voice came out of the bathroom, he was sitting in the bathtub. I was busy in the kitchen, we had the doors open. And he said, 'Elfriede, you want to go to Hollywood?' I said, 'Oskar, what kind of joke is that now?' thinking it was a New Year's prank. 'No, no, no. All you have to do is say yes and you'll go to Hollywood.'

"He had a contract. We should read it and should he sign it? We talked another few days. He couldn't read English, not a word. I had learned English in school and I started to translate it and I said, 'It sounds aw-full-ee good!' "

The chance to go to work in America must have seemed very appealing to Fischinger at that time for a couple of reasons: the increasingly powerful Nazi government considered abstract art "degenerate" and life was becoming difficult for all such artists. Secondly, the Fischingers had just suffered a personal tragedy, the accidental death of their second baby son. Oskar's grief was such that he was finding it difficult to work.

Now America beckoned, offering Fischinger what seemed a perfect opportunity to escape problems in Germany and to develop his art to even greater heights; perhaps the vast resources, technical and financial, of the movie industry in Hollywood would allow him to realize his long-cherished dream of creating an abstract feature-length animated film.

Paramount rushed Fischinger out of Berlin within two weeks after he signed the contract. Elfriede remained behind

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*Oskar Fischinger's films are authorized for sale and rent from Pyramid Films, Box 1048, Santa Monica, Calif. 90406, (213) 828-7577. Most of Fischinger's sound films are available for rental from the Creative Film Society, 7237 Canby, Reseda, Calif., (213) 881-3887, and selected Fischinger films can be rented from Cecile Starr, 50 West 96th Street, New York, N. Y. 10025.*

*Mrs. Elfriede Fischinger is available as a lecturer with programs of her husband's films. She can be addressed in care of the Fischinger Studio, 8925 Wonderland Park Avenue, Los Angeles, Calif. 90046.*

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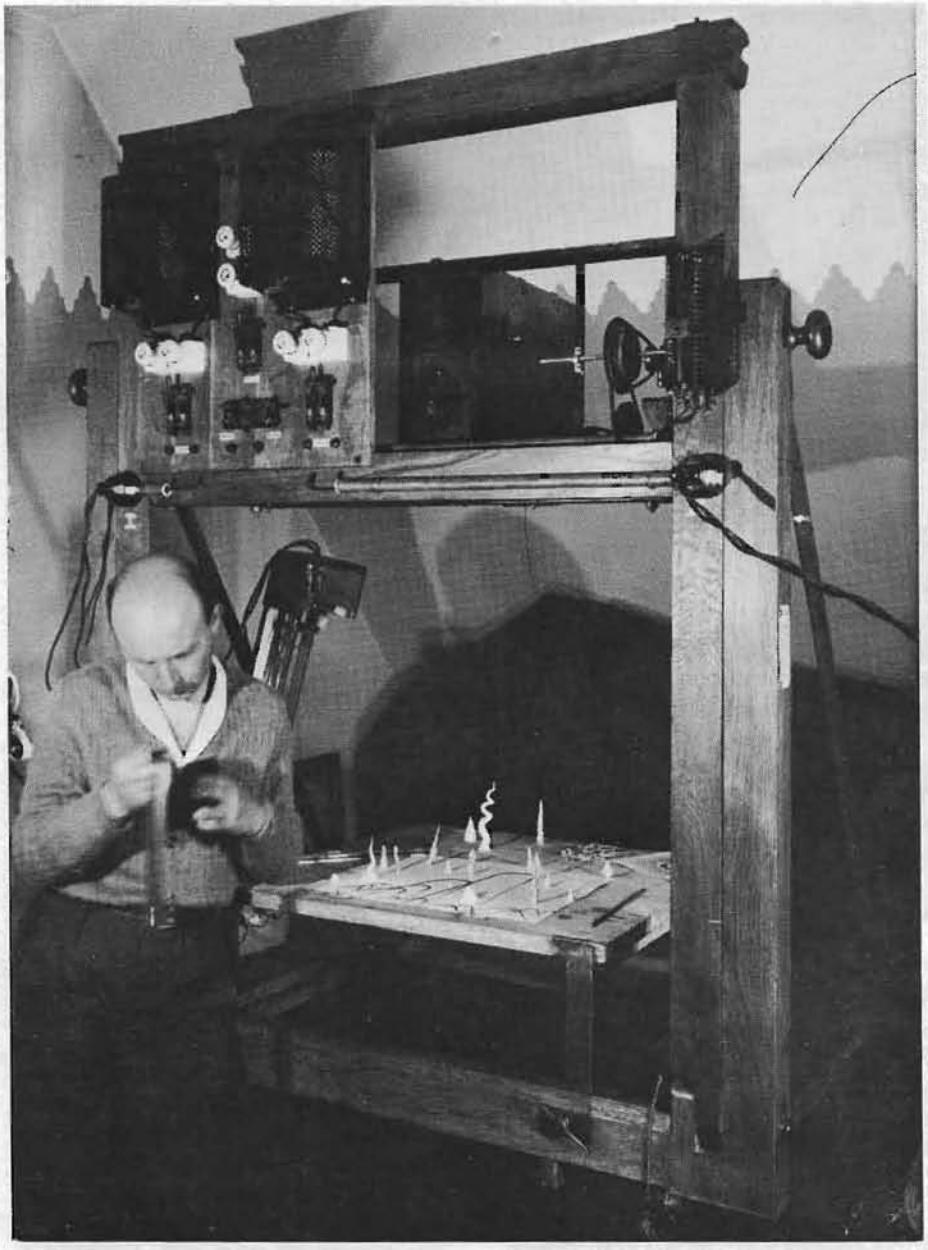


*Oskar in Munich, c. 1924.*

for three months to liquidate the business; in May 1936 she and her first son, Karl, sailed for America to join Oskar in Hollywood.

The taxi finally reached Kennedy Airport; after checking in, we were amazed to find there was time to drink a coffee before Elfriede's flight left. We listened for a bit to a tape cassette on her recorder of Bill Moritz reviewing a film on his L. A. Pacifica radio show, *Moritz on Film* ("Bill has such a good voice," she remarked).

She made me promise to send her first copies of a special animation issue of *Millimeter* magazine that I was coordinating; it would contain an article on Oskar at Disney's, written by Moritz. The piece was titled, "Fischinger at Disney, or Oskar in the Mousetrap" and it made Elfriede laugh: "That's such a funny title. Oskar always used to joke that *I* was 'the mousetrap' and he was 'the mouse' because I caught him!"

She gave me a quick hug and a kiss. I said I would see a lot of her and Bill when they hit New York in April on their cross-country "grand tour."

She juggled a couple of large carry-on bags while striding with determination down the long, white, red-carpeted hallway, her hair floating above her head like a fuzzy cloud. She didn't look back or wave, but grew smaller and smaller in the distance, then abruptly turned a corner and disappeared.

*Excerpts from a February 25, 1977 letter from the author to John Musilli, producer of CBS-TV's* Camera Three:

Dear John:

Enclosed please find a special issue of *Millimeter* devoted to animation, which I coordinated and edited. I call to your attention the article on page 25: "Fischinger at Disney, or Oskar in the Mousetrap."

The article covers one brief moment in the long, difficult career of a great film artist and I show it to you because it contains a good capsulization of Fischinger and is an example of what happened to him throughout his life in America until his death in 1967. I think the films and life of Oskar Fischinger would be excellent program material for *Camera Three*.

Fischinger sought to create "statements in pure form" in his abstract films, but he used music as a compositional underpinning, not because he wanted to "illustrate music" (as in *Fantasia*) but because music acted as an aid toward the understanding and acceptance of abstract images . . . If you wish I can arrange for you to see some of Fischinger's films at a private screening at MOMA (Museum of Modern Art). . . In fact, on April 7 MOMA will be featuring an all-Fischinger program, with Mrs. Elfriede Fischinger as guest speaker. Oskar's widow is a friend of mine and she is a bustling, delightful German woman who has been traveling the world since Oskar's death screening her late husband's films, encouraging appreciation of them, and perpetuating the genius of Fischinger — keeping his art alive. She is not wealthy, in fact, has very little money and depends on film sales and rentals and film festivals for most income . . . She should definitely be interviewed on-camera and perhaps a show could be built around her struggle . . .

Let me know how you feel about all this . . .

*Excerpts from a March 9, 1977, letter from the author to Elfriede Fischinger:*

Dear Elfriede,

*Camera Three* is a prestigious CBS-TV program of the arts which has in the past presented half-hour documentaries about Hans Richter, George Dunning, the Whitneys, and the Warner Brothers' cartoon directors (which I helped write and was on-camera host for).

Last week I sent to *Camera Three* producer/director John Musilli and writer Stephan Chodorov a copy of the *Millimeter* article and the *Film Culture* piece on Oskar. Today I arranged for them a screening at the Museum of Modern Art of some of Oskar's black and white and color films.

I am pleased to tell you that as a result *Camera Three* is interested in presenting a television program about the life and films of Oskar Fischinger. Not only that, but they

wish to interview you (and probably Bill Moritz) on film during your upcoming visit to New York and insert your comments into the half-hour documentary *hommage*, along with excerpts from the films and still photographs. They will phone you next week to discuss this proposed show.

Elfriede, this would be the first national TV presentation of Oskar and his *oeuvre;* it would be very important in terms of the number of people you will be reaching . . . you must understand, however, there is not a lot of money in this for you. *Camera Three* is a low-budget show, but they will pay you a fee for appearing on-camera and will also pay for the use of excerpts from Oskar's films.

I strongly urge you to cooperate with these gentlemen and help them put this program together . . . If all this works out, you could possibly film your interview in New York during the week of April 4 or after you return through New York on your way back from Halifax the week of April 25 . .. Good luck, Elfriede. This could be a great year for spreading the word about Oskar Fischinger!

*April 6.* Elfriede and Bill have arrived from California in a small camper truck packed with a mattress, blankets and personal luggage, as well as the usual Fischinger archival materials, e.g., films, photos, drawings, press clippings, and so on. They also brought with them a young friend from L. A. , Larry Cuba, a West Coast independent filmmaker who later that night, after dinner at my place, would screen for us a clip of some digital computer graphics he animated for a new film being released that summer, called *Star Wars.*

Elfriede, Bill, Larry and I had first met the summer before at the Ottawa International Animation Festival. Ottawa presented a marvelous Fischinger retrospective that revealed Oskar's working processes, and Bill and Elfriede charmed the bilingual audience by attempting to comment on the films and *"le process de travail"* in French and English like some marvelously odd vaudeville team. At the final night's awards ceremony, they attended both dressed in long flowing robes, looking like genial potentates from a distant, peaceful world. I liked them immediately and after Canada they passed through New York and had dinner at my apartment where we screened all the films they showed at Ottawa, and more, into the wee hours.

The Ottawa Festival was the first time I had seen a good-sized representation of Fischinger's work and I was profoundly impressed. My first and only exposure to a Fischinger film prior to Ottawa was a chance viewing of

*Elfriede in Berlin, 1932; photos by Oskar.*

*Allegretto,* which appeared without warning one evening as "filler" on New York City's educational TV station. "And now," said the female announcer's voice, "a short film from Germany," as perfunctory and inaccurate an introduction to a work of art as one could hope to encounter. I recall being stunned by the four-minute film and when the filmmaker's name was announced after the showing, I dove into anthologies and film books trying to find some information on Fischinger.

Gaps in my, and a lot of people's knowledge about Oskar and his films were filled more than adequately by an exhaustive monograph on the life and career of Oskar Fischinger by William Moritz, published in 1974 in Jonas Mekas' quarterly devoted to avant garde film, *Film Culture.* Moritz's treatise, prepared with the "tireless energy and boundless enthusiasm" of Elfriede, is superbly detailed and has certainly done its part in "snowballing" recent public interest in Fischinger. Here, for example, is Moritz writing on the first film Oskar worked on in the United States, *Allegretto:* "The colors are California colors — the pinks and turquoise and browns of desert sky and sand, the orange of poppies, and the green of avocados. The figures work themselves up into a brilliant and vigorous conclusion, bursting with skyscrapers and kaleidoscopes of stars/diamonds, and every facet of the chic Hollywood design of the thirties. It is a celebration, plain and simple, of the American life style, seen fresh and clean through the exuberant eyes of an immigrant."

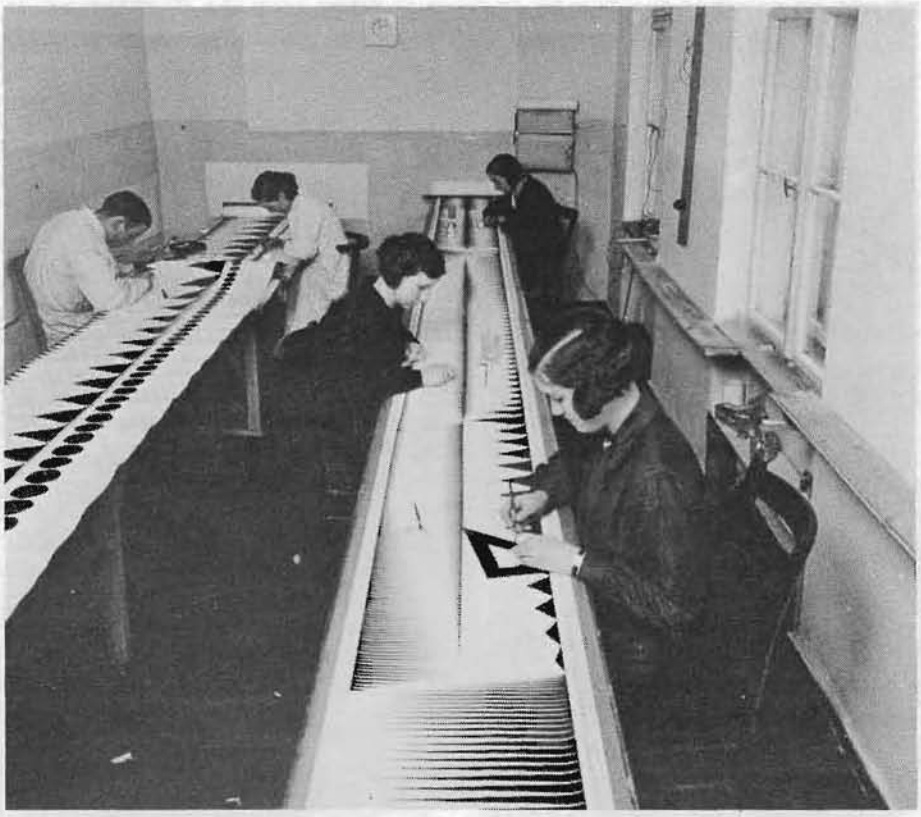
The waiter from the CBS commissary wheeled a cart containing a large pot of coffee, cups and saucers, spoons, sugar and cream, into the large, white screening room. John Musilli and Stephan Chodorov of *Camera Three* were talking and selecting material for the Fischinger TV show with Elfriede and Bill.

Moritz is 35, prematurely bald but with a full, dark mustache and beard; he has worked with Mrs. Fischinger, sorting and studying her late husband's work, since 1970. Moritz explained to the CBS men that *Allegretto* was made at Paramount, where Oskar lasted only six months. The film, as we know it, was never used by the studio, but a black and white version with tacky live-action overlays was substituted for use in *The Big Broadcast of 1937.* Five years later, Fischinger, with the aid of a grant, bought from Paramount all his original cels, soundtracks, and test material, and he re-photographed the short and titled it *Allegretto.*

"Fischinger's independent temperament and language difficulties made it extremely hard for him to work in studio situations," said Moritz in his soothing, deep, reasonable voice.

"We were pretty unhappy in Hollywood, especially Oskar," chirped up Elfriede. "His words were he felt 'like a tree pulled out of the ground and strown on the desert.' "

John and Stephan looked at each other and at me. Unbeknownst to Bill or Elfriede, this meeting was their audition to see if they could be utilized on-



*Fischinger's Berlin studio in 1932, with employees working on synthetic sound drawings. Hans and Elfriede Fischinger are at the left-hand table.*

camera. Producer Musilli was pleased and later he discussed their broadcasting qualities: "Moritz gives us the facts articulately and Elfriede adds flavor, a sense of history." I was asked to emcee the show, ask the questions and keep the show moving forward through the mountain of material that would have to be covered in 30 minutes.

A taping date was firmed up for May 16 and another meeting was planned to sharpen the program on May 4. Bill and Elfriede happily zipped off to edit films onto large reels for tomorrow's two-part Fischinger show at the Museum of Modern Art.

*April 8.* On this evening I have arranged for Elfriede and Bill to show a few films to the East Coast branch of ASIFA, an international group of "individuals interested in animation." The MOMA show the night before was nice but not very well attended. Could it be that because of a Fischinger show only last February at New York's Film Forum in Soho (a sell-out for each of its two weekends), Fischinger is suffering from slight over-exposure in New York City?

There was the tiniest of gatherings assembled for the screening/talk in the spacious Magno screening room in the MGM building on Sixth Avenue. "It's cause of Good Friday," remarked a friend, supplying a religious alibi for the no-shows that I would never have thought of. In any case, Bill and Elfriede answered all questions with patience and warmth; they and Larry Cuba left that night in the camper for three weeks of screenings in Canada, from whence Larry returned to the coast. They had collected two parking tickets in three days.

*"Movie Journal" by Jonas Mekas in* The Soho Weekly News, *May 12, 1977:*

. . . But, ah! one bit of good news. Elfriede Fischinger and Bill Moritz stopped in town. They have been traveling through the country with the work of Oskar Fischinger. I don't have to tell you about Fischinger. His place in the history of cinema has long been established. I should only express my admiration for these two people, Elfriede Fischinger and Bill Moritz, for their immense dedication to Oskar Fischinger's work. We should be grateful to them for restoring and preserving Fischinger's work, and now, making it available to us all . . .

*May 3.* Back from Canada, Elfriede and Bill arrived in town in time for dinner at my place and the three of us rode in the cab of their cluttered camper down to Wooster Street in Soho for their show at Jonas Mekas' Anthology Film Archives. Mekas, who has been referred to as the patron saint of the underground cinema, has insisted on a screening of the *complete* Fischinger filmography *in chronological order:* tonight we will see *all* the black and white films and tomorrow *all* the color. A rare and glorious feast!

But there were so few partakers of the banquet. A light spring rain and gloomy skies underscored Mekas' mood. He watched an audience of 10 meander in slowly and he seriously considered canceling the show. A few more people arrived, friends of Elfriede and Bill. Joseph Kennedy, with whom I share my apartment, showed up as did Mike Sporn, a member on the board of ASIFA East with me, and a Fischinger fan. There were a handful of independent filmmakers, but no members of New York's independent-animators community showed up. (Disinterest? Laziness? Overfamiliarity with the films? Perhaps. For me, Fischinger is like the sun when it sets — I can find new and ever more beautiful things in it everytime I watch.)

It turned out to be a happy, very informal screening, with Bill and Elfriede calling out comments in the dark between films or during the silent films. Mekas sat with his wife and child, a curly-haired little girl who burbled happily and made her own comments throughout. There were a few questions after, but the long show had left everyone spiritually sated but physically tired and hungry, so the queries were short and soon everyone left.

Joe and I asked Bill and Elfriede if they would need a place to stay, adding that they would be more than welcome to share our large apartment on the upper West Side for the duration. "No, thank you," said Elfriede, "we be all right. We are sleeping in the camper with the art. It is parked right in front of the Anthology and we'll be quite safe in Soho."

Poor California innocents. I said that if they changed their minds they shouldn't hesitate to call me.

*May 4.* The call came early the next morning. "Could we take you up on your offer, Chawn?" said Elfriede.

It seems Soho is not any safer than any other part of Manhattan. Around two that morning some opportunistic miscreant broke into the cab of the little camper and was about to steal everything in sight when the voice of the valkyrie was heard coming from the back of the vehicle, screaming inflammatory epithets. Having routed the rascal, Elfriede and Bill stood uneasy guard

over Oskar's legacy until dawn — a pair of weaponless gypsy sentries.

Outside my apartment house Joe, Elfriede, Bill and I formed a combination assembly-line/relay-race to empty the camper parked in front of the building and to drag its contents into the lobby, up in the elevator, down a hallway and finally into my apartment, which was fated to be in disarray for the next two weeks. Elfriede would occupy a convertible sofa in the living room and Bill settled on a small cot in my studio.

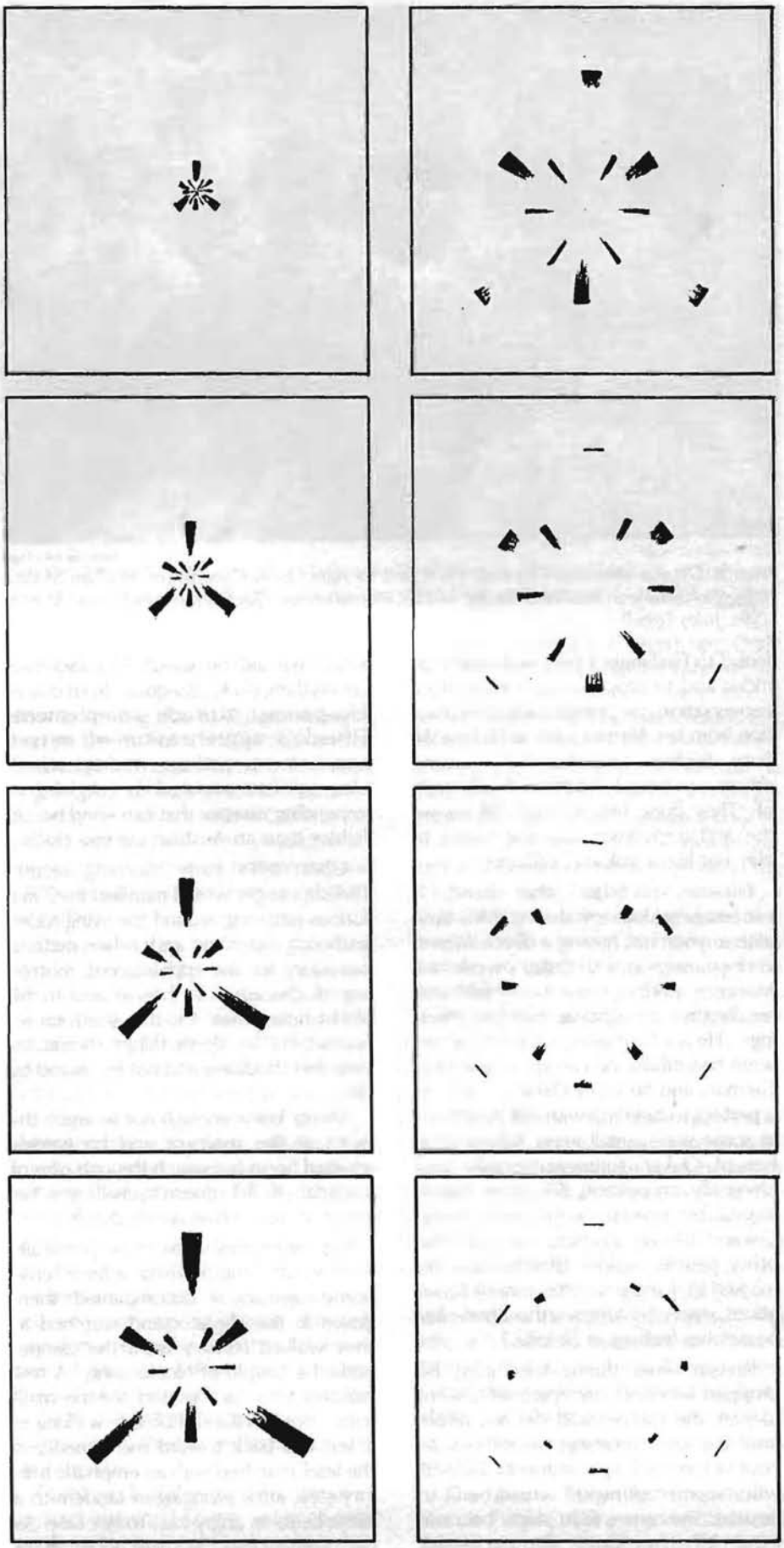
At our meeting at CBS later that morning, John Musilli unveiled a blueprint of "The Fischinger Set." The area where our taped interviews would take place consisted of an interlocking platform and half a cyclorama painted in the primary hues and circular design of Oskar's *Kreise*. Delighted by the classy treatment *Camera Three* was giving the show, Elfriede asked for the blueprint "to add to the Archives."

"I had a feeling you might want it for that," smiled John as he handed it over. Elfriede insisted on certain things being written into her contract, money things and receiving a cassette tape of the entire show "for the Archives." A running gag at the taping would be that anything that wasn't tied down on the set would end up in the Fischinger Archives.

The screening of the color films that evening went well; there were a few more people attending besides the Fischinger loyalists. After the show, over burgers and beer at the Broom Street Bar, Elfriede and Bill complained about the parking situation in New York (they now had five tickets!) and then they began to pick up on an old argument about illustrated sound and whether it is important that Oskar was or was not the first to create synthetic soundtracks. Bill said being first was not important and Elfriede disagreed loudly.

The tensions of traveling together for such a long period and working so closely with each other were beginning to surface between Bill and Elfriede. They know each other's sensitive areas well and this tour, with its constant pressures for preparation and performance, had brought their strengths, weaknesses and vulnerabilities into sharp relief.

Oskar Fischinger harbored a silent resentment against certain filmmakers who he felt duplicated or laid claim to his ideas and film techniques. Bill knows these angry feelings have been trans-



*Successive frames from* Study No. 7 *by Oskar Fischinger.*

Photo by Jules Engel

*At the Ottawa animation festival, 1976, left to right: John Canemaker, William Moritz, Elfriede Fischinger, Louise Beaudet of La Cinematheque Quebecoise, and Irene Maryan (Mrs. Jules Engel).*

ferred to Fischinger's widow through osmosis and to drop certain names into a conversation can provoke a violent reaction from her. Names such as Stokowski, Bute, Richter and Alexeieff, among others, can bring forth from Elfriede wails of "They done him wrong!" Bill knows this and sometimes uses the names to play her like a volcanic calliope.

Elfriede, on the other hand, is extremely jealous of sharing Bill's time with anyone not having a direct interest in or connection with Oskar's work. "Bill Moritz is perfect," she once told me, recalling her thoughts at their first meetings. "He is a filmmaker, a scholar, he can write beautifully, he can speak and read German, and he loves Oskar's work. He is perfect to help me with the Archives." In some ways, small ways, Bill *reminds* her of Oskar, temperamentally and physically, an opinion, Bill claims, that is shared by several people who knew Oskar. "It's very strange," he said, "but other people besides Elfriede have remarked that there is some aura of Oskar about me. Somehow this provokes possessive feelings in Elfriede."

Several times during their stay, Bill dropped us off at my apartment, went to park the camper and did not return until the next morning, sometimes an hour before their appointments. Elfriede, who "worried all night," would be fit to be tied. She runs a tight ship. "I do not mind Bill's freedom," she exclaimed, "when we are home in L. A., but not when we are on tour!" Bill's laid-back "everything's o.k." (to quote from one of his poems) attitude complements Elfriede's apprehension of missed appointments and screwed-up schedules, an often overanxious imagining of impending disaster that can wind her up tighter than an Austrian cuckoo clock.

Upon Bill's early morning return, Elfriede's anger would manifest itself in a furious pattering around the living room, gathering up films and other material necessary for the appointment, muttering all the while to herself and to Bill about how unfair it is that the total responsibility for these things should fall onto her shoulders and not be shared by Bill.

Moritz knew enough not to argue the point at the moment and he gamely assisted her in her search through piles of material. If Bill doesn't challenge her anger, it most often winds down.

But sometimes it has to be physically worked off. One morning, after a tense scene upstairs, I accompanied them down in the elevator and watched as they walked stiffly toward the camper parked a couple of blocks away. A few minutes later, as I waited for the mailman, I noticed Bill and Elfriede walking at a fast clip back toward me. Elfriede, in the lead, marched with an emphatic military step, arms swinging in tandem to a silent beat, an angry cast to her face. As they approached me, I was about to ask if they had forgotten a film or something, but they strode by, Elfriede in a hot fury looking straight ahead, Bill glancing over to me with his mild "everything's o.k." smile. When they reached the middle of the block, Elfriede suddenly turned, marched past me again with Bill following, and the two of them continued on in the direction of the camper, the wrathful spirits of the spleen having been exorcised, I assumed.

*May 5.* Bill Moritz's show at the Anthology. Generous soul that he is, he started the long program by showing four films by James Whitney, one of which, *Wu Ming,* lasts almost half an hour and ends with a screen-sized dot slowly receding into infinity. Mekas later declared this film "looks like it's made by gods." Moritz also showed *Tanka,* by another West Coast filmmaker, David Lebrun, a rapid collage of an Indian painting shot in triple-frames. Mekas' expression after this film (which *I* enjoyed) seemed to say he did *not* feel it was made by gods.

We don't know what he thought of Bill's work because he left before it began; so did a few in the already sparse audience, including a pair of gum-cracking teenaged girls who, wandering the East Village for something to do, were enticed by Bill Moritz standing at the door of the Anthology promising "new and different films."

Their loss. They missed what is an exotic mind-trip for most of us Eastern filmmakers: the special sensibility of the West Coast film artist. Bill Moritz wants to establish "a new rapport between filmmaker, imagery, and viewer." To do this, he makes viewing his films a very personal experience. He introduces each film in person and reads selections of his poetry; he projects some films with two or three projectors running simultaneously; he burns incense, rings Tibetan bells and makes noises from different parts of the theatre; for one film he ran back and forth in front of the projector with Fourth of July sparklers in both hands.

If his poems have a libidinous drive behind them, (e.g., "I Met a Former Lover at a Tap Dance Class," "Homoh Love Poem for Jasper"), many of his films possess a spirituality, clear and lyrical, (e.g., *Jude, Haiku for Buddah-John*), and both his poems and his films share his sense of cosmic humor. While Bill Moritz stretches "the expressive capacity of film and the perceptual vocabulary of the viewer," he is smiling.

*May 14.* We had dinner together this Saturday night and went to see former animator Walerian Borowczyk's erotic spoof, *The Beast.*

*May 15.* We visited the Nicholas Roerich Museum on West 107th Street to see the unique and mysterious paintings of Himalayan landscapes by spiritualist/philosopher/painter Roerich (1874-1947). Late that afternoon, Joe and I rode in the back of the camper, staring out the side windows and the ceiling-opening all the way down Broadway to Jonas Mekas' huge loft. Bill had prepared a dinner at my place which we carried downtown in pots, kettles and jars. There was a mixture of Indonesian/Balinese textures, including mixed salad with peanut butter sauce, banana yogurt with dill, spicy chicken, and so on. There was lots of wine and Mekas tolerated with amusement my watching *The Wonderful World of Disney* on my portable TV (which I brought along to catch a show on cartoon villains). He squeezed off a few frames on his Bolex, as is his custom, to preserve a record of the evening.

*May 16.* The morning of the taping of the Fischinger show at CBS, Bill left the apartment early for the studio to transfer to tape the films we selected, clips of which would be edited into the final program. Elfriede was relaxed but worried about what she should wear on the air. She was eating a hard-boiled egg out of an improvised egg-cup — one of my whiskey shot glasses — while sitting on the edge of the sofa in her long white cotton nightgown, surrounded by orderly piles of the usual film cans, paintings, photos, etc. A tiny framed photo of the young Oskar Fischinger (which she always carries with her and displays when traveling) sat propped against a window sill.

We started to talk about her and Oskar's life in America at the same conversational point where we had left off five months before. "It was quite a hassle," she said. "We couldn't take any money with us from Berlin. Paramount said we weren't supposed to tell the immigration office we had a contract, which made me suspicious. We had to come in as visitors, for a year, then we got an extension, then they 'finagled' for a lot of money and we had to go to Mexico, re-enter the States as Mexican citizens."

She laughs, but then moans, "We were so frustrated and so misunderstood. Oh, I can't tell you! And I got pregnant right away again. Oskar was unhappy at Paramount. That lasted only half a year. A contract with MGM was slow in coming due to Oskar's immigration problems, but it finally came and he created *An Optical Poem,* a fine work which played with first-run features." Fischinger's contract with MGM was not picked up because new departmental management preferred representational cartoons, e.g., Tom and Jerry, to abstract animation.

Photo by Linda Holiday

*On the "Fischinger set" for CBS-TV's* Camera Three, *May 16, 1977, Stephan Chodorov (back to camera) speaks with (from left) John Canemaker, William Moritz, and Elfriede Fischinger.*

Disillusioned by his life in the New World, depressed by the lack of outlets for his work in Hollywood, Fischinger drove alone to New York early in 1938 hoping to find backing for films he was planning. He was surprised to find himself treated as a major artist in New York; his films were screened, his paintings exhibited; he was wined and dined by important artists and critics, and he obtained the promise of financial assistance from the beautiful and eccentric curator of the Solomon Guggenheim Foundation, Hilla Rebay.

Elfriede took care of the babies and started working at home knitting sweaters and sewing clothes for members of the film colony, such as Bette Davis. Oskar returned to Hollywood late in 1938 only when his agent got him a contract with the Disney Studio to work on *Fantasia.*

Fischinger had discussed his idea of an abstract animated feature using classical music with Leopold Stokowski when they were both at Paramount. Elfriede's opinion of Stokowski? "Pretty boy. Curly hair, very good-looking in a way. Imposing figure. Very friendly, very nice. I wasn't worried at first, but I told Oskar don't tell everybody your idea, especially not Stokowski. But actually he had already said it to newspapers in Germany that he wished to make a concert feature." Stokowski took the idea to Disney and Oskar was hired to work on the "Toccata and Fugue" section as a "special effects animator." He lasted nine months before he quit in disgust over his inability to put his ideas across and the impossibility of making artistic decisions without going through committees and studio politics.

After Disney, Fischinger had had it with studios and working for other people; with a Guggenheim grant he began work on *American March,* a short finished in mid-1941. He hired three girls and his wife to work on the film and Elfriede recalled, "Oskar put me on the employment roll and I got Social Security which does me some good now." She also worked two years (1946-47) at a firm called California Accessories, "designing pocketbooks, weaving belts, shoes, caps on heads"; next she worked at a similar company for four years on the Sunset Strip.

The grants from the Guggenheim stopped after Fischinger and Hilla Rebay argued over the artistic merits of his last great film, *Motion Painting I,* completed

in 1947, 20 years before he died. "For the last 20 years of his life," Moritz once wrote, "Fischinger had to content himself with endless unfulfilled projects, with his paintings (which involved him in dozens of gallery shows), and with a home light-show instrument, the Lumigraph, which he invented in the early '50's but for which he never found commercial distribution."

"Even when we had momentarily big sums," said Elfriede, "from TV spots he animated, we had debts piled up. We had to pay bills and we were right away down on the bottom again. The children sold papers or babysat for extra income while going to school or universities. Oskar killed any interest or desire they had to become artists.

"It was always touch and go. He became a painter because he had more time on his hands. He didn't make films because of the lack of money and the lack of getting to a screen. Earlier in Berlin there was a club of independent filmmakers that stretched to theaters all over the whole of Europe. He had access to a screen, his films got to the public. But in Hollywood, except for art schools and museums, you couldn't get on the theater screen. It was occupied by the cartoon."

Fischinger's spirit deserted him and then his health went. "I think he ruined his health when he made *Motion Painting*," Elfriede said. "He sat there, day in, day out, smoking those cigars in a room with no air, painting one stroke and then leaning back to take one frame with the camera. He did that for months."

He began to have mild strokes that left him paralyzed for days, then more serious ones. Finally, a major heart attack ended his life. "I wish I had never put him in the hospital," exclaimed Elfriede. "I think the hospital killed him! They wouldn't let him walk. The second day I came he told me they wouldn't let him go by himself to the toilet. He also had diabetes.

"He wouldn't stick to doctor's orders anyway. He had a very bad toe that looked gangrenous. Our doctor was also a friend who collected his paintings so I could talk very freely to him. Oskar just wouldn't do what was required. He got cold feet so he put on plastic shoes. Plastic house shoes! If the air can't get at . . ." She shook her head.

"At home he wouldn't stay off his feet when the doctor said he had to lay down. So the doctor said, 'Take it easy. Have eight days in the hospital.' It sounded as if nothing would happen, that he would be back home in eight days. My daughter took me down to the hospital every morning at eight and back home at six every day.

"I saw him have two strokes . . . I'm sorry. I can't talk about it. It's pretty horrible to watch it and you cannot do nothing about it." Her voice trailed off and she looked as if she were going to cry.

Later, as we walked across the courtyard of Lincoln Center, taking a short cut to CBS, I worried that Elfriede's mood would not be conducive to appearing on a network television taping in about an hour. And I blamed myself for asking her those questions at this particular time.

But I reckoned without Elfriede's feisty resilience. As we strode down 57th Street, she talked about getting started again after Oskar's death.

"At first I didn't want to do nothing. Sometimes I even have those spells now. I just sometimes get to the point and tell myself *okay*! If the world doesn't want to, why should I force it on the world, right? But then there were people who pushed me, like Guy Cote from Cinematheque Canadien, who right away wrote me letters saying it should be preserved. He said he had money for the Animation Festival at Expo '67 in Canada, so I shipped some films out. It did a good thing for me. Oskar was represented in the history of animation exhibit. It made my daughter say you come with us — my daughter wanted to go to the Expo by car with a friend and take me. So I went and I saw all the country and it got me away from home, from everything. We camped out. I love to rough it! And I started to think anew and I started to think about a new life.

"This Expo started the ball rolling. I heard from all of the Cinematheques. It just went on and on and on ever since."

Bill and I were sitting on the "Fischinger set" under the lights as technicians adjusted cameras and mikes. Elfriede finally appeared from "make-up" having decided to dress in a colorfully striped, voluminous robe. She looked dignified, peaceful — beautiful.

The stage manager signaled me. We were taping and I introduced the show and the two guests. The first question was to go to Elfriede, as agreed upon in the pre-show meetings. I knew her answer would set the mood for the rest of the show.

"Mrs. Fischinger," I said, "tell us when and where Oskar Fischinger was born, a little about his background, and how he became interested in film."

Elfriede, completely relaxed and self-possessed, looked at me with level eyes and smiled. "Of course," she began. "He was born in Gelnhausen, which is near Frankfurt, Germany, in 1900 . . ."

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*Bill Moritz and Elfriede Fischinger, by John Canemaker.*