MODES OF FILM PRACTICE
IN THE AVANT-GARDE

Jonathan Walley

Introduction: ‘Artists and Film-makers’

The dichotomy between avant-garde film (and video) makers, and artists ‘working in film/video’, still seems to be with us. Despite the important role being played by museums like the Whitney in bridging this divide, the two worlds sometimes seem like Crick and Watson’s double helix, spiraling closely around one another without ever quite meeting.¹

Anthony McCall

I think the relationship between film and art is a one-way love affair. Artists love film, but the film world is largely indifferent to the fact. In fact, it often irritates them — they deride it — because filmmaking is still essentially a craft.²

Chrisie Iles

These statements exemplify the perception of a split between two bodies of filmic art. The first is typically called ‘avant-garde’ or ‘experimental’ film, while the second, comprised of works made in film or video but designed primarily for gallery exhibition, is called ‘artists’ film/video’, ‘projected-image art’ or ‘film/video installation’. While this distinction has been acknowledged by artists, scholars, curators, etc., it has been addressed only generally — often in colloquial terms — and its precise nature remains unclear.³ There is not even agreement among the interested parties about whether or not a divide between ‘artists and film-makers’, as it is often put, exists in the first place. Moreover, the consequences of the split, if there is one, have yet to be thoroughly considered.

The Whitney Museum’s 2001 exhibition ‘Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964–1977’ threw this vexing issue into bold relief. Organised by Whitney curator Chrisie Iles, ‘Into the Light’ featured nineteen installations involving film, video or other projected media (e.g. slides, holography). In her catalogue essay, Iles incorporated these installations into a history of contemporary projected-image art, a form that now dominates the art world.⁴

⁴ Chrisie Iles, ‘Re: Into the Light’, email post in Frameworks archive, 29 October 2001, www.h-b-beam.net/fw/index.html; Frameworks is an online experimental film discussion list with thousands of members internationally, including major figures in avant garde film theory and practice.
Iles's historiography was unusual because it included several pieces by artists whose film work had not previously been associated with the gallery art world, but with that thing called 'avant-garde cinema'. Iles herself noted the difference in acknowledging 'the film-makers in the show', who included Michael Snow, Paul Sharits and Anthony McCall. Placing these film-makers within her lineage of projected-image art, Iles argued that their films were related to sculptural and process-based work of the 1970s. Film-makers like Sharits, McCall and Hollis Frampton, according to Iles, were 'exploring many of the same concerns' as artists in other media, which warranted her inclusion of their work. The decision indeed brought important but rarely seen works to light, and Iles's art-historical contextualisation was compelling; at the same time, however, it raised the spectre of a split, even an unbridgeable gulf, between two camps of film art.

The situation of McCall's Line Describing a Cone (1973) was especially telling. The work is a three-dimensional film in which spectators, rather than watching an image on a screen, engage with the projector beam as it transforms, over 30 minutes, from a thin line to a hollow cone. The film was reconfigured for 'Into the Light' as a looped installation, and experienced as an ongoing, cyclical gallery work rather than being shown in the format typical of film exhibition venues — single screenings with distinct beginnings and endings. This raised questions about the relationship between the 'new' Line Describing a Cone and the 'old' version: was it best understood as a film or an art object, and what was the difference? Was the film better illuminated by the context of canonical avant-garde cinema — Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, Ken Jacobs, et. al. — or that of film and video art — from Bill Viola, Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham to Matthew Barney, Pierre Huyghe and Shirin Neshat? Was the change that McCall's film had undergone for the Whitney's exhibition a distortion, or did it shed new light on a classic work? Such questions extend to the relationship between avant-garde film and the avant-garde in general, especially as museums are increasingly saturated with film and video art. McCall addressed this in a talk at the Whitney during the exhibition, making the 'double helix' analogy cited above.
What does it mean to say that there are ‘two worlds’ of film art, or to
distinguish between ‘artists and film-makers’? Given the history of cross-
fertilisation among all media in the avant-garde, can we make a distinction
between so-called ‘avant-garde film-makers’ and ‘artists working in film/video’?
Is such a distinction even feasible? I believe that the answer to the latter
questions is yes, and will offer here a model for thinking about the distinction
between ‘avant-garde cinema’ proper, so to speak, and what I will refer to as
‘artists’ film’ (including film and video, and especially the use of these media
in installation formats).

**Modes of Film Practice**

The two bodies of work tentatively identified thus far as ‘avant-garde cinema’
and ‘artists’ film’ constitute two different modes of film practice in the avant-
garde. The term ‘mode of film practice’ refers to the cluster of historically
bound institutions, practices and concepts that form a context within which
cinematic media are used. In their groundbreaking book *The Classical
Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, David Bordwell,
Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson explain the term this way:

> The concept of a mode of film practice situates textual processes in their
> most pertinent and proximate collective context. This context includes
> both a historically defined group of films and the material practices that
> create and sustain that group ... A mode of film practice, then, consists of
> a set of widely held stylistic norms sustained by and sustaining an integral
> mode of film production ... These formal and stylistic norms will be created,
> shaped, and supported within a mode of film production — a characteristic
> ensemble of economic aims, a specific division of labor, and particular
> ways of conceiving and executing the work of filmmaking.\(^6\)

The authors note that a mode of film practice is not limited to the aims and
methods of production, but extends to the channels of distribution, venues
and conventions of exhibition and to the viewing strategies that characterise
each mode and distinguish one from one another. For instance, Bordwell
identifies art cinema (e.g. Godard, Fellini, Bergman) as a mode of film practice
possessing a definite historical existence, a set of formal conventions, and
implicit viewing procedures’ distinct from classical Hollywood cinema.\(^7\)

Film historian Murray Smith has applied this term to avant-garde cinema,
identifying it as a mode distinguishable from both Hollywood and art cinema:
‘Such a practice is defined by an integrated set of economic, institutional, and
aesthetic norms.’\(^8\) Smith elaborates on some of these norms, tracing out

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6 David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical
Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*,

7 David Bordwell, ‘Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice’, *Film Criticism*,
vol.1 no.4, Fall 1979, p.56.

8 Murray Smith, ‘Modernism and the Avant-Gardes’, *The Oxford Guide to Film

Cinema*, op. cit., p.xiv.
the shape, so to speak, of avant-garde film via a consideration of its history, major figures, animating theoretical concepts and perceived relationship to Hollywood and art cinema.

A mode of film practice, then, is a simultaneously historical, institutional and discursive context constituted by the norms of production, distribution, exhibition and reception of film art. These four categories overlap and shape one another over time. For instance, the production aims of artists inform critical reception, which in turn feeds back into the pool of aesthetic ideas upon which artists draw. Assumptions about the exhibition contexts in which works will be seen affect both artistic production and critical reception, as do changes in media technology. We shall see specific examples of how this works, but for now suffice it to say that the concept of modes of film practice provides a general model for characterising and differentiating between broad contexts in which cinematic media have been used, made into new forms, circulated, experienced and interpreted.

The benefit of this concept for the problem at hand — the ‘artists and film-makers’ split — is that it provides the widest array of differentiating factors. It enables us to see beyond aesthetics, subsuming aesthetics under its broader heading; the contexts of production, distribution, exhibition and reception are the material conditions under which aesthetic goals are formed by artists and recognised by spectators. As Bordwell and his co-authors explain, a mode of film practice is not limited to a genre, an oeuvre, aesthetic tendencies, etc., but cuts across these, placing them in the context of ‘the historical conditions that have controlled and shaped textual processes’. This is especially important here. The two modes of film practice in the avant-garde share aesthetic preoccupations and personnel (i.e. artists who have moved between both modes), which is often asserted as a reason not to distinguish between the two groups of film artists. When we expand our consideration of film in the avant-garde from these local factors to the more global perspective of modes of film practice, however, significant differences stand out. These differences, in turn, shed new light on apparent aesthetic affinities between the two bodies of work; the contrast between the two modes extends to the aims behind these aesthetic qualities and the circumstances under which they can be seen and understood.

Production and Distribution

In this section I consider some of the major points of distinction between the production and distribution of avant-garde cinema and artists’ film. This section is not meant to be exhaustive, but to set out what I take to be the most important and widely applicable differences. Setting forth the major characteristics of the different ‘infrastructures’ of production and distribution will allow me to explain how these aspects of each mode of film practice bear on the aesthetics of avant-garde cinema and artists’ film.
Avant-garde cinema's mode of production has been described in many ways: 'personal', 'independent', 'amateur', 'artisanal'. These labels all speak to the fact that avant-garde cinema breaks with other film-making traditions in which production is organised according to a hierarchical division of labour. Film historian Ed Small has called experimental film-making 'radically acollaborative', as typically the film-maker—not 'director', 'writer', or 'cinematographer'—controls every aspect of production from the initial conception of the film's idea, through writing and shooting, to post-production (editing and striking prints). In many cases, as in films by Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger and George Kuchar, the film-maker also performs in the film. While there have been famous instances of collaboration among avant-garde film-makers (e.g. Ken Jacobs and Jack Smith, Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid), these are infrequent and do not represent a division of labour like that of other modes of production, as the collaborators still tend to share responsibility for the entire production. Acollaborative production is a core feature of avant-garde film's historical identity, one that has distinguished it from mainstream studio film-making and the capitalist aims its division of labour is often taken to represent.

Artists' film production, however, has become increasingly collaborative since it emerged as a recognisable category of film art in the 1960s. Some work even approaches the scale of mainstream film-making, such as Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* series and recent pieces by Bill Viola, but even smaller scale artists' film production often involves cinematographers, film editors, sound recordists and editors, composers, costume and set designers and performers. Sometimes this division of labour is acknowledged, as in Shirin Neshat's *Passage* (2001), which has a musical score by Philip Glass, or in the *Cremaster* films, which roll end credits in the manner of more conventional films; but more often no reference to the collaborative nature of artists' film appears in the works themselves or in accompanying texts (e.g. exhibition catalogues, critical writings, etc.) Thus, a more proximate reference point for artists' film might be independent art cinema, as it is there that the division of labour in production is subsumed under the rubric of the *auteur*, or film author—the person recognised as the creative conscience to whom the film's form and meaning is ultimately attributed. There are aesthetic reasons to draw an analogy between artists' film and art cinema, but it is also pertinent in terms of the way the labour of film production is represented in publicity and critical discourse around artists' film.

The distinction between artisanal and collaborative production extends to financing and the relationship of each to distribution and exhibition practices. Here we find some of the most pronounced differences between the two modes. McCall has said that 'the avant-garde film tradition is economically unsustainable and probably always has been, and yet somehow it goes on existing'. While avant-garde cinema has rejected much else from mainstream film, it has adopted—albeit on a much smaller scale—commercial film distribution and exhibition, wherein set prices for film rentals and a share
of ticket sales constitute the sole revenue film-makers see from their work. This, along with personal funds and occasional grants from arts foundations, is what sustains avant-garde film production. Given the size of the avant-garde film audience and relative rarity of screenings in all but the largest cities, avant-garde film production is generally not financially profitable. Mainstream feature film-making is done on a scale that makes it economically feasible, generating revenue via mass theatrical screenings substantial enough to sustain further production, but this economic model is problematic for film-makers who cannot release multiple prints of their films and whose work, after all, is not fashioned for mainstream tastes.

With rare exceptions, avant-garde film-makers do not sell prints of their films, and the occasional release of experimental films on video is aimed at the video sales and rental market and priced accordingly. Film-makers who do offer prints for sale simultaneously keep one or two circulating in the rental market; the ownership of a print by a private collector has no bearing on the rental price or circulation of other prints.

Artists’ film has adopted an entirely different economic model, one that solves many of the financial problems lamented by avant-garde film-makers. The key difference is in how avant-garde film and artists’ film regard the tangible, material object that film-making produces: the print.\textsuperscript{10} Whereas the limited number of prints avant-garde film-makers strike is a function of their extraordinarily low budgets, in artists’ film prints are purposefully scarce, as scarcity is what makes them valuable in the art market. We might characterise this difference as one of unintentional or unavoidable scarcity (as avant-garde film-makers cannot afford to strike multiple prints) versus intentional scarcity (as artists’ films, like works of art in other media, are editioned). In McCall’s words, the process of editioning films is a matter of ‘finding a simple logic to justify the work’s selling price that can fund the next project’, which involves setting a price for each edition of the film that is a multiple of the cost of production, based in part on the number of editions made.\textsuperscript{13} Of course, the notoriety of the artist plays a significant role in establishing the price of editions, a phenomenon not paralleled in the setting of rental prices by avant-garde film distributors.

Simply put, artists’ film regards the film print as an art object in a way that avant-garde cinema does not. The same medium used in two different modes of film practice is subject to strikingly different processes based on distinct conceptions of its materials. As many film scholars have pointed out, the potentially limitless reproducibility of film prints was one factor that


\textsuperscript{11} Jonathan Walley, ‘An Interview with Anthony McCall’, \textit{The Velvet Light Trap}, no.54, Fall 2004, p.70.

\textsuperscript{12} As opposed to the less tangible experience of viewing the film in projection.

\textsuperscript{13} G. Baker, et. al., ‘Round Table: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art’, \textit{op. cit.}, pp.94–95.
prevented film's entry into the art world during the 1960s and 70s. The art world has solved this problem by recourse to the same phenomenon that is regarded as a drawback in avant-garde cinema—scarcity of prints. The aura, supposedly a thing of the past in the age of mechanical reproduction, is maintained via control of just how much reproduction of artists' films takes place. In sum, it is not solely the inherent reproducibility of the film medium but the economic structures in which that medium is used that must be considered in an examination of the relationship between avant-garde cinema and artists' film.

The practice of editioning is aimed at selling the work rather than renting it, and because of this artists' film-making is potentially much more lucrative. This is one factor that enables the degree of collaboration in artists' film I have described; collaboration on this scale is expensive, as cinematographers, editors and actors have to be paid. In general, production budgets are higher in artists' film than in avant-garde cinema, and in many cases artists' films are at least partially financed by galleries, who also play a role in editioning. Higher budgets are also connected to the tendency toward higher production values, especially in more recent artists' film. 'Production values' is a somewhat vague term, subject to individual taste to some extent, and related to aesthetics as much as economics; I raise it here briefly to note a general sense that artists' film aims for a different kind of image quality than avant-garde cinema. Hal Foster has referred to this quality of contemporary artists' film as 'rampant pictorialism, which is also a rampant virtualism'; these terms connote both narrative and illusionism in contrast to abstraction and an emphasis on literal space that had been, by many accounts, the dominant concerns of earlier artists' film and avant-garde cinema. Rosalind Krauss has been critical of attempts by certain artists to incorporate traditional painterly values in contemporary work with the photographic image. Certainly, work produced for thousands or even millions of dollars—such as the Cremaster films and recent works by Neshat (Pulse, Possessed and Passage, all 2001) and Rodney Graham (Vexation Island, 1997; City Self/Country Self,
2000; and A Reverie Interrupted by the Police, 2003), all made collaboratively in 35mm colour film—possess a higher degree of visual polish than any avant-garde film could achieve. My point is not to criticise such works, but to suggest that different structures of production and distribution enable artists’ films access to more material resources and thus different aesthetic possibilities. Once more, the mode of production and the preoccupation in artists’ film with ambiguous narratives and a ‘painterly’ sensibility suggest it has more in common with art cinema than avant-garde film.

In contrasting the production and distribution structures of avant-garde cinema and artists’ film, there is one key point I have not mentioned, as it is as much aesthetic as material. In avant-garde cinema, film is the artist’s primary, often sole medium (sometimes excepting video). In artists’ film, however, film is one medium among many, and artists’ films are often part of a body of related works in a variety of media. Barney’s Cremaster sculptural objects; Neshat’s photographs (especially her Women of Allah series of the mid-90s, also collaboratively produced); Tacita Dean’s drawings; Rosemarie Trockel’s sculptures, drawings, books and woven pieces; and Graham’s photographs and musical recordings are just a few of many examples of the nexus of works that creates a pool of themes and associations for the explication of films. In addition to providing points of reference for critics who seek the individual artist’s sensibility in collaboratively produced films, these other art objects often subsidise work in projected images.

Among avant-garde film-makers, however, film is the centre of artistic practice. This is not to say that these film-makers adhere to medium-specificity theory, reducing the art of film to the brute materials and processes of the medium. But the medium and the aesthetic qualities it makes possible remain central preoccupations. Much attention has already been paid to the ways avant-garde film-makers and critics have investigated the ‘essential’ nature and purposes of the medium and its materials, processes and signifying practices. And as the medium has moved closer toward its long-predicted, long-delayed obsolescence, these preoccupations have become more pronounced. Film-makers and critics alike regularly bemoan the discontinuation of 16mm stock and equipment, and there is a long tradition in avant-garde film of celebrating outdated cinematic technologies and rediscovering possibilities in obsolete or aborted forms. This may have something to do with the total commitment to the film medium that avant-garde cinema’s acollaborative mode of production entails—a defensiveness about the materials and processes of the craft of film-making, every aspect of which the artisanal film-maker knows intimately. The ongoing fascination with film is a crucial feature of avant-garde film.


See Rosalind Krauss, “...And Then Turn Away?” An Essay on James Coleman’, October, no. 81, Summer 1997, p. 28. In this essay, it is Jeff Wall, not Coleman, who Krauss criticises.
culture's historical identity; its assertion of autonomy from the art world; and its systematic, obsessive investigation of all things filmic, which is not a feature of artists' film.

One dimension of this has been the exploration of film's spatial qualities — not screen space, but that of cinematic exhibition itself. I consider this phenomenon next, as it plays a central — though often misunderstood — role in perceptions about the two modes of film practice in the avant-garde.

Exhibition and Aesthetics: Cinematic Space

The difference between artists and film-makers is often expressed in terms of the 'white cube of the gallery' and the 'black box of the theatre', respectively. The white cube-black box dyad organises a number of oppositions between the art and film worlds: the sculptural space of artists' film opposes the theatrical film's two-dimensionality; the gallery's mobile viewer is distinguished from the seated cinema spectator; the gallery space enables freedom of choice and movement among viewers who come and go on their own time, while the theatrical space of film screenings putatively constrains the viewer's temporal and spatial experience. This last quality of film is often described as a barrier to film's entry into the art world, as it demands a temporal commitment quite different from that of looking at painting or sculpture. The installation format common among artists' films solves this problem, as film looping de-emphasises the beginning-middle-end structure of theatrical screening, freeing the spectator in time and space. Many artists' films designed for looping engage it in self-aware or playful ways. Rodney Graham's recent films, including Vexation Island and City Self/Country Self, possess simple narratives whose cyclical structures mirror (and mask) the looping. In Tacita Dean's pieces about lighthouses, Disappearance at Sea (Cinemascope) (1996) and Disappearance at Sea II (Voyage de Guérison) (1997), the circular scan of the lights on-screen parallels the motion of the loopers in the exhibition space, while repetitive imagery and lack of narrative development obscure the moment each loop begins again.

The ideas about film installation and spectatorship expressed in the white cube–black box distinction emerged out of the expanded, participatory art scene of the 1960s. Minimalism's conception of the relationship between artwork and viewer and the theorisation of this in terms of phenomenology emphasised the apperception of the literal space and time that the viewer and work co-occupied. Thus, the use of film in the gallery has been theorised under the rubric of the sculptural, in the expanded sense of that term in the art world. That is, the white cube–black box distinction implies that any filmic work embracing the space and forms of the gallery departs so dramatically from cinematic convention that such work is best explained in the language of another form. For instance, Iles describes Line Describing a Cone as combining 'the phenomenological reductivism of Minimalism with the participatory
inclusiveness of Happenings to create an ephemeral projection event. Additionally, the film’s three-dimensionality and open viewing space represent ‘a complete reversal of conventional cinematic viewing’. McCall offered an alternative take on whether his films ultimately belong in the white cube or the black box; after all, *Line Describing a Cone* had initially been made for theatrical screenings rather than a looped installation. He notes that while his ‘solid light’ films of the 1970s relate to sculpture, their meaning does depend ultimately on their being looked at as film. During the period these works were made they were first shown in avant-garde film showplaces, where they were looked at and thought about in relation to other films — such as work by Tony Conrad, Michael Snow, Malcolm Le Grice and Paul Sharits, for instance.

McCall’s claim about the relationship between the meaning of his work and its historical context is suggestive. A three-dimensional film can retain its identity as film rather than taking on the new identity of sculpture. In support of this idea, McCall names factors that shaped his films’ aesthetics, including specific exhibition sites and a perceived relationship to a specific institutional and conceptual framework within which the spatiality of his films was legible as cinematic rather than sculptural. Considering avant-garde film-makers’ notions of cinematic space reveals their distinctness from the aesthetics of space in artists’ film.

Writing in 1960, film-maker Stan Brakhage acknowledged film’s spatiality:

Believe in [the illusion of film] blindly, and it will fool you ... Believe in it eye-wise, and the very comet of its overhead throw from projector to screen will intrigue you so deeply that its fingering play will move integrally with what’s reflected, a comet-tail integrity which would lead back finally to the film’s creator. I am meaning, simply, that the rhythms of change in the beam of illumination which now goes entirely over the heads of the audience would, in the work of art, contain in itself some quality of a spiritual experience.

Here, the pursuit of heightened perception characteristic of avant-garde cinema from its beginnings includes making the spectator aware of the projector beam (predicting McCall’s films); the space of the theatre between projector and screen; and the total system of screen, projector, beam, filmstrip, theatre and audience. Brakhage’s comments demonstrate how avant-garde film-makers could conceive of their art as three-dimensional even in its conventional screening format, an idea echoed by Michael Snow in his notes 17. Christine Iles, ‘Between the Still and Moving Image’, *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art, 1964-1977* (exh. cat.), New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001, p.45.
on his landmark experimental film Wavelength (1967): ‘a definitive statement of pure film space and time, a balancing of “illusion” and “fact,” all about seeing. The space starts at the camera’s (spectator’s) eye, is in the air, then is on the screen, then is within the screen (the mind).’

The exploration of film space among experimental film-makers began in earnest in the late 1960s. Tentatively, we can identify three aspects of cinematic space in the discourses of avant-garde film. First is the space of the theatre and the activity of viewers within that space. Second is the space of what has been called the ‘apparatus’ or ‘film machine’, which extends beyond the screen to the projector and film reel normally behind the audience. Third, and somewhat more abstractly, are the institutional spaces that define avant-garde film and their ramifications for spectatorship. These are not necessarily distinct categories, but different points of emphasis among film-makers exploring film’s spatiality.

The work of the London Film-Makers’ Co-op encompasses all three conceptions of cinematic space in avant-garde film during the 1960s and 70s. The LFMC provides a rich case study of the relationship between the two worlds of art and film, as many Co-op film-makers were art-school trained and worked in other media. Nevertheless, the Co-op distinguished itself from the art world even as it took up the aesthetics of space that were simultaneously a preoccupation of artists, as A.L. Rees has demonstrated:

From LFMC experimentation sprang a kind of filmmaking which was related to but finally distinct from the contemporary films of Gilbert and George, Gordon Matta-Clark and Marcel Broodthaers, to take a random sample of artists. In their cases, film extended or documented their practice in other media, as it still does for artists from Bruce Nauman to Tacita Dean. The LFMC — in the spirit of Deren and Brakhage as it happens — was committed to film as an independent art form. The conditions of making and projecting film were taken to be internal aspects of the art form, to be investigated as its major content … New roles were explored for maker, for viewer, and for the space — the viewing space, be it cinema or installation, live performance or film projection — which stands between them.

Many Co-op film-makers produced spatial film works; while some were designed for installation, many were intended to be shown in the conventional theatre space and screening format wherein the work was experienced all the way through from beginning to end. These spatial pieces grew out of the focus amongst Co-op film-makers on the relationship between film and spectatorial activity. The most prominent example of this emphasis was Structural/Materialist film, which aimed to heighten viewers’ awareness of the literal

Co-op film-makers translated this into spatial terms, calling for physical self-awareness and bodily participation from the viewer. These works paralleled in space what Structural/Materialist films achieved in time; in each case, the works drew attention to the ways that film might activate and organise the viewing space beyond the screen.

The emphasis, in either case, was on the moment of projection, and this led many film-makers to envision time and space as inseparable elements of cinematic experience. In William Raban’s *Take Measure* (1973), the filmstrip, once fed into the projector, is wound outward toward the screen and cut at that point. When the projector starts, the on-screen image of a footage counter measures the space between screen and projector, which in turn determines the duration of the film. In Annabel Nicolson’s *Reel Time* (1973), the film ran in a wide loop from the projector, around the performance space, through a sewing machine at which Nicolson sat and back to the projector. As the film made its way repeatedly through the loop, it accumulated perforations made by the sewing machine; these appeared on the screen, simaltenously weakening the film. Nicolson noted that the film ended when the strip broke, making the duration of the piece a function of the object properties of filmstrip, projector and viewing space: ‘Working with spatial projections inevitably called into play the whole of the performance/projection space, inseparable from its temporal qualities. The movement in and around the space determines how it is what it is.’

In other spatial works, the projector beam was a concrete formal component. Malcolm Le Grice created a series of film performances in which he moved in the space between projector and screen, modulating the light beam. In *Horror Film* 1 (1971), Le Grice performed movements in the path of multiple projectors, casting overlapping shadows onto the screen. Le Grice’s actions vividly dramatised the shadow nature of all film projection, calling attention to the physicality—and spatiality—of the film system and asserting the primacy of these physical parameters in the film-viewing experience.
In Lis Rhodes’s *Light Music* (1975), the audience occupies the space between two facing screens. Under each screen is a projector aimed at the opposite screen. The two projector beams, made visible by smoke, articulate the space the audience occupies. The film’s imagery—patterns of black-and-white bars of varying thickness—extends into the portion of the filmstrip that usually contains the optical soundtrack. Thus, the shifting images, visible both on-screen and in the air, are echoed by distinctive sonic patterns produced by these very images. Viewers must constantly choose where to stand and what to look at, turning their backs on one screen to look at another, or placing themselves between the screens to interact with the projector beams. The apprehension of temporal patterns on the screens is thus inextricably related to the viewers’ position and movement in the three-dimensional space of the film. Indeed, the film’s organisation of the viewing space is striking to watch, as some spectators line up along the edges of the space while others enter it to interact with the crossing beams. As one critic described it, ‘the film becomes a collective event where the audience are invited to make interventions into the work itself’.  

The collectivity of these works is indeed important to consider. While many Co-op film-makers did make film installations, their investigations of film’s spatiality began in the conventional film theatre and the familiar beginning-middle-end screening structure of commercial cinema. The format’s clear spatial and temporal boundaries made film’s organisation of time, space and spectatorial activity more palpable than in the installation format, in which time is undefined and spectators come and go at will. McCall makes precisely this argument—that the discrete screening and unified audience of cinema was a powerful form for his own testing of ideas about time, space and cinematic experience. To paraphrase McCall, the collective audience and bounded exhibition time of the cinema dissolved into the gallery into individual spectators making their own choices about the length of time they invested in the work.

Hence, the reconfiguration of *Line Describing a Cone* for installation during ‘Into the Light’ potentially obscured the film’s temporal structure—its slow development from line to cone—as well as the corresponding changes in the way the evolving shape of the projector beam organised audience position, movement and interaction. In this light, we can perceive *Line Describing a Cone* not as ‘a complete reversal of conventional cinematic viewing’, nor as a ‘sculptural’ work, but as a particularly vivid embodiment of ideas about film’s essences, including its spatiality, as articulated by avant-garde film-makers in the early 1970s. We can also view its installation at the Whitney as an attempt to shift the film from one mode of film practice to another—from the aesthetics and exhibition conventions...
of avant-garde cinema to those of the art world, from the essentially cinematic to the essentially sculptural.

The exploration of cinema's spatial possibilities in the theatrical context eventually extended into the gallery. Nevertheless, the film-makers who took their work into this space continued to conceive of it cinematically. Their shifting of film from black box to white cube was not an attempt to attain 'art object' status for their work, as some critics have claimed, nor was it a turning away from film-ontological concerns. Instead, these film-makers used the installation format to further enact ideas about cinematic space. In such work, questions about the relationship between the forms and institutions of avant-garde cinema and the art world come to the fore.

The film installations of Takahiko iimura revealed what he called 'the film system', the totality of machines, materials and space of film (what was being theorised as 'the apparatus' in cinema studies, and what Hollis Frampton named 'the film machine'). The gallery space enabled iimura to bring to light, all at once, the interconnected elements of the film system of which the on-screen image was only part. In Projection Piece (1968–72), two projectors, mounted side-by-side on stands, faced a third in the middle of the gallery. They were positioned so that one of the projectors stood in the path of the other's beam, casting a shadow in the lit frame on the wall behind. Two strips of film passed though enormous loops, through the two side-by-side projectors to the ceiling above them, across the ceiling to a spot on the wall several feet away, and then down through the exhibition space and back into the projectors once more. On each pass, the two filmstrips picked up dirt and scratches that appeared in the frame on the wall facing the projectors, creating an index of each strip's multiple passes through loop and projector. The contrast between the static projector shadow and the animated scratches on the opposite wall revealed two dimensions of cinematic time according to iimura: 'permanent and temporary'. iimura's installations illuminated other cinematic dualities as well: they contrasted film as temporal experience with film as object (filmstrip, projector, screen and space); and the two-dimensional film image with the three-dimensional space of the 'film system'. iimura was careful not to equate the spatial qualities of his work with the sculptural: they were not to be seen as movie-sculpture consisting of the machines. The film-installations are a dialectic, positive and negative, which makes apparent what the film system is.

iimura's rethinking of cinema as dialectic—simultaneously temporal and spatial—was paralleled by Paul Sharits at roughly the same time. Sharits's film installations, multi-format gallery exhibitions and theoretical writings comprise an exhaustive project of researching the ontology of film and imagining new forms, materials and spaces for the medium. Designed

'Anthony McCall', op. cit.
28 Ibid.
for display in a gallery, Sharits’s ‘locational film environments’—including *Sound Strip/Film Strip* (1971), *Synchronous Soundtracks* (1973–74) and *Shutter Interface* (1975)—aimed to ‘allow [the] public to share with me a respect and enthusiasm for the primary structures of cinema’. His investigation of these structures had led him, around 1970, to the same dualistic quality of Iimura’s installations. Film was simultaneously a tangible physical material occupying space and an ephemeral experience unfolding in time. Hence, film possessed a spatial dimension ultimately distinct from sculpture’s. Moreover, the two poles of film’s ontology were not separable:

‘Film,’ can occupy spaces other than that of the theatre; it can become ‘Locational’ (rather than suggesting-representing other locations) by existing in spaces whose shapes and scales of possible sound and image ‘sizes’ are part of the wholistic piece. I have found this form of filmmaking and display, using ‘more than one projector’, more and more meaningful (and imperative if I wish to truly actualize my intent of developing a clear ontological analysis of film’s many mechanisms and dualisms).  

Sharits’s presentation of film in the gallery naturally raised the question of his work’s categorisation. Addressing this, Sharits made an early reference to the ‘artists and film-makers’ gap. Though his film installations had ‘been generally better received in the museum-gallery context than in the theatrical art (“film-making”) context’, Sharits claimed:

I do not regard myself as either a ‘film-maker’ or an ‘artist who makes films’; rather, I view my activity as prototheoretical and I view myself as an artisan of infrastructural cinema.

Though unwilling to commit to either side of the artists and film-makers split, it is significant that Sharits identified his work as cinematic rather than sculptural, invoked the artisanal mode of production of avant-garde film and cast his work as film ontological research, an aim that places him within the tradition of avant-garde film-making, with which he did indeed self-identify in other contexts. Indeed, it informed a multi-disciplinary pedagogy of film Sharits named ‘cinematics’, an approach to film instruction that reached beyond film-making craft and aesthetics and into avant-garde film’s history, institutions and discourses. That is, ‘cinema’ stands in Sharits’s work for the totality of film-related phenomena subsumed under the heading ‘mode of film practice’.

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29 Paul Sharits, ‘Statement Regarding Multiple Screen/Sound Locational’ Film Environments—Installations’, *Film Culture*, no.65–66, 1978, p.79.
30 Ibid.
A final and most unusual example of film installation is Tony Conrad’s *Shadow File* (1975), a work employing no film, camera or projector. Though designed for a gallery, *Shadow File* is different from the works previously mentioned in that it had a projected running time rather than an indeterminant duration of looping. Because this running time was in the realm of months rather than hours and minutes, the installation format was more accommodating.

*Shadow File* consisted of an acetate diffusion screen suspended in a darkened gallery so that viewers could stand on either side of it. The screen was coated with photochromic paint, which changed colour when exposed to different types of light. One side of the photochromic screen was illuminated by visible light, which caused it to grow lighter, and the other by ultraviolet light, which made it darken. Thus, the screen was held in a state of equilibrium by the two contrasting light sources, unless a viewer blocked one of them. If said viewer stood still for several seconds, the space of their shadow on the screen would become lighter or darker depending on which light source they blocked. After several minutes, the shadow image ‘stored’ on the screen would revert to the equilibrium colour. Over a period of months, the screen would lose its sensitivity to light, at which point *Shadow File* was considered over.

*Shadow File* was part of a group of works Conrad made beginning in 1972 that he identified as films but that dispensed with one or all the materials of the medium. I have discussed these ‘paracinematic’ works elsewhere, along with similarly dematerialised film works by McCall and others. Conrad’s paracinema included the series *Yellow Movies* (1972–74), rectangular sheets of paper coated with house paint and allowed to yellow over long periods of time, and a group of unprojectable films subjected to frying, roasting, hammering or pickling. The genesis and aims of Conrad’s paracinematic works are complex, as detailed in my other essays. For my purposes here, paracinema is important because it represents the dispersal of film across a variety of forms other than the medium as we know it, just as film installation extends film practice to non-theatrical spaces. But the wide array of materials, forms and spaces of paracinema and film installation have been, and remain, legible as film and, more specifically, as manifestations of the avant-garde film tradition.
Conrad, attracted to the ‘hopelessly shabby integrity’ of experimental film and its apparent incompatibility with the art market, made Shadow File in response to critical misunderstandings of Yellow Movies based on their apparent similarities to painting. Like Yellow Movies, Shadow File amplified the investigation of duration in avant-garde film to a degree that the normal materials of film could not accommodate. In this respect, it extended two central trends in avant-garde film history: the radical re-thinking of the implications of film time and space for spectatorial activity and the search for alternative forms of film production and exhibition.

Conclusion

The assertion that works like Shadow File, Yellow Movies and Horror Film I are films is only possible in the context of a mode of film practice — a set of institutions and discourses that can alternatively be applied to other materials, making these recognisable as cinema. The reverse occurs in artists’ film; that mode of film practice involves taking up the medium in a sculptural or performative context within which it is used, experienced and theorised differently. Film allowed artists like Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Dan Graham and Bruce Nauman — contemporaries of the film-makers surveyed here — to engage more directly with the temporal dimension of sculptural work theorised in the language of phenomenology and ‘art process’. Hence, even certain artists’ films that did not take the form of installation have been called ‘sculptural’. The ability of film to destabilise the space of the gallery via its illusory images also seems to have been appealing to artists; the prevalence of mirrors and other reflecting surfaces in artists’ films or of disorienting camera (or even projector) movements suggests a desire to disrupt the viewer’s comprehension of space.

And while some critics have found ‘pictorialism’ and ‘virtualism’ in more recent artists’ film, the associations with sculpture and the assumptions about viewer activity implied by the white cube-black box distinction are still prominent. Recent work by Neshat, Trockel, Douglas Gordon, Stan Douglas and Liisa Roberts, among many others, has been described in precisely these terms.


35 These include Railroad Turnbridge (1967) and Hand Catching Lead (1968) by Serra, and Thigging (1967) and Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square (1967–68) by Nauman.

26 I have in mind works like Morris’s Flinch College Project and Mirror (both 1969); Nauman’s Rotating Glass Walls and Spinning Spheres (both 1970); Graham’s Body Press (1970–72) and Helle/Spiral (1973); Dennis Oppenheim’s Echo (1973) and Gunfire (1974); and many others.

27 In Shirin Neshat: The Woman Moves (Jörg and Ralf Raimo Jung, 2006), a documentary about her work, Neshat invokes the passive cinema viewer and argues that the three-dimensional space created by facing monitors in her installations encourages spectatorial activity. See also Chrisie Iles,
In emphasising the differences between avant-garde cinema and artists’ film, I do not mean to suggest that there are no similarities or that certain works ‘belong’ to the discipline of film studies and others to art history. Nor are the institutions and histories of the two modes entirely separate. In examining the points of difference, however, we can get a clearer picture of the very phenomenon usually raised as a counter-argument to the ‘artists and film-makers’ split: the sharing of aesthetic interests, personnel, institutional support and critical languages that does indeed take place. The ways such areas of overlap have been conceived are themselves part of the two modes, as I hope the foregoing has suggested. The concept of modes of film practice is not meant, then, to impose boundaries on artists and art activity, but to illuminate distinctions that already exist and that are often acknowledged (at least tacitly) by artists and critics, who test, challenge and complicate them all the time. While the two modes of film practice in the avant-garde may, like the double helix, ‘spiral around each other without ever quite meeting’, the individuals who operate within these modes have more freedom of movement.