

studio production system. Rear projection was, in sum, perfectly consistent with the Hollywood studio production system, but not with its ideal seamless aesthetic. The visible seams in the classical system vividly exhibit and, to a degree, narrativize the industry-wide struggle to maintain the illusion of picture-perfect realism. *

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Experimental Screens in the 1960s and 1970s: The Site of Community

by TESS TAKAHASHI

It is common knowledge—though often forgotten—that experimental film production in 1960s and 1970s expanded not only what constituted a screen, but where screens could be located and used. Gene Youngblood documents this multiplication of screens via experiments with mobile cinema vans, portable inflatable cinema, and screenings in artists' spaces and galleries, on public and broadcast television, on concert stages in conjunction with live music, in planetariums, in the home, in the classroom, and in enormous multiscreen environments, which utilized multiple media such as 16mm and 8mm film formats, slide projectors, and television monitors. Artists across disciplines in this period paid attention to the materiality of the screen, the spaces in which screens appeared, and the communities that congregated around them. In many cases, filmmakers themselves served as programmers, distributors, and exhibitors of experimental film. However, within the scholarship on experimental media, this proliferation of cross-screen experimentalism and new display environments tends to get passed over in favor of attention to the medium, or media, on which a work was produced. A tendency to focus on the experimental artist and his or her production process has only reinforced this emphasis. As a result, moving-image practices have been discussed in relatively siloed disciplines: experimental video art and performance in Art History; avant-garde film in Film Studies; and television and its audiences in Communication and Media Studies.

This artificial disciplinary segregation largely ignores the site and context of the screens on which experimental work was shown and

encountered.¹ Within Art History, video art in this period is seen far too often by outsiders as hermetic and, in the oft-cited words of Rosalind Krauss, “narcissistic,” with the monitor functioning as a mirror for the artist’s gaze.² Video audiences, often key to the very constitution of the art itself, are almost entirely absent. Likewise, within Film Studies, experimental work tends to be associated with formalist, medium-specific, “structural” film, which has been described as film that focuses exclusively on the specific properties of celluloid and projection. In this context, screens are usually described as flat, white, and material rather than as part of a site that includes a moment of performance and also an audience. Within Communications and Media Studies, TV gets figured as a medium for a large mainstream audience, its screen most often understood as the one-way instrument of broadcast for the insular family unit. In that context, TV is rarely seen as an experimental medium. However, audiences have seldom been segregated completely by medium. Experimental screens in all guises have often brought together multiple media and multiple constituencies: the art world, the avant-garde film world, and mainstream audiences.

In response to the critical tendencies described above, and in line with recent research on the 1960s and 1970s avant-garde, I suggest that we shift our gaze from medium-specific experimental works and the artists who made them to the screens on which the experimental work appeared. “Screens” means screening spaces. When I speak of experimental screens, then, I reference three kinds of screening sites: screenings of experimental work on physical screens that were key to the work’s construction and function; screenings of experimental work in traditional theatrical space; and screenings of experimental work in nontheatrical spaces, often in nontraditional venues like clubs, fields, churches, backyards, university classrooms, and, most important, the home.³

The first category, the spectacular, formally experimental screen, tends to get all the attention, and with good reason. One thinks of the famous horizontal and multiple film screens that composed the *Labyrinth* exhibit developed by Roman Kroitor, Colin Low, and Hugh O’Connor at Expo ’67 in Montreal, the Eames multiscreen *Glimpses of the USA* venture in Moscow in 1959, Jordan Belson’s Vortex projections at the San Francisco planetarium, and Stan VanDerBeek’s movie-drome in upstate New York.⁴ Likewise, there were spectacular experimental assemblages of video screens, often in

1 Sites of exhibition and consumption are areas that until very recently have been under-investigated in the critical tradition of studies of experimental film and video, with some exceptions. See David E. James, ed., *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Scott MacDonald and Amos Vogel, eds., *Cinema 16: Documents toward a History of the Film Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002); Sky Sitney, “The Search for the Invisible Cinema,” *Grey Room* 19 (Spring, 2005): 102–113; Michael Zryd, “The Academy and the Avant-Garde: A Relationship of Dependence and Resistance,” *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 2 (2006): 17–42; and 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 / Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2010).

2 Rosalind Krauss, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” *October* 1 (1976): 50–64.

3 Such screening venues are nontraditional, but not unusual for the cinematic avant-garde, whose chronic impoverishment has resulted in an ability to make do.

4 According to the National Film Board of Canada, 1.2 million people went through *Labyrinth*; see *Time*, “Fairs: Goodbye to the Expo,” November 3, 1967, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,837461,00.html>. See also Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: Dutton, 1970); and Beatriz Colomina, “Enclosed by Images: The Eameses’ Multimedia Architecture,” *Grey Room* 2 (Winter 2001): 6–29.

combination with other media, like Nam June Paik's *TV Garden* (1974), as well as his smaller-scale constructions for performances by cellist Charlotte Moorman, which included a TV bra, TV bed, and TV cello. Aldo Tambellini's large-scale Black Gate Theater (1967) utilized multiple media, including slides, live light sources, and video monitors showing tapes and closed-circuit images. Likewise, Juan Downey's multimedia extravaganza in Syracuse, *Three-Way Communication by Light* (1972), incorporated video, Super 8mm film, and laser beams.⁵ Such physically elaborate screenings had the structure of an event—special, rare, and not to be missed—and often drew large, diverse crowds composed of artists, aficionados, gawkers, and cultural tourists.

However, most experimental film, video, and multimedia screenings happened on the second kind of screen, traditional theatrical space. Throughout the heyday of 1960s experimental film production, sites like Cinema 16 and the Film-Maker's Cinematheque (later Anthology Film Archives) in New York City held regular screenings.⁶ These screenings happened usually, but not always, on traditional white screens in traditional theatrical space. However, these screens were never purely experimental in content. Rather, they regularly incorporated art cinema, classical Hollywood narrative, silent serials, animation, science film, documentary, and exploitation film—for audiences of up to 1,600 people in the case of Cinema 16 at its height. Theatrical screening spaces that showed experimental film often incorporated other artistic forms like music, dance, and video. While Anthology Film Archives, with its Essential Cinema series, tends to be associated with the aspiration for cinematic purity, in the 1960s and 1970s it was home to video and multimedia performances, featuring artists like Nam June Paik, Beryl Korot, and Woody and Steina Vasulka. On the flip side, screening spaces known primarily for showing video, like the Kitchen, regularly screened experimental film.

However, the third kind of space, nontraditional theatrical space, was probably the most important for experimental film and media in the 1960s and 1970s. Screening series dedicated to experimental work frequently migrated because of limited funds and availability, a tendency that also characterizes today's microcinema. Canyon Cinema functions as an emblematic example. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Canyon used traditional theatrical spaces in the Bay Area like the Fillmore, the Avalon, the Presidio, and the Gate Theater. It also set up makeshift screens at the Berkeley YMCA, "the Bistro run by the Wobblies in Berkeley" (in the words of Chick Strand), a bar on San Pablo Avenue, the Masonic Hall, the Coffee Gallery on Grant Street, the Tape Music Center on Divisadero Street, the San Francisco Mime Troupe theater, and the Glide Memorial Church.⁷ Canyon also partnered with colleges, holding screenings at

5 Peter Frank, "Video Art Installations," in *Video Art: An Anthology*, ed. Beryl Korot and Ira Schneider (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 204–209.

6 Run by Amos and Marcia Vogel between 1947 and 1963, Cinema 16 held screenings at various sites including the Paris Theater, the Hunter College Playhouse, the Fifth Avenue Playhouse, the Provincetown Playhouse, the Beekman Theater, the Murray Hill Theater, the Central Needles Trades Auditorium, and various first-run theaters in Manhattan. Jonas Mekas screened films at the Charles Cinema, the Gramercy Arts, the Maidman Theater, the City Hall Cinema, the 41st Street Theater, 80 Wooster Street, the Methodist Church, the Bleecker Street Cinema, the Elgin, the Gotham Art, the Gallery of Modern Art, Joseph Papp's Public Theater (Home of the Invisible Cinema), and Anthology's current location at Second Avenue and East Second Street.

7 Strand quoted in Anker, Geritz, and Seid, *Radical Light*, 118.

the local California College of Arts and Crafts and the San Francisco Art Institute. As Michael Zryd notes, the university classroom became an important and enduring setting for experimental film screening, even at the height of its popularity.⁸ Over the years, Canyon also screened films at a variety of private homes, including those of Bruce Baillie, Chick Strand, and Ernest Callenbach.⁹ Despite their frequently peripatetic movement, experimental screening series such as Canyon's often happened on a regular calendar, and thus became important sites of communal gathering.

As an experimental screening space, the private home was, and continues to be, a significant informal gathering site. Filmmakers and programmers held salon-style screenings in their homes for small groups of friends and acquaintances on makeshift screens. In an interview with Scott MacDonald, Robert Breer recounts that "Amos [Vogel] had parties in his apartment, and I remember him showing *Blazes* (Breer, 1961); he had a screen propped up on a pillow in his bedroom."¹⁰ Likewise, P. Adams Sitney describes Ken Jacobs's informal home screenings for friends of the unfinished *Tom, Tom the Piper's Son* (1968). Strand describes Canyon Cinema's backyard screenings on bedsheets in the early 1960s: "We wanted the screenings to be a neighborhood thing. The audience was all friends, artists, academics, crazies. . . . Kids would certainly come, my own kids included; pets, too."¹¹ As Callenbach recalls, "It was important that people brought their friends to the programs. It was not just a showing; it was also a little tribal assemblage."¹² More recently, in the 1990s, Rick Prelinger held screenings combined with potlucks in his New York loft, just one of many examples of the continuing tradition of holding informal screenings in the home.

We often forget that even before VHS and DVD, the home could function as an experimental screening space for an audience of one. In the 1960s and 1970s, individual filmmakers, along with organizations like Canyon Cinema, New York's Filmmaker's Co-op, and Vogel's distribution arm of Cinema 16, worked to facilitate distribution of experimental films to cine-clubs, university classrooms, and private individuals. Experimental filmmakers and video artists also regularly loaned and traded their work through the mail. Such exchanges of prints and tapes were accompanied by letters about life, questions about the films themselves, and the gossip of the day. Sitney writes, "One of [Stan Brakhage's] major concerns has been the encouragement of private libraries of 8mm and 16mm films. . . . Since the early 1960s he had been prophesying a breakthrough for the avant-garde film-maker when films would be available for purchase like books, records, and painting reproductions and therefore be owned and screened many times and at pleasure," as videotapes and DVDs are today.¹³

8 In this period, the number of film courses offered in the United States expanded exponentially, from 244 in 1963 to 7,648 in 1979. Michael Zryd, "Experimental Film and the Development of Film Study in America," in *Inventing Film Studies*, ed. Haidee Wasson and Lee Grievson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 189.

9 Anker, Geritz, and Seid, *Radical Light*, 111–121.

10 Scott MacDonald, "Conversation with Robert Breer, 12/19/00," in MacDonald and Vogel, *Cinema 16*, 387.

11 Quoted in Anker, Geritz, and Seid, *Radical Light*, 117.

12 Quoted in *ibid.*, 112.

13 P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–2000*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 183, 209.

Finally, while it might seem counterintuitive, the home television screen sometimes also functioned as an experimental screen in this period. The adjective “experimental” usually conjures the image of small audiences, not the seemingly massive realm of broadcast television. However, the idea of television as a mass medium was crucial to the development of the artistic and cinematic avant-gardes of this period. It is not surprising, then, that artists’ film and video showed up on broadcast TV from time to time. Some pieces were introduced gently to a broad audience, as with *Screening Room with Robert Gardner*, which aired on ABC’s Boston affiliate WCVB in the 1970s and featured films by, and conversation with, guests like Breer, Hollis Frampton, and Yvonne Rainer. Other works showed up unannounced, often aired by artists who bought air-time during commercial breaks on individual television stations. The most notorious might be Chris Burden’s *Through the Night Softly* (1973), in which a statically framed black-and-white video image shows the bound and nearly naked artist wriggling over a field of broken glass. Others, such as Gerry Shum’s *Fernsehgalerie* (TV Gallery; 1968–1970), a series of programs conceived as televised art exhibits for German television, attempted to bring art out of the gallery in the mode of land art, process art, and performance without a word of explanation.¹⁴ Valie Export’s *Facing a Family* (1971), for example, confronted viewers of the Austrian television series *Kontakte* with the filmed image of a family watching TV while eating dinner.¹⁵ Less well known, perhaps, is Stan VanDerBeek’s mix of live transmission and prerecorded video in *Violence Sonata* (1970), which examined issues of race and violence. Broadcast on WGBH in Boston on two channels, *Violence Sonata* asked that people bring their TV sets into the homes of their neighbors and watch the two screens side by side.

What is the legacy of experimental screening spaces from the 1960s and 1970s? Some, like Anthology Film Archives and Canyon Cinema (its screening arm now the San Francisco Cinematheque), are still going strong decades later. However, in the past twenty years they have been joined by an explosion of experimental “microcinemas.” Experimental screening series like Balagan (Boston), Early Monthly Segments (Toronto), Light Industry (New York), Magic Lantern (Providence), and a host of others have popped up, disappeared, and reemerged under other names all over North America. Ed Halter writes, “As filmmakers of the 60s, 70s, and 80s became instructors in the increasing number of film and video production courses in the 90s, the possibilities of minor cinema were passed down to a new generation of artists.”¹⁶

In many ways, the microcinema movement is the most obvious legacy of 1960s and 1970s experimental screens. However, now as then, experimental screens are everywhere—on flat screens in the subway, on computer monitors via sites like YouTube and Ubu, at concerts with live image mixing, in theater productions, in the barn at Phil Hoffman’s Film Farm in Mount Forest, and at Lincoln Center during the annual

14 Schum’s “Identifications” featured filmmakers and artists like Valie Export, Richard Serra, and Joseph Beuys. Gerry Schum, “Letter to Gene Youngblood,” June 29, 1969, *Medien Kunst Netz*, <http://medienkunstnetz.de/source-text/89/> (accessed April 3, 2011).

15 Sarah Robayo Sheridan, *EX Guide: We Interrupt This Program: Print Ads and TV Spots by Artists* (Toronto: Mercer Union, 2009).

16 Ed Halter, “Head Space: Notes on the Recent History of a Self-Sustained Exhibition Scene for North American Underground Cinema,” unpublished essay.

experimental film festival Views from the Avant-Garde. By putting avant-garde film into full dialogue with other media, we uncover the ways in which experimental traditions and audiences have intersected not only with one another, but also with mainstream technologies and viewers. Further, in using the screen as a site of critical entry, we see that the history of avant-garde film extends far beyond the story of the artist and work. In reaching out to far messier and more material questions of display and circulation, the idea of “experimental film” also opens up: what was initially considered obscure, difficult, and hermetic instead emerges as a rich site of community, movement, and exchange. *

The Crack in the Electric Window

by CHARLES R. ACLAND

You can always rely on Marshall McLuhan to supply memorably pithy aphorisms about media culture, even if his logic soon crumbles apart in your fingers. Reading his distinction between *light on* media, like film, and *light through* media, like television, he appears to have captured a fundamental aspect organizing screen technologies, namely projection versus emission.¹ But then he extends his observation to what are ultimately untenable claims about differing levels of cognitive and emotional involvement in each. As is the case with most dichotomies, it takes only a few counterexamples to reveal the wobbliness of the split. Film can be back-projected, video can be front-projected, and both were being done for years prior to McLuhan’s own technologically static projections.

McLuhan’s binary prompts him to declare that projected images situate spectators in the position of the camera, whereas the emission of light from television turns viewers into screens.² The notion of “viewers as screens” is provocative for screen culture scholars struggling to provide workable definitions for any and all “screens.” At the most basic level, regardless of the light source, our faces are the surfaces on which both projections and emissions settle. Our eyes register the light, reflected or not, and our ears receive the sound waves. One such iteration of viewers as screens—the wide-eyed child, bathed in the light of a television, computer, or film—is a conventionalized representation of absorption and hypnotic media control; it is a figuration of the innocent actually becoming a media screen. But we need not reinforce this version of what C. Wright Mills

1 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 313.

2 Ibid.