

To my mind, we lack a resonant shorthand to describe **the** work of Alan Berliner. His five feature-length films have been variously dubbed "documentaries," "experimental documentaries," "cine-essays," "personal non-fiction," and "autobiographies," to name just a few. The films and his **art** installations have been hailed as innovative, even one of a kind. Certainly, Berliner's artistic signature coupled with a uniquely "personal" take on the themes he explores, makes it easy to

recognize an **ALAN BERLINER** film. But what is it that distinguishes his films from those of other documentary, experimental documentary, cine-essay, personal non-fiction, and auto-biographical filmmakers working today? To

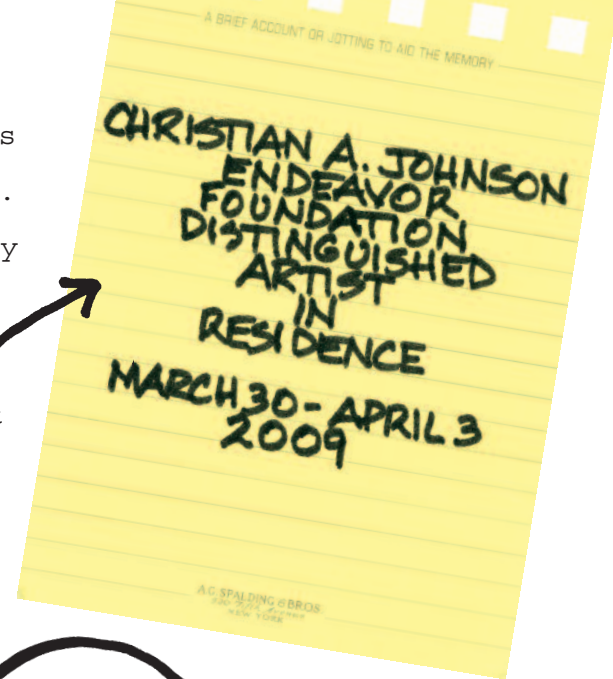
Intimate Stranger is maternal grandfather about his father, saying his films are and family. Of all **of** these - but extended conversa- the filmmaker on I believe, that the film or installation



say, for example, that a film about Berliner's and **Nobody's Business** falls as short as about identity, memory, course they are about also far more. The tion I've had with these pages reveals, essence of a Berliner may not be the

subject matter of the work but rather the very **process** of its making, and what that reveals about the artist himself. A Berliner film is what happens when a quixotic curiosity harnesses an obsessive creative drive and finds a story that the filmmaker must tell. How that story will eventually be conjured depends upon which prism Berliner selects from his magical cinematic toolbox. Just know that it will always be something fresh and unexpected.

In many ways the success of Berliner's work rests on a commitment to take his dialogue with the viewer as seriously as the one he has with the work itself. He knows that the "personal" story he explores on the screen will succeed only if it can transcend the details of his circumstance and provide viewers with insights into their own. On the occasion of his visit to Colgate University, I had the opportunity to speak with Berliner - who also loves to talk - about what inspires him, the alchemy of his creative **process**, and how he manages to consistently produce work that makes us giggle and - at the same time - better understand the human dilemma. **Anne S. Lewis**



Hi Anne.
Should we mention that we're doing this interview at midnight, New York time?



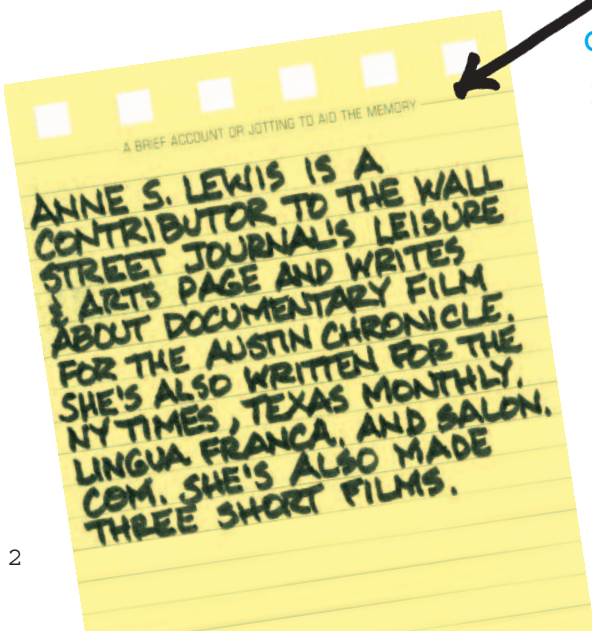
Anyone who's seen **Wide Awake** knows this is the time you do your best work.

So fire away fellow night owl...



Can you talk about how you come up with the ideas for your films?
How do you know when you've hit upon the right subject?

Every film I make is a unique equation; a mixture of things I'm curious about combined with layers of psychological and emotional elements that motivate me to begin looking at my life in new and different ways. It often takes me several years to finish my films, so they better be about subjects I enjoy spending lots of time reading, researching, and learning about. But there also has to be something that compels me to embrace the **process** of filmmaking as a kind of personal journey. To put it simply: a combination of fascination and need. And then there's an additional "X" factor:

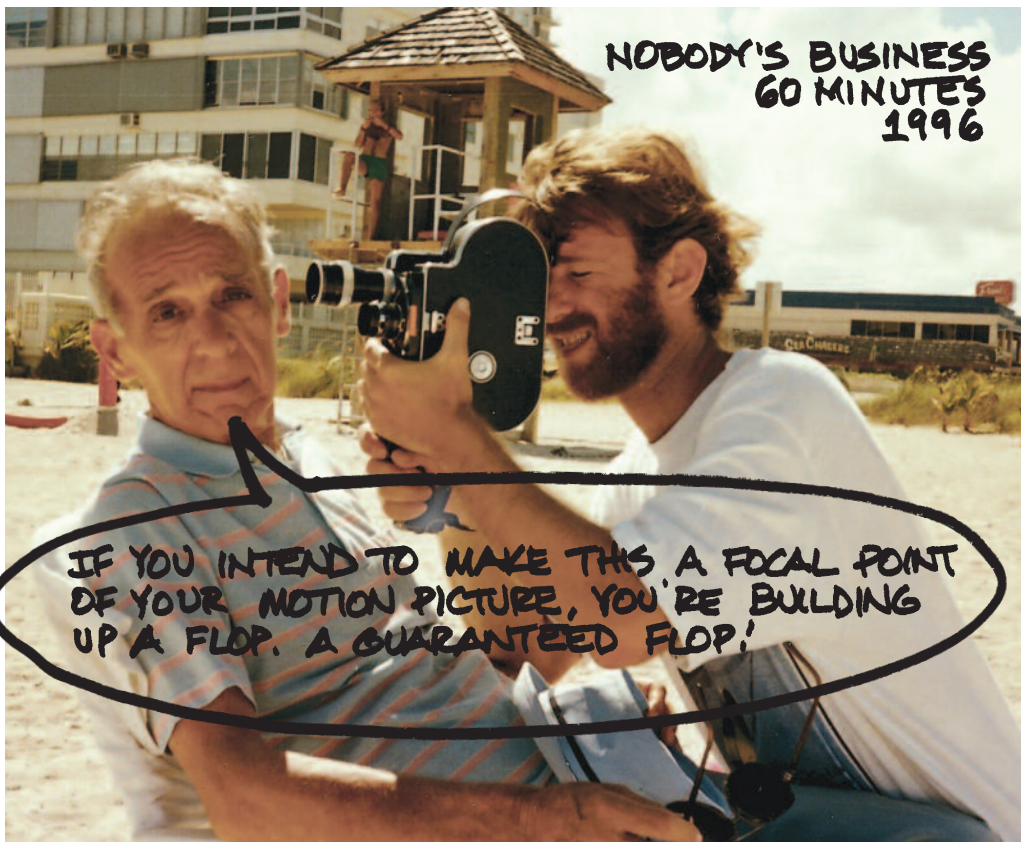
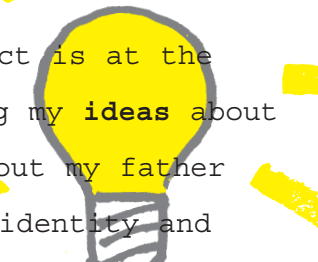


it has to be a subject I can have fun with as a filmmaker. I have to be able to find humor in it, to make fun of myself, to be playful and silly, or intimate and vulnerable. It also has to be a story that challenges me to find its own unique way of being told.

I SHOULD HAVE SAID INVENT
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Given the personal subjects of your films, how do you navigate the hazardous shoals of imbuing a personal exploration with universal meaning?

At some point early on, I begin to understand how my subject is at the crossroads of many issues. When I was initially formulating my ideas about **Nobody's Business**, for instance, I realized that a film about my father could also be a film about love and family and memory and identity and



IF YOU INTEND TO MAKE THIS A FOCAL POINT OF YOUR MOTION PICTURE, YOU'RE BUILDING UP A FLOP. A GUARANTEED FLOP!

aging, about the unspoken contracts that bind parents and children, and siblings and cousins, and about world history and family history, and genealogy, and I started to see that this one

subject - a biography of this one ordinary man - can be at the crossroads where all these things intersect.



I CAN STILL HEAR MY FATHER SAYING.
^



MEET SHARI AND ELI



ANONYMOUS



THE FAMILY ALBUM
60 MINUTES
1986

Can you imagine a film that you would want to make that did not involve you or your family?

I ponder that question all the time. I like to think of myself as someone who's quite engaged with the world, someone who's always observing and questioning the swirl of things around us. There's a part of me that would love to make a film about the novelist Philip Roth, ^{ALREADY BEEN DONE} or the Israeli/Palestinian struggle, ^{THERE MUST BE HUNDREDS BY NOW} or why it's taken the automobile industry ^{OIL. OIL. OIL. AND GREED!} so long to make electric cars. But when it all comes down to it, I almost always take what I think of as the more difficult path – the one that scares me the most, the one I have the biggest stake in, the one I can't stop thinking ^{OR TALKING} about – the personal.

And with this choice ^{MAYBE I SHOULD HAVE SAID, "WITH THIS NEED."} comes the responsibility of creating works that transcend the details of my life by transforming them into resonant universal experience. By using my life as a living laboratory, I want to make viewers reflect upon similar circumstances or issues in theirs.

MEANING "LOST" OR "ORPHANED"

How did your obsession with personal filmmaking begin?

In many ways it all started with **The Family Album**, which came about after I bought a collection containing more than 40 hours of old 16mm home movies from the 1920's through the 50's, from about 75 different families – all anonymous. I edited fragments of those home movies into the arc of a composite lifetime, from birth to death, and then added a soundtrack of many different – again mostly anonymous – family audio recordings. None of my own family home movies are used in the film – just a couple of audio recordings and pieces of an oral history from

MOST OF THEM BOUGHT AT FLEA MARKETS AND GARAGE SALES



my family here and there, that's all. And there I was screening **The Family Album** around the world, talking as if I was an expert on the "family." An expert on home movies yes; but on the family, no. And that's because I had no personal stake in the film. I was outside looking in, to the deepest themes my film was trying to explore.

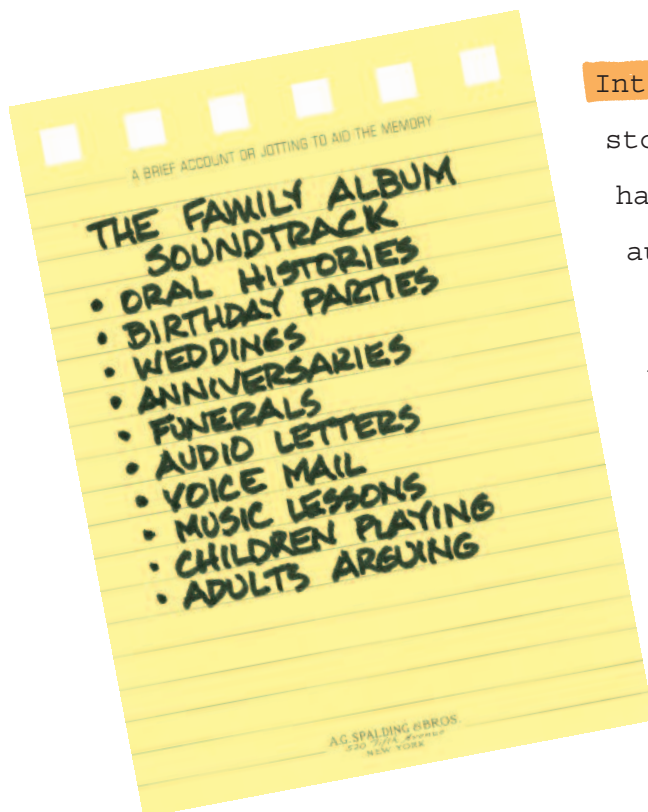
So how did that push you to your next film?

The Family Album not only activated my fascination with family issues, but also pushed me to look closer at my own. The next film I made was

Intimate Stranger, a film about my maternal family history told through the story and the **legacy** of my grandfather, Joseph Cassuto, who had died 16 years earlier in the middle of writing his autobiography.

THOUGH I DIDN'T QUITE UNDERSTAND WHAT A LEGACY WAS WHEN I STARTED

After **Intimate Stranger**, I started feeling connected to the challenges and rewards of personal filmmaking and followed my instincts towards an encounter with the paternal side of my family history, seen through the prism of my father Oscar, who thought it was all nonsense **SEE PAGE 3** a project that became **Nobody's Business**. Both films explore the life stories of ordinary, average people in search of a deeper understanding of identity, personal history, and the role of memory in family relationships – and a million other things as well.





PALESTINIAN JEW
RAISED IN EGYPT
IN LOVE WITH JAPAN

(MAYBE MORE THAN HIS FAMILY)



HE'S THE ONLY ONE
IN A WHITE SUIT!



After finishing **Nobody's Business**, I decided to focus on something outside of myself, **AND MY FAMILY** and so

The Sweetest Sound started out as a rather straightforward film about names and identity, spanning race, religion, ethnicity, and nationality. Perhaps I was trying to make a more traditional "documentary" film. Perhaps I was just being lazy. But the early versions of the film were pretty flat, stuffed with information, and not very cinematic. I had done hundreds of street interviews for the film, so there were sections made up entirely of talking heads. All of which made me **realize** that I didn't have to make a film using 10,000 names to investigate the subject of names, but that I could mine a single name and get right to the heart of the matter. And that meant only one thing. . .



A film about your name.

Exactly. And so I learned what I suppose I already knew. That my name could become a kind of proxy for the way all names function as compressed histories of who we are, where we come from, and what our parents may have been thinking once upon a time. I had to accept that my strength as a filmmaker lies in being willing to take on these difficult journeys of the self and identity.

OR MY FOLLY



I FOUND EVERYONE IN THE WORLD WHO SHARES MY NAME AND INVITED THEM OVER FOR DINNER

THE SWEETEST SOUND
60 MINUTES
2001

- A BRIEF ACCOUNT OR JOTTING TO AID THE MEMORY
- ALAN / ALLAN / ALLEN / ALAIN BERLINER
- 2 FILMMAKERS
 - 2 DOCTORS
 - 2 LAWYERS
 - PHOTOGRAPHER
 - ACCOUNTANT
 - PHARMACIST
 - HEALTH CLUB MANAGER
 - GUIDANCE COUNSELOR
 - CLINICAL SOCIAL WORKER
 - ENGINEER

- 1 Alan M. Berliner
- 2 Alan Berliner
- 3 Allan Berliner
- 4 Alan Berliner
- 5 Alan S. Berliner
- 6 allan berliner
- 7 Allen Berliner
- 8
- 9 Allen I. Berliner
- 10 Alan F. Berliner
- 11 Alan Berliner
- 12
- 13



WIDE AWAKE
79 MINUTES
2006

A FILM ABOUT SLEEP
ABOUT OBSESSION
ABOUT SEEING IN THE DARK
ABOUT THE TUGS OF LOVE AND FAMILY
ABOUT CREATIVITY ITSELF

PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST AS INSOMNIAC

My next film, **Wide Awake**, was about my life-long struggle with insomnia, told and visualized in the first person. I tried to represent what goes on in my mind when my head hits the pillow, and how my insomnia has impacted my life, my work, and my family. **JET LAGGED IN MY OWN TIME ZONE** It's personal filmmaking with a capital "P" and might just be the most personal film I'll ever make. It certainly was the most difficult and the most risky.

Those familiar with your body of work can't help but notice a certain self-referentiality. Somehow I suspect intentionality.

I continually recycle images, sounds, and themes, and in some cases reintroduce ^{OR UPDATE} storytelling strategies throughout my films. It's as if they're linked through their DNA. I think of it as "quoting" from one film to another, kind of like references or footnotes in a book.

Because all of my films are so interconnected, it makes sense that certain sounds and images would reappear again and again. But to be honest, I love playing with the plasticity of cinematic storytelling – the way that a single sound or image can morph, and take on different contexts from one film to the next. This not only

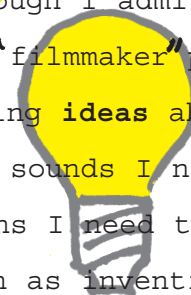


creates continuity between all the films, but also generates additional layers of meaning that I can build on with each new film. **Wide Awake** in particular, has images from almost every film I've ever made.



So many filmmakers happily delegate the editing process to others. Could you imagine anyone else editing one of your films?

That would simply be inconceivable to me, though I admit I'm a bit extreme. The editing table is where all the different "filmmaker" parts of me come together. When I'm editing, I'm also generating ideas about shots I need to shoot, archival images I need to search for, sounds I need to record, words I need to write, books I need to read, questions I need to ask, music I need to listen to, et cetera. I'm not editing so much as inventing my films as I work on them; it's not something that I can farm out – and frankly, it's way too much fun to let go of.



How has your editing process changed over the years?

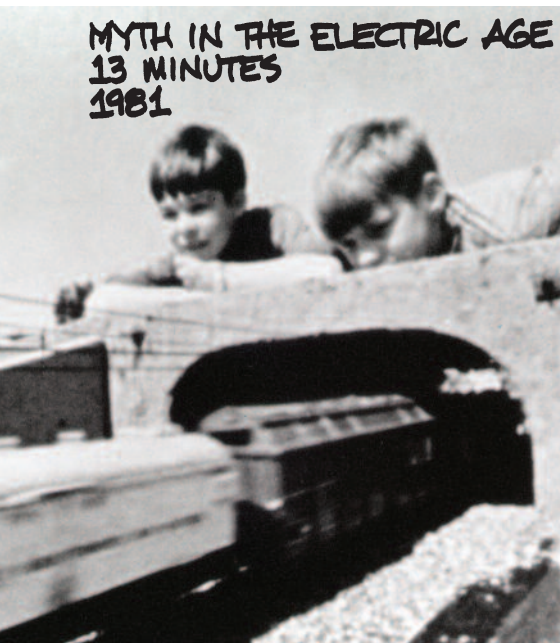
I no longer doubt my initial instincts when I begin to assemble a film. If I've conducted an interview for instance, and then start making selections to use in my film, I only need to do that once; I don't second-guess myself. I've also come to believe in the power of bad ideas. I'm not afraid to have them; in fact, I believe they're essential to the creative process. I also have faith in the very idea of process – that I might start somewhere, think I'm headed in a particular direction, make all sorts of wrong turns trying to get there, then realize I've been mistaken and begin to rethink and reorient where I'm going and how I might get there.

BLIND FAITH
^

BECAUSE I NOW HAVE A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF MY STORY

WITH NEW INSIGHT
^

I'm also someone who loves to refine things. I seem to have unlimited patience for working and reworking something until I get it right. I'm always on the lookout for something loose to tighten, something crooked to straighten, even something good to make better. There's also a little bit of the frustrated musician in me. All of my films have highly articulated rhythmic dynamics that are inspired by a musical sensibility. Throughout the making of *Intimate Stranger*, I always thought of the typewriter as a kind of musical instrument. Same with the use of the metronome in *Nobody's Business*. Thinking back to the days of making *The Family Album*, I've always approached the flow of words and dialogue in my films as melodies - little micro-rhythms that I can counter-point and layer over music or other sounds. I'm always aware of the entire architecture of my canvas: sound-to-sound, picture-to-picture, and picture to sound. Each film has to look right - and sound right. Again, that's part of the fun.



That makes me think of your use of the typewriter sounds in *Intimate Stranger*.

People always ask me where the typewriter idea in *Intimate Stranger* came from. The answer is that I borrowed it from a short collage film I'd made 10 years earlier called *Myth in the Electric Age*. There's a section of that film in which I cut together a bunch of abstract images against the clickety-clack sound of someone plucking away on a manual typewriter. Ten years later I found myself thinking of that same sound-image strategy while staring at thousands of photographs, letters, stamps, and documents left behind by my grandfather. It made total sense to reinvent it in a biographical context as a way of mediating the story of his life - and the sheer volume of elements I had to work with.

How do you account for the stylistic innovations you aim for in films that are also so very personal?

AND TIME CONSUMING

Although it always makes things more difficult for me, I'm continually trying to re-invent the language and grammar of cinema in my films. I'm always searching for new ways of integrating form and content, and developing a coherent set of metaphors that give authenticity to each film. I'm a firm believer that every unique story has its own unique way of being told.

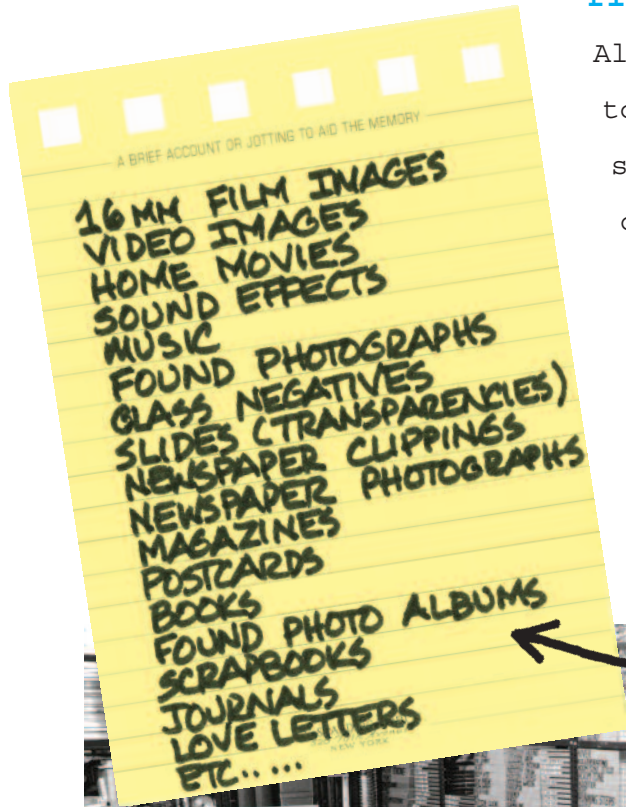
OR SHOULD HAVE

In **Wide Awake**, you took the viewer on a tour of your legendary studio archive, the wall of color-coded boxes containing files of the sounds and images that figure so heavily in your films. How do you make use of archival images?

One of the first epiphanies I ever had about myself was that I am a natural collagist. I like putting things together. Over the years my collections have kept growing and growing. But isn't that what collagists do – gather things around them to put together one day?

IF NOTHING ELSE

At some point along the way I made a rather surprising discovery: that an archival image can simultaneously universalize and personalize





my storytelling. In **Wide Awake**, for example, there are many shots of people tossing and turning in bed, taken from old public domain industrials, news-reels, and fiction films that are part of my collection. These images allow me to universalize the subject of insomnia by taking myself out of the picture momentarily and allowing the viewer to identify with what these anonymous characters are doing or experiencing. It somehow opens up the film. At the same time those images also reinforce the "personal" dimensions of the film, because each of those people struggling to fall asleep serves as both a surrogate and a stand-in for me - as character and as storyteller. Somehow using these archival characters helps alleviate some of the narcissistic baggage that all personal films have to carry and overcome. Ironically, by deflecting attention away from me, I can dare to be even more personal.

"THAT COULD BE ME"



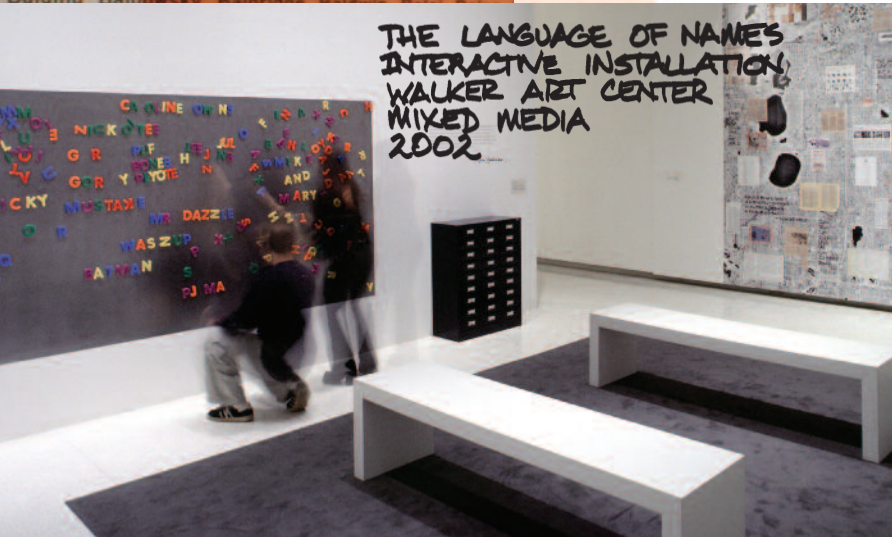
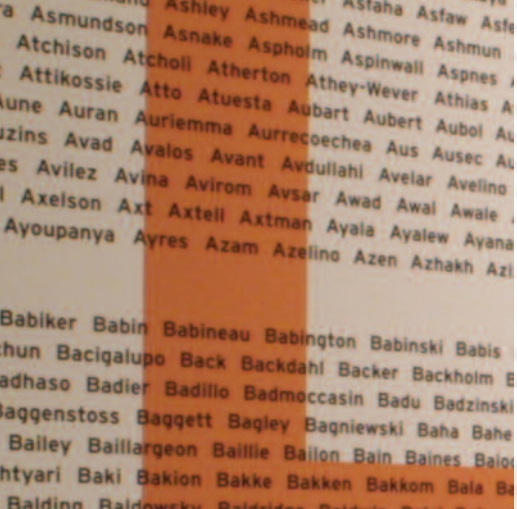
At what point did you realize that?

There are many examples of that phenomenon throughout my work. During the divorce section of **Nobody's Business**, there's a shot of a house falling off a cliff into a river. The scene culminates with my mother saying, "I waited 17 years. I just had to get out of the marriage," and at that very moment, this suburban house literally collapses and slides into the water.



THIS IMAGE WAS ORIGINALLY TAKEN FROM A FILM ABOUT

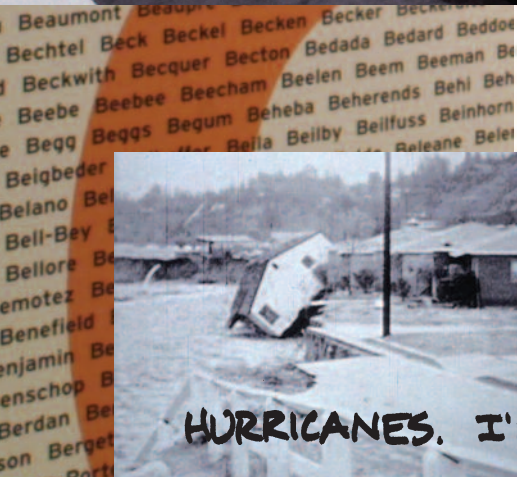
But inside the film that image functions in many ways: it's my house, figuratively and metaphorically; it represents life as we used to know it as a family; **DOWN THE DRAIN, SO TO SPEAK** it's a symbol of my parents' relationship, and/but at the same time, it's also a metaphor for the concept of marriage and the sadness of divorce – both inside and outside of my family. The shot has devastating emotional and psychological power – both personal and universal – simply because of the dramatic content of what is being said over it, none of which has anything to do with houses, rivers, hurricanes or suburbia.



How do your films relate to your installation projects?

In 2002, a year after finishing

The Sweetest Sound I was invited to be an artist in residence at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and made a series of interactive works around the subject of names called **The Language of Names** which also included a text mural on the lobby wall composed of the surnames of everyone living within three miles of the museum. That was the only time I ever conceived of an installation that was directly related to one of my films.



HURRICANES. I'LL NEVER BE ABLE TO LOOK AT IT THE SAME WAY EVER AGAIN.



LATE CITY EDITION 1991



ALL NEWS RADIO 1996



CRITICAL MASS 1996

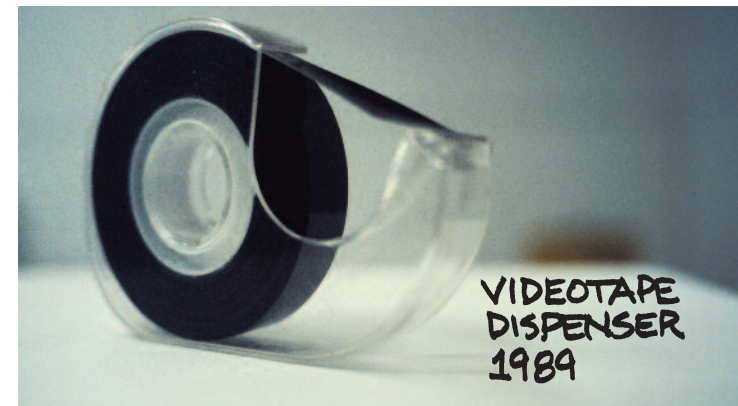
How do the installations fit into your creative life?

I've always operated on two parallel tracks: one in which I make films, and the other that creates installations and other sculptural projects. Many of them are interactive, almost all of them involve mediating and transforming large quantities of material and information - especially sounds and images - and every one of them is shaped by a cinematic sensibility linked to the process of "editing."

REPACKAGING, REFRAMING, AND RESISTING - INFORMATION OVERLOAD



AUDIO YARN 1989



VIDEOTAPE DISPENSER 1989

These audio installations, video sculptures, and "para-cinema" works have allowed me to go outside the boundaries of filmmaking to explore a wider range of forms, which in turn have generated a broader range of ideas about interactivity, ritual, human nature, and the physical embodiment of sound/image relationships. They also allow me to work with "things" - especially the raw materials of media production - like tape recorders, audio speakers, radios, newspapers, televisions, video projectors, video monitors, and most recently, computers. I've always thought that they complement rather than compete with my work as a filmmaker.

DESPITE THE FACT THAT I'M OFTEN INTIMIDATED BY TECHNOLOGY



Where does the interactive component come in?

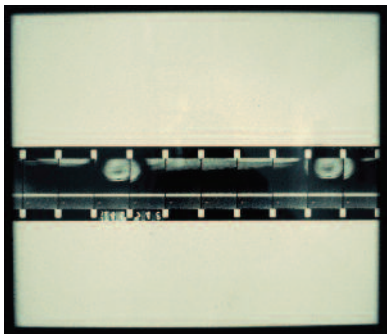
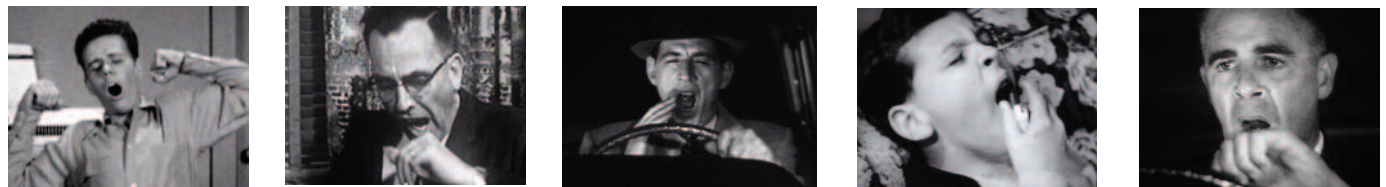
I've always been interested in creating experiences that make people think, that engage them in the process of making choices, and that allow them to have fun at the same time. I want the gallery visitor to feel like they're actively participating in the creation of the work. In ways I both do and don't understand, this way of thinking almost always feeds back into the films.



How so?

Several of my films have interactive components, in which I address the audience directly. For instance, an inter-title in **Nobody's Business** invites viewers to "Please contact the filmmaker" if they recognize a face in one of my father's army photographs. **ONE PERSON DID** **The Sweetest Sound** encourages viewers to contact me if they can prove that their surname was changed at Ellis Island, **NO ONE HAS** and **Wide Awake** is filled with interactive gestures, including one in which I edit a montage of images intended to make the audience yawn. **90% OF THEM DO**

PHOTOGRAPHS OF YAWNING ALSO WORK... →



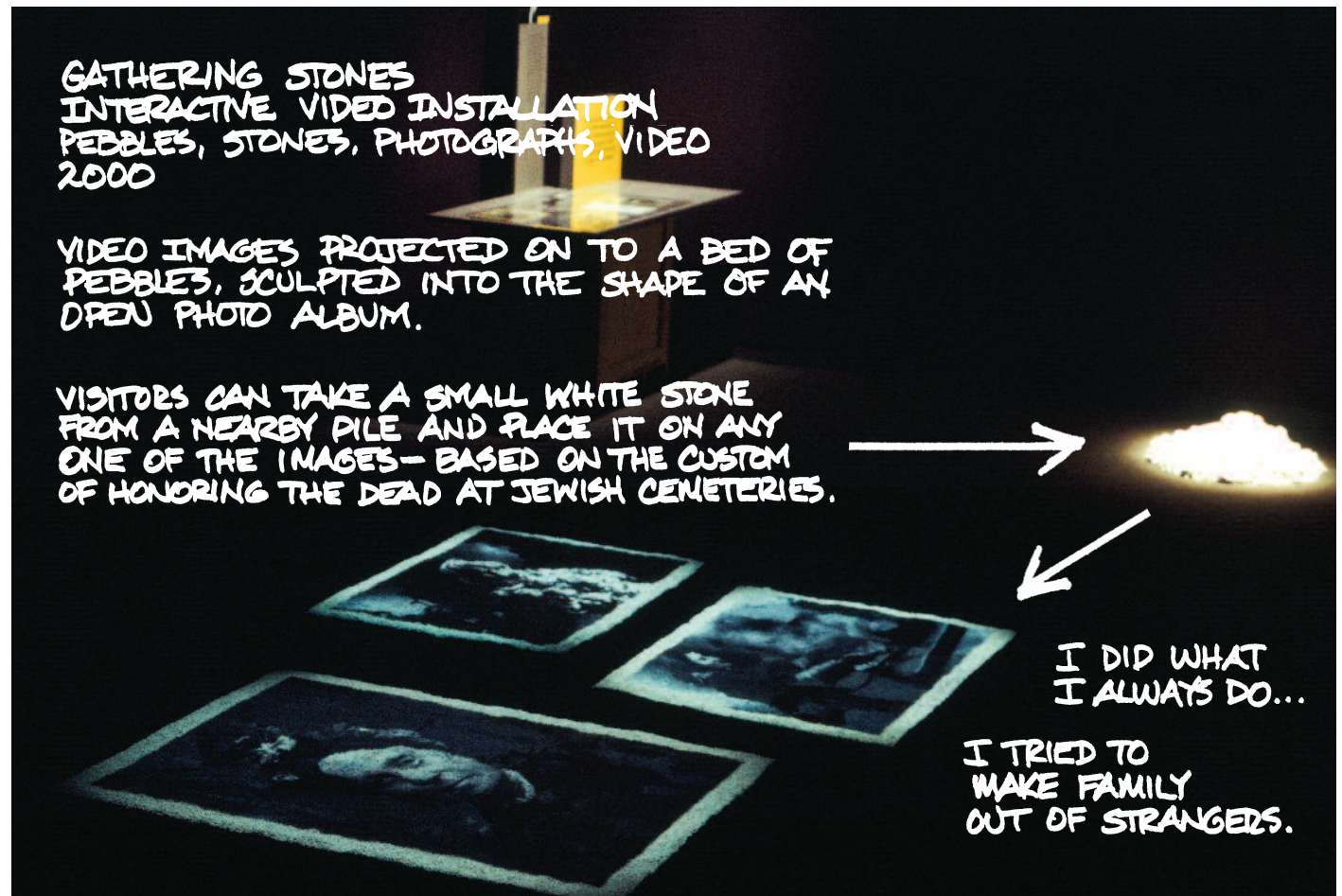
CENTRAL AVENUE 1992

But in a way, the very act of personal filmmaking is interactive. I'm asking the viewer to engage with my film as a mirror **OR A WINDOW** to reflect upon **OR LOOK THROUGH TO SEE** his or her own circumstances. Everyone questions the role of family in their lives: everyone struggles with identity; everyone is inspired by – or haunted by – someone's legacy. I want to take the audience to places they already know very well, but might not venture to on their own.



Your installations haven't been about personal subjects, have they?

I've been commissioned several times to make works exploring my Jewish identity and heritage. In 2000 I was commissioned to make **Gathering Stones**, an installation inspired by portrait photos of life in pre-war Eastern Europe from the archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. And in 2008, the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco asked me to make a work inspired by the Creation story in Genesis. **Playing God** used seven computers to operate what I describe as an interactive video slot machine that produces seven-word Haiku-esque phrases from the scrambled text of Genesis. And so, to



PLAYING GOD
INTERACTIVE VIDEO INSTALLATION
CONTEMPORARY JEWISH MUSEUM, SAN FRANCISCO
MIXED MEDIA
2008

open

story

with



beginning

His

work

PART GAME OF CHANCE, PART CINEMATIC TOY,
PART BIBLICAL COMMENTARY, I WANTED TO REVEAL
A UNIVERSE OF SIGNIFICANCE, MEANING AND
CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE HIDDEN INSIDE THE
TEXT OF GENESIS.

PRESS TO START SCRAMBLING
THE WORDS OF GENESIS

PRESS TO STOP ON A
SEVEN-WORD PHRASE

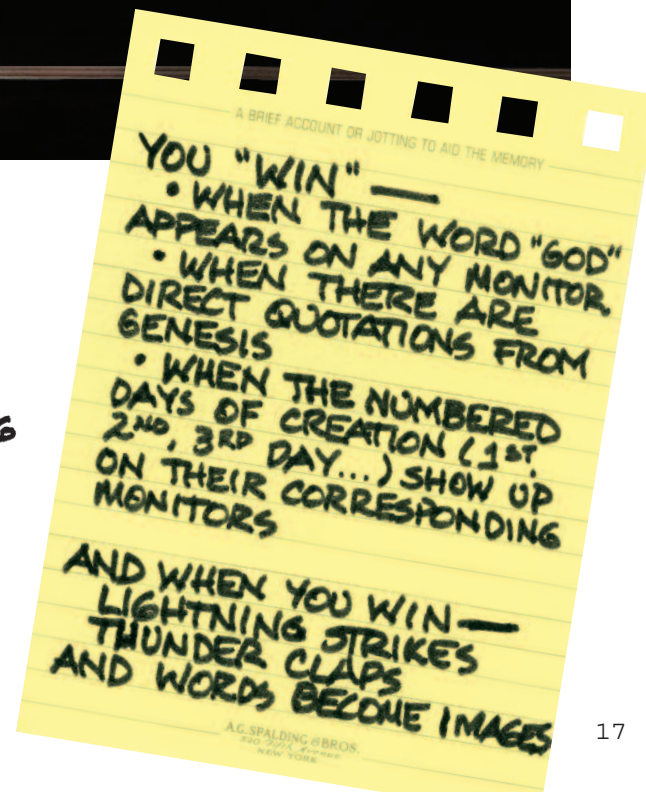
LIKE A SLOT MACHINE

answer your question, no, I've never done an installation project directly related to me or my family, but it's something that's always in the back of my mind.

Wait... just for the record, I did use the sound of my father's voice in **Audiofile**, a sound sculpture I made back in 1993. Also the sound of dirt hitting a casket that I recorded at my Uncle Henry's funeral.

HARD OF HEARING

REST IN PEACE



I remember seeing **Audiofile** during my first visit to your studio. How did you decide what was going to go in each of those drawers?

UNPREDICTABLY INTRIGUING **ALSO**
I needed to find 108 sounds that would cut through the low-fidelity playback of a cassette tape recorder. But the real fun part was giving each drawer a label **A NAME!** — Open a drawer labeled “No Trespassing” and you hear a dog barking. Open “Light Breeze” and you hear wind chimes. “Nobody Home” is a telephone ringing. Before you hear any sound, the label on the drawer has already set up a playful dynamic between the acts of guessing, anticipation and surprise.



And it was also fun to play, like an instrument.

Once you start playing with it, you can create a wide range of sound combinations - from raucous cacophonies to concrete music compositions to the soundtracks of imaginary narratives. At one time **Audiofile** had a kind of cutting edge feel to it, but now 16 years later, it's begun to feel like a monument to the cumbersome excessiveness of all things analogue. People have suggested that I make a digital version of it, and it would probably be easy enough to do; but as both concept and an art object there's something quintessentially pure about touching, seeing and hearing everything right in front of you.

NAM JUNE PAIK ONCE WHISPERED IN MY EAR HOW MUCH HE LIKED IT!

And so what words would you use to describe yourself?

I've avoided that question my entire creative life. I've been described in many different ways, ^{SEE PAGE ONE} but have never actually used any of them to describe myself. I have a pedigree in avant-garde film but I make films that are embraced by the documentary film world. I make interactive installations that can range from emanations of Fluxus ^{AUDIOFILE IN PARTICULAR} to investigations of my Jewish heritage. I'm way too obsessive and much too restless for anyone to easily categorize; I suspect that'll always be the case.

LAWEEKLY 1-26-2006

One of the most satisfying reviews ^A ever written about **Wide Awake** said, "Another gloriously eccentric achievement by filmmaker Alan Berliner." I'm not exactly sure what that quote means, but it made me feel wonderful. In the end I don't



SELECTED WORKS

FILMOGRAPHY

WIDE AWAKE (2006) 79 min. color sound
THE SWEETEST SOUND (2001) 60 min. color sound
NOBODY'S BUSINESS (1996) 60 min. color sound
INTIMATE STRANGER (1991) 60 min. color sound
LATE CITY EDITION (1990) Video, 19 min. b/w sound
THE FAMILY ALBUM (1986) 60 min. b/w sound
EVERYWHERE AT ONCE (1985) 10 min. color sound
NATURAL HISTORY (1983) 13 min. color sound
MYTH IN THE ELECTRIC AGE (1981) 15 min. color sound
CITY EDITION (1980) 10 min. b/w sound
LINES OF FORCE (1979) 7 min. color sound
COLOR WHEEL (1977) 20 min. color silent
FOUR CORNER TIME: 4 PARTS (1976-77) b/w silent
 LINE 7 min., PERIMETER 11 min.,
 TRAFFIC LIGHT 12 min., INTERSECTION 10 min.
PATENT PENDING (1975) 11 min. b/w sound

PARA-CINEMA, WEB WORKS, INSTALLATIONS AND MEDIA SCULPTURES

EXQUISITE CORPSE (2008)
PLAYING GOD (2008)
13 WAYS OF LOOKING AT SOUND (2003)
 www.transom.org
GATHERING STONES (2002) and (2000)
THE LANGUAGE OF NAMES (2002)
THE ART OF WAR (1999)
FOUND SOUND (1998) www.ntv-artbytes.org
ELECTRIC GUITAR (1997)
ALL NEWS RADIO (1996)
CRITICAL MASS (1996)
THE RED THREAD (1996)
POSTMARKS (1994)
AUDIOFILE (1993)
AVIARY (1993)
CENTRAL AVENUE (1992)
LATE CITY EDITION (1991)

MADE FOR TV MOVIE (1990)
SEA OF TRANQUILLITY (1990)
TOUCH TYPING (1990)
AUDIOMERA (1989)
AUDIO YARN (1989)
VIDEOTAPE DISPENSER (1989)
SONAR FLASHLIGHT (1989)
NATURAL HISTORY: A PHOTO JOURNAL
 (1981) Performance
PAPER FILMS - VARIOUS (1980 - 1986)
WORKPRINT (1979)
HOME MOVIE (1979)
BLACK & WHITE TO COLOR (1978)
CITY FILM STRIPS (1978)
SOLID STATE (1978)
SPLICE (1978)
CINE-MATRIX (1977)



CITY FILM STRIPS
1978

think it matters how my work is labeled – by me or by anybody else. But if I had to choose some descriptive words, I'd say that all of my films and installations are highly edited constructions, trying to re-imagine and re-frame our relationships to things we often take for granted. I

IN ANY MEDIUM

want all of my work to resonate that way. Lots to think about, fun to interact with, playful but controlled – and/but also unpredictable, inspired, and each authentic in its very own way. And last but not least, labors of love, each and every one of them. Simple as that.

AND PEOPLE
AND RELATIONSHIPS
AND PROCESSES

I think I'm going to have to stop you on that thought; it's getting way past my bedtime.

C'mon Anne, I'm just getting warmed up. . .

It's time to go to sleep, Alan. →



SPECIAL THANKS
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