

Introduction

Robert Gardner

*Rebecca Meyers, William Rothman,
and Charles Warren*

Caleb Gardner concludes his introduction to *Just Representations* (2010), a diverse collection of Robert Gardner's journals, essays, and other writings, by citing one of his father's earliest journal entries, which "describes how servants in Johannesburg bow and cup their hands around whatever money they have been given, while also trying to see just how much it is."¹ While noting that some version of this behavior will be found wherever there are people, he imagines it as having special relevance to his father's life—"a life spent looking at oneself by watching other people," as he puts it. "I can almost see the writer as a younger man, in possession, like all of us, of something still not completely known to him, eager, but also a little afraid to open his hand and find out exactly what it is."²

When Gayatri Chatterjee invokes this little parable near the end of her chapter in this volume, she sagely observes, "Perhaps this is a 'possession' one does not ultimately possess." For what Caleb Gardner imagines cupped in his father's hand, as he was beginning the journey of discovery that was to bring us the remarkable body of work *Looking with Robert Gardner* looks at and celebrates, can only be the gift (it can feel like a curse) of humanity. This is what he had in common with the "others" he was to watch in the course of his long career, and with us.

Because human beings are subjects as well as objects of self-knowledge, we can never know ourselves objectively. And because we are free to change, to become other than we have been, we cannot know ourselves completely. Robert Gardner's films, as Fanny Howe eloquently observes in her chapter here, "reflect on the strangeness of being

ourselves.” She adds, “Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, Richard Kearney and Julia Kristeva are just a few of those who have tackled the question of the stranger, sometimes called Other, who is finally ourselves.” A philosopher closer to home who tackled this question is Stanley Cavell, Gardner’s longtime Harvard colleague and friend, who in *The World Viewed* writes, “Apart from the wish for selfhood (and the always simultaneous granting of otherness as well), I do not understand the value of art.”³ Another kindred spirit was Ralph Waldo Emerson, Gardner’s great New England progenitor, who begins his essay “Experience” by saying that when we awaken to our human condition, we find ourselves in no place we know. We are strangers to ourselves.

Robert Gardner overcame his fear of what he might discover about himself by watching other people, and strove tirelessly to express what he *did* discover. He opened his hand to create—he opened his hand *by* creating—the films, photographs, and writings he gave the world. (To this list should be added the Film Study Center he founded at Harvard and *Screening Room*, the weekly television show he created and hosted to promote the work and ideas of independent film and video artists.) In opening his hand, Gardner found in the human condition the painful difference between what we must be and what we might want to be, to paraphrase his narration in *Rivers of Sand* (1974). But in creating the works he gave to the world, he also found the freedom to “walk in the direction of the unattained but attainable self,” as Emerson put it, despite being shackled by society’s conventions, as all human beings are.

Tom Conley compares and contrasts what he calls the “aerial view” in Gardner’s journals and films with the intimate view of his camera when it “touches down” and would become “the appendage of a human attending to everyday life in the milieu he or she inhabits.” We have divided the book into two parts that more or less correspond to this division between Gardner’s reflections on seeing the world from the air—he piloted his own private plane—and his accounts of travel and encounter when he “touched down.”

The chapter by Eliot Weinberger that opens the first part of *Looking with Robert Gardner* is the only piece not written especially for the book. Although it has previously been published, we have included it, and placed it first, because it serves so admirably as a general statement about Gardner’s work, and so effectively introduces themes developed in the chapters that follow.⁴ The eleven pieces in Part I address general topics (but not without “touching down” at times to look closely at particular examples): Tom Conley on Gardner’s geographic sensibility; Fanny Howe on color and Gardner’s relation to races other than his own; Daniel Morgan on Gardner’s achievement of valid ethnographic knowledge; Maxime Scheinfeigel on Gardner’s striking points of comparison with and difference from his somewhat older contemporary (and friend) Jean Rouch; Charles Warren on Gardner’s intellectual relationship with Stanley Cavell and an understanding of filmic reality they seem to develop between them; Gayatri Chatterjee on Gardner’s self-questioning and on reaction to him in India; Kathryn Ramey on Gardner’s relation to experimental film; and Brian Frye on *Screening Room*. We also bring Gardner’s own voice into the mix by including a 2008 interview conducted in Mexico City by Carlos Flores and Antonio Ziri6n. This part of the book concludes with images photographer and close Gardner friend Susan Meiselas took on her visit with him to New Guinea in 1988–1989, many years after he had shot *Dead Birds* (1963) there.

The chapters in Part II, ordered chronologically, focus primarily on individual Gardner films (but not without offering aerial views at times): Charles Musser on *Dead Birds*; Mario Bucci and Irina Leimbacher on *Rivers of Sand*; Murray Pomerance and Ricardo Zulueta on *Deep Hearts* (1981); Richard Allen and Julia Yezbick on *Forest of Bliss* (1986); Richard Deming on Gardner's films about artists and their art; Bruce Jenkins on *2 Sons of Catalonia: Josep Lluís Sert & Joan Miró* (2013), and William Rothman on *Dead Birds Re-Encountered* (2013).

We do not claim that this book presents a complete account of Gardner's work. How could it? But the authors who have accepted our invitation to contribute represent several nationalities and a diversity of approaches, sensibilities, intellectual concerns, and disciplinary affiliations. The multiplicity of their voices helps give the book a monumental quality. It takes a monumental book to begin to do justice to the magnitude of this artist's aspirations and achievements. Yet in writing about Robert Gardner, these authors all begin from the same starting point: the conviction that the works he has placed in our hands are gifts of great value. They also share the same goal: to discover exactly what these gifts are and where their value lies. And in pursuit of this goal, they have all had the courage to open their own hands.

Too often, Gardner has been pigeonholed as an ethnographic filmmaker, then pilloried for failing to conform to the constricting conventions some take that term to imply. Undeniably, his best-known films—*Dead Birds*, *Rivers of Sand*, *Deep Hearts*, *Forest of Bliss*—have an ethnographic dimension. All his films do; far from denying the value of ethnographic knowledge, his films pursue it. Daniel Morgan mounts a powerful argument to demonstrate that, some anthropologists' claims to the contrary notwithstanding, Gardner's films *succeed* in attaining, and communicating, what can legitimately be called "ethnographic knowledge." But they challenge conventional ethnographic filmmaking, and anthropology more generally, to change—as to a degree they have, in ways Kathryn Ramey and Julia Yezbick reflect on in their chapters. Even though the value of Gardner's films cannot be separated from their poetic quality and cinematic artistry, his champions make a serious mistake, as Morgan argues, whenever they concede, rather than contest, the charge that his films make no significant contribution to anthropology.

The contributors to this volume do not make that mistake. They recognize that there is no conflict between art and science in Gardner's work. Kathryn Ramey, for example, writes, approvingly, "Although Gardner's primary motivation has been a cinematic engagement with real people in the real world, he has approached this task as an artist and a poet." Charles Warren puts it this way:

Gardner's films make clear, as do his considerable writings on film, now collected in several volumes, that he has always seen himself as scrupulously trying to render the world as he finds it, to keep faithful to it—and at the same time as making, fashioning, working poetically, from a basis in his own sensibility. . . . Gardner believes, or finds, that the engagement of sensibility with the world—an artistic, a poetic engagement—finds out reality.

Gardner himself speaks to the point in the Mexico City interview:

If the goal of anthropology is to try to reveal the meanings of our behavior, how can it dispense with the aesthetic dimension? I sometimes feel as though critics on warring sides of these matters make the mistake of thinking science is opposed to or incompatible with art and *vice versa*. In my view, they coexist with no difficulty at all. I would submit my own work as examples of why “aesthetics” should not be ignored.

The fact that Gardner’s films are works of art does not mean they are unconcerned with attaining, and communicating, knowledge of the kind that moves anthropology closer to its goal—or what *should* be its goal, in Gardner’s view—of “revealing the meanings of our behavior.” Gardner believed that it was a mistake for anthropology to take itself to be—or to aspire to become—an “objective,” value-free science no different in principle from chemistry or physics. Insofar as they are works of art, Gardner’s films cannot but be concerned with aesthetic matters (and with moral matters as well). But so must they be concerned with aesthetic and moral matters if they are to be of real value to anthropology. To reveal the meanings of the behavior of the people he filmed, which in Gardner’s view is anthropology’s proper goal, his filmmaking had to be, as he put it, “of a kind that makes the humanity of others accessible,” a kind that “depends as much on empathy as craft.” For Gardner, in other words, ethnographic knowledge—knowledge that genuinely advances anthropology—is a kind of knowledge that is also self-knowledge, the kind of knowledge that art alone is capable of granting us. That is why the fusion of art and anthropology Gardner aspired to and achieved is not only possible but necessary—necessary *morally* as well as aesthetically, as Richard Deming argues:

Gardner’s world is an art world. His very mode of perception is that of an artist, and so the world he lives in is determined by its capability to be art, and is thus constituted by his aesthetic responses. Moreover—and this is important—such artistic perception is predicated on the sense that the phenomenal world makes moral claims upon our attention. “I propose that in film’s very nature,” Gardner has written, “somewhere embedded in its formal attributes as a mediator of the phenomenal world, there arises a capacity for evoking moral responses in those who come in contact with it.” Such a formulation suggests that in his role as filmmaker, he is the shaper of a moral possibility occurring in response to—indeed, as part of—aesthetic experience.

Mauro Bucci concurs that it is an important feature of what he calls Gardner’s “poetics” that his art has a moral dimension:

Rivers of Sand allows us to draw a moral from the representation of Hamar life: it invites us to become aware of the constraints imposed by social standards and the inequalities that roles can give rise to—the way they seem obvious and inevitable because of their deep roots in

everybody's life. The knowledge that the existence of the individual is not shaped by immutable or natural laws, but, rather, by cultural patterns—that is, possible options in the way human beings live, as Gardner reminds us in his film *Ika Hands* (1988)—allows us to confront the restrictions imposed by social models with a more critical attitude, and to consider them amenable to change.

In Gardner's own words: "Films like mine, I have hoped, would act in some manner or other, as a mirror of the viewer's own soul, that is to say, life experience. To the extent this occurs, I am confident that a viewer will examine his or her own life, which seems to me the most desirable goal of all." The chapters in this volume explore in concrete detail strategies Gardner employs in his striving to achieve this goal.

Richard Allen offers a key insight when he suggests, in his compelling reading of *Forest of Bliss*, that the film "brings to bear the full stylistic arsenal of film upon elements of actuality in order to create an experience for the spectator that is akin to ritual, where banal facts of quotidian life are perceived as expressions of spirit, or of a higher transcendent time." In this way, as Allen argues, *Forest of Bliss* "enacts, as a film, the ways of being that it strives to represent."

Maxine Scheinfeigel offers another key insight when she observes that Gardner's work, in contrast to the films of his Jean Rouch, "is traversed by a conception of images more *figural* than figurative: sails of phantom ships, undulations of human faces, rolling of the feet of camels." And yet, as she observes, "beyond the forms actualized in the images," the films express ideas—ideas that "surge forth" from the depths of the films' images and sounds, emerging "less from the decoding of meaning than by the aesthetic perception of lines and forms, of movements and sounds, of vibrations and the visual and auditory echoes that these vibrations simultaneously engender."

Irina Leimbacher illustrates how ideas "surge forth" from Gardner's images and sounds by beginning her chapter on *Rivers of Sand* with the simple evocation of what viewers see and hear in the first few moments of the film: "First just a bush, a thorn bush. Next a woman's hands pick some thorns from a branch. We hear the sound of repeated scraping accompanied by images of the up and down motion of a hand. Something is being rhythmically brushed against the metal leg rings adorning a woman's ankle and calf."

Murray Pomerance, too, illustrates this feature of Gardner's cinematic style, while at the same time making an important point about the kind of critical writing his films call for, by concluding his provocative chapter about *Deep Hearts* with a poetic evocation of his experience of the film's closing sequence. Pomerance's passage begins this way: "Day and night and night and day. The purple sky and the green sky. The bodies singing 'Aiahhhhhhhhh.' The hands gesticulating, speaking to space. The lips pulled back and marked, the flashing teeth. The flashing eyes." And it ends with this:

The patient camels, the camels attendant, a face painted oxblood red,
the long line, the blue sky, fingers touching up the eyebrows, a face
as orange as yams, the blue burnoose, the blue sky, the long line,

the smile of victory, the sharp teeth, the prize teeth, the blue sky, the multicolored umbrella. The hands, the clapping hands, the open hands, the trading hands, the open hands, the camels' feet sliding away.

The ethnographic cinema Gardner developed is based entirely on such “telling details and oblique images,” as Eliot Weinberger puts it. That is why the contributors to this book have all felt the need for their prose to become evocative—to be expressive of their own experience of those film moments—whenever they “touched down” to look at particular cinematic passages. And they all recognized that their prose had to “touch down” at certain points if they were to discover the intimate secrets those “telling moments” tell, and to convey how Gardner’s art enables those secrets to be told.

In the films Gardner made about artists and their art, which comprise an important but relatively neglected part of his oeuvre, the “ways of being” he strove to represent are, explicitly, ways of creating—ways of creating that are also ways of looking. Such a film as *Mark Tobey* (1952), *Mark Tobey Abroad* (1973), or *Passenger* (1997), a film he made about the painter Sean Scully, becomes “a vision of another’s way of envisioning,” as Richard Deming puts it, in a manner analogous to the way the chapters in this book present “visions of another’s way”—Robert Gardner’s way—“of envisioning.”

As a filmmaker, Deming writes, Gardner attempts in these films “to represent artistic processes intimately, personally, and in such a way as to create a cinematic dialogue between his work and the work with which the artists onscreen are engaged.” His camera’s gaze “forges a connection between the perceived and the perceiver,” just as the authors of these chapters do. But this connection isn’t solely between the filmmaker and the subject. “The intersubjectivity that a film makes possible flows in two directions—towards the subject and towards the viewer.” Thus in these films “cinema, as an art, encounters art, and the results, as Gardner suggests, have ethical implications because they are the intertwining of personal responses, which viewers must then respond to.”

In the chapter on *Dead Birds Re-Encountered* that concludes this book, William Rothman extends Deming’s point, in effect, by suggesting that Deming’s insightful observations about Gardner’s artist films apply to most—perhaps all—his other films as well. Those films, too, become “visions of another’s way of envisioning.” In those films, too, “cinema, as an art, encounters art” insofar as it is a characteristic feature of a Gardner film that it builds toward a climactic passage in which its own art dialogues—Rothman’s word is *fuses*—with the art of the people in the film:

In *Blunden Harbour* (1951), *Dead Birds* and *Rivers of Sand*, for example, Gardner’s art fuses with dance. In *Deep Hearts*, it fuses with the performance art, as we might think of it, of the men who are participating in the “beauty contest” that provides the film with its grand finale. In *Ika Hands*, it is the chanting of the holy man called Mama Marco as he walks into the clouds, the culmination of his meditation, the fusing of song and nothingness, that is at once captured and affected, cinematically, by the camera. *Forest of Bliss* climaxes not with the sequence in which we finally see a dead body

being cremated, but with the subsequent performance of the healer, whose ecstatic chanting at once possesses, and is possessed by, Gardner's rapturous camera.

And, as Rothman argues, *Dead Birds Re-Encountered* completes the cycle when it climaxes, and concludes, by fusing with Gardner's own breakthrough film, *Dead Birds*.

In writing about *2 Sons of Catalonia: Josep Lluís Sert & Joan Miró* (2013), a short film that was more than four decades in the making, Bruce Jenkins proposes that Gardner found in the modernist architect Sert a "brother in arms," a "compelling analogue for his own attempts to create works that utilize the aesthetic interplay of space and light to mediate the realms of nature and culture" so as to discover the "spiritual dimension" that animates art and life. Like *Dead Birds Re-Encountered*, *2 Sons of Catalonia* has what Jenkins describes as "a valedictory feel, a palpable sense of looking back at the past, of chronicling the achievements of a lifetime of work." And yet, as he observes, "the two titled protagonists of the film, joined at times by the filmmaker, seem to actively challenge this reading." Like the artists he filmed, Gardner "remains focused on the work that still has to be done." His last works, for all their valedictory quality, reveal and declare that their creator was still "journeying on." This is what Emerson called "walking in the direction of the unattained yet attainable self"—although he had reached a place, as Rothman's chapter closes by saying, at which "journeying on" also means returning home.

Mark Tobey, one of Gardner's earliest films, made immediately after *Blunden Harbour*, is an "experimental portrait" (to borrow the description in the catalog of Documentary Educational Resources, which distributes the film) of the well-known painter "which tries to show in cinematic language how this man looked at the world." The film addresses the painter's art with the kind of ethnographic interest, as we might put it, that *Blunden Harbour* manifests in the dances and myths of the Kwakiutl people of the Pacific Northwest. In creating these early films, Gardner's interest in coming to know the way the people he films look at the world went hand in hand with an interest in coming to know "cinematic language." In his subsequent work, as in these early films, Gardner approached his abiding subject, the intersection of life and art, as an anthropologist *and* as an artist. In the language of cinema, there is no distinction between anthropology *and* art; art *is* anthropology, science *is* magic, looking *is* creating, creating *is* knowing.

When Stanley Cavell introduced *Forest of Bliss* at its world premiere at Harvard's Carpenter Center, he characterized the film as acting "to burst its form, as if its maker is challenging its origins, taking his work into its own exploration of the conditions of art and of life that make it possible."⁵ In Cavell's formulation, the film's "origins" are its roots in the reality of the people and places Gardner filmed, but also its roots in the reality of the world his film projects—a world transformed or transfigured by the medium of film and the singular art that medium makes possible. In Gardner's words: "Film is not simply a mirror recording our physicality, but a medium achieving a transfiguration of our ordinariness."⁶

Collectively, the chapters in this volume can be seen to make the case that every Gardner film challenges its origins, bursts its form, by exploring the conditions of art and

of life that make it possible—where “art” means both Gardner’s own art and the art of the people he filmed, and “life” means both his life and theirs. And every Gardner film manifests, as Cavell argues *Forest of Bliss* does, “respect for difference, for otherness, respect for the other’s mystery and for its own power to communicate what it wishes known. It is a version of that respect for his or her subject or material that every true artist manifests.”⁷

The academic study of film is finally emerging from a protracted period in which film criticism, like anthropology, was in the grip of the notion that it should aspire to the condition of a science like physics and chemistry, not an art. Like Gardner himself, the contributors to this book manifest respect for their subject. In so doing, they testify to the value of art—and the value of criticism when, aligning itself with Gardner’s art, it strives to attain and communicate a kind of knowledge that is also self-knowledge.

All the chapters in this book acknowledge that Robert Gardner’s art is grounded in his practice of looking at himself by watching other people. “Gardner has always regarded his anthropological projects as pathways to ‘help me understand myself,’” Bruce Jenkins writes. Charles Musser makes the point by writing, “*Dead Birds* is about the human condition, about what the film’s creator has in common with the Dani.” Charles Warren puts it this way: “Gardner seeks to do away with the barrier [separating us from the “ethnographic Other”], making in his work a strong gesture of, in the Chandogya Upanishad’s utterance, ‘I am thou.’” And Ricardo Zulueta, writing about *Deep Hearts*, says this:

When Gardner is behind the camera, the intuitive fluidity with which he lovingly, sensitively, and passionately films the Wodaabe suggests that he feels an intimate kinship with them. Perhaps his “natural” reserve is a façade, like their painted faces and exaggerated expressions, to keep others from looking into his “deep heart,” the metaphysical space in which he hides his true feelings, as they do, from the eyes of those he fears might devour him, figuratively speaking.

The authors who have contributed to this volume have looked at Gardner’s works in ways that respect, and emulate, his practice of looking at himself by watching other people. They have allowed these works to teach them how to look at them. In this sense, we can say that they have looked *at* Robert Gardner by looking *with* him. Hence the title we have given this book. In looking with Robert Gardner, they have kept faith with *his* faith—above all, his faith in the power of art to bring home to us what it means to be human.

What is most to be valued about being human, Gardner fervently believed, is the capacity to create art, which is inseparable from the capacity to be moved by art. He expressed this conviction by creating *Dead Birds*, *Rivers of Sand*, *Deep Hearts*, *Forest of Bliss*, and the other sublime and beautiful works this book looks at and celebrates, works that grant us knowledge about ourselves and our fellow human beings by moving us beyond words.

Gardner's narration for *Dead Birds* famously begins:

There is a fable told by a mountain people living in the ancient highlands of New Guinea about a race between a snake and a bird. It tells of a contest to decide whether men would be like birds and die, or be like snakes, which shed their skins and have eternal life. The bird won, and from that time all men, like birds, must die.

Robert Gardner's art will live on.

Notes

1. Caleb Gardner, "Barren Mazes," in Robert Gardner, *Just Representations* (Cambridge, MA: Studio7Arts & Peabody Museum Press, 2010), xv.
2. Ibid.
3. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 22.
4. Weinberger's work as presented here consists of two parts: excerpts from "The Camera People," which was published in Weinberger's book *Outside Stories: 1987-1991* (New York: New Directions, 1992) and also in Charles Warren, editor, *Beyond Document: Essays on Nonfiction Film* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan/University Press of New England, 1996); and the Preface to *Still Points*, a forthcoming collection of Robert Gardner's photographs (Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum Press).
5. Stanley Cavell, "Words of Welcome," in *Beyond Document*, ed. Charles Warren, xvii.
6. Robert Gardner, "The Moral Nature of Film," in *Just Representations*, 244.
7. Cavell, "Words of Welcome," xxvii.