

# A concrete experience of nothing

## *Paul Sharits's flicker films*

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In Paul Sharits's 1968 film *N:O:T:H:I:N:G*, a line drawing of a light bulb pulses intermittently on screen (fig. 1). The image recurs as part of an animated sequence that extends over the course of the film. The light bulb gradually transforms in ways that suggest a play between its status as a sign of illumination and its underlying dependency on another bulb, the one emitting light from the projector. As Sharits described it, "upon retracting its light, the bulb becomes black and, impossibly, lights up the space around it. The bulb emits one burst of black light and begins melting; at the end of the film the bulb is a black puddle at the bottom of the screen."<sup>1</sup> The sequence is as striking as it is simple, if only because, aside from the brief appearance of a chair photographed in the process of tipping over, the bulb is the only representational image in the thirty-six-minute-long film. Otherwise, *N:O:T:H:I:N:G* is comprised entirely of alternating sets of monochromatic frames. The animated light bulb, the retracting of light, and the dripping of the black puddle all happen amid fields of color that flash and displace one another on screen, at times frantically enough to produce a stroboscopic effect or "flicker."

As he had done with all of his films from that period, Sharits "scored" or "mapped" out every frame of *N:O:T:H:I:N:G* according to an elaborate compositional process similar, he said, to writing music. In a statement about the film, Sharits described how *N:O:T:H:I:N:G* follows a symmetrical chromatic structure modeled on a Buddhist mandala.<sup>2</sup> Long stretches of warm-colored frames gradually approach and then retreat from a cool-colored center. The light bulb image, in all of its different phases, punctuates this structure at precise intervals. When the film strip is taken off of the projector reels and examined as a static object—a practice central to Sharits's work—the regularity of these intervals becomes

clear, as he said, "even to the most naïve viewer."<sup>3</sup> Yet, when set in motion, in the midst of a screen flickering in apparently irregular, unpredictable patterns, the images can seem random as well. In a 1974 interview Sharits discussed his film from six years earlier, specifically emphasizing this potential disjunction between his compositional process and what the viewer perceives on screen. "They are markers," he said of the light bulb images, "real metric markers—markers of time. But they are markers which you are experientially unable to relate to."<sup>4</sup>

Sharits's flicker films are rarely discussed in terms of what they render experientially inaccessible. The relatively sizeable bibliography devoted to Sharits's work tends to focus instead on what his films reveal, especially about the nature of film as a medium. "The effect is literally dazzling," one critic wrote of the flickering in Sharits's films, "the oscillating colors not only foreground the pulsing light beam, they also reflexively remind the viewer of the physical limit of the frame and of the surface on which films are projected."<sup>5</sup> In the late 1960s, Sharits described his own work in these terms. *N:O:T:H:I:N:G*, he said, would "strip away anything (all present definitions of 'something') standing in the way of the film being its own reality."<sup>6</sup> Yet even as Sharits attempted to purge his work of what he called "non-filmic codes," the underlying reality of the medium proved irreducible to a presentation of film frames, screens, and light beams. Despite the insistent, even "dazzling" forms that his works could assume, in his theoretical writing from the 1970s Sharits also suggested how his films could be considered in terms of what they displace or withhold. Informed by research

1. P. Sharits, cited in P. A. Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 386.

2. Sharits, "N:O:T:H:I:N:G/ From an Application for a Grant," *Film Culture*, no. 47 (1969):15.

3. Sharits, "Statement," in *Drawing Distinctions: American Drawings of the Seventies*, exh. cat. (Munich: Alfred Kren, 1981), p. 171.

4. Sharits in Linda Cathcart, "Interview," in *Dream Displacement and Other Projects*, exh. cat. (Buffalo, New York: Albright-Knox Gallery, 1976), unpaginated.

5. S. Liebman, *Paul Sharits* (St. Paul, Minn.: Film in the Cities and Walker Art Center, 1981), p. 11.

6. Sharits (see note 2), p. 15.

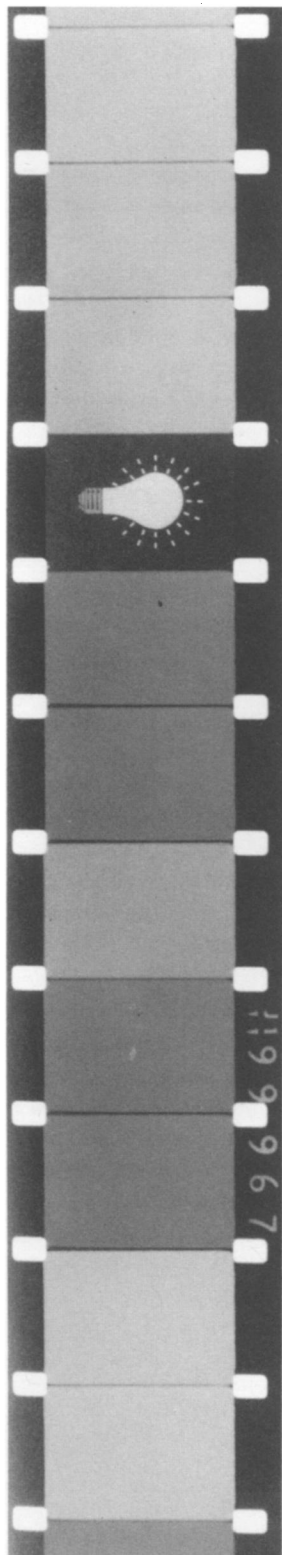


Figure 1. Paul Sharits, *N:O:T:H:I:N:G*, 1968. Film stills. Reproduced with permission from the Paul Sharits Estate.

into systems and information theory, Sharits developed a theoretical framework within which these moments of withholding—the “experientially unable to relate to”—were not just an inherent part of his films, but were also a precondition of their reception.

*N:O:T:H:I:N:G* is the last in a series of flicker films based on mandala structures, including *Ray Gun Virus* (1966), *Piece Mandala/End War* (1966), and *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* (1968), which Sharits made between 1965 and 1968.<sup>7</sup> The 1960s were something of a golden age for flicker films. Peter Kubelka produced what is generally considered to be the first, *Arnulf Rainer* in 1960, and Tony Conrad premiered *The Flicker* in New York in 1966.<sup>8</sup> While Sharits was neither the first nor only artist to make flicker films, his engagement with the form was the most sustained and complex. Beginning with *Ray Gun Virus* and culminating in *N:O:T:H:I:N:G*, he layered the flicker with color, sound, and representational imagery.

That there should be such a genre as the “flicker film,” and that Sharits would be far from alone in working within it, speaks to the ambitions of a loose network of experimental filmmakers whose work has been given the equally loose critical moniker “structural film.”<sup>9</sup> Hollis Frampton, a key filmmaker within this burgeoning counter-cinema, described the movement as one to reconsider and recover an entire history of film that had become mistakenly bound to that of the photograph.<sup>10</sup> That is, they sought to start again where filmmakers of the 1920s, like Hans Richter, Oskar Fischinger, and Viking Eggeling had left off, when advanced painters and sculptors looked to film for the most progressive

7. *Word Movie/Flux Film* (1966) and *Razorblades* (1965–1968) also employ a flicker effect but without the mandalic structure.

8. Victor Grauer’s *Archangel* and John Cavanaugh’s *Blink*, two other flicker films, were also made in 1966.

9. The term “structural” has at least three separate meanings, which are often confused. P. Adams Sitney coined the term “structural film” in 1969, referring to works wherein “the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape that is the primal impression of the film.” Peter Gidal’s use of the term “structuralist/materialist film” refers to those works that dialectically engage the viewer in order to renounce the illusion of commercial film. Finally, structural in relation to Sharits’s work tends to have a third meaning associated with an analytical approach to film derived from Claude Levi-Strauss’s structural anthropology.

10. H. Frampton, “For a Metahistory of Film: Commonplace Notes and Hypotheses,” in *Circles of Confusion: Film, Photography, Video, Texts, 1968–1980* (Rochester, N.Y.: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1983), pp. 110–111.

developments in the visual arts.<sup>11</sup> This would mean purging from film everything that tied it to industrial entertainment, including the basic function that had been most associated with the medium historically: the representation of naturalistic motion. It would also mean using film to interrogate the medium itself with the critical rigor evident in postwar painting and sculpture. Just as Frank Stella explored formal tautology with his striped paintings or Jasper Johns approached conceptual tautology with his maps and targets, Sharits argued that his films could sustain themselves by making reference only to the process of filmmaking itself.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was common for critics to discuss Sharits's work, and structural cinema in general, as a continuation of the developments in painting and sculpture that had emphasized self-description. By the early 1970s many of the critics interested in American avant-garde film, like many of the filmmakers themselves, including Sharits, came from fine art rather than film-specific backgrounds.<sup>13</sup> Clement Greenberg, as much as any of the editors at *Film Culture* or *Cahiers du cinéma*, informed the criticism of Sharits's work at the time.<sup>14</sup> In a 1972 *Studio International* article, for instance, Regina Cornwell identified "some formalist tendencies in the current American avant-garde cinema."<sup>15</sup> Though "formalism" did develop a meaning specific to film in a few instances, here Cornwell used the term to contextualize American avant-garde cinema of the late 1960s within a historical trajectory of American art that had begun more than twenty years earlier.<sup>16</sup> "Like the tendency exhibited in painting and in the other arts," she wrote, "recent film-makers have chosen modes of reduction of the technical-formal options available to

them . . . through acts of honing down the materials involved and often through revealing the process of making . . . the locus of attention returns to the work as such, as object and as art."<sup>17</sup> Cornwell cited Sharits's flicker films as manifestations of this shift away from illusionistic representation and towards a consideration of film as an object.

Framing cinema in these terms, however, also meant stretching modernist ideals to encapsulate not only an object, but a mechanical process as well. In order to represent motion, a film strip must be divided into individual frames that are exposed to light serially in the camera and then projected back. No matter the rate of projection, the division between the frames will always produce a mild, even imperceptible flicker. When made visible, this slight delay might be considered a mistake or an intrusion into the illusion of cinematic motion. Through the dissonant juxtaposition of monochromatic frames, however, Sharits's films emphasize these "mistakes," positioning them at the center of a self-referential cinema.

The flicker can seem to articulate the interface between the static celluloid strip divided into frames and the projector that sets those frames in motion—the mechanical process that defines cinema. Because film is a medium closely tied to mass entertainment and capital, "revealing" its material and mechanical basis also took on a political and ethical dimension. "De-mystifying the process of filmmaking," as the artist and critic Peter Gidal argued, forced the viewer to realize the constructed nature of the filmic image.<sup>18</sup> The spectacle of cinematic projection and the layers of ideology latent within it could be brought to consciousness through this mode of cinema as self-criticism.

Displacing one mode of illusionism, however, may have cleared the way for another, perhaps of a more intractable nature. "The flicker film was invented to stop time," as Rosalind Krauss put it recently, echoing an article from the early 1970s she wrote on Sharits's work, and "this stoppage, the reasoning went, would make it possible to look past the illusion and actually 'see' the basic unit of the film, the real support of the medium: the single frame."<sup>19</sup> This reasoning, however, begs the

11. See the discussion of film, for instance, in L. Kassak and L. Moholy-Nagy, *Buch Neuer Künstler* (reprinted; Baden: Verlag Lars Müller, 1991), unpaginated.

12. Sharits, "Words per Page," *Afterimage* 4 (Autumn, 1972), reprinted in *Film Culture*, no. 65–66 (1978):31.

13. Sharits came from a background in painting and occasionally discussed his work in those terms. See J. Lebensztejn, "Eight Interviews/Statements," *Art in America* 63, no. 4 (July–August, 1975):67–69.

14. Although there was certainly some overlap between structural film and other "new waves of cinema" on both sides of the Atlantic. See Sharits's reading of Godard's use of color in *Contempt: "Red, Blue, Godard," Film Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (Summer 1966):24–29.

15. R. Cornwell, "Some Formalist Tendencies in the Current American Avant-garde Film," *Studio International* 184, no. 948 (October 1972):110–114.

16. Sitney uses formalism in connection with what has also been called American personal cinema, especially the work of Maya Deren and Stan Brakhage. See Sitney (note 1), p. 369.

17. R. Cornwell (see note 15), p. 111.

18. P. Gidal, "Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film," in *Structural Film Anthology*, ed. P. Gidal (London: British Film Institute, 1976), pp. 1–21.

19. R. Krauss, "Pulse" in *Formless: A User's Guide*, ed. Y. A. Bois and R. Krauss (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 161. See also Krauss, "Paul Sharits: Stop Time," *Artforum* 11, no. 8 (April 1973):60–61.

question: Why not just turn the projector off in order to look directly at the “real support of the medium,” the single frame? In conflating a projection and an object, Sharits’s critics also confused what appeared on screen during the flicker film with the material support of the medium. (In fact what they saw was a sequence of forms that alluded to the structure of the film strip.) Flicker films are difficult to describe because they require a critical and intellectual rubric that can accommodate both a static object and a process that takes time to commence.

This is what Sharits indicated in a 1970 statement when he described the “problematic equivocality of film’s ‘being,’” as “perhaps cinema’s most basic ontological issue.”<sup>20</sup> Film’s “equivocality” stems from the fact that what happens on screen is an effect produced by an elaborate process that normally stays hidden. In order for film to exist as a temporal experience, the film strip, the “thing” that the artist made, has to be fed through a machine sequestered away in the projection booth.<sup>21</sup> Examining the film strip at a standstill, as a string of tiny frames, offers an equally partial understanding of the material basis of the medium. The sprockets on the side of the film strip serve as an intractable reminder of its imminent mechanical activation. Hollis Frampton reiterated the problem from an artist’s perspective quite succinctly: “The act of making a film, of physically assembling the film strip, feels somewhat like making an object: that film artists have seized the materiality of film is of inestimable importance, and film certainly invites examination at this level. But at the instant the film is completed, the ‘object’ vanishes.”<sup>22</sup> The filmic object available for analysis at any given time—either the fleeting onscreen display or the still film strip—offers only a partial glimpse into a more complex system, elements of which always exist elsewhere.

Michael Fried outlined the difficult implications of film’s equivocality—its tendency to vanish—in “Art and Objecthood,” his well-known, and often-glossed 1967 critique of Minimalism. The relevant part of Fried’s argument here is his description of modernist art’s incompatibility with duration.<sup>23</sup> In contrast to the

immediate “presentness” of the modernist painting and sculpture he champions, Fried argued that Minimal art structures for the viewer an empty experience of space that unfolds over time. By their “mere” presence, Minimal objects create situations that are dependent upon the viewer. Rather than exploring the possibilities and limitations of specific media, these objects epitomized for Fried the dissolution of the boundaries between media. Fried famously called this condition “theatrical.” Although film is a temporal, hybrid art, and therefore strictly speaking theatrical as well, Fried exempted it from his larger critique:

There is, however, one art that, by its very nature, escapes theater entirely—the movies. This helps explain why movies in general, including frankly appalling ones, are acceptable to the modernist sensibility whereas all but the most successful painting, sculpture, music, and poetry is not. Because cinema escapes theater—automatically, as it were—it provides a welcome and absorbing refuge to sensibilities at war with theater and theatricality. At the same time, the automatic, guaranteed character of the refuge—more accurately, the fact that what is provided is a refuge from theater and not a triumph over it, absorption not conviction—means that cinema, even at its most experimental, is not a modernist art.<sup>24</sup>

Fried guardedly accepted movies as antitheatrical precisely because he saw their equivocality as objects—to use Sharits’s term—as a property inherent to the medium. Nonetheless, the kinds of practices that structural filmmakers proposed would appear to Fried as misplaced attempts to force modernist ideals where they do not belong.

Viewed through a lens of Fried’s conception of modernist art, Sharits’s films present a true problematic. While remaining rigorously faithful to and critical of the medium, they nonetheless produce an experience of space and time contingent upon the presence of the viewer. An embodied viewer was inseparable from Sharits’s conception of film, as he made clear in a 1969 statement at the experimental film festival in Knokke-Le-Zoute, Belgium. While moving to “abandon imitation and illusion” in his work, Sharits sought to engage what he called “a higher drama,” animated by an interplay between

celluloid, two-dimensional strips; individual rectangular frames; the nature of sprockets and emulsion; projector

20. Sharits (see note 12), p. 36.

21. For a discussion of the equivocality of mechanical reproduction in relation to photography, see T. Crow, “Hand-Made Photographs and Homeless Representation,” *October* 62 (Autumn 1992):128–129.

22. Frampton (see note 10), p. 115.

23. P. Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 62–75. Lee also discusses Fried’s passage about film in these terms, though her ambitions for a revisionist critique of Fried’s article extend well past the cinema.

24. M. Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” reprinted in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 148–172. The quote is on p. 164.

operations; the three-dimensional light beam; environmental illumination; the two-dimensional reflective screen surface; the retinal screen; optic nerve and individual psycho-physical subjectivities and consciousness.<sup>25</sup>

In his statement, Sharits charts a progression of inquiry that links the celluloid strip (film's material support) to the retinal screen (the physiological site of vision). Sharits often drew such parallels between the mechanical cinematic projection and the physical process of seeing. "Flashes of projected light initiate neural transmission as much as they are analogues of such transmission systems," he wrote, "the human retina is as much as 'movie screen' as the screen proper."<sup>26</sup> These analogies between the eye and the film apparatus, however metaphorically Sharits may have meant them, speak to a longer history of junctures between cinema and the scientific study of human vision.

Stroboscopic effects like the ones produced by Sharits's films were used in the nineteenth century to study the phenomenon of afterimages—the subtle retention of an image on the retina. These experiments suggested the viability of the cinematic illusion of motion in the first place, but, more broadly, such research also grounded the visible "within the unstable physiology and temporality of the human body."<sup>27</sup> It followed that by manipulating the body physically perceptual experience could be disciplined. Or, conversely, as recreational drug culture in the 1960s promised, those perceptions could be expanded.<sup>28</sup> Commentators equated the color afterimages retained amid the rapid juxtaposition of frames in Sharits's films with psychedelic hallucinations. An advertisement for one of Sharits's screenings offered that with films like *Ray Gun Virus*, "LSD may become obsolete."<sup>29</sup> As Brion Gysin and other investigators of

"dream machines" repeatedly attested, a flickering light could, when viewed under the right circumstances, facilitate a meditative state, similar to that produced by hallucinogens.<sup>30</sup> Films could control the rate of flickers with more precision and careful timing than a dream machine, thereby increasing the effect. While such a trip could disrupt the mechanisms of social control that permeate regimes of vision, at least temporarily and on an individual level, such a close interaction between the film and the viewer's body could be threatening as well. A title card appearing at the beginning of Conrad's *The Flicker* famously warns audiences that the stroboscopic effects could cause seizures. Such warnings are still customary prior to screenings of Sharits's works, disclaiming the way the film may operate directly on the viewer's body. Sharits's films, like those of other structural filmmakers, seemed to show how investigations into the film mechanism could be, simultaneously, investigations into the nature of human perception, extending ultimately, and perhaps not in an entirely benevolent manner, to consciousness as well.<sup>31</sup>

Sharits's flicker films, as one critic wrote, succeed in "reincarnating our perceptual substance by affirming, imitating, and reifying the process of consciousness itself."<sup>32</sup> These kinds of statements, which draw upon a popularized phenomenology, were not unique to descriptions of Sharits's films, and often followed preambles about "material supports" and the reality of film frames.<sup>33</sup> Both the materiality of film and its more psychophysiological implications inform P. Adam Sitney's highly influential definition of "structural film." With that term Sitney designated films that insist upon an "overall shape," that is "predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape which is the primal impression on the film."<sup>34</sup> In turn, this shape would be determined by basic camera operations, edits, and the physical limitations of the film stock; the shape of *Piece Mandala/End War* in this sense would emerge from the single-frame arrangements

25. Sharits, "General Statement for 4th International Experimental Film Festival, Knokke-Le Zoute," *Film Culture*, no. 47 (1969):13.

26. *Ibid.*, 13.

27. The quote is from J. Cray, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), p. 70. For a discussion of the roots of cinema in physiological experimentation, see F. A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. G. Winthrop Young and M. Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 115–122. Kittler cites Edgar Morin's observation that moviegoers "respond to the projection screen like a retina inverted to the outside that is remotely connected to the brain," p. 121.

28. Experimental film facilitated many comparisons to drug culture, implicit and explicit. See G. Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970).

29. It was advertised as such at a 1971 screening at the University of Victoria, Vancouver.

30. For a discussion of the political implications of dream machines, psychedelic culture, and physiology in relation to Conrad's films, see B. Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), pp. 304–313.

31. J. C. Lebensztejn, *Écrits sur l'art recent: Brice Marden, Malcolm Morley, Paul Sharits* (Paris: Éditions Aldines, 1995), p. 153.

32. S. Field, "Film is . . . ?," *Art and Artists* 6, no. 9 (1971):26.

33. Michael Snow described his seminal film *Wavelength*, a forty-five-minute zoom across a Manhattan loft space, as "a summation of my nervous system, religious inklings and aesthetic ideas." In *The Collected Writings of Michael Snow*, ed. M. Snow and L. Dompierre (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), p. 40.

34. Sitney (see note 1), p. 369.

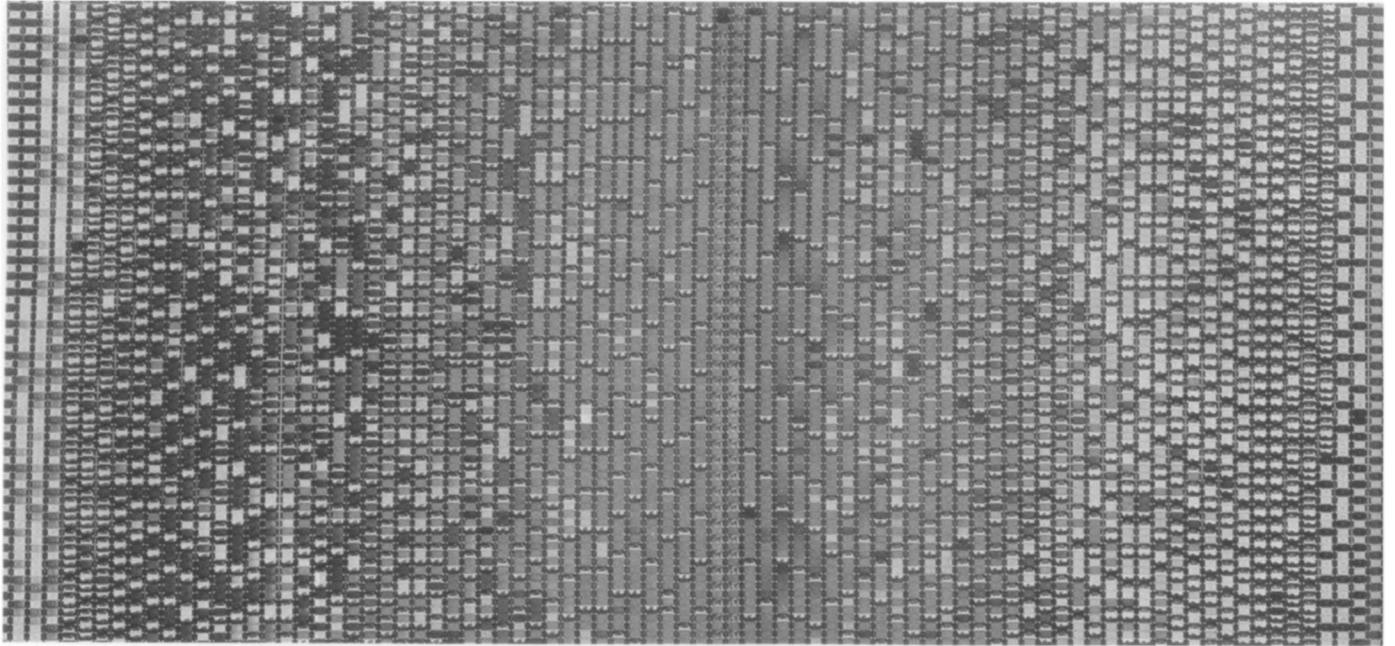


Figure 2. Paul Sharits, *Piece Mandala/End War*, 1966. Film stills. Reproduced with permission from the Paul Sharits Estate.

that build towards a symmetrical “mandalic” chromatic progression (fig. 2).

Equally important to this shape in Sitney’s account are the primal impressions that emerged from the material support of the film. Sitney posited an almost transcendent openness between human consciousness and the film apparatus, arguing that “the cinematic reproduction of the human mind” was the unifying pursuit of the American avant-garde. Structural film, including Sharits’s work, he wrote, approached “the condition of meditation and evokes states of consciousness without mediation; that is, with the sole mediation of the camera.”<sup>35</sup> Perhaps it is because he placed such a premium on the immediacy of this experience that Sitney was never entirely pleased with the role of representational images that recur in Sharits’s work: the depictions of a couple having sex in *Piece Mandala/End War* (fig. 3) and the recurring scenes of a young man being cut with scissors or scratched in *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* (fig. 4). Sitney implied that these images—of the cutting and joining of human bodies—could be metaphors of film itself.<sup>36</sup> But “these

metaphors,” he wrote, “either lack the immediacy of the color flickers . . . or they overpower their matrix . . . and instigate a psychological vector which the form cannot accommodate as satisfactorily as the trance film or the mythopoeic film.”<sup>37</sup> The imagery that punctuates the flicker films, in other words, seems to require a level of interpretation that, for Sitney, both conflicts with the “primal” psychological affect of the film and also disrupts the purity of the structure.

It should be noted that the psychologizing tendencies evident in the writing of Sharits’s critics of the 1960s and early 1970s stand in opposition to what is now a much more familiar application of psychological principles to film criticism.<sup>38</sup> Lacanian psychoanalysis offered a sophisticated framework for understanding the type of “higher drama” that Sharits sought to develop between the film apparatus, eye, and consciousness. In contrast to the direct connection between a viewing subject and the film that Sharits’s critics envisioned, Lacan’s work on vision emphasized interruptions. For instance,

35. *Ibid.*, p. 370.

36. Krauss also discusses the images in these terms in *Dream Displacement and Other Projects*, exh. cat. (Buffalo, N.Y.: Albright-Knox Gallery, 1976), unpaginated.

37. Sitney (see note 1), p. 389.

38. Exemplified, for instance, by C. Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. C. Britton, A. Williams, B. Brewster, and A. Guzzetti (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1977).

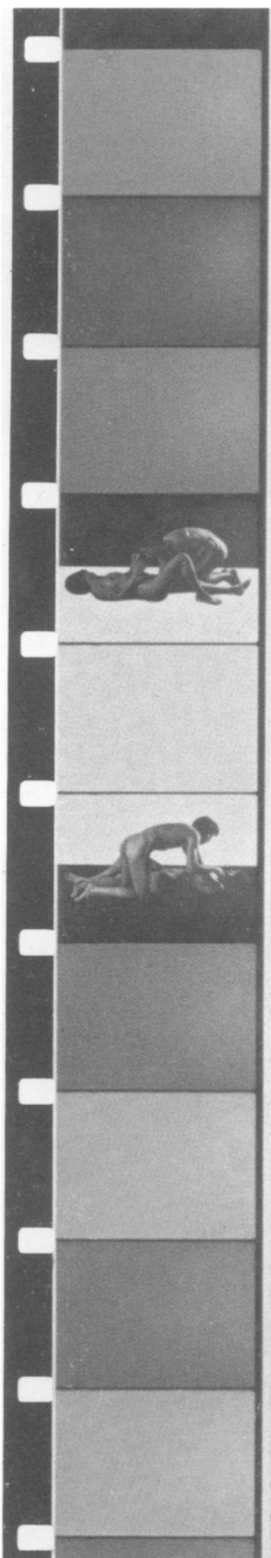


Figure 3. Paul Sharits, *Piece Mandala/End War*, 1966. Film stills. Reproduced with permission from the Paul Sharits Estate.

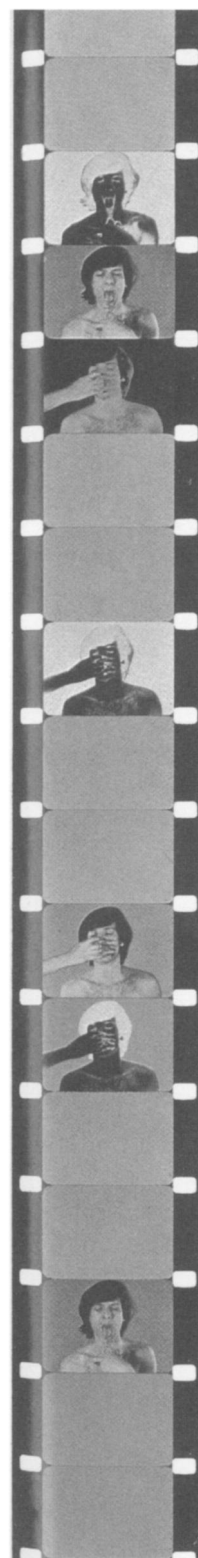


Figure 4. Paul Sharits, *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G*, 1968. Film stills. Reproduced with permission from the Paul Sharits Estate.

scotomization, which refers to a literal blind spot on the retina, became in Lacan's work a fundamental means of metaphorizing the intractable *méconnaissance* that splits and divides the subject.<sup>39</sup> Dismantling the illusion of wholeness that cinema could produce in order to cover over this fundamental split was a motivating concern of French film criticism in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>40</sup> Sharits did not take up Lacanian principles explicitly in his own theoretical writings. As we'll see, however, his information-theoretical analysis of the medium troubled the possibility of a "primal" experience of film in a way that may parallel Lacanian thought.<sup>41</sup>

Sharits's flicker films have long been situated in a critical discourse that imagines how a film mechanism, reduced to its essential components, can become fully present for the viewer in a way that seems to transcend its own equivocal nature. As Krauss has observed, summarizing much of Sharits's reception, "it is the trajectory from what could be thought of as a relative visual or structuralist 'purity' to the corporeal dimension of seeing that is ultimately at stake in the flicker medium."<sup>42</sup> If we follow those two strands of thought to their point of intersection, however, what we find is a contradiction: a seemingly unmediated experience, like the one described by Sitney, emerging from a process designed to reveal the properties of film as a medium.

It is clear from his writings of the early 1970s that, faced with these contradictions, Sharits began to reevaluate his cinematic investigations. Instead of questioning *what* constitutes film in raw, material terms, Sharits began to explore instead *what* a medium *does*, which is mediate communication.<sup>43</sup> How film specifically facilitates or hinders the transmission and reception of meaning became the pertinent question. In 1968, though perhaps without conceiving it in these

terms yet, Sharits anticipated that the answers would have as much to do with what films can withhold as with what they reveal. Despite the representational images of the light bulb in *N:O:T:H:I:N:G*, the sign of illumination he so carefully planned throughout, Sharits insisted, "the film will not 'mean' something—it will 'mean', in a very concrete way, nothing."<sup>44</sup> Meaning, and the concrete production of its absence, is at stake in Sharits's films. If we shift the criteria with which to evaluate Sharits's work towards the kind of functional analysis he applied, it becomes clear that as much as Sharits's films produce dazzling experiences of light and space, they also generate moments of loss, or blind spots, that call into question the position of a viewing subject.

In order to understand these blind spots and how they function in Sharits's flicker films, it is necessary to consider his theoretical writings from the early 1970s. His most original statements about film postdate the mandala series, and Sharits has described the years immediately after he finished *N:O:T:H:I:N:G* as a "major turning point" in his work.<sup>45</sup> After 1970, he largely avoided the flicker effect and began to work on his series of multiprojector "locational films" that could be displayed in a gallery and that emphasize the spatial experience of the work. Still, it would be a mistake simply to isolate the flicker films from these later strands of thought.<sup>46</sup> Because of the relatively limited distribution networks for experimental films, it was only in the 1970s that Sharits's flicker works were screened widely and discussed in art and film journals. Their date of production should mark a point of departure for a developing discourse rather than a closure of one.

In 1970 Sharits was appointed associate professor at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, and charged with developing an undergraduate film program. Sharits taught at Antioch for two years before joining the now-legendary media studies faculty assembled by Gerald O'Grady at the State University of New York at Buffalo.<sup>47</sup>

39. M. Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 360–362.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 456–491.

41. See Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*; J. Elmer, "Blinded Me with Science: Motifs of Observation and Temporality in Lacan and Luhmann," *Cultural Critique*, no. 30: The Politics of Systems and Environments (Spring 1995):101–136.

42. Krauss, "Moteur!" in *Formless: A User's Guide* (see note 19), p. 137.

43. J. Hay, "Interventions: The Mediating Work of Art," *Art Bulletin* 89, no. 3 (September 2007):435. Hay defines the mediations as "the broader capacity of artworks to create transformative linkages between the viewer and the world in which both viewer and artwork operate." Hay's definition follows the analytical framework proposed by N. Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, trans. E. M. Knodt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

44. Sharits (see note 2), p. 15.

45. Sharits had something of a personal crisis while completing *N:O:T:H:I:N:G* in Baltimore. He also split from his wife at that time. He recounts this transitional period from 1968–1970 and leading to the production of his 1968–1971 film *S:TREAM:S:S:ECTION:S:ECTION:S:S:ECTIONED* in "-UR(i)N(u)LS:TREAM:S:S:ECTION:S:S:ECTION:S:S:ECTIONED(A)(LYSIS)JO: '1968–70,'" *Film Culture*, no. 65–56 (1978):7–28.

46. Tony Conrad remarked in a letter to Gerald O'Grady, "Mr. Sharits is one of the very few filmmakers whose work as a whole can readily be approached as a tangibly holistic body." Cited in Joseph (see note 30), p. 379, n. 92.



But even in the short time that Sharits was there, Yellow Springs became an important and unusually active node in a network of experimental filmmaking and theory then developing outside of traditional cultural centers.<sup>48</sup> It was in Yellow Springs that his thinking about film shifted away from what he considered “formalist tactics” of the 1960s and he began to understand filmmaking as “propositional (rather than formal or expressional).”<sup>49</sup>

An academic environment may have facilitated this new direction. Some of Sharits’s most interesting theoretical statements from the time take the form of course proposals and academic statements of purpose, which he subsequently published in the journal *Film Culture*.<sup>50</sup> In one of these statements from 1970, he introduced his class with a directive: “I would like you, in this ‘course,’ to regard your art as *research*, research in contemporary communication and meaning systems.”<sup>51</sup> We know from his extensively footnoted statements that Sharits was conducting research for himself; his bibliographies from the early 1970s include books on phenomenology, structural linguistics, general systems theory, and cybernetics, and his “course” reflected that turn. By distilling these different research methodologies into a new approach he designated as “cinematics,” Sharits hoped to instill in film instruction an academic intellectual rigor that was perhaps only implied in his loftier statements of the 1960s.<sup>52</sup>

As the primary text for one of his early “cinematics” courses, Sharits assigned Abraham Moles’s *Information Theory and Esthetic Perception*.<sup>53</sup> Moles’s book, originally published in France in 1958, is a concise primer on the then-burgeoning science of information and serves as a suitable glimpse into Sharits’s interests at

the time. Moles glosses, and occasionally rehearses, a wide body of theoretical literature on information theory with a specific focus on aesthetics.<sup>54</sup> But for whatever technocratic promises in the field of art that the work’s title seems to suggest, Moles never quite defines what could be considered an aesthetic in any conventional way. His diagrams and equations instead map the contours of certain kinds of information that resist or even confound the normal channels of transmission and reception.

Moles defines information in general as originality or complexity. Information is the part of a message that cannot be anticipated by a recipient; it draws attention by virtue of being unexpected. Information, however, can never be effective wholly on its own; a message entirely comprised of original elements would be, Moles argues, indistinguishable from random background noise. Communication succeeds only if information can be contrasted against what Moles calls a “repertoire” of predictable elements.<sup>55</sup> In language, for instance, redundancy is ensured by grammatical rules, and a limited repertoire of phonetic sounds understood by a community of speakers. In Moles’s structural approach, meaningful communication is constituted by the difference between originality and redundancy. With sophisticated models based on this basic schema, Moles theorizes that every message can be analyzed by its ratio of originality to redundancy. Such an analysis would ostensibly provide the means to optimize that ratio while still transmitting a coherent message.

What Moles describes as aesthetic information, however, works against optimization and efficiency. Aesthetic messages not only have a much higher quantity of originality than “semantic messages,” but they also are organized around redundancy of a different nature. Rather than a standardized repertoire of words and sounds, individual receptors (people) bring to a work of art their own unique set of experiences. These experiences, rather than an abstract set of rules, configure different aspects of an artwork as either redundant or original.<sup>56</sup> To use an example that Moles cites, someone who has heard Beethoven’s Ninth Sonata multiple times would have a different, presumably

47. For a discussion of the role of this department in shaping what would become “media studies,” see *Buffalo Heads: Media Study, Media Practice, Media Pioneers, 1973–1990*, ed. W. Vasulka and P. Weibel (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008).

48. Hollis Frampton spent time in Yellow Springs and made *Yellow Springs*, “a portrait of the filmmaker Paul Sharits, in particular response to energies he generated one May afternoon in 1971.”

49. Sharits, “Cinema as Cognition: Introductory Remarks, 1975,” reprinted in *Film Culture* 65–66 (1978):77.

50. Most of Sharits’s writings from the early 1970s are collected in *Film Culture* no. 65–66 (1978), an issue devoted to his work.

51. Sharits (see note 12), p. 29.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

53. Sharits recounts having assigned the book in a statement of purpose for the Center for Media Study/SUNY at Buffalo, “A Cinematics Model for Film Studies in Higher Education,” reprinted in *Film Culture*, no. 65–66 (1978):62; A. Moles, *Information Theory and Esthetic Perception*, trans. J. E. Cohen (Urbana and London: University of Illinois Press, 1966).

54. The work develops similar research in C. Cherry, *On Human Communication: A Review, a Survey and a Criticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Technology Press of MIT Press, 1957) and C. E. Shannon and W. Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949).

55. Moles (see note 53), p. 12.

56. Moles (see note 53), pp. 128–129.

more subtle, schema for making a distinction between originality or redundancy than someone who hears it for the first time, which is not to say a work can ever be fully depleted, or made totally redundant, after multiple repetitions. Instead, the Beethoven connoisseur can draw from the work information that will be different from what will be communicated to the novice.

This framework explains how works of art can mediate experience in a virtually limitless number of ways. What an artwork communicates is mutable, because information is perceptible only in relation to redundancy; communication depends as much upon the absence of information as it does on information itself. At the same time, Moles's theory acknowledges that the reception of aesthetic information is also always contingent upon an individual's prior experiences, their "sociological background."<sup>57</sup> It is not hard to see the inverse of this conclusion: that an artwork's complexity exceeds an individual subject's grasp of it. The fundamental premise underlying Moles's work is that "the individual receptor has a limited capacity ( $H_o$ ) for the apprehension of information (originality) (Moles's emphasis).<sup>58</sup> Aesthetic communication, in this model, would be dependent upon that limiting operation.

Moles's theory is an abstract one, and in 1958 it was far from fleshed out. Yet his approach to aesthetic problems through information theory has implications for understanding how Sharits's flicker films mediate communication. In a 1971 article on structural film, Annette Michelson, perhaps the most astute critic of American film, characterized flicker films in a way that echoes Moles's concept of originality. She maps a trajectory of American avant-garde film as "an attempt to situate film in a kind of perceptual Present, one image or sequence succeeding another in rapid disjunction, tending, ultimately in the furious pace of single frame construction, to devour or eliminate expectation as a dimension of cinematic experience."<sup>59</sup> The bare single frame construction, in which any fragment of time could succeed any other with equal probability, opens the possibility of a total negation of redundancy in film. It would be a message wholly composed of original elements, an event that Moles terms "the message

most difficult to transmit." Although most of Moles's examples of aesthetic information come from music, he described this limit, this un-transmittable excess of complexity, in visual terms: "We know well what this message will look like. . . . It will appear to us like a gray perpetually agitated, foggy undulation with little, capricious, constantly changing outlines. In over-all appearance, it will be indistinguishable from background noise, with a uniform probability distribution for its elements."<sup>60</sup> Flicker films always threaten to approach such a condition. The message most difficult to transmit is a limit of communication, not because it overwhelms our eyes and ears physically with excessive sound or light, but because it represents the total absence of redundancy. In Moles's theory, a message of pure unadulterated information "lacks interest"; it inspires boredom.<sup>61</sup> Such was a common critique of Sharits's films, though one often only aired from the back of the room during post-screening question-and-answer sessions with the artist.<sup>62</sup>

Boredom is a specter in Sharits's flicker films because they cultivate a tension between the unexpected and the predictable, between information and redundancy. They self-consciously test the possibilities of communication, and they do so in a way that only the hybrid structures of film allows. This becomes most clear, in *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G*, from 1968, which is the only flicker film that includes verbal language.<sup>63</sup> The soundtrack is a looped recording of the poet David Franks repeating the word "destroy." Over time the sound of Franks's voice gradually becomes unrecognizable as a spoken series of discrete words, an effect Sharits intensified by editing out pauses. The syllables seem to recombine to form other words and phrases—"this girl is gone" and "history" are commonly heard—before ceasing to express at all, indicating only as sound.<sup>64</sup> Using Moles's terminology, we might say that the message is highly redundant because it follows simple conventions of language. These conventions then

60. Moles (see note 53), p. 61.

61. *Ibid.*

62. Such a comment was recorded in "An Evening with Paul Sharits, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1969," MoMA archives.

63. Sharits also worked with written language in *Word Movie/Flux Film*, which is composed of a string of words that flash by so rapidly that it becomes difficult to distinguish between the letters as form and letters as carriers of meaning.

64. Sharits frequently compared his films to the elements of language and speculated about ways for cinema to "legitimately become 'meaningless' syntax," a process that seems to be on display in *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G*. See Sharits (note 12), p. 32.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 132. As Moles writes, "esthetic information is randomized and specific to the receptor, since it varies according to his repertoire of knowledge, symbols and a priori structuring, which in turn relate to his sociological background."

58. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

59. A. Michelson, "Toward Snow Part 1," *Artforum* 9, no. 10 (June 1971):32.

break down and morph into more complex, unexpected meanings. Finally, through repetition, the word deteriorates into a wave of sound apparently unmoored to the structures of language, thus becoming a difficult message to transmit.

Yet, recounting such an experience in a linear way belies the complex interplay of sound, color, and image in the film. The color sequences and representational images both follow serial, repetitive patterns, although they can also produce original and astonishing effects. An image of Franks shirtless and framed in three-quarters view recurs throughout the film. But it also varies in unexpected ways; at times he holds scissors to his tongue, or his face is scratched by a woman's hand (fig. 4). The monochromatic background to the images can seem as random as those in *N:O:T:H:I:N:G*, but again, they also follow a symmetrical mandala structure. The overall effect of *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* is the interaction between these separate but parallel channels, each of which follows its own serial logic. Because they largely repeat, each track of information on its own might induce boredom through total redundancy. Combined on a film strip and projected, however, where they mutually inflect one another, *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* can seem boring for the opposite reason: its excessive complexity.

Sharits used terminology apparently derived from Moles to describe how he conceived of the relationships between channels. In a comment about *N:O:T:H:I:N:G*, which could be equally applicable to *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G*, he noted that "where the visual image is redundant, the auditory image is active and as the visual image becomes active (begins falling), the auditory becomes redundant."<sup>65</sup> This oscillating balance would not necessarily be something the artist could program into a film, but would be, as Moles's theory suggests, determined by the viewer's limited capacity as a receptor for these heterogeneous signals. In his short essay on Sharits's flicker films, Gidal describes the "impossibility of non-interference of various levels of perception."<sup>67</sup> But what keeps this web of interference from becoming overwhelming—"the message most difficult to transmit"—is a certain economy of perception inherent in the viewer's limited capacity.<sup>67</sup> Our inability

to take in the work's full complexity allows different perceptual strands of the film to emerge and recede. Sharits's films demonstrate how, in order to receive a message at all, something has to be overlooked. While Moles's theory suggests that this overlooking is part of all communication, in Sharits's films, the viewer can become aware not only that it is happening, but that it is necessary.

In the same syllabus he presented to his students at Antioch, Sharits described his interest in information theory as part of a more general departure from the humanistic thought that had informed his earlier theoretical work and the reception of his films in the 1960s:

I would like to suggest that current research methodologies such as general systems, information and communication theory, structuralism, cybernetics, and others which are more involved with "form/function" than with "content/substance" are not isolated non-humanistic fads. Because they are increasingly significant in anthropology, linguistics, sociology, economics, natural science, community planning, communication and transportations systems, engineering, medicine, psychology, and so forth, they are *defining our environment* and, as such, they must have significant implications for culturally relevant art.<sup>68</sup>

Sharits sought to synthesize these various research methodologies in both the production and analysis of his films, an ambition he felt could align his work with broader social developments. Admittedly, the relationship between Sharits's abstract films and, for instance, community planning or transportation may seem fairly attenuated. What Sharits perceived, however, was that his films challenged the position of the viewing subjects in ways that did have implications for other kinds of social interactions.

By re-reading the projected flicker films in relation to information theory, we saw that multiple configurations of the work could emerge from a highly complex flux of light and sound. Beginning with his first flicker film, *Ray Gun Virus*, Sharits displayed his films in ways that further destabilized any single, unified mode of observation. In addition to projecting one print of a film, Sharits cut a second print into strips of equal length and then pressed those strips between two clear pieces of Plexiglas (fig. 5). These grid-like objects, which Sharits called "Frozen Film Frames," showed the entire film at a glance and invited close inspection of the relationships between individual

65. Sharits quoted in R. Cornwell, "Paul Sharits: Illusion and Object," *Artforum* 10, no. 1 (September 1961):61.

66. Gidal (see note 18), p. 94. Gidal's quote is in reference to *Word Movie/Flux Film*.

67. To this extent, the science of information that developed in the 1950s bears resemblance to the scientific discourse of attention that developed in the late nineteenth century, as discussed in J. Crary, "Unbinding Vision," *October* 68 (Spring 1994):24–27.

68. Sharits (see note 12), pp. 29–30.



Figure 5. Paul Sharits, *Dream Displacement and Other Projects*, 1976. Installation view. © Albright Knox Gallery. Image courtesy of the G. Robert Strauss, Jr. Memorial Library, Gallery Archives, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York. Photo: John O'Hern.

frames.<sup>69</sup> Though historians of film have generally used Frozen Film Frames as convenient illustrations, Sharits came to regard the objects as equivalent to his projected film, and in fact inseparable from what he considered "the work" to be.<sup>70</sup>

In the early 1970s Sharits began to show his works in galleries, a context that both allowed him to expand his films into space, as with his "locational films," and present more and varied manifestations of them.<sup>71</sup> Though the flicker films are generally still shown in cinemas, and frequently without Frozen Film Frames, they too facilitate the presentation of a film as both

object and projection which became integral to Sharits's practice in the 1970s. At his 1976 retrospective at the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo, Sharits included projected films, Frozen Film Frames, and a series of drawings on graph paper (fig. 6). The latter, which Sharits called "scores," or maps for the film, could be viewed as "all-over" drawings or "read like a book, from upper left to right, one line after another from top to bottom."<sup>72</sup> In Sharits's view, the entire arrangement comprised the record of an ongoing research project:

In a museum-gallery space I can display together not just the outcome of an investigation (i.e., a film or a film piece composed of several ongoing, recycling, variational-permutational films-in-relation-to-each-other) but the whole thought and making process which has formed the film(s) (the infrastructural "blow up"). In proximate spaces one can observe: scores which have generated a film; that film can be viewed as an object (seen as physical strips

69. Sharits, "Exhibition/Frozen Frames: Regarding the 'Frozen Film Frame Series: A Statement for the '5th International Film Festival,' Knokke, December 1974," reprinted in *Film Culture* 65–66 (1978): 81–82.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

71. Sharits, "Statement Regarding Multiple Screen/Sound 'Locational' Film Environments—Installations," reprinted in *Film Culture* 65–66 (1978):79–81.

72. *Ibid.*, 82.

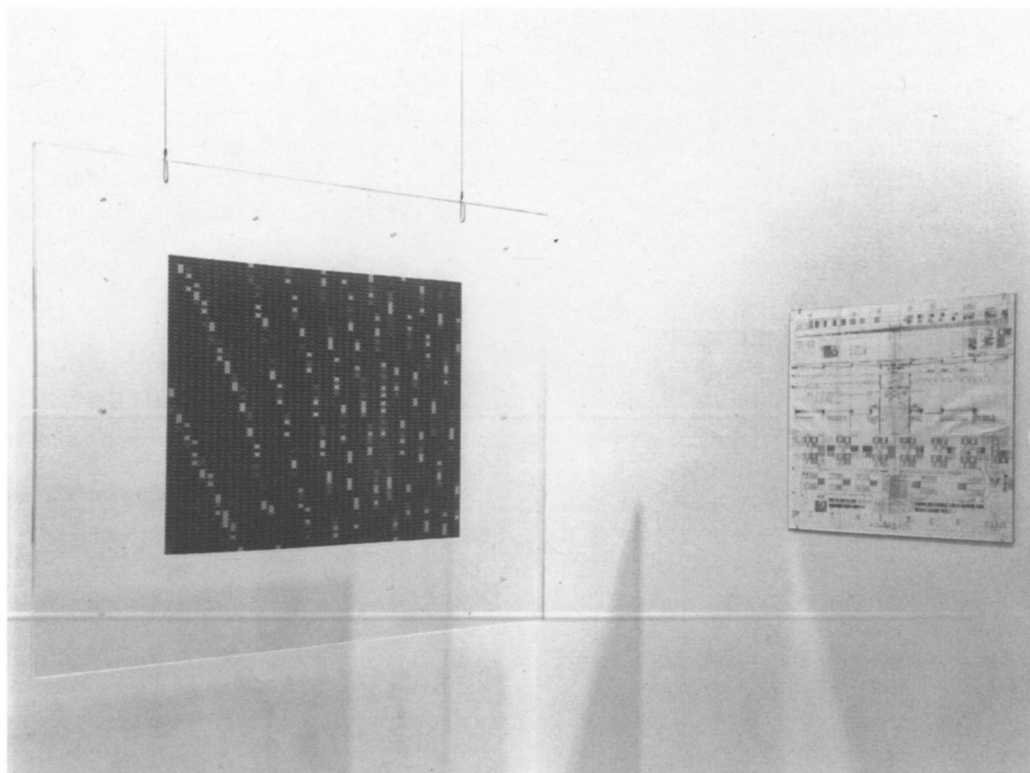


Figure 6. Paul Sharits, *Dream Displacement and Other Projects*, 1976. Installation view. © Albright Knox Gallery. Image courtesy of the G. Robert Strauss, Jr. Memorial Library, Gallery Archives, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York. Photo: John O'Hern.

serially arranged and encased in plexi-glass sheets); and, the projection of my analysis of that film object.<sup>73</sup>

The presentation of a film as a series of component parts risked inviting misinterpretation; the grid-like Frozen Film Frames could easily be understood as aesthetic objects. Sharits warned that "the esthetically minded critic may find such an all-at-once presentation of concept disconcerting or troublesome because it refuses to locate meaning in one object or hierarchy of objects."<sup>74</sup> While a gallery context allowed Sharits to reveal much more of the material support of film, his displays of film frames, drawings, and projectors hardly consolidated the practice of filmmaking around self-contained forms. Rather, these objects and projections demonstrated the multiple interrelated forms that can emerge from the medium of film conceived, in Sharits's terms, as a "conceptual system." Understood as part

of such a system, the objects that Sharits displayed would be mere traces of a dispersed, ongoing process of generating and continuously analyzing a film.

Sharits's references to general systems theory and nonhumanistic research methodologies speak to a trend in aesthetic thinking that emerged in the late 1960s. The concept of systems, drawn from the social and life sciences, had enormous cultural currency in the arts at the time.<sup>75</sup> In his well-known 1968 essay "Systems Esthetics," the artist and curator Jack Burnham contextualized contemporary art in relation to what he saw as a broad transformation from an "object-oriented" to a "systems oriented" culture. In the "super-scientific" world that Burnham described, "change emanates, not from *things*, but from the *way things are done*."<sup>76</sup>

73. Sharits (see note 49), p. 78.

74. *Ibid.*

75. See Lee (note 23), pp. 62–75, for a discussion of the various, often exuberant, manifestations of a "systems" aesthetic.

76. J. Burnham, "Systems Esthetics," *Artforum* 7, no. 1 (September 1968):30–35; Burnham's emphasis.

The rhetoric of systems theory in the 1960s, including Burnham's, carried with it a sense of optimism about the possibilities for refining social interactions through logical study and the role of art in that process.<sup>77</sup> As Benjamin Buchloh has argued, however, this optimism was deeply imbued with the logic of late capitalism. Even artistic appropriations of a systems aesthetic—reflected most acutely for Buchloh in the minimal grid—could only serve to reinforce the control of market structures.<sup>78</sup> Sharits's embrace of systems theory, then, may only reaffirm cinema's links to industrial art—precisely what his films seemed to escape when understood as materialist interventions or as part of a psychedelic project. While a systems analysis of Sharits's films requires abandoning those points of escape as illusory, Sharits's interest in nonhumanistic research does not simply affirm the bind that Buchloh laments. Instead, Sharits's film systems succeed in making visible the contingent role a subject assumes when interacting with complex systems. But the films do so, paradoxically, by affirming the blind spots inherent in such interactions.

Systems models, in aesthetics and other disciplines, developed at the expense of the changing relevance of a human subject as a category, with all of its physiological connotations. Just as the art object dissolved into a network of conceptual or procedural relationships, the notion of a person "viewing" an artwork seemed an increasingly inadequate way to describe a "system interface."<sup>79</sup> The corporeal dimension of seeing so central to Sharits's work would also, in this sense, designate the source of closure from the full complexity of the work. The implications of this shift are already apparent in Burnham's formulation that, "in a systems context, invisibility, or invisible parts, share equal importance with things seen."<sup>80</sup> However, it was only in the work of a later generation systems theorists, including Niklas

Luhmann, that the nature of this "unseen" assumed central importance as a precondition for "seeing" anything at all. To observe the social systems Luhmann conceives as defining modernity means making a radical distinction among a complex network of relationships. Such a distinction, according to Luhmann, necessarily produces blind spots, as indicating one aspect of a system for observation also means excluding another.<sup>81</sup>

In his own theoretical writing, Sharits approached a similar conclusion from the perspective of continental philosophy. At Antioch and Buffalo, he struggled to develop a model for reconciling a structural analysis of film with a phenomenological experience—two modes of observation that he found to be both necessary for understanding his work and mutually incompatible.<sup>82</sup> Only in Derrida, whom Sharits referenced in a vague footnote, did he find a means of describing how one might both "read" the structure of the film strip while also simultaneously perceiving it as a holistic experience of light and sound. In the critique of Husserl that Sharits cites, Derrida's interweaving of linguistic structures and phenomenology reconciles itself only in terms of absence and blindness.<sup>83</sup>

These theoretical ambitions suggest that although Sharits described the relationships between the various parts of his film systems as "absolute," such an assertion does not necessarily imply a unity that can be observed.<sup>84</sup> The flicker films are constructed according to the most basic internal logic of cinema:

81. For a concise narrative of system's theory's conceptual evolution, see N. K. Hayles, "Making the Cut: The Interplay of Narrative and System, or What Systems Theory Can't See," in *Observing Complexity: Systems Theory and Postmodernity*, ed. W. Rasch and C. Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 137–162.

82. Sharits (see note 53), p. 68, n. 14. He cites J. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. D. B. Allison (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973). In "Cinema as Cognition" (see note 49, p. 76), Sharits writes: "Two subpremises are implied and they are cybernetically 'bound' together: first, that 'cinema' is a conceptual system; and, second, that there is submerged meaning in the primary-material ('support') levels of the cinema apparatus. If this is true, then both the kind of (anti-phenomenological) 'structural' analysis proposed by Levi-Strauss and the kind of 'phenomenological' analysis proposed earlier by Husserl must be somehow interfaced, as improbably as this may appear." The apparent incompatibility of these two modes is discussed in A. Michelson, "Art and the Structural Perspective," in *On the Future of Art* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Viking Press, 1970), pp. 37–60.

83. Derrida (*ibid.*), p. 65: "There is duration to the blink, and it closes the eye."

84. Sharits (see note 69), p. 82.

77. Sharits cites L. von Bertalanffy, *Robots, Men and Minds: Psychology in the Modern World* (New York: George Braziller, 1967) as an example of predicting "a 'unitary theory' in which 'body' and 'mind,' in their formal or structural aspects, are comprehended by one 'neutral' conceptual system," in "-UR(i)N(u)LS" (see note 45), p. 9.

78. B. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990):105–143.

79. The concept that would come to dominate systems-theoretical research after the 1960s and that describes this relationship is "observation." Shifting from seeing to observing also marks an acknowledgment of contingency. An observer makes a distinction between one side of a form and not the other. Inherent in every observation is a blind spot. See Luhmann (note 43), pp. 54–101.

80. Burnham (see note 76), p. 32.

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single frames arranged serially on a film strip and then set in motion. Yet from a position outside of the film—our only position—these relationships can be characterized equally by disjunction. Encountering *N:O:T:H:I:N:G* in this systems context could mean, as we have seen, clearly understanding the metric spacing of the light bulb icon within a grid, and then, as Sharits noted, being “experientially unable to relate” to that coherence in the projected manifestation of the film. As much as the various parts of the film apparatus, or even the relationships between those parts, in the situations Sharits stages these experiences of misalignment become visible; indeed, they may be what the films communicate.