NOTES FROM INSIDE THE BLACK BOX

Innovative film venues in New York are bringing experimental works from the 1960s and '70s to new audiences.

Two filmstrips from Bill Brand's *Angular Momentum*, 1973. Left, a piece of the original strip scraped with a razor, and right, a piece of the completed print. Courtesy the artist.

by Vera Dika

This is, the Formalist critic implies, how literary change comes about . . . The obsolete device is not thrown overboard, but repeated in a new incongruous context, and this is either rendered absurd through the agency of mechanization, or made "perceptible" again.[1]

—Victor Erlich

THE RECEPTION OF American avant-garde film has changed over the years. The practice has been lauded, questioned and, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, partially rejected by postmodern artists interested in breaking away from its more minimalist concerns and established screening venues.[2] Yet, as a film scholar observing this trajectory, I am intrigued by a phenomenon: avant-garde film, especially that of the 1960s and 1970s, seems to be experiencing a kind of resurgence. This includes a rise in viewership, often among members of a new generation, but also a returned concern for the material properties of film as well as the visions film can offer and the enthusiasm it can generate. Is this reappraisal a form of nostalgia? Or are deeper issues being addressed? To answer these questions, we must look at the strategies being employed in this reexamination. What happens to current assumptions when older elements are provocatively positioned and expanded in a new setting and a new community?

I will consider a number of contemporary production and exhibition spaces. While their practices are varied, I will concentrate on a particular issue: the reengagement of a past avant-garde. The places in this sampling include several Brooklyn venues: Mono No Aware, Light Industry and Microscope Gallery, all small, not-for-profit and run largely by young curators and gallerists. I will discuss these in relation to several established spaces—Film-Makers' Cooperative, Millennium Film Workshop and Anthology Film Archives—which have been or are being reconfigured, and in some cases relocated and restaffed. At all of these venues, programming is being reimagined.

BEFORE I CAN continue, I must clarify my terms. P. Adams Sitney, a film historian and a founder of Anthology Film Archives, chose to use the phrase "avant-garde film" in his seminal 1974 book on the subject, *Visionary Film*.[3] Primarily addressing American works from the 1940s through the 1970s, Sitney selected the often-contested term to encompass a group of films that might also be called "experimental," "underground" or "independent." Their defining features are their non-narrative, anti-Hollywood stance, as well as their critical position, best identified by Annette Michelson as a "radical aspiration."[4] For Michelson, American avant-garde filmmakers (as opposed to Soviet avant-garde artists, who could align themselves with a political revolution) turned to practices of social and aesthetic subversion in their work. The programming today includes works from this canon as well as new films and those previously overlooked.

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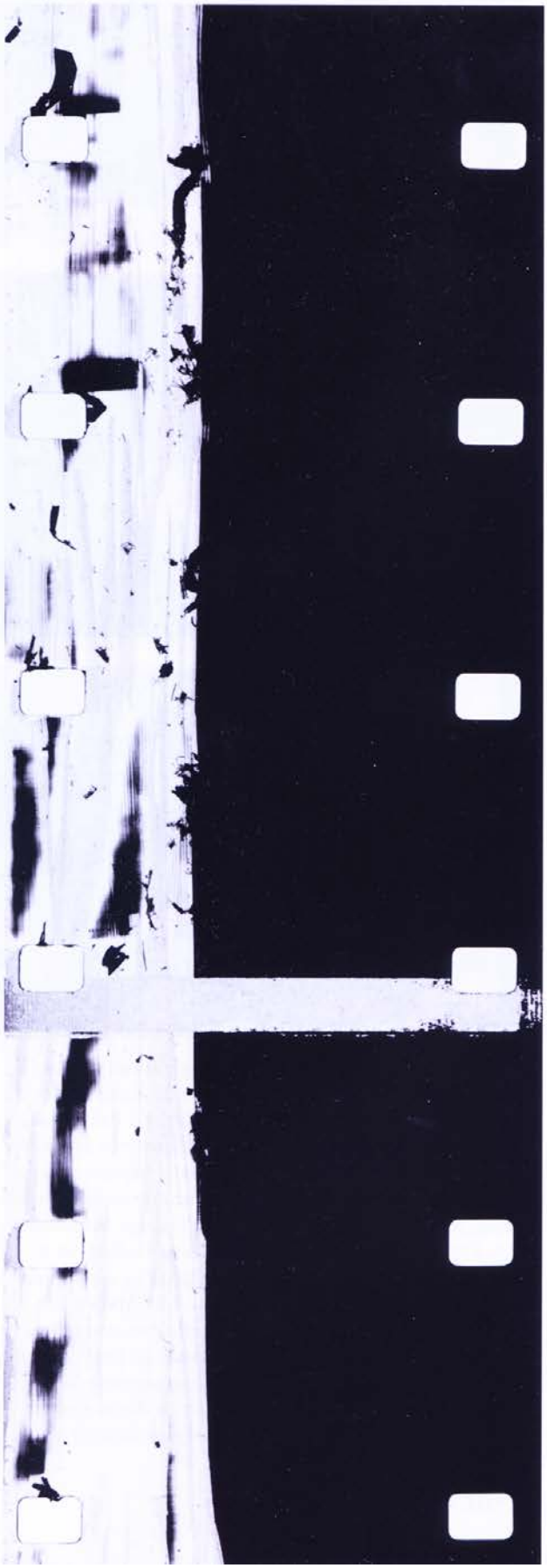
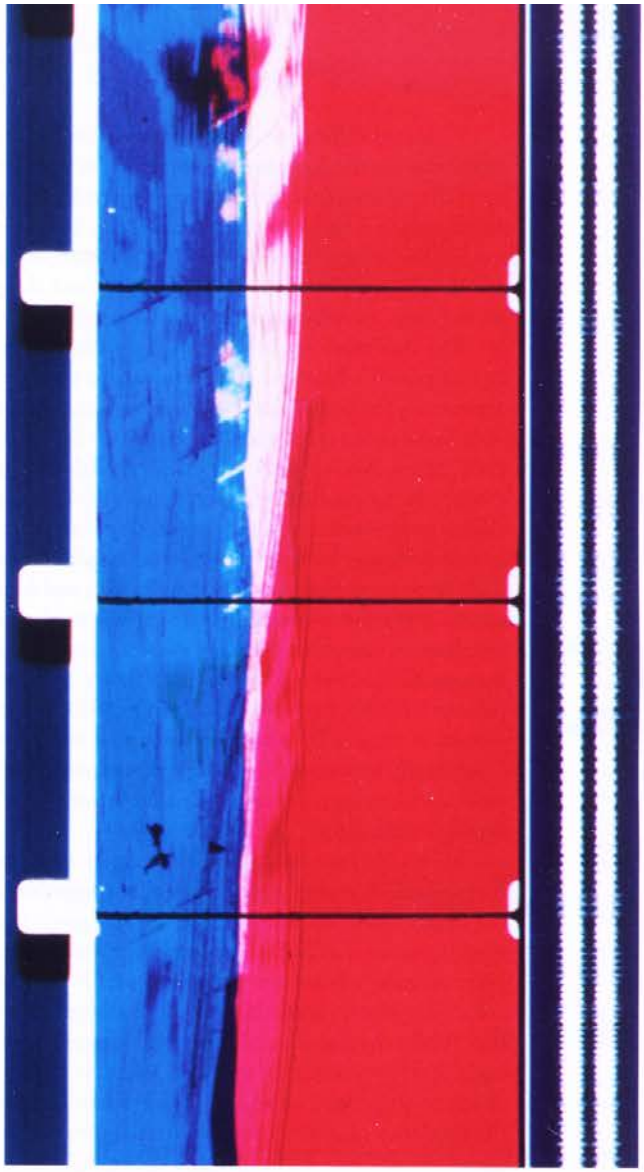




Three stills from Ken Jacobs's *Orchard Street*, 1955, 16mm film, 27 minutes. Courtesy Film-Makers' Cooperative, New York.

A crucial difference between the earlier avant-garde and today's is the looming obsolescence of the film medium itself. Photochemical film is, from a manufacturing standpoint, mostly a thing of the past, and this is a central reason for the resurgence of interest in its material conditions and its history. The filmstrip, the camera and the projector, for example, have become points of attention.

The Bushwick establishment Mono No Aware takes its name from a Japanese term referring to a gentle sadness concerning the transience of things, a feeling that resonates with film's endangered status. Founded by Steve Cossman in 2007, Mono No Aware builds on old models of film workshops, joining production, education and exhibition. It offers classes in photochemical film processing, animation and optical printing, for example; presents regular screenings of films from its workshops to live audiences; and holds yearly events of expanded cinema, where various mediums—video, installation, computer graphics, etc.—are used to highlight the specific qualities of the film experience. For instance, Juliette Dumas's *Laser/Water*, shown in 2013, encompasses a beam of white light projected through a water droplet (continually regenerated by a pipe setup), which refracts in moving colors onto a screen, like a projector's light passing through a filmstrip.

Mono No Aware also shows works by more established filmmakers. A recent screening brought together rarely seen early works by Bill Brand, an avant-garde filmmaker working since the 1970s. Among them was his abstract piece *Angular Momentum* (1973), in which the surface of color film was scraped and then optically printed to create beautifully rhythmic patterns. Brand attended the screening. During a discussion with the attentive young audience of about 40 people, he admitted that when he first noted the tendency of contemporary filmmakers to return to questions of film's materiality, he thought, "Well, 'we' [the 1970s generation] already did that!" Then he reconsidered, "Film is being looked at differently today." There are still questions to be asked of film.

To address the issues and disjunctions that arise, I turn to the Film-Makers' Cooperative, founded by Jonas Mekas in 1961. And, in a sense, answers come in the person of Mekas himself. The Coop, originally set up to protect artists from censorship and provide financial support, is one of the oldest organizations for the distribution of independently produced films. With 5,000 works in its archive, it still operates with this goal, while also serving as an exhibition space. The continued presence of Jonas Mekas at the Coop (he is on the board of directors), and in the avant-garde film community generally, is important in critical terms. When Mekas appears, the history of American avant-garde film, exhibition and criticism stands before us, almost as a live performance.

For instance, Light Industry—founded in 2008 by Ed Halter and Thomas Beard and noted for its eclectic programming and public conversations with distinguished artists, critics and curators—held a reading last summer of Pier Paolo Pasolini's unproduced, politically radical screenplay about St. Paul. Among the 20-some readers, including Lynne Tillman, Amy Taubin and Paul Chan, was Mekas. When he spoke, the words written by Pasolini resonated with Mekas's own activist history, adding significance to the script. A similar reverberation existed when Mekas presented Fluxus artist George Maciunas's *12! BIG NAMES!* (1976) at Microscope Gallery, an art and film exhibition space started in 2010 by artists and curators Andrea Monti and Elle Burchill. Maciunas's piece consists of slides questioning the commercialism of his colleagues. But Mekas's presentation here created a gentle dislocation, made all the more meaningful as Mekas attempted to explain that past to the audience. Not everyone in the room may have been familiar with

the 1960s historical context and the names included. Yet, Mekas offered a political, aesthetic and social challenge to connect with the avant-garde and its subversive practices.

A sense of history was also evident when M.M. Serra, the current executive director of the Film-Makers' Cooperative, hosted an evening of films by Ken Jacobs at Soho House in Manhattan. Serra is a filmmaker who champions critical programming, especially works by women and those featuring freedom of sexual expression. On this evening, Serra presented films that stood in interesting disjunction to the location in which they were shown. Soho House is a hotel and members-only club in the heart of a completely altered Meatpacking District, an area now removed from its industrial past. Ken Jacobs, who founded Millennium Film Workshop in 1966, was at the event, in which new works—such as the abstract *Joys of Waiting for the Broadway Bus (#3)*, 2013, in digital 3-D—were screened along with his first 16mm film, *Orchard Street* (1955).

Viewing *Orchard Street* at Soho House made perceptible yet another New York neighborhood that has been irretrievably changed. The film features the Lower East Side of the 1950s, conveying it with the warmth and delicacy of 16mm color stock. The extensively gentrified and corporatized New York of today was set in relief, especially with the presence of Jacobs, for whom the New York of *Orchard Street* is a living memory. What can still be asked of film? Perhaps the answer is, simply, to see it again—to see its tracings of the past, the imprint of previous lives—and so not let it pass away.

An impression of peering into the past was brought to us this summer as Stephanie Wuertz and Sasha Janerus, young filmmakers and programmers at Millennium Film Workshop, screened rarely seen avant-garde film portraits of artists by artists. Millennium Film Workshop, located for nearly 40 years on East 4th Street in Manhattan (and directed by Howard Guttenplan during that period), was evicted in 2011 and relocated to Bushwick. On this summer night, films were shown off-site at Manhattan's Le Petit Versailles, a small garden area between two buildings on the Lower East Side. The past both lingered here and was gone, as the feel of a 1960s film exhibition was reimagined. A white sheet on a brick wall was the makeshift screen for a 16mm projection. Films included *George Dumpson's Place* (1965) by Ed Emshwiller, *Manual of Arms* (1966) by Hollis Frampton and Marie Menken's *Andy Warhol* (1965), a cinematic portrait of one of the most famous avant-garde portraitists. In Menken's film, we see various views of Warhol in the process of labor, as he and Gerard Malanga—instead of lingering, posturing or feign-

Marie Menken: *Andy Warhol*, 1965, 16mm film, 22 minutes. Courtesy Film-Makers' Cooperative.

Gregory J. Markopoulos: *Gilbert & George*, 1970, 16mm film, 12 minutes. © Estate of Gregory J. Markopoulos. Courtesy Temenos Archive, Uster, Switzerland.

ing indifference—are seen packing, shipping and crating the artist's famed Brillo boxes. The means of production, the sheer repetition of industrial work—inherent in the symbol of the Brillo boxes themselves—was evoked in a new way. Through the historical and spatial dislocation at Le Petit Versailles, we see the ghosts of the past in a different register—almost as a premonition of the heightened commercialization of our current lives.

THIS FEELING OF exploring the past in new contexts was also recently evident at the venerable Anthology Film Archives. Founded in 1970, this avant-garde institution is now headed primarily by a younger generation, including Andrew Lampert, curator of collections, and John Klacsmann, archivist. Originally built around works that the founders called Essential Cinema, a selection that was meant to define film as an art form, Anthology has since expanded its programming to include a vibrant mix of new and old. Last September, Anthology returned to its past, with a presentation of infrequently viewed works by Gregory Markopoulos, one of the Essential Cinema legends. Celebrating the publication *Film as Film: The Collected Writings of Gregory J. Markopoulos*, the screenings—which included *Bliss (*1967), *Sorrows* (1969) and *Genius* (1970)—were presented by the book's editor, Mark Webber, and the filmmaker Robert Beavers. P. Adams Sitney was also on hand to introduce some of the works, urging us again to ask questions of film. He reminded us of film as a singular perspective on the world, a point of view, and how that world changes with different positions. Sitney encouraged the audience, as Ralph Waldo Emerson once did his, to "turn the eyes upside down, by looking at the landscape through your legs"—in order to see the world anew.[5]

One of the most intriguing films for me was Markopoulos's *Gilbert & George* (1970). A simple work, it is a portrait of the two British artists, composed of views of their suited bodies. Close-ups of shoes, of heavy suit material, of sections of jackets, of trousers, of suit pockets—all the stuff that covers the body but not the body itself. Flashes of skin are then seen: the nape of the neck against a white starched collar, a hand emerging from a sleeve. These moments seem to denote intense desire. The body as presented here is nearly hidden, inaccessible to the touch, and the perfect symbol for the 1970s era of struggle against homoerotic repression.

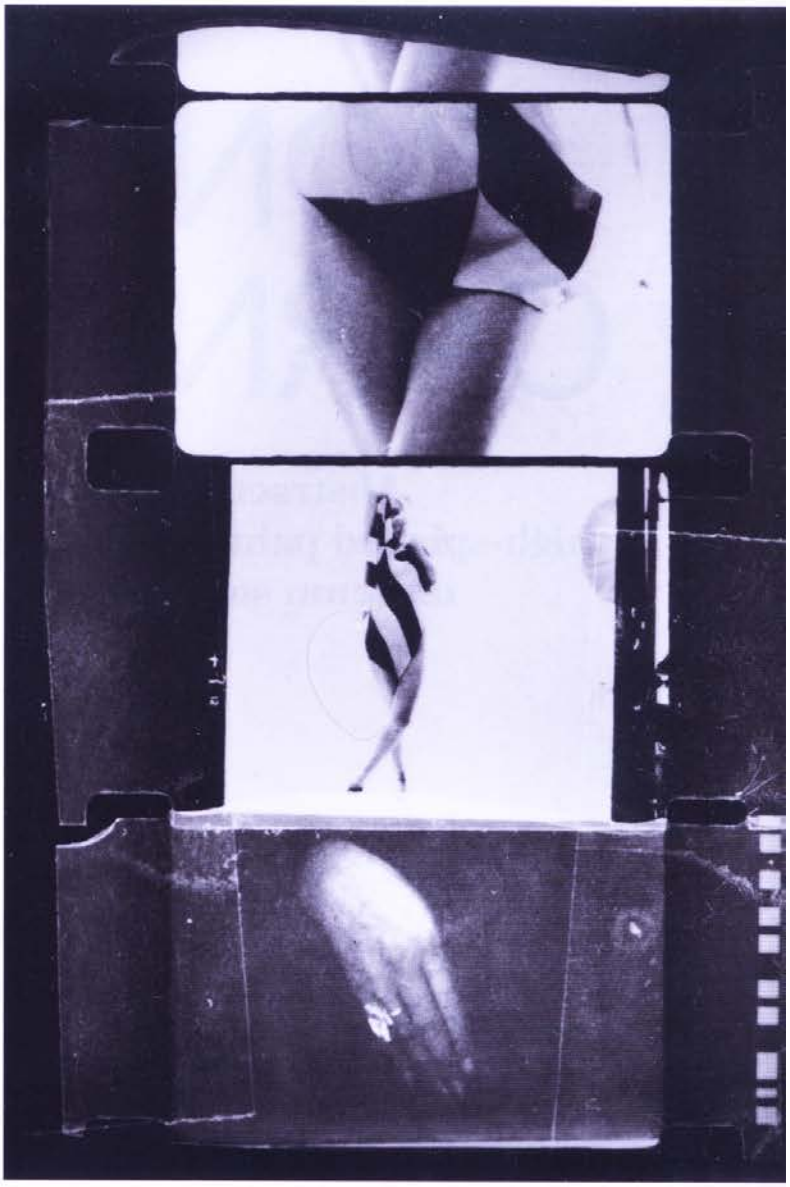
To see what is concealed, to peer into forbidden places, has been a central method of Italian avant-garde photographer and filmmaker Paolo Gioli. He has spent the majority of his 45-year career in Italy and hasn't been critically incorporated into the American canon. Gioli's images are fleeting, at times imprecise (he has even used a simple pinhole camera to make movies), yet they bring to the fore the very notion of film as a trace, a link to reality. The first U.S. solo exhibition of his photographs and films will be presented

in April at Microscope Gallery. The show is organized in collaboration with Enrico Camporesi, a young writer and curator living in Paris.

The photographs in the show are from a series called "Sconosciuti" (1994), an Italian word meaning "unknown persons." They reveal what had been unseen in the found objects Gioli chose to photograph: mid-20th-century photographic plates of faces retouched by a painter's brush. The "embellishments" of the plates are presented by Gioli in such a way as to make them paramount in the image. We see traces of white light swirling across the surface, while the photographic faces recede (almost, at least) behind the markings. In this way, Gioli comments on the history of painting on film in order to reveal its surface. We also are left to contemplate the photographed body, the touch of paint, and the blurring of boundaries between the two.

The body is a central theme in many of Gioli's films. For example, *Filmarilyn* (1992) presents photographs of Marilyn Monroe taken by Bert Stern six weeks before her death. The series of posed shots makes for an unnerving view of the famed star. We cannot help but see her at a remove. We know that she is dead and she is going to die.[6] We peer at her body, imperfect, no longer an ideal of beauty. Nonetheless, we want to see her again and again.

And here the present intervenes, as it does in all of the films and dislocations that I have been discussing. Viewing *Filmarilyn* today, especially in a contemporary American setting, brings to mind Cindy Sherman's photographs. The works and cinematic procedures mentioned are energized by their new context, by their repositioned presentation. They are made visible by it, and so again made relevant. ○



Above, Paolo Gioli: *Filmarilyn*, 1992, 16mm film, 10 minutes. Courtesy the artist.

Left, a black-and-white photograph from Gioli's "Sconosciuti" series, 1994, 9½ by 12 inches. Courtesy Microscope Gallery, New York.

1. Victor Erlich as quoted by P. Adams Sitney in "The Idea of Morphology," *Film Culture*, no. 53-54-55, Spring 1972, pp. 4-6. Sitney explains that Erlich "put 'perceptible' in quotes because the formalist believed that the reorientation of old materials made it possible to bring them alive in a startling way and to make them perceptible, visible, rather than automatic."
2. See J. Hoberman, "After Avant-Garde Film," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, New York, New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1983, pp. 59-73. Hoberman chronicles an era of American film practice concerned with making this break. In this period, New York artists and filmmakers showed their films in clubs and at alternative spaces like The Kitchen in Soho, or set up their own spaces, such as the New Cinema on St. Marks Place.
3. P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1974.
4. Annette Michelson, "Film and the Radical Aspiration," *Film Culture Reader*, New York, Union Square Press, 2000, pp. 404-21.
5. See P. Adams Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 8. Emerson's admonition continues: "How agreeable is the picture, though you have seen it many times these twenty years."
6. Discussing the "anterior future" of the photographic image, Roland Barthes notes the photograph of a now-dead convict awaiting execution with a temporal disjunction: "He is dead and he is going to die." Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, translated by Richard Howard, New York, Hill and Wang, 1981, p. 95.