



Norman McLaren and Mary Ellen Bute in 1982  
Photograph by Pierre St-Arnault

## MARY ELLEN BUTE: REACHING FOR KINETIC ART

*Editor's Note:* Mary Ellen Bute (1904–1983) was one of the first abstract film-makers in the United States. Between 1934 and 1953 she made over a dozen films with such materials as oscilloscopes, mirrors, three dimensional objects—often to classical music. Her films were presented in commercial theaters across the country. Bute rarely spoke about how she became a film-maker. On May 7, 1976 she gave a talk at the Art Institute of Chicago. The following was assembled from her remarks. The complete tape recording of the program is in the collection of the Pioneer American Women Filmmakers project.

I was a painter in Texas [and] lived on a ranch [until my Houston art teacher] arranged for a scholarship for me at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. That was a whole new world for me. Practically all of the articles and journals that had reached my part of Texas were very against modern art.

[So] when I went to Philadelphia I was... deeply impressed by the wonderful Picassos, the African art, the [Paul] Klees, the Braques, the Kandinskys.... He [Kandinsky] used abstract, nonobjective elements so you could experience a canvas the way you experience a musical composition.... Well, I thought it was terrific... [but] these things should be unwound in time continuity. It was a dance. That became my [objective]...

I came to New York and tried to find the technical means. The most developed thing at that time was stage lighting. I went to an art school where we did many things with lighting, but it wasn't adequate, an art medium *per se*. Then, by a fluke, I got into Yale, and they had a fabulous switchboard—and of course I became one of its runners, reaching for my kinetic art form.

From Yale I got the job of taking drama around the world... and got to see, oh, the Noh drama of Japan, and the Taj Mahal in India [where gems surrounded the building]. I looked into the gems and saw reflected the Taj Mahal, and the lake, and the whole thing appealed to me enormously... because it was romantic and because it was a kinetic, visual thing. I started entertaining myself by imagining these designs and patterns all in movement.

Back in New York I related all of this to Thomas Wilfred, who by that time had developed a color organ. This was in 1929... Then I heard about Leon Theremin... and apprenticed myself to his [sound] studio to learn more about composition. He became interested in my determination to develop a kinetic visual art form [and helped me with experiments].

We submerged tiny mirrors in tubes of oil, connected [them] to an oscillator, and drew where these points of light were flying. The effect was thrilling for us—it was so pure.

But it wasn't enough. Finally we got a Bolex camera, and started... to make my first film, *Rhythm in Light*. It was mostly three-dimensional animation. Pyramids, and ping pong balls, and all interrelated by light patterns—and I wasn't happy unless it all entered and exited exactly as I had planned.