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Curation and Cinema

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Abstract

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From the London Film Society in the 1920s to Cinema 16 in the 1950s to a multitude of contemporary artist-run and DIY screening spaces, the independently curated film screening has historically been, and remains, a robust and underdocumented practice. Following from the traditional definition of curate, to *care for*, and the contemporary notion of curation as the putting together of materials for exhibition, this dissertation examines the practice of independent cinema curation.

As a practice, the curation of cinema has tended to slip through the cracks between commercial cinema and museums or other major institutions. At the same time, it has not been extensively theorized in either curation studies or cinema studies. Rather than recuperate this activity into one or another of these fields or institutional contexts, I argue that the strength of cinema curation is in exactly this in-between location. Artist Mike Kelley's notion of "minor history," the queer temporalities of José Esteban Muñoz, and the "now-being" of past objects discussed by Walter Benjamin each provide a theoretical example of rethinking the possibilities of curation through cinema. Independent curators of cinema move among institutional and non-institutional settings, outside of festival models, and among the different temporalities of film durations, screening durations, and historical eras, to create uniquely configured experiences that reflect the thematic, political and structural concerns of the works shown. Instead of presenting films as objects, I argue for methods of curation that provoke a work's traces, and cinema's excess elements.

Amos Vogel's mid-century film society Cinema 16, Andy Warhol's multimedia shows with the Velvet Underground, and James Nares' television-based performance work *Desirium Probe* each provide a case study of moving outside the bounds of presenting films as self-contained objects and into the curation of cinematic experience. The dissertation is based in both theory and practice: each of the case studies consists of historical research and film analysis alongside a practice component in the form of public screenings or performance.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Describing a Film, Describing Curation

Anthony McCall's 1973 film *Line Describing a Cone* takes thirty minutes to draw a white circle on a black background. Nothing else happens on screen in the course of the movie: no other imagery or action, and no sound. Off screen, however, is a different matter. The film requires that the room be slightly fogged with a machine, and this fog makes visible the projected light on its way from projector to screen.¹ The result is that the circular line on the screen gradually *describes*, in the geometrical sense, a cone in the room, with its base at the screen and its apex at the projector lens. The film is viewed not in a regular theater but in an empty space without seats (another requirement). Viewers position themselves anywhere they like along the slowly forming cone of fog and interact with it: putting their fingers through it to interrupt it, putting their heads inside to look at the mysterious, somewhat magical curved light, or simply observing the process: the other people, and the cone that, once completed, disappears at film's end. Wherever the viewers may go—and set free from theater seating, there are any number of responses—it

¹ Anthony McCall, "Specifications for the Projection of *Line Describing a Cone* to an Audience," Canyon Cinema, <http://canyoncinema.com/catalog/film/?i=1617> (accessed October 6, 2013).

is clear that the “best view in the house” is actually found standing at the screen, just outside of the circle, and facing back toward the projector.

I have begun by describing the experience of a particular film rather than with a hypothesis or a research question, because this project and the questions it asks—like the practice it examines—are always first motivated by the experience of particular films, and are best approached through that experience. As both a reel of film and an experience in time and space, *Line Describing a Cone* describes the cinema that has brought this research project into being. It is explicitly social, creating a situation for viewers to interact with the work but also with each other. It embodies forms other than cinema (*film describing a sculpture*)—ironically, by reducing film to what may seem to be a fundamental quality, projected light.² It requires any exhibitor of the film to locate an appropriate (specifically non-theatrical) venue, thus becoming about the space in which it’s shown. It necessarily places the film projector visibly in the room, eliminating the separate projection booth. And it inverts the subject of our viewing: instead of facing the screen, we face the source of the projected light. And we do so communally.

In this last way, *Line Describing a Cone* describes my research project itself: turning back to face the projection, the process by which we experience, and think about,

² This irony was noted in Jonathan Walley, “An Interview with Anthony McCall,” *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 54 (Fall 2004): 65. McCall has long spoken of the film’s relation to sculpture, as well as of the film as “a type of participatory performance.” Anthony McCall, “‘Line Describing a Cone’ and Related Films,” *October* 103 (Winter 2003): 43–47.

cinema together. If traditional film scholarship involves showing films to identify and analyze what they contain, this project inverts that scholarly mode: I will discuss certain films in order to examine the process of showing them. The subject, then, is the curation of cinema—first, the putting-together of films into programs (curation in its popularly understood sense); second, the putting-together of these programs with viewers; and, in a more traditional sense, how this process helps to care for those film works and kinds of cinema that bring film curation into being—and that, in turn, *describe* curation. The research question, then, is about the relationship between these two entities: how does curation change cinema, and how does cinema change curation?

Once again, *Line Describing a Cone* is instructive here. As mentioned above, the film cannot be shown in any space where the presence of seats would impede the free movement of viewers. This automatically removes it from a traditional movie theater with its fixed seating. In practice, it turns out to be quite difficult to find an empty room of thirty to fifty feet in length, adequately accessible to interested viewers, that can be completely darkened, where a fog machine will not set off a smoke detector, or cause any number of other problems that sometimes aren't even apparent until the event of projection. Today, projections of this film usually find a home in a gallery or museum, but they do not always adhere to the museum viewing model, in which viewers wander in

and out independently of the imagery.³ Thus, the film's conceptual location is as ambiguous as its physical one, and is intimately linked with it.

Line Describing a Cone, then, is exemplary of films that do not just benefit from but require particularly active, even performative, curation. In contrast, this activity is entirely absent from commercial studio-produced cinema, which has its own well-oiled, deliberately fogged structures of making, distribution, exhibition, publicity and reception.

Line Describing a Cone is commonly located within avant-garde film, but the films which require curatorial care are not limited to this tradition. On several occasions, I have shown *Behind Every Good Man*, a 16mm student film made by Nikolai Ursin in 1966 Los Angeles, about a transgender African-American. This small, remarkable film envisions a completely different way to represent gay or transgender people: instead of the motifs of angst, shame, suicide or homicide common to mainstream film of the time (and well after), *Behind Every Good Man* shows an everyday existence, with a character whose explicitly stated wish for "a happy life" seems less anomalous or radical than simply achievable. And its form subtly reflects its subject. The opening and closing sections are a thinly veiled narrative about the protagonist's search for love, but the

³ As Branden Joseph notes, "Unlike now, when *Line Describing a Cone* is increasingly presented as a continuously running installation, viewers originally always started as a group." Branden W. Joseph, "Sparring with the Spectacle," in *Anthony McCall: The Solid Light Films and Related Works*, ed. Christopher Eamon (San Francisco: New Art Trust, 2005), 45. McCall noted the differences between theatrical and museum screenings of the film in McCall, "'Line Describing a Cone' and Related Films," 44–45. My own presentation of *Line Describing a Cone* in the Film Love series (October 7, 2005) was as a cinematic work, viewed by the audience from beginning to end.

middle section is pure documentary: while on the soundtrack the man tells the story of a police bust with an unexpectedly happy ending, we see him apply makeup and wig, transitioning among genders as surely as the film does among genres. I could not find any earlier document of an openly gay African-American in film history. Yet when I first showed it in January 2007, there was only one passing reference to this film in print, and almost no mention of it on the internet. Further, I was told by the distributor that I was showing the only circulating print in the United States (and, as far as I could tell, anywhere).

Unfortunately, it does not seem coincidental that a film, even if the very first, on a transgender African-American should itself be neglected, nearly invisible and at imminent risk. Different as this film may be from *Line Describing a Cone*, we can see that they both require an active mode of *care* for their ongoing survival, that this mode of care touches the political as well as the aesthetic (or renders the distinction irrelevant), and that the results have implications for both our interior and social lives, grounded in the collective experience of cinema.

But further, the mode of care is itself in need of explication, and preservation. The curation of cinema is not merely a transparent process at the end of which codified images appear on a screen for us to then interpret. In such films as I have described, processes of transition (from one gender, genre, cinema space to another), interruption (of the cone, of the distribution of a film), non-fixity (of the image, of context, of meaning, of the cinema space) and ephemerality (of projected light, of the cinematic experience),

work together with those of fixity (of the film as an artifact, of the photographic index, of the progression of cinematic duration) to define not only the content but the exhibition of these films. In short, the curation of cinema cares for not only films but for their exhibition and their contexts—ultimately, for what a given film does outside and beyond the screen.

David MacDougall describes a salient feature of the French notion of *photogénie*: “...a heightening of cinematic ‘excess’—that physical residue in the image that resists absorption into symbol, narrative, or expository discourse. As excess, the by-products of mechanical vision defy the containment of the work and are more capable of touching the exposed sensibilities of the viewer.”⁴ This excess—“by-products”—becomes visible through the projection of film: “mechanical vision.”

The artist and filmmaker Jack Smith put this another way. “The primitive allure of movies is a thing of light and shadows. A bad film is one which doesn't flicker and shift and move through lights and shadows, contrasts, textures by way of light.”⁵ Smith was praising Maria Montez, whose films were often considered “bad” by those who could not *see* their primitive allure. But he could have been writing of von Sternberg, or Stan

⁴ David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 18.

⁵ Jack Smith, “The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez,” in *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith*, ed. J. Hoberman and Edward Leffingwell (New York: Serpent’s Tail, 1997), 33.

Brakhage, as he was of the Marx Brothers, Busby Berkeley, *I Walked With a Zombie*, “the whole gaudy array of secret-flix, any flic we enjoyed.”⁶ That cinema’s allure—indeed, its underlying subject—is the play of light rather than the content or ideology of a given film, suggests a knowledge, or a reality, beyond that which is reproduced for us within the frame and on the screen. It is exactly this excess—whether found in the photogénie of the image, the flicker and shift of film’s light and motion, or the methods of curating and exhibiting moving images—which interests me.

The research question outlined above, then, leads to a practical question: how does one curate not only cinema but its excess? Of what does this excess consist, and is it part of the work, or beyond it? And what are the exhibition methods that best address these questions?

Animating Questions

Since 2003, I have presented one hundred thirty programs in Film Love—a large-scale, ongoing, public curatorial project intended to provide access to important but not easily seen works. Not limited to avant-garde works, the series presents film documents and artifacts of any kind, seeking different ways of viewing and thinking about the moving image in culture and history.

⁶ Ibid., 32.

Film Love began as an autodidactic method of cinema history—or put more practically, a way for me to afford to view films I wanted to see but which no one nearby was exhibiting. An immediate audience and critical response in the form of higher-than-expected attendance, positive press coverage, and grant support for screenings indicated that describing these films as “obscure” (or “avant-garde”) represents aesthetic and economic prejudices more than an accurate reflection of their worth. Experiences such as showing *Behind Every Good Man* and *Line Describing a Cone* to large and enthusiastic audiences alerted me to the urgency of availability and critical evaluation of such films, and by extension others in similar circumstances.

Thus, a program with the initially modest goal of presenting rare works has become a multifaceted, long-term project taking in a study of the history of independent film exhibition and distribution; issues of preservation and archiving; forays into ethnography, art history, queer history and their intersections; and scholarship and writing geared toward a general audience and dedicated to demystifying the viewing of these works. In turn, all of these concerns have impacted my curatorial and artistic work, inspiring explorations into original modes of viewing films, including site-specific screenings, and raising questions about the nature of independent film screenings. What exhibition models, other than commercial theaters, film festivals, and art spaces, are available for films? How can these models reflect the concerns (historical, formal, and medium-specific) of the films themselves? How do different types of film relate to each other in a single screening, as well as over the course of a long-term series? What is the

place of the audience in experimental film exhibition, given the noncommercial aspect—yet clear appeal—of much of this work? What does it mean to curate, in the sense of care for, a film? Is film curating a part of curation, or does curation as we traditionally conceive it change when its subject is the moving image and its audiences?

These questions extend to those who practice curation. The film curator is a more or less independent, more or less political figure, albeit one who tends to disappear behind his or her curatorial choices. How, then, are film curators and the film curatorial seen—if at all? Are they visible as the curatorial in the way films are visible as cinema? And again, what are the curatorial and exhibition methods that address these questions? All of these questions animate this project, and their answers will hopefully serve to sustain this practice and the moving images it presents.

This Introduction

In the remainder of this introduction I will locate the intellectual framework of the dissertation within studies of curation and film, establish the Film Love series as subject and research method of the dissertation, and describe the case studies. First, I will look at curation as it has been theorized in its contemporary visual arts context. This leads to a more extended historical study of independent film curation. Situating Film Love in this history, I describe how the series inverts or otherwise changes standard models of film exhibition, from the choices of films to the temporalities and spatialities of exhibition.

Intellectual framework of the dissertation

In this project I hypothesize that the context of curation changes how we think of and view cinema, and that curating cinema changes how we experience acts of curation. While cinema and curation have been extensively theorized as separate fields, they have rarely been thought through together. Combining them thus requires some critical unpacking of the terms. Later in this introduction I will discuss what “cinema” means in the context of Film Love; in this section I will define the term “curation” for the purposes of this dissertation. I will situate my own use of curation in the field of curatorial studies, but—led by my own practice of curating Film Love—also look at how it differs from this field.

What is Curation?

Curate, curation, curator, curatorship, the curatorial: these terms follow one from another, and mean different things in different contexts. A traditional definition of *curate*—to care for, look after, preserve—links curation with the management of a collection, and by extension aligns the curator with a museum, library, or other collecting institution. The subtitle of *Film Curatorship*, the first book-length study on the subject—“Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace”—suggests exactly this definition. Indeed, the book is primarily a series of conversations about the curatorship of collections

in film archives, and the attendant issues of preservation amid the change from the medium of film to digital platforms.⁷

In the visual arts, where most critical writing on curation has been done, the definition and role of curation has extensively and continuously mutated in the last decades. Writing in the 1990s on the emergence of the curator as “exhibition author,” the visual art and film curator Jens Hoffmann argues that “curating has clearly reinvented itself to a degree that it is unlikely to return to the situation in which the curator is perceived as facilitator or caretaker.”⁸ Beatrice von Bismarck *et al* write of a “curatorial turn” that has taken place in contemporary culture, and that concomitant with this turn is a new notion of curating as “principally an activity of putting together.”⁹ If this is true, it applies as much to the presentation of exhibitions as to the building and maintaining of collections and archives. Indeed, it is the last of these terms, the *curatorial*—“of or pertaining to a curator,” according to the OED—which narrows the activities of curation to the particular skills involved in exhibiting a selection of works, and thus widens the field of curators beyond those institutionally affiliated figures maintaining archives and

⁷ Paolo Cherchi Usai, et al., eds., *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace* (Vienna: Österreichisches Filmmuseum and SYNEMA--Gesellschaft für Film und Medien, 2008).

⁸ Jens Hoffmann, “A Certain Tendency of Curating,” in *Curating Subjects*, ed. Paul O’Neill (London: Open Editions, 2007), 138.

⁹ Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, and Thomas Weski, introduction to *Cultures of the Curatorial*, ed. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, and Thomas Weski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 8.

permanent collections, to include those groups and individuals who are primarily involved in choosing, arranging and interpreting works for an exhibition context. Following from this is the contemporary figure whose creative exhibition work blurs the boundaries between curation and artistic activity.¹⁰

It is this contemporary sense of the curatorial with which my project and practice are concerned. Specifically, I study curation as the activity of creating and presenting public programs of films, usually short films, including the tasks of choosing works, researching works and their related subjects, contextualizing selections for viewers, and in the process fostering awareness of cinematic possibilities, and extending and facilitating communal viewing experiences. As a practitioner of a curatorial tradition extending back at least to the 1950s in the United States, I work among rather than within institutions, tend to present in non-commercial spaces, and am involved in putting together and exhibiting programs rather than in the building and maintenance of a collection. In short, my practice is that of *independent cinema curation*—the process of making films visible *as cinema* to a public. This process preserves not individual films but rather a mode of cinema exhibition. This mode involves the temporality and spatiality particular to cinema, leading to the question of what it is that is curated differently when we speak of curating cinema.

¹⁰ On the history of convergence between artistic and curatorial practice, as well as the implications for both art and curation, see Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 87–129.

Curatorial Studies and History as a Framework

In *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, Paul O’Neill examines the changes in curatorial discourse since the late 1960s, and the origins of the art exhibition as a kind of work in its own right. In the 1920s, artists had begun to construct installations of multiple works, to question art’s status as autonomous from society. This resulted in exhibitions that emphasized the viewer’s participation and their negotiation of the exhibition space, rather than the artwork as an object independent of these relations.¹¹ By the late 1960s, this historical avant-garde had extended to conceptual art, which postulated that art could be about—or could simply exist as—ideas. This led to an expanded activity of art making in many different forms, including performance, installation, and everyday activities. Alongside this development emerged curators who were independent of institutions and of collecting roles. As a result, the exhibition came to be considered its own medium, “clearly identified with a specific exhibition maker, or with the signature style of the curator-producer and by his or her ability to contextualize a range of work as a whole entity.”¹² In this moment, the gallerist and curator Seth Siegelaub conceptualized his own exhibition practice as “demystification”—that is,

¹¹ Ibid., 10–11.

¹² Ibid., 16.

making visible the factors involved in the exhibiting of art.¹³ As a result, “the production of the work of art and its mediation in a public exhibition context were intertwined.”¹⁴

In subsequent decades, this demystification of exhibiting led to ever-increasing visibility of curators, and to the curated exhibition as a recognized form of discourse. In some ways, curators’ visibility was conceptualized as a form of accountability, based on the assertion that curators’ power resided in invisibility, “intrinsically bound to the traditional concept of the museum as a rational, neutral and authoritative place of absolute truths and values,” as Catherine Johnson wrote.¹⁵ To demystify the process and make visible the curator’s contribution was to resist institutions’ authority. On the other hand, this visibility reinforced curators as individual figures and centers of discourse in art, thus contributing to a hierarchy in which curators’ power was increased. Since the late 1980s, this has been gradually reflected in the linguistic expansion of “curator” as a noun to the newly introduced verb “to curate” and the adjective “curatorial,” with the phrase “curated by” denoting authorship, and “mak[ing] evident the idea that there is an

¹³ Ibid., 19.

¹⁴ Ibid., 21.

¹⁵ Catherine Thomas, *The Edge of Everything: Reflections on Curatorial Practice* (Banff, Canada: Banff Centre Press, 2000): ix, quoted in Paul O’Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, 33.

agency other than the artist at work within all exhibitions, and that the exhibition is a form of curatorial vocabulary with its own grammar.”¹⁶

O’Neill describes a subsequent explosion of written discourse on curating in the 1990s and beyond, as curators attempted to counter historical “amnesia” with exhibition and curation histories and theoretical literature. O’Neill is critical of much of this discourse, which “remains self-referential, curator-centered, and curator-led, with unstable historical foundations.”¹⁷

Accompanying this discourse, and the attempts to establish a historiography of exhibition and curating, has been the increasing professionalization of the field in the form of graduate degree programs in curatorial practice and study throughout Europe and the United States.

First-person in Theory and Practice

As part of this project, I argue that the curation of cinema is distinct from that of the visual arts. But the issues involved with the emerging discourse on exhibition curation interface with that of cinema curation at certain points. This dissertation is my attempt to understand cinema curation, the activity which represents my public commitment to and personal experience of cinema over the last thirteen years. I submit that the public

¹⁶ Paul O’Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, 32.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

activity of my curating and its personal impact on me are not easily separable, nor is it always productive to do so, especially at this moment. As O’Neill describes the early attempts at curatorial discourse, “without exception, and some more than others, they placed an emphasis on individual practice, the first-person narrative and curator self-positioning...as they attempted to define and map out a relatively barren field of discourse.”¹⁸ How much more barren and undefined is the discourse of cinema curation: as Laura U. Marks wrote in 2004, aside from a handful of little-documented conferences, “[film] curators and programmers are mostly on their own in the attempt to develop a thoughtful practice.”¹⁹ Subsequent attempts to theorize film curation have been few. In a way, then, this dissertation follows the earlier trajectory of curatorial studies—it is at times a first-person account of curating, on the way to discovering the meaning of the public activity of creating cultural experience. This give-and-take between the personal and the public merges with that between theory and practice. That is, in this dissertation I both practice curation and study that practice. Further, as we will see in subsequent chapters, the practice itself is inherently subjective. In writing as a practitioner, then, I will necessarily approach this project in part as an account of my practice—but not, in O’Neill’s formulation, “individual” practice, for the public experience of cinema and of films remains primary. This project does not seek to establish a theory or genealogy of cinema curation, for there are many possible approaches to the subject and the practice.

¹⁸ Paul O’Neill, introduction to *Curating Subjects*, 13–14.

¹⁹ Laura U. Marks, forward to *The Moving Image* 4, no. 1 (2004): ix.

Nevertheless, there are ways to discuss what is specific to the curation of cinema, and how this opens onto larger questions of the curation of culture generally.

Film Curating and Film Programming

As in any robust but largely undefined field, film curation is partly characterized by a profusion of practices and an accompanying confusion of terms. *Avant-garde* and *experimental* are used interchangeably to describe (to almost no one's satisfaction) a body of films as disparate as *Line Describing a Cone* and *Behind Every Good Man*. *Programming* and *curating* are similarly utilized together to delineate the activity of selecting films for public screenings. As I have suggested above, the aim of this project is not a genealogy; it is still less to define these terms. Indeed, I would seek to *preserve* this unruliness—not to sow confusion, but because in theory and practice I am interested precisely in the lineaments of cinema that become apparent in the places where cinema and its practices are resistant to codification. In other words, I seek not to clarify terms but to illuminate connections, and in so doing to magnify the process of interconnecting that I believe characterizes curation's most productive potential. The question of how this process works, and how it is visible, will be taken up in the case studies.

The following section of this introduction, then, will draw a certain scholarly line through existing terms, literature, and histories of cinema curation, in order to establish a framework for the case studies. Methodologically, it combines a review of the relevant literature with a historical overview, moving from the independent activity of putting together and exhibiting films to historical attempts to locate this activity physically (in

what spaces has this taken place?) and conceptually (where has this practice been located artistically, in scholarship, and for viewers?).

Laura U. Marks has differentiated film programming from film curation.²⁰

Programming denotes regular exhibition in festivals and series; it is characterized by Marks as “objective,” and purports to survey specific areas or fields of (presumably current) filmmaking, and to do so with the assumption that what is being offered is the best quality work that the programmers could find: “programming is a reflection on the state of the field.”²¹ Or, as Director of the New York Film Festival Richard Peña has said, “We aim to show what we feel is the best on offer in any given year.”²² By contrast, curating is subjective, depending largely on the taste, ability and knowledge of the curator, and driven by ideas, concepts, or themes. But in either case, according to Marks, it is the presence of a framing *argument* in a screening or series which allows for dialogue and accountability. For example, in programming, where “quality” is an often nebulous and unexamined basis for choices of films, stating the criteria by which quality

²⁰ Laura U. Marks, “The Ethical Presenter: Or How to Have Good Arguments over Dinner,” *The Moving Image* 4, no. 1 (2004): 34–47.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

²² Richard Peña, “Setting the Course: Directors and Directions at the New York Film Festival, 1963-2010,” in *Coming Soon to a Festival Near You: Programming Film Festivals*, ed. Jeffrey Ruoff (St Andrews, Scotland: St Andrews Film Studies, 2012), 81.

is judged is essential. In curating, which is more subjective, an explicitly stated thesis “invites agreement, qualification, or dissent,” and fosters audience trust in the curator.²³

For Marks, curating “is ideally a dialectic between ideas and films,”²⁴ but in practice the organizing idea is primary; she goes so far as to describe coming up with the title and concept of a program, then looking for films which fit. (As we will see in chapter two, Amos Vogel, the foundational example of American film curating, did not work this way at all.) Though my own programs contain conceptual links among selections that may amount to an argument, I work in the opposite direction from Marks. In almost all cases, a Film Love program’s origin is in my attraction to a particular film or group of films. I then go so far as to organize other films around this initial selection in terms of an anticipated *affective* quality, more than an intellectual idea.

This is not to say that programs are devoid of an intellectual thread, for a *theme*, if not an argument, generally emerges out of the process and affects the further choices. Ideally, this allows the selections to cohere emotionally and intellectually. However, there are reasons to be wary of a requirement for an overarching theme or argument in film programs. As Marks points out, there is a danger of subjugating film’s *visuality* to a

²³ Marks, “The Ethical Presenter,” 43.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

verbal argument.²⁵ But further, an argument can be misapplied to describe a program whose integrity may actually reside in its resistance to a standard intellectual (not just verbal) construct. (Once again, Cinema 16 will provide just such an example in the next chapter.)

Tracing Historical Film Curation

In this project I apply to cinema a notion of the curatorial usually considered the purview of visual arts and art history. To a certain extent, this project will be located among traditional historical divisions and relations between these two fields of visual arts and film. These divisions, often acute and tense, have manifested in a kind of class distinction described broadly as that between experimental *filmmakers* (for example, Stan Brakhage) and *artists* who work with the film (or video) medium (such as Tacita Dean).²⁶

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 43–44.

²⁶ For a lucid exploration of these differences, see especially Jonathan Walley, “Modes of Film Practice in the Avant-Garde,” in *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton (London: Tate Publishing in association with Afterall, 2008), 182–99. Also see Erika Balsom, “Brakhage’s Sour Grapes, or Notes on Experimental Cinema in the Art World,” *Moving Image Review & Art Journal* 1, no. 1 (January 2012): 13–25, though Balsom describes these differences as a way of arguing the *proximity* of experimental film to the art world. On these divisions and distinctions from a curatorial perspective, see Siri Peyer, introduction to *On-Curating.org*, no. 3 (2010): 1–2; and Siri Peyer and Wolf Schmelter, “The Cinema Auditorium: Interview with Ian White,” *On-Curating.org*, no. 3 (2010): 2–4, http://on-curating.org/files/oc/dateverwaltung/old%20Issues/ONCURATING_Issue3.pdf (accessed September 22, 2013).

Aesthetically and formally, this division is neatly sited in spatial terms, as the “black box” of cinema and the “white cube” of the gallery or museum.²⁷

This is a more recent manifestation of a long history of ambivalence among cultural institutions regarding the inclusion of moving imagery. As Alison Griffiths has shown, early natural history museums desired to incorporate film from the beginning, but always amid a tension between the museum’s role in civic uplift and rational learning and the cinema’s perceived milieu of popular amusement and spectacle: “Motion pictures were desirable in their mass appeal, but this appeal was exactly what was most suspect and subject to censorship.”²⁸ The first museum to fully promote film collecting and exhibition in a major way was the Museum of Modern Art, beginning in the 1930s. Haidie Wasson has shown how the MoMA Film Library’s “earliest and most significant impact was in coordinating and mobilizing a set of ideas and practices of watching movies.”²⁹ This new institutional view of cinema as an art changed not only film but also the museum, by “institutionalizing the relatively novel and modern assertion that in

²⁷ For example, see Tanya Leighton, introduction to *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, 7; Andrew V. Uroskie, *Between the Black Box and the White Cube: Expanded Cinema and Postwar Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Erika Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 39–42; The gallery as “white cube” was first and most prominently theorized by Brian O’Doherty in a series of 1976 articles for *Artforum*. See Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica, CA: Lapis Press, 1986).

²⁸ Alison Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 262.

²⁹ Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 7.

addition to paintings and sculpture, the material of everyday life...constituted valuable sources of aesthetic, historical, and intellectual contemplation.”³⁰

But even within museums’ gradual acceptance of moving imagery, there were films, filmmakers and bodies of work that proved unassimilable. Peter Decherney shows that during the postwar period, MoMA promoted Hollywood film alongside Abstract Expressionist painting as quintessential American art forms. This marginalized avant-garde film but also played a creative role in forcing the development of the model of a self-motivated, community-building avant-garde filmmaker—specifically Maya Deren, who not only was rejected by the Museum but also actively discouraged by them from making further films. Deren was forced to create systems of production and exhibition for herself and other avant-garde filmmakers.³¹

Why did the Museum of Modern Art initially reject avant-garde film—an art form so concerned with the medium-specificity that was a hallmark of modern art? Decherney locates the answer in the Museum’s economic and political propaganda efforts: “As Abstract Expressionist painting symbolized the creative possibilities of the individual

³⁰ Ibid., 17.

³¹ Peter Decherney, *Hollywood and the Culture Elite: How the Movies Became American* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 168–176.

under American democracy, Hollywood came to symbolize the triumph of the American free market. Avant-garde film only challenged this neat formulation.”³²

This challenge was by no means limited to the museum or to avant-garde film; or rather, the challenge is shared among so many types of marginal cinemas and cinematic contexts that it necessitates a wider definition of avant-garde. In his book *The Most Typical Avant-Garde*, David E. James locates a “rainbow coalition of demotic cinemas: experimental, poetic, underground, ethnic, amateur, counter, noncommodity, working-class, critical, artists’, orphan, and so on” in order to group all these under the rubric “minor cinemas.” Here, it is not the museum context outside which these films exist, but rather the “dominant” Hollywood film industry.³³ These kinds of films, then, were marginalized in both commercial and high-art contexts.

Thus unmoored, they required their own models of exhibition. Deren’s solution, in addition to traveling with her films, was to rent a theater in Greenwich Village and produce a one-woman show of her own films. This gambit was successful beyond all expectation, and became, as Decherney says, “the prototype for exhibiting avant-garde films, whereby the individual filmmaker presents his or her work to an initiated

³² Ibid., 168.

³³ David E. James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 13, 446n32.

audience.”³⁴ Amos Vogel, who attended Deren’s show, subsequently rented the same theater and began Cinema 16—which grew into the largest film society in America. At mid-century, Cinema 16 was the country’s most prominent exhibitor (and eventually distributor) of avant-garde cinema, which it contextualized within a wider stream of international art cinema, educational and scientific film, and the kind of homegrown minor cinemas described by David James.³⁵

Vogel’s film programming synthesized contemporaneous exhibition modes—the pedagogical and advocacy efforts of the Museum of Modern Art and Deren’s DIY, avant-garde-identified mode. But it had earlier models as well, in European *ciné-clubs* (particularly in Paris) and later, American film societies. Richard Abel locates the first conscious attempts at featuring “alternate” cinemas in the ciné-clubs of 1920s Paris.³⁶ The ciné-clubs—at first discussion and lecture clubs, and later identified with screening events—grew out of the first serious attempts at film criticism in France in the preceding years. By the middle 1920s, ciné-clubs were a well-established part of an unprecedented, sustained project of thinking of film as an art. As this movement spread throughout cities in France, its loose network of practitioners’ activities included film criticism in journals

³⁴ Decherney, *Hollywood and the Culture Elite*, 174.

³⁵ Scott MacDonald, Introduction to *Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 4–13.

³⁶ Richard Abel, *French Cinema: The First Wave, 1915-1929* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 251–275.

and newspapers, production of radical and experimental films outside the commercial industry, the building of a mass audience for the acceptance of film as art, an early practice of film history in the form of the preservation and screening of films from prior eras, and the construction of specialized cinemas for screenings.

According to Abel, the movement gained a radical political focus and at the same time an increased and non-specialized audience. As it thus became more of a threat to the commercial film industry and the government, it was actively undermined and eventually collapsed, with the help of the arrival of sound film in 1929. The movement's energy dispersed, coalescing around preservation efforts in the establishment of the French Cinematheque in the early 1930s.

However, ciné-clubs and film societies were sustained throughout Europe and beyond in this era. Abel mentions Brussels, Lausanne, and Geneva as locations; Vogel attended film society screenings in Vienna as a teenager in the 1930s.³⁷ The American journal *Experimental Cinema*, published from 1930 to 1934, contained reports from ciné-clubs and film guilds in London, Edinburgh, and Liverpool, with further mentions of Glasgow and Dundee.³⁸ From Mexico City, the Cine Club of Mexico published its first

³⁷ Ibid., 264; Scott MacDonald, "An Interview with Amos Vogel," in *Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 37–38.

³⁸ Victor P. Smirnov, "London Cinema Notes," *Experimental Cinema*, no. 4 (1932): 42–43; Michael Rowan, "Scotland and Film," *Experimental Cinema*, no. 5 (1934): 58; Michael Rose Roberts, "Toward a Workers' Cinema in England: The Merseyside Workers' Film Society," *Experimental Cinema*, no. 4 (1932): 28.

report at this time as well.³⁹ Like the journal *Experimental Cinema*, most of these ciné-clubs operated as radical leftist political activism, advocating for a “workers’ cinema”; in this context, amid a larger interest in Soviet cinema, the key figure was Eisenstein.⁴⁰

Local in focus, these ciné-clubs stood somewhat in contrast to the parallel development of large film societies in major cities. The most prominent of these were likely the London Film Society (formed in 1925), and Amsterdam’s Filmliga (1927).⁴¹ Characteristic to all these clubs and societies was a focus on, and even reverence for, banned, controversial and non-commercial films—once again, Eisenstein and Soviet cinema were of prime importance. The London Film Society was perhaps Cinema 16’s closest aesthetic precursor in its diverse mix of short films, emphasis on both technological and aesthetic developments in avant-garde film, and championing of banned films.⁴²

³⁹ Abel Plenn, trans., “Bulletin No. 1 of the Mexican Cine Club,” *Experimental Cinema*, no. 4 (1932): 34.

⁴⁰ For example, see “Editorial Statement,” *Experimental Cinema*, no. 4 (1932): 1.

⁴¹ The emergence of cine-clubs in Europe and the importance of the London Film Society and Filmliga to this movement are covered in Malte Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-Garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919-1939* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 77–120.

⁴² Typically, the Film Society’s seventy-fourth program, given November 25, 1934, featured Jean Vigo’s *Zéro de Conduite* (then recent and banned from public showing in France) alongside a demonstration produced by the Gaumont company of a cathode ray oscillograph, and a selection of short films (two by Oskar Fischinger) that demonstrated the Gasparcolor color cinematography process. Council of the London Film Society, *The Film Society Programmes, 1925-1939* ([New York]: Arno Press, 1972), 301–03.

Founded in 1947, Cinema 16 was the most extensively practiced (and one of the earliest) exemplars of a burgeoning film society movement throughout the United States. Cecile Starr's 1956 book *Film Society Primer* documents some of these film societies which formed in towns and cities from the late 1940s to mid-1950s, and which were centered on the availability of portable, consumer-friendly 16mm prints and projectors.⁴³ (Indeed, Cinema 16 itself was named after 16mm film, and what Vogel characterized as its "liberating" and "subversive" potential.)⁴⁴

After the 1963 demise of Cinema 16, Vogel moved to co-found the New York Film Festival, which helped to consolidate the emerging international art film, and to some extent an avant-garde, in the high-art institutional setting of Lincoln Center.⁴⁵ Slightly earlier than this, Vogel's dominant role in the avant-garde had moved from galvanizing to antagonizing a group of downtown New York-based filmmakers, who

⁴³ Cecile Starr, ed., *Film Society Primer: A Compilation of Twenty-Two Articles about and for Film Societies* (Forest Hills, NY: American Federation of Film Societies, 1956).

⁴⁴ Bill Nichols, "To Counteract the Forces of Hollywood: An Interview with Amos Vogel," *Cineaste*, Fall 2014, 6–7, reprinted in Paul Cronin, ed., *Be Sand, Not Oil: The Life and Work of Amos Vogel* (Vienna: Österreichisches Filmmuseum and SYNEMA--Gesellschaft für Film und Medien, 2014), 242–52. 16mm film, of course, had been put to many ideological uses since its introduction in the late 1920s. For example, Gregory Waller has shown how 16mm film supported nationalist unity during World War II. See Gregory A. Waller, "Projecting the Promise of 16mm, 1935-45," in *Useful Cinema*, ed. Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 125–48. Yet the same portability and availability that allowed 16mm to be used for these mass forms of education and propaganda also were crucial to the formation of a sustained avant-garde film practice, and to film societies such as Cinema 16. In turn, the ability of laymen, non-professionals and autodidacts (such as Vogel was when he began) to not just make but project 16mm resulted in the establishment of independent film curatorial practice.

⁴⁵ Rahul Hamid, "From Urban Bohemia to Euro Glamour: The Establishment and Early Years of The New York Film Festival," in *Film Festival Yearbook 1: The Festival Circuit*, ed. Dina Iordanova and Ragan Rhyne, (St. Andrews, Scotland: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2009), 67–81.

formed rival organizations such as the New American Cinema Group and the Film-Makers' Cooperative, an all-inclusive, artist-run distribution center for avant-garde film. These activities centered around the work of Jonas Mekas. Mekas' role as exhibitor of avant-garde film throughout New York in the 1960s was only one among many overlapping and sometimes conflicting roles of advocacy: co-founder and editor of film publications, primarily *Film Culture*; film critic, most prominently for the *Village Voice*; pioneer filmmaker in his own right; conduit for funding of avant-garde film; founder of museums, archives and screening spaces including Anthology Film Archives.⁴⁶ On the West Coast, particularly in the San Francisco Bay area, similar models of filmmaking, exhibition and distribution were developed concurrently, most prominently Canyon Cinema.⁴⁷

In subsequent decades, parallel to the rise of the international film festival, this underground activity flowered into hundreds of alternative and radical screening venues, from DIY spaces in the punk era to the coining of the term “microcinema” in the 1990s.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ For an overview of Mekas' activities, see David E. James, introduction to *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas & the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 3–16. On the relationship of Mekas and avant-garde patron Jerome Hill, see Decherney, *Hollywood and the Culture Elite*, 161–165, 176–203.

⁴⁷ Steve Anker, Kathy Geritz, and Steve Seid, eds., *Radical Light: Alternative Film and Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 8–127; Scott MacDonald, *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 1–16.

⁴⁸ On the variety and number of alternative screening spaces in San Francisco alone, see Steve Anker, “A Haven for Radical Art and Experimental Film and Video,” in Anker, Geritz, and Seid, *Radical Light*, 10–11. The most recent issue of *Incite* journal, dedicated to alternative exhibition spaces, suggests

And as with Deren's situation, these developments were brought about largely due to the neglect of these films within institutions. Commercial cinema had no place for those films which challenged viewing conventions, including those whose durations were longer or shorter than the required feature length; most nonfiction film; fiction films which did not fit into auteurist frameworks; not to mention works with radical political views, alternative forms, or those made by and representing marginalized populations. And in parallel, formal avant-garde works by film artists found at best an uneasy relationship with museums and galleries. All these kinds of works, finding themselves without institutional support in high-art or commercial contexts, needed a kind of *care*. Thus a figure previously nonexistent in cinema—the independent film curator—gradually emerged. Vogel supplied one model of the curator who carefully crafted film programs of others' work, with a high degree of professionalization and a self-created role as programmer, administrator, distributor, public advocate, and private advisor to filmmakers. Unlike Vogel, Deren and Mekas did not cultivate a curatorial style or role—they were showing their own films and those of their colleagues, as if thrust into the position of exhibitor because initially no one else would show their work. But as

the robust presence of these spaces in contemporary cinema culture. For the origins of “microcinema,” see Brett Kashmere and Walter Forsberg, introduction to *Incite Journal of Experimental Media*, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 10–13. Kashmere and Forsberg explicitly locate DIY and microcinema practice as inheritors of the curatorial approach of Amos Vogel at Cinema 16. On the terms DIY and microcinema, and their relation to punk, see Ed Halter, “Head Space: Notes on the Recent History of a Self-Sustained Exhibition Scene for North American Underground Cinema,” *Incite Journal of Experimental Media*, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 20–33. The 1970s-80s No Wave cinema movement in New York exemplified a cinematic practice that included making films, establishing and curating exhibition spaces, cross-disciplinary artistic collaboration, and radical political and gender representation, all within a punk-identified DIY aesthetic. See Matthew Yokobosky, *No Wave Cinema, 1978-87: October 3, 1996-January 5, 1997*, New American Film and Video Series 79 (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996).

combination artist-exhibitors, they were perhaps equally influential as curatorial models, in the proliferation of grass-roots film movements and artist-run film venues since the 1970s.

I reference these historical divisions and anxieties here not to reinforce them, but rather to outline an existing legacy for the *film curatorial* as a practice: among and between institutions, venues, fields and sets of practices, and defined in part by the very works which necessitate curatorial activity. With these film works so multiply marginalized, their curation is uniquely and necessarily *contingent*—continually relocating itself in emerging interstices of changing visual exhibition practices, whether cinema or visual art, high-culture or commercial, institutional or personal, professional or beginner, explicatory or imaginative—and “curatorial” or “artistic.” Perhaps, to use a body metaphor, film curating is *fascia*—a connecting tissue interrelating the elements of a larger structure. It relates these elements to each other and to itself through processes of connection, movement, and performance. And it is most effectively examined through the interconnections it forms. Beginning with individual film works, we are led, then, to the context in which they are shown and seen.

Film Love: Situating Film Curatorial Practice in Time and Space

Situating Film Love in Film Curatorial History

In a practical context, Film Love synthesizes many of the strands from the curatorial history I have outlined above. It is part of the DIY tradition of independent

screenings taking place in artist-run spaces—in my case the multidisciplinary downtown Atlanta art space Eyedrum, which functioned as an essential and unique laboratory space for the formulation of my own curatorial practice and theory for almost eight years. However, within this artist-run setup I often took a more institutional approach by showing canonical avant-garde works rather than programming exclusively new work by living artists. As a curator, I follow in the tradition of Amos Vogel and Cinema 16, with variations modeled on subsequent developments, such as the emergence of conceptual art, video art, and performance art in the 1960s and 1970s. These variations introduce common ground with the traditionally separate museum context, though the exhibition method remains that of the discrete screening. And my personal curatorial history also recalls a visual arts, rather than cinematic, model—what Jessica Morgan identifies as a self-taught curator who came from a field outside art history, as I developed my own exhibition practice independently of training in cinema studies.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Jessica Morgan, “What Is a Curator?,” in *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*, ed. Jens Hoffmann (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2013), 23–24.

Defining Cinema: Reversing the Ratio

Great Films

I began presenting film screenings in January 2003, naming the ongoing series Film Love in 2004.⁵⁰ As the series website informs the public, Film Love “provides access to great but rarely-screened films.” This statement elaborates that “through public screenings and events, Film Love preserves the communal viewing experience, provides space for the discussion of film as art, and explores alternative forms of moving image projection and viewing.”

Although this mission statement is written with language meant to attract audiences, it does speak to the ideas that animate my curation, as well as the types of programs which result. The description of a film as “great,” for example, clearly functions on one level as publicity. But part of the Film Love project has been to utilize this term to rethink, in public, how and why a film can be important, and what kinds of films can be considered in this light.

The definition of a “great” film will vary with each viewer (each critic, each filmmaker, each publicist or programmer, and all for different reasons), but as many popular lists of “great films,” and many cinema textbooks and histories demonstrate,

⁵⁰ An online archive of the series, including a list of programs, program notes, press releases, and other material, is at <http://www.filmlove.org>.

these variations take place within a generally accepted parameter of what is eligible to be considered great: feature-length fiction films produced by major studios for a mass audience. The building blocks of narrative and the issues of reception are thus the criteria for judgment: on one side, style, cinematography, editing, mise-en-scene, and other elements that support auteurist readings of films; on the other, the social relevance of subject matter, how a movie star's performance or persona relates to the performer's audience, a film's interface with the social aspects of its reception, and the mass scale of that reception. Lurking here as well is the film industry's longtime conflation of art and entertainment.

For example, is Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) great because of its director's apparent mastery of narrative form, because the central performances are recognizably classic, because its scenes of lovemaking between men were popularly apprehended as both a scandal and a landmark progression in social views, because the temporal scope of the film (its running time and the tale's chronology) and the grandeur of its landscapes work together to reflect its technical mastery and at the same time form a dialectic with the ordinariness of its protagonists, or because the film and all its constituent elements were validated as art by its popular success? Whatever the case (and however much I admire this film), the contours of its acceptance can stand some scrutiny—perhaps by way of another film, about a similarly devoted couple.

Carl Michael George's *DHPG Mon Amour* (1989) is a Super 8mm film about two lovers, David Conover and Joe Walsh; both have AIDS. In the central event of the film,

Conover self-administers an injection of DHPG. This drug, although proven successful in arresting the advance of blindness in AIDS-related CMV (cytomegalovirus) retinitis, had not been approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Thus the film was intended as an advocacy of experimental treatments for AIDS, and a protest against FDA inaction of the kind that motivated the widespread queer protest movements of the late 1980s (ACT UP most notably).

At the same time, the film's structure, technique, and status as a small-gauge format film reflect its commitment to the daily lives of its ordinary protagonists. In so doing, it also implies (as did many of the AIDS-related videos and films of this period, such as Gregg Bordowitz's 1990s series *Portraits of People Living With HIV*) a further political commitment to documenting such lives in their very ordinariness, as necessary work in battling the stigma of AIDS. The Super 8mm format disallowed synchronized sound recording; George's solution was to film silent footage as usual with Super 8, then project the film for the two men in their home while running a sound recorder. Their spoken commentary as they watched the images became the film's soundtrack. As Conover is nearly blind, Walsh must tell him what is on the screen and describe for the viewer what is going on with the injection. The visual and aural intimacy of the men's communication is paired with imagery of their living environment on one hand, and on the other the long injection sequence which makes no attempt to smooth over this visceral process. Familiar tunes play on records in the background as the men describe their struggle to gain access to this non-approved treatment, their gratitude that it's "keeping

David alive,” and their admonition to viewers to “fight” for the treatment they need. In the especially touching conclusion, the footage has ended and the lovers, both to soon die, joke and banter over the tail-end film leader on the screen. It is a moment of existential wit, for because the film has visibly run out we can now empathize with Conover’s blindness and approaching death, even as we hear the enduring evidence of the two men’s happiness in their shared life.

That I have discussed the twelve minutes of *DHPG Mon Amour* at substantially greater length than the epic *Brokeback Mountain* will indicate something of my approach to film curation and how it is motivated by my own very personal desires for cinema. The most immediately apparent effect is that an inversion of priorities and preferences in cinemagoing is reflected in the curatorial choice of films. In contrast to the exclusivity and dominance of feature-length fiction films in commercial movie theaters, I did not show a fiction feature until the sixtieth screening of Film Love, and after over five years of regular programs.⁵¹ Not including the films of Andy Warhol, I count seven feature-length fiction films presented over one hundred twenty-six programs in eleven years—between five and six percent.⁵² (The first one hundred twenty-two screenings included

⁵¹ The program on September 27, 2008, paired Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* (1966) with Michael Snow’s *Wavelength* (1967).

⁵² In addition to *Blow-Up*, these seven films include *L’Age D’Or* (Luis Buñuel, 1930), *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai Du Commerce, Bruxelles 1080* (Chantal Akerman, 1975), *Normal Love* (Jack Smith, 1963-65), and three films by Jan Nĕmec: *Diamonds of the Night* (1964), *A Report on the Party and the Guests* (1966), and *Martyrs of Love* (1967).

only four, about three percent of the whole.) The vast majority of Film Love programs have featured non-narrative (or at least nonfiction) films, of short length. Feature-length films are screened only when they include some aspect that undermines or critiques the near-invisible hegemony of this form—for example, the way the extreme long takes and running time of Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) depict and trigger the full weight of boredom and time. The short films presented, by contrast, number in the hundreds. Commercial cinema favors not only certain content, but the form in which that content can be transmitted. This is the importance of short films in Film Love programming (and why this dissertation’s case studies will take up not only short films but other cinematic forms, including how filmmaking and viewership interfaces with live performance).

Rarely Screened Films and Rarely Screened Cinema

The other part of the above equation, “rarely-screened,” should be mentioned here, along with its relation to preserving “the communal viewing experience.” As a curator, I often battle a popular and critical assumption that effectively the entirety of movie history is now available online—and that anything that’s not there is absent primarily because of corporate copyright issues and not because of marginalization. The *New York Times* critic A. O. Scott expressed it this way in 2007: “It is now possible to imagine—to expect—that before too long the entire surviving history of movies will be

open for browsing and sampling at the click of a mouse for a few Paypal dollars.”⁵³

Describing this as “a wild exaggeration,” Kristin Thompson has debunked Scott’s claim from multiple standpoints: archival and preservation, copyright, economic, and cultural.⁵⁴

Further, in Scott’s phrase “the entire surviving history of movies” we hear an echo of prior cultural institutions’ past indifference or hostility to films that do not fit economic priorities: to choose just one type, many experimental or avant-garde films (despite relatively canonical status) were never made available on video even during the era of VHS tapes and then DVDs, and there is little reason to think that their restoration and transfer to digital formats is any more profitable now. In this context, then, it is important to note that although some of the films I have shown have been subsequently released to the public on DVD video, or other consumer formats, the vast majority of Film Love selections were not available to the public at the time of screening.

What, in our context, may constitute *availability* of a film to an audience? I count those films which could reasonably be acquired by consumers, in authoritative versions, on formats playable with standard contemporaneous technology. Allowing for the assumptions inherent to such concepts as “authoritative” and “standard,” and aware that the technological ground shifts continually, “available” in our immediate context would

⁵³ A. O. Scott, “The Shape of Cinema, Transformed at the Click of a Mouse,” *New York Times*, March 18, 2007.

⁵⁴ Kristin Thompson, “The Celestial Multiplex,” *Observations on Film Art*, entry posted March 27, 2007, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2007/03/27/the-celestial-multiplex/> (accessed January 27, 2015). Reprinted in Cherchi Usai et al., *Film Curatorship*, 216–21.

include a DVD or Blu-Ray disc release, especially through a publisher with powerful enough distribution to be available through Amazon and other prominent online retailers; or an online streaming video authorized by the filmmaker or filmmaker's representative. Videos of films posted to YouTube and other online sites by fans and consumers do not count, because as unauthorized postings they could disappear at any time, because there is no way to determine whether the poster has edited or otherwise changed the film, and because image quality is variable at best. To these last two problems, avant-garde film, because of its challenging viewing parameters and specialized visual approaches, is particularly susceptible.

Consider again the above list of types of film that have been traditionally marginalized in high-art and commercial contexts, and think of this in genre terms: experimental and avant-garde, artists' film and video, much of documentary film practice, ethnographic film, educational film, home movies, pornography or otherwise sexually explicit work, queer film, women's and feminist cinema, work produced out of the African diaspora, early cinema and pre-cinematic forms, ephemeral and orphan films, expanded cinema and new media. This is an incomplete list to be sure, but the reader will see that despite its marginality, this body of cinema far outstrips in production that of mainstream narrative film. Surely this work represents a vast part of "the entire surviving history of movies," yet it remains undigitized and unpublished, and there is every reason to think that curated public screenings will constitute access to these films for some time to come.

At the time of writing, as of one hundred twenty-six Film Love screenings, I count thirty that have featured any selections which could otherwise reasonably be seen at home by viewers—less than one-fourth of the total screenings. Further, several of these thirty screenings featured only one or two short films that were available, out of a much longer program, so that the percentage of Film Love selections that were available on video at the time of screening is much lower. It has been from the beginning a motivating part of Film Love to present such films as cannot be seen on video or online. Necessarily, these films are screened for an audience, which in turn “preserves the communal viewing experience,” conflating the rarity of a selection with that of the collective experience of cinema within our current turn toward private viewing on cable, the internet and mobile devices. Thus, Film Love provides access not only to rarely screened works but to a context in which they may be apprehended as cinema.

This explicit conjunction of films and their viewing context defines the Film Love project, and opens up onto a larger question. If these films offer a wider conception of the cinematic, how may this conception guide a re-thinking of the curatorial and exhibition structures involved in the presentation of films? In other words—to return to the central research question posed earlier—how do film and curation change each other? Here, I offer two frameworks for thinking through this question. These frameworks are rooted in Film Love’s curatorial practice and –returning to the two central ideas of *Line Describing a Cone*—the cinematic notions of *time* and *space*.

Temporality

Film Love is conceived and described as an “ongoing curatorial project.” This is intended to distinguish the series temporally from the most familiar model of cinema curation and programming, that of the film festival. (And in the visual arts context, from the biennial, triennial, and other such forms.) In practice, Film Love shows are programmed throughout the year at intervals which are generally (though not always) regular. The series averages ten shows per year, spaced roughly once a month, but occasionally clustered in groups of three to four in a shorter period, or going as much as three months between shows. This tracking back and forth between regular and irregular programming, though not always by choice and sometimes dependent on factors outside of curation, removes the series from the festival model with its strictly annual ritual and dense schedule compressing a large selection of films into multiple screenings per day.

This method of programming brings about a different way of thinking of film time than is available in the commercial cinema space, the annual film festival, or the gallery exhibition. As Marijke de Valck and Skadi Loist have observed, studies of film festivals have drawn on more general anthropological and sociological frameworks of the festival, but have also described temporalities inherent to the *film* festival, namely “the

festival calendar, which defines the relation of festivals to one another, positions them in the circuit, and sets the expiration date at a one-year maximum.”⁵⁵

The implied rigidity of this setup, as well as its political basis, is questioned by Janet Harbord in one of the comparatively rare studies of film festivals’ temporality. Following from Mary Ann Doane’s work on time in early cinema, Harbord suggests that the structure of film festivals echoes the relation of contingency to structuring in early actuality films.⁵⁶ Film *records*, and this recording capability constitutes its structuring of time; but what it records, in the case of actuality films such as those by the Lumières, is open to chance. Harbord argues that, as a live event of projection within a highly organized temporal structure, the film festival reintroduces the relationship of contingency to structured time present in early cinema: “The contingency of early cinema, of the magic of anticipation, has become the contingency of the event itself.”⁵⁷

However, Harbord also describes the effect of densely compressed events of film festivals: “always offering more films than we can make time for...the fleeting spectre of the festival as event...positions itself as the scarce resource.”⁵⁸ For Harbord, this

⁵⁵ Marijke de Valck and Skadi Loist, “Film Festival Studies: An Overview of a Burgeoning Field,” in Jordanova and Rhyne, *The Festival Circuit*, 192.

⁵⁶ Janet Harbord, “Film Festivals-Time-Event,” in Jordanova and Rhyne, *The Festival Circuit*, 40–46.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 40–41.

condensed structure works together with a sense of contingency—in the sense of the accidental occurrence—to re-establish the importance of the “here and now” of viewing and projection within the festival context.

Nevertheless, in Harbord’s study the accidental and contingent is either located in the event of projection or limited mainly to the unpredictable behavior of movie stars and charismatic critics and the notion that a festival premiere (itself an event of privileged access) “marks” the subsequent life of a film. Together with the anxiety of an economy of scarcity which she adduces, these factors, however contingent, also reinforce film festivals’ role within globalized and neoliberal economic models—that is, the ways in which film festivals take part in what has been called “the transition from ‘ritual’ to ‘spectacle.’”⁵⁹

On his up-to-the-minute blog, film scholar David Bordwell has recently reported on his experience at the 2014 Ritrovato Film Festival at Bologna, one of several must-see stops on the international festival circuit, dedicated to important restorations of older works. An overarching theme of his report is the scarcity of time in the midst of the spectacle, which he summarizes as “diverse, turbulent, and overwhelming,” an event of

⁵⁹ Montserrat Crespi-Vallbona and Greg Richards, “The Meaning of Cultural Festivals,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 13, no. 1 (February 2007): 106.

“tidal-wave energy.”⁶⁰ Over the festival’s eight days, *six hundred* films are presented, alongside large-scale special events, opportunities for shopping and browsing books and DVDs, and “the need to socialize with old friends.” Bordwell reports that “it’s become harder to find time during the event to write [a report].” On the single day he chose to describe, he saw two feature films before noon, at which time he attended a panel on film restoration at major studios; then “a hurried lunch” with an archivist, two William Wellman features, and then Raj Kapoor’s *Awara* (1951) in the late afternoon. That makes a total of five feature films and a panel, with the evening programming yet to come. “I tell you,” Bordwell concludes, “it’s hard to keep up, running on Ritrovato time.”

Bordwell’s blog post is meant to highlight Ritrovato’s admirable commitment to film history by emphasizing the breadth and depth of choice for filmgoers. But what comes across just as much is the anxiety of the limited economy of attention available to festivalgoers, and the accompanying loss of time for writing (and hence contemplation).⁶¹

Such impulses precede the modern film festival—even through one of my own curatorial models, Amos Vogel. As part of Cinema 16, Vogel hosted bus trips to Eastman House archives in Rochester, New York, for marathon screenings of classic and archival

⁶⁰ David Bordwell, “12 Hours, Ritrovato Time,” *Observations on Film Art*, entry posted June 30, 2014, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2014/06/30/12-hours-ritrovato-time/> (accessed July 2, 2014).

⁶¹ Festival programmers, of course, are especially subject to these extremes; in a typical account given by the Mill Valley Film Festival’s program director, a desperate sense of accelerated time suffuses every page: Zoë Elton, “24 Hours @ 24FPS: A Programme Director’s Day,” in Ruoff, *Coming Soon to a Festival Near You*, 117–34.

works that could not otherwise be seen.⁶² A newspaper report of one of these trips focused mainly on the effects of sleep deprivation, and the efforts to watch films from 8:30 a.m. Saturday to 2:30 a.m. Sunday, then getting up early to repeat the process. Vogel and his staff provided “periodic ministrations of coffee and cookies at such crucial hours as 12 midnight and at other periods when it seemed the collective will-power would evaporate...”⁶³

In its temporal setup, *Film Love* seeks to counteract the sense of overload and spectacle that accompanies such events, whether in the film or art worlds—while retaining, and sometimes structuring itself around, contingency. The Raqs Media Collective (hereafter, “Raqs”) has suggested the temporal potential of this style of curating. They locate within the familiar art world model of the biennial exhibition—mainly theorized throughout curation studies in terms of economics, geography and aesthetics—a “temporal experience of compression” resulting in a “bi-polarity of glut and famine within the attention economy” of art; visitors to biennials are “borne aloft by the velocities of the strong currents that propel exhibitions and/or artists from one show to another.”⁶⁴ Raqs suggests a different model, that of the “slow-motion biennale,” in which

⁶² MacDonald, introduction to *Cinema 16*, 20.

⁶³ Lawrence J. Quirk, “Staff Man Is Weary After Eastman House Viewing,” *Motion Picture Herald*, March 10, 1956.

⁶⁴ Raqs Media Collective, “Earthworms Dancing: Notes for a Biennial in Slow Motion,” *E-Flux Journal*, no. 7 (2009), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/earthworms-dancing-notes-for-a-biennial-in-slow->

the biennial ceases to be a single event impacting a space disproportionately for a compressed period of time, and stretches out over the two years of its organization. This would result in a more process-oriented, developmental form of creation, a “non-rivalrous order” in which “processes...grow, mutate, fall back on themselves, hibernate when need be, change course, and proliferate.” This extended temporality impacts the *space* of the biennial as well: a “high-intensity occupation of infrastructure” would yield to the flexible use of multiple spaces. I would add that festivals, biennials and other such time-intensive spectacles perform high-intensity occupation not only on spaces and infrastructures, but on the attention of their viewers as well, causing the sense of overload familiar to festivalgoers. In this “attention economy,” the inability to *attend* to everything, and its *attendant* anxiety, becomes an often unspoken but very present part of spectators’ experiences of the event.

The spacing of Film Love shows throughout the year, bound to neither an annual calendar event nor to “festival time,” is meant to counteract the exhausting effects of spectacle, to give viewers space for contemplation, and to allow particular films to linger. For me as a curator, the stretching out of screenings in time, and the thinking of the whole series cumulatively, as a single “ongoing curatorial project,” allows for a deliberate growth in process over years, including strands which begin and end indeterminately, mutations or juxtapositions of styles, doubling back to prior moments

and forms, and other curatorial strategies not possible in the compressed festival atmosphere. In this temporal “anti-festival,” one screening or set of films may speak to the last, or to the next, occurring at a different time and perhaps in a different space, but in dialogue with what came before and what comes after.

There is an acutely practical limitation to this approach: non-spectacular events are often, and in most contexts even including critical and aesthetic ones, barely apprehendable as events at all. They need different models of publicity and explication, and they need to be defended against the idea that mass-produced works and spectacular forms are the privileged site of cultural experience (or that these mass-produced works are the ground against which all other forms are judged, and which thus limits such forms to the realm of “alternative” culture). In short, the exhibition context of Film Love and other such independent efforts is an “unseen object,” just on the edge of sight, itself in need of careful *curation* just like the films it seeks to make visible. This is one more way in which the independent curation of film screenings differs from that of the visual arts exhibition, as theorized in curatorial studies. Where in visual arts the exhibition “curated by” a singular figure is a dominant model, the independent film screening is itself a marginalized form.

Double Duration, Double Curation: Past and Present Works, in Screening Time

In contrast to the self-contained feature film, it is the putting-together of short films in a particular order which constitutes a majority of Film Love programming. This is also in contrast to the time of visual art exhibitions in the space of the gallery or

museum, with looping media works and spectators wandering in and out at their leisure. The organization of “screening time” presents a conjunction of two durations, that of an individual film work and that of the screening as a whole.

As an individual film relates to the entire program, the screening relates to a larger history of cinema. In practice, this means that Film Love often combines films from different eras on a single program, as a mode of historical research. Pulling from different eras for a single program (“screening time”) allows us to think of a different relation between cinema and history. Duration is curated in two interlocking ways, then: the relation of a short film to the whole of the program, and the relation of present to past. This double curation (and doubled notion of duration) itself takes place in a further temporality, that of the “*ongoing* curatorial project.”

Writing on the curation of tribal, indigenous and Native work within museum settings, James Clifford has identified a contemporary shift: rather than the museological model dominant in the nineteenth century which took for granted a linear history of development and saw the curator as a conservator of objects in a protected space, contemporary indigenous curating “taps into a different historicity of continuity, rearticulation, and renewal.”⁶⁵ In parallel, curatorial care becomes “about preservation in

⁶⁵ James Clifford, “The Times of the Curator,” in *Intense Proximity: An Anthology of the Near and the Far*, ed. Okwui Enwezor et al. (Paris: Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Palais de Tokyo, and Artlys, 2012), 73.

the sense of helping something *thrive*.⁶⁶ Similarly, the different temporalities available to the curator of film—not only durations of films or programs, but eras and periods different than our own, “different historicities”—allow for the thriving of different histories—and of thinking history and visuality differently. José Esteban Muñoz also addresses such a relation to the thriving of pasts in the work of queer artists Jack Smith and My Barbarian, works which create “utopian deployments of the past in the service of critiquing the present for the ultimate purpose of imagining a future that is unimaginable in normative or straight time.”⁶⁷ In turn, curating with this in mind may help us see films from prior eras as something other than artifacts shedding light on the past. In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin discusses the difference between the “concrete historical situation of [an] object” and “the concrete historical situation of the *interest* taken in the object”—that is, *our* interest, in our moment.⁶⁸ In this dialectic, there is an interpenetration of a historical object and our own interest, so that the object gains the “higher concretion of now-being.” But because such a dialectic requires overcoming “the ideology of progress,” the now-being is different than “the present time.” This process of

⁶⁶ Ibid. (My italics.)

⁶⁷ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 178.

⁶⁸ Walter Benjamin, “K [Dream City and Dream House, Dreams of the Future, Anthropological Nihilism, Jung],” in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 391–92.

thinking and actualizing “serves to ignite the explosive materials that are latent in what has been.”

To combine Muñoz and Benjamin in a practical example: it is one thing to show Kenneth Anger’s 1947 film *Fireworks* as a pioneering work of queer cinema, slotting it into a progressive narrative of gay (or cinema) history; the question is how to show it in a context that is capable of, in Benjamin’s formulation, igniting *Fireworks*’ continuously explosive potential. In other words, instead of curating according to an artifact’s historical importance, I am interested in how films are films of now. Instead of the date of production or premiere that I and other curators append to film titles in programs, Film Love posits another date of a film—its now-being, the time in which we see it anew.

Perhaps this replacement of progressive history with radical simultaneity may be seen as an anti-preservationist impulse, for those who work to preserve our moving image heritage scrupulously research, give dates to, and otherwise fix film artifacts in order that we may continue to have these precious records. But in another sense, to curate film according to a process of simultaneity is itself an impulse of preservation—one that treats artifacts as alive, that preserves not artifacts or histories but a temporary now-being. Not autonomous or outside of history, as art is sometimes supposed to be—but outside, whenever and wherever we can imagine, wherever we can *see* outside, the “ideology of progress.”

Spatiality

The curation of art exhibitions is generally discussed in terms of the spatial (the museum space, geography, or national borders). Studies of film exhibition generally discuss reception and, in the case of film festival studies, concentrate on the social, political, and geographical or nationalist aspects of festivals.

How, then, can we discuss the spatialities of independent film screenings? Here I return to the curatorial “activity of putting together,” and to the perspective of practice. Like visual arts exhibitions, film curation is involved in putting together works within spaces, spaces whose parameters, histories, and political implications often go unremarked.

Film Love shows take place not in a single location but throughout the city; not solely in cinema spaces but also in museums, galleries and art centers; in both alternative and commercial theaters, and at times in no type of theater setting at all but in locations that suggest a relation between cinema and site-specific art work, performance, or installation. This is a pragmatic move. Like the occasionally skewed temporality of Film Love, this ranging among venues was initially a response to the simple lack of a consistent space in which to show films. (This problem only increased with the closure of Eyedrum’s downtown location—Film Love’s original setting and most consistent home—in late 2010. Finding adequate projection spaces, as well as dealing with the physical and logistical challenges of constant moving among spaces, is easily one of the most daunting and labor-intensive aspects of Film Love.)

However, once again a practical contingency allowed—or perhaps forced—a creative conception of film curation as embodying a particular relation to cinema space, a relation that further allows a rethinking of what film does. All these different spaces have their own histories, patrons, and priorities; they might even constitute something that could be thought of as *genres*. What kinds of films, then, go in what kinds of spaces? The answer is not always a one-to-one correspondence, such as an art film in an art space, a radical documentary in an anarchist squat, or Buster Keaton in a commercial movie theater. In the way that curation puts together works in order to bring out connections, Film Love programs deliberately cast spaces and their contexts as part of the show.

Undoubtedly, there is something of the queer in these connections, which sometimes actively undermine the seamlessness of commercial cinema settings. As Muñoz writes, “We have been cast out of straight time’s rhythm, and we have made worlds in our temporal and spatial configurations.”⁶⁹ Film Love does not always present queer films, but the connections I seek to make through curation constitute a method of queer worldmaking, making visible, even if temporarily, temporalities and spatialities which remain just on the horizon of sight.

One example of how this curating takes place out of “straight time’s rhythm” involves Andy Warhol. In 2009 I presented two Warhol films, *Blow Job* (1964) and *My Hustler* (1965), as part of Out on Film, an annual festival devoted to LGBT narrative and

⁶⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 182.

documentary film and held at a well-known commercial theater in midtown Atlanta. Because this screening took place outside of the normal museums or art spaces showing Warhol works, there was a diverse audience of straight- and queer-identified people, from regular attendees of Film Love who would normally not have ventured to a gay film festival, and vice versa. At the same time, the films' exploration of long durations was an eruption of historical queer experimentalism into an event devoted to current festival-circuit works and a commercial theater space devoted to mainstream forms.

This eruption was spatial as well. Warhol's films had to be projected in 16mm, so working with the theater's staff for several days in advance, I hauled in my own projectors and stands and installed them inside the screening room rather than the booth (which couldn't fit them). This arrangement necessitated blocking off sections of seating that would interfere with sightlines. For sound, we had to connect cables directly from the projectors to a mixer in the booth above. When patrons entered the theater for the show, they were treated to a resplendent display: a bank of 16mm film projectors taking up the back row of seats, plugged into side outlets with extension cords visibly taped to the floor, and connected to the booth fifteen feet above by multiple sound cables stretching gracefully through the air, under which people walked to their seats.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ I hasten to add that such spatial and material elements as I describe here (cords, cables, projectors in the room) were in the service of achieving the best possible projection of these films in this space, given the limitations of independent film curation among the available spaces in my community.

However extreme, this is a literal and visible manifestation of what the Film Love project entails. Just as most physical venues must be retrofitted for these events, Film Love (like other such curatorial projects) must adjust institutions, programming genres and scholarly fields, in order to be apprehended as cinema.

Presence of Curator and Audience at Screenings

In this conjunction of temporality and spatiality is the question of *presence*—the curator’s and audience’s. At each Film Love program I give a verbal introduction to the work or works about to be screened. The goal of these introductions is always to give some kind of orientation for viewers to the often unusual moving image forms that are about to be screened, while avoiding telling them how to view a work. While I do not always think of the kinds of films I show as “alternative,” it is true that most viewers come from a highly standardized narrative film viewing practice, which may not be an adequate model for much of what I show. Indeed, such films as Michael Snow’s *Wavelength* (1967), Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), Nathaniel Dorsky’s and Rose Lowder’s painstaking and visually exquisite films, early Direct Cinema films such as *Primary* (1960), and Jean Rouch’s *Les Maitres Fous* (1955) are unique works not only in their forms or imagery, but in their intimations of new parameters for viewing. They do not benefit from the standard theatrical invisibility of setting and presumptive familiarity of narrative viewing codes. My own introductions to these and other works, then, are attempts to provide curatorial care to modes of viewing as singular as those of the films themselves. In practical terms,

this means that as curator, I am visible as *host* of the screening, and that the two roles are often conflated and inseparable. This visibility corresponds to the visible presence of film or video projectors in the room instead of a separate booth, but it also means that as curator, I am responsible for the screening as an event.

More unusually, each Film Love event features a formal post-screening discussion among the audience and myself as curator. Sometimes this takes the form of questions about the selections, which I answer based upon my research. At other times, discussion happens among the viewers with little need for direction on my part. This is not dissimilar to what happens in the classroom, and there is something of pedagogy to this aspect of Film Love screenings (and to the project in general). However, more than translating the classroom to the setting of a public screening, I am interested in the explicit presence of curator/host and audience in a cinematic context, where these elements are normally elided (just like the projectors). At the end of most screenings, discussion continues informally among the many attendees who remain in the venue (often, as I have observed, for the better part of an hour after the event's conclusion). This social aspect is not dissimilar from *social practice*, a term used by artists and critics to describe artistic practices and works whose main aim is not necessarily to create an object or performance but to create interactions among viewers, interactions which then become a focus of the piece. This aspect of Film Love necessarily involves a more open-ended approach to the temporality of an event (based upon the interactions of attendees,

rather than the running time of films) and to its spatiality (spaces that encourage face-to-face communication rather than the fixed seating of the movie theater).

Conclusion: Curation as Minor History

Though in this introduction I have defined (for the present purpose) “cinema” and “curation,” I am also thinking about how these activities work *outside* of the various models, genealogies, and critical conventions available to them. This is, once again, in the spirit of Benjamin’s thinking outside progressive history to bring about the now-being of concrete objects (in this case, films), and Muñoz’s working outside “straight time” to grasp future worlds on the edge of our imagination. Through this process, we arrive back at the central research question outlined at the beginning of this introduction—how do curation and cinema change each other?—only now with a more specific focus and methodology. I am speaking here of what art historian Branden Joseph describes (following the artist Mike Kelley) as *minor history*.⁷¹

Joseph relates Kelley’s minor history to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s “minor literature.” In this formulation, the “major” may be any manifestation or phenomena (whether, for example, cultural, scientific, or linguistic) constituted to regulate and maintain hierarchies of power: “an idea, category, or constant against which,

⁷¹ My discussion of minor histories in this section draws from Branden W. Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts After Cage* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 48–53.

whether explicitly or implicitly, other phenomena are measured.”⁷² Minor figures are those which are “marked by an irreducible or uncontainable difference.”⁷³ (Think again of the cinematic *excess* of photogénie as David MacDougall describes it: “that physical residue in the image that resists absorption into symbol, narrative, or expository discourse.”) The uncontainability of a minor figure or work not only critiques the major figure (sustaining, not negating, a certain relation between the two) but also the hierarchical structure that gives rise to the system of relations itself (suggesting an *outside* to this system).

To be specific, a minor history does not seek to recuperate or insert *sui generis* or underrepresented figures or movements into major categories: in fact, “minor” figures—for Deleuze and Guattari, Franz Kafka; for Joseph, Tony Conrad; for my own study, Andy Warhol—are not necessarily marginalized. Nor is a minor history oppositional (a minor “avant-garde” versus a major “mainstream”), for such a model would merely reproduce hierarchies of power inherent to standard histories. Instead of two opposing points, a minor history constructs a more diffuse field of effects, only to trace a more particular trajectory through it. As Deleuze and Guattari describe this trajectory, “The line does not go from one point to another, but runs *between points* in a different

⁷² Ibid., 48.

⁷³ Ibid., 50.

direction that renders them indiscernible.”⁷⁴ Since as they also state, “there is no history but of the majority,”⁷⁵ a minor history as Kelley conceives it is not primarily to elevate or analyze specific artists, writers, or other manifestations, but rather to redraw the terms on which history itself is written and practiced.

Of course, in such a formulation the minor is at a distinct disadvantage in terms of our ability to apprehend it outside of an oppositional model. Minor histories thus (just as I have described the emergence of independent film curation above) must resort to certain familiar models of culture and history, in order to both critique and move outside these models. As Kelley puts it, “Minor histories are ones that have yet found no need to be written. Thus they must find their way into history via forms that already exist, forms that are considered worthy of consideration. Thus minor histories are at first construed to be parasitic.”⁷⁶ In the context of a major history, minor figures can thus appear as “an unruly and indistinct mob... misguided or underdeveloped practitioners.”⁷⁷

I have written above of the marginalization of certain films and types of films in order to outline the historical necessity of independent cinema curation. But in the spirit of Mike Kelley’s art and Branden Joseph’s study of Tony Conrad, I do not seek in this

⁷⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, 51.

⁷⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 50.

⁷⁶ Mike Kelley, “Introduction to an Essay Which Is in the Form of Liner Notes for a CD Reissue Box Set,” in *Poetics Project* (Tokyo: On Sundays/Watari Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997), n.p.

⁷⁷ Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate*, 51.

project to systematically oppose a group of marginalized films against an idea of “mainstream.” Instead, I see cinema and curation as ways of moving *outside* and *between* codified points of film history, in a process of movement that is specifically not defined by those points, yet relates to them as a way of questioning the structures that bring them about. In this project, then, curation becomes—through cinema—a method of minor history.

If, however, cinema and curation are the theoretical beginning points, the *practical* starting point is my own affection for those decidedly minor attributes graspable during the cinematic projection of certain films: the latent now-being of past objects, the excess of imagery, and those practitioners who not only appear, but sometimes must be, misguided, underdeveloped, unruly. Through these affections, the “love” in *Film Love* becomes itself a parallel method of minor history, one which makes it possible to imagine helping cinema to thrive. How this works—in other words, how curation may preserve not a set of films as objects but the unruliness that makes them visible as cinema—is the subject of the following studies.

Chapters and Structure: Case Studies

The remainder of this dissertation consists of three case studies, each from a different decade: 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. The first involves a foundational moment of film curatorial practice, the second examines a filmmaker and the singular role that film exhibition and projection plays in his work, and the third—although examining an artist

whose filmmaking is a sustained part of his practice—involves the reconstruction not of a film but of a film-related performance.

Cinema 16

In chapter two, I examine the mid-century film society Cinema 16 and its founder and programmer, Amos Vogel. Cinema 16 is primarily known as the largest-ever showcase for avant-garde and independent cinema in the United States, with audiences in the hundreds for a typical screening and a long list of prominent directors whose work first screened there. On closer inspection, however, Vogel's programming practice is more radical than a roll call of famous directors and canonical works would suggest. How did Vogel achieve this paradoxical goal of a large audience for avant-garde and radical film, and in this process, how did Cinema 16 change not only cinema but the roles of the curator and of the audience, and the relationship between them? Vogel established curatorial authority through a well-developed cinematic aesthetic, a traditional theatrical screening practice, and the pedagogical functions of Cinema 16, especially printed program notes (which are what survives as an "archive" of the screenings). I examine how this authority worked to foster, rather than suppress, less predictable modes of viewer participation in the screenings. The chapter concludes with an account of showing a particular Cinema 16 program from 1950 in the present day. If Cinema 16's printed program notes and papers are the most recognizable form of an archive for the screenings, what other forms are available to us? How does a *screening* work as a kind of

sensory archive, and what does the practice of projection and viewing tell us about the curation of Cinema 16, and of cinema?

Andy Warhol and the Velvet Underground

Following from this experiment with *projecting* as well as studying Cinema 16, chapter 3 considers the 1960s films of Andy Warhol, in which the act of projection not only makes the work visible but *creates* it as such. Exhibition techniques such as slow-motion projection and double-screen presentation shift the “work” from something inherent to the reel of film to something inherent to its exhibition as projected light. Film’s archival function is thus subtly unfixed. How, then, does this change how we think of curation? In this chapter I particularly study Warhol’s film *The Velvet Underground and Nico* (1966), which exists now as a fixed, stand-alone work (and one of historic importance, given its rare depiction of this group in performance) but was previously a modular component of the multimedia shows Warhol produced with the Velvet Underground, which featured many different elements including multiple film projections.

The Velvet Underground and Nico, like many of Warhol’s films, demonstrates an exceptionally tight relation between filmmaking process, the visible themes in the resulting film work, and its exhibition and viewing. Each point in this process—the activity of making, exhibiting, and viewing—involves a kind of performance inseparable from the work itself. A 2014 presentation of Warhol’s Velvet Underground films, as a kind of research into the performance of curation and viewing, forms the second part of

this chapter. How does the active, visible presence of curator-as-projectionist during an event change how we think of curation?

James Nares and *Desirium Probe*

Chapter 4 takes off from this Velvet Underground event to study a further curatorial performance, *Desirium Probe*, originally presented by the artist James Nares in 1977-78, and which I revived in 2012. Based upon the instant re-performance of television content for an audience, *Desirium Probe* is a work of performance art, but one with a precise relation to both cinema and curation. The relation is one of embodiment and non-fixity, through the different levels of curation involved in both performing the piece in real time and in preserving it as an almost-forgotten work. As (taped) television content is run through a performer's body and presented to a live audience, what becomes fixed and what becomes unfixed? And what is the relation between this process and curation (understood as an "activity of putting together")?

Reflecting the double nature of *Desirium Probe* (live and recorded, performance and re-performance), this chapter presents two simultaneous texts: on the left side of the page, a scholarly examination of the work, its performances, and what it says about both cinema and curation; and on the right side of the page, material transcribed from my own performance of the work in 2012. This material is edited down but presented, for the most part, in the order performed. This right-hand column thus reflects the parameters of the performance itself, which involved switching unpredictably among television channels to create a disjunctive narrative. (I explain more about how this works in

chapter 4's section on methodology.) Throughout the chapter, each column retains its own structural integrity, while *in relation* the two texts may jostle, compete, reinforce or contradict. Although this particular arrangement of texts is present only in this chapter, it is conceived not as a departure but as a *continuation* of the dissertation's inquiry into the sometimes ambiguous relations between cinema, curation, and the archive, and into the methods of curatorial juxtaposition that are paramount in both Cinema 16 and the films of Andy Warhol.

Each of these chapters addresses a different type of cinematic subject (a film society screening in a traditional theater, an artist collaborating with a rock group in a multimedia spectacle, and a performer using media as raw material), and each poses a different type of challenge to the researcher (from an abundance of archival material to an ambiguous relation to the archive to a historical work with virtually no documentation at all). As put together here, they are intended, then, to present a fuller picture of the activity of curation—the role of curators, and curators' relations to audiences, works, and the spaces where this activity happens. In so doing, these diverse chapters evince a curatorial approach to this dissertation's arrangement of materials and subjects. This acknowledgement of the *practice* of curation is reflected in each chapter's inclusion of a curated public cinema event, as a method of research: a 1950 Cinema 16 screening transposed to the present day, a multimedia presentation of Warhol films drawing on his 1960s projection methods, and the revival of a 1970s performance work. As I will discuss further in the next chapter, these public events are inquiries not only into films but into

past *screenings* of films; they necessarily represent a kind of reenactment that plays off of the nature of film as a repeatable medium. Yet there is an irony here. As Rebecca Schneider points out in her study of reenactment and performance, there is “a certain superabundance to reenactment, like a run-on sentence, as if an event in time, refusing to be fully or finally ‘over’ or ‘gone’ or ‘complete’ pulses with a kind of living afterlife in an ecstasy of variables, a million insistent if recalcitrant possibilities for return (doubling as possibilities for error).”⁷⁸

This “superabundance” sounds much like the cinematic excess I have described above: resisting absorption, suggesting knowledge beyond that contained in a fixed work, and sometimes taken for “error.” At the same time, there are echoes of the minor history’s misguided, unruly mob of practitioners in Schneider’s characterization of anticipated anxieties about reenactment: while the first time is authentic and real, the second time is “way off, late, minor, drag, DIY, any-clown-can-do-it.”⁷⁹ These reenactments, then, will *enact* curation as a method of minor history.

⁷⁸ Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 29–30.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 180.

Chapter 2

The Huge Film of Cinema 16

Introduction

This chapter concerns a foundational moment in film curation: Cinema 16, the film society run by Amos Vogel (along with his wife, Marcia Vogel, and Jack Goelman) in New York City from 1947 to 1963. I will show how Cinema 16, in its manifestation as a series of film screenings, had unique programming and exhibition processes and a distinct relationship to its singular audience. Specifically, Vogel selected and juxtaposed divergent and often difficult films, then carefully presented them via a familiar, seamless cinematic spectacle. The combination of disorienting content and familiar moviegoing ritual produced a particular atmosphere at screenings which often encouraged individual responses among viewers. Three elements—curator, film, and audience—were thus brought into unique relation, creating an autonomous community of viewers different from Hollywood’s version of a mass consumer audience, or the educational subjects envisioned by institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art. What this relation meant, and how it was created, is the subject of my research here. To determine this, I use a combination of film historical writings on Cinema 16, Vogel’s own published writings, and unpublished archival documents including program notes provided to audiences at screenings and Vogel’s private notes on the programming process.

But in order to understand Cinema 16, I also need the films themselves—specifically the activity of watching and showing them. Vogel’s championing of independent and challenging films, and—to a lesser extent—his montage-style juxtaposition of disparate films in curated programs are oft-remarked in studies of Cinema 16. Far less examined are his process of programming and, especially, exhibition practice. What was the *experience* of a Cinema 16 screening? How was it created—or curated? Since it was the screening event where Cinema 16 had its impact as a film society, this question is central to understanding how the film society worked. Yet it can be only partially answered by the textual and verbal materials—program notes, papers, interviews, publicity—that are what survives as an archive of Cinema 16’s screenings. The cinematic *excess* of which I have written in the previous chapter, so essential to a minor history, requires the time of projection as well as the space of the page and of the archive.

Therefore, my study of the interplay of discontinuity, cohesion, and community at Cinema 16 extends to the gap between what we can know of a screening from the page and what happens when we put the films together, and then together with an audience. This is partly, of course, a question about the relation of theory to practice in curation, and Cinema 16’s compelling combination of the two forms a significant part of this chapter. But this question opens onto the larger issue of the role of documentation of screenings—that is, how screenings exist in the archive—and to a related issue, how curating links historical time and cinematic time. These questions are taken up through

the presentation (as a public Film Love program) of Cinema 16's May 1950 program in its entirety, and an account of this contemporary screening event forms the second part of this chapter.

Methods and Materials

The films and their arrangement into programs are key, but not the only, elements in the meaning of Cinema 16 and its programming. In this study, I will also consider exhibition and programming factors outside of the content of the films shown at Cinema 16: the organization and process of projection, the atmosphere created by Vogel at screenings, and the contextualizing program notes provided to viewers. I analyze these factors using the published literature on Cinema 16, and also unpublished primary documents contained in Vogel's papers at Columbia University and at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research. Some of these factors were rigorously controlled to ensure that Cinema 16 could be absorbed into the flow of normal cinemagoing; other factors were unique or less controllable, and set Cinema 16 apart from that flow. But they are just as crucial to consider as the films themselves, because in studying Cinema 16 I am concerned with what it means to curate not just films but *cinematic experience*. What is the role of viewing conditions in curating cinema, what is the relation of curating to spectatorship, and how does the selection and arrangement of films interface with the work of creating cinematic experience?

Cinema 16 makes an appropriate study for these questions not only because of its influence on subsequent screening societies and film series, but also because archival

documents show that Amos Vogel was as focused on the atmosphere of Cinema 16 screenings as on the arrangement of films. Aware of the unpredictable effects what he was showing, he sought to balance this volatility by contextualizing the films in a tightly organized cinematic presentation. Some aspects of this presentation, such as program notes, have been considered in other studies of Cinema 16. But in place of analyzing these items as separate elements, as prior studies have tended to do, I would like to ask how these aspects worked together to create the Cinema 16 screening event as a whole.

In other words, the subject here is not only past films, but a past *configuration* of these films, a separate entity but intimately linked. And here we return to Walter Benjamin's idea of the now-being of a past object. I hypothesize that presenting these particular films in Vogel's configuration today will do more than recreate a past event, resuscitate a curatorial style for temporary examination, or be an exercise in determining curatorial influence on present day practice. That is, more is at stake than establishing the historical importance of Cinema 16. In presenting Cinema 16 to a contemporary audience, I hope to explore experientially (as indeed, Cinema 16's audience did) the sometimes contradictory interface between cinema's ephemerality, as manifested in its projection, and its artifactual status, which mirrors that of the screenings' printed documentation.

A Brief Overview of Cinema 16's Activities

Cinema 16 was started in autumn of 1947 by Amos Vogel along with his wife, Marcia. Named for the "liberating medium" of 16mm film, Cinema 16 was formed,

according to Vogel's 1948 "Statement of Purposes," "to advance the appreciation of the motion picture not merely as an art, but as a powerful social force."¹ As a series of ongoing film screenings, this goal was accomplished through the consistent presentation of avant-garde work and nonfiction films that, because they pushed cinematic boundaries, were ignored in commercial venues. After an initial period, Cinema 16 was incorporated as a non-profit, members-only film society. This identity allowed for the showing of otherwise censored or restricted works, and permitted the Vogels to commit themselves full-time to the venture.

After the first three 1947 screenings, Cinema 16 programs were planned and announced in series. These were seasonal at first (a fall series and a spring series, announced separately); starting in fall 1952, one full year of programming was announced at a time.² A season contained a series of monthly "regular" programs, almost always devoted to short films, and a series of "Special Events" for presentations (feature films, themed programs, symposia, lectures and filmmaker appearances) which fell outside of the regular program model. To become a member, one purchased a year's subscription, allowing attendance at all programs. By the early 1950s, Cinema 16 had become the largest film society in the United States. At its peak, over 7,000 members had

¹ Nichols, "To Counteract the Forces of Hollywood," 6; Amos Vogel, "Cinema 16 Statement of Purposes," 1948, box 4 folder 8, Amos Vogel papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, NY, reprinted in MacDonald, *Cinema 16*, 6.

² MacDonald, introduction to *Cinema 16*, 28.

joined; screenings regularly filled a 1,600-seat auditorium. Cinema 16 was likely the largest-ever showcase for avant-garde and otherwise non-commercial film.

Though cinematic screening is the focus of this chapter, Cinema 16 went well beyond regular screening events in its commitment to reimagining cinema in its context. Vogel facilitated excursions to archives for private viewings of rare films; set up university film courses in New York; gave high-profile awards to avant-garde filmmakers; and even started a series of screenings for children, of which avant-garde films were a part. Finally, there is the special importance of Cinema 16 to American avant-garde film in this historical moment. All kinds of film were put on equal footing at Vogel's screenings, but the emerging avant-garde film movement particularly benefited from Cinema 16's film distribution service, which provided smaller film societies across the United States with avant-garde works otherwise unavailable or difficult to track down, and by extension validated individual filmmakers and filmmaking practices that would otherwise have been much more isolated. Vogel's persistent inclusion of avant-garde films at screenings facilitated further work: more than one avant-garde filmmaker has claimed to have continued making films because Cinema 16 provided a public venue for their work.³ In this way, Cinema 16 was central to sustaining avant-garde filmmaking in the United States.

³ Scott MacDonald, "Conversation with Carmen D'Avino, 2/16/85," in *Cinema 16*; Scott MacDonald, "Conversation with Melvin van Peebles, 1/18/01," in *Cinema 16*, 354–55.

Literature Review

Cinema 16 has been the subject of several scholarly studies, as well as numerous articles in the popular press, especially in New York. The first sustained study is Stephen J. Dobi's 1984 doctoral dissertation "Cinema 16: America's Largest Film Society" (Ph.D., New York University, 1984). Dobi gives a detailed history of Cinema 16's programs, along with its other activities such as film distribution. He draws largely on the film society's printed documentation—in particular, sustained readings of program notes, along with press coverage and member questionnaires. Dobi details the programming and audience reception of Cinema 16's first three years, and usefully situates Cinema 16 within the prior history of film societies and cinema clubs in Europe and the United States.

In his book *Freedom to Offend: How New York Remade Movie Culture*, Raymond J. Haberski Jr. locates Cinema 16 within the culture of post-war moviegoing in New York City, and as an important part of the influence this city, as a center of exhibition, criticism, and reception, had on the breakdown of censorship. He characterizes Cinema 16's programs as a new kind of "confrontational cinema," with the audience as the object: "Vogel did not merely show films, he forced moviegoers to confront them."⁴ Focusing on this confrontational aspect of Vogel's programming, and the varying

⁴ Raymond J. Haberski, *Freedom to Offend: How New York Remade Movie Culture* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 110.

reactions to these choices among both viewers and critics, Haberski argues that Cinema 16 converted cinema from a passive experience to an intellectual exercise, “a way to move beyond the staid limits of mainstream movie culture without obliterating the limits that made it a shared culture.”⁵

Scott MacDonald has most extensively theorized the practice and political implications of Vogel’s film programming. In the introduction to *Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society* (an essential collection of primary documents), MacDonald gives a short history of Cinema 16, paying special attention to its formation, reception and audience composition, its distribution and educational activities, and its effect on filmmakers, programmers, and other attendees. MacDonald explicitly links the dialectical programming style of Cinema 16 screenings to Sergei Eisenstein’s montage editing, and identifies it as a function of Vogel’s leftist politics. He describes how the film programs likely worked in their context: “one form of film collided with another in such a way as to create maximum thought—and perhaps action—on the part of the audience, not simply about individual films but about film itself and about the social and political implications of its conventional (or unconventional) uses.”⁶ This view of Cinema 16 as a political project is reinforced in an interview with Vogel, in which he outlines his own politics, his upbringing and early cinemagoing in Vienna, and experience as a

⁵ Ibid., 94.

⁶ MacDonald, introduction to *Cinema 16*, 10.

Jewish refugee from the war.⁷ More recently, MacDonald has written further on how Cinema 16's programs acted not merely as film programs but as "*cinematic* scholarly 'essays,' reports on extensive research (into cinema itself as a medium and a history)."⁸

These prior accounts have analyzed Cinema 16 primarily by concentrating on readings of the films shown there (such as pointing out the confrontational nature of certain selections or by listing the many prominent avant-garde and independent narrative filmmakers who debuted at Cinema 16), or—as MacDonald does—further emphasizing the films' arrangement into programs, and the political and cinematic implications of this. I approach Cinema 16 from a slightly different angle, although part of my approach is to extend MacDonald's notion of Cinema 16 programs as a non-textual essay form. It is my contention that, even though Vogel took the idea of authorship of film programs further than it had been before, he did so not only through the choice of films, or even the innovation of showing radically different kinds of films together. Rather, Vogel's creation of Cinema 16's unique screening atmosphere loosened boundaries between curator, audience and work, as surely as it reimagined the social experience of film screenings as a deeply personal project. My project, then, is to study the creation of

⁷ MacDonald, "An Interview with Amos Vogel," 37–40.

⁸ Scott MacDonald, "Film Comes First," in Cronin, *Be Sand, Not Oil*, 104 (italics in the original). An anthology of Vogel's writings and new articles by scholars about Vogel, *Be Sand, Not Oil* was published during the completion of this chapter, and situates Cinema 16 within Vogel's lifelong cinematic project of curating, writing, and education. Along with Paul Cronin's introduction to the book (10), MacDonald's article is the first instance (as far as I have found) of applying the term "curator" in its contemporary usage to Vogel in his role at Cinema 16.

atmosphere—the curation of cinema’s excess material—at Cinema 16, an atmosphere only partially available through the materials of the archive and the methods of cinema history, and only partially available through the practice of screening.

I also study the structure of Vogel’s programs because I am interested in placing his montage style of “editing” film programs in relation to Laura Marks’ theory of ethical curating, described in the previous chapter, in which one begins with an argument that the choice of films then illustrates. As we will see, Vogel worked in the opposite direction—“film comes first,” to use Scott MacDonald’s phrase describing Vogel’s method⁹—yet I argue that Cinema 16 is also an ethical project: explicitly social and dedicated in content, form, theory, and practice to political change through the expansion of consciousness.

Structure of Chapter

My study of Cinema 16 is in three different sections, each intended to cover different but related aspects of these screenings as they existed in practice: the behind-the-scenes programming process; the exhibition and projection of programs; and the interactions between individual films and entire programs as they happened on the screen. The first section, “Theory and Practice of Programming at Cinema 16,” uses published interviews with the participants and primary documents to establish how the discovery of specific films, and the desire to show these films, motivated much of

⁹ MacDonald, “Film Comes First.”

Vogel's curating. In turn, this method of curating subtly interfaced with the act of spectatorship at Cinema 16. The next section, "Exhibition Practice," seeks to uncover the specifics of how Vogel established the type of theatrical atmosphere that would allow Cinema 16's more expansive political and social goals to be realized. The third section examines the onscreen relation between the different films of a particular program, in order to ask how the wider set of relations between curator, audience, and film were changed by Cinema 16.

In the second major part of this chapter, I recount my own presentation of Cinema 16's May 1950 program in the present day. If cinema curation brings the durations of films and the eras of historical time into relation, what can the recreation of a past screening tell us about the times of cinema? And how do audiences, films and curator relate now?

Theory and Practice of Programming at Cinema 16

Though Cinema 16 presented feature films and themed programs, Vogel's primary programming technique was the juxtaposition of radically different types of films into a single evening's program. Scott MacDonald located this programming style partly in Vogel's desire for political activism (in which Cinema 16 programs functioned as a critique of mainstream cinema filmmaking *and* exhibition) and partly in an aesthetic

derived from his admiration of Sergei Eisenstein's use of dialectical montage in films.¹⁰ Here, I analyze this programming style from a curatorial perspective, to consider the ways in which Cinema 16 was a kind of activism—particularly in the way it *activated* audiences through a process of displacement, a process that took place on the levels of individual films, entire programs, and moviegoing in general. In turn, Vogel's own curatorial process becomes public, even visible as part of the spectacle of Cinema 16. Cinema 16 becomes, then, a kind of participatory pedagogy of cinema—a self-reflexive process and a social community, enacted within a traditional exhibition context that masked a deeper radicality.

The Programming Process

Jack Goelman, who assisted Vogel with programming the series, described the process of choosing selections for an entire year of Cinema 16 programs. As a valuable description of Cinema 16's process, I quote it here at length:

We'd spend three days a week and sometimes weekends if we had a lot of films [to watch]. I don't know how many films we'd look at in a day. I just remember films being all around the room—science films, experimental films, travel films, foreign films without subtitles. We kept notes on every film we saw, whether we liked it or not.

When we were ready to do the programs, we used a system of index cards. We would lay a deck of cards on the table and play around with them. The problems sometimes started after we saw the films and knew we wanted to show them. What is a program? What six films would go together? What about the order of the six? Why would a certain film open a program? Why would a certain

¹⁰ MacDonald, introduction to *Cinema 16*, 10.

film close it? It was fascinating because it was all theoretical. I always felt that we were into unknown territory, and there was a great deal of satisfaction in it.¹¹

Practical problems quickly transmuted to theoretical questions. After Vogel and Goelman saw certain films, they “knew [they] wanted to show them.” We also know that Vogel was constantly scouting films from submissions, catalogs, and festivals. All this supports that Cinema 16 was programmed according to—in fact, largely motivated by—the discovery of particular films. Upon finding a film, how then does one proceed? This is the theoretical question that Goelman identifies. Its practical manifestation was in the projection of an arrangement of chosen films for a paying membership, along with all the practices around that event, such as promotion and the writing and printing of program notes. But because the discovery of films gives rise to the method of programming, practice and theory are not easy to separate in Cinema 16. In turn, the thought process of programming as described by Goelman suggests that it is not simply a group of new films, techniques, or ideas that the audience of Cinema 16 experienced, but the excitement of *discovery* of these things as well—an implication of the curatorial process in the experience of the screening. This was surely part of being a member of Cinema 16 as a film society, and it set Cinema 16 apart from both commercial moviegoing and institutional art film settings such as the Museum of Modern Art.

¹¹ Scott MacDonald, “An Interview with Jack Goelman,” in *Cinema 16*, 72–73.

The “satisfaction” that Goelman identifies in programming points to the creative nature of presenting Cinema 16, specifically located in the short film program: “It’s easy to program when you have a feature and a short, or three thirty-minute films, but six or seven—that’s when the fun would start.” And he indicates that laying out Cinema 16’s entire year of programming in advance was more than an organizational strategy or economic decision; it was also creative: “Sometimes we’d have to carry a film we liked over to the next year, if it didn’t have relevance and immediacy in the series we were working on.” In fact, Goelman explicitly states that putting together an entire year of Cinema 16 programs was “like editing a huge film.”¹²

Vogel’s Writings on Cinema 16 and Film Societies

The relation of the practical and theoretical in Cinema 16’s programming is also visible in articles by Vogel or about Cinema 16. Published in film journals and popular magazines throughout the run of Cinema 16, they served as both publicity for the film society and statements of its purposes, aims, and relevance. Practical advice and nuts and bolts details of film societies accompanied statements on the theory of film programming and the importance of cinema as a force for change.¹³ As Vogel advised, “the individual

¹² Ibid., 73. Although Vogel was not a filmmaker, Goelman had been previously employed as a documentary editor at Affiliated Films alongside Richard Leacock and other prominent filmmakers (ibid., 71). His comparison of programming to editing thus draws on filmmaking experience.

¹³ For example, see Amos Vogel, “Cinema 16 Explained,” *Film News*, April 1948; Amos Vogel, “Cinema 16: A Showcase for the Nonfiction Film,” *Hollywood Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (Summer 1950): 420–22; and Al Hine, “Cinema 16,” *Holiday*, March 1954. Vogel’s focus on the practical alongside the theoretical

brave enough to venture into this troublesome field, must be...an organizer, promoter, publicist and copywriter, businessman, public speaker and artist; a conscientious, if not pedantic, person versed in mass psychology. He must have roots in his community. And he must know a good film when he sees it.”¹⁴ Typically, this expansive statement was immediately followed by a list of film distributor catalogs, including addresses. Such statements invariably linked Vogel’s ambitious vision for the social function and scale of Cinema 16 with the practical and technical aspects required to bring this vision about.

“Statement of Purposes” and the vision for Cinema 16

In 1948, Vogel released a “Statement of Purposes” for Cinema 16. This is perhaps the clearest document of his cinematic vision. In it, he outlines seven specific activities for the film society: first, the screening of both classic and new documentary films; second, screening educational and scientific films; third, screening the best experimental and avant-garde works; fourth, encouraging the production of new films through building an audience, sponsoring film contests, and distributing films; fifth, hosting appearances and discussions by filmmakers; sixth, screening international documentary and experimental works; and seventh, the creation of Cinema 16 movie houses throughout the United States. (Within just a few years, Cinema 16 brought about each one of these

was lifelong: see Amos Vogel, “Amos Vogel on Cinema 16,” *The Independent*, September 1984, 15–17, reprinted in Cronin, *Be Sand, Not Oil*, 85–95.

¹⁴ Amos Vogel, “The Film Society,” in *Ideas on Film, a Handbook for the 16 Mm. Film User*, ed. Cecile Starr (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1951), 63–64.

goals—except for the last, which was never realized.) Yet the document begins not with these specifics, but with a preamble in which Vogel reveals the aims of his film society, and for cinema as a whole. He identifies a “double purpose” for Cinema 16: on one hand, to “contribute to the growing appreciation of the film as one of the most powerful art forms” through the presentation of avant-garde films; on the other, its screening of scientific and educational films “will provide its audience with a more mature realization of the nature of this world and of its manifold problems.”¹⁵ Already (for he had only been programming a matter of months!), Vogel here explicitly casts cinema “not merely as an art, but as a powerful social force.”¹⁶

The radicality of this document has few parallels in its context. Vogel identifies “a vast potential audience—numbering in the millions” for the kinds of films Cinema 16 presents. At the same time, he casts these films against popular and Hollywood cinema: “Unadorned and free of Hollywood tinsel, they have recreated the stark reality, the poignancy, the brutality of life.” Yet they “[aim] at greater international and interracial understanding and tolerance.” Given the promotional nature of this document—written partly to encourage membership in the society—the inclusion of “brutality” is telling. The confrontational nature that Raymond Haberski identifies in Vogel’s programming

¹⁵ Amos Vogel, “Cinema 16 Statement of Purposes.”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

was present from the beginning—but as MacDonald points out, the “Statement of Purposes” also makes clear that “Vogel did not see his project as marginal in any way.”¹⁷

Bringing audiences and films together

Vogel concludes that Cinema 16’s goal is “to bring together this audience and these films.” But both “audience” and “films” consisted of individual elements that themselves had to be constituted in order to be brought together. I have been considering how Vogel brought individual films together into programs. But just as it is difficult to separate theory and practice in Cinema 16, films and audience are most productively considered together there as well, perhaps because Vogel so explicitly saw his function as social. In fact, Cinema 16 was not only a film series; it was itself a kind of cinema that brought about a community of people. MacDonald observes that this sense of community is apparent from the Committee of Sponsors listed on the “Statement of Purposes,” many of whom, including prominent artists such as Leonard Bernstein and W. H. Auden, had little to do with avant-garde film.¹⁸

As Cinema 16’s publicity progressed to printed brochures and rental catalogs, its slogan quickly became “films you cannot see elsewhere”—or a variant on this phrase, such as “films that cannot be seen elsewhere.” “Elsewhere” was clearly the mainstream

¹⁷ MacDonald, introduction to *Cinema 16*, 5.

¹⁸ Ibid.

movie houses and the limitations of commercial cinema. What was the unquestioned center, then, was cast as being *somewhere else*—and *here*, at the center, were the films of Cinema 16. Vogel’s envisioning of a “vast potential audience” of millions and his locating normative cinema “elsewhere” were deliberate ways of casting Cinema 16 as something other than an alternative to the mainstream—in fact, the very concept as well as the word “alternative” is conspicuously unmentioned in these documents. In this way, Cinema 16 itself becomes the kind of minor history I have outlined in the previous chapter: refusing the oppositional stance that merely reinforces cultural hierarchies in favor of a more expansive field of possibilities.

Vogel’s Programming Criteria

Goelman’s recollections naturally emphasize the collaborative aspects of choosing film selections at Cinema 16. Vogel’s own papers reflect this to an extent, but also suggest that he saw Cinema 16 as very much a personal project, and continually struggled with the tension between subjectively programming according to his own taste and vision of cinema, and his perception of the tastes and needs of Cinema 16’s audience—with a third factor, critics, occasionally coming into play. In his 1983 interview with Bill Nichols, Vogel identified several factors in his choice of films for Cinema 16. One was a visceral response and attraction to “strong visuals,” which he opposes to the “invisible classical code of Hollywood” that suppresses visual interest in favor of narrative’s basis in spoken text. Another factor was his voracious interest and voluminous reading in all manner of subjects far beyond cinema, which led to his

programming strategy of combining different types of films into programs. But Vogel cast both of these in terms of his subjectivity as a programmer: “It comes down to the fact that it was a subjective decision made by Amos Vogel as to what he thought was good or bad.”¹⁹

Yet Vogel attempted to counteract what he knew were his own subjective tendencies. Vogel’s private notes on his programming criteria show that he continually tried to gauge his taste and priorities against those of his audience. Because these documents address Vogel’s intentions for programming and his relation to his audience in detailed and relevant ways that his published articles and statements do not, I shall consider them at length here.

An initial typewritten sheet, possibly compiled by Vogel in 1950 after about three years of programming, reveals a multitude of complex interacting criteria which directed his choices.²⁰ These criteria range from the content of an individual film to the flow of a program to the trajectory of an entire season, as well as from objective evaluation to

¹⁹ Nichols, “To Counteract the Forces of Hollywood,” 7.

²⁰ Amos Vogel, notes on criteria, ca. 1950–1962, Amos Vogel Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, NY. What appears to be the first of these criteria sheets is undated. Its first line refers to the film *Japanese Family* (Julien Bryan, 1950), which was first shown at Cinema 16 in fall 1950, suggesting that it was compiled after a few years of programming experience. Handwritten additions to the sheet reference the films *The Navigator* (Buster Keaton, 1924), *Él* (Luis Buñuel, 1953) and *Earth* (Alexander Dovzhenko, 1930), all shown between fall 1954 and spring 1955, so perhaps this sheet was kept over several years as Vogel added to it by hand. Additional criteria sheets are dated from fall 1955 to summer 1962; Vogel seems to have typed up his thoughts by programming season rather than by individual screenings. In his interview with MacDonald, Goelman states that part of his job was to evaluate and make notes on the reception of each individual screening (MacDonald, “An Interview with Jack Goelman,” 75); I have not found these notes in Vogel’s collections of papers.

subjective feeling. They consider film genres, technical issues of projection and venue, how a given film placed Cinema 16 competitively in the New York cinema scene, and issues of audience attraction, reception, and retention. Most of all, they suggest that Vogel was constantly aware of, and struggling with, the dual nature of his curatorial choices: on one side, the personal taste that he deemed necessary to evaluate films; and on the other, the audience reactions and attendance pressures involved in sustaining the series.

At first, Vogel considered the aesthetics of his programs in terms of balance between genres and in the interaction of individual films, full evening programs, and entire seasons. The very first line of the earliest criteria sheet asks whether there are enough films like the documentary short *Japanese Family*, which Vogel apparently considered exemplary. He continually asks whether there are enough of certain genres: dance, children's films, social documentary, and especially "psych films," his terms for films of psychological experiments normally reserved for clinical settings. Aesthetically, an entire program should have a balance between "fast and slow" and color/black and white. In general, there should not be too many "'old' films" or comedies, or too many films already shown at Cinema 16; as well, there should not be too much duplication of film types or genres over a season.

But more striking in these notes are the purely subjective criteria. A handwritten addition to the sheet asks if there are “enough programs I feel *certain* of?” and mentions Buster Keaton’s *The Navigator* in this regard.²¹ The idea of “certainty” about a program indicates that for all his careful planning and high-level organization, Vogel acted largely intuitively when it came to combining films into programs. He asks whether each program is “not too heavy,” or is “so constituted that we have a starting and ending film and the order of films ‘sounds’ right.” Each program should have only one “borderline” film—that is, a film about which Vogel had some reservation—but also should have at least one “fun” film. Programs should have a “center of gravity (a long, substantial film),” and be balanced with the “proper proportion” of experimental and documentary. From what “sounds right” to “proper proportion,” these are all intuitive measurements of what made a film program effective as an aesthetic experience with the possibility of political change.

Yet the challenge was that these aesthetic and subjective choices always took place alongside the dependence on filling seats and staying economically viable. “Cost” is a stark addition to the list; the need to find cheap and even free films is noted. Introducing the issue of what will attract an audience in blunt terms, Vogel asks if there is enough (or too much) “controversy.” Vogel was well aware of the drawing power of

²¹ In these sheets, Vogel uses consistent abbreviations and shorthand for terms and words—for example, “enof” for “enough.” In quoting the documents here, I use standard spellings and correct punctuation for clarity, but otherwise leave textual idiosyncrasies, such as capitalization, intact.

controversial selections, but on the other hand, he also asks himself if the programs are “too morbid.”²²

These practical anxieties extend to Vogel’s awareness of Cinema 16 as part of the competitive landscape of theatrical exhibition in New York, and his programming criteria also reflect this. Would a film be shown by other venues in the city, or did a film need to be shown in a timely fashion? Given Cinema 16’s mandate to show the best films, how should recognized classics be treated? Should Cinema 16 show classic films that are appropriate for the series—and which would draw audiences—if those films were also being shown by the Museum of Modern Art? These issues became more acute and explicit in later criteria sheets—partly because the type of cinema audience Cinema 16 brought into being had by the early 1960s made possible the opening of further specialized cinemas such as The New Yorker, art houses whose selections clearly overlapped with Vogel’s. And Vogel knew there were economic consequences to his choices. “CLASSICS,” he wrote in a later criteria memo, “are more popular than my esoteric discoveries; THEREFORE, theatres took them from me.” He also noted many times the painful lessons of not trusting one’s own judgment, as when not following his

²² This is not as left-field a question as it might seem. Due to a complex set of factors and influences, among them Vogel’s status as a Jewish refugee from Nazi-era Austria, his leftist political involvement, and the postwar American context, he commonly chose challenging, even shocking films to show; two of the works repeatedly championed at Cinema 16, for example, were George Franju’s graphic slaughterhouse documentary *Blood of the Beasts* (1949) and Kenneth Anger’s homosexual and sado-masochistic fantasy *Fireworks* (1947)—sometimes shown on the same program. Vogel had good reason to check in with himself about the extreme affective qualities of his programs.

“instinct” allowed The New Yorker to trump him on *Operation Abolition*, an important documentary.²³

This reference to curatorial instinct leads us back to an especially important consideration—Vogel’s ongoing attempt to place his programming appropriately between his own vision and the perceived needs of his audience. Again and again in these pages he deplores his own tendencies to program according to his taste (which he identifies as “esoterica, experimental, advanced art, AV’s sleepers”). The 1961-62 season was summarized as “too experimental, or too serious, too much ‘for me,’ too little for them, not enough audience satisfaction.” He boils the conflict down to a stark question: “programming for me? or critics? or paying audience?” He is especially wary of screenings that demonstrate when his taste is “ahead” of the viewers’.

Cinema 16 was Amos and Marcia Vogel’s livelihood. Vogel had to separate his audience’s taste from his own, because he had to anticipate it in order to survive. Yet, at least according to these private notes, his paradoxical method for this was *instinct*. “Play your own hunches, rely on no one,” he advised himself, confident in his taste yet also betraying uncertainty about how exactly to apply it: “our’ discoveries never do as well as ‘recognized masterpieces.” What defined Cinema 16 to a great extent is not a clear-cut

²³ This competition worked in the other direction as well: often, Vogel notes in his criteria that it did not hurt him to screen a film that had also been at another venue, even one playing theatrically at the same time—and it even occasionally helped with publicity. But either way, he clearly viewed as necessary a hyperawareness of the entire film scene in his community.

tension between personal vision and audience needs, but the tension between the merging and separation of these things. It is mirrored in the entwining of theory and practice in Cinema 16's uncharted territory, in the co-existence of film as a subversive art (the "stark reality, the poignancy, the brutality of life" identified in Vogel's original Statement of Purposes) and Cinema 16's mass audience (potentially "numbering in the millions"), and in the duplication of the curatorial experience of discovery in the act of viewing films: curation as a subversive art, cinema as community. To what extent Cinema 16 was personal for Vogel and to what extent it was communitarian is a philosophical question couched in practical terms, just as Cinema 16 was a social awakening in a cinematic space.

Exhibition Practice

What, then, were the practical terms of Cinema 16? Its popular success suggests that Cinema 16 existed in relation, as well as opposition, to mainstream exhibition practice. Thus, in this section I look at how Cinema 16's relation to its audience manifested in the atmosphere of screenings: projection, the ambience and environment, and program notes.

Projection and Atmosphere at Cinema 16

In one of Vogel's articles on Cinema 16, he emphasized that "carelessness and amateurishness are the bane of the 16mm. industry...Showmanship is one of the first prerequisites of a successful film society."²⁴ Showmanship here involved technical matters and voluminous attention to detail in the projection booth and the auditorium. Vogel clearly saw the quality of projection as key to the success of Cinema 16 in its wider cultural context. As related in Paul Cronin's documentary *Film As a Subversive Art: Amos Vogel and Cinema 16* (2004), Vogel and Goelman rigged a buzzer system in the auditorium for each show, going from the auditorium directly to the projectionist's booth. Depending on the number of buzzes from Vogel or Goelman, the projectionist was to adjust sound, focus, or framing. (Three buzzes meant, "Look at the screen *immediately!*") Professional projection, wrote Vogel, "gives evidence that 16-mm. projection can be as satisfactory as 35-mm."²⁵ In 1984, Vogel recalled the two 16mm arc projectors which had to be set up and broken down for each screening: "With this equipment we were able to show 16mm films in a regular theater, enlarged to fill a 35mm projection screen. Brightness and focus were such that the audience could not tell the difference."²⁶ Viewers' prior moviegoing experience had taken place with such

²⁴ Vogel, "The Film Society," 65.

²⁵ Vogel, "Cinema 16: A Showcase for the Nonfiction Film," 422.

²⁶ Vogel, "Amos Vogel on Cinema 16," 15.

mainstream professional standards, and Cinema 16's critique of mainstream cinema would be most effective at this same standard.

The films themselves had to match this standard despite their often marginal production means. The programming criteria lists examined above included such standards for films: they had to be at least technically suitable enough to be apprehended by an audience of up to 1600 people. Technically poor films caused great problems and each film was evaluated in terms of this: print condition had to be good, and dark or otherwise poorly made films that looked acceptable while previewing in the office often did not translate to the very large theater screens. Poor sound was especially an issue, given the low-quality nature of optical film soundtracks and the penurious filmmaking conditions of many of the works shown at Cinema 16. All these were taken into account in Vogel's notes.

Vogel's attention to detail extended to the environment of the auditorium as well. He offered a thorough checklist for successful screenings, including testing for proper sound, electrical connections, and heating, preventing ambient light from entering the room, and using black curtains to mask the screen. (This would "prevent the usual naked 16mm. screen, complete with tripod, from impressing [the] audience with the amateurishness of the performance.")²⁷ "Remember," he exhorted, "that you are a missionary for a wider use of 16mm. films and that you should try approximating

²⁷ Vogel, "The Film Society," 65–66.

professional theatre standards, with the possible exception of providing popcorn or exhibiting insipid films.”²⁸ The buzzer system, for example, was originally rigged to prevent the possibility of the audience hearing Vogel communicate with the projectionist during quiet or silent films.

In a typewritten list of instructions compiled for Cinema 16 ushers during the 1953-1954 season, ushers are instructed in making sure the exit doors work properly, and that no audience members reserve seats. Before the show, ushers should note where the empty seats in their section are, for easily locating them in the dark. After the show begins, ”Keep flashlight pointed to floor. Keep voices low so as to create a minimum of disturbance.” They were to lower window shades, in order to prevent outside light.²⁹

Detail-oriented curators who like to have a high level of control over presentation will recognize in this document a kindred spirit. But it should be remembered that Cinema 16 was then at its height, with up to sixteen hundred members attending *a single show*. The pressure must have been great: a staff of three people constituted the standard for non-mainstream cinema exhibition in New York, and to a great extent the United States, including but not limited to screening and distribution support for the American avant-garde as it was just coming into being, and accomplishing this in the context of

²⁸ Ibid., 66.

²⁹ “Instructions for Cinema 16 Ushers,” ca. 1953, box 1 folder 1, Amos Vogel papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, NY.

highly visible, mass-attended public events that were experimental not only in content but in *method*. Against this, in terms of sheer numbers the audience response is astonishing now and clearly motivated a highly professional standard. It was crucial to Cinema 16's legitimacy, as well as that of the American avant-garde cinema, to construct an atmosphere of professionalism and formality. The discomfiting nature of Cinema 16's programs was balanced—and heightened—by this professional mode of exhibition which took into account viewers' prior moviegoing experience. This was how films which could not be seen elsewhere were *seen*—that is, apprehended *as cinema*—at Cinema 16.

Program Notes

Printed notes were provided to the audience at each of Cinema 16's screenings, and were part of a further process of contextualizing difficult films as cinematic.³⁰ These were either written by Vogel or the filmmakers themselves, or commissioned from experts such as critic Parker Tyler or Museum of Modern Art curator Richard Griffith, or culled from catalogs or previous publications. With these notes, Vogel intended to provide “background information about the filmmaker, the context in which the film was made, the intention of the filmmaker, maybe what some critics or I may have said about

³⁰ A complete set of Cinema 16 program notes is held in the Amos Vogel Papers at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia University in New York. My analysis of program notes in this chapter draws on this collection.

it, whatever I thought might be of interest to audiences.” Vogel viewed these notes as essential to the screenings, “because *it wasn’t enough to see the films.*”³¹

Indeed, Vogel was quite serious about the importance of program notes: in the checklist for Cinema 16 ushers, we see that they were to be distributed by hand to all persons as they entered the theater. If seeing the films wasn’t enough, what did these program notes do that was essential to the experience of Cinema 16?

Characteristic of program notes at Cinema 16 is a consistent sense of separation between films. Quite commonly, each film was covered by a different writer, considering the film on its own apart from the other selections and ensuring a multiplicity of perspectives and styles echoing the difference between the films onscreen. As well, the notes demonstrate divergent modes of writing: film analysis for one selection, artist’s statement for another, historical contextualization for another. These disparate modes reinforce the films as discrete entities. At times, Vogel further demarcated the films by labeling each with a category, such as “The Documentary Film” (for a current work), “The Evolution of the Documentary Film” (for a historical work), “A Cinema 16 Premiere,” or “The Dance Film.” (All of these appear in the program notes for November 1949’s screening, analyzed below.) Yet bringing them together is the fact that the notes commonly address what the films do *cinematically*: how they innovate, how they were made, where they stand in relation to cinema’s history or its future. In aggregate, then,

³¹ “Interview with Amos Vogel, June 23, 1976” in Dobi, “Cinema 16,” 273 (my italics).

the notes prepared viewers to experience the disjunction of varying styles on the screen, but also to accept them all as *cinema*, and thus as a coherent experience—one “huge film,” in Jack Goelman’s characterization of Cinema 16 programs.

A number of experiential factors interact, then, at a Cinema 16 screening: the familiar, seamless experience of a night at the movies; the intellectual, written and verbal orientation of the program notes; and most elusively, the impact of watching the different films together. Of these, only one, the program notes, exists in a recognizably archival configuration. And of course, these printed notes suggest a more rigidly demarcated experience than was the case. Rather, the program notes’ function of orienting the audience worked alongside the disorienting juxtaposition of films—which itself was both facilitated by and dialectically entwined with the professionalized and invisible projection process. It was this carefully arranged atmosphere—partly guiding viewers, partly dislocating them—where these films and their temporary configurations could be cinema, and where the political possibilities of Cinema 16 could happen.

Programming, Films, and the Audience

If Vogel’s curatorial role at Cinema 16 was largely unprecedented, so were many of the films which he showed, and the configurations in which he showed them. But how, then, was Cinema 16’s *audience* different than what came before? Given what I have established above about Vogel’s curatorial relationship to his audience through standards of exhibition and presentation, how might his programs have come across to viewers?

What was different about spectatorship at Cinema 16? Here, I will attempt to answer these questions by considering in depth the composition of specific Cinema 16 programs. I will especially analyze a representative program from 1949, but will also look at the relation of single films to a whole program, and at how individual programs relate to the larger project of Cinema 16.

Cinema 16 announced its Fall 1949 programs via a promotional brochure.³² The November program was to consist of a clay animation film titled *No Credit* (1948); *Feeling All-Right* (1948), a documentary about syphilis in southern African-American communities, “performed entirely by Negro actors”; a film record of a classical Indian dance; *Explosions on the Sun* (1946), a coronagraph film of solar eruptions unprecedented until recently; a film by sculptor Jim Davis creating abstract imagery from light on transparent plastic plates; and Joris Ivens’ fifteen-year-old *New Earth*, a documentary on the Netherlands’ reclamation of the Zuider Zee, “seldom shown because of its uncompromising social realism.” By screening time, according to the program notes, Davis’ abstract film had been moved to a later program to accommodate the premiere of *1848* (1949), a new French film on the subject of historical documentary drawings by 19th-century artists such as Daumier, using magnified photography and film editing to closely analyze these drawings. The clay animation film is not included in the program notes and was presumably dropped from the program without explanation.

³² Reprinted in MacDonald, *Cinema 16*, 133–135.

November 1949's program (including its last-minute adjustments) may be seen as typical of Amos Vogel's main programming style in Cinema 16. In a telescoped fashion, this style is identifiable from the level of individual films to that of a full program to the whole of Cinema 16, and further out in its relationship with cinemagoing itself at this time. Here, I consider briefly these different levels and what together they say about Cinema 16 and its relation to cinema and viewership. How would such disparate films produce a cohesive statement? How were they apprehendable to viewers as cinema?

Individual Films

On their own, each of the films presented in November 1949 would have produced, separately and to varying degrees in different viewers, affectively charged experiences. *Feeling All-Right*, though a subtle and sensitive treatment of its subject, addressed overlapping taboos of race, sexual intercourse and disease. (Indeed, the program notes tell us the film had been rejected for public screening by the New York censorship board, a circumstance which encourages a heightened curiosity or concern in viewers.) In the context of Cinema 16, there was also a peculiar combination of race and genre at work in *Feeling All-Right*. The film's presumption of a black audience (for it was intended educationally for such an audience) would have subtly displaced many

Cinema 16 viewers; this would have been compounded by the act of watching a specialized educational film in a normally theatrical cinemagoing context.³³

The program's other films also carried their own charge. The short film on classical Indian dance transported the audience even further geographically and culturally from the American south, while *1848* (as Richard Griffith's program note tells us) moves to an earlier and revolutionary historical era in a experiential way quite distinct from the aims of the costume or period drama. *New Earth's* denunciation of economic disparity would have explicitly presented politics that may have been only implied in the other documentary works. It was also the program's sole non-recent film and was presented without English subtitles. (To compensate, the notes provide a detailed explication.)

A silent film of coronas bursting from the surface of the sun—imagery only recently possible, projected on a large screen—took the audience into outer space (after a journey around the world) and into a consideration of the “universal” context of everything they had seen, and of their own lives on earth as well. Like *Feeling All-Right*, *Explosions on the Sun* is another good example of how Cinema 16 recontextualized a film. Its title implies a status as discrete, completed work. In fact, after a brief introduction of outdoor scenes and views of the coronagraph itself, the film consists

³³ In 1983, Vogel estimated the Cinema 16 audience as “probably ninety-five percent white.” Nichols, “To Counteract the Forces of Hollywood,” 9; In 1953, Vogel polled the Cinema 16 membership and concluded that the majority of the members were thirty years old or younger, and seventy-five percent were college graduates. Members would likely have been familiar with educational films, but almost certainly not in a theatrical context. MacDonald, *Cinema 16*, 213.

entirely of extended views of different types of sunbursts, in black and white and preceded by title cards with very brief descriptions. After a series of these views, the film ends. As footage, it remains rather wondrous; as a film, it is clearly a collection of shots created for research. The presentation of *Explosions on the Sun* (and other films like it) at Cinema 16 certainly achieved, and spectacularly, Vogel's stated goals of impelling "greater knowledge and a more profound understanding of [the] world." To accomplish this, it had to achieve something else: the transformation of many kinds of motion pictures into cinema, and in turn the expansion of the conception of cinema into the widest possible circle of what could be filmed and viewed.³⁴

It is important here to remember that this program was seen in a movie theater, and that each of the presentations of this November program was attended by many hundreds of people; this was primarily a *cinematic* context. Because of this, it was also an affective context. We can guess at what the emotions and feelings were upon seeing these individual films—wonder, awe, discomfort, anger, boredom, aesthetic enjoyment. However, differently than with the skillful emotional manipulations in Hollywood films,

³⁴ Programs presented by the London Film Society from 1925 to 1939 are clear precursors to the range of Vogel's programming at Cinema 16, as well as the idea of featuring technical films as part of cinema screenings. Program 49, shown on November 15, 1931, showed archival screen test films to demonstrate studios' testing methods, program 57 (October 30, 1932) featured a selection titled Spicer-Dufay Colour Process, described in the program note as "short sequences demonstrat[ing] a new process of colour photography on non-inflammable film," and program 74 (November 25th, 1934) screened a demonstration produced by the Gaumont company of a cathode ray oscillograph alongside Jean Vigo's *Zéro de Conduite* (1933). See Council of the London Film Society, *The Film Society Programmes, 1925-1939*, 192-93, 230-31, 301-02. Vogel himself was not aware of the London Film Society's programs when he developed his programming style for Cinema 16. See MacDonald, introduction to *Cinema 16*, 32n19.

the affective qualities of Cinema 16 films were not intentionally built into the films. Rather, they represented a wider range of possible reactions among viewers, because of their viewing context. In large part the value of Cinema 16 was not to “mass” its audience together in the manner of Hollywood cinema, but to preserve the members’ individual responses and agencies. To see how this worked via the curation and exhibition of cinema, we can telescope out further to the level of an entire program.

The Full Program

As Scott MacDonald says, in the way that Sergei Eisenstein’s montage editing combined sometimes disparate images to jolt spectators into new awareness of class and political issues, “at Cinema 16 presentations, one form of film collided with another in such a way as to create maximum thought—and perhaps action—on the part of the audience, not simply about individual films but about film itself and about the social and political implications of its conventional (or unconventional) uses.”³⁵ Late in his life, Vogel stated it this way in Paul Cronin’s documentary *Film As a Subversive Art: Amos Vogel and Cinema 16*: “When I showed five or six films on a Cinema 16 program, they were always selected from the point of view of how they would collide with each other in the minds of the audience. On one program there would always be an abstract film, a scientific film, an avant-garde film, and a political documentary, because my intention at all times was to subvert audience expectations by showing such diverse and different

³⁵ MacDonald, introduction to *Cinema 16*, 10.

films on one and the same program.” Cinema 16 program announcements and notes show quite a bit of variation on Vogel’s formulation (some documentaries more political than others, older films with new films, commonly adding humorous and children’s films, psychiatric instead of scientific laboratory films). But it is clear that he practiced Cinema 16 programming as a dialectical method.

To return to the November 1949 program, the sheer unusualness of each film was its own statement; but we can also imagine how these films worked together onscreen in the way MacDonald and Vogel describe. I have already suggested above the intricate web of different geographies and historical times created by the selections. Each film would also have had its own pacing, length, and visual style, as well as differing from the sharp lyricism of Joris Ivens to the social utility of *Feeling All-Right* to the raw footage of the coronagraph film. One can imagine many further ways in which they are distinct from one another.

At the same time they are *united* under Cinema 16’s peculiar umbrella: not only “films you cannot see elsewhere,” but films which were explicitly presented as pushing forward cinematic art, expression, depiction, and social use, whether to the delight or the discomfort of viewers. Vogel’s taste, however wide-ranging, was also a unifying and defining factor. Nevertheless—quite unlike an Eisenstein sequence—no overarching programmatic theme or message, whether aesthetic or political, is obvious in the grouping of these particular films. This is important, for this nearly Surrealist approach to curating is consistent throughout Cinema 16; it is clearly deliberate and foundational. It

seems that Vogel, having established that particular films belonged in Cinema 16's purview, let these films guide him to their arrangements into different programs and program orders—filtered through his own preferences for radical aesthetics. Instead of constructing a program to support an argument, as Laura Marks identifies the ethical activity of curation, the argument in a Cinema 16 program seems to a great extent to *be* the program. It is the relations between the films, and the larger juxtaposition of strangeness and familiarity, which activate viewers' sensibilities. For a given program's radical shifts, combined with deliberately open-ended organization of the material, leaves room for multiple connections, varied interpretations and active reactions among audience members. As I will detail below, Vogel encouraged such individual responses, even to the point of walkouts and other negative incidents. This may be Cinema 16's most radical critique of mainstream cinema, for it differs so sharply from mainstream cinema's formulation of a mass audience—yet it preserved moviegoing as a collective, social experience. The ethical project of changing society through cinema required implementing an equally ethical screening method: an open-ended montage of films that could activate individualized responses within a collective framework.

Wider Contexts: the Full Season, the Cinemagoing Experience

Just as single films had the wider context of the whole screening, Cinema 16 programs themselves had wider contexts: that of the entire Cinema 16 season, and further, that of mainstream moviegoing. Cinema 16 was a film society—a private membership club, non-profit and tax exempt. This meant that film selections were not

subject to the pre-approval of the New York State Censorship Office. But this status changed the nature of attendance: as a membership club Cinema 16 could not sell individual tickets to shows. The only way to attend was to pay for a year's membership in advance. Ten dollars per year granted admission to sixteen programs, plus two complimentary guest tickets. According to Vogel, Cinema 16 was for the entirety of its existence exclusively sustained economically by these membership fees.³⁶ Buying a year's membership did not guarantee that a member would attend each of the season's shows, but it made it more likely for members to return to subsequent shows, since they had already paid for them. Cinema 16 screenings, then, were not isolated events for their attendees. Members attended multiple shows, which over time would have accustomed them to Vogel's programming style and allowed them to compare one show to another. Further, the addition to Cinema 16's schedule of themed "special programs," programs devoted to feature films and programs arranged around an explicit theme, meant that the main dialectical screenings became part of what MacDonald terms "the meta-dialectic that characterized the overall history of the film society's offerings."³⁷ Indeed, Vogel and his programming assistant Jack Goelman not only carefully organized each screening, but viewed an entire season of Cinema 16 as a large work in itself—a "huge film."³⁸

³⁶ MacDonald, "An Interview with Amos Vogel," 42–44.

³⁷ MacDonald, introduction to *Cinema 16*, 10.

³⁸ MacDonald, "An Interview with Jack Goelman," 73.

Finally, mainstream cinema was by definition the larger context for viewers' experiences of the films and screenings at Cinema 16. "Films you cannot see elsewhere," Cinema 16's recurrent slogan, accented its sharp economic and aesthetic distinctions from mainstream Hollywood cinema—films you cannot escape—but it also cannily used certain of that cinema's conventions, particularly the organized professionalism of the projection and the theatrical setting.

Confrontations

Spectators confronted with films

To conclude this section, I would like to return to the idea of Cinema 16 as "confrontational cinema," in Raymond Haberski's phrase, in order to rethink what kind of confrontations took place there, in the light of what I have established about Amos Vogel's practice. Recall Scott MacDonald's characterization of Cinema 16's juxtapositions: creating "maximum thought—and perhaps action—on the part of the audience...about film itself and about the social and political implications of its conventional (or unconventional) uses."³⁹ The nature of the films shown meant that action among Cinema 16's audience often took the immediate form of active rebellion, rejection, or approval. For filmmaker Carmen D'Avino, the Cinema 16 audience was

³⁹ MacDonald, Introduction to *Cinema 16*, 10.

“volatile and beautiful”: “They’d boo; they’d walk out; they’d scream for joy.”⁴⁰

Numerous other accounts corroborate the heightened emotional atmosphere at Cinema 16’s screenings. Filmmaker Ken Jacobs remembered starting a “verbal fight” with audience members who showed vocal hostility to Stan Brakhage’s *The Wonder Ring* (1955), and in a letter to Vogel after the screening of his own film *Mother’s Day* (1948), James Broughton registered his “distaste and amazement” at the audience reaction: “We are fortunate [in San Francisco] not to have to cope with audiences like yours for fortunately they only exist in New York.”⁴¹ “We watched carefully for the responses, we listened very carefully,” Jack Goelman stated in the documentary *Film as a Subversive Art*. The viewers “would applaud with their feet, with their hands, they would make noises, whistle. I couldn’t understand people getting that excited about it. It made up for the other end.” The other end was undoubtedly a 1952 screening of Willard Maas’ poetic film *Image in the Snow*, which Goelman estimated endured “four or five hundred” walkouts over the course of its thirty minutes (from an audience of twelve hundred). They did not go quietly, in some cases yelling, “What kind of shit is this!”⁴²

Responses such as these had precedents. They did not merely represent aberrations from established norms of moviegoing, but reached back into long-standing

⁴⁰ MacDonald, “Conversation with Carmen D’Avino, 2/16/85,” 278.

⁴¹ Scott MacDonald, “Ken and Flo Jacobs,” in *A Critical Cinema 3: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 367; MacDonald, *Cinema 16*, 118.

⁴² MacDonald, “An Interview with Jack Goelman,” 75.

anxieties among cultural institutions about the effect of films on viewers. Alison Griffiths has written of the American Museum of Natural History's conflicted approach to including film in the first decade of the twentieth century: desirous of film's mass audience, but eager to differentiate between the seriousness of their scientific mission and film's popular appeal and entertainment function.⁴³ In *The Birth of the Museum*, Tony Bennett has argued that through architecture and rules, museums in the late nineteenth century sought not only to suppress the rowdiness they feared public admission would bring, but also to teach members of the public to restrain and regulate their own behavior, by making the museum a place to be seen as much as a place for looking at objects.⁴⁴

While "passive," self-regulated spectatorship is often assumed among viewers in mid-century commercial cinema houses, in the 1930s art cinemas and other less-established setups were very much still in the process of defining viewing practice and decorum. The Film Library at the Museum of Modern Art, Cinema 16's major predecessor in New York, had itself begun only twelve years before Vogel presented his first screenings. Charles Turner, a filmmaker, collector and early film enthusiast, attributed the discomfort of MoMA's early screenings to the largely unprecedented practice of exhibiting historic—indeed, any non-current—cinema, and the resulting conflict between serious students of old films and those who "would laugh at anything

⁴³ Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference*, 255–270.

⁴⁴ Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 99–102.

that wasn't absolutely current in style or performance."⁴⁵ The conflicts often erupted into verbal and physical confrontations. Turner relates that MoMA's first film curator Iris Barry actively monitored behavior at screenings, and went so far as to project a slide announcement during disturbances, warning viewers that the film would be stopped if behavior did not improve.⁴⁶ In her book *Museum Movies*, Haidie Wasson shows how MoMA established practices of exhibition and spectatorship: on one hand, presenting films as complete contained works, discouraging vocal responses, and requiring punctuality and other codes of behavior; on the other, providing program notes and other educational cues, emphasizing films' cinematic qualities and achievements more than their social or thematic content, and recasting film as an art object equivalent to painting or sculpture.⁴⁷ Although in some ways this tamping down of rowdiness interfaced with early museums' establishment of public behavior norms, Wasson shows that MoMA's creation of viewing practice served progressive purposes as well: providing access to non-American and experimental films, giving cultural legitimacy to cinematic modes and content discouraged by the highly regulated commercial film industry, and incorporating into the museum space objects (in this case, film) from everyday experience.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Ronald S. Magliozzi and Charles L. Turner, "Witnessing the Development of Independent Film Culture in New York: An Interview with Charles L. Turner," *Film History* 12, no. 1 (2000): 78.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Wasson, *Museum Movies*, 22–23.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 15–18.

When MoMA began showing films, it was early cinema and films from the past which confused viewers; by mid-century, it was the more recently emerged American avant-garde which had the same result. Vogel's immediate predecessor on the West coast was Frank Stauffacher, who began the Art in Cinema series at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1946, a year prior to Cinema 16's first screening. Stan Brakhage attended the screening at which the Beat poet and filmmaker Christopher Maclaine's landmark antinuclear film *The End* (1953) first appeared. Brakhage described a true riot, including the audience dismantling the seats: "I remember chairs began disappearing on all sides of me."⁴⁹ Importantly, this reaction did not faze Stauffacher as programmer or projectionist—according to Brakhage, "Stauffacher, bravely, went right on showing the film clear through to the end."⁵⁰

Just as Stauffacher kept the projector running during the chaos of *The End's* premiere, Vogel was famously determined to not let signs of approval or, especially, disapproval, sway his programming. He stated to Scott MacDonald that negative comments about avant-garde film in Cinema 16's member polls were useful to gauge audience response but did not influence him to reduce the number of avant-garde films he

⁴⁹ Stan Brakhage, Brecht Andersch, and Timoleon Wilkins, "Christopher Maclaine and the San Francisco Film Scene in the 1950s," in Anker, Geritz, and Seid, *Radical Light*, 56.

⁵⁰ Ibid. Brakhage's memory of this extreme negative reaction to the film is supported by audience ratings collected by Stauffacher; *The End* received the lowest ratings of any film shown that year, and inspired vitriolic comments. See Kathy Geritz, "Two Premieres at Art in Cinema: *The End* and *Venom and Eternity*," in Anker, Geritz, and Seid, *Radical Light*, 64.

showed.⁵¹ And in an article on film programming published at the height of Cinema 16, he approvingly quoted an orchestra director “who after introducing Brahms to Chicago audiences for the first time said: ‘They do not like Brahms...I shall play him again.’”⁵² In turn, Cinema 16 members seem to have anticipated the inevitability of being irritated, as well as exhilarated, at screenings, and to observe such reactions among other viewers.⁵³ In other words, viewers were prepared to be confronted at Cinema 16, not only by films, but by the possibility of unanticipated responses. The heightened emotional charge of such an atmosphere was surely different than that of either mainstream cinema or the museum.

Films confronted with spectators

But confrontation seems to have run in another direction at Cinema 16 as well. I have mentioned above Raymond Haberski’s study of Cinema 16 as a kind of confrontational cinema. As might be expected, Haberski characterizes Cinema 16’s viewers as the ones being confronted, and the accounts I have given of walkouts, whistling, and the like provide evidence that a confrontation was indeed happening. But

⁵¹ MacDonald, “An Interview with Amos Vogel,” 48.

⁵² Amos Vogel, “Cinema 16 and the Question of Programming,” in Starr, *Film Society Primer*, 57.

⁵³ In his 1976 interview with Stephen Dobi, Vogel extended the “dialectical relation” of programming to that between the programmer and audience: not hesitating to show films he knew were important but would be unpopular, yet not showing entire programs or seasons full of these films. Stephen J. Dobi, “Interview with Amos Vogel, June 23, 1976,” in “Cinema 16: America’s Largest Film Society,” 278.

consider again *Feeling All-Right*, the syphilis treatment documentary mentioned above. This film exemplifies that aspect of Cinema 16 programming which was about unlodging films from nontheatrical contexts and exhibiting them in the theater, as part of cinematic practice and history. Again and again at Cinema 16, films that were made for professionals, clinicians, scientists, students or researchers on highly specialized subjects were themselves confronted—first with a new cinematic context, then by the program’s other films, and most importantly with a *public*, which Vogel had convened expressly for the purpose of viewing. I am inverting for a moment the usual equation of a public confronted with a film, in order to suggest that such films as *Feeling All-Right* were themselves confronted with viewers—changed in the process of their recontextualization in Cinema 16, just as viewers were changed in the process of watching them.

Conclusion: Planes of Action

If early museums were ambivalent about the popular culture aspect of cinema, seeking to eliminate its non-scientific aspects, and MoMA sought to elevate cinema to the status of art (and if in these ways both sought to temper public behavior), Vogel seems to have done something different yet: widening the field of what could be considered cinema, in a kind of radical inclusivity, he also expanded the range of viewers’ reactions, and the possibilities for individual responses. Cinema 16’s program notes and Vogel’s public statements on film societies make clear that, like Iris Barry, he viewed his cinematic project as pedagogical. But unlike Barry, Vogel does not seem to have actively sought to control his audience, to stop them from leaving or reacting. The newness and

unfamiliar quality of the films at Cinema 16, their juxtapositions, the fact that Vogel never hesitated to show imagery he knew would shock and upset as well as delight audiences, and the constant possibility of audience revolt—all of these were exactly what both museums and mainstream theaters had long strived to eliminate, out of a deeply ingrained fear of uncontrollable behavior. It wasn't only Cinema 16's programmers who were, in Jack Goelman's words, "in uncharted territory." It was the films (in their new cinematic context) and the viewers as well. Members of Cinema 16 were on multiple levels thrown back onto their own reactions and were forced to locate themselves in relation to the films and to the other spectators in a way that regular cinema-going discouraged or suppressed. As the curators of Cinema 16 became akin to filmmakers in their organization of programs, the films became a new kind of cinema and the audience became a type of cinematic subject, individualized and collective, and visible to itself. In the atmosphere created at Cinema 16, the boundaries between curator, audience and film became more permeable—just as theory and practice merged there in unusual ways. The ethical project of Cinema 16—to confront society with cinema, changing both in the process—required, and made possible, the dissolving of boundaries in subjective experience.

Revisiting Cinema 16: May 1950, September 2014

Cinema 16 activated its viewers as an audience, preserving individual responses in a mass cinemagoing context. Within this context, and at the same time, it actively dissolved boundaries between cinematic and non-cinematic by combining rawer footage

and other types of non-theatrical films with finished or more recognizably cinematic works. Both of these programming strategies together subtly shifted the emphasis of the experience between viewers and cinema. In provoking individual sensibilities and reactions within a collective experience, Cinema 16 worked against the Hollywood filmmaking codes that formulated a mass audience. In this sense it was itself avant-garde—only through the arrangement rather than creation of films, and further, through using many educational and documentary films that were not themselves avant-garde.

The combination of avant-garde curation strategies with a constant and often successful outreach to the widest possible audience—and without a sense of contradiction in these positions—helped to define Cinema 16. When Vogel ended the film society in 1963, this kind of open-ended yet engaging film programming gave way to a more polemical practice personified by Jonas Mekas, the Film-Makers' Cinematheque and the larger underground film movement, and characterized by radically inclusive programs dedicated to single filmmakers or entirely to avant-garde films. Vogel had avoided both of these strategies—especially the latter—believing such programs would fatigue and alienate general audiences.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ The break between Vogel and Mekas, and Vogel's views on the Film-Makers' Cooperative and Cinematheque programming strategies, are well documented. See Dobi, "Interview with Amos Vogel, June 23, 1976," 277; MacDonald, "An Interview with Amos Vogel," 57; and Nichols, "To Counteract the Forces of Hollywood," 8.

MacDonald has suggested that, for various reasons, we find ourselves in a time in which Vogel's self-sustaining curatorial approach might have wide application; indeed, Brett Kashmere and Walter Forsberg have more recently identified Cinema 16 as the primary precursor to the contemporary landscape of independent film curation and exhibition, from alternative cinema spaces to the microcinema movement from the 1990s to the present.⁵⁵ According to MacDonald, diminished government funding for the arts once again puts film programmers and curators in a position similar to that of the Vogels when they began Cinema 16. Yet, curators today are in a somewhat different position in regard to audiences. Unlike in the era of Cinema 16, there is unprecedented access for individual viewers to virtually any kind of existing filmmaking style and genre, and digitization and online video streaming technology have accelerated the decline of moviegoing as a communal experience. But in some ways, this situation has made curation all the more relevant. Many of the films Vogel showed now can be seen elsewhere. But because so much can be seen elsewhere—in fact, because in terms of digital media the *here* and *elsewhere* of cinema have been so effectively collapsed—the curatorial function of putting together, of choosing from and making sense of the mass of material, remains useful. It is also true that while historic avant-garde film has benefitted somewhat from digitization efforts, the majority of canonical works (and of course those even less celebrated) remain available only on 16mm. In these ways, today we remain in

⁵⁵ MacDonald, introduction to *Cinema 16*, 29–30; Brett Kashmere and Walter Forsberg, introduction to *Incite!: Journal of Experimental Media and Radical Aesthetics*, vol. 4, 2013, 10–13.

parallel to Amos Vogel's position in the years of Cinema 16. We need to bring this audience and these films together.

Given these differences and similarities in the curator's position between then and now, how can we think of the audience's position? How might we as viewers react today to this curatorial strategy and these films? To return to Walter Benjamin's idea from the previous chapter, is there a potential now-being not only in objects (in this case, films) but in a past *configuration* of objects? As a method for determining this I presented, as part of the Film Love series, an entire program of Cinema 16's to a present-day audience. In this section, I recount this event and the process of its creation, as a way of researching what audiences, what films, and what times curation brings together.

Precedents

Cinema 16 has been the subject of several curatorial initiatives. In 1994, Scott MacDonald curated a series of tribute screenings at Anthology Film Archives in New York. Consisting of seventeen programs, it is one of the most extensive curatorial responses to Cinema 16.⁵⁶ Programs one and two recreate Cinema 16's first four programs in their entirety (by twice combining two original programs into one long screening). Nearly all of the subsequent programs were also in the classic Cinema 16 "dialectical" style. But instead of continuing to recreate original programs for the entire

⁵⁶ I am grateful to Scott MacDonald for providing the program schedule for this series.

series, MacDonald chose to combine films from different screenings and eras. This curatorial strategy preserves the discontinuity of Vogel's curatorial style while accenting the many individual films that had retained an association with the film series and which remain of interest to contemporary audiences. In 2002 at the Museum of Modern Art and again in 2007 at the Harvard Film Archive, MacDonald curated smaller programs of Cinema 16 favorites, again using Vogel's method of colliding styles and subjects, and mixing different selections for a contemporary context.

After Vogel's death in 2012, prominent institutions presented their own tribute screenings and series. Anthology Film Archives and the Museum of the Moving Image, both in New York, launched ambitious programs in 2013 dedicated to the enduring influence of Vogel's book *Film as a Subversive Art*. At the same time, the Spectacle microcinema in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, launched a monthly series dedicated to the book. At the two larger institutions, as Dan Streible observed, programs of feature-length films dominated, rather than the short film programs that characterized Cinema 16.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Dan Streible, "*Film as a Subversive Art* Tribute at Anthology Film Archives and Spectacle Theater," Curating Moving Images, entry posted February 25, 2013, <http://curatingmovingimages.blogspot.com/2013/02/film-as-subversive-art-tribute-at.html> (accessed September 23, 2014). Also see Matt Prigge, "Anthology Film Archives' 'A Tribute to Amos Vogel and *Film as a Subversive Art*,'" Curating Moving Images, entry posted February 25, 2013, <http://curatingmovingimages.blogspot.com/2013/02/anthology-film-archives-tribute-to-amos.html> (accessed September 23, 2014). Individual programs for Anthology's series are listed in the calendar section of Anthology Film Archives' website. See http://anthologyfilmarchives.org/film_screenings/calendar?view=list&month=02&year=2013#showing-40397 (accessed September 23, 2014). For a list of programs in the series at the Museum of the Moving Image, see <http://www.movingimage.us/films/2013/03/16/detail/a-tribute-to-amos-vogel-and-film-as-a-subversive-art/> (accessed September 23, 2014).

Choosing a Program

The only published source for Cinema 16's programming selections is Scott MacDonald's edited volume of primary documents, *Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society*. As mentioned above, however, MacDonald chose to publish the promotional program announcements (which state Vogel's *intentions* for the programs) rather than the final program notes (which state what was actually shown), arguing that the announced programs give the more accurate theoretical sense of Vogel's programming.⁵⁸ Complete sets of Cinema 16 program notes are held in Vogel's papers at Columbia University and at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research. Stephen Dobi's 1984 dissertation on Cinema 16 outlines each program of the first three seasons in detail, including excerpts from the program notes. Using these sources, I settled on the program presented in May 1950, for several reasons. The printed notes indicate that this screening was presented as originally announced. The individual films in this program remain compelling works, and their combination is thematically rich and complex, with potential for the type of differing interpretation and experience among viewers which I have described above as characteristic of Cinema 16. A presentation of this screening during a cinema course I taught at Emory University in fall 2013 confirmed for me that the program coheres as a whole. Finally—and below, I will take up this subject further—the difference in these films' status from then to now (in 1950, they

⁵⁸ MacDonald, introduction to *Cinema 16*, 28–29.

represented very recent developments cinematically, socially, or both; in 2014, they are either acknowledged classics or forgotten, though fascinating, experiments of another time) will reveal what curation does with the conjunction of cinematic and historical time, a conjunction uniquely available in the curation of film.

Program description

Like the preceding spring 1950 programs, May 1950's program consisted of six films. Three were by the abstract filmmaker Oskar Fischinger, shown together and listed on the program note under the umbrella title *The Evolution of the Experimental Film: The Work of Oskar Fischinger*. Thinking of these three short films as forming a group of their own, we see that this program conformed to Vogel's stated goal of having one avant-garde film, one abstract film, one politically-minded documentary and one scientific or educational film on each program.

The evening began with Fischinger's three shorts. Fischinger was already a legend in avant-garde film, having spent two decades at the forefront of handmade and animated film, so his portion of the program was both an explicit reference to film history and a demonstration of the state of the art. *Absolute Film Study #11* (1932), *Allegretto* (1936-43), and *Motion Painting No. 1* (the most recent film, made in 1947), were shown chronologically and clearly Fischinger's work was reaching a peak with the virtuoso oil-on-plexiglas painting of *Motion Painting No. 1*. The three films displayed internal variety among themselves, from the relatively simple, elegant black & white ground of the first film (with Mozart) to the dazzling movement and color of *Allegretto* (and its jazzy pop

score), to the complex geometric meditations of the recent film (drawn in part from Hindu philosophy and synchronized to Bach).⁵⁹

Fischinger was followed by John Huston's *The Battle of San Pietro* (1945), the second film in what is now known as his war trilogy. Thus, the joyous feel, energy, color and spiritual references of Fischinger's painting in motion were immediately replaced with a stiffly delivered speech by a military general—tacked onto the beginning of Huston's film by Army officials in order to undermine what we soon see for ourselves: an unprecedented representation of the heat of battle, disturbing imagery of killed and wounded soldiers, and above all a sense of war's futility.

Even after decades of a continuous uptick of violence in narrative film, and our knowledge that some of this film's action was staged, *The Battle of San Pietro* remains disturbing viewing; among the most indelible of the film's images are men being folded into body bags (not staged), and the almost grotesque contrast with the smiling children of the devastated Italian village. One can only imagine what it was like to view these images with the war so freshly in mind.

Only a four-minute intermission separated this depiction of a shattered, insane world from the program's next challenge. An American counterpart to Luis Buñuel's and Salvador Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), Sidney Peterson's seventeen-minute *The Lead*

⁵⁹ William Moritz, *Optical Poetry: The Life and Work of Oskar Fischinger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 184–86.

Shoes (1950) is an aggressively Surrealist intervention into the program (and possibly into cinema at that moment). It is based on a conflation of two traditional ballads, one of which retells a Cain-and-Abel story. These ballads were also recorded for the soundtrack by a collective of musicians, in an amalgam of traditional jazz and bizarre free improvisation—a sonic analogue for the alternately absurd and unsettling imagery, distorted by use of an anamorphic camera lens. No rest for the audience, however: after this audiovisual assault came a long journey into the unconscious, incongruously presented in a banal setting. *Unconscious Motivation* (1949) was, at nearly forty minutes, the film's longest program—yet it is visually and filmically the most pedestrian, taking place entirely in a nondescript office, consisting mainly of talk, cutting between only two camera angles and occurring in real time. Two subjects, Don and Claire, are hypnotized, given a false memory of having stolen money as a child, and are told that this buried memory has impacted their adult behavior. Upon awakening, they are taken through a number of tests and experiments (such as word association and inkblot interpretation) to resolve the conflict.

Films and availability

Selecting a Cinema 16 program is more than a matter of judging the collective and individual strengths of the selections. Other programs contained perhaps equally breathtaking juxtapositions, such as November 1949's program detailed above. Or consider the pairing of *Experiments in the Revival of Organisms* (1940)—a Russian laboratory film in which dogs are put to sleep and brought back to life, and in which we

see a severed dog's head kept alive in the lab—with *To Hear Your Banjo Play* (1946), featuring a young Pete Seeger demonstrating American folk music styles. The pairing of these two films itself forms no coherent intellectual argument about their subjects. Yet their combined effect is powerful: watching the music film after the lab film brings out unexpected and quite effective emotional resonances, especially in the second film's final dance sequence.

Clearly, many of Vogel's programming choices hold up today. Yet history has acted upon these films. In the 1940s and 1950s, their marginal status was connected partly with their *newness*, whether as avant-garde statements or scientific documents hinting at a forthcoming world full of both promise and threat. In 2014, many of Cinema 16's selections are simply not to be found, but for a different reason: they have long ago disappeared from distribution, reverting to archives or undocumented storage sites, their screening rights ambiguous if a print could even be found.

One more reason, then, to consider May 1950: all of its selections are available. The two documentary films exist in digital versions. Fischinger's and Peterson's films are canonical avant-garde works and are available in 16mm prints from Canyon Cinema and the Film-Makers' Cooperative respectively. The program was thus *projectable*, and the screening was placed on the fall 2014 schedule at Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, under the title "Cinema 16, May 1950: Revisiting a Radical Mid-Century American Film Society."

How to Approach Presentation and Context

As with the other case studies in this dissertation, the recreation of Cinema 16's May 1950 program presents special problems that illuminate the issues in showing historical cinema. First, there is the unusual nature of the event: not an exhibition of historical cinema works, but of a historical screening event, of which the films are only a part. This means that the films as well as the non-film aspects—spoken introductions and program notes, venue and projection, publicity and reception—would stand in relation to what we know of the prior event. They thus reflect their prior counterparts: my program notes would to some extent be about Vogel's program notes, and so on. Given this reflective nature, my own program notes would inevitably invert Vogel's procedure. Where Cinema 16's notes avoided discussing connections between the films, mine would have to address them, as part of the reason for revisiting the event. For those uninclined or unable to read the notes, a verbal introduction would serve as usual to orient the program, as well as to urge participation in the post-screening discussion and to fill out comment cards.

What the original program notes said

The original program notes followed Vogel's pattern of addressing each film separately, through the introduction of a different writer's voice for each film. Fischinger's films had the benefits of three different commentators: Vogel provided a brief introduction to Fischinger and the films, followed by a reprint of Frank Stauffacher's program notes for Fischinger's San Francisco screening at Art in Cinema

and a statement from Fischinger himself, emphasizing the necessity for the film artist's isolation in creative work. Richard Griffith of the Museum of Modern Art provided background and analysis of *The Battle of San Pietro*. Parker Tyler sympathetically analyzed *The Lead Shoes*—perhaps that film's first extensive commentary. Vogel saved *Unconscious Motivation* for himself.⁶⁰ “By the camera's magic,” he says, “mysteries of nature are revealed that heretofore had been hidden from view”:

Instead of *reading about* the subconscious, *we actually see it at work*. What makes this film even more amazing is the fact that it is entirely *unstaged* and *unrehearsed*. It is presented exactly as it was filmed—with 2 cameras running continuously, and no attempt made at editing or creative camera work... The film is not only an accurate and authentic clinical protocol, but a most provocative and disturbing motion picture as well.⁶¹

Characteristically, Vogel chose to end his note with praise of a film's “provocative and disturbing” quality, and by extension to end his *program* with a sense of provocation and disturbance. This is another indication of the dialectic of confrontation and trust with which he approached Cinema 16's audience. We could not be further away from the forces of Hollywood.

⁶⁰ Stephen Dobi claims that Amos Vogel was “the author/editor of all copy” for Cinema 16 program notes, and attributes the program note for *Unconscious Motivation* to Vogel. Dobi, “Cinema 16: America's Largest Film Society,” 100, 105.

⁶¹ Cinema 16 program notes, May 1950, box 8 folder 22, Amos Vogel papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, NY.

How to Approach Documentation

As suggested above, Vogel regularly polled audience members for their opinions of Cinema 16's films and their presentation, and the responses provided him not only with feedback, but with lasting documentation of the film society's reception. Spurred by accounts of Cinema 16 questionnaires, I have distributed audience comment cards at most of my events since 2009. For this event I modified the comment form by asking viewers to state their favorite and least favorite films on the program. This addition reflects similar inquiries on Cinema 16's questionnaires, as well as those of the Art in Cinema series. The program notes and comment cards, then, form the printed documentation of our screening.

How to Approach 1950 in 2014

The importance of "newness"

"Film societies must remain at least one step ahead of their audiences," Vogel wrote in the 1950s. He was writing, essentially, a manifesto and a pep talk for budding curators: about taste, the resistance of "entertainment" as a standard of judgment for the success of a film, and the need to risk disapproval and errors in programming the *new*.⁶²

⁶² Vogel, "Cinema 16 and the Question of Programming," 57–58.

It is clear that much of Cinema 16's appeal and relevance for audiences was due to a sense of seeing advanced or unprecedented imagery and approaches on screen—in other words, the new. Save for the earlier Fischinger films, all the films in May 1950's screening were recent. *Unconscious Motivation* and *The Lead Shoes* had both been completed the year before. *The Battle of San Pietro*, depicting events of December 1943, had first been seen in theaters in July 1945, when it gained attention for its unsparing and unprecedented depiction of war's brutality.⁶³ Besides the chronological, each film represented a new cinematic, social or psychological development as well.

What am I curating?

What, then, does one “curate” when presenting a historical screening?⁶⁴ For when we attend a theater screening of a historic film, we think of watching a film from long ago, but do not usually think of attending a long ago *screening*. The “Cinema 16, May 1950” event asks the audience to do this.

In a sense, this program overlays Cinema 16 onto the Film Love series. A model for this comes from another political radical of the 1950s, the French writer Guy Debord. In his essay “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,” Debord wrote of a friend

⁶³ Mark Harris, *Five Came Back: A Story of Hollywood and the Second World War* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 382–385.

⁶⁴ This section is adapted from program notes by the author, distributed at the event “Cinema 16, May 1950: Revisiting a Radical Mid-Century American Film Society,” September 19, 2014, Atlanta Contemporary Art Center.

who had wandered a portion of Germany while blindly following a map of London.⁶⁵ Such a transposition of one map onto a different location, for Debord, expressed “not subordination to randomness but complete *insubordination* to habitual influences.” This was a method of “psychogeography,” which Debord defined as “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.”

This event’s method of superimposing 1950 onto 2014 is intended to do the same thing, only through a conjunction of cinematic and historical time instead of urban space. In other words, there is more at stake here than simply recreating a past screening of a former cinema, or establishing the historical importance of Cinema 16. Like the strangeness of juxtapositions in Cinema 16 programs, the conjunction between 1950 and now may teach us something about how cinema is not just an art of time, but of *relation across time*. To put together recorded moving images, and to bring them together with audiences, is to curate historical time, as well as cinematic duration.

⁶⁵ Guy Debord, “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,” in *The Situationists and the City*, ed. Tom McDonough (New York: Verso, 2009), 62.

The Event

The venue and audience

As a way of researching the questions of historical time and juxtaposition which I have outlined above, I presented the Film Love program “Cinema 16, May 1950” on Friday, September 19, 2014 at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center. Six pages of program notes were provided to the audience, with a brief history of Cinema 16, an explanation of its methods and programming style, descriptions of the films shown and a condensed version of what I have written above regarding the “overlay” of one time onto another. I also introduced the screening with similar words about the event.

As the overlay of eras implies, it was not possible (nor was it my goal) to “recreate” a Cinema 16 screening. The venue was a mid-size contemporary art center instead of a large traditional movie theater. Although this situation does not translate to a “specialized” audience, as art centers are often assumed to be (Film Love programs are conceived for the widest possible audience), the audience was quite a bit smaller in size. Physically, the venue itself is not particularly specialized for film. The screening room (which was quite advantageous for the Andy Warhol film event described in the next chapter) is an all-purpose lecture/screening/event room optimized for video projection. In this case, the 16mm film prints of Fischinger’s and Peterson’s works, and digital videos of Huston’s film and *Unconscious Motivation*—a hybrid film and video presentation that is a decidedly contemporary and unavoidable microcinema phenomenon—undoubtedly made for less smooth transitions than in the original program. Together, the conceptual

and physical relocation of Cinema 16 to this particular room, and the intimate (instead of “vast potential”) number of viewers allowed for a critical experience of Vogel’s curation as well as the films, and facilitated extended group and individual discussion at the event—a community once again, if not on the scale of Cinema 16’s.

I could not hope to replicate the sheer audience size of Cinema 16’s programs, nor the grand scope of its theatrical setting. A recontextualization of the event and the films was thus inevitable. But this speaks to the difference, of which Benjamin wrote, between the “concrete historical situation” of an object, and the historical situation of *our* interest in that object. Instead of a recreation or re-enactment, I hoped to discover something of what is contemporary about the historical situation of Cinema 16.

Audience response

Unusually, the May 1950 program inspired writing in both primary and secondary documents about viewers’ reception, or potential reception, of these films. Decades after the event, Dobi described the likely situation of viewers midway through the program as “seriously disjointed and intellectually, and visually, overwhelmed.”⁶⁶ Parker Tyler, who contributed the program notes for *The Lead Shoes* and witnessed the May 10, 1950 screening of the program, indicated in a letter to Vogel that *The Lead Shoes* did not fare well: “Apparently a good part of the audience last night—the belligerently uneducated

⁶⁶ Dobi, “Cinema 16: America’s Largest Film Society,” 100–105.

part—simply loathed it.”⁶⁷ May 10 was a Wednesday—the weeknight on which Cinema 16 screened in its largest theater, of 1,600 seats. So for Tyler to notice disapproval from “a good part of the audience” must have meant a good deal of vocal reaction to Peterson’s strange film.

In turn, Tyler made an inspired observation about the program in his letter, comparing the *audience* for *The Lead Shoes* to the *subjects* of *Unconscious Motivation*: “It’s amusing to reflect that ‘The Lead Shoes’ gives just as much trouble as the young man and young woman were given by their hypnosis-dream!”⁶⁸ In the formal subversion and elusive imagery of *The Lead Shoes*, its audience at Cinema 16 was cast as the dreaming subjects of another film.

I was eager, then, to experience these films together with an audience and to hear their reactions during the post-screening discussion. Would *The Lead Shoes*—still a challenging film—irritate? *Unconscious Motivation*, while fascinating, depicts and thus *reproduces* the tedium and frustration of its subjects’ slow progress toward solving their predicament. Would viewers abandon the film—the last, and longest, on this nearly two-hour program? How would Fischinger’s animations and Huston’s war imagery come across after decades of cinematic advances? Would the program be bothersome, pleasurable, or seem dated? “It was fascinating, because it was all theoretical,” said Jack

⁶⁷ MacDonald, *Cinema 16*, 147.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Goelman of the programming process at Cinema 16. Inverting Vogel's charge to be "one step ahead" by showing the new, I was stepping back, showing past objects, and seeking audience reaction.

There were certain cues during the screening. Enthusiastic applause after a film—particularly one many decades old, or with the filmmaker not present—is a good indicator of approval. This is what happened after the Fischinger films. By contrast, after *The Lead Shoes* there was complete silence—until one person clapped, perhaps ironically, to the audience's audible amusement. *Unconscious Motivation* had a surprising reaction: laughter. What I thought might be disturbing or irritating proved instead to be something like comedy. I had been aware of humorous moments, such as the word association test in which the young man gets stuck on the word "mother," to his obvious puzzlement. But there was more consistent laughter than I'd predicted. (I now wonder whether the Cinema 16 audience found it funny as well, despite Vogel's casting of the film as "provocative and disturbing.") Not for the first time, I discovered that the audience may have been "one step ahead."

A post-screening discussion—along with the comment cards, the best opportunity for gauging audience reception—revealed numerous and unexpected interpretations of the films' arrangement and of individual films. In particular, two viewers (one in discussion, one on a comment card) remarked that the Fischinger films made graphic elements of the men and gunfire in Huston's film. For another viewer, *The Lead Shoes* retroactively affected her reading of the war film. The variety of interpretations suggest

that the open-ended quality of Cinema 16 programs do facilitate individual readings of single films and of their arrangement.

Comment cards also provided unexpected conclusions. Out of eighteen responses (from thirty-five attendees), each of the four films (counting the Fischinger films together) received at least one vote for “favorite.” Of these, Fischinger’s were solidly the most popular (eight votes). Surprisingly, the next most popular was *The Lead Shoes*. Only *The Lead Shoes* and *Unconscious Motivation* received “least favorite” votes. Two comments by viewers on the question of favorites—“always changing” and “not sure yet”—suggest further individualized responses as well.

A 1953 membership poll revealed that most Cinema 16 attendees identified themselves as “professionals or professionally employed”; only seventeen percent were in “the arts, advertising and publicity.”⁶⁹ I am equally interested to know who the audience is. Film Love comment cards always contain the question, “How did you hear about this program?” This is intended to gauge the effectiveness of various publicity modes; but the answers can also suggest other things. If one hears about the event because they are on the email list or have signed up for the Facebook group, they have already sought out the series. If, however, one attended the program through a friend or spouse, it is more likely they are new, and perhaps less likely that they have a specialized interest in film. As in Cinema 16, Film Love’s programs are intended for the widest

⁶⁹ Ibid., 213.

possible audiences; they are not conceived as events for film or art specialists. In this sense, I was pleased that nearly half the responses indicated “friend”—*friendship*—as the way they heard about the event. One such respondent, though finding the screening “defamiliarizing,” wrote, “I am not a film buff but found this to be a special experience.” The paradox of Vogel’s “vast potential audience” for noncommercial film remains viable.

Conclusion

As I have suggested above, this event was not only a screening of circa-1950 films but a recreation of a circa-1950 *screening*, and this layering is reflected in the “superimposition” of Cinema 16 onto my own series, Film Love. In such methods, we can see one way of provoking—or curating—a certain kind of cinematic *excess*, as I have described it in the previous chapter. Different than what we can know about the films archivally, this excess is visible through the projection of these films together in time, and in what that projection reveals and produces: a community of viewers, with individual responses and interpretations based across a set of films shown in a certain order at a particular place and time. As the light travels from the projector to the screen, connections form in our minds and in the room, possible through the sensory archive of the screening event.

In contrast to film as a fixed and repeatable medium, this cinematic excess is (in this instance, by its nature as a projection) temporary, ephemeral, and *malleable*, as we have learned from those 2014 viewers whose favorite films of this 1950 program are

“always changing,” “not sure yet.” If film’s archive (still images on a strip, program notes) exists in tension with the moments of its projection, what can projection—a kind of sensory archive—tell us about curation? To what extent is curation of cinema a curation of projection? The next chapter, on the always changing films of Andy Warhol, will tell us.

Chapter 3

Curating Underground: Projecting Andy Warhol

Introduction

It's a February night in 2014 at an art center and for the last hour, I have been handling six different projectors filled with reels of Andy Warhol's films of the Velvet Underground, with up to five going at once. Some of the projectors were equipped to turn laterally on their stands; when I did so, the projected image moved all the way across the opposite wall, overlapping with those from the other projectors. This was one of many visual effects during the show.

At screening's end, I took questions and comments from the audience. One viewer asked about how the show's projection worked, but expressed this in terms of how the films were made. It took me a moment to figure out that this viewer hadn't understood the difference—that when an image moved across the wall, it was me moving the projector; when it zoomed in or out, or cut, that was in Warhol's film—and that this uncertainty was caused in part by the interplay between these different kinds of motion visible during the event. This was a very good question, a basic one generally presented by the films of Andy Warhol, and which thus animates this chapter: what is the projection, and what is the film? And it leads to a further question specific to this project: where, in this equation, is curation?

If contemporary curation may be described as “an activity of putting together,”¹ and if my own curatorial project places special emphasis on the activity of *making accessible*, Andy Warhol’s films throw both of these into flux. Their inconvenient (if not impossible) modes of exhibition, and their multiple levels of inaccessibility—whether engineered by Warhol or by historical circumstance—are not mere obstacles to be overcome on the way to making these films visible in a theater. Instead, they seem to be *part of the work*—to extend the films’ compelling thematic and visual concerns with disappearance and flux into the space of projection, and across historical eras. Where and how curation acts in this space would seem to be very different, then. In this chapter, I hope to determine how.

It takes a certain devotion—or love—to be extensively involved with the showing of Andy Warhol’s films (especially, as I discuss below, in our moment). It’s not just a matter of presenting them. One takes pleasure in throwing the switch on a Kodak Pageant projector to slow the projection speed and produce visible flicker on the screen. Certainly, you have to love the flicker itself, and the *difference* between this slower speed and the regular one. And one must have affection for all the productive confusions engendered by the questions these films raise within the frame and without. This includes the question from our viewer above—which is the film, and which is the projection? It seems inimical to such a love to posit definitions, and in the process re-establish

¹ Von Bismarck, Schaffaff, and Weski, introduction to *Cultures of the Curatorial*, 8. In the introduction to this dissertation, I explain the importance of this definition of curation to my project.

boundaries and hierarchies of filmmaking, projection, and curation. So although a question which adumbrates the difference between film work and film projection is our starting point, and although I will address this question throughout, my project here is not about providing a definitive answer to it. Instead, I want to understand what the very existence of such a question—as prompted by the films in their historical and contemporary contexts—tells us about the activities of curation: caring for, putting together, and making available.

Structure and Methods

This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first, in two parts, takes on the double inquiry noted above: *What is the film, and what is the projection?* To understand how Warhol's films (including their projection) might change how we think of curation (including film curation), it is necessary to look at the films, but also how Warhol made them, and how they are screened as well, since these things are unusually bound together in Warhol's work. Thus, film analysis is here combined with historical research on production and an account of the process of projecting 16mm film in slow-motion and double-screen modes. These methods are applied first to a discussion of how Warhol made his early silent films and how the act of projection modifies and completes these films as cinematic works. Then I undertake an extended analysis of particular Warhol works: the *Screen Test* films which he made as an ongoing series from 1964-66, and *Outer and Inner Space* (1965), a vehicle for the performer Edie Sedgwick. This analysis is closely focused on the active role that projection plays as part of these works. Via

projection, the *Screen Tests* expand cinematic time and *Outer and Inner Space* expands the space of the screen. Together, what do these two different expansions tell us?

Because the issues of expansion these films raise are only visible through the medium of film projection, the next part of this section takes on the question of projection, considering this activity in greater detail through its special meaning for Warhol's body of work. Specifically, I consider 16mm film, the medium in which Warhol's films were made and in which they are still distributed today. Not only does this medium have particular photographic properties, but Warhol used its possibilities for projection speed and its portability to determine his films' structures. Like all Warhol's silent films, the *Screen Tests* are (or are supposed to be) projected in slow motion; *Outer and Inner Space*, like several of Warhol's major sound films, is projected in double screen (two reels shown simultaneously, side by side). Given the virtual abandonment of 16mm among screening venues and institutions in the contemporary turn toward the digital, how does our current relation to 16mm projection affect how we *see* these works? How do Warhol's films in projection change the role and meaning of curation? Because these questions are acute, and because projection is at the heart of my inquiry, this part of the chapter asks where a devotion to 16mm projection places the film curator in relation to our contemporary moment.

Together, as I hope to show in this first section, the *role* of projection in Warhol's films and the *status* of film projection in our moment engender a particular mode of *performance*, both on the screen and curatorially. But what is this mode? What is being

performed? This question leads to the second major section of this chapter: my own 2014 presentation of Warhol's 1966 films of the rock group the Velvet Underground, and my written account of this event. Partly by design and partly through unplanned circumstance (a combination, as we will see, wholly characteristic of Warhol's body of film work), this presentation itself became a kind of performance. As I experience and analyze this performance, it reveals unexpected functions of curation, in relation to its definition as "putting together" and "making accessible."

Curation of Warhol's Films as Research Method

In the second main section of this chapter, I once again apply a combined methodology of film analysis, and historical research into both production and exhibition of the Velvet Underground films, particularly *The Velvet Underground and Nico* (1966). I draw on scholarly and critical accounts (as well as popular ones, and even the "hearsay" of legends, rumor, and inaccuracies that came to stand in for the films in their unavailability, and comprise an essential part of the history of Warhol cinema). But differently than these others, my own account is necessarily seen through the activities of curation. That is, this study is my own *projection*, in more than one sense. Specifically, to curate Andy Warhol's films in our present era involves a hands-on style of programming, exhibiting, and projecting; it is, in a very real sense, to curate projection itself. This is not to enshrine or encourage a sense of Warhol's films as fixed works, nor to simply make them accessible to viewers as such. Rather, screenings of the Warhol films discussed here are active investigations into the ambiguity of film's status as a fixed medium. Curatorial

practice thus becomes a method of research into the films, their history and their present-day being. In turn, these films and their history teach us about curation: specifically, how it brings to light those aspects of a film's context—contingent, speculative, and ephemeral—that stand in ambiguous relation to the work itself.

Literature and Scholarship on Warhol's Films

Since January 2007, I have regularly presented screenings of Andy Warhol's films, concentrating on those made prior to the best-known and widely available features made in collaboration with Paul Morrissey beginning in 1969. I have also incorporated shorter films by Warhol into screenings of works by multiple artists. As an independent curator of Warhol's film work, I quickly found myself enmeshed in a set of daunting yet enticing issues that in aggregate seems to apply to no other filmmaker. These include the knowledge that what films are available represent only a fraction of his work, and that many significant works remain out of reach; the difficulty of accessing the films outside of New York or the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, or outside of professional and scholarly channels; the attendant confusion in Warhol scholarship, including a body of critical and popular writing that for all its insight is rife with errors and legends—and even at its best, painfully aware of its own incomplete purview; and the issues of contemporary projection of Warhol's chosen medium of 16mm, not to mention slow-motion and double-screen projection.

Profusion and absence

Andy Warhol was an extraordinarily prolific filmmaker; it is difficult to find any comparable figure, especially when one considers the brevity of his career. During the period from roughly mid-1963 through mid-1968 he produced hundreds of reels of film and exhibited them in multiple configurations, some as fixed works and others in ever-shifting series of shorter reels, in traditional movie theaters, in private screenings, and in multimedia contexts. The Warhol film scholar Callie Angell places his original footage at just over 290 hours of screen time.² These individual reels of film, voluminous to begin with, themselves became building blocks for multiple versions of feature films and expanded cinema performances, so that the fixed-artifact film reel nearly became less important than the order (or position on the screen, or combination with other reels or with live music) in which it was shown. Further, Warhol was not bound by limitations of style or genre. Directly alongside, and intersecting with, the production of his silent films and expanded cinema works, he developed a successful and equally radical narrative cinema practice, including such now-classic works as *My Hustler* (1965) and an extended series of films scripted by Ronald Tavel, like *Vinyl* and *The Life of Juanita Castro* (both 1965) as well as his commercial breakthrough *The Chelsea Girls* (1966). But even these

² Callie Angell, introduction to *The Films of Andy Warhol: Part II* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994), 8. Only a fraction of this total has been restored and is currently available to see.

relatively fixed works were subject to what Jonas Mekas in 1970 called “the changing states and shapes and lengths and even the titles of his films.”³

Then, it all disappeared. Sometime in 1972, for reasons that remain mysterious, Warhol pulled almost the entirety of his film work from circulation. It remained unavailable for nearly two decades. These twin poles—an overwhelming profusion followed by a complete absence—have defined Warhol’s cinema, its legacy, and its scholarship to this day. For very different reasons, viewers were unable to comprehensively attend these works either in the time they were made and first shown, or in later years when they represented a finished and largely circumscribed body of work, which however was present only as the subject of rumor and legend.

Literature and disappearance

This dichotomy is reflected in the gulf between these films’ popular reputation—in which an unmoving camera stares moronically at this or that object for eight hours, in which “nothing happens”—and the increasing profusion of scholarship on Warhol’s films, in which it becomes apparent that his body of films is rewarding precisely because of its rich matrix of fascinating, endlessly overlapping concerns. One may survey Warhol’s film career from 1963 to 1968 (when he largely gave up hands-on involvement in filmmaking) and find either a discernible progression through styles and technique—

³ Jonas Mekas, “Notes After Reseeing the Movies of Andy Warhol,” in *Andy Warhol*, by John Coplans (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1970), 145.

an increasing sophistication and intentionality of production, for instance—or conversely, find what David E. James calls “abrupt lurches into new directions and shifts to different scales of production,” such that his filmmaking career’s “only continuity appears to be that of discontinuity, its only coherence that of fracture.”⁴

But even those writers who seek to preserve this “fracture” must find a framework in which to lend coherence, however contingent, to Warhol’s films. Instead of looking for coherence in the body of work, James argues that in each “sphere” of Warhol’s film production, “his formal organization of the art object was inseparable from his organization of its social insertion,” and thus finds in Warhol’s films a “continuity in his role as a *producer*.”⁵ More recently, while acknowledging these views, J. J. Murphy argues that the earliest critical work on Warhol’s films, by Jonas Mekas and P. Adams Sitney, overemphasized duration and minimalism (Sitney) as the key elements, or Warhol’s films as documentary recordings that make the everyday into the luminous (Mekas), and thus inaugurated an enduring critical and scholarly rift between the early (minimalist, i.e., art) films and the sound (narrative, i.e., Hollywood-derived) films, as well as contributing to a sense of linear “progress” in a career whose value lay in precisely the opposite: “Warhol’s shifts do not represent a logical progression, but were

⁴ David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 62.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 65 (italics in original).

often occurring simultaneously.”⁶ Nonetheless, Murphy also identifies a coherence in Warhol’s body of film work, namely in the concepts of *transformation* and *narrative*. “Transformation” for Murphy is the extremely broad possibility of change in a film, from one thing, person, event or state to another. Murphy doesn’t define narrative for his study; in fact, narrative developments here seem to represent a species of transformation.

Wherever we might locate coherence in Warhol’s unwieldy body of work, it is useful to keep in mind what Callie Angell says in her own study, that “Warhol’s films may eventually be best understood in terms dictated by his own unique conceptions of the medium.”⁷ A particular Warhol film enters the matrix of his work through many possible overlapping issues, “ranging from private gossip to the history of cinema, from Hollywood scandals to formal issues of avant-garde art practice, from the artist’s personal relationships to technical considerations.”⁸ I would add that these issues include Warhol’s abiding interest in the *tease*, in the ongoing cat-and-mouse game in which the obscurity and covering over of his own films (through legend, through gossip, through profusion or unavailability) was a creative process. In short, Warhol’s ironic incorporation of *disappearance* into cinema is a lens through which to view all of his film work, including how we present it today.

⁶ J. J. Murphy, *The Black Hole of the Camera: The Films of Andy Warhol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 4.

⁷ Angell, introduction to *The Films of Andy Warhol: Part II*, 9.

⁸ Ibid.

My own writing on Warhol's films, including my focus on their curation, is similarly bound up in the issues of their availability. Since the Museum of Modern Art returned Warhol's films to distribution around the early 1990s, there are essentially three ways to see them. One can wait for (or travel to) a venue that is screening a selected film or a retrospective; travel to either New York or Pittsburgh to view them in a research context at the Museum of Modern Art or the Warhol Museum respectively; or one can rent the prints and screen the films oneself.⁹ As I write in summer 2014, I have always opted for the latter, and (as I have explained in previous chapters) I trace my own curatorial impulses and patterns to exactly this model: renting a film which I can see no other way (at least without extensive travel), and presenting it to the public here in Atlanta, partly to cover the cost and partly out of a communal impulse. MoMA's price list for rentals of Warhol films indicates fifty-three different titles (counting the full versions of *Sleep* and *Empire* but not the one-reel excerpts of those films which the Museum also rents), plus an additional twenty-eight reels of *Screen Tests*, all but one of which contain ten *Screen Tests* each. There are also two more recently restored films (*Velvet Underground in Boston* and *Velvet Underground Tarot Cards*) that are available

⁹ The DVDs of Warhol's film work released in Europe over the last decade by the Rarovideo are at least controversial; the company claims they are authorized, but the Warhol Museum disputes this, and viewers have found numerous errors in the transfers and presentation of the films. See Karen Rosenberg, "A Controversy Over *Empire*," NYMag.com, <http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/art/10422/> (accessed June 2, 2014), and Greg Allen, "On The Mixed Up Films Of Mr. Andy Warhola," Greg.org: The Making of, entry posted September 14, 2007, http://greg.org/archive/2007/09/14/on_the_mixed_up_films_of_mr_andy_warhola.html (accessed June 2, 2014).

but do not appear on the rental list. Of all of these, I have screened sixteen in my film series since 2007. I have seen a further four of the films through classroom or public screenings not in my series, and have seen about sixty of the *Screen Tests*, mostly when I have shown them in my series. This is to say that almost my entire viewing experience of Warhol's films has been part of the effort of presenting those same films to an audience. This chapter's scholarship, and its use of curation as a research method, extends this relation.

Finally, numerous though they are, the available films represent a fraction of what Warhol actually shot and exhibited from 1963 to 1968. Should more films ever become available—and there are many significant works still not—the resulting more complete picture will surely change the contours of our knowledge of Warhol's films, and some of the views of them which we have come to take for granted, including those which inform the present study.

Warhol's Films in Projection

The Screen Tests

The *Screen Tests* are a series of over five hundred portrait films Warhol made of fellow artists, friends, acquaintances, and other visitors to his Factory studio during 1964 to 1966. These three-minute rolls were shot with the same Bolex camera Warhol used to make his early silent films such as *Sleep* (1963); by the end of 1964, the Bolex was pressed into service exclusively for the purpose of making *Screen Tests* after Warhol

purchased the Auricon camera which he used for his sound films.¹⁰ As in each phase of Warhol's cinema, significant exceptions abound; but for the majority of the *Screen Tests* subjects were seated and lit, then asked to remain still for the duration of the three-minute filming.

Warhol's cinema is characterized by a radical reconfiguration of cinema's boundaries, often through playful attempts to merge cinema with other media by applying the other mediums' parameters to it. This is most apparent in the *Screen Tests*, which are an extension into cinematic time and space of Warhol's extensive engagement with still photography; in fact, as Callie Angell points out, they are "conceptual hybrids, arising, like much of Warhol's work, from the formal transposition of idioms from one medium to another."¹¹

Elsewhere, Angell characterizes how Warhol's filmed portraits (stilled films, non-films, moving portraits) introduces a third medium: "In the films, the act of portraiture is stretched out over time and, therefore, becomes a kind of performance...instead of

¹⁰ Callie Angell, introduction to *Andy Warhol Screen Tests: The Films of Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné, Volume 1* (New York: Abrams and the Whitney Museum of American Art, 2006), 17–18.

¹¹ Ibid., 14. Angell identifies sources for the *Screen Test* films in several instances of still photography in Warhol's works, especially photobooth portraits and police mug shots. Bill Jeffries characterizes the *Screen Tests* as enacting a series of "inversions" of the film medium, with the "primary inversion" being between still photos and motion pictures. See Bill Jeffries, "Warholian Physiognomy: The *Screen Tests* of 1964 to 1966," in *From Stills to Motion and Back Again: Texts on Andy Warhol's Screen Tests and Outer and Inner Space* (North Vancouver, B.C.: Presentation House Gallery, 2003), 44–45. With implications similar to those of the word "inversion," Homay King characterizes the *Screen Tests* as "experiments without results, trial runs that yield no data." Homay King, "Girl Interrupted: The Queer Time of Warhol's Cinema," *Discourse* 28, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 98.

pseudo-photographs, what you get are some very intense performances, performances which emerge from the tension that is created when people are asked to behave as if they were their own image.”¹²

These films thus enact parallel conceptual hybridities: between still photography and motion, between portrait and performance, between oneself and oneself as image. In turn, they create a kind of compound parallel: between performance and documentary, or to phrase this in performative terms, *onstage* and *backstage*. My inclination here is to use “backstage” rather than “offstage.” Both terms situate themselves in relation to onstage, which is fully appropriate for Warhol; but backstage retains a certain proximity (physical or conceptual) to the stage area, in which one is always headed to or from a performance, and this seems the most apt. For no matter how documentary-like, how offstage, the action appears, the stage (and thus performance) can reappear at any moment. In Warhol, as we will see, backstage itself can be the stage.

Once one begins to think of Warhol’s films as existing on this double level, most of them appear to adhere to it on principle. Though they clearly are portraits, Angell describes the *Screen Tests* as also being “like little documentaries about what it is like to sit for your portrait.”¹³ The portrait also contains the process of its own making. In the act

¹² Callie Angell, “Doubling the Screen: Andy Warhol’s *Outer and Inner Space*,” *Millennium Film Journal*, no. 38 (Spring 2002): 26–27.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 27.

of transposing the idioms of one medium to another, Warhol created films that allegorize themselves.

Screen Tests and the Expansion of Cinematic Time

Alongside this uncanny doubling, there is a further aspect to consider in the *Screen Tests*: their expansion of time. The shooting and exhibition of Warhol's early silent films marked a radical departure in cinematic conceptions of time. Amidst much experimentation and many exceptions, Warhol quickly developed a kind of standard shooting practice for his early films: a one-hundred foot, three-minute roll of film (the maximum size possible with his Bolex, the first camera he used) was devoted to an unbroken shot of a single activity (a haircut, the eating of a mushroom, cavorting on the studio couch) or person (the many *Screen Test* portrait films).¹⁴ In themselves these three-minute shots were longer than all but the most exceptional long takes in mainstream filmmaking. But Warhol further strung these three-minute reels together to form longer films. This is how he made the (sometimes infamous) first works he exhibited as a filmmaker: *Kiss* (1963-64, 48 minutes), *Haircut* (different versions, 1963, 24 minutes in version no. 1), *Eat* (1964, 35 minutes), *Blow Job* (1964, 36 minutes), and others. This long-duration aesthetic culminated in the five-hour forty-minute running time of *Sleep*

¹⁴ Callie Angell, "Some Early Warhol Films: Notes on Technique," in *Andy Warhol: Abstracts*, ed. Thomas Kellein (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1993), 73.

(1963), and the eight hours of *Empire* (1964).¹⁵ All of these films (including the *Screen Tests* when they were shown) were then projected in slow motion, making them a unique, extended body of cinematic works that take longer to watch than they did to make.

Let us consider one aspect of the slow-motion projection of these films, then. The Museum of Modern Art's rental catalog for the available Warhol films notes, "In order to create a kind of slow motion, Warhol intended his silent films to be projected at 16 fps [frames per second], but since most silent speed projectors now operate at 18 fps we recommend that speed for the Warhol silent films...Exceptions to this are the complete versions of SLEEP and EMPIRE, which must be projected at 16 fps in order to achieve the running times which Warhol intended."¹⁶

"In order to create a kind of slow motion," these films are projected at a speed slower than that at which they were shot. Two durations—that of the event as filmed and that of the cinematic work as projected—become apparent. The film reel's duration (about three minutes) differs from the projection duration (about four). But both durations

¹⁵ It is entirely characteristic of the paradoxes in Warhol's cinema that these two films, so definitive of his long-take aesthetic, are exceptions to his established technique of stringing together three-minute rolls. *Sleep* is made from three-minute rolls, but the rolls are sometimes looped and otherwise edited in a complex way that Warhol never again attempted; *Empire*, shot with a different camera, is made from sequentially filmed rolls of much greater length (see Angell, "Some Early Warhol Films," 76). Nevertheless, they can easily be experienced as extensions of the long-take aesthetic developed by Warhol in his "shorter" films. In this, they demonstrate a double nature discernable throughout Warhol's filmmaking career: distinctive and rigorously practiced filmmaking techniques (the three-minute roll, the unbroken take, the lack of editing) veil a profusion of experimentation within those techniques, as well as regular exceptions to them.

¹⁶ Museum of Modern Art Circulating Film Library, *The Films of Andy Warhol* (New York: Museum of Modern Art Circulating Film Library, n.d.), 14.

are perceivable by the viewer; neither is dominant. That is, the minimal nature of the events onscreen and Warhol's heightened attention to them makes us aware of the slowness and extended duration of the original event, while through the slow-motion projection process we then undergo a further extension of the duration as viewers. In the case of Warhol's silent films, the projector becomes more than a machine to facilitate the apprehension of moving images. It modifies these images to create a doubled experience of time in the viewer—one that itself reflects the content onscreen.

In the *Screen Tests*, then, we see films that are doubled within the frame (a portrait that consists of a record of the process of portraiture) and between the screen and the theater (through a double expansion of duration). In a significant way—and specifically through slow-motion projection—the onscreen themes of the *Screen Tests* are duplicated in their viewing.

Outer and Inner Space and the Expansion of the Screen

Projection was used to modify Warhol's sound films as well, and similarly to the silent films this results in a reinforcement of the film's onscreen themes in the act of viewing. In January 1966, Warhol premiered a film he had made with actress Edie Sedgwick the previous summer: *Outer and Inner Space*. In summer 1965 Warhol had made a series of videotapes using a prototype video recorder provided by the Norelco company. In one of these videos, Sedgwick faces off-camera in profile and gives a lengthy monologue. For *Outer and Inner Space*, he filmed Sedgwick sitting just in front of a television monitor playing this videotape. She cannot see her video image, but she

can hear her monologue. The filmed Edie interacts with the off-camera crew while reacting to her videotaped self. Warhol made two 33-minute reels of this activity, both unedited. His recent narrative films, such as *My Hustler*, had been constructed from stringing together these 33-minute “takes” to form 66-minute features. But for *Outer and Inner Space*, he decided to project both reels simultaneously, directly adjacent on the screen. We then see four Edies at once (with each reel featuring both a videotaped and a filmed Sedgwick). Through exhibition, then, this film manifests simultaneous internal and external repetitions of both image and time: the repetition of Sedgwick’s image and voice within the frame is doubled on the screen; and the tension between the “present-time” Edie and her prior videotaped self is compounded by the simultaneous projection of two reels that were originally filmed sequentially. As the present audience we stand in relation to the past Sedgwick as the filmed Sedgwick stands to her videotaped self.

The film’s title may be seen as referencing the two sides of Edie Sedgwick’s experience, subjectivity, or personality. The videotaped Edie is seen in profile, while in the film, the “live” Sedgwick is positioned at only a slight angle to the camera, almost at a right angle to her own video image. On the videotape, her monologue (given to an off-camera presence) seems to be abstract, philosophical, and discursive (“I want to talk about...at least about space...No emotional qualities are ever attached to it...”).¹⁷ She

¹⁷ Because of the audio recording quality during filming and the multiple projection nature of the work, Sedgwick’s dialogue in *Outer and Inner Space* is mostly indecipherable. I rely here on a partial transcription of her words, in Lisa Dillon Edgett, “What Edie Said in *Outer and Inner Space*,” in *From*

seems to be in a quite meditative frame of mind. In contrast, the “live” Edie, responding to both this videotape and to the real-time presence of Warhol and the film crew, displays a certain fragility but is vivacious, with the oft-remarked beauty and charisma she brought to her work with Warhol. She consistently disparages her video monologue (“It sounds like a lot of bullshit”), reveals her acute discomfort at having to listen to her own voice (“it’s dreadful. It gives me the creeps”), and attempts to keep the conversation light instead of philosophically portentous. Edie’s interiorized monologue (the past, itself now externalized via videotape) conflicts continuously with her present, “live,” outgoing self.

However, as a title *Outer and Inner Space* suggests not only Sedgwick as subject but also its audience. The work contains both an inner (video monitor) frame and an outer (film) frame, with the whole setup repeated across the screen. This doubled doubling—again, inherent not in the reels as filmed but rather in the exhibition of *Outer and Inner Space* as a double-screen, dual projection—extends to viewers’ experience of the film. If, as J. Hoberman writes, Sedgwick’s “normal degree of acute self-consciousness has here been squared” by her exposure to her own videotaped monologue, projection of the film *cubes* this process in the black box of the theater. There, we watch Edie struggle with the multiple stimuli in the film, but are subject to it ourselves as well. Viewers of the film thus experience an inner discord deriving from the outer space of the cinema. *Outer and*

Stills to Motion and Back Again, 27–39. Sedgwick’s quote (“I want to talk about...space”) implies that the idea of “space” may have been the subject of her videotaped monologue, and the film’s title may refer to this. The same summer, Warhol made a different Sedgwick feature film titled *Space*.

Inner Space, then, duplicates the film in the viewers' experience of it, through the process of projection.

But perhaps “duplicated” is not quite the word—or perhaps what is duplicated is a general condition as much as a specific situation. Consider again that the duration of viewing the *Screen Tests* and Warhol's other silent films outlasts that of the original filming, compounding an already difficult experience of slowed time. In the same way, because we see and hear four Edie Sedgwicks at once, the images and sounds we must endure in viewing *Outer and Inner Space* expands that which Sedgwick endured in making it. With each iteration of the events, what is duplicated is not simply the event but the experience of *exceeding* its prior iteration.

Viewers are, in this sense, asked to *perform* the viewing of Warhol's films, as surely as Warhol's performers are asked to perform themselves. Inevitably, then, viewers are brought onto a plane equivalent to (if separate from) that of the performers in the film. And what is the plane of the projectionist, as the medium for this experience? Is something from the film, or its making, duplicated in the projectionist as well? Is projecting performing? To attempt to find out, I delve here into the practice of projecting Warhol's films—what it takes to do so, and where the activity locates curators and projectionists.

Projection

“...he would sit wrapped up with his legs crossed. And like a little child: just perfectly content. It wasn't a look of rapture so much as a perfect contentment that could

just go on, and, I realized, could go on for hours and hours like that unless he was interrupted.”¹⁸ –*Ronald Tavel on watching Andy Warhol watch his own films*

P. Adams Sitney says, “Warhol made the profligacy of footage the central fact of all of his early films.”¹⁹ This profligacy is consistent with Warhol’s notorious work ethic and productivity, but it is ironic in its immediate context. The extended durations and slowing of time onscreen contrasts deeply with the furious pace at which Warhol produced films, paintings, and other works in this period—and also with the not-unrelated use of amphetamine as the drug of choice for many of the personalities who populated Warhol’s working environment and films. Here, following Warhol, I will slow down my subject on the page. Wrapped up like a child, content, I would like to discuss 16-millimeter, 18 frames-per-second film projection—an artifact of the disappearing twentieth century, in all its flickering contingency. This kind of projection, ostensibly required for the films, is exactly what is often overlooked in their exhibition. It is worth examining why, and what the pursuit of 16mm projection in our current moment tells us about curation.

The independent programmer of Warhol’s silent films, at least for public screenings, will very possibly be not only curator but also projectionist. The films are rented from the Museum of Modern Art in 16mm prints, the format in which they were

¹⁸ Patrick S. Smith, *Andy Warhol’s Art and Films* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986), 489.

¹⁹ P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-1978*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 371–372.

made and exhibited by Warhol. What then is the current state of 16mm projection? Here in Atlanta, I am aware of no public movie theaters that utilize 16mm for programs. The only professional projection of 16mm film is at Emory University's White Hall and in the Rich Theatre at the High Museum.²⁰ These venues, of course, use sound (24fps) projection and to my knowledge have no silent-speed projection capability. On the seven occasions I have screened Warhol's silent films for the public (and on the numerous other occasions when silent-speed projection was required, for example the films of Rose Lowder), I have provided my own equipment and acted as projectionist; there was no one else to do it. Regarding the equipment itself, 18 fps projectors can still be found (I acquired one of the most common models, a Kodak Pageant AV126TR, on the online auction site Ebay), though they are no longer commonly serviced.

However, projectors which run at 16 fps are extremely rare. Thus *Sleep* and *Empire*, in the unlikely event of a proper screening, essentially require their own projectors as part of the work. This would happen only at great expense and with a type of expertise in small-gauge film projection that hardly exists now. *Empire* was screened in its entirety in Atlanta in 1999, in a theater at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Well prior to my own beginning in exhibiting film, this event served as one of my initial inspirations and models. The presenters were Lance Ledbetter and Stephen Fenton, two prominent enthusiasts of historical music and avant-garde arts. (Ledbetter now runs the

²⁰ The High Museum exhibited Warhol's *The Chelsea Girls* in November 2011 and *Kitchen* in October 2012, both in 16mm.

Grammy-winning archival record label Dust-to-Digital.) I arrived slightly late and attended about the first hour of the film, long enough to see the first reel change. (Were I seeing it now, I'd certainly stay for the full film.) There were two other people in the audience. I remember knocking on the door of the projection booth and finding Lance and Stephen inside. This was a rather bold move for me at the time, but I needed to know who would do such a thing here in Atlanta. They weren't "curators," they were just two people who wanted to make this happen, and I was impressed with their informality, bonhomie, and commitment. But they were disappointed: they were at that moment just realizing (through timing the events onscreen) that their projectors, which they had paid a sum to have specially modified for the correct 16 fps speed, were nonetheless erroneously projecting at 18 fps.²¹

Next, since theater projection booths are usually taken up by bulky, permanently installed equipment, 16mm projectors when used will often be out in the screening room itself. There is no booth, and the projectionist, projectors, audience, and screen are thus separate but related parts of the same "theater."

²¹ It cannot be said enough that silent-speed projection is essential to the effect and the aesthetic of these films; yet it is astonishing how often this requirement is disregarded. I have seen Warhol's film *Blow Job*, whose slow-motion effect is inherent to any interpretation of the film, projected by an instructor to her students in regular speed projection with no mention whatsoever to the class that they were not seeing the work as intended. Even when the exhibitor is attempting to rigorously follow this requirement, projector problems can bedevil these screenings, as with *Empire* in Atlanta. When I screened *Blow Job* for an experimental film class at Emory, I brought my own Pageant 18 fps projector, explained the importance of projection speed in Warhol's films, and even instructed the students in threading film through this particular projector's path—only to have the projector malfunction during screening and run the film at 24 fps. I can say from this experience that *Blow Job*, for one, is not the same film at normal speed: a good deal of its conceptual and visual power comes from the slow motion onscreen.

Thus I refer above to proper screenings of these films as an “unlikely event.” A fiftieth anniversary screening of *Empire* at a New York gallery in early 2014 was reported by the New York Times to be running at 18 fps, shortening its running time to just over seven hours.²² A recent Museum of Modern Art exhibition of digital versions of Warhol’s films tells us something about the historical status of these works and their projection. In 2011, art critic Amy Taubin (herself once a *Screen Test* subject) castigated MoMA for showing inferior digital transfers of Warhol’s silent films in a museum show dedicated to his moving image work.²³ (According to Taubin, the films had not been transferred to digital video from the originals, or from any form of celluloid film, but rather from the “crude, outdated analog video formats” of one-inch tapes and Betacam SP tapes.)²⁴ The same year, video transfers of Warhol’s *Screen Test* films appeared at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta as part of a large-scale exhibition of selections from MoMA’s permanent collection. When I visited this show, these video projections had the washed-out quality that Taubin describes in her review. I also noticed something Taubin doesn’t describe: for most of the films the motion onscreen appeared to be regular speed and not slow-motion. The films’ running times—closer to three minutes than to four—

²² Blake Gopnik, “Monumental Cast, But Not Much Plot,” *New York Times*, January 17, 2014.

²³ Amy Taubin, “‘Andy Warhol: Motion Pictures,’ Museum of Modern Art, New York,” *Artforum International* 49, no. 8 (March 2011): 260–61.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 261.

seemed to indicate that some of the *Screen Tests* had been transferred to video at the faster speed.

Commercial publishers seem to do no better. Until the American release of a DVD of *Screen Tests* in 2009, the only available videos of Warhol's silent films were produced by the Italian company Raro Video.²⁵ The selections on Raro Video's disc were transferred at 24 fps instead of 16 or 18 fps—shortening their running times and speeding up the onscreen action.²⁶

“I am a digital person,” remarked Klaus Biesenbach, organizer of the digital exhibition of Warhol films, at a press preview for the exhibition; Taubin also quotes Biesenbach as saying “work on celluloid is the equivalent of an artist trying to communicate with him by telegraph.”²⁷ With film projection as not pre-digital but *pre-modern*, how much more remote and irrelevant are the slowed time, the wrapped-up contentment, of Warhol's silent movies.

In preceding sections we have seen how Warhol used his films' projection as a means of duplicating (and exceeding) their experience in the viewer. Filmmakers,

²⁵ Andy Warhol, *13 Most Beautiful: Songs for Andy Warhol's Screen Tests*, DVD Video (Brooklyn: Plexifilm, 2009); Andy Warhol, *Andy Warhol: 4 Silent Movies*, DVD Video (Rome: RaroVideo, 2004).

²⁶ Adriano Aprá, “A Concrete Warhol,” in *Andy Warhol: 4 Silent Films* (DVD Booklet) (Rome: RaroVideo, 2004), 38.

²⁷ Taubin, ““Andy Warhol: Motion Pictures.””

projectionist, and viewers are thus brought onto planes of action that may be separate but are unusually equivalent. Something of the same thing is at work here, only across historical eras. In 2014, to project and care for these films, and to be aware of their mode of projection as a source of pleasure, of fascination, and as central to the films themselves, is to become conscious of one's own status as separate from cinematic, artistic, and other mainstreams. It is to, like its prior practitioners, go *underground*.

Slippage

As its title suggests, *Outer and Inner Space* contains a number of dichotomous views and events, mirrored pairs, and dialectics: video and film, television monitor and screen; the doubled Edie in each screen and the further doubling of this through dual projection; a tension between our view of the film as a pair of images and our experience of it as a single, overwhelming whole; the relation between the film's themes and their duplication in the viewer's experience, the two types of conversation (abstract and breezy) discernible. In this last, we return to the mirrored role of performance and documentary—onstage and backstage—in Warhol's films. *Outer and Inner Space* contains two different performances, one on videotape and one on film. But crucially they are performances by virtue of being broadcast, exhibited, as such. While both the videotaped and filmed Edies are clearly interacting with an offscreen presence, the videotape depicts what appears to be a continuous monologue, and thus is at least partially related to a traditional idea of performance. The filmed Edie, however, is reacting both to her offscreen interlocutors and to the (onscreen) presence of the

videotape. *Outer and Inner Space* thus exemplifies the kind of dual performance that characterizes many prominent Sedgwick/Warhol films, especially *Poor Little Rich Girl*, *Beauty #2* and *Kitchen* (all 1965): Sedgwick is “performing herself” for the camera (an activity which came to be an almost ontological condition for subsequent Warhol superstars), but is also undergoing a process that itself becomes a performance by virtue of being filmed and exhibited. In the case of *Outer and Inner Space*, this process is that of reacting simultaneously to her videotaped monologue and to her offscreen interlocutors. These offscreen presences (Warhol among them) give a “backstage” feel to the film—Sedgwick interacting in real time with her friends. But the process of reacting to these multiple stimuli as if the video monitor (past) and the running film camera (present) are both there and not there clearly puts Sedgwick onstage. Once again we find that in a Warhol film, it is not so much performance or documentary, art or life that is at issue, but the slippage between, both onscreen and in projection.

Here we reach the second main question of this chapter: In the equation of “the film” and “the projection,” where is curation? If to curate Andy Warhol’s films is to curate projection, and if projection here slips into performance, what is the curation that is being performed? Are we onstage, backstage, or somewhere between? To understand this, we now move deeper into the undergrounds, Velvet and otherwise, in which Warhol situated his filmmaking practice in 1966.

The Velvet Underground and Nico: Curation as Unfixing Film

Among the hundreds of *Screen Tests*, there are many discernible subsets.²⁸ One is a group of *Screen Tests* whose filming dates can be roughly identified because of a problem in Warhol's camera. In the period in which these films were shot, the sprocket holes on the sides of the film strip would slip out of engagement with the claw mechanism inside the camera, so the film was moving through the camera in and out of sync with the shutter mechanism that exposes each frame. The effect is of a blurring or rolling of the image. In the dramatic 1966 *Screen Tests* of Richard Rheem, Rheem's face slips in and out of view due to this mechanical problem. Callie Angell notes that the effect of this, while unplanned and uncontrollable, mirrors that of Warhol's experimental camera work in the Rheem films: he zooms, pans, and refocuses constantly, so that the image registration problem "seems almost purposeful at times, since it fits so well with the deliberate pattern of repeated loss and recovery of the image that Warhol is creating in the camerawork."²⁹ Two things, then, to which we shall return: slippage, whether through the mechanism or the thematic, is a kind of collaborator in the work; and the fact that Warhol—with whom we virtually identify the fixed camera stare—is embodying the opposite of the fixed camera to create a uniquely *cinematic* portrait.

²⁸ This paragraph is adapted from a previous presentation by the author. Andy Ditzler, "Performing the Catalogue Part 3: Memory, Sound, Performance" (Lecture/Performance, Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, December 9, 2010).

²⁹ Angell, *Andy Warhol Screen Tests*, 161.

A “repeated loss and recovery” is a good way to describe not only this single instance of alternately poignant and playful visuality, but Warhol’s cinema in general—including its subsequent history and its present-day exhibition. In this section, a multimedia presentation of Warhol’s 1966 films of the Velvet Underground, centered on *The Velvet Underground and Nico*,³⁰ serves as a case study in uncovering the historical currents of loss and recovery I have described above in the exhibition of Warhol’s films, and how these currents lead us to different notions of preservation, and curation. The tracking back and forth from fixed to unfixed in Warhol’s films—from the incorporation of chance elements and unpredictability during filming to the fixing of these momentary events on repeatable film reels, to the juggling and continuous reorganization of these reels in multimedia contexts, and on to our present-day notions of what these films represent—reveals much about what curation does in film, how curation itself fixes visual representations of historical events, and how it can deal with transience, non-fixity, unpredictability: how curation cares for both recovery and loss.

We are back to the question that began this chapter: what is the relation between film’s status as an artifact—a fixed, repeatable document—and the ephemeral qualities of its exhibition? But now the question is put in practical terms: what does curation do with and in this space of difference? To answer these questions, I will begin by contextualizing the Velvet Underground within underground film in 1965 and 1966,

³⁰ Confusingly, this 1966 film carries the same title as the much better-known 1967 debut LP by the group. Throughout this section, this title shall refer to the film only, unless specified in the text.

leading up to their collaboration in Warhol's multimedia events. Following this is an extended analysis of Warhol's film *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, with special emphasis on its status as historic document and on the relation between the band's activities and Warhol's camerawork during filming. Finally, I give an account of presenting this film and others by Warhol and the Velvets in 2014, as a method of researching the modes of onstage, backstage, and slippage discussed above.

The Velvet Underground and Andy Warhol: a Brief History

The centrality of filmmaking to Warhol's work in the mid-1960s has sometimes obscured the fact that film was part of a wider multimedia artistic project he was developing. Sometime in late 1965, as his stable of "superstars" and his prototype of full-scale independent film production began to take shape, Warhol seems to have had the idea to incorporate music and film into a multimedia setting. By late December, he had taken the Velvet Underground into his stable, signing them to a management contract and offering both financial support and access to his creative process and, of course, the atmosphere of the Factory itself.³¹

³¹ The Velvet Underground at this time consisted of John Cale (viola, bass, and other instruments), Sterling Morrison (guitar), Lou Reed (songwriting, vocals, and guitar), and Maureen "Moe" Tucker (drums). The German singer and sometime actress Nico was added to the group's lineup by Warhol soon after he took them on. Nico sang with the band through the release of their first album in mid-1967. Generally, dates in this section are taken from Richie Unterberger's exhaustive *White Light/White Heat: The Velvet Underground Day-By-Day* (London: Jawbone Press, 2009). It should be said that Paul Morrissey claims to have discovered, signed and managed the Velvet Underground for Warhol (Unterberger, *White Light/White Heat*, 64). While it does seem that Morrissey is an important influence on many aspects of Warhol's filmmaking and business operation during this time, his claim of near-exclusive

Most of Warhol's associates and superstars remain primarily known for their involvement in his work. Among the exceptions, the Velvet Underground is likely the most conspicuous. The band's subsequent impact is so great, particularly via their influence on the explosion of punk rock in the mid-1970s, that their early involvement with Warhol (while crucial to their career) is an often overlooked part of their overall story. Thus, in the following section I will bring out historical and artistic currents—underground cinema, the musical avant-garde, and Warhol's production of live events—not always accounted for in histories of the Velvet Underground, on the way to showing how Warhol's major film of the band works as a collaboration in a unique way.

Undergrounds

The Velvet Underground's divergent musical roots in rock & roll, doo-wop and the downtown New York avant-garde is well-documented.³² Less well-known in the band's history is that it was New York underground filmmaking that provided the central context for these influences to cohere into the band's unique sound, and that this deep relation to filmmaking continued throughout their alliance with Warhol. Perhaps due to a lack of adequate documentation of the band's early shows, the fragility of the period's

credit for discovering the band, as well as for Warhol's move into live performance and multimedia—a claim characteristic of Morrissey for much of Warhol's post-1965 work, it must also be said—contradicts most every other account of the events.

³² In my writing here on the Velvet Underground, their relation to underground film, and *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, I draw on my own program notes written for and distributed at the event *Film Love: The Velvet Underground*, presented at Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, Atlanta, GA, February 21, 2014.

avant-garde filmmaking legacy, or to the ephemeral nature of the events themselves, the deep connection between underground film and the band's music remains underexplored.

Through his participation in the minimalist avant-garde group Theatre of Eternal Music, Velvet Underground member John Cale was well-connected with underground filmmakers such as Tony Conrad (also a musician in the Theatre of Eternal Music) and Jack Smith, taking part in projects and informal recording sessions with these artists.

Original Velvets percussionist Angus MacLise collaborated extensively with quintessential underground filmmaker, poet and publisher Piero Heliczer, who himself made the first film of the Velvet Underground, broadcast on network television on the last evening of 1965. (Appropriately, this first national exposure for the band was in a CBS News segment titled *The Making of an Underground Film*; the band is shown playing in makeup and costume while being filmed by Heliczer for one of his 8mm underground productions.)³³

Even the band's name reflected their involvement with film. Although they famously appropriated "Velvet Underground" from the title of a mass-market paperback on the perverse sexual underbelly of America, they chose this, as guitarist Sterling Morrison later wrote, "*not* because of the S&M theme of the book, but because the word

³³ A DVD of this long-sought-after television segment was released as part of Johan Kugelberg, *Piero Heliczer and The Dead Language Press: A Bibliography* (New York: Boo-Hooray, 2014).

‘underground’ was suggestive of our involvement with the underground film and art scene.”³⁴

Most importantly, in their early incarnation the Velvets served as a kind of “house band” for underground film screenings, including early multimedia events organized by Heliczer and MacLise in summer 1965 for the Film-Makers’ Cinematheque. In a mutually beneficial arrangement, the musicians provided live and taped soundtracks for films by Heliczer, and the screenings allowed the band to cohere as a performing unit and as a musical concept. For Morrison, the context provided by Heliczer’s screenings was crucial. He had despaired of ever finding an audience for the band’s unprecedented and decidedly subcultural sound. But at the underground film screenings, “the path ahead became suddenly clear—I could work on music that was different than ordinary rock’n’roll since Piero had given Lou, John, Angus and me a context to perform it in.”³⁵ It was undoubtedly this context in which the band met underground filmmaker Barbara Rubin, through whom they subsequently met Warhol later in the year.

³⁴ Sterling Morrison, “Going Back in Time to Piero Heliczer,” *Little Caesar*, no. 9 (1979): 227. Morrison’s comment is surprising, as the Velvet Underground was notorious for the imagery in their songs of S&M and other “deviant” and subcultural sexual practices. Still, at the beginning of this article Morrison states unequivocally that in the early 1960s, the term underground “referred to *underground cinema*, and to the people and lifestyle that created and supported this art form” (ibid., 223; italics in original).

³⁵ Ibid., 227.

The Exploding Plastic Inevitable

Once the band got together with Warhol, underground film continued to be the primary context of their performances and their identity. In almost every one of their shows beginning in February 1966, they shared billing with screenings of Warhol films or performed as one part of larger multimedia events with film projection prominent. In the same month, members of the band provided an improvised musical soundtrack for the filming of Warhol's *Hedy* (1966).³⁶ All of this film and music activity was leading up to the April 1966 New York debut of the Exploding Plastic Inevitable (hereafter, "EPI"), the culmination of Warhol's involvement in live performance and multimedia work.

Branden Joseph describes the elements of the EPI at its peak: "three to five film projectors, often showing different reels of the same film simultaneously; a similar number of slide projectors, movable by hand so that their images swept the auditorium; four variable-speed strobe lights; three moving spots with an assortment of colored gels; several pistol lights; a mirror ball hung from the ceiling and another on the floor; as many as three loudspeakers blaring different pop records at once; one to two sets by the Velvet Underground and Nico; and the dancing of Gerard Malanga and Mary Woronov or Ingrid Superstar, complete with props and lights that projected their shadows high onto the

³⁶ In MoMA's Warhol film rental catalog, *Hedy's* musical soundtrack is credited to The Velvet Underground. Museum of Modern Art Circulating Film Library, *The Films of Andy Warhol*, 10; Murphy credits the full band as well: Murphy, *The Black Hole of the Camera*, 86; Unterberger reports that of the band, only Lou Reed and John Cale actually play during the filming. Richie Unterberger, *White Light/White Heat: The Velvet Underground Day-By-Day* (London: Jawbone, 2009), 76–77.

wall.”³⁷ The EPI combined light-show, music, sound barrage, cinema, performance and other inexplicable elements as much social as artistic, into a full environment—one whose many accounts, given by often overwhelmed and sometimes frightened visitors, brings to mind David E. James’ phrase on Warhol’s cinema: “its only coherence that of fracture.”³⁸ Along with the band’s epochal first LP, the EPI was the culmination of Warhol’s collaboration with the Velvet Underground.

Warhol and company were not alone in their multimedia activities in 1966. Besides the previous summer’s ambitious spectacles by MacLise and Heliczer, Barbara Rubin had pioneered double-projection methods in her 1963 film *Christmas on Earth*, which was shown with a soundtrack of then-current AM radio pop songs. By 1966, particularly on the West Coast and in Britain, light shows and media projections of various types were being combined with rock music just as musicians began exploring group improvisation and other formal experiments. In short, music and visual arts were merging at a time when mass culture and avant-garde experiments were interacting in a specifically countercultural milieu.

Yet the EPI seems to have differed in fundamental ways from all other such projects during this era of unprecedented cross-fertilization between multimedia art, rock

³⁷ Branden W. Joseph, “‘My Mind Split Open’: Andy Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable,” in Leighton, *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, 92.

³⁸ James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 62.

music, and the counterculture. Writing at the time, Jonas Mekas suggested that the pioneering light-show collective USCO and the burgeoning psychedelic movement were partaking of a traditional mystical Christian spirituality—a “sunset peace of the Age of the Fish”—while the EPI was “a dramatic break just before the dawn.”³⁹ Joseph suggests that the EPI’s subversions contrasted not only with other rock-oriented light shows but with Marshall McLuhan’s emerging media theories of “retribalisation” and such spectacles as the IBM Pavilion at the 1964 New York World’s Fair, in which multiple visual stimuli were deployed to reinforce capitalism’s technological modes of information delivery.⁴⁰ The EPI’s abrasive multiplicity of imagery and sound, its radically disorienting effects and its social milieu—the queer outcasts of Warhol’s Factory as opposed to the hip counterculture—meant that the whole project stubbornly refused to be located among the prevailing theories or uses of technology or art. In this, it reflected the artistic and musical priorities of its main players.

I have been trying to set a historical context for the importance of underground cinema to the Velvet Underground and Warhol’s move into multimedia and performative aspects of cinema. Next, I turn to the ways in which the Velvets themselves were subjects for Warhol’s film camera, and what this reveals about Warhol’s singularly performative approach to expanded cinema.

³⁹ Jonas Mekas, “On the Plastic Inevitables and the Strobe Light,” in *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema, 1959-1971* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 243.

⁴⁰ Joseph, “‘My Mind Split Open’: Andy Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable,” 109–111.

As a manager of a rock & roll band, Warhol was formidably attuned aesthetically. But he was not a powerful figure in the music industry. So at the time of their most significant activity the Velvets lacked the kind of industry support that was essential for radio exposure and record sales. Therefore, much unlike the few 1960s bands of comparable significance—for instance the Rolling Stones and the Beatles—the Velvet Underground was barely documented on film. This makes *The Velvet Underground and Nico* a particularly valuable historical document: a nearly hour-long performance by the band, in synchronized sound and image, from the period when their unique sound was cohering and they were on the verge of their first large-scale public performances.⁴¹

The Velvet Underground and Nico

A “rehearsal” film (backstage)

It is strange that there is so little published about this important and fascinating film. A basic description, as well as the authoritative idea that it was intended for live performance and multimedia contexts, is included in Callie Angell’s 1994 catalog for a

⁴¹ The Velvet Underground had one of the shortest active lives of the major rock & roll acts: they gave their first concerts with Warhol in early 1966 and then released one album per year from 1967 until 1970, when they effectively disbanded. Along with photographs and a burgeoning cottage industry of concert recordings, snatches of Velvet Underground footage exist. But footage of their performances with synchronized sound is rare indeed. In addition to *The Velvet Underground and Nico* only one other synch sound film of the band appears to exist, also made by Warhol, of a later concert (*Velvet Underground in Boston*). I have not seen this film, which has only recently become available.

major Warhol retrospective.⁴² Richie Unterberger gives the only detailed account of the film's making, albeit entirely dependent on Paul Morrissey, who credits Warhol with the film's camerawork.⁴³ Although throughout his book Unterberger assiduously documents the band's relation to avant-garde filmmakers, musicians and poets, he is unsympathetic to experimental film in general and this one in particular; disparaging the band's performance, the camera work, and the film's failure to straightforwardly document a performance of songs, he concludes rather oddly that the film contains "little action."⁴⁴ Nearly two decades separate Angell's one-page account of the film from J. J. Murphy's analysis. Drawing on Unterberger, Murphy writes that the film "becomes interesting only [with] the unanticipated arrival of the police" late in the film.⁴⁵ Needless to say, my own view could not be more different.

Though *The Velvet Underground and Nico* is a valuable document of the band, the film does undercut expectations of a straightforward concert. It was shot sometime in 1966, though an exact month is difficult to determine.⁴⁶ Like all his films of this period, it

⁴² Angell, *The Films of Andy Warhol: Part II*, 27.

⁴³ Unterberger, *White Light/White Heat*, 76.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Murphy, *The Black Hole of the Camera*, 166–168.

⁴⁶ Callie Angell states January 1966 as the likely month of shooting. See Angell, *The Films of Andy Warhol: Part II*, 27; Victor Bockris and Gerard Malanga had earlier identified the same month, in the caption to a still photograph by Stephen Shore of the police officers who came to the Factory: Victor Bockris and Gerard Malanga, *Up-Tight: The Velvet Underground Story* (New York: Omnibus Press, 1983), 25. Yet there is contradictory information here, for elsewhere in the same book the authors include another

uses the thirty-three minute film reel as the basic structuring principle: the entire film consists of two of these reels joined together, shown uncut as they were shot, lasting sixty-six minutes total.

The film begins with a tight close-up on Nico's face. We hear guitars tuning. There are no titles. The proceedings have a definite casual feel. Nico speaks to someone offscreen, seated below her, and smiles. After two full minutes of this, one of the guitarists (likely Lou Reed) begins repeating a single-note riff. A song or performance of some kind has clearly begun. Just at this moment, as the sound snaps into focus as "music," the image of Nico has gone out of focus, to return to clarity a few moments later. This refocusing is one of three main visual strategies (focus, zoom, and pan) of the film's camerawork. The first use of the zoom lens takes place just after three minutes, when Warhol rapidly zooms out fully to reveal the entire band. The black-and-white visual composition is striking; from our historical perspective, we can clearly recognize it as the compositional space of Warhol's films. The musicians are seated in a semi-circle tableau, with Nico on a stool in the center; the person below her to which she speaks is revealed as her four-year-old son Ari, who is playing on the floor and roaming around.

Nico plays a tambourine with a maraca, but does not sing—in fact, there are no conventional songs performed in the film at all. Instead, the musicians explore this steady

photograph by Shore, clearly taken during the same filming, but dated "Fall 1966" (ibid., 64); Paul Morrissey claims April of that year in Unterberger, *White Light/White Heat*, 76; Based on the presence of Nico's son Ari, who reportedly had not joined his mother in New York until later, J. J. Murphy guesses the film was made that summer. Murphy, *The Black Hole of the Camera*, 272–73n40.

rhythm pulse and single chord, without pause, for roughly fifty of the film's sixty-six minutes. The guitars of Morrison and Reed interlock; Reed appears to perform much of the rhythm guitar function, and also focuses the band's tonality on the single note he repeats. Morrison plays something more like a lead guitar, his note choices reminiscent at times of non-Western scales or modes, with notes outside the standard rock tonalities. We can see Tucker playing her drums, but she is not miked and they can barely be heard. This suggests that the guitar amps are quite loud, consistent with the reputation of this band's live performances. (Here, Warhol is recording the sound via his usual setup: an Auricon motion picture camera with a single microphone plugged into it, that recorded the soundtrack directly onto the film strip. This accounts for the often rough sound of his films.)

The wild card in the group is John Cale, playing a long drone on an electrified and amplified viola. Cale had the most avant-garde pedigree of any of the band members, having trained formally as a classical composer, and having spent several years playing concerts of very long duration (also sometimes using single tones) in the radically minimalist group Theatre of Eternal Music. During the second half of the film, he moves to the center of the setup, where he has what appears to be two large metal springs, attached to a piece of wood disconnected from the inside of a piano, which is contact-miked and which he plays by strumming. It is heavily amplified and makes a thunderous noise. Cale's improvisation on this instrument integrates with the musical sound made by

the rest of the band but is also perceivable as being somewhat outside of it—as if a John Cage concert were being skillfully superimposed over an early punk band.

The film thus documents a less-generally understood side of the band's musical roots, in those tonalities and structures associated more with New York avant-garde music than with rock & roll. Perhaps, however, it may be more accurate to say that the kind of minimal tonalities and repetitive rhythms found in this film are both avant-garde and also quintessentially rock & roll. That is, rather than merge rock & roll and avant-garde art as if they were disparate entities, as they are critically and popularly credited with doing, the Velvet Underground actually revealed the similarities between those two forms by pushing both to the extreme. In this, the Velvet Underground makes an ideal artistic match for Warhol, who also used repetition, minimal gestures, and other extreme formal and structural elements to audaciously link popular culture (in the form of soup cans or Elvis Presley) with more traditional “high-art” genres, such as painting and portraiture.

Both open-structured and highly disciplined (never varying from the steady pulse and minimal tonality), the Velvets find endless slight variations within their limited structure. They seem content to play on like this forever; the cause for the music's end is not formal, but rather an escalating situation with the police, responding to a noise complaint.

A “performance” film (onstage)

The Velvet Underground and Nico is most often described as a film of the band rehearsing inside the Factory space, and those elements of the film and its actions which I’ve described above—the casual feel, the long warm-up section, the lack of a stage and of songs, young Ari playing on the floor—support the idea that what we are watching is a rehearsal, a “backstage” view of the band at work. But characteristically for Warhol’s films, deeper observation makes such categories of genre less fixed. What can a “rehearsal film” mean, in fact? Through the act of filming and exhibiting, this rehearsal becomes at least partly a performance. And the film’s status as some of the only extant footage of the band playing raises the stakes of performance further.

But, once again characteristically, Warhol uses the act of filming to change the nature of an event, while at the same time letting chance elements in that event expose the process of filming. Consider how Warhol’s camera works here. For example, in addition to the zoom and focus elements described above, Warhol makes extensive use of panning. But typically, he almost never uses the pan or zoom for their usual functions: to give a sense of revelation of a person or event, to clarify or frame a central action, or suggest where a viewer’s attention should go. Instead, the panning and zooming here have their own life, especially at the pitch of extremity these devices reach at film’s midpoint: wild zooming in and out, extremes pans from left to right (and, disconcertingly, up and down), often stopping to rest somewhere (the ceiling, the floor) other than where

we presume the main action to be. At times, Warhol zooms, pans, and defocuses all at once.

Far from Warhol's reputation of simply turning on the camera and recording reality no matter how dull, in this film capturing a documentary reality seems to be of incidental concern. As with so many Warhol films, documentary reality is ever-present but only visible when such a documentary view appeals to Warhol's very particular visual interest—and the rest of the time, documentary reality is present only in the negative, in its conspicuous absence. Back to rehearsal, back to experiment.

The slippage between onstage and backstage so visible in Warhol's films is often identified as a function of the volatile onscreen performances which he coaxed from his superstars. But in *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, Warhol's camerawork creates slippage on a formal level, which resonates with and emphasizes the slippage between onstage and backstage characteristic of his films. Just a few weeks after this film, Warhol made the film *Hedy*. The Velvets provided a soundtrack by playing live during the filming; but *Hedy* also shares with *The Velvet Underground and Nico* a visual interest in the seeming indifference of the roaming camera. Ronald Tavel, who wrote *Hedy*'s script, spoke of Warhol's camerawork in the film: "As the action would move toward its most dramatic, move toward its point, its shattering, unbearable thing, the camera eye would move away, the camera eye would become bored with the action, with the story, with the problem of the star...and would begin to explore the ceiling of the Factory. Well, I was

just wiped out. I said this is just like something else. Beautiful. *Horrible in terms of the script.*”⁴⁷

Both Tavel and Stephen Koch identify Warhol’s camera movement in *Hedy* as evidence of his real authorship of the film.⁴⁸ But in *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, this same strategy of camerawork appears less an act of authorial control than a *performance* concurrent with that of the music. That his camerawork could be in *Hedy* “horrible in terms of the script” and in *The Velvet Underground and Nico* “horrible” in terms of capturing a precious visual record of the band’s actual playing, suggests that Warhol was to a significant extent indifferent to distinctions between reality and performance—not only onscreen but behind the camera as well; not only with his superstars’ performances but formally and structurally; not only onstage but backstage too. By allowing his camera to wander on a separate but related plane to that of the action—by insisting on cinema as a visual, rather than verbal or documentary medium—Warhol makes equivalent the cinematic and the actual, the performative and the documentary, the “stages” (on and off) of filmmaking. His camera is not in thrall to a story but leaves a visible and material trace of his own consciousness at the time of filming—related to the action but separate from it: a secret performer in his own work.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Stephen Koch, *Stargazer: Andy Warhol’s World and His Films*, 2nd ed. (New York: Marion Boyars, 1985), 75 (my italics). According to Warhol, *Hedy*’s star Mario Montez “got very upset and hurt” by the wandering camera. Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol ’60s* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 91.

⁴⁸ Koch, *Stargazer*, 75.

As a film, then, *The Velvet Underground and Nico* is torn between documentary (the Velvets backstage rehearsing, unedited, a slice of life) and art—because in its extremity the camerawork achieves a uniquely cinematic visuality that leaves documentary realism somewhere to the side of the action; and because we are acutely aware of the camerawork in this film as a performance in its own right. What is Warhol performing? He seems to be roughly the visual equivalent to John Cale’s function in the band: a counterpoint of, or dialectic between, freely experimental unpredictability and the hyper-focused concentration of the music.

I am writing here of a certain integrity, an uncompromising working method visible throughout Warhol’s work but specifically located in the movements of the camera here. Just as the EPI shows existed within a hip pop-art psychedelic context but manifested a complete indifference to the social and spiritual priorities of that context; just as the Velvets played a rock & roll that was also as avant-garde as they felt like being at a given moment, without explanation as to why and how; just as Warhol’s camera in *Hedy* could be “something else...beautiful...horrible in terms of the script,” *The Velvet Underground and Nico* is also *something else*, something other than a documentary, a concert, a rehearsal, even a performance; fulfilling something other than the needs of music fans, concert promoters, cinemagoers.

But what is this something else? To find out, perhaps we can go deeper into the film. John Cale is furiously strumming the metal springs. Nico has seated herself where Cale was, and is playing his abandoned guitar, strumming the strings with a brush. A low

amplified roar sonically underpins the guitars and drums, which have settled into a propulsive beat; the tonic note and tempo remain the same as at the beginning of the music forty minutes earlier. Warhol's camera has settled, if that's the word, on little Ari as the focus of attention—the zooms and pans follow and mimic his curious gaze and playful, independent traversal of the room and events. Things have reached a kind of fevered equilibrium: it's the Velvet Underground and Nico, and Ari, and Andy, all playing in their different, mutually constituted yet independent planes of action, and each indifferent to priorities of documentation, avant-garde, performance, adulthood, art, counterculture, music, cinema...and just at this point, things have gone a bit too far. The camera veers to the side of the setup bringing the band's famous Vox amp into view, then up and suddenly the jarring sight of a New York City police officer standing at the amp's controls. A Factory denizen consults briefly with the officer, an emissary to the law; the officer then turns the amp's volume down. (The shock of it, to this day—turning Lou Reed's amp down right in front of him!)

The band is unfazed; they continue playing, but a gradual buildup of offscreen voices picked up by the mic alert us that something is wrong: "It's still too loud." Nearly ten minutes pass, with the band moving into a somewhat calmer groove. Just as the tonality shifts slightly via a pretty, major-key triplet guitar riff introduced by Reed, the music collectively stops—clearly, the police situation has brought things to a halt.

Bottles of beer in hand, the band members exit the 'stage' area—but then again there is no stage area, or rather the stage has expanded to the entire Factory space. The

camera for the first time pans to the darkness outside the playing area; then the house lights are turned on, revealing the depth of the Factory space itself. Warhol begins moving in and out of the camera's view, conferring with the officers and the musicians; they and other Factory regulars wander about, exchanging the occasional comment. The voices are indistinct; a few selected phrases are audible, most notably an officer's declaration "No photographs," followed by Warhol repeating this phrase.⁴⁹

This section of indeterminate activity lasts twelve minutes—almost a fifth of the running time. Atmospherically, it is one of the most remarkable in Warhol's films. Ari immediately disappears from the action, and the music has ended, replaced by the indistinct sounds of confusion. Warhol is clearly occupied with defusing the situation, but other members of the Factory simply wander around and chat as if nothing special is

⁴⁹ We hear this—Officer's voice: "No photographs." Warhol's voice: "No photographs." This exchange takes place offscreen and presumably is directed to the young man in suspenders, seen onscreen with his still camera just prior. "No photographs." "No photographs." I cannot resist linking this repetition to all the other famous ones in Warhol's paintings and films, from Campbell's soup cans to the double Elvis paintings to the *Screen Tests*. One wonders why Warhol felt the need to repeat the officer's phrase verbatim, beyond an ingrained aesthetic of repetition. He seems to be concurring with the officers perhaps out of fear, or perhaps in making a show of agreement with the law in order to protect himself and everyone else in the Factory at that moment. (Part of the tension of the police presence in this film is our knowledge of the socially and sexually marginal population of the Factory, its reputation for legal and social transgressions far beyond a mere noise complaint, and thus the multiple ways in which police presence would constitute an immediate threat.) Unlike 1960s gay bars, where regular raids accustomed patrons and the larger society to the constant possibility of legal interventions into queer-constituted spaces, the Factory (as manifested in the art and films produced there) had heretofore been largely immune from such direct interventions. The officers' entrance in *The Velvet Underground and Nico* just as the film displays a multiply-leveled indifference to both artistic and social priorities is thus doubly sobering. But I hear something else too. The police officer's directive is the voice of law, but we are in a space—the Silver Factory—where by all accounts the ultimate word comes from Andy Warhol. It's entirely possible that Warhol re-emphasizes "No photographs" because he knew that his word had more credibility than a police officer's within the Factory space. What seems at first a passive acquiescence may in fact be a sly assertion of his own authority. And of course, as Murphy observes (*The Black Hole of the Camera*, 168), Warhol's *film* camera continues capturing footage all along.

happening: Gerard Malanga reads a book to Maureen Tucker on the Factory couch, then shares a slug of liquor from Sterling Morrison's bottle. Reed, Warhol, and Nico confer amongst themselves, as if deciding where to eat dinner or when to leave for the evening's party. (The microphone captures almost none of the talk; we must imagine what is said.) Other figures move in and out of the frame, busy with what we cannot know. At times there is a fascinating layering of sociality going on, particularly since many of these people later became quite famous artists; at other moments there is nothing much to see, but even these moments hold their own interest because of their relation to the whole.

What transforms the events is once again the camera—but in a role inverted from when it was capturing the music. With Warhol appearing onscreen, it's clear that someone else has taken over the filming—yet the camerawork strategy remains largely unchanged. Zooms and pans continue, although the camera stops to rest more often. It is as if the unexpected legal proceedings and the attendant confusion were an aesthetic opportunity equivalent to the Velvet Underground's music. Indeed, the alternating fascination and ennui of this record of twelve minutes of everyday life in the Factory asserts its own authority: although Warhol's Factory is subject to the law, the encounter with the law is contained within Warhol's film—and like the music, it is converted to cinema by virtue of the unchanging, uncompromised camerawork and the reproducible medium of film.

Angell's and Morrissey's accounts, as well as the film itself, make clear that this event began as a cinematic and not musical one: the musicians were brought to the

Factory specifically to be filmed, rather than giving a concert which then happens to be documented. The camera was known and visible to all as both recording instrument and the reason for the event's being. But once the music stops and the police enter—particularly after their demand of “No photographs”—the camera is no longer the reason for being, but is now a clandestine element. Even as the consistency of camera style converts everything—performance, everyday life, a police visit—into cinema, the camera itself is changed, its function inverted, in the course of the events it records. The result is to turn *The Velvet Underground and Nico* midway into a documentary, and Factory life into a performance.

In the end we return to a slippage of the camera, then—and a slippage of language, for faced by the law on one hand, and Warhol's unchanging and utterly changed camera on the other, I no longer recognize the clear dichotomies of *Outer and Inner Space* and the dialectic of audience and subject, past and present so painfully evident in the *Screen Tests*. Mindful of how, at their extremes, the Velvet Underground's music and Andy Warhol's art dissolve distinctions more than merge discrete entities, here at the outer limits of Warhol's cinema—where the camera moves on a separate but related plane to the action, where camerawork becomes the performance, where the screen doubles, triples, moves across the wall, and out of the theater—here, the slippage of performance, rehearsal, documentary, art into life, cannot preserve these categories as separate entities to be merged in some new duality. Instead, it is the slippage itself that appears most precious; that must be cared for, preserved.

The film as a document, the film as exhibited

I have been describing *The Velvet Underground and Nico* as a fixed work of cinema, as it would be watched like most any other art film, say, *8 ½* (1963) or *L'Age D'Or* (1930). It is screened this way today, and certainly bears repeated scrutiny as such. The film's status as some of the only extant synch-sound footage of perhaps the most important American rock band only further reinforces it as complete in itself, an archival work of historical importance. And though the combination of extreme camerawork and extended improvisation irritates many music fans who only want documentary concert footage, I suspect the film does exert a pull on those viewers who are especially attuned to the Velvet Underground's experimentalism. Such viewers, of course, tend to be more open to the film as a whole.

Yet, as Branden Joseph's article makes clear, this was not how the film was shown by Warhol. The extreme camera movements were not meant to be absorbed in a movie theater, nor was the music soundtrack intended to be studied in its own right; in fact, it's possible that the music in this film was not even heard during its projections, or was at best heard in combination with sounds from other films, or even the band playing live.

If we watch this film as a discrete film, then, we enact a cinematic conversion of our own, somewhat different than Warhol's intentions: from component in ever-changing multimedia show to fixed work of cinema. (And fans or students of the Velvet Underground further convert the film into an archival document worthy of study.)

History thus enacts a similar process of conversion on this film that Warhol himself enacted in the gap between the film's deliberate making, and its indeterminate exhibition. Back to documentary, back to performance.

An Exhibition of *The Velvet Underground and Nico*

What can be accomplished, then, by re-situating such a singular film in the kind of shifting media environment represented by the Exploding Plastic Inevitable? What might such experiences tell us today? This was one question I hoped to answer by presenting *The Velvet Underground and Nico* in a curated show on February 21, 2014, at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center. In this section, I will discuss how the shifting parameters of *The Velvet Underground and Nico* (existing between rehearsal, performance and documentary) and its ambiguous status as both document and ephemeral projection may influence strategies for its contemporary curation.

I had attempted to show this film the previous summer, as a separate work in its own right, at a large festival in Decatur, Georgia. We were exhibiting outdoors in a tent, and a fierce thunderstorm cancelled the screening. (Yet again, Warhol's films taken away from view.) So in the previous summer I myself was not adverse to programming this film as a cinematic document in just the way I have described above.

In the interim, however, Lou Reed died. He was a musician and writer about whose work I had thought continuously for many years; and for me, his death prompted a re-examination of his career. Thus, a Reed tribute was planned for late February on the

museum's schedule. It ended up applying more generally to the Velvets and to their specific relationship with Warhol—and to the importance of underground film to the development of the group, which I have outlined above. This would be a unique opportunity to undertake research into *The Velvet Underground and Nico* as a historical document, and into its meanings both today and in the context of the EPI.

The gear and films

In addition to *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, MoMA rents a number of other Warhol films of the band. There are several *Screen Test* reels of the individual group members, as well as *Salvador Dalí* (1966), a short reel featuring *Screen Tests* of Dalí (a sometime guest at the EPI), Nico, Reed, and two short reels of the “whip dances” performed by Gerard Malanga and Mary Woronov at EPI shows. As mentioned earlier, most *Screen Tests* are distributed in fixed reels of ten, organized on the reel in the arbitrary order in which they were preserved; thus, those of the Velvet Underground individual members are interspersed through dozens of other reels. I chose one reel of ten *Screen Tests* that fortunately included both Nico and Reed (importantly, near the beginning of the reel) and other prominent Warhol stars such as Baby Jane Holzer. These were supplemented by *The Velvet Underground* (1966), a desultory two-reel film of the band members clowning with whips and food, but playing no music. All this imagery would be projected around *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, the only one of the films which would be continually centered on the screen and whose soundtrack would be dominant.

Two reels of *Screen Tests* (silent) plus two different sixty-six minute films (four thirty-three minute reels total, all sound) necessitated two 16mm Kodak Pageant projectors for silent speed and four 16mm sound projectors—all potentially working at one time. I borrowed one Pageant silent-speed projector from a film professor and two sound projectors from a filmmaker friend to supplement the ones I own.

The brand new screening and lecture room at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, part of a long-term renovation, is roomier than the previous one. It is also actually a screening room—rather than the combination foyer and entrance to the main galleries that served as the (challenging) previous space. It is an empty room, free of fixed seating, and is well-appointed for most any format that would be screened in a contemporary art center—that is, it is entirely digital. There are a few video cable plug-ins in the front corner, and the sound mixer and other electronic equipment are tucked away in a closet to the side. There is no screening booth; the video projector is mounted on the ceiling. This makes sense; booths are increasingly unnecessary since video projectors are largely quiet, do not need as long a “throw” for a large image (and thus must be placed closer to the screen than a film projector), and their position on the ceiling extends the customary invisibility of the technological apparatus.

In other words, this screening room had to be reconfigured for a film, as opposed to digital video, screening. A heavy eight-foot by four-foot platform was hauled from the storage room to provide some elevation for the bank of sound projectors. The screening room is open-ended at the back, so the platform was placed at what seemed to be the best

spot, actually outside the normal confines of the room. Despite these challenges, I was grateful for the blank space which allowed me to work with mobility of projectors and have a flexible setup.

I acquired four colored gels—transparent plastic sheets in various hues often placed in front of theater spotlights—as well as a powerful strobe light with a knob to manually vary the speed of flashing. Mindful that the EPI shows were sonically as well as visually complex, I brought two turntables along with my Velvet Underground vinyl recordings and plugged those into the sound system, running concurrently with and mixed separately from the film soundtrack. Of course, each of these items required electrical power, enough extension cords to get to the nearest outlets, and sound cables to run to the mixer, most of which I provided. (Had I not already acquired over a decade all the necessary equipment with which to run all these effects at once, the project would have been financially ruinous.)

What about that strobe light? It didn't seem enough to simply flash it in the room at different speeds and times. Some type of visible flicker needed to come from the film projectors themselves. Running a standard, three-blade electric room fan in front of the projector lens produced just the effect—a pulsating light that seemed to envelop the entire room, much more immersive than a regular strobe light, and apparently caused by the interaction between the projector's internal shutter blade and this improvised external one. The fan's speed, however, could not be altered. Being able to vary the speed in real time would allow for control over more subtle light variations. A close friend trained in

electronics and a hobbyist at woodworking built a device: a motor with a variable-speed knob attached to a wooden circular spinning wheel with three curved slots to allow for light to pass through. Running at different speeds in front of the projector lens, this device could produce an intensity of stroboscopic light akin to that in the film *The Flicker* (produced in 1965-66 by Tony Conrad, former bandmate of Lou Reed and John Cale just prior to the Velvet Underground, and released in the same year as the EPI) and to artist Brion Gysin's Dreamachine, a slotted rotating cylinder with a light bulb in the middle, to be looked at up close with eyes closed. (Both *The Flicker* and the Dreamachine had been exhibited in previous Film Love shows.) This device, being held in *front* of the projector lens, could both alter the projector light and make a given film flicker on and off the screen at various speeds. The spinning wheel was large enough to incorporate the space of two projectors set side-by-side, so two different film images on the screen could potentially be flashing at once. At times I would want just the projector light, rather than a full film, flickering on the screen—thus, a seventh projector (containing no film) was added.

The elements, then, were: seven film projectors, “often showing different reels of the same film simultaneously,” (to return to Branden Joseph's description of the EPI) and movable by hand so that their images could sweep across the wall, landing at center screen, or perhaps somewhere to the side of the main action; a wide variation of flicker speeds on the screen, as well as the interaction these flicker speeds would create with the pulse rates of the freestanding strobe light, itself variable; “an assortment of colored

gels”; simultaneous music and film soundtracks; and the strobe light—which in this case projected shadows onto the surrounding walls—not of dancers, but of the viewing audience. This setup seemed an ideal mechanism to loosen these moving images of the Velvet Underground that subsequent histories of both music and film had fixed.

The open rehearsal

In MoMA’s rental catalog and in her own brief essay on the film, Callie Angell states that *The Velvet Underground and Nico* “is a portrait of the band, recorded during a practice session at the Factory”; that the band is “rehearsing at the Factory,” and “the rehearsal is stopped” by the police.⁵⁰ Murphy avoids the word “rehearsal,” instead alternately referring to the music as a “hypnotic jam session” and a “performance” documented for the camera, while Unterberger writes that the Velvets “simply perform an endless, wordless, cacophonous jam,” but also refers to a “performance.”⁵¹ All three writers depend on firsthand accounts of the film’s purpose as what Morrissey calls “wallpaper,” to be projected behind the band as they played; perhaps this accounts for the shifting terminology of what is going on.⁵²

⁵⁰ Angell, *The Films of Andy Warhol: Part II*, 27; Museum of Modern Art Circulating Film Library, *The Films of Andy Warhol*, 10. The rental catalog credits Angell with “critical and historical information” (14).

⁵¹ Murphy, *The Black Hole of the Camera*, 168; Unterberger, *White Light/White Heat*, 76.

⁵² Unterberger, *White Light/White Heat*, 76.

This confusion speaks to what the film does as a document. Even though the band may be rehearsing, the rehearsal is obviously staged for the camera—this is an ostensibly musical event that is actually a cinematic one. And of course, it was made to be screened for an audience—seemingly at cross purposes with the very idea of what a rehearsal is for.

As I have tried to establish, the tensions between the casual feel of the atmosphere and extended improvisatory nature of the music on one hand, and the intensity of the band's focus and Warhol's performative camerawork and the exhibition context on the other, amount to a kind of hybrid film—both rehearsal and performance, onstage and backstage, staged and chance, documentary and art and life. And further, the convergence of media—from music to cinema—contained within the film document was doubled and mirrored when screened as part of the Exploding Plastic Inevitable: the film became part of an event that itself merged music and image on a grand scale, and converted all manner of gesture including the *projection* of film, into performance.

It is hard to know just how *The Velvet Underground and Nico* was projected in its first shows, or even when those were. All accounts agree that it was made to be part of the Exploding Plastic Inevitable live shows (although like other Warhol films it was made available for rental as a stand-alone work, distributed through the Film-Makers'

Cooperative).⁵³ But among the many photographs of EPI performances that show the projection of film over the Velvets and Nico as they played, I have not found any that show this particular film. Photo documentation of film projection in the EPI most often depicts *Screen Test* films.⁵⁴ Callie Angell identifies a number of *Screen Test* “background” reels that were assembled (and likely filmed) specifically for inclusion in the EPI, as well as a list of Warhol feature films also projected.⁵⁵ Of these, *Vinyl* (1965) appears to have been most common; Ronald Nameth’s film document *Andy Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable* (1967) shows the prominent use of *Vinyl*’s S&M imagery.

To return to our question above: how to show a film whose nature *as a document* seems to be inseparable from its refusal of categorization, its uncertain exhibition history and its continual appearance and disappearance? I decided to first make my own rehearsal a form of research into these very aspects of the film. The night before the public screening, I held an event titled *Velvet Underground Rehearsal*. This Warholian title punned on the two rehearsals—the actual Velvet Underground’s

⁵³ *Film-Makers’ Cooperative Catalogue No. 4* (New York: Film-Makers’ Cooperative, 1967), 155. Until about 1968, Warhol’s publicly available films were distributed through the Film-Makers’ Cooperative. It seems that *The Velvet Underground and Nico* was available for rental beginning in 1967. Searching extensively through the Film-Makers’ Cooperative’s rental cards for 1967 and 1968 (though their collection is not cataloged and may not be complete) I found many instances of Warhol rentals, but not a single rental for *The Velvet Underground and Nico*.

⁵⁴ Photos are included in Bockris and Malanga, *Up-Tight*, 32–34; Angell, *The Films of Andy Warhol: Part II*, 26; Angell, *Andy Warhol Screen Tests*, 264; Joseph, “‘My Mind Split Open’: Andy Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable,” 111; and Matthias Michalka, *X-Screen: Film Installations and Actions in the 1960s and 1970s* (Köln: Walther König, 2004), 12–13.

⁵⁵ This exhaustive research is contained in Angell, *Andy Warhol Screen Tests*, 264–279.

rehearsal/performance which was fixed on film by Warhol, and my own live rehearsal of *The Velvet Underground* as a film event. This was the only occasion on which I had all the films and the equipment together in the same room, so it actually was a valuable rehearsal, including mistakes and opportunities to experiment. But as a conscious attempt to research, in public, Warhol's filmmaking process at the time, this was also an event. The invited guests—assorted friends and the press—were stand-ins for those onlookers at the Factory during the filmmaking, who are revealed on film after the music stops. I treated the rehearsal in the same manner as Warhol filmed the reels: one single take, no do-overs or going back to fix mistakes. Finally, I asked filmmaker Blake Williams to document the rehearsal event on video, as Warhol had captured the Velvet's rehearsal on film. While the films ran their course onscreen, Blake followed me on my rounds as I taped gels over projector lenses, tested the different rates of strobe flicker, timed when to turn films on and off, and generally tried to determine whether the project would work as I envisioned it. His video, a single shot lasting around sixty minutes, creates a fixed (if mobile) document of this one-time exploratory event, and cements the hybrid form between rehearsal and performance that was extended into the public event the next evening. To create a further overlap between rehearsal and performance, I projected the video of this event the next night, as “background” or “wallpaper” while the audience entered the room and milled about waiting for the show to begin.

In retrospect, this last act resulted in a slightly uncanny effect, different than what I have been describing as the Velvet Underground's and Andy Warhol's activity of

dissolving categorical boundaries. While my own rehearsal was an attempt to dissolve rehearsal and performance, incorporating the video of this into the beginning of the performance did not so much further dissolve these two categories as subtly reassert their differences. The Warholian mysteries and counter-mysteries continue in the unending cycle of fixing and unfixing documents.

The screening/performance

In this section, I describe the process and some of the results of presenting this research as a public event (and public events as a form of research). The curation and exhibition of such a program involves detail-oriented technical and logistical problems, some of which may only be addressed improvisationally during the event. And there are sudden illuminations hard to separate from the mundanity of what it takes to bring them about. In this small way, the process is reminiscent of a Warhol film—so I will describe it in some detail.

Film Love: The Velvet Underground took place on February 21, 2014 at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center. Everything had been left in place from the night before. The previous evening's rehearsal had clarified details of timing: when to start certain films, when to have all the films running for a kind of "peak"—and how to treat the ending. I realized that, although much of the event was conceptualized around the chaotic visual and sonic immersion of the EPI, the twelve-minute ending of *The Velvet Underground and Nico* was best left on its own with no other visuals running. In other words, the 1966 police intervention on film would also bring an end to the multiple

stimuli of our 2014 screening, returning us to the single-screen theatrical experience—just at the moment that the film itself ceases recording the band and becomes a “secret” document of a police problem.

I drew a timing diagram for everything that was to be turned on and off, and taped it to the projector table for consultation during the event. This was not only necessary for timing of events, but to keep me focused on pacing. Films were loaded onto the projectors, and records onto the turntables. The projector with no film and one of the slow-motion projectors were placed on a wheeled cart for movement. Cables were taped to the floor where people would be entering. I myself would have to be continuously mobile, traveling from projector to projector: there were colored gels to change, films to start and stop, the strobe light to lift and carry. And how to move the flicker machine from projector to projector? There was no good solution. I would just have to pick it up in real time—motor box in one hand, wheel in the other—and move it carefully, without breaking the delicate wire connection between the two elements or yanking the power plug from the wall socket (and of course, it needed a long enough extension cord in order to travel from one end of the setup to the other). I would also have to step around and over many cords and cables on the floor, as well as continuously step up to and down from the projector platform, and round the corners of the platform, all in uncertain lighting conditions. There was no central spot of control for the projection—nor, I now realize, for the curatorial control of the experience.

At this point we should open the doors and let the audience in. In fact, an idea of the audience had already been present in the decision-making.⁵⁶ Earlier in the day, I was still undecided about the arrangement of the audience space. I had wanted as immersive a feel as possible to the proceedings. One solution was to remove the chairs from the space. This would allow the audience members to wander to different vantage points; but it would also be uncomfortable for many who would like not to stand for the full hour. As the day went on, and the museum fielded an increasing amount of calls for directions and tickets to the event, it became clear that the room would be full. This meant that wandering would be less feasible, and also that such a multitude of standing bodies would surely block the projections. This tipped the decision in favor of having chairs and treating the event as a screening. So the *anticipated* audience size determined that the “unfixed” quality I was striving for onscreen would not be extended to the configuration of the room.

However, the actual audience size once again unfixed this assumption. By start time, one hundred fifty people had arrived for a room that seats about eighty. Since the proper screening area filled quickly, additional chairs were placed to the side of and

⁵⁶ There is much to say about how ideas of the audience factor into curatorial decisions, and the subject is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, my own theory and practice of curating film runs opposed to that I have observed in other contexts—namely, that programmers and curators often pick films based upon what they think the audience will approve and attend. And of course, this is how many commercial and industrial films are made—or more pertinently, rejected—by producers and executives whose greatest pride is how well they know what “the audience” wants. I could not be more opposed to curating based upon assumptions about the audience’s tastes or abilities to handle the material. Indeed, my curatorial activity is sustained by not only the presence of an audience, but by how viewers’ reactions to the films undermine my assumptions about audiences.

behind the projection setup. Those who arrived after all the chairs were full stood to the side of the aisles.

Any experienced performer or presenter will know the difference between addressing an audience of low numbers, one of medium-size, and a standing-room only crowd. Each room has its particular number of attendees which could be called a critical mass. There is no substitute for the energy provided by a room that has reached critical mass. One result is the confidence that such a quantifiable marker of success supplies; but further, a kind of snowball effect happens in which the size of the crowd itself creates a certain anticipation for the work. The importance of this for a presenter is crucial. Indeed, one of the animating forces behind the entire Film Love project is that periodically attendance reaches this critical mass—though why and how is difficult to determine. Since the closing of Eyedrum's last major location in 2010, and even before this with the financial crisis of late 2008, my own audience had begun to significantly decrease. Up to that point I could count on a core minimum audience of, say, fifty attendees for an average show (not critical mass for Eyedrum's screening space but more than enough to sustain the practice), and several times a year a major program would exceed this. But since 2010 and the dispersion of events throughout venues across Atlanta, I struggled to get thirty (sometimes less) people to the screenings. So audience size at the Velvet Underground show was not only meaningful to that particular event; as a curator I also experienced it in the context of my own series as a return to the *possibility* of a long-term sustainable audience, with implications for the continued survival of the Film Love

project. Such thoughts represent an affective dimension to independent curating whose importance should not be underestimated.

As is customary, I gave a verbal introduction to the show. Surmising that many in the audience were less familiar with the 60s underground cinema scene than they were with Lou Reed as a musical icon, I contextualized the show by relating a few facts about the Exploding Plastic Inevitable. I explicitly characterized the show not as a recreation of the EPI, but rather as a form of live research into the ideas that the EPI brought up in its time, and how these ideas and visualities look to us today in our context.

The unforeseen effect of the overflow seating was to divide the audience into two planes, and two different experiences. Those who sat in front of the projectors saw what took place on the wall, in the manner of a normal theatrical screening (albeit one which disregarded the normal boundaries of the frame). Those who sat adjacent to or behind the projector setup saw the same screening but also its presentation: the projectors in motion, and my own activities among the projectors, lights, and sound sources. Thus, part of the audience experienced the Velvet Underground show as a *curatorial performance*. While I had anticipated that I would in some way be performing the screening, I had not expected to have a large audience in doing so. I decided the best route was to go about my work as usual. But in this, what was I performing, exactly, and what did this performance bring about, for the films and for the audience?

A separate but related plane

“Going about” the work of real time projection: the phrase suggests motion, and in retrospect it was my own motion, my own mobility among the projectors and turntables that catalyzes much of how I think of this event. The heightened embodiment of viewing this program—processing the optical and sonic effects such as flickering light and conflicting sound sources—extended to my own embodied movement around the space of projection. In this way I was externalizing the act of viewing these films, converting this act into a kind of movement.

But I feel more was at stake than using my own activity as an evocation of, or meta-reflection on, Warhol’s merging of performance and life and rehearsal. It is something I could not have learned solely by analyzing the film and studying its history, and thus why it was necessary to present *The Velvet Underground and Nico* to an audience, as a form of research. Certainly, I meant the presentation to be reflective of the film. But in retrospect, I have the undeniable feeling that in moving around the space, I enacted a “work” that was inevitably distinct from the films, a kind of movement that could almost be mapped (as indeed, I am doing right now). I had been moving on a plane both related to and separate from the action in the film—as if two distinct sets of motion, my own around the projectors and Warhol’s camera around the space of the Factory, were being superimposed in the screening room. Strangely, an act of embodiment had a distancing effect on me—from the audience, from the films, from the space—ultimately, from myself. Perhaps this is the distance of a theatrical performer from the emotions he

or she portrays—or perhaps it was an acute feeling of the *slippage* I was inhabiting—embodying?—between the cacophonous jam session, the on-point performance, the film, the video, and even the not tripping over cables. This sense of embodied displacement was certainly fleeting. For me now, it evokes the ephemerality of the visual effects created by the one-time-only conjunction of films, colors, music, sound and light: a fragmentary glimpse into a plane separate from but related to that which is visible on the screen.

A curatorial performance is embodied, then, fragmented and momentary—as if in performance, curation disperses and displaces as much as it puts together. An act of performed research into a fixed, historical film document and its incongruously mutable presentation leaves us here, on this indeterminate plane. Its coordinates shift, slip through our various descriptive terms, a process visible just long enough to be temporarily mapped in writing: now filmmaking, now performance; now documentary, now backstage, the plane of Andy Warhol's cinema is revealed to be not new hybrids from the merging of these things, but *the process of slippage itself*. Curating this slippage paradoxically becomes an activity of taking apart, and making accessible by preserving unfixity. What do we do with—on—this plane of slippage? Can it be photographed, measured? Does it correspond to the archive, or its limits? Does making it visible truly care for it? Like the projected images of the Exploding Plastic Inevitable and our descriptive terms for them, like the voluminous reels of Warhol's cinema, the questions multiply, their relation to each other more important than what they ask on their own. To

care for these relations, to put them together and take them apart, we now go further into curatorial performance, into embodiment and displacement, in a performance of James Nares' work *Desirium Probe* (1977-78)—a real-time act of putting together located in the shifting, shamanic space of the curator's body.

Chapter 4

James Nares' *Desirium Probe*: Performing Curation, Provoking Traces

Introduction

In the Bar

The Elliott Street Pub in downtown Atlanta is cozy and small, and quite crowded on this April night in 2012. A popular “arts walk” event among the neighborhood galleries ends here, at a massive outdoor iron pour and party, spilling into and out of the pub adjacent. Inside, behind the bar, the TV monitors play silently, independent of the action and largely unnoticed. Usually they display sports, television shows, or movies. Tonight the feature is different, for down the stairs at the back of the pub there is a stage in a dark room where a smaller crowd has gathered to watch me change channels on a television and re-enact for them whatever programming I hear. During this performance, my TV is on the same cable circuit as the monitors upstairs. So as I press buttons on the remote, each of my channel

Toxic Home Front Sunday night eight pm. Those two men accused of shooting five African Americans in Tulsa last week have been charged with their crimes. That's on top of three counts of first-degree murder. Two men, both white, went to North side last Friday, and gunned down five apparent strangers. Three of them died.

We filter our water to be sure it's clean, and safe, but what about filtering your indoor

changes is visible from the bar.

I did not know this at the time of performing, and the bar patrons, unless moved to inquire about the disembodied channel changing, were unaware of the performance downstairs. This “program” ran only once, an unrecorded residue, an inexplicable, irretrievable, silent witness to a performance.

air?

(Laughter)

It's proven to be five times more polluted than outdoor air. Breathe clean indoor air. Help capture dust, and pollen before they settle in your home.

Lost Property

In *The Cut-Ups* (1967), Antony Balch's film collaboration with writer William Burroughs and artist Brion Gysin, randomly organized scenes are intercut in an overlapping pattern, just under one second per shot throughout. This rhythm never varies. The soundtrack is a set of four phrases repeated over and over: *Yes, hello? Look at this picture. Does it seem to be persisting? Good, thank you!* On two occasions (a screening I attended in Kassel, Germany in 2007 and my own presentation in Atlanta in 2009), the film's extreme repetitions over its twenty minute running time gradually brought forth a collective madness in the

Disposable air filters, the most effective filter technology available. High performance filters trap, and actually lock dust and pollen. And on it goes, you always need to have a goal, a goal, yeah. And this is a big goal. It's like something very little. I think that's, that's the one. Like, like everybody should have like for me right now.

audience. The film created a unique atmosphere: an expanding matrix of frustration, dread, amusement, and rebellion, with many viewers throwing the phrases back at the screen (“Hello!” “THANK YOU!”), and others as puzzled by this behavior as by the film. The manager at the London theater where *The Cut-Ups* initially ran in the late 1960s told Balch that whenever the film screened, “there was an extra-large number of articles left behind in the cinema. Lost property.”¹

Like I'm on top, but I always have a small goal, a long-term goal, a short-term goal. Gives me lots of motivation. So when you're on the driving range, do you have a goal? Yes, I do. (Laughter)

Research Question

Lost property: Balch’s lovely phrase brings to mind David MacDougall’s description (addressed in the introductory chapter) of *photogénie*: “...a heightening of cinematic ‘excess’—that physical residue in the image that resists absorption into symbol, narrative, or expository discourse. As excess, the by-products of mechanical vision defy the containment of the work and are more capable of touching the exposed sensibilities of

I think I left the ball. (Music) You grow old when you stop thinking. Meet Britain's Rosemary Rich. She's 77 years young, and enjoys needlepoint, collecting stamps, and trying new things. (Music) (Laughter)

¹ Tony Rayns, “Antony Balch,” *Cinema Rising* 1, no. 1 (1972): 12.

the viewer.”² And from the silent TV monitor display produced by a performance to the vocal “soundtrack” provided by *The Cut-Ups*’ audience to the articles they left behind, it would seem that there is another cinematic excess as well—one that defies the containment of not only the work but of the image, even of the screen, an excess defined in part as the *traces* a work leaves. These traces—cinema’s lost property—are the subject of this chapter, along with their care. If in the last chapter a viewer asked, what is the film and what is the projection, here I ask, what is the work and what are its traces? What is their relation to each other? And—to once again address our main subject—where does curation stand in this equation?

Desirium Probe

To answer these questions, I recount the tale of *Desirium Probe*, a 1977 performance by the artist James Nares, which I revived in 2012. In *Desirium Probe*,

Today this grandma is taking her first crack, which involves climbing into a gigantic inflatable ball with a partner and going for a ride.
(Laughter)
(Music)
He is now positioned ahead.
Plus, the Florida judge overseeing the second-degree murder case against George Zimmerman today said that she may have a conflict of interest.

That's the story of the unarmed Florida teen whom this man admits he shot and

² MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image*, 18.

television content is re-performed on the spot for a live audience. A combination of desire and delirium, the “desirium” of the title is taken partly from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of “desiring machines” in their book *Anti-Oedipus*.³ The television—the “probe”—is hung from the ceiling, just above head height, facing the performer. The performer wears headphones and uses a microphone and a remote control, switching among channels and embodying or re-interpreting the programs. While the performer must listen to and repeat the content, and can see the television, the audience can neither see nor hear the television; they can “watch” TV only “as relayed through (interpreted by) the performer.”⁴ The sole lighting comes from the television, reflecting off the performer’s all-white clothing.

In 2012, I revived and performed this nearly forgotten and barely documented work, presenting it in the killed. So what happens to the judge? That as we approach the bottom of the hour. Exaggerate this problem because the fact of the matter is no one knows how to deal with North Korea, and we don't have a lot of leverage in dealing with them. We've tried engagement, it hasn't worked. We tried sanctioning them, it hasn't worked. And that's what the administration is going to do; they're going to take away the food we promised them. Won't work. Three, and this is where I

³ James Nares, Press release for *Desirium Probe* at The Kitchen, 1977. Reprinted in Nikki Columbus, ed., *James Nares* (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2014), 181.

⁴ Ibid.

contemporary context of the Film Love series. In acting as both curator and performer of this piece, I found that the roles often merged. Performing the work thus set off a sometimes dizzying series of doublings and relations: between myself as curator and myself as performer, Nares as originator and myself as re-enactor, between the two versions of the piece, between the instant re-enactment of television that defines this work and the re-enactment of the work itself thirty-four years later, between the performance and its documentation, between Soho New York (and network television) in 1978 and downtown Atlanta (on cable) in 2012. While these doublings are present throughout the chapter, I especially concentrate on a particular one: the curation of a work and the caring for its traces. I am interested in how something taking place in time—a performance, a film, an interaction, an act of research—leaves a trace, an index of not only what remains, but what disappears, and what lies between, partially other, just on the edge of our vision.

think we can make a difference, we've got to lean on the Chinese and say, "Come on, this is your neighbor. This is your bad teenager. Do something." (Laughter) Hey, I'm going across America to get people to try on these new Depends Silhouette Briefs, and today we're rocking the red carpet. It's Lisa Rennett. Lisa hi, I know you don't need one, but will you try on these new Depends Silhouette Briefs to prove (Laughter) just that they fit even under a fantastic dress? Are you serious? Yes. I'm serious. Sure.

Intellectual Frameworks and Literature Review

Though this chapter deals largely with a performance, the performance in question has a precise relation to the cinematic. In turn, the theoretical framework I outline here is a way of bridging the exhibition of cinema with the *body* inherent to performance.

Jean Rouch's idea of the ciné-trance, in which the filmmaker enters a parallel equivalent to the possession of the subjects in his ethnographic films, is a "creative state," but is also a profound exchange of power between observer and subject, and between different states of being.⁵ Rouch's long study of Songhay society revealed the constant presence of the "double," or *bia*. This double accompanies everyone throughout life, and exists in the parallel spirit world. The possession rituals, magicians' works, and sorcerers' attacks which Rouch studied all take different forms, but

It's this side of the world, it's true. Do you think it could be this? How can you say that? That wasn't the answer you wanted. Can you pretend to be like you used to be? Give me some comfort. People break down into two groups. One experiences something lucky. And it's more than luck, more than coincidence. They see it as a sign—evidence that there is someone up there watching out for them. And number two, some see it as just pure luck. I have

⁵ Jean Rouch, "The Creative Trance," in *Ciné-Ethnography*, ed. Steven Feld (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 182–85; and Jean Rouch, "On the Vicissitudes of the Self," in Feld, *Ciné-Ethnography*, 87–101.

each requires a separation of the human body from its eternal chance. I am sure that double, which acts in various ways in the spirit world people in group number two while the body remains in the “real” world. are looking at these fourteen

lights in a very suspicious way. And the situation for them is 50/50. Could be bad, could be good. But deep down, they feel that whatever happens, they’re on their own. And that fills them with fear. Yeah. Yeah. There are those people with their wits intact.

For Rouch, this doubling is replicated in ethnographic cinema as he practiced it. Different than writing, the act of filming creates a doubled or parallel world of “shared anthropology”: Rouch borrows Vertov’s notion that the filmmaker “ciné-sees” and “ciné-thinks” and compares this layering of film on reality to the doubling of the spirit and real worlds in Songhay society. This changes both the filmmaker and the subject, who does in turn “ethno-show, ethno-speak, ethno-think.”⁶ To *ethno-show* and *ciné-see* is to enter the spirit world of “shared anthropology.” More than the mere inclusion of the subject in the filmmaking process, shared anthropology is a potentially risky way of dissolving the differences between subject and observer. It's a trick, it's her ex-husband. He's making trouble for us, he hates us. He hates who we are. I don't have anything to prove to Nicole. I know that she's overwhelmed

Rouch’s cine-trance is manifestly an attempt to meet the Songhay halfway, so to speak. Rather than “steal the

⁶ Rouch, “On the Vicissitudes of the Self,” 98–101.

secrets” of the Songhay and return safely to the Western context, Rouch seeks to be transformed by Songhay culture as well as to affect it by his filming.

Rouch used technological media, specifically film, as an active agent in ritual—to the point of provoking possession and trance. He claimed that showing films of the Hauka possessed by spirits immediately put them back into trance, and also claimed that when the Hauka saw Rouch’s early films of possession rituals, they asked him to film their own ritual—not for documentation but so the films could be used in future rituals, to facilitate possession.⁷ Rouch’s film *Tourou et Bitti* (1971) documents a moment during a ritual when Rouch’s presence and act of filming suddenly provoked the needed moment of possession. The media doubles the process of ritual by acting as its own *bia*: while taking part in the ritual, it also produces documentation, which stands outside the ritual,

your sense of right and wrong, but nothing is too insignificant to escape her attention.

For a free brochure, or to enroll, call now. Helping veterans, and their families, that's why I work for Humana. Agh! The death of a third hostage, and the threat of another execution every 30 minutes, the Algerian authorities decide to wash their hands of the escalating crisis.

They finally agree to allow the plane to land. Our rule of thumb, we have to have three

⁷ Hamid Naficy, “Jean Rouch: A Personal Perspective,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 4, no. 3 (1979): 352–53.

becoming the ritual's own spirit world.

Rouch's cine-trance, along with *The Cut-Ups*, Warhol's multimedia shows and to some extent Cinema 16, are examples of an embodied cinema that has been theorized by David MacDougall, Paul Stoller, and Laura Marks. In *The Skin of the Film*, Marks draws a complex thread between the body, the archive, and the screen, a thread manifested in "intercultural cinema." This refers to a body of work by immigrants, cultural minorities, and displaced people who draw on the experience of dislocation, memory, and hybridization—the ambiguous process of adjustment to a new culture—to create cinematic difference. Key to this difference are two elements. First is the necessity of formal experimentation in the representation of non-Western experience: other methods are needed to find the expressions, memories and history that are not available in dominant cinematic forms. Second, intercultural cinema is *embodied*. Cinema here is conceived in terms of all the senses. Touch, rather than vision, is the "model for knowledge," and the "skin" of the book's title is a

pieces of evidence that back one another up, and then we can say, "Okay, that was a paranormal experience."

(Laughter)

The next day Dusty picks up property records from the county courthouse. She discovers that Dunham's house has been sold several times, often for much less than nearby properties. She learns that local Native Americans once considered areas around Deltona sacred land. Shhh. Dusty believes two previous owners, a man and an elderly woman, died inside the house. (Music)

It gave me hope that we were actually finding a reason for

metaphor for film as a surface, a material artifact of the contact between viewer and subject.⁸ However, these different “senses” of cinema are not opposed. Intercultural cinema activates memories that cannot be found in archives, or expressed in audiovisual terms, and these memories take other sensory forms; thus, intercultural cinema uses the verbal and visual channels of cinema not to dominate but to activate other senses.

In her subsequent book *Touch*, Marks extends the metaphor of skin into a theory of “erotic spectatorship.” She illustrates this in the relationship between haptic and optical viewing. Optical viewing denotes a possessing or dominating gaze associated with depth and Renaissance perspective. Haptic viewing is the skin: it seeks to brush up against the surface of the image, rather than penetrate its depth. Haptic imagery often facilitates traveling between the surface and depth of the image (for example, the interplay between the level of activity that was going on in the house. Than to do what you want. (Music) It sounds easy but Seth has to overcome the most mysterious rule of reality: the fact that his quantum bits stopped being able to do all of this at once as soon as he tries to observe them. The quantumness of reality is apparently very sensitive. Trying to get together and she was really excited about that. In the last week of August, 2006, Hans Biggs needed to let the children say

⁸ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 22.

found erotic footage and the paint applied to the filmstrip's surface in Peggy Ahwesh's *The Color of Love* [1994]). Marks discusses the haptic in terms of the erotic: a shifting relationship between distance and closeness, and the giving up and restoring of control over one's viewing (what Marks provocatively describes as an "S/M model of looking").⁹ Through haptic viewing, the viewer may "dissolve his or her subjectivity into a close and bodily contact with the image."¹⁰ In theorizing the contact between viewer and subject as multisensory rather than strictly audiovisual, Marks suggests the cinema screen not as a reflection but as a kind of skin, the site for a contingent dissolution of boundaries.

Paul Stoller calls for a "sensuous scholarship" that takes the entire body into account.¹¹ Like Marks, Stoller suggests that only through a fuller use of the

with him over the upcoming Labor Day holiday. She reluctantly agrees but only for part of the three-day weekend. She -- Sunday September 3rd, on her way to Hans' house, Nina stops to buy groceries at this supermarket in Berkeley, California. Security cameras capture her with the children at about 1:30 pm. It will be the last time she is seen in public. Just half an hour later, she disappears. At that point, the only information we have is that Nina went to the house

⁹ Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 73–90.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹ Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

senses can we hope to understand across cultures. Traditional Western scholarship is “bound to Reason, to disembodied words, and to plain style.”¹² This requires a separation of mind and body, which blocks understanding. Such occurrences as possession rituals and the speaking of history by griots are sensory, embodied activities that are best understood through “the scholar’s body.” Sensuousness, however, requires humility—specifically, in the approach of the Western scholar to non-Western culture.¹³ This humility is equivalent to the give-and-take of power in Marks’ erotic spectatorship.

Drawing on the work of Linda Williams and Bill Nichols, David MacDougall has written about the presentation of the body in cinema—particularly in extreme states of exposure or danger, such as pornography, horror, or Stan Brakhage’s autopsy film *The Act of Seeing With One’s Own Eyes* (1971). where Hans lived, dropped the children off, and we knew the children were safe because they were with Hans. And Nina had completely vanished. Two days later, Nina doesn’t pick the children up after school. After school, a friend takes them home, and calls the Oakland Police. The case is assigned to the Missing Persons Bureau who quickly make it a top priority. People that go missing don’t plan for the future. Going to the grocery, dropping children off, making plans to eat with

¹² Ibid., 132.

¹³ Ibid., 136–137.

Viewers' charged bodily responses to such films reveal the idea of a disconnected voyeur as fallacious. Vision is connected to our own bodily processes. Bodily taboos in cinema (sex, digestion, death) contrast with mainstream "beauty" to show that viewers' responses to corporeality in film are varied, relative, cultural—and embodied.¹⁴ Further arguing against the idea of passive viewership, MacDougall recalls Marks in adducing the "interplay of stimulus and bodily response between the screen and the spectator," extending at times even to unconscious mimicry of the action onscreen, and concluding that the viewer's involvement in film is as much corporeal as psychological.¹⁵

It is not by chance that for all of these writers, embodiment is associated with marginalized or dislocated people, liminal states, possession rituals, taboo body functions, experimental scholarly methods—and all the radical forms of cinema that, I have

people. They just go missing. In this case, Nina was planning for the future, so it was very suspicious. It just didn't make sense that this woman would have just gotten up and vanished leaving her kids behind, not knowing what was going to happen to them. It just didn't make any sense. An extensive search for Nina is officially lost. The starting point is the last place she was she was seen alive, Hans' house. Could Nina have run away or was something much more sinister at play? I hope

¹⁴ David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image*, 16–20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 20–26.

previously argued, gave rise to cinema curation. When scholars talk about awareness of the body, about *presentness*, we paradoxically become outsiders—doubles in a kind of alternative spirit world existing alongside that of traditional Western modes of knowledge and experience.

This is not accidental, for at the same time the body is also the site of performance; and performance is both an embodiment and a *distance* from one's body. In the previous chapter, I recounted how my performative presentation of Warhol's Velvet Underground films was both embodied and distanced from that embodiment. In *The Red Fez*, his account of spirit possession in Africa, Fritz Kramer describes certain African dances which prominently feature European dress. Refuting the idea that this reflects European values, Kramer says this shows the dancer's "partial otherness to his African surroundings," while "highlighting a specific quality he associates with his [European] model," concluding that "a person who *dances* a figure is denoting his distance to

this isn't a murder case.

So hydrogen and rich gasoline. Up to 20% more cleaning agents than before.

(Engine sounds)

(Music)

That's every exit out of Manhattan. Are you crazy?

That's all we want is the girl.

That's all we want is the girl.

(Sounds)

You broke his trachea.

(Music)

AUGH!

(Shooting)

(Laughing)

Safe.

it, for he cannot *live it out* at the same time.”¹⁶

Embodied Curation as Method and as Minor History

Taken together, MacDougall’s embodied cinema, Marks’ exchange of control in viewing, Stoller’s call for sensuous awareness, Rouch’s account of the doubled world of the spirit and body, ethnography’s mirroring of this double world, and my own experience of embodied distance in performance provide a theoretical framework for thinking about the question of *traces*, but they also address the practical method used to answer this question, namely *curation*. Curation is once again the method for my inquiry, as well as its subject. Here, however, curation is specifically *embodied*. Curating takes place in and through the body. If I take a scholarly approach to researching and analyzing *Desirium Probe*, this is inseparable from the physical and psychological impact of performing it. (Recall from Nares’ statement above

The usual. Hey guys. This is the defining moment. We can continue down the bland avenue or we can turn this day around with the spicy chicken sandwich. Whooh! How about a third signal? Wendy’s Spicy Chicken Sandwich starts with a tender whole filet, and our perfect blended of tasty spices. We layer on more flavor. Spicy chicken club. We’re way better than ordinary, that’s Wendy’s way. Oh that’s better. Next please.

¹⁶ Fritz Kramer, *The Red Fez: Art and Spirit Possession in Africa* (New York: Verso, 1993), 132.

that the television content in *Desirium Probe* is both “relayed through” and “interpreted by” the performer.) TV source for gaming news, reviews, events, and demos. *Desirium Probe* is doubly curated (I present it to the XP is the place you want to be, XPlay, only on G4. channels as a real-time act of curation, taking the TV (Boom! programs apart and putting them together). This is Fighting sounds) appropriate, for it reflects a doubling in my study. So now let's go to Little Whereas to some extent I study *Desirium Probe* Caesars because it's ready conventionally, as a *performance* that produced whenever he wants it. It takes *documentation*, I am more interested in its secret double less time to get what he calls role: an embodied curation that produced traces, the best seat in the house. unassimilable fragments, lost property. Little Caesars large five

To put this another way—in the introduction to dollar hot and ready pizza or this dissertation, I quoted Mike Kelley: “Minor histories eight dollar three meat treat. are ones that have yet found no need to be written. Thus (Laughter) they must find their way into history via forms that For dinner made easy, we already exist, forms that are considered worthy of wrote the book. It's a pizza. consideration. Thus minor histories are at first construed Come on dad. I'm here to to be parasitic.”¹⁷ The traces produced by certain works unleash my inner cowboy.

¹⁷ Kelley, “Introduction to an Essay Which Is in the Form of Liner Notes for a CD Reissue Box Set.”

seem parasitic, then, to the more worthy subject of performance and its documentation. They may sometimes take the form of documentation—an audio cassette, a TV monitor playing behind the bar—but they seem to do a different kind of work. If performance and documentation are here the major categories, *Desirium Probe* and its traces play the role of a minor history: they intersect with, and sometimes are, performance and documentation, but only in order to question and to escape the hierarchical flows of those categories. It is curation's relation to this double world, the spirit world of the minor history, that I would like to examine here.

Instead I got heartburn.
(Laughter)
Hold up partner. Try Alka-Seltzer for fast relief.
L'Oreal scientists have formulated an effective moisturizing treatment that helps fade dark spots, reverses the formation of pigment, and illuminates instantly. Deep dark spots.

The Transcript

In this project I closely link the curation and performance of *Desirium Probe*, indeed arguing that they are in some ways inseparable. Performance then becomes part of the research methodology of this chapter, specifically the transcription of excerpts of my *Desirium Probe* performance that appears on the right of each page throughout this chapter. The process is this: in *Desirium Probe*, a fixed (pre-recorded) television

Where am I -- wait, you wrote poetry? Uh-huh. Yeah.
In my misguided youth. But into the room walks your mother, and I can't speak. It was love at first sight, it was really, it really was actually. I was running late, and I was

program was taken apart and unfixed, run through the performer's body, and that unfixing was recorded on video. The performance is transcribed from the video, thereby fixing the performance as text, where it here is converted back to a "re-performance" by virtue of being included alongside this chapter, as an independent but related plane of action. The arrangement of these pages refers back to William Burroughs' extensive use of "cut-up" texts in his literature beginning in the 1960s, in which he (literally) cut up texts and rearranged them randomly to bring out new meanings, a technique which also animated *The Cut-Ups*, the film I have described at this chapter's beginning. But the juxtaposition of texts here is meant as a practice-based method—that is, though the transcription to the right is obviously text, the gesture of including it is non-textual. Perhaps something of this non-textuality will be present in its reading as well.

Description of Chapter Structure

In the remainder of this chapter, I will study *Desirium Probe* in two manifestations: the original Only three years. It was one of the those things where you

embarrassed because the whole classroom was staring at me because I turned and looked at your father, and he was sitting there, looking at me. I mean, and he said, "Sometime, too hot the eye of heaven shines. And every fair for fair sometimes to climbs to thine eternal summer mark shall death but of you wanders in his shade."

1977-1978 performances in New York by its creator, James Nares, and my own 2012 performance of the work in Atlanta. In the first section below, I will try to uncover some of Nares' intentions in performing the piece. In addition, I will contextualize Nares' performance within his body of work, and but also within and among more elusive *traces*, such as the particular artistic and social circles in which Nares moved, and which partly gave rise to his methods of working; and within tendencies of performance art of the period.

In the final section, I discuss performing the work in 2012, which also involved *curating* the work on different levels, including the curatorial nature of the performance itself. I also discuss methodologies for presenting the work, especially in relation to its striking, but in some ways productive, lack of documentation. In this section I also compare the televised source material between the two eras and what the difference might mean for our sense of "timing" in the performance, and discuss the ongoing theme of "traces" through an

really never felt that level of violence when you come on the north side of the border. I've run that, I run that knife through my head every day. I mean, he did his job, he did it well, he gave his life for the security of this country. One suspect has plead guilty to his murder. The investigation is ongoing.

Six p.m. Rookies Derek McCain, and Matt Gable continue their patrol in due to area where Russell was murdered. It was an eye-opener. That could have been any one of us. Absence of government, absence of order and really what I did was entertain the audience.

examination of unexpected layers of performance (Music) uncovered in the process of presenting *Desirium Probe* anew. The conclusion to this chapter presents ideas about what the piece and its performance then and now might tell us about the process and activity of curation.

1977-1978: Performing *Desirium Probe*

The Performances

James Nares first performed *Desirium Probe* in December 1977 in the New York loft of artist Joan Jonas, at 112 Mercer Street.¹⁸ This performance lasted under an hour, and was given for an audience of thirty to forty people, mostly friends. On January 24, 1978, he gave the second and final performance just three blocks away, at The Kitchen, a prominent space for art, performance, and music, then located at 484 Broome Street. Somewhere between two hundred and two hundred fifty people showed up. A promotional flier

We don't follow mainstream choreography. We get our inspiration from comedy. And whenever we watch a television show and we think it's funny, we try to incorporate that like in our routine. Some, they call us slackers; we're not the best looking. So I mean, like look

¹⁸ The details of *Desirium Probe*'s two 1970s performances in this section come from phone conversations with James Nares on October 22, 2010, September 11, 2011, and March 8, 2012, and from documents in the artist's papers.

indicated a “continuous” performance—meaning the audience could come and go—from 8:30 to 11:00 pm. Nares planned to perform until there were no more audience members. But the audience for *Desirium Probe* had still not left by the two-and-a-half hour mark. Eventually, at the point of exhaustion, he just stopped.

The next few days were spent in bed with a fever. Nares listened to a few minutes of an audiotape that was made of the performance, but wasn’t interested in revisiting it. Someone took a picture during the performance and the next month it graced the cover of *Lofty Times: A Magazine of the Arts*, for its cover story by Hilton Kramer, “Hi Art Class Punk.”¹⁹ But according to Nares, *Desirium Probe* was not mentioned in the piece, and indeed appears not to have been reviewed anywhere at the time despite its large turnout and visceral impact. At some point, the audio tape was lost, and the long disappearance of *Desirium Probe*

at this crew. But we see this opportunity as a chance to change all that. My family just went through a huge foreclosure. We pretty much have nothing right now, and the whole crew is pretty much going through some more stuff. We've never been the most motivated guys. You know this is our chance to give back to our parents, and we're going to do everything we can to win for them. Five, six, seven, eight. We're down for a challenge. So this song is by Britney Spears.

¹⁹ Email from James Nares, October 22, 2010. According to Nares, the issue is dated February-March 1978. Unfortunately, so far I cannot locate this issue of *Lofty Times* in any library, archive, collection, or bookstore.

commenced.

(Laughter)

Three decades after Nares performed *Desirium Probe*, Amy Taubin commemorated the piece in the opening paragraph of her *Artforum* article on Nares:

Oh man, you do not want to do this to Britney Spears. Oh but man but we can do this,

Wearing headphones and white coveralls, Nares stood in a white room facing a television screen, with the audience seated behind it. In his hand was a remote control. For about four hours, he switched from station to station, channeling the words and sounds he heard through the headphones, which only he could hear. He stammered, muttered, sang, and occasionally shouted in a mad mimicry of news reports, sitcoms, dramas, commercials, theme music, as the flickering light from the screen bounced off his pale face and whitesheathed body, bathing the room in a radioactive glow.²⁰

we can add some funniness and oh my god. What makes us America's best dance crew is we can go on the stage, act, dance, and touch people in ways that we're not usually allowed to touch people.

Taubin's description functions as a documentation of the piece, and a de facto "score" for its performance; in addition, she reveals the fate of the piece's contemporaneous documentation: "It was never documented on video, and the audiotape that Nares recorded during the performance disappeared years ago. All that remains is a single photograph."²¹

(Laughter)

Superstar, if you've seen this by Britney Spears, here are the Step Boys!

²⁰ Amy Taubin, "Repetition Compulsion," *Artforum International* 46, no. 9 (May 2008): 83.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 83. Late in the writing of this chapter, I was able to access a file of materials on Nares' performance, in the archives of The Kitchen in New York. Two additional photos of the performance are in

Nares' Intentions, and the Press Release

Aside from Taubin's latter-day remembrance, (Music) *Don't fake boy, I'm*
 Nares' press release for his 1978 performance at The *the one that—*
 Kitchen is the most extensive documentation of the Dear God. Gentlemen, it's the
 piece and his intentions for it. Taubin describes brilliant mind of Edgar Allen
Desirium Probe as in part "a human physiological index Poe. There's a fine line
 of everything aired on TV during a particular evening between genius—my writing
 before lower Manhattan was wired for cable."²² But has become inspiration for a
 television is only partly the subject of *Desirium Probe*, killer—and madness. This
 as Nares makes clear in his press release: killer is going to strike again,

The title of the piece, "Desirium Probe", is a clue it's part of his game, and it's
 to Nares' underlying concern here, being a combination of the two words desire/delirium, about to be severed.
 and a direct reference to the concept of "desiring machines" as propagated by Deleuze and (Yelling) Agh, the raven!
 Guattari in their book *Anti-Oedipus* which deals (Laughter) It's time to
 essentially with the politics of desire...They talk completely upgrade your
 of desiring machines, the body without organs, and flows, etc., and these issues occupy an

this file, taken by E. Lee White. The photos confirm Nares' clothing, use of remote and headphones. Taken from a bit further back than the photograph I describe here in the main text (whose author I cannot determine, and which is not in The Kitchen's file), they give a sense of the stage area and of the platform that Nares constructed to hold the television. The television faces different directions in the two photos: once toward Nares and in the other, oddly, toward the audience. Perhaps the ropes with which Nares suspended the television were capable of twisting? In this last photograph, two audience members are visible, sitting on the floor (as children often did while watching TV in this era). One is preoccupied with something inside a leather or vinyl bag or case, though this is obscured by the other viewer. I suspect it may be the machine which captured the now-missing audio recording of Nares' performance.

²² Ibid., 83.

important place in the piece aside from, or underlying the more apparant [sic] concerns with T.V. reality versus individual reality. It utilises T.V. as a source for desiring production, and to this extent becomes a personal “probe”...²³

Television, then, is not primarily the subject but the *probe*. It is the central point through which the piece’s two lines—cultural (TV) and personal (desire)—run, in both directions. Nares expresses these two lines as paradoxes, once by describing the performer, then by describing the piece. First: “He [the performer] becomes the T.V. The machine. Controlled by it, but at the same time, released by it.” Then: “It [*Desirium Probe*] deals obviously with the direct intake of cultural propoganda, but in another sense, it is a statement of no opinion.”

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Tracing Lines of *Desirium Probe*

In this section, I will place *Desirium Probe* in relation to James Nares’ body of work. But Nares’ work, like so many of his fellow artists, is intimately connected to the social and artistic networks of New

You play video games, you should get Gamefly. I save a lot of money, and I get all the games I want. Go to Gamefly

²³ James Nares, Press release for *Desirium Probe*. According to Nares (phone conversation with author, March 8, 2012), the press release was deliberately written in the third person. It was typewritten in all capital letters. For readability in this context, I have retained normal capitalization and punctuation.

York at this time, and with these their living and working spaces; so I will consider *Desirium Probe* in relation to these as well. These networks are occasionally elusive—a kind of historical excess, much like the traces of a work that I have described above. If, as Amy Taubin has noted, *the line* is a fundamental structuring element throughout Nares' work,²⁴ I would like to follow this by drawing lines—among influences, personal connections, and ideas of performance—and connecting them back to Nares' very personal art.

James Nares and his art

James Nares was born in London in 1953, and studied art before moving permanently to New York in 1974. Within a few years, he became a prominent member of what later became called No Wave: a loose coalition of artists associated with New York's Lower East Side, whose work was defined by collective creation, DIY exhibition, punk attitudes and

dot com now. Click the joystick in the top right corner. Enter "Video" in the box, and get started with the free extended trial. Products shown. Gamefly saves you a lot of money.

(Gunfire)

First, they're sour, then they're sweet. That's amazing.

(Laughter)

Sour Patch Kids. Sour, sweet, not. That girl does not leave this city. What the hell did

²⁴ Amy Taubin, "Red-Handed: The Purity of Hybrids in the 1970s and Beyond," in Columbus, *James Nares*, 262.

performance practice, and cross-media work among film and video, performance art, music, painting, and installation. Nares embodied all of these practices: joining various bands and collaborating on film productions, he also made solo works in all of the above media. These consistently centered on his concerns with motion and movement, play and games, the relation of artists' tools to artistic process, and the human body, in works whose production has occasionally involved explicit risk. Since the 1980s painting has been his most sustained practice, though he has never stopped making moving image works: his latest video, *Street*, was installed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2013.

Nares' comfort in both underground spaces and the Metropolitan Museum echoes his art's traversal of collaborative and solo practice, Super-8 film and high-tech video, and the relation of painting and drawing to the many other forms in which his work has appeared. For example to create his large-scale brushstroke paintings, he is known for suspending himself above large canvases placed on the floor—using a specially

you do kid? It's about—It's all over Manhattan. It's the girl. You broke his trachea. I didn't know a trachea could break.

(Gunfire)

(Fight sounds)

All right, Jordan. These volleyball-playing twins. Jodie is here to spike your head into the mat. You ready for this? If you don't want to get out of here, I know that he doesn't want to get out of here, so let's start the fire! The rules are simple, no strikes allowed. The bullies start the round with five thousand dollars. Every time he scores one thousand dollars from his victim, he's

constructed scaffold and harness—and executing a painting with a single great brushstroke using a hand-modified brush. The resulting paintings have origins ranging from calligraphy to graffiti to abstract expressionism, and many including Nares have noted the technique’s relation to performance, to dance, to photography and even cinema.²⁵

either caught in the choke or the lip lock. And he forces them to the mat, and all the money the bully loses -- defense, defense, defense, defense, defense, defense, defense, defense, defense. Jordan. Go!
(Music)

Lines in space

From his earliest work, Nares was preoccupied with the body in performance—not only in the sense of performing for an audience, but the bodily mechanics of movement involved in producing art, and the interface with various tools required to do so. This often manifested itself in real-time performance, documented extensively in Nares’ Super-8 films of the period. In *Steel Rod* (1976), Nares and an offscreen friend toss the

And the guestroom’s locked up. Yeah. Who’s in there? Who do you think? Stanley? They’re in there right now. (Laughter) Yes. (Laughter) (Music). But don’t get in here. Cheers! Twenty-one

²⁵ Carlo McCormack, “James Nares’ Masterstroke,” in *James Nares: Interferences* (New York: Paul Kasmin Gallery, 2012), n.p.; Taubin, “Repetition Compulsion.”

heavy titular object back and forth; for *Block* (1975), Nares walked along a Manhattan street, filming with his left hand a close-up of his right hand dragging along the side of the block-long building as he walked. The later *Cloth* (1998) shows the artist's wrist continually manipulating a cloth in the air by snapping it up and down, in extreme slow-motion; the undulating shapes of the cloth are an analogue for the brushstrokes in his paintings. *Arm and Hammer* (1976) is exclusively a close-up of Nares' forearm twirling and catching a hammer. *Giotto Circle #1* (1975) documents the drawing of a circle on a wall, as large as Nares could make it; the circle becomes a record of Nares' attempt to extend his arm movement to its widest possible range, and becomes a circumscription of the wall space and a measurement of Nares' own body. Along with their varied techniques and thematic concerns, common to these films (and many of Nares' others) is that they each document a different method of drawing a line in space. In this way, his films are connected back to his paintings and work in other media. The drawing of a line is not

year-olds. (Laughter)

(Music) Thank you for having me. Hey, where's the champagne? Can I get some champagne? Yeah.

(Music)

Say cheers, happy birthday.

(Music)

Whoa, whoa, whoa, I had a feeling where I wanted to make out with somebody so I just made out with Raita, because all the guys liked that. Hey, whoa, whoa, whoa. We love Rock and Roll Fantasy Camp. The Capital One Cash Rewards card gives you a 50% annual bonus. Ding! Career into his own hands launching his own record label, which has just

only a structuring element for individual works, but is also an allegory for Nares' larger practice, which draws both conceptual and formal lines among different media. released his very first single, titled, "Don't Miss Your Life."

Lines of influence

On arriving in New York, Nares immediately visited the publishers of *Avalanche* magazine, a cutting-edge arts journal he admired, which had prominently featured the performance artist and poet Vito Acconci.²⁶ Nares has spoken of his admiration for Acconci, whose work indeed seems an influence on the challenging mental and physical tasks of *Desirium Probe*. Acconci's performances of the early 1970s were characterized by a rigorous conceptual approach, repetition of a single action (usually one rich in associations and implications), and a commitment to carrying through these actions in their full duration, sometimes to the point of danger or risk. Acconci's videotaped performance *Two Track* (1971) even anticipates During a great afternoon of music and conversation in his living room in Nashville, Phil revealed to me the true story behind the growing hit and his view of current day country music. *Plane to the west coast / Laptop on my tray* It's true, I believe I've got a monster hit on my hands. Wouldn't that be nice? Yes. Good feeling to get the response this early though isn't it? Yeah, it is actually,

²⁶ Glenn O'Brien, "James Nares," *Interview*, September 2008, 236.

Desirium Probe's technique of repeating back the television words and sounds. Acconci faces a man reading a Mickey Spillane novel out loud and repeats every word; simultaneously and to his side, a woman reads aloud from Raymond Chandler, and Acconci must occasionally stop repeating the man's words to answer an offscreen question about what the woman has read. Acconci must thus listen to both readers at the same time, regurgitating the words of one while keeping the words of the other in his mind. Other Acconci pieces forced the artist into similar feats of concentration or physical strain over long durations; in many of these pieces, as in *Desirium Probe*, emotion, humor, poignance and risk often co-exist with a sense of rigorous and transparent process.

Another artist "very present in the neighborhood and in [Nares'] mind" was the sculptor and filmmaker Richard Serra.²⁷ (Nares' film *Arm and Hammer*, described above, could be seen as a direct tribute to

it's really great, you know. You don't always get that, that's for sure. You know when they're always, "Please play my song, please play my song," and then they start playing it, and it's like "Really?" *Fame and fortune come with a heavy price / Don't miss your life* (Laughter) Where did this song come from? Uh, because it sounds very personal. (Laughter) Well it is actually, I got this song from, I was having this conversation on uh, on a plane with this guy, and he had just retired, and was

²⁷ Ibid.

Serra's own earlier film *Hand Catching Lead* [1968].) In a precursor to *Desirium Probe*, Serra collaborated with the artist Nancy Holt in the 1974 video *Boomerang*. As Holt speaks in this video, she hears through headphones her own words fed back on a one-second delay. (The viewer hears both voices as well.)

Social collaborations

While three of Nares' films which I have described above seem to have been produced alone in a studio or other undefined space, *Steel Rod* was undertaken on the sunlit roof of Nares' apartment complex with his close friend Seth Tillett, and *Block* was clearly produced out on the street. Nares interacted with the spaces and structures of New York and perhaps more importantly, with the artists, musicians and friends who populated these spaces in then-dilapidated lower Manhattan.

Alongside solo projects, his numerous and sustained collaborations include playing guitar in two bands (The Contortions and The Del-Byzanteens), working on others' films (his "floating" camerawork on going to see his kids. He says, "Man you're traveling all the time, you're going to miss a lot of stuff." *Thirty years ago my friend / I was you*

So I was going through my iPhone of pictures of my kids, and, and their friends, and their mom, and not me. And you know, um, I was like, "You know I'm a ghost." *I missed the first steps my daughter took / The time my son played Captain Hook, and Peter Pan.* Even though the song kind of rolls off your tongue, I thought this was a kind of a neat way to say this. When we were done,

John Lurie's *Men in Orbit* [1978] is a significant contribution to that film), and co-founding the important artists' collective Colab and the short-lived but influential New Cinema screening space. Importantly, these artistic collaborations were not just about the creation of works, but also involved the creation of exhibition and social spaces (just as both Amos Vogel's Cinema 16 and Andy Warhol's Factory created exhibition spaces as a kind of social practice). As *Desirium Probe* traverses a line between private and public, or interior and exterior, Nares' art takes place at a convergence of the personal and the social. If the locus of Nares' work is what Taubin calls its "combination of conceptual élan with sensory practice," this combination takes place against and through personal connections and public spaces.²⁸ (Recall from above how Nares described Richard Serra's influence: "very present in the neighborhood and in my mind." The neighborhood *and* the mind are equally visible, and connected, as spaces

I just felt like we really had something. *Don't miss your life*. Listening to it, uh, it sounds like a, uh, like an upbeat Phil Vassar song, just completely stripped away. Ha ha ha. It's got all the *whoo's*. Yeah, we took all those out. Yeah, I know that. I'm just saying, man, I got two, uh, two albums out right now. I'm going man, "When did that happen? That's never happened before." *Come on over, let's get, get, get, get together*. You're taking it all out yourself. It's Phil Records, what an idiot. (Laughing).

²⁸ Taubin, "Red-Handed: The Purity of Hybrids in the 1970s and Beyond," 262.

for influence.)

Boris Policeband—an interlude

As with most in this scene, James Nares' art was rooted in social interactions and their economic circumstances. Friendships and collaborations contended with unstable living arrangements, makeshift apartments, chance street encounters, shifting romantic relationships, and the necessity of exhibiting work in purloined, abandoned, or temporary spaces. All of these affected the making, the aesthetic, and the survival of the work of Nares and his contemporaries. By their nature these aspects exist as accounts in interviews long after the fact, and other less concrete forms of documentation. (And in these precarious circumstances many works were lost. Amos Poe—a now canonical figure of super-8 filmmaking in this period—lost an entire film when he failed to pay the rent and the landlord summarily discarded the contents of his Rodeo wave, yeah, I'm either really smart or really stupid. And from day to day that changes. And you can sign onto another label somewhere. Well sure but why? I mean everybody talks about it. Talks about it, and very few do it. But a lot of times you've got to do something even if it's wrong just to figure out, and I think it's uh, for me, it's kind of what it was. It was like, look, I'm at a point where I'm creating, I'm doing all these

apartment.²⁹) In this sense, art and filmmaking in this time and place, among these people, was both collective *and* social practice. This is perhaps most visible in Nares' film *Rome '78* (1978), a super-8 historical epic whose cast was largely Nares' group of friends and fellow artists. Just as ancient Rome (for instance, the cast in their makeshift period costumes) is superimposed on the unaltered 1970s New York locations that provided the "set," the "historical epic" becomes indistinguishable from a document of the film's participants as a social network.

One artist provides a closer window on this conjunction of the social and the artistic. During one of my conversations with James Nares he mentioned a performer named Boris Policeband as a direct influence on *Desirium Probe*. In 2008, Nares told Glenn O'Brien that Policeband "lived with us for a while...He was the things, and I don't want somebody telling me when I can put a song out, what it's going to be. I mean, I know how to do all that stuff. I've been doing it for a while, and uh, and you know I get it. And I think there's a lot of; you know we've got 30 or 40 artists on a label. I don't care who you are. Somebody's going to suffer from that. *Hey don't miss your life*. I remember having the same conversation with the guys at the record labels. You know, you can't—you got to be at a

²⁹ This story was part of opening remarks given by filmmaker Michael Oblowitz at the event "Modern Mondays: A Cine Virus Evening with Michael Oblowitz and Sylvère Lotringer," Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 17, 2014. The economic circumstances that forced downtown New York artists to constantly change living spaces certainly affected the disappearance of *Desirium Probe*'s documentation.

first guy who watched more than one television at a major label to get, you know time. He had about 10 TVs, which seemed really radical. you got to be on Leno, and Letterman, and all this which There were no remotes. He ran around changing channels while he talked to you.”³⁰ Beginning in 1976, is a joke because they don't Policeband’s performances anticipated *Desirium Probe* even care if you're on a major sonically and technically as well: while playing an label. If you're a frickin’ dog amplified violin, he was hooked into a police scanner that can do a Frisbee trick, through headphones; this radio band became his music they'll get you off from the “band,” as he repeated and re-enacted the police chatter Internet. They don't care what onstage through his microphone.³¹ label you're on. And, and for

Policeband’s performances were loud, sure, the fans don't care. You aggressive, and often drove listeners out of the room know they could care less. despite being very short.³² A 1978 performance lasting They just want something about thirty seconds was documented by Coleen that they can hold on to Fitzgibbon and Alan W. Moore.³³ A seven-inch vinyl whether it's a great song, a record of Policeband was released by artist Dike Blair great artist, whatever it may

³⁰ O'Brien, “James Nares,” 236.

³¹ Dike Blair, *New York Noise Vol. 3: Music from the New York Underground 1977-1984* (Soul Jazz Records, 2006) (CD Liner Notes), 8.

³² Ibid.

³³ Coleen Fitzgibbon and Alan W. Moore, *X-Magazine Benefit*, 2011, <http://vimeo.com/28997394> (accessed November 22, 2014).

on his Vacuum Records label in 1979, by which time, as Blair put it, “the cop-talk and violin-screech [had] coalesced into discrete songs.”³⁴ On the first side of this single five separate tracks last less than two minutes in full. Indeed, the tracks do have the direct, concise feel of songs, particularly as they existed in the punk era; their lyrics are found and repeated phrases from police scanners, or cop-related narratives.

But in stark contrast to the well-documented works and lives of Acconci and Serra, very little is known about Policeband (his “stage” name; his real name was Boris Pearlman); his is perhaps the most elusive line in my study. Essentially, we owe what we know of him to three people: Nares, Blair (who recorded and released Policeband’s sole record) and Sylvère Lotringer, who published a one-page interview with Policeband in Semiotext(e)’s 1978 *Schizo-Culture* issue. In this interview, Policeband spoke explicitly about what the electronic equipment meant to his performances. In

be. *Just another day in paradise.* (Laughter)

All right, I’m ready. One, two, three. (Music)

They’re listed here, there’s your work right there. And it’s about 700 already. Now folks, here’s the print price

guide to the graphic works 2012 edition, cross referenced, cross referenced to the *Albert Hill Catalog*.

Here’s the visions, Dolly, Dollyian, and—sorry, sorry, Dalí and *Dalían Fantasy*. No, sorry, that’s *Dalí’s Fantasy*.

Now here’s your work, now look at this folks. Unframed, \$10,500 gallery price.

³⁴ Police Band, *Stereo/Mono* (Vacuum Records, 1979); Dike Blair, *New York Noise Vol. 3*.

fact, he came to his performance technique and style through it: “I found out what the machines were capable of. They led me straight to Policeband. It was almost as if the technology applied its own politics.”³⁵ One passage is particularly relevant to both the technique and theme of *Desirium Probe*:

Schizophrenia...allows you to jump back and forth from position to position without any sense of self. Hopefully one position will click. It's like the [police] scanner. I tell you, you should look at this piece of equipment. It just bounces back and forth until it finds something to signal into and it just stops if there's information coming over that wavelength. So, in effect, my act's quite schizophrenic.³⁶

The schizophrenic jump “back and forth from position to position without any sense of self” links the self-guiding technology that animated Policeband's performances, and the remote control channel surfing of *Desirium Probe*.

\$10,500 gallery price. That is unframed. Now this framed ladies and gentleman is \$1,500. \$12,000 gallery price. Gallery price \$12,000 for a \$1,000 bid. Now thank you for your bid. This is very unusual. This is Dalí folks, very twisted look. This is *Dalian Fantasy*. We have these uh, we have these uh, yeah, yeah, we have, we have a cross for a head, and we have uh, a couple of what appear to be peanuts.

³⁵ Police Band, “Antidisestablishment Totalitarianism,” in *Schizo-Culture: The Book*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2013), 65.

³⁶ Ibid.

Lines Against Performance Art: Theater, Entertainment and Fun

Through television, *Desirium Probe* also stakes out a very explicit and forward-looking position in relation to performance of the time—namely, in its relation to theater, entertainment and fun. A paradox of 1970s performance art—one that *Desirium Probe* directly confronts and exploits—is that of charismatic performers negating a traditional sense of theatrical performance. An opposition to traditional theater is explicit in many performers' statements. For example, Marina Abramović stated, "For me, theater is something false and I've never liked it because it isn't real, you're not yourself—you're playing somebody else and working in a certain way that has nothing to do with performance. Performance is a straight dialogue of energy and theater is different."³⁷ But at least since its ascendance as a major mode of art practice in the late 1960s, performance art style has actually existed along a spectrum of theatrical behavior. On one end, the

Now what's good about this work folks is that every color is done with a separate plate. A separate plate. Multi color one, two, three, four, five, and at least six plates were created. It is hand signed and numbered; \$12,000 gallery price. Frist time shown, first time presenting all the fine art ladies and gentleman. We are twelve hundred now, bid of thirteen. Twelve hundred now, bid of thirteen. That is ten cents on the dollar. And again, guaranteed forever. Guaranteed forever. They want to see the price. The

³⁷ Aaron Moulton, "Marina Abramović: Re:Performance," *Flash Art* 38 (October 2005): 87.

archetypal performance artist is a paradoxically nontheatrical model: an immobile figure upon whom actions are performed *by other people*. Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971), Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964) and Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1974) are representative of this style. On the other end of the spectrum are the extravagant monologues of Acconci in such video pieces as *Theme Song* (1973) and *Turn On* (1974). Though Acconci is at least as archetypal a performance artist as everyone mentioned above, in these pieces his face, voice and performance style all suggest theatrical—or more accurately, cinematic—performance. In fact, as I have pointed out elsewhere, a recurrent paradox in Acconci's video work is that his epic project of self-effacement, failure, and loss of identity takes place through the medium of a highly charismatic figure.³⁸

Interestingly, despite her assertions of purity Abramović often occupies a position in the center of this price was again. Absolutely, my pleasure. The price guide again—lots of calls coming in, lots of calls coming in, this is the, this is the print price guide to the graphic works of Salvador Dalí, 2012 edition—fourteen hundred. I thank you for your bid. Um, I'm sorry, unframed, let's get a nice little shot there, here we go. \$10,500. Here is the visions, they, they, they don't, *Dalian*, *Dalian Fantasy*, \$10,500 unframed, and there's your work. That's just for the sheet. For the paper only \$10,500. That's modest.

³⁸ Andy Ditzler, "Tonight: Videos by Vito Acconci at Eyedrum," January 29, 2010, <http://www.artsatl.com/2010/01/tonight-films-by-vito-acconci-at-eyedrum/> (accessed January 29, 2010).

spectrum. Her rigor, concentration, and silence—all of which mark her as a classically “real” performance artist—compete with a clear theatricality “formed,” as Chrissie Iles says, “by the combination of her use of catharsis and the visual power of its delivery.”³⁹ To which I would add: her undeniable charisma and poise, often seen in her most confrontational works. The most famous instance may be in her reenactment of a Valie Export piece in *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005), in which she unexpectedly locked eyes with a young woman in the audience for an hour, with both parties reduced to tears.⁴⁰

In the context of performance art’s oft-stated antagonism to theater, one of *Desirium Probe*’s most remarkable and appealing characteristics is its genesis in television watching. Compared to the “bloody serious

I’ll show you the works. They sell them for fifteen, \$20,000 at auction. \$1,500. This is incredible. \$1,400, thirteen. This is, it’s really it’s work because I wasn’t expecting it to have this quick result. I think the New Brilliance has come to the perfect product. You really, New Brilliance really is a great alternative for somebody who can’t afford to spend hundreds or thousands of dollars at one of our professional offices. New Brilliance being vacuum

³⁹ Chrissie Iles, “Marina Abramović and the Public: A Theater of Exchange,” in *Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present*, ed. Klaus Biesenbach (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 40.

⁴⁰ Johanna Burton, “Repeat Performance,” *Artforum* 44, no. 5 (January 2006): 56. This encounter is briefly visible in Babette Mangolte’s film *Seven Easy Pieces* (San Francisco: Microcinema International, 2010).

way”⁴¹ in which Marina Abramović approaches and defines performance and re-performance, TV watching’s supposedly mindless media consumption has rich possibilities for commentary on both American entertainment and performance art. It introduces *entertainment* and *theater*, the enemies of “real” performance, into the proceedings. It produces laughter. And it results in a narrative, however fractured or nonlinear. All of this sharply contrasts with prior approaches to art making in New York; as Nares said later, “To have fun making art was something that the generation before mine was not supposed to do.”⁴² Fun (and its counterpart entertainment, especially through narrative forms) was one important means by which Nares and other downtown New York artists and filmmakers of the late 1970s distinguished themselves from the ultra-serious attitude of the previous

along with a diamond tip, along—it really is the same process that we use in a professional setting, and it’s something we can use over and over again at home, and it will pay for itself within the first one or two years. And now it’s your chance to take advantage of this limited time offer—New Brilliance. (Music)

Peter Apatow, thanks for being on the show. Thank you, it’s awesome to be here. Now first, you’re not a doctor. But what qualifies

⁴¹ Moulton, “Marina Abramović: Re:Performance,” 88.

⁴² O’Brien, “James Nares,” 237.

generation.⁴³ This was recognized at the time, as well. you as being expert at being, Writing on the New Cinema—a screening space for at getting rid of pain? Well downtown artists’ super-8 films co-founded in 1978 by you know the world’s Nares—journalist Gary Indiana identified the venue’s greatest medical experts from “populism” as a departure: “It was as if the vitality of the United Nations—the the New Cinema, the unpredictable quality of the films Bone and Joint...Committee, and the rambunctious energy of its audience were an they selected me separate to affront to staid, hallowed tradition. Screenings at the being the leading advocates New Cinema were *fun*. You could drink beer, smoke all around the world to help whatever, talk back to the screen; it was the kind of joint pain, bone pain, back viewing situation the old, structuralist avant-garde pain, muscle pain for avoided like leprosy.”⁴⁴ everybody around the world,

At the same time, running television programs okay? I'm not a doctor. What through the performer’s body and psyche establishes a I am is a researcher, and an critical distance on entertainment product, an embodied arthritis survivor myself.

⁴³ Examples abound. Eric Mitchell and John Lurie giggle their way through their roles in Lurie’s astronaut film *Men In Orbit* (1978), while punk-identified super-8 filmmakers such as Beth B. and Scott B. restored the influence of narrative and B-movies to underground filmmaking in reaction to the high-art formalism of structural film. Perhaps the most visible development of this is the cross-pollination of artists and musicians in this period and bands’ use of visual artistic strategies onstage. This was exemplified by Talking Heads in the punk scene, and by the close links between graffiti writers and rappers. Making all this explicit was the name of the Fun Gallery, which opened in New York in 1981.

⁴⁴ Gary Indiana, “James Nares: An Interview,” *East Village Eye*, Summer 1980, 38 (italics in the original).

distance that is the purview of performance. The “bloody serious” approach is replicated, but also subverted by the introduction of pleasure—*fun*—into the rigor and risk of performance. This is pointedly illustrated in *Desirium Probe*, as the piece simultaneously converts entertainment programs into performance art, and the watching of performance art into the watching of (live) television.

Desirium Probe is exactly the opposite of a wordless tableau such as Abramović’s reenactment of Export, but it partakes of a similar intensity of emotion and visible concentration. What Abramović called the “bloody serious” work of performance⁴⁵—here, the activity of repeating television word for word for two straight hours or longer—carries its own drama legible in the performer’s physical and mental effort, but also produces comedic absurdity: melodramas juxtaposed with golf games, and so on. The simple act of unmooring the dialogue from its visual context can

What do you mean, arthritis survivor? (Laughter) Well, I suffered from severe arthritis pain in my hip for decades. I was almost completely immobile, I could barely walk, I had pain day, and night. It was painful to sit and move, to stand. It was an absolute nightmare. I searched the entire world for a way to end my own nightmare of pain, and I did it. You found a way to end your own pain? I did. I discovered safe all natural building blocks that would be prescribed by doctors all over the world. They're healing

⁴⁵ Moulton, “Marina Abramović: Re:Performance,” 88.

render the banal deeply strange. All this results in moments that the audience finds genuinely funny, to judge from the laughter at my own performances. I had prepared for my performances in a “bloody serious way.” *Desirium Probe* is an endurance piece: several hours of continuous physical activity—running, dancing, falling and getting up, punctuated by moments of relative stillness—combined with the mental effort of repeating television word for word or imagining reinterpretations, all in front of an audience. Sustaining this effort required physical preparation—a workout and exercise regimen undertaken a full year in advance, to develop the needed stamina—and plenty of rehearsal with the television, to develop the particular style of concentration, abandon, confidence, and narrative skill that would make the piece come off. At the same time, it was *fun*. (Imagine a performance of this work that wasn’t fun—who would want to watch it?) Whatever happened, my goal was to make the watching of *Desirium Probe* as entertaining as the watching of television itself, while retaining the sense of critical agents that actually reverse the cartilage breakdown that causes joint pains. And you know what? Listen to this. That’s to lose weight because I have lost 115 pounds. I’m eating pizza and cheeseburgers and I’ve lost 50 pounds. (Laughter) I eat my favorite foods all day long. I went from a size 18 to a size 6. Hi, my name is Annette O’Hare, and I’ve been asked by Provita Life Sciences to come here and tell you about the food lover’s fat loss system. Not because I’m a famous celebrity, and not because I had anything to do with creating the product, but

distance that the piece provides as an artwork.

In its attitude to television and theater, *Desirium Probe* not only reacts to its immediate context but looks forward to a theatrical turn which began around this time in the work of artist/actors such as Eric Bogosian (and from another direction, the comedian Andy Kaufman) and reached prominence in the 1980s with Ann Magnuson and others.⁴⁶ Bogosian—who programmed dance performances at The Kitchen at the time Nares performed *Desirium Probe* there⁴⁷—took on invented characters in his early performances, while Kaufman inserted radical conceptual gestures (and physical challenges, such as wrestling) into his 1970s television appearances on *Saturday Night Live* and elsewhere. *Made For TV*, a 1984 video collaboration between director Tom Rubnitz and performer Ann Magnuson,

because I'm a regular person.

A 42-year-old mother of three who used the food lovers fat loss system to lose 25 pounds, and four dress sizes in just twelve weeks. It's the first weight loss program to make total sense to me. And I can tell you three things. I was never hungry, I never ate food I didn't like, and I never deprived myself of a single one of the foods that I love. I don't eat diet food; I don't eat little bits of celery, little bits

⁴⁶ This transition is chronicled in RoseLee Goldberg, “Art After Hours: Downtown Performance,” in *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene, 1974-1984*, ed. Marvin J. Taylor (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 108–15.

⁴⁷ Eric Bogosian, “That Large, Shiny Space,” in *The Kitchen Turns Twenty: A Retrospective Anthology*, ed. Lee Morrissey (New York: Kitchen Center for Video, Music, Dance, Performance, Film and Literature, 1992), 53–55.

exemplifies this turn. Like *Desirium Probe*, *Made For TV* uses channel surfing as a structure—switching between multiple “channels,” each of which features Magnuson in a different role, roles which embody and comment on the possibilities for women’s representation on television. As in *Desirium Probe*, one performer carries the burden of multiple television roles—though unlike Nares, Magnuson’s schizo-personae manifest through video editing.

Made For TV is reminiscent of a James Nares film titled *TV Faces*, which he made alongside *Desirium Probe* and which is a kind of companion piece to it. For an evening, Nares aimed his super-8 film camera at his television, and recorded a few seconds, with sound, whenever a face came on the screen in close-up. The result was a lightning montage of human faces and bursts of interrupted speech. Much of this speech is clearly political in nature, though there are few coherent statements to be heard. The total effect, then, is a combination of chaotic fragmentation and an awareness of underlying structures, always emerging, never

of this and that. I eat fried chicken. I eat French fries. I eat these foods in the right combinations and I eat more frequently throughout the day. You can have all the foods you want, all the foods you love every day, day in and day out, and still lose weight. Before I started the food lover’s fat loss system, I wore a size 16. This dress—size 4 in just six months. Since I started the food lovers fat loss program, I’ve lost 115 pounds. In the past, I’ve tried to lose weight by fasting. I would skip a meal, I would skip breakfast, I would skip lunch, I would eat very, very little, and it never worked for

completed.

Such are the strands, sometimes elusive and sometimes less so, of artistic and social practice among James Nares and his fellow artists in the mid-1970s in New York, *Desirium Probe* included. Having outlined a brief history of *Desirium Probe*'s original intentions, performance, and disappearance, and drawn some lines among Nares' practice and its context, I would now like to turn to my own performance of the piece. This contemporary performance is deeply informed by this sense of barely visible influences and traces, beginning with the piece's existing—and non-extant—documentation.

me.

Right there, ladies and gentleman, this is for the first column is a circa 1950 at 699, 699. Yeah, we got it, we got, we got it, we got it. This is the very large piece -- let me go do -- sorry, there we go. Two inches in the drop and this is a pin and a pendant. Okay, and a pen and a pendant.

(Music)

2012: Curating *Desirium Probe*

The Non-canon, the Non-document

Unlike the work of Abramović, Acconci, and many others, *Desirium Probe* is not canonical—it disappeared from history almost immediately. Also unlike most re-performances of earlier works, there is very little documentation—at the time of my preparation

My skin has changed. I have really nice skin now. (Laughter) And at my age it's really hard to have nice skin. It's like it's come back. But

for performing, only a single photo of the performance in process. Further, three and a half decades separate the original event from my own version of it, and this version from any memories of attendees on which I might draw.

Instant re-performance, non-canonical status, and lost or never-produced documentation skew *Desirium Probe*'s relation to re-performance and also to documentation. With *Desirium Probe* the question arises: how does one approach performing and curating a work that barely seems to exist? If the standard forms of photography, video, sound, contemporaneous descriptions or reviews do not exist for this piece, what kinds of documentation are available? In this section, I outline my own approaches to performing *Desirium Probe*, as well as some of my intentions in doing so. Much of this depends, as throughout this chapter, not on recuperating a forgotten work into the history of performance (although it is an important work), but on preserving and caring for what *else* the work shows us about a work's excess, the traces that survive of a work.

it's, it's like it's come for the first time maybe. It's—I'm sure I had nice skin when I was younger but I didn't pay any attention to it like none of us did. And maybe I'm taking for granted that—yeah, see all, oh yes, oh we drink champagne, and I fall asleep, and I try and take my—I do not take my makeup off. Right. You know when you're dating, you don't take your makeup off. You don't need to get up an hour early. Yeah? Ha ha. Yeah, ha ha. (Laughter) And it is, and I know it's so—so the whole concept of super food for your skin is really inherent in this dynamic duo.

And your skin will immediately thank you. It will immediately thank you.

A photograph

The surviving photograph of *Desirium Probe* reproduced on the cover of *Lofty Times* shows James Nares in mid-performance. He has spiky hair, and is wearing not coveralls, as Taubin remembered, but a shiny white jacket over a shirt with upturned collar. He's up against a white wall; a sharp shadow suggests it's a flash photo. The remote appears to have an antenna; wires are otherwise everywhere in evidence. Nares is in midgesture – he looks like a rock star, shouting, eyes closed, wired in, one shoulder thrust forward as if in mid-Jagger move. It's seductively punk.

Photographer and filmmaker Babette Mangolte distinguished two types of visual documentation of performance, still photography and video: "One shows an immediate access to the iconography while the other

You won a gemstone; this is a collector's gemstone. They marketed this, this thing. Custom molds to your teeth for a perfect fit. Guaranteed to stop your snoring right away. I want you to have one day without any stress or drama because I don't think I've had a drama free day since I turned 16 years old.

(Laughter)

Aww, Carrie, Carrie, Carrie, Carrie, look, look, look, Carrie, look. What's going on

shows process.”⁴⁸ This seems to be the case with the photograph of *Desirium Probe*: an almost overwhelming impact of the iconography of performance. But it’s a representation of only a fraction of a second. It gives permission for a certain style of abandon. But process—trajectory, pacing, duration, movement, lighting—is not present. My performance of *Desirium Probe* would be structured largely not through documentation, but through its lack. For this, we must listen to the missing audiotape.

between Nicole and me? It's very complicated, okay? You know, you know what, I really don't care, I don't care. Karen please—No, I don't care. Just listen, Karen, just listen to me. Oh, what's going on here? Still juggling both women and our divorce isn't even final yet.

A cassette: lost property

As I have mentioned above, an audio cassette tape was made of Nares’ performance at The Kitchen. He listened to only a few minutes of it, quickly abandoning *Desirium Probe* and moving on to other projects (he was to complete his feature film *Rome* ’78 just a few months later, in addition to continuing his

(Laughter)
Look, look Melissa and I are just discussing some things. Oh it's important—are you sharing with her the fact that you got Nicole pregnant?

⁴⁸ Babette Mangolte, “Balancing Act between Instinct and Reason or How to Organize Volumes on a Flat Surface in Shooting Photographs, Films, and Videos of Performance,” in *After the Act: The (re)presentation of Performance Art*, ed. Barbara Clausen (Vienna: MUMOK Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, 2007), 45.

music and film collaborations and opening the New Cinema). A good deal of the film work of Nares' contemporaries remains unknown, unavailable, or in fragmentary form today; indeed, Nares stored away many of his 1970s short films (perhaps fortunately for their survival) for decades. He only returned to them in the first decade of this century, arranging for their preservation and for screenings. It is difficult to know how often (or when, where, and how) his short films like *T.V. Faces* (1977), *Pendulum* (1976), *Steel Rod*, and even more ambitious completed works like his political essay film *Suicide? No, Murder* (1977) were shown at the time of their making; indeed, he has suggested that some of these, after being completed and shown informally or for a single evening at an exhibition, went unpromoted and unshown, in favor of restlessly moving on to new work. Given these circumstances, today we are lucky to have Nares' films, which represent a significant addition to both artists' film and American independent film of the era. However, the audiotape of *Desirium Probe* apparently did not make it to storage;

You don't even know, right, that he slept with her? Obviously—That's enough. Enough. Karen doesn't mind you know. We're very different. Maybe she doesn't mind sharing her boyfriend. So I think it'll get messy once the baby comes, and once—Go to hell Sammy!

(Laughter)

Well, so much for a drama free day.

(Laughter)

Take her, take her bible, go before the television, and open it. Go to the bible, and study, and she is so prepared in the word, and I just—

There's so many preconceived notions of

somewhere in the restless making and moving around, it disappeared.

Yet this disappearance, which we might normally consider catastrophic, was in another way helpful to my contemporary performance of *Desirium Probe*, because of its precise relation to the structure of the piece itself. To understand how, consider another tape, made of another 1970s television performance.

people saying you don't need to understand the relation. You're going to fly away. And that's a lie. And God tells you, "I have things for you to do, that's why I created you." I don't have to worry about that, I'm going to be gone. No you're not. That's why God talks to you. All these traditions of man on the side, listen to God's word, he sent it to *you*.

Cycles: recorded and live, fixed and unfixed

"*All in the Family* was recorded on tape before a live audience." Throughout the 1970s, this statement was heard during the closing credits of each episode of the popular television comedy. It cannily trumpeted *All in the Family*'s precedent-setting refusal to employ a

He interviewed every one of those guys, nobody helped. Such as Atlanta Braves Baseball, and NCC Basketball. This just makes

prerecorded laugh track.⁴⁹ The show was thus marked as no sense. We think you authentic performance, drawing on the excitement of would agree that they should early live television. But of course, the show was not have to pay premium broadcast as a prerecorded tape—hence, its double rates over multiple years if claim: recorded *and* live. (In fact, episodes of this show Turner eliminates its were generally constructed from the best moments of premium programming. You two different performances in front of two different wouldn't lease a luxury audiences.⁵⁰) In later seasons this closing statement was vehicle, and then let the delivered by Rob Reiner, the actor who played son-in- dealer swap it for a compact law Michael Stivic, one of the show's four main next year at the same price. characters. Watching the show as a child, I clearly It's standard industry practice recognized Reiner's voice in this statement, and just as for broadcasters to commit to clearly intuited that it was Rob Reiner's, not Michael a specific quality of Stivic's, voice; yet, it seems now that I only knew programming to receive the Reiner's voice through Stivic's. In retrospect, this agreed upon fees. We share ambiguity mirrors that between the prerecording and the your sense of urgency in live audience. The fusion of *recorded* and *live* is bringing Peachtree TV back

⁴⁹ The live audience was commonly considered as a major factor in the show's popular success. See Fred Keefer, "Applause! Applause! The Spontaneous Outbursts of the Studio Audiences of *All in the Family*," *American Humor* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 12–18.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

reproduced in the claim's presentation by *character* and *actor*. Both the claim and its delivery, then, may usefully undermine common ontological distinctions between a performance and its documentation.

Elsewhere, I have written about how non-digital media artifacts in archives, such as film reels or audio tapes—items which, unlike print materials or digital videos, cannot be viewed on the spot—“emerge in a state of anticipation and desire.”⁵¹ The cassette for *Desirium Probe* engenders just this kind of archival desire. Actually, its disappearance intensifies this desire, becoming its own *desirium*. It thus takes part in the larger allegory of *Desirium Probe*: the cassette, like the prerecorded television shows, is always an artifact (“recorded on tape”), its absence, like the re-performance of those television shows, is always a continuous present-time event (“before a live audience”). It takes part in a cycle of fixity and non-

to this channel lineup. Especially now that the Braves games are about to begin. The bottom line is that we have agreed upon rates with Turner. Call them at area code 404-325-4646, and tell them to finalize the agreement with the Dish so you can again enjoy Peachtree TV programming. If you have any questions or you would like to provide feedback, please visit [feedback satellite dot com](http://feedback.satellite.com). We encourage your feedback. Thank you for being a valued Dish customer.

⁵¹ John Q (Wesley Chenault, Andy Ditzler, and Joey Orr), “*The Campaign for Atlanta: An Act of Research*,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 1, no. 2 (2014): 23.

fixity. Nares unfixed the taped television content through embodiment; and fixed this embodiment on a recordable cassette. The tape's loss unfixes this yet again.

The tape of *Desirium Probe* is reproducible, but not mechanically or digitally. In its absence, what is reproduced is the sense of its presence as an always-deferred possibility. The “beholder” of the missing document must in some sense “perform” it (imagine, enact, embody it; deny, defer, mourn it). With loss at its heart, this embodied document, then, reflects the larger process of performing *Desirium Probe*, in which taped content is unmoored from its artifactual status through the body. We cannot know the content of the tape; instead, the missing tape is a document of the very structure of *Desirium Probe*'s cycle of fixity and non-fixity. It thus becomes the piece's *bia*, its *trace* in the spirit world—present throughout life, but accessible only through acts of possession or performance.

*You got to let go of the strife /
you got to let go of that
woman / Somebody else's
wife. You got to let go of him
/ and you got to let go of him.*

*Forgive, don't, don't let it
crimp your life. Whoo. One
more time, something you
just have to do. It's free now.
You know you want to. You
can break from chains, you
can break, break from the
chains. No I can't.*

(Laughter)

Okay, muscle confusion.
Let's talk about that.

2012 Performance: presenting and curating

In this section, I discuss some methodologies for

Here's something—this

the curation of *Desirium Probe*. On the practical level, retroactive and embodied forms of documentation such as I have discussed above allowed a rethinking of curatorial methodologies for presenting *Desirium Probe*. These centered on different aspects of the relationship between 1977 and 2012.

Desirium Probe as Cinema

Desirium Probe is a work of performance art. Yet it is also other forms. It is in some sense a concert, since the performer is emoting into a microphone on a stage in exactly the manner of a rock singer. It is clearly theatrical. But it is also cinematic, in the way it unmoors the audiovisual elements of cinema from the integrated form of a film, and re-routes them through the body. It is about *movement* and *motion* of that body. It draws on traditional movie and television dramatic forms to construct a meta-narrative. It works on audiovisual channels, like cinema. And it is a projection—not only in the psychological sense, but in the actual sense: the white clothing is meant to reflect the glowing television

graphic we spent a lot of money on. It shows you how the effectiveness of workouts diminish over time leading to a diminished area called the plateau effect which any gym member can tell you sucks.

This obliterates that effect by using the advanced training called muscle confusion. Over the course of ninety days as your body gets confused, P90X changes right along interestingly so that your body never has time to adapt to a new routine leading to faster results, and greater muscle. There's five different plateaus and resistance routines that force

light, *screening* the performer.

As cinema has often been seen (or marketed, perhaps) as the combination of traditional arts into a new form, so *Desirium Probe* easily fits in the context of a *film*, rather than performance, series. This is also suggested by the prior reception of the piece—as we have seen, despite Nares’ casting of the piece as a “continuous” performance in the classic gallery model of duration and endurance, viewers immediately took to it as a narrative form to be watched in full.

your muscles to go faster.

You'll also fly high with the explosive power of this training with the focused intensity of martial arts, and stamina with extreme yoga, and with a rock solid foundation, with the rock solid moves of gymnastics. And don't forget the cardio.

Desirium Probe in Music Venues

Having established *Desirium Probe* as a kind of cinema, I sought to unfix this notion through the choice of multidisciplinary venues often associated with music concerts. The very intimate room at Elliott Street Pub features a small stage with many jazz and experimental rock shows (although this heroic venue hosts events that cross many different genre and medium lines), while the Goat Farm (in Atlanta, somewhat analogous to The Kitchen’s more established institutional status) is a well-known concert and theater venue. The Goat Farm’s

There's actually been very little gun related legislation on a federal level in the last four years, Romney’s own record on gun patrols, putting him at odds with the NRA in the past while running for governor of Massachusetts. Romney said, "Blah, blah, blah, blah." Now, he's sitting

expansive environs allowed for the showing of related films by Nares in different rooms: *TV Faces*, described above; *Roof* (1975), an early rooftop video showing the kinds of risk Nares undertook as part of performance; *Steel Rod*, the rooftop film described above; *Primary Function* (2007), the reproduction on video of a tortuous cognitive test Nares underwent during recovery from an illness; and *Waiting for the Wind* (1982), a remarkable film of Nares' single-handed destruction of his soon-to-be-abandoned loft.

Methodologies of Unfixity in Curating Re-performance

To the extent that one does re-perform *Desirium Probe*, it is a re-performance of a re-performance that in turn produces a double documentation. In order to re-perform the piece, I re-perform the television immediately, in real time. This immediacy stands in ambiguous relation to the three-and-a-half decades between the two most recent performances of the piece. Meanwhile, I produce a double documentation: I embody the television programs, creating a “body document” of that evening’s content (and of my own

there and he's finally—he's alone. Behind bars. Thank you. Now I'm going to assume the best, and assume that he's crying over the death of Trayvon Martin because I now know he wants to reach out to the Martin family and apologize for what happened.

Whoo, you're thrilled. All right, what, what, we just—what the hell is going on? You dropped the damn cake. It's none of your business. Now *beep*. Dammit, you *beep*. Goodbye. Please don't come back.

Today we're repossessing the home. We have to be very,

channel changing); and also produce more fixed documents of this bodily document—video, audio, photos, and even drawings (by an artist who happened to attend with her sketchbook).

There is additional resonance with the way we understand the relation between documentation and an “originary event.” The bulk of the television programs are fixed (“recorded on tape”); they are themselves *documents*, but in the context of *Desirium Probe* their broadcast (“before a live audience”) becomes an unfolding event to be reinterpreted. Like Abramović’s activity of treating a performance work as a “score” to be interpreted, my job is to recreate the television program, but also to remove its fixity: to run the programming through my body and psyche, amping up certain aspects, diminishing others, unfixing the content; but also preserving it, and messily. The resulting videos and photographs once again fix this bodily act of performing into a document. Nares’ original performance did all of this too, with an audio tape instead of video. The loss of the audio tape added

very careful. Boom, she's got a gun. Look out!

(Explosion sound)

(Gunfire)

Welcome to Long John Silvers. Oh, whoa, we got this. Yeah.

(Laughter)

On December 21st, polar shifts will reverse the earth's gravitational pull, and hurtle us all into space.

(Laughter)

Which means Tina, all eyes are on you to defend the family honor. Okay, all right.

Tina, it's all up to you. Good luck—let's go. Twist it! Twist it! Uh oh. Abigail, you missed, no and Audrey you pulled for no reason, which

another layer to the process; the fixed performance document became unfixed, living only in imagination. In these overlapping instances of fixity and nonfixity, and in my repetition not of Nares' performance, but what his performance *unfixed* and *produced*, my re-performance of *Desirium Probe* becomes a more general act of re-performance.

This circumstance assisted me in the problem of how to re-present a work about which so little is known. Instead of trying to replicate what Nares did onstage, I referenced metastructural aspects of the original performance. Nares performed *Desirium Probe* twice in quite different circumstances: once in a fellow artist's loft with a small audience of friends, and once in a public venue for a much larger crowd. So I scheduled my own performances to take place in successive months (as Nares' also did). The more intimate performance at Elliott Street Pub took place on a Friday night during a monthly "art stroll," and thus could be expected to draw some audience members who would happen upon the performance unexpectedly as part of

means you're both out. And now so much for the moms defending the family. Give them a hand, give them a hand.

You broke his trachea. I didn't know a trachea could break.

(Laughter)

(Punching)

Whatever it takes, wherever it takes us, America's making a global force for good.

This dress was once a sketch, then he studied fashion, turned it into reality. With practice, he mastered the scales of draping, and merchandising, and now his collections are worn by

their evening. At The Goat Farm, a more institutional art center, viewers traveled to the venue specifically to see this performance. The Goat Farm performance also took place on a weeknight (as Nares performed at The Kitchen on a Tuesday), so the television programming would differ in substantial ways from that of the weekend show at Elliott Street. The spatial and temporal aspects of the original performance, more than documentation of the piece in progress, provided a structure for approaching its repetition.

The Source Material

Though as we have seen, television is the “probe” and not the primary subject of *Desirium Probe*, it also provides the piece’s raw material. It thus determines to a great extent its structure and its affective quality. Though Nares was certainly re-enacting “television” as a kind of cultural archetype, it is equally true that this archetype was embodied in specific programs and types of programs, and that in their specificity these programs had their own purchase on the performance. So what exactly did Nares have to work

celebrities worldwide. But without that first step, this dress would still be a scribble, and I would not look this fierce. With an Arts Institute's education, imagine what you could create.

A Chanel fanny pack? Super cute. When did you get this? 1990. And when did you wear it last? 1991.

(Laughter)

Exactly. And tell me where do you envision yourself wearing this fanny pack? Looking for a man! Yeah, I see this fanny pack getting

with in his performance at The Kitchen?

January 24, 1978 was a Tuesday. According to the *New York Times*' television listings for that date, Nares had fourteen channels from which to choose—a mix of programming from the three major networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) and their local affiliates, public access channels, and stations specific to the New York City area, such as the educational channel WYNE.⁵² The networks had a mix of popular sitcoms (*Laverne & Shirley*, *M*A*S*H*, *Three's Company*), talk shows, and a Bette Davis thriller. Bob Hope and Leslie Uggams headlined a variety show on CBS celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Kraft foods corporation. Earlier, the same network had broadcast a special report on “the CIA’s secret army.” One wonders how Nares (and his audience) negotiated channel 50’s 10:30 pm presentation of “Dance for Camera”—which, taking its title at face value, would have involved a re-enactment of an original conversion of live performance to

you a man. Yeah. So I could definitely get rid of this and turn it into a handbag or even a clutch or something continuous. Here—I have this Chanel denim—ohhh—Nicole Miller. We have to get this one out of here, yes. I feel really good about the fact that we cleaned out all those old memories. So Anita doesn't need them any longer. It was so wonderful. Thank you. We did a great job. Fine, congratulations. Thank you. This whole experience has been great. You are so ready. And I, I didn't realize I had so much stuff I'd been holding

⁵² “Television,” *New York Times*, January 24, 1978.

recording (*dance for camera*), thus re-converting it on to and I, and I'm ready to ("dance for camera" made live again). For that matter, say goodbye to it. And I'm the Bob Hope/Kraft Foods "variety show" would have ready to go out there and, and been incorporated into the meta-variety show of meet the world. *Desirium Probe*. An additional connection: as a regular (Music) viewer of (at least) *M*A*S*H* in my childhood, I was very likely watching these network shows on January 24, 1978, as Nares was re-performing them.

Distances in embodiment

As Nares' performance motored on past the Crushed basil, a little pepper, original planned ending time of 11:00 pm, his raw a little salt, a little extra material shifted in tone, moving from "prime time" virgin olive oil, smells so network comedies to late-night talk shows, old movies incredibly fresh. Oh yes. and syndicated shows from the past. At 10:30 pm, Here we go. Doesn't that look channel 11 ran *The Twilight Zone*. Appropriately—if great? This incredible kitchen Nares was still going by then—they ran *The Twilight island. You can live in Zone* again at midnight. In between, the same channel harmony with nature and ran old episodes of *The Odd Couple* (first broadcast in 2012 HGTV Green Home the early 1970s) and *The Honeymooners* (the 1950s). located in Serenbe, it's just a

These particular programs were "repeats," or in short drive from Atlanta. And contemporaneous parlance *re-runs*. They were now for your chance to win

prerecorded content whose periodic repetitions were an established feature of American culture. As such, much of Nares' (presumably young) audience would have been familiar with them from childhood onward, in some cases as individual episodes with specific situations and bits of dialogue, in most cases as more general archetypes ("the odd couple"), but in all cases *as repeats*. In fact, they might have been intimately familiar with some of these shows—much more so than the man who was *performing* them, who had only moved to the United States a few years before. If running TV programs through the body establishes a critical distance on entertainment, the distancing is compounded by the strange mix Nares must have felt between the utter familiarity of television in general and the specificity of his relation to *American* television.

I could not replicate this particular distance in my performance, although I had distances of my own. I had grown up with American television—sitting on the floor, watching reruns of *The Brady Bunch*—but when I began rehearsing for my own performances of *Desirium* this beautiful custom designed home. And they waited. They waited for him to die. That's what the world is waiting on for you. The world wants to see wiped out this morning as I awaken by turn the television on in my hotel room and there's a report of what we are allowing our children to watch on television. And there was a man who was the creator of a—of a show called Veggie Tales— (Laughter)— who was on Fox News this morning and was explaining how we have allowed—we have allowed um, people who

Probe, I had barely watched television at all for decades. I now realize, however, that I was hardly isolated from TV, for I continued to hear about it through friends, through magazines and newspapers, and many other sources. For example, I never saw an episode of *Seinfeld*, by some measures the most popular comedy series ever (if not indeed the most popular TV series ever up to that point), during its original run in the 1990s. Yet why was I familiar at that time with its characters and many of its situations? It was through my friends' and co-workers' descriptions—their *re-enactments*—of these characters. As I remember, these word-of-mouth re-enactments were meant to reinforce the shows as culture (although I would not claim there was no critical distance involved in this mode of re-enactment). Still, by their nature they presented the shows at a remove.

don't um even believe in God to take home—in our homes and be babysitters to our children then our children watch some fifty-six hours of children's television each month. And spend about two to three hours in church. And with the cartoons and the things that show have no relationship, they have no church, no minister, no prayer, no God and they were allowing them to be babysitters to our children and our grandchildren.

Distances in timing

In 1978, videocassette players were not yet widely available, meaning that broadcast television and movies in theaters were still the almost-exclusive modes

If you think the world is for you, you are wrong. The world is against you and

of viewing for audiences. By 2012, cable television had exponentially multiplied the number of channels and digital broadcasting had replaced analog transmission. This affected the dramatic pacing of this show in two ways. First, cable programs are transmitted via satellites far above the earth. Anyone who has switched channels on a contemporary television has experienced the pause in both image and sound that occurs while the signal change travels from one's living room to outer space and back. With 1978's analog transmission Nares had the advantage of a relatively instantaneous change in channels, allowing for a *continuous* stream of content; whereas I had to deal with a pause (silence and darkness for up to two seconds) with each channel change. A meditative moment, or blank spot, or interruption, would punctuate my performance throughout. The *delirium* of *Desirium Probe* was potentially threatened by this. My solution was to use these blank spots dramatically, as dictated by the programming. Sometimes I would incorporate the silence to create tension; other times I would run over it, continuing to stammer out what I

Jesus himself said if you love me, the world is going to hate you. He was saying if they come against me, how much more are they going to come against you. Believing in God is the greatest risk in faith that you will ever take. Most people think that his last name is Damn It. It's a risk of faith.

Picture this scene. A young seventeen year old boy emaciated in his body now down to 112 pounds with a six foot two frame having laid in bed for five months dying with tuberculosis, hemorrhaging, spitting up blood until (vomit sounds).

The last mile of the way—

thought a character might have said after the sound disappeared, until the new sound kicked in—thus preserving momentum. At all times, however, the idea was to sustain the programming through these silences.

Second, because cable television has given rise to increasingly specialized channels (shopping, history, classic movies) rather than the relatively ecumenical approach of the 1970s networks (who were forced into programming variety in order to attract the widest audience), there was little sense of a change in programming over the hours of performance. Instead of the clear transition from prime time to evening news to late shows that would have characterized Nares' performances, I had access to endless jewelry and clothes shopping, endless World War documentaries, endless chases after animals in the jungle, endless power workouts, etc. Together, these two changes in dramatic structure and performance timing reflect a different *timing* between 1978 and 2012—but not necessarily a predictable acceleration. Rather, the different timings represent two different approaches to the pursuit of people came to pray for him, but they prayed an unusual prayer. They said, "Lord if it be your will, heal this boy." And then they said, "Son be patient." And if he had been patient he would have been dead. Now that boy was named Granville Oral Roberts. My grandmother shooed that pastor out of the room and said, "Don't come in our house and pray like that. For God has already made up his mind. It's not if it be his will, it is his will. Beloved I wish of all things that you prosper and be in health even as a soul prospers, that includes healing from tuberculosis."

delirium through the probe of television.

What Was Performed

Performing curator, performing viewer

In the previous chapter, an Andy Warhol/Velvet Underground film event threw into flux the boundary between curator-as-projectionist and filmmaker; in *Desirium Probe* it is the boundary between curator-as-performer and audience at issue. Changing channels and making choices, I *took apart* the television programs, only to *put them together* as a performance work. Curation involved both taking apart and putting together, in front of an audience. But to curate in this way, I had to first be the *viewer* of the television programs—or I should say, I had to be the *first* viewer. I then had to perform this viewership for an audience as well. (The audience could not see or hear the television; I had to be their eyes and ears.)

“Pieces of the past”

But unexpectedly, *Desirium Probe* was a “private” viewing as well. At one point while

And in 1935 there was no medicine for tuberculosis.

Pro grade resistance band with your order so you'll have everything you need to get extreme results. P90X comes with 30 day guarantee so if for any reason you're not satisfied send it back for a full refund, no questions asked but you can keep Toby's extreme ab regimen.

(Music)

There are pieces left behind. Its diamond texture is soft

performing, I hit a sports channel with a boxing match, and more durable versus the
 and spent a few minutes boxing on stage. Dancing in ultra ripple brand so it holds
 and out of the TV glow, I realized I was also “covering” up better, far more
 the final scene of Martin Scorsese’s *Raging Bull* (1980), dependable, clean. There are
 where Robert De Niro shadow boxes in his dressing pieces left behind. Now
 room. who's a man? You both are.

Raging Bull is appropriate here. In this final We'll go. Why not enjoy with
 scene, De Niro’s character, Jake LaMotta, is a former Charmin Ultra Strong.
 boxer waiting to go on stage at a nightclub and deliver a (Music)
 monologue. He warms up by reciting Marlon Brando’s So I would encourage you to
 famous climactic speech from *On the Waterfront*. Thus, incorporate your vibrator,
 De Niro plays LaMotta playing Brando playing Terry incorporate self-touch from
 Malloy: a performance of a re-performance, given by De most women does the trick.
 Niro while looking in a mirror.⁵³ Would—would you feel bad

Perhaps it is also appropriate to use the term if he was incorporating a
 “covering,” which I borrow from pop music practice: a vibrator instead of using—no
 band “covers” a song by another band—performing it I would really prefer it.
 sometimes note-for-note, sometimes re-interpreting (Laughter)

⁵³ Scorsese himself recognized this at the time. David Thompson and Ian Christie, eds., *Scorsese on Scorsese*, (London: Faber, 1989), 77. The scene was shot in nineteen different takes.

radically. Later, it was pointed out to me that in my shadowboxing around the stage I might have also been covering Vito Acconci's performance piece *Shadow-Play* (1970), in which Acconci boxed against his own shadow. To paraphrase Nares on Richard Serra's influence, Acconci is always "very present in my mind," if not in my neighborhood; was my boxing a re-performance of his piece as much as the television boxing match? I remember at times drawing on other pieces that had nothing to do with what was on the television—performance styles, monologues, references everywhere. In acting out certain shows I remember drawing on the maniacal energy of Lenny Bruce's self-reflexive comedy routine "Comic at the Palladium," in which he does an entire routine in the voice of another character, which itself includes other characters and noises. At other times, I stood still onstage and relayed whatever I heard on the television calmly, with a flat voice and as little affect as possible, denying the emotions of the television programs in favor of a pure delivery of "data." This technique was drawn directly

See the response—all the response would be on your shoulder? No I just feel like she would be more into it if she was doing it more herself. And that's actually really I think for most guys sexy and kind of a relief. God you guys should just throw me out and have sex right now. It's nice to meet you guys. Good. Nice to meet you. Good luck. Thank you. Thank you for letting me barge into your dorm room. Oh it's fine. We needed some uh info—uh and now he needs a little less Dan Savage I think. Oh yeah. Thank you, bye.

(Music)

from the composer/performer Robert Ashley's clipped, unaffected delivery style in his text-based theater works. Many other references are possible, some only in retrospect. What was I performing, then? *Desirium Probe*, or some other work(s)? These other energies, coverings, these "pieces of the past"—to quote, once again, a Vito Acconci performance—were part of the curation of *Desirium Probe*: taking apart, and putting together, covering and uncovering, on many different planes.

Why do so many women give it up so easily nowadays? They're not giving it up. They're taking, taking, right? This is what I say.

Conclusion: The Truest Index

This layer of performance in *Desirium Probe*, (Boxing sounds) Luis Nogera invisible to its very audience, in the end brings us back enters the cage tonight. He's to the bar upstairs. The TV monitors play on, registering won eight of his last nine each of my channel changes. The monitors provide a fights. (Punch) precise index of my performance, even as—just like the I had a very short time. I was audio cassette of James Nares—they immediately married by the time I was become "lost property." fourteen years old, and I had

These lost indices, it now seems to me, may be my first baby when I was the truest documents of *Desirium Probe*. For in their fifteen. (Punch) I had to work existence as *traces*, they allow us to care for them as right away to support my

processes rather than as objects. The cycle of fixity and non-fixity in *Desirium Probe*—from prerecorded show to embodied performance, and back, and back again—produces these traces: a lost but remembered cassette, an ephemeral evening of channel changing on a television monitor, a set of invisible covers and re-performances of private references, items left in seats, phrases thrown at a screen (*Yes, hello? Thank you!*), a performance converted to text, then back to performance on the page. These traces exist outside the work, but are created through it; they disappear from the work yet remain part of it all the same. They are created and accessed through not only putting together but taking apart—finally, through the caring for non-fixity that is curation’s truest index. The desire in *desirium*, the *love* in *Film Love*, the care in curation, reside somewhere here, in the always temporary, always contemporary, gathering together of these seductive, elusive indices.

wife and child, it wasn't easy.

(Punch) It wasn't easy. It was hard to make ends meet, and my heart was broke. I have those memories when I'm in the cage that's why fighting comes easy to me. (Punch)

This is my chance. I have a huge stake in this fight. I have to win or my family goes home. I'm coming into this tournament not to win decisions but to finish people. Luis is the first name on my list; he's not going to take this opportunity away from me.

(Music)

(Punching)

Will the championship belt be taken by Luis Nogera? Find out when we ret—

Andy in Georgia, what do
you have for me? Hi Dr.
Drew, I love your show.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Two films

On the back deck of a bar around the corner from Ansley Mall in Atlanta, the final reel of Andy Warhol's *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968) winds through a 16mm projector. Superstar Viva is giving her big monologue, an attempted seduction of the hunky cowboy portrayed by Tom Hompertz, spiced with generous references to Catholic liturgy. This 2010 screening commemorated the film's original Atlanta run in 1969, at the long-disappeared Ansley Mall Mini Cinema. On a Tuesday night, a novel combination of Atlanta police, district attorney's representatives, deputy sheriffs, and the Chief Assistant Solicitor General raided the theater about twenty minutes before the film's end. They illegally confiscated the print, arrested the projectionist, and photographed each of the audience members. ("We want to try to develop if we can what kind of people go to these movies," Fulton County Court Solicitor General Hinson McAuliffe told the *Atlanta Journal* about the photographs. "We've got an idea that a lot of homosexuals go.")¹ Four decades later, as part of the John Q collective's event *Memory Flash* (2010), we finished this 1969 screening by projecting the film's final reel. We pointed the projector's throw

¹ John York, "Warhol's Cowboys Lassoed; Photos Taken of Audience," *Atlanta Journal*, August 6, 1969.

toward the direction of the original screen, and let the image fall where it may. I performed as the projectionist, sitting by the projector (which was in the midst of the crowd), unmoving, staring at the screen, and not responding to the gathered people. This was in tribute to the original projectionist, about whom I could find no other information than his name. With no more cinema there, and no more screen, this event thus commemorated not only the film but its local censorship and the disappeared cinema; what I remember most is a shattered image: the beautiful face of Viva, falling onto a newly sprouted tree, each leaf its own reflective surface.

In 1964, Yoko Ono wrote a series of film scripts (which she alternately called “scores”). Unrealizable as films, these scripts are actually instructions for an audience watching pre-existing films or imagery. *Film Script #3* consists in its entirety of one such instruction: “Ask audience to cut the part of the image on the screen that they don’t like. Supply scissors.”²

Taking the script at its word, I supplied scissors and a temporary screen in an art space. Looping video imagery was projected. Audience members approached the screen first shyly, then with enjoyment, discussing the work, what part of the screen to cut, and how to do it. At Ono’s request, each viewer kept the part of the screen they had cut—perhaps as an ironic reminder of the part of the image they had removed. In another

² Yoko Ono, “Six Film Scripts,” in *Screen Writings: Scripts and Texts by Independent Filmmakers*, ed. Scott MacDonald (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 19–20.

irony, all the cut parts of the image were then projected through the holes in the screen onto the gallery's back wall. Far from removing the unwanted imagery, then, the act of cutting the screen only projected it larger onto another surface. Neither Ono's curator nor I could find record of an earlier presentation of this piece; thus, this event exists as a highly provisional "premiere" of *Film Script #3*.

I began this project by looking back toward the projector lens, and end here with cut-up screens, blocked yet multiplied images, and the viewers once again more a community than an audience. And from an unknown projectionist, to an ambiguous premiere of a removed work, to a reconstructed performance that was never adequately documented, archival uncertainty has accompanied us throughout. In this project, film's function as an archive of images and movement and curation's activity of putting together have been paradoxically utilized for a project of unfixing as a kind of preservation. And this leads to an equally paradoxical reversal, for it is unfixity, ephemerality and dispersal that has lent this project its coherence as a minor history.

Summary of the Case Studies

Cinema 16 created a cohesive *community* around the liberating political and aesthetic potentials of cinema, distinct from Hollywood's formation of a *mass audience*. This was more than a crude opposition to Hollywood's ideological values and the passive spectatorship they assumed (though Cinema 16 did effectively oppose these things). In retrospect, Cinema 16 supplies a model of *immanence* in the creation of screening

experiences. Several elements contributed to this. First, Vogel's process of programming—though casting Vogel as an author of the programs—subtly transferred the curatorial act of discovering a film to viewers. Second, Cinema 16's screening atmosphere drew on the familiarity of the liminal state of cinematic viewership, while facilitating individual, unusual and sometimes disruptive responses inimical to passive spectatorship. Both of these viewer-centered impulses acted alongside the establishment of curatorial authority through program notes, selection of films (many of which were raw footage and otherwise non-theatrical, recast as cinematic works precisely by virtue of being programmed at Cinema 16), Vogel's pedagogical role, and his hosting and control of events in the service of creating such a cinematic space for individualized experience. As a result, curator/programmer, viewer, and film were put on a *plane of action* different than that of museum cinema models (from early museum film exhibitions to the Museum of Modern Art) or commercial cinema. On this unique plane, Cinema 16's viewers were confronted with challenging films, but in the other direction, films were confronted with challenged (and challenging) viewers.

Cinema 16 relates to the archive largely via announcements and program notes—which, as Vogel practiced them, rigorously separated the films on a certain program and thus accent the films' autonomy. But screening Cinema 16's May 1950 program in the present day, as a practice component of this chapter, brings these films together (and together with viewers) in the act of projection. In this attempt to invest the 1950 event with what Benjamin termed *now-being*, or the explosive potential latent in past objects, a

superimposition of 1950 and 2014 brings a notion of historical time together with the cinematic time of screening; at the same time, the stability of Cinema 16's printed archive (program notes, etc.) is juxtaposed with a notion of projection as an unstable, fleeting and sensory archive, one that is preserved contingently.

Following from the projection of Cinema 16 in the present day, chapter 3 analyzed Andy Warhol's film and multimedia work with the Velvet Underground in 1966, to reveal how curation of cinema, in its expanded mode, becomes a kind of performance. Consistent through much of Warhol's cinematic practice is the idea that a film is completed not just by projection but by being *modified* in the act of projection. This is true from the early silent films, which require silent-speed projection, to many of the sound films, which—from *Outer and Inner Space* to *The Chelsea Girls*—were projected in double screen with sometimes precise timings. Thus, Warhol extended his filmmaking process to the site of projection. In turn, modes of projection often become a subtext of the films.

At the same time, the contemporary curation of Warhol's films involves the dedicated maintenance of 16mm projection. Projection of these films becomes a contested practice, given that many venues, even institutional ones, are no longer equipped to present in this format. In my own case as an independent curator, this has meant hands-on projection using my own equipment. And so with Warhol's films in our particular historical moment, curation and projection become tightly linked, and 16mm projection locates film curation "underground" in relation to current film and art

institutions. In assuming flexible projection modes as part of the filmmaking, and existing as 16mm projections in our moment, Warhol's films demonstrate an exceptionally close relation between film curation and film projection.

The multimedia shows with the Velvet Underground which Warhol produced in 1966 utilized films of the band created for multimedia exhibition. But these shows also featured previously exhibited complete works such as *Vinyl* in new configurations. As the band played live, multiple films were projected among, around, and onto them, while high-volume music, dancers, strobe lights, and social elements created an immersive atmosphere. As a film created to be projected in this context, *The Velvet Underground and Nico* carries an ambiguous relation between rehearsal, performance, and backstage (and thus between documentary and performance). This interplay of context is matched by the visible planes of creative activity visible within the film: the band's sonic and musical exploration, the perspective of childhood provided by Nico's young son Ari, and Warhol's own highly active camerawork (itself a performance). These planes of activity are at once separate and interdependent. The ambiguity of the film's relation to performance and the visible interrelations of the planes of activity determine an aesthetic of *slippage between* that marks all of Warhol's work.

My own 2014 presentation of Warhol's Velvet Underground films, undertaken as a practice component, researched this process of slippage in the context of a live event. Moving among projectors and orchestrating an immersive experience, I was both a curator (backstage) and a performer (onstage). Meanwhile, the audience experienced the

slippage of these different planes, in conjunction with the films onscreen. As shown in multiple overlapping projections, these films themselves manifested a slippage, for they were both film documents of a historic music group (and of interest as such a fixed artifact) yet were shown in something like their original use as components of a shifting multimedia show, redirecting the archival interest of the footage into a temporary preservation of its historic mode of projection. This act of projection as research reveals cinema curation to be not only a performance, but a process that privileges slippage itself, rather than the points one slips between—as if by being true to artifacts and processes of connection, curation displaces and takes apart, as well as puts together. In this sense, curation becomes a performative method of minor history.

Following from curation as taking apart, and from the notion of an unstable cinematic archive, chapter 4 analyzes James Nares' 1977 performance work *Desirium Probe*. The chapter centers on the act of re-presenting this performance work in 2012. Because *Desirium Probe* is itself a re-performance (a solo performer re-enacts broadcast television content for an audience in real time, as it comes across his headphones and he switches channels), it has a double relation to re-performance. Thus, I analyze it partly through the lens of Jean Rouch's ethnographic approach to the double, in the form of the *bia*. The spirit world, with which one communicates during possession rituals, is a double for the physical one. In turn, when Rouch enters the "cine-trance" of filming during rituals, he enters a parallel (and performative) double world alongside the possession ritual. This doubling is present within *Desirium Probe* itself (the performer doubles the

television content, with an abandon resembling possession), and also between Nares' 1970s performances and my own re-presentation of the work. But further, the piece's barely existent documentation forces an imaginative, rather than codified, re-interpretation of the piece. This introduces a speculative aspect to curating the piece, which in turn places the act of presenting *Desirium Probe* in a kind of spirit world of curation. As with a "performance" of Warhol's Velvet Underground films, these doublings and imaginative reinterpretations produce a distancing, specifically the distancing of performance.

In the end, the archive (whether that of taped television content that is being reperformed live, or of *Desirium Probe*, which must largely be imagined) becomes sensory, and curation becomes an activity of unfixing documents, and works, through the body.

Cinema 16, the films of Andy Warhol, and *Desirium Probe* are each exemplary of a mode of minor history "immanently related to the archive, so as to be extractable only incompletely and with difficulty."³ They are modified, not merely illuminated, by projection, and they carry a continual sense of disappearance and reappearance, relating strangely to what we know of cinema and of the archive. The minor quality of these

³ Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate*, 50.

works is particularly non-recuperative: they fit uncomfortably in cinema, and they require of curation a commitment to, and affection for, strategies of embodiment and fleeting, sensory forms of documentation that manifest ambiguous relationships to their status as artifacts. Projection of these works strives to locate *now-being* in past objects, putting historical time in dialogue with the bounded time of the screening event and provoking the excess of a work, its traces. Curation, then, does not make whole what was fragmented, or restore something missing; rather, it preserves a process by which things (objects, events, occurrences) are continually lost and regained, in new forms. Such shattered images, incompletely recombined in time, graspable mainly through their excess, their residue, and their resistance, are what I, as a curator, have cared for, as cinema.

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