

X-SCREEN
Film Installations and Actions
in the 1960s and 1970s

Edited by

Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien
Matthias Michalka

Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln

2003

Disciplining Expanded Cinema

Liz Kotz

Efforts to construct a critical discourse around multiscreen and expanded cinemas face a host of obstacles. One key difficulty lies in the inherently ephemeral nature of such practices, which makes them structurally incompatible with conventional forms of documentation. Unlike the single-screen film, which offers a relatively stable object for preservation and analysis, even a comparatively "simple" dual projection movie—like Andy Warhol's *Lupe* (1965) or *The Chelsea Girls* (1966)—entails an event in which the synchronization or juxtaposition of tracks will always differ. When it comes to discussing far more complex and variable examples of expanded cinema, such as Jordan Belson's legendary late-1950s Vortex Concerts at the Morrison Planetarium in San Francisco, or Stan VanDerBeek's celebrated 1965 *Movie-Drome*, the contemporary critic is largely forced to rely on still photographs, diagrams, period accounts, and artists' statements.

A quite different problem arises from the multimedia nature of such work. For better or worse, critical accounts of expanded cinema practices have been oriented towards film history or a more amorphous "media studies." A handful of recent articles have protested the ways in which modernist narratives about the specificity of the filmic medium have tended to occlude the diverse cross-disciplinary, multi-media, and performance-oriented practices that have contributed to experimental and avant-garde film from the start.¹ Yet this quest for more diverse and robust histories that would allow a fuller account of multiscreen and performative cinemas to emerge is often unable to articulate a set of terms—historical

trajectories, defining conditions or artistic principles—that would give multiscreen work some kind of historical or aesthetic grounding: in effect, to provide it with some kind of *discipline*. Such disciplinary coherence, however, may be difficult to locate in a field of activity that aggressively accumulates practices ranging from abstract painting, post-Cubist collage, and kinetic sculpture to experimental theater, dance, and electronic music.²

This expansive, hybrid tendency has often brought more free-form variants of expanded cinema into conflict with the avowedly self-reflexive projects of "structural" or "structural-material" film. In effect, these conflicts revolved around the definition of cinema: while one set of producers focused on strictly "filmic" materials or devices, like the filmstrip, projector, screen, etc., others saw cinema as encompassing all aspects of the performative situation, including elements drawn from early cinema and vaudeville antecedents. As filmmaker Birgit Hein argued in a 1978 essay on structural film for the influential *Film als Film* exhibition and catalogue, self-reflexive explorations of film formats and materials quickly took on the aggregate condition of the cinematic apparatus, dramatically expanding the project of structural film:

These works are basically exploring the whole reproduction-process that underpins the medium, including the film material, and the optical, chemical, and perceptual processes. Work in film is no longer restricted to photographic representation on a single screen, but includes projections

of light, shadow-play, actions front of the screen, the extension of projection into the whole space and even installations within that space where there is no film at all. The medium, in short, is being explored as a visual system.³

As Rosalind Krauss has argued in a very different context, the irreducible heterogeneity of the cinematic medium made 1960s debates about filmic “specificity” both generative and ultimately undecidable. As one group of filmmaker-theorists sought to define the medium with its most minute material infrastructure—film frame, flicker, effect, grain—others sought precisely to theorize this composite character:

[T]he medium’s aggregate condition [...] led a slightly later generation of theorists to define its support with the compound idea of the “apparatus”—the medium or support for film being neither the celluloid strip of the images, nor the camera that filmed them, nor the projector that brings them to life in one motion, nor the beam of light that relays them to the screen, nor that screen itself, but all of these taken together, including the audience’s position caught between the source of the light behind it and the image projected before our eyes.⁴

This “visual system”—and the place of the viewer within it—becomes immeasurably more difficult to theorize when it incorporates live performance elements and strategies drawn from experimental theater, including dispersed action, altered sightlines, multiple scrims or stages, flexible seating arrangements, or mobile viewers. Yet however undertheorized, this multidisciplinary profusion was central to many 1960s avant-gardes. This is particularly the case in the United States, where experimental cinemas emerged from gestural/expressionistic types of action

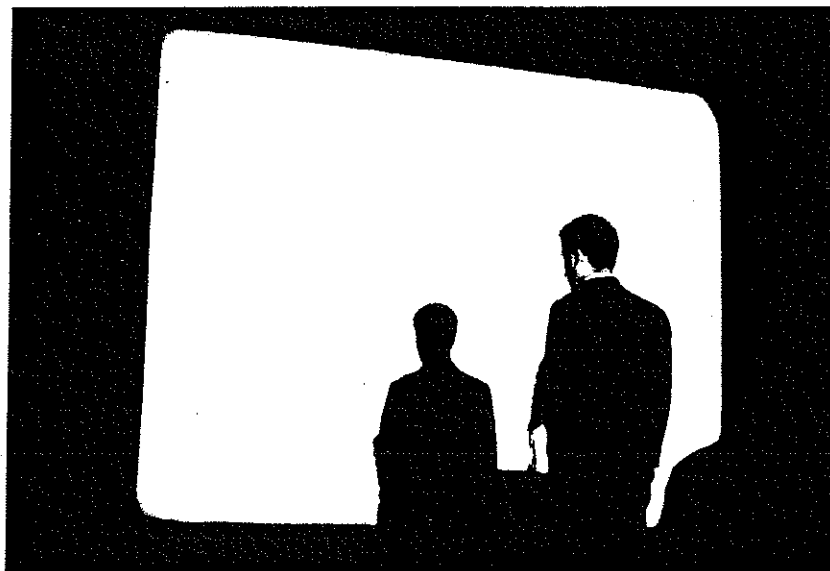
painting as well as from experimental music and postminimal sculpture.⁵ In New York, artists affiliated with the Judson Dance Theater scene, including Robert Rauschenberg, Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneemann, and Robert Whitman, experimented with projecting slides or film footage onto performers or into the performance space, often employing all manner of transparent sheets, scrims, colored lights, falling materials, and sound sources.⁶ Documentation suggests that such projections largely pursued a painterly and expressive collage-based aesthetic of superimposition and dynamic juxtaposition non unlike an earlier, multi-focal happenings aesthetic; this practice was quite distinct from the more focused, minimalist-derived and conceptually-oriented film installations of the later 1960s, and from the minimal-orientation of Judson dance itself, which was based on a partial “objectification” of bodily movement that suppressed the expressive and allegorical dimensions of American modern dance.

In its more painterly, expressionist manifestations, expanded cinema tends to rely on notions of sensory impact and visual presence that imply an ahistorical subject, a viewer whose physiology can be accessed directly through sensation (terms that uncannily recall the rhetorics surrounding early twentieth century abstract films).⁷ Avowedly anti-disciplinary, many “inter-art” and “multimedia” practices exhibit an almost programmatic desire to ignore the defining role of institutional and art historical conventions. For instance, filmmaker Jackie Hatfield critiques P. Adams Sitney’s influential *Visionary Cinema* for exhibiting “a bias to single-screen work”⁸—a claim which belies the fact that “single-screen” work is not simply one option among several, but the dominant convention to which all cinematic work inevitably has to respond. Despite the best efforts of countless “experimental” artists, projection-based art does not escape the structure of the frame simply by

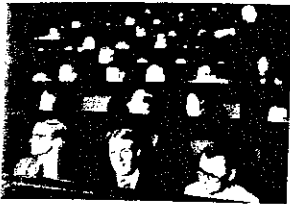


Nam June Paik, *Zen for Film*, 1964

In the attempt to undermine the conventional form of film presentation by linking it to the structure of real time-space, *Zen for Film* is considered one of the earliest pieces of expanded cinema. Analogous to John Cage's use of silence as not-sound, this work explores the emptiness of the image. An unexposed filmstrip runs through the projector, so that nothing but a white field is visible on the screen. In the bright light of the projector, Paik stands on the stage and meditates or carries out simple actions—he serves as a "living film," as it were, for the duration of the performance. After repeated screenings, dust particles and scratches begin to collect on the clear film leader, which then appear as traces in the projection and animate the apparently imageless surface, attesting to the temporality of film's material basis.



26, 27 Nam June Paik, *Zen for Film*, 1964
Photos: Peter Moore, New Cinema Festival I,
Cinematheque, New York, November 2, 1965
©Estate of Peter Moore/VBK, Vienna/VAGA, NY



Peter Kubelka *Invisible Cinema*,
Anthology Film Archive,
New York, 1970



El Lissitzky, *Soviet Pavilion*,
International Hygiene
Exhibition, Dresden, 1928

transferring it onto the architectural container or proliferating it in a kaleidoscopic array of images. The persistence of certain defining structures of cinema in even the most systematic efforts to evade them is underlined by the historical coincidence of seemingly directly contrary tendencies: on the one hand, the intense concentration of the cubicle-like viewing booths of Peter Kubelka's *Invisible Cinema*, designed for New York's Anthology Film Archives, which physically restrict the viewer in order to focus all perceptual attention onto the screen, and on the other the hyper-profusion and dispersion of John Cage, Lejaren Hiller and Ronald Nameth's 1969 multimedia performance HPSCHD, which famously featured "fifty-two loud-speakers, seven amplified harpsichords, 8000 slides, 100 films."⁹

While my own desire to historicize and hence "discipline" expanded cinema will no doubt appear inherently conservative to some readers, I suspect I am by no means the only one who has found herself cringing at the extreme arbitrariness and over-inclusiveness of much contemporary multimedia sculpture or performance. Such work is all too often governed by the dreaded art school logic of "and then you could:" video footage is projected onto a hanging white shirt, and some text is perhaps added, and then finally some sound element is introduced.¹⁰ While it is too easy to parody bad student work in any genre, there is nonetheless a deeply pictorial, expressionist, "and then you could" logic that underlies much multimedia art. It is no coincidence that Robert Whitman's work (like his 1964 assemblage *Shower*, which features a film of a naked woman projected onto an actual shower curtain with running water) has recently been embraced in New York circles as a crucial transition from early 1960s performance projects to film installation, neglecting more minimal and potentially more conceptually challenging projects associated with

early and proto-Fluxus art (like Nam June Paik's 1964 *Zen for Film*, in which a length of clear leader is projected onto a small screen, accumulating scratches and dust over multiple screenings). Historically rooted in the more conventionally theatrical side of happenings, Whitman's practice tends to locate its notion of "installation" within a normative, object-based trajectory of gallery and museum-based practice, while a focus on artists like Paik, Tony Conrad, or LaMonte Young would instead emphasize links to more generative histories, like those of postwar experimental and electronic musics.¹¹

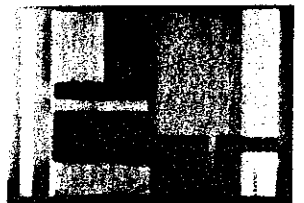
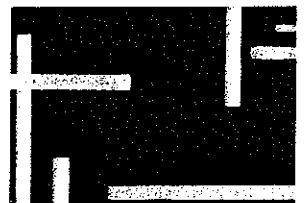
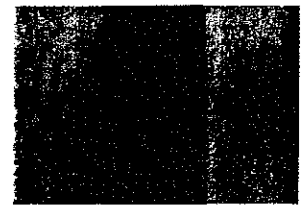
It is ironic that so many efforts to locate experimental cinema in the history of visual art tend to situate it in emphatically pictorial or object-based lineages that themselves sever modernist painting and sculpture from wider contexts of avant-garde experimentation. Even Standish Lawder's landmark 1975 book *The Cubist Cinema* focuses on conventional manifestations of cubist painting, while making no reference to related developments such as the readymade. A more effective way to situate expanded cinema would be to read it as an extension or reception of early twentieth century projects of abstract art and photomontage aesthetics. Such an approach, as I will show in the following, must incorporate related precursors such as kinetic sculpture and multi-media architecture and exhibition design—projects that share a historical emergence in the art practices of the Bauhaus and Soviet constructivist practices. Placing multiscreen cinema in relation to this broader aesthetic history will give us a wider perspective, one that allows certain oft-repeated departures from cinematic conventions, like the activation of a mobile spectator or the use of environmental projection to "free film from its flat frontal orientation,"¹² to be understood in relation to the other aesthetic and disciplinary norms within which such choices are

inscribed. This wider history will also counteract politically naïve tendencies to view all such departures from cinematic norms as inherently “liberatory” or “disruptive,” since it will force us to consider postwar cinema’s proximity to mainstream display culture. After all, the Bauhaus-inspired design animating Edward Steichen’s legendary 1955 Family of Man exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art led mobile spectators through a carefully orchestrated profusion of images whose narrative structure was partially drawn from cinematic precedents, just as Charles and Ray Eameses’ influential seven-screen film installation *Glimpses of the USA*, shown in 1959 at the American National Exhibition in Moscow, surrounded Russian audiences with still and moving images, to visually bombard viewers with the material abundance of postwar American life.

In *The Cubist Cinema*, Lawder identifies two poles or tendencies of film that attracted the attention of early twentieth century visual artists: on the one hand, its “kinetic dynamism, the very fact that film was a moving picture,” and on the other, its capacity for fantasy, for “conjuring up a world of strange and unexpected happenings [...] normally accessible only through dreams or hallucinations.”¹³ Curiously, both poles focus on film as sensation, as capable of conveying visceral effects, rather than responding to film structurally—as sequence, segment or montage. Writing from the viewpoint of 1960s formal experimentation, Lawder enthusiastically recounts an array of proposals from the 1910s and 1920s to use film to create “visual music” or “colored rhythm.” Not unlike the colored light organs of the late nineteenth century or composer Alexander Scriabin’s attempted light-play performances, these efforts drew on widespread Symbolist preoccupations with theories of synesthesia, and related analogies between the harmonic scale of western tonal music and the color scale of light frequencies. In

line with utopian Modernist ideals, abstract films by Viking Eggeling, Hans Richter, Oscar Fischinger, and Walter Ruttmann aspired towards a “universal language of abstract forms,” a formal vocabulary of abstraction capable of evoking emotional response without mimetic representational content—projects of “absolute film” understood as analogous to the paintings of artists like Wassily Kandinsky and Robert Delauney. Eggeling, Lawder notes, “intended to develop a vocabulary of abstract forms and then to explore its grammar and syntax by combining these forms into ‘contrapuntal pairs of opposites, within an all-embracing system based on mutual attraction and repulsion of paired forms,’” producing scroll-like sequences of hieratic figures.¹⁴ Like Richter, he embraced film as “the logical medium to extend this dynamic potential into actual kinetic movement.”¹⁵ Yet it is the pared-down, block-like forms of Richter’s *Rhythm 21* (1921) that generate a more complete homology between film frame and picture plane, in which the screen reads not as a page in a book or window onto a depicted scene but as “a planar surface activated by the forms on it,” a “self-contained kinetic composition of pure plastic forms” which generates a “complex spatial illusionism that derives from the dynamic interplay of contrasting areas of black and white.”¹⁶

In its structural equation of film frame and picture plane, *Rhythm 21* potentially offers a model for moving from the projected film image to an investigation of the architectural container. Although *Rhythm 21* and other early abstract films remain beautiful and evocative, the limited scope of their project—confining abstract art to the selfenclosed production of geometric forms—becomes all too apparent in the hands of the dozens of postwar imitators who pursued abstract filmmaking as an isolated and increasingly decorative practice, completely severed from the integrated modernist movements that gave abstract



Hans Richter, *Rhythm 21*, 1921

art its enormous power and cultural relevance.¹⁷ Crucial to the advanced abstract art associated with De Stijl, Bauhaus and Constructivism was the integral, structural relation between the two-dimensional picture plane and the three-dimensional architectural space. “Proun is the transfer station between painting and architecture” (“*Proun ist die Umsteigestation von Malerei nach Architektur*”), Lissitzky quipped in *Kunstism*.¹⁸ This move—taken by more radical projects of geometric abstraction throughout the 1920s—would paradoxically not be pursued in film until well into the 1960s.¹⁹

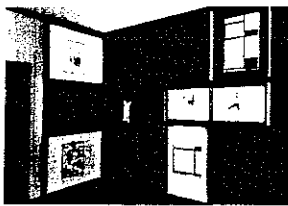
In a 1929 review of Lissitzky’s 1927–28 *Kabinett der Abstrakten* [*Abstract Cabinet*], commissioned by Alexander Dorner for the Provinzialmuseum in Hanover, the architectural critic Sigfried Giedion provocatively notes:

It is particularly important in Germany, where expressionism has been regarded as the new painting for such a long time, that for once a publicly owned institution should show itself aware of the age in which we live and should raise the whole complex of questions implicit in abstract painting [...] Note: not abstract painting alone; the whole complex question of the new vision of our age is involved, from cubism to surrealism.²⁰

It is precisely this “whole complex of questions implicit in abstract painting” that have been systematically neglected in the Anglo-American context, in favor of the fully depoliticized, decontextualized and anodyne practices of quasi-constructivist art that Benjamin Buchloh once termed “Cold War Constructivism.”²¹ Although Buchloh’s essay addresses the domesticated neo-constructivist sculptural practices of Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner, its terms are relevant to the fate of a number practices in the postwar United States and Great Britain derivative of constructivism and

the Bauhaus. In his comments during the discussion, Buchloh explicitly includes László Moholy-Nagy in this problematic historical reception. Along with designer Herbert Bayer, Moholy was perhaps the most influential figure in bringing certain Bauhaus visual art practices to the United States. While Bayer’s work remained better known in advertising and exhibition design, it was Moholy—along with quasi-disciples, such as György Kepes—who significantly transformed American fine art education according to the principles of a technologically-driven modernism that ambivalently equated greater technical means with greater personal expression and a more egalitarian social order.

Moholy’s artistic legacy remains particularly ambivalent. On the one hand, he was credited by Walter Gropius for extending Bauhaus graphic design methods into exhibition design, including “moveable walls lettered with new slogans, rotating color filters, light projectors, signal demonstrations and reflectors: transparency, light and movement all in the service of the public.”²² Yet Moholy’s manifestos and statements in *Painting, Photography, Film* clearly resurrect an older Romantic project of “painting with light.” Furthermore, his photograms, light projections, and early experiments with airbrush technologies can be read as painterly efforts to spray light and color around, direct extensions of a corporeal-psycho-physical expressivity.²³ Thus his work was often dismissed by critics associated with minimal sculpture for its figurative, anthropomorphic orientation. In *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Rosalind Krauss disparagingly compares Moholy’s 1930 *Light Prop* “intended to function during a performance by operating as an on-stage projector, weaving around its turning center a widening fabric of patterned light and shadow,” with Francis Picabia’s set for the 1924 ballet *Relâche*: While “both considered light as energy rather than



El Lissitzky, *Abstract Cabinet*, Provinzialmuseum Hanover, 1928

static mass and therefore as a medium which is itself temporal" and "use the radiance of electric light to undermine the physicality of the object which is the source of that radiance, exploiting the fact that light projects away from its source," Krauss asserts, "*Light Prop* is a surrogate person, an actor in technological disguise, and Picabia's bank of 370 spotlights is not."²⁴ She concludes that "the first is a technological contribution to the conventional sense of dramatic space and time, while the second is involved in a movement to radicalize the relationship between theater and its audience."²⁵

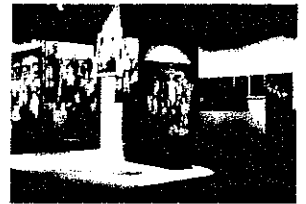
Similar critiques, it seems, could be made of any number of postwar and present-day efforts to use film and image projection in quasi-theatrical contexts, producing a technologically-enhanced spectacle without addressing or changing the relation to the viewer. Just as the project of abstract film often fails to produce more than a series of optical effects, Moholy's quasi-utopian embrace of dynamic forms, kinetic sculpture, light art, and projection art often seems to pursue a dream of endlessly expanded opticality whose premises are ultimately quite anti-conceptual and whose political-perceptual effects are at best ambiguous. A strikingly similar techno-futurist-liberatory rhetoric surrounds Belson's work for the *Vortex* concerts. As the program notes from May 1958 announce:

Vortex is a new form of theater based on the combination of electronics, optics and architecture. Its purpose is to reach an audience as a pure theater appealing directly to the senses. The elements of *Vortex* are sound, light, color, and movement in their most comprehensive theatrical expression. These audio-visual combinations are presented in a circular, domed theater equipped with special projectors and sound systems. In *Vortex* there

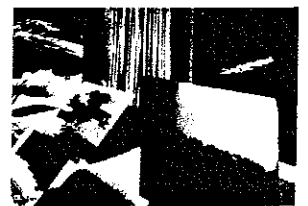
is no separation of audience and stage or screen; the entire domed area becomes a living theater of sounds and light.²⁶

A linked trajectory of the American reception of Bauhaus and constructivist legacies can be traced in postwar American practices of multi-media exhibition design, which reconfigured strategies from Constructivist art and photomontage aesthetics. As Christopher Phillips has persuasively argued, while the aggressive juxtapositions and disjunctive spatial relations of European photomontage were suppressed in post-1930s American graphic design, their crucial historical reception occurred in the context of exhibition design, starting with the radical exhibition formats mounted by Herbert Bayer at the Museum of Modern Art from 1939 to 1942, and culminating in Steichen and Paul Rudolph's design for *The Family of Man* in 1955. Departing from the relative classicism of MoMA photography exhibitions, which treated photographic prints as fine art objects, Bayer's aggressive use of large-scale photographs, texts, diagrams and spatial partitions pursued an inherently cinematic strategy that aimed to entice, overwhelm, and educate the viewer.

As Phillips notes, "Bayer's own [...] idea of the aims of modern exhibition design descended from El Lissitzky's revolutionary use of repetitive photographic/typographic clusters in the late 1920s,"²⁷ and, we might add, from Lissitzky's experimentation with spatial montage to construct narrative drama and psychological involvement. This programmatic use of overall space—walls, ceiling, floor, dividers, and scrims—and multimedia devices aimed to activate the space and mobilize the viewer within it: to create a multi-layered and dynamic visual field that viewers would not only navigate but experience as a process, in which they themselves had also participated. While Bayer understood these devices as rooted in commercial advertising, the



Paul Rudolph, *The Family of Man*, 1955



Herbert Bayer, Installation of *Road to Victory*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1942

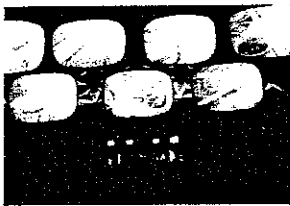
language of spatial penetration he employs derives from early film theory: the modern exhibition, Bayer wrote, “should not retain its distance from the spectator, it should be brought close to him, penetrate and leave an impression on him, should explain, should demonstrate, and even persuade and lead him to a planned and direct reaction. Therefore we may say that exhibition design runs parallel with the psychology of advertising.”²⁸

As the best-known creators of multi-screen visual displays, including their trademark “information walls,” the American designers Charles and Ray Eames drew extensively on Bayer’s and Moholy’s work—and by way of these two central European émigrés, on earlier Soviet models as well. The quandary we confront when relating the discourse of expanded cinema to postwar display culture is precisely not the *eccentricity* of multiple, overlaid, or environmental uses of projected images, but rather the intense familiarity and potential normativity of such multiscreen models. In terms borrowed from recent theorists of new media like Lev Manovich, the tableau-like screen of classic cinema has long been invaded (and perhaps dispersed) by the “control panel,” signage, and splitscreen functions of modern information display.

In a recent essay on the Eameses’ multimedia architecture, Beatriz Colomina argues: “We are surrounded today, everywhere, all the time, by arrays of multiple, simultaneous images. [...] The idea of a single image commanding our attention has faded away.”²⁹ Instead, Colomina suggests, “this new kind of space, the space of information,” has become the *de facto* norm: “Rather than wandering cinematically through the city, we now look in one direction and see many juxtaposed images, more than we can possibly synthesize or reduce to a single impression.”³⁰ Colomina cites the military gaze of World War II situation rooms,

equipped with simultaneously-projected wartime footage for instant analysis, as one precedent for this new form of perception. But she primarily focuses on the Eameses’ celebrated multi-screen exhibitions—exhibitions whose forms prefigure aspects of the expanded cinema installations of Belson, VanDerBeek, and other artists using multiple projections to orchestrate a spectacular profusion of images. While these comparatively low budget art projects eschewed the univocal messages typical of the Eameses’ productions in favor of a more chaotic, dehierarchized proliferation of effects, they share a desire to immerse audiences in images and overwhelm them with sensation.

After realizing similar projects on a smaller scale in the early 1950s, the Eameses were commissioned by the US Information Agency to design an exhibit for the American National Exhibition in Moscow. Their film installation, *Glimpses of the USA*, was projected “onto seven twenty-by-thirty foot screens suspended within a vast (250 feet in diameter) golden geodesic dome designed by Buckminster Fuller” and featured “more than 2,200 still and moving images [...] which presented ‘a typical work day’ in the life of the United States in nine minutes and ‘a typical weekend day’ in three minutes.” Drawn from public photo archives, magazines, and private collections, these images were “combined into seven separate film reels and projected simultaneously through seven interlocked projectors.”³¹ Unlike the explicitly somatic, dreamlike address of VanDerBeek’s *Movie-Drome*, which required viewers to lie prone, fanned out in a circular pattern watching gently undulating images projected onto the interior surface of the geodesic dome’s fabric roof, *Glimpses of the USA* greeted a seated Soviet audience with a tightly-regulated and explicitly technological spectacle whose big-budget media resources could be seen as a sub-



Charles und Ray Eames, *Glimpses of the USA*, 1959

limation of the post-Sputnik "space race." The film opened with images from outer space, and moved through aerial views of cities and landscapes to move into close-ups of daily life and domestic space, suggesting that the ideological stakes of the exhibition were its profuse visualization of American consumerism and leisure activity.

Such multi-screen exhibitions, Colomina insists, were by no means mere entertainment:

The huge array of suspended screens defined a space within a space. The Eameses were self-consciously architects of a new kind of space. The film breaks with the fixed perspectival view of the world. In fact, we find ourselves in a space that can only be apprehended with the high-technology of telescopes, zoom lenses, airplanes, night-vision cameras, and so on, and where there is no privileged point of view.³²

Although she argues that "*Glimpses* breaks with the linear narrative of film to bring snippets of information, an ever-changing mosaic image of American life,"³³ Colomina acknowledges that the ultimate message was very linear and institutional: a liberal humanist narrative of universal emotions and American liberty and material abundance, albeit one that implicitly inscribes a growing awareness of cinematic technologies as surveillance as well as spectacle.³⁴ In 1964 the Eameses presented their film-installation *Think* at the IBM pavilion of the New York World's Fair, bringing these techniques to wider American audiences. Not unlike Bayer's exhibition designs, the exhibition's multi-tiered visual excess fused filmic and architectural principles to give viewers an experience of actively navigating their own journey, albeit through a series of tightly-pre-planned message-tracks. As Colomina argues: "The Eameses treated architecture as a multichannel information machine. And, equally, multimedia

installations as a kind of architecture."³⁵

Critical awareness of such projects, which fully deployed the technical means of modern mass media and "visual communications" in the service of political propaganda and corporate advertising, requires us to rethink the implications of more apparently countercultural artistic projects like VanDerBeek's *Movie-Drome*. In "Culture Intercom," a 1966 manifesto published in *Film Culture*, VanDerBeek proclaims that "Motion Pictures may be the most important means for world communications," and calls for artists to help create new visual systems for global dialogue: "It is imperative that we (the world's artists) invent a new world language ... that we invent a non-verbal international picture language."³⁶ He proposes "immediate research ... on the possibility of an international picture-language using fundamentally motion pictures. That we research existing audiovisual devices, to combine these devices into an educational tool, that I shall call an 'experience machine' or a 'culture-intercom.'"³⁷ VanDerBeek then proceeds to describe his own prototype theaters, or *Movie-Dromes*, which would incorporate new image-making devices including computers, television, and videotape.³⁸

The avant-garde is often pictured as a kind of Research & Development arm of advanced capital, speculatively producing sensual experiences that temporarily exceed the capacities of Instrumental Reason. Here, a different, almost opposed, logic appears at play, in which the speculative hippy dreamer—soon to take up a position as artist-in-residence at MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies—calls forth visions that seem drawn directly from advanced capital, or at least the decidedly creative, liberal-humanist side embodied by designers like the Eameses. (The latter were exceedingly well-versed in integrated modernist movements and earlier efforts at expanded cinema, and in California had collabo-

rated with the Whitney brothers on commercial adaptations of computer-generated film abstractions and what John Whitney was beginning to formulate as "motion graphics.") VanDerBeek's chaotic and somatically-enhanced image flow could be seen as dressing up a new perceptual mode of profusion and distraction in terms more amendable to a countercultural elite. Indeed, VanDerBeek's manifesto stresses the decentered, anti-hierarchical possibilities of such presentations:

Thousands of images would be projected on this screen...this image-flow could be compared to the "collage" form of the newspaper, or the three ring circus...(both of which suffuse the audience with a collision of facts and data)...the audience takes what it can or wants from the presentation...and makes its own conclusions...each member of the audience will build his own references from the image-flow, in the best sense of the word, the visual material is to be presented and each individual makes his own conclusions...or realizations³⁹

Is it only an enormous act of cultural hindsight that such mid-1960s proclamations now seem to resemble certain versions of contemporary cultural studies and "reader response" theories that emphasize the capacities of modern day media viewers to fashion their own cultural narratives from an ever-present flow of mass-produced images? In light of such efforts, how are we to read the very different scenes of everyday life collaged together in VanDerBeek's work?

However differently they may interpret it, historians agree that in post-World War Two America, areas of "private" experience not previously integrated into the working of capital or visual representation became sites for intense political and ideological struggle. In such a context, staging scenes of daily life—particularly in envi-

ronmental settings such as VanDerBeek's, designed to encourage collective participation and dissolve or dissimulate the structural divide between projected image and assembled viewers—entails some complex negotiation of cultural identities that cannot simply be assimilated to spectacle or surveillance. Nor can it be fully extricated from them.

Notes

1 For example, in a recent essay the British filmmaker Jackie Hatfield sets out "to discuss how interactive moving image practice and its ancestors, expanded cinema, media, and performance have been excluded from the main theoretical arguments that have shaped the histories of experimental film and video." Against the admittedly anti-narrative orientation of much avant-garde film studies, especially in Britain, Hatfield announces her goal of "charting the avant-garde that has been multi-screen, narrative, pro-illusion and pro-representation, since expanded and interactive cinema have often been the exploration of all these elements" ("Expanded Cinema and Its Relationship to the Avant-Garde," *Millennium Film Journal*, 39/40 (Winter 2003), p. 51). In a linked protest against overly restrictive medium-specific histories of experimental cinema, film historian Jonathan Walley adopts Ken Jacobs' term "paracinema" to describe the "array of phenomena that are considered 'cinematic' but that are not embodied in the materials of film as traditionally defined," like the filmstrip, projector and screen (Jonathan Walley, "The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema: Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-Garde Film," *October* 103 [Winter 2003], p. 18). Discussing 1970s projects by Paul Sharits and Anthony McCall, Walley attempts to ground the paracinematic as "work with light and time." Yet the very open-endedness of such a Moholian project—which would historically include kinetic light constructions and the sorts of reflecting devices used in experimental set design—makes it incapable of articulating the kinds of necessary conditions that generate compelling artistic practice.

2 "Expanded" cinema thus appears to be precisely where experimental film most actively incorporates materials and models from other artistic disciplines, either in terms of direct borrow-

ings of theatrical props and formats, as in some of Joan Jonas's and Carolee Schneemann's performances, or in using projected images to think through the relation between cinema and painting, as in Marcel Broodthaers' *Section Cinéma* (1971).

3 Birgit Hein, "The Structural Film," *Film as Film: Formal Experiment in Film, 1910–1975*, London, Hayward Gallery/Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979, p. 93.

4 Rosalind Krauss, "A Voyage on the North Sea": *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2000, pp. 24–25.

5 This is also true to an extent in Austria, where artists like Kurt Kren and VALIE EXPORT arguably crossed structural and conceptual strategies with elements from a more painterly/expressive *Aktionist* legacy.

6 In his "Foreword" to the *Into the Light* catalogue, Whitney Director Maxwell Anderson proposes that "Robert Whitman formed a bridge between the painterly Happenings he, Robert Rauschenberg, Allen Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg, Carolee Schneemann, and others had created from the late 1950s onwards, incorporating film loops, slides, objects and performance, and the more conceptual installations made by artists such as Bruce Nauman, Robert Morris, Dan Graham and Michael Snow in the later 1960s and early 1970s, in which projected images questioned and redefined both the darkened space of the cinema and the white cube of the gallery" ("Foreword," *Into the Light. The Projected Image in American Art 1964–1977*, ed. Chrissie Iles, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001, p. 27). This narrative, which seems to have gained increasing currency with the Dia Foundation's 2003 retrospective exhibition of Robert Whitman's work, seems questionable to me: the activation of space and viewer in Warhol's implicitly ambient cinema appears to be a far

more historically acute precedent than Whitman's resolutely pictorial work. As Jonas Mekas notes in a 1965 text on "The Expanded Cinema of Robert Whitman": "The whole thing was so beautiful and so real that people kept coming back and peeking into the shower box to see if the girl was really there. The amazing effect [...] It is really a further extension of what Andy Warhol started with his *Sleep* movie" (Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema 1959–1971*, New York: Collier Books, 1972, p. 189).

7 Such assumptions resemble the Purist formulation attributed to Ozenfant and Jeanneret in El Lissitzky and Hans Arp's *Die Kunstismen 1914–1924*: "The painting is a machine for the transmission of sentiments. Science provides us with a kind of physiological language that enables us to produce precise physiological sensations in the spectator." ("Das Gemaelde ist eine Maschine zur Uebertragung der Gefuehle. Die Wissenschaft bietet uns eine Art physiologischer Sprache, welche uns ermöglicht, beim Beschauer eindeutige physiologische Empfindungen hervorzurufen.") Zurich, Munich, Leipzig 1925. Similar symbolist-derived rhetorics animate the worlds of abstract film even today.

8 Hatfield, "Expanded Cinema and Its Relationship to the Avant-Garde," p. 52.

9 Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, London, Studio Vista, 1970, p. 375.

10 At one student critique I attended not long ago, one participant even offered the extremely helpful suggestion of adding tubes of running water!

11 Critical texts which address the relation of Fluxus experiments to structural film include George Maciunas, "On 'Structural Film'" (by P. Adams Sitney), *Film Culture Reader*, New York, Praeger Publishers, 1970; and Bruce Jenkins, "Fluxfilms in Three False

Starts." *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, Minneapolis, Walker Art Center, 1994. While not focused on film, my essay "Post-Cagean Aesthetics & the 'Event' Score" (October 95 [Winter 2001]) attempts to theorize the use of durational structures in work by John Cage, George Brecht, and La Monte Young, partly as precedents to subsequent minimalist projects.

12 Milton Cohen, describing the ONCE Group's multimedial "Space Theatre," cited in Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, p. 371.

13 Standish Lawder, *The Cubist Cinema*, New York, New York University Press, 1975, p. 19. Other texts which address this tradition include Birgit Hein, "The Futurist Film," Wulf Herzogenrath, "Light-Play and Kinetic Theatre as Parallels to Absolute Film," and Malcolm LeGrice, "German Abstract Film in the Twenties," in *Film as Film: Formal Experiment in Film, 1910-1975*, and P. Adams Sitney's chapters "Absolute Animation" and "The Graphic Cinema: European Perspectives," in *Structural Film*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1974.

14 Lawder, p. 42

15 Lawder, p. 46.

16 Lawder, pp. 49-51.

17 Thus one recalls Jonas Mekas's excoriating account of postwar abstract film (which he terms "cineplastics") in his 1955 essay "The Experimental Film in America." Noting that "The main direction of contemporary art being towards a decorative abstraction, it is only natural that cineplastics use the film for the same purpose, as an animated canvas," Mekas states: "Though cineplastics is one of the most original forms of cinema, it is also one of the hardest to achieve. Thus looking at the recent American cineplastic films, we can't avoid seeing their technical crudeness, repetitiousness and unoriginality. After

seeing one such film by Ellen Bute, James E. Davis or Jordan Belson, we have seen them all. The lack of imagination, lack of creative discipline and control in their films brings the whole form to a standstill." He dismissingly concludes that most such abstract films are "no more creative than the electrically controlled *Lumia*, exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, which continuously produces moving color designs and patterns - all in 3D and without a camera." ("The Experimental Film in America," *Film Culture* 3 (May/June 1955), p. 18.)

18 El Lissitzky and Hans Arp, *Die Kunstisten*, p. xi.

19 Among the projects which could be seen to begin this shift from abstract film toward a deeper structural or installational orientation, we might identify 1950s-1960s works by Robert Breer, Peter Kubelka, and Tony Conrad; the acute formal reduction entailed in shifting from permutation of black and white geometric forms within the film frame to permutations of black and white leader within the film sequences is crucial.

20 Sigfried Giedion, "Live Museum," *Der Cicerone*, 21.4 (1929), reprinted in Sophie Lissitzky-Kueppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1968, p. 383.

21 Benjamin Buchloh, "Cold War Constructivism," in Serge Guilbaut, ed., *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris and Montreal 1945-1964*, Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press, 1990, pp. 85-110.

22 Sigfried Giedion, *Walter Gropius: Work and Teamwork*, New York, 1954, p. 49. (Cited in Arthur A. Cohen, *Herbert Bayer: The Complete Work*, Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press, 1984, p. 289.) Describing the Deutsche Bauausstellung in Berlin 1931 as a "triumph of the integral pedagogy of the Bauhaus," Arthur Cohen notes, "Bayer and Moholy used huge photo-

montage displays (in the Lissitzky manner) that opened and changed on louvers, animation, peepholes, montage murals with relief signage, giant maps with magnification, devices that could be initiated by the viewer—all manner of techniques to engage the viewer's active participation and sustain and guide his intellectual curiosity and judgment" (p. 295).

23 These Romantic underpinnings emerge even more clearly in subsequent, more technically-advanced projects. VanDerBeek, who started as a painter, relies on this expressive paradigm throughout the most high-tech forms; his use of computer-monitor light pens simply reproduce a notion of drawing as a kind of direct bodily extension. In the documentary *Stan VanDerBeek: The Computer Generation* (Creative Arts Television, 1972) the filmmaker poses in his studio at the MIT Center for Advanced Visual Studies, manipulating a beam of light on the monitor, as if drawing with his finger or emitting the artwork directly from his body. This is a not atypical example of the extraordinarily traditionalist assumptions embedded in the high tech devices, where artistic activity is figured as quasi-unmediated psychic expression and bodily extension.

24 Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press, 1981, p. 207.

25 Krauss, *Passages*, p. 213. The critic Barbara Rose decries Moholy's 1930 film *Lichtspiel* as "a film without either cinematic space of structure [...] its illusions are pictorial illusions, not cinematic illusions. They deal with transparencies, overlays, positive-negative figure-ground reversals, the textures of grids, grills and perforations, the alternation between solid and transparent planes, the play of silhouette and shadow." She concludes "it is a great animated Cubist painting." ("Kinetic Solutions to Pictorial Problems: The Films of Man Ray and

Moholy-Nagy," *Artforum* 10.1 [September 1971], p. 73.)

26 "Vortex Program Notes, May 4, 1958," available on Jim Horton's "The History of Experimental Music in Northern California" website, www.mcs.csuhayward.edu/%7Etebo/history/50s&_60s/Vortex.

27 Christopher Phillips, "The Judgement Seat of Photography" (1982), reprinted in Richard Bolton, ed., *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press, 1989, p. 24. As Phillips notes, this cinematic effect extended to the exhibitions' planned distribution as well: "as early as the 1942 *Road to Victory*, each of these thematic exhibitions was conceived not as a single presentation, but as a set of multiple 'editions' of varying physical dimensions intended to circulate—in the manner of motion pictures or magazines—throughout the United States and the world. Thus by the mid-1950s, MoMA's initial press release anticipated that *The Family of Man* would open simultaneously in New York, Europe, Asia, and Latin America, thereafter to travel globally for two years" (p. 28).

28 Herbert Bayer, "Fundamentals of Exhibition Design," cited in Phillips, "The Judgement Seat of Photography," p. 24. Detailing the Bauhaus role in marrying media spaces and techniques (graphic design, signage, photomontage, the gridded space of the illustrated magazine) with modern architecture, Arthur Cohen describes Bayer's exhibitions as employing "a synoptic visual language that was instantly intelligible, that integrated dramatic placement of materials along with appropriate visual implementation, moving through the exhibition space with narrative intention. The exhibition must narrate [...] in each situation, Bayer located the narrative line and devised a system of disclosure that enabled the viewer to pass through the exhibition space keyed by appropriate diagrams of

exhibition [...]" (Cohen, *Herbert Bayer: The Complete Work*, p. 288). Noting Bayer's use of analytic procedures, and a line of vision not limited to the frontal, horizontal plane, in order to activate the immense mobility of the eye, Cohen describes the "fundamental of exhibition design" in Bayer's work as "shifting the emphasis from the display to the viewer" (*ibid.*, p.289).

29 Beatriz Colomina, "Enclosed by Images: The Eameses' Multimedia Architecture," *Grey Room* 2 (Winter, 2001), p. 7.

30 *Ibid.*

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

34 She notes: "The overall effect of the film is that of an extraordinarily powerful viewing technology, a hyper-viewing mechanism, which is hard to imagine outside the very space program the exhibition was trying to downplay. In fact, this extreme mode of viewing goes beyond the old fantasy of the eye in the sky. If *Glimpses* simulates the operation of satellite surveillance, it exposes more than the details of life in the streets. It penetrates the most intimate spaces and reveals every secret. Domestic life becomes the target, the source of pride or insecurity" (*Ibid.*, p. 13).

35 *Ibid.*, p. 22. In *Think*, she suggests: "The screens wrap the audience in a way that is reminiscent of Herbert Bayer's 1930 *Diagram of Field of Vision*. [...] The eye cannot escape the screens and each screen is bordered by other screens [...] of different sizes and shapes. [...] Once again, the eye has to jump around from image to image and can never fully catch up with all of them and their diverse contents. Fragments are presented to be momentarily linked together [...] each momentary connection is replaced

with another. The speed of the film is meant to be the speed of mind. The 'host' welcomes the audience to 'the IBM information machine.'"

36 Stan VanDerBeek, "Cultural Intercom," *Film Culture* 40 (Spring 1966), p. 15-16. (The ellipses are from the original text.)

37 *Ibid.*, p. 16

38 In a much earlier manifesto, "If the Actor is The Audience," published in *Film Culture* in 1962, VanDerBeek offers a quite different alternative to mainstream cinemas: "I propose a simple plan. I suggest the opening of Gallery Theaters. That is, a regular art gallery that takes on the added function of screening films in the evening ... to the public, with the intention of sale of prints of the films to private collectors, almost as one would buy records, prints, paintings ... to encourage, in some way, the private purchase and collection of films in the hope that way can be found to break the stranglehold that commercial cinema has on the eye and senses." (*Film Culture* 24 (Spring 1962), p. 92).

39 VanDerBeek, "Cultural Intercom," p. 16.