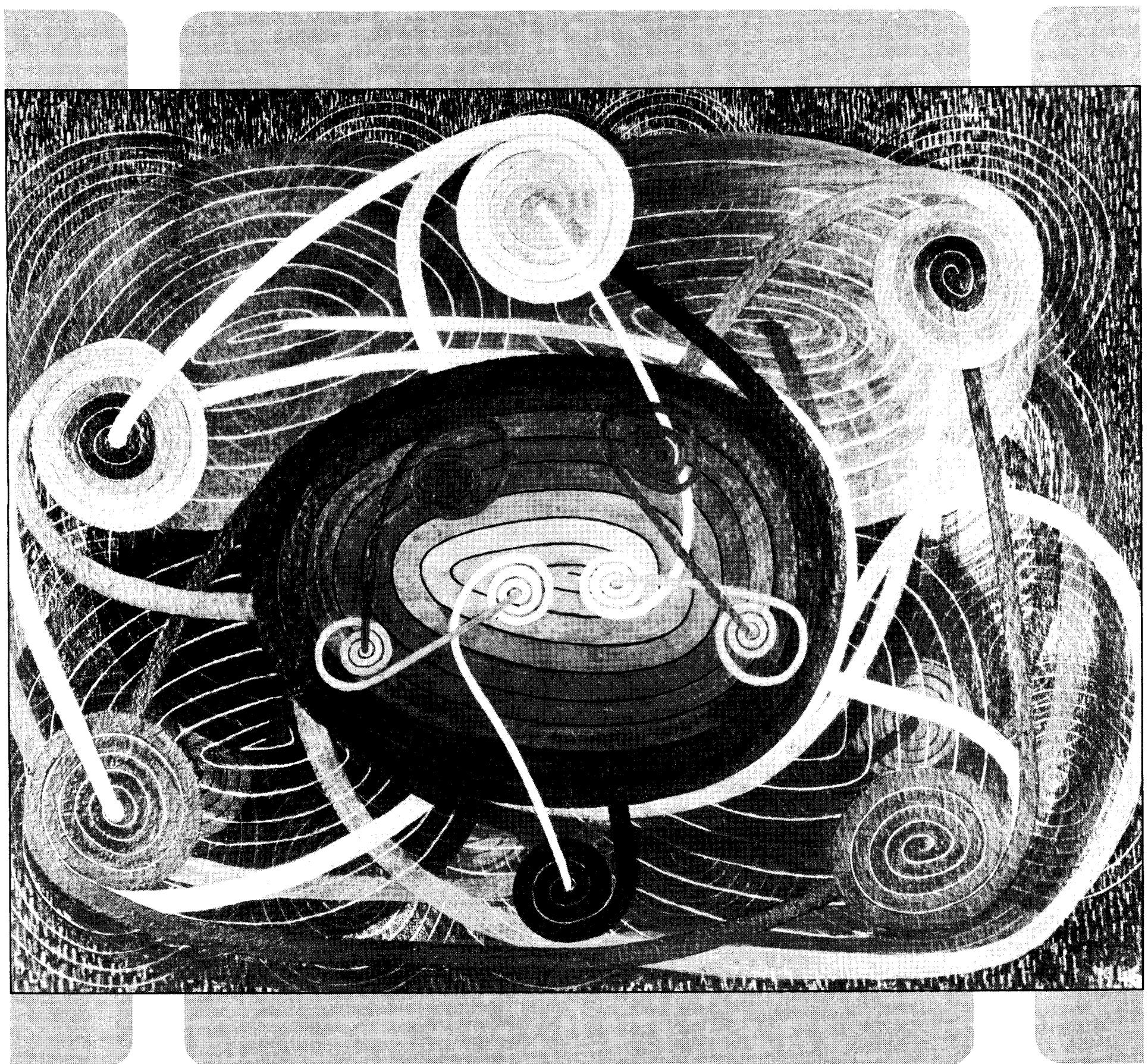


*Articulated Light*

# The Emergence of Abstract Film in America



Harvard Film Archive  
Anthology Film Archives

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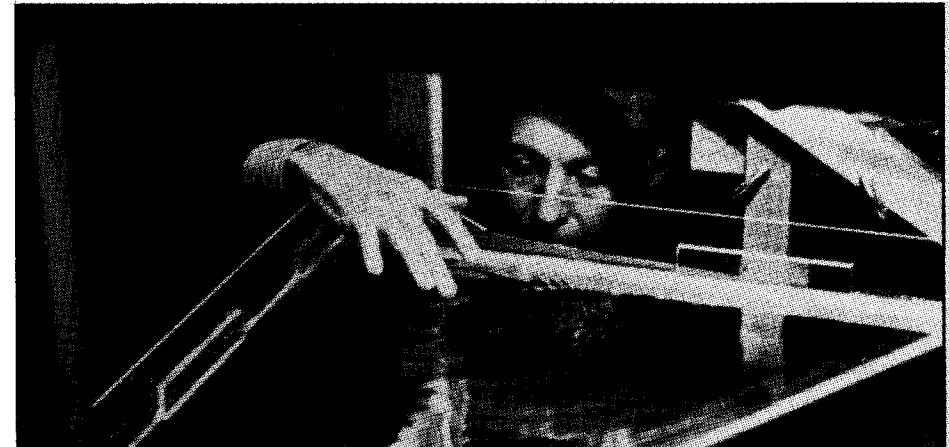
Gerald O'Grady  
Bruce Posner

### Design

Donald Watkins

### Cover Photo

Oskar Fischinger's Motion Painting No. 1 (1947)



James Whitney studying water currents for *Wu Ming* (1973)

## Legacy Alive: An Introduction

Bruce Posner

Early 20th-century Modern Art held the possibility for the creation of abstract, non-objective imagery, and thus avant-garde filmmaking also sought out non-representational cinematic methods. Collected here are the works of American abstract film created between 1920-1970 and selected programs of influential or associated films, and their progeny. The major film artists surveyed are represented with all extant prints available, offering a singular opportunity to view complete retrospectives of individual artists alongside their contemporaries. With six lectures and two panel discussions, the event brings to light the visionary achievements of these neglected filmmakers.

In an ever dizzying milieu of visually aggressive images in movies, television and computers in 1995, it stands as some kind of judgement that the masterworks of abstract cinema are virtually unheard of and definitely not programmed in any viable repertory at either commercial or academic venues. No one culprit stands to be accused, but the pity lies in the wasted beauty and the loss of critical aesthetic discourse that could be generated by these gems of artistic innovation.

One reason is that high quality projection prints are nearly impossible to locate. Years of research and detective work have led to the catacombs of some of the world's leading film archives—only to find film prints quietly succumbing to color fading or one or another of the dreaded "syndromes" afflicting film stock through their chemical deterioration. Film distributors have closed or scaled back their operations in the face of the declining film rental market and the astronomical expense of maintaining new film prints. Sometimes, it's as sad as sheer neglect, in that the films have fallen prey to what Jonas Mekas has poetically declared as "the ravages of time."

On the other hand, a committed group of film scholars, curators, archivists, distributors and the filmmakers themselves have earnestly squirrelled away classics of abstract filmmaking for future generations to evaluate and appreciate. Among the persevering few, a tradition continues to breathe new life.

So what has intrigued some of the finest artistic sensibilities of this century?

The notion to move is perhaps the defining characteristic behind the abstract film. The essays, biographies and statements that follow all illustrate this fascination with movement as a unique quality of motion picture arts. Although it is a given in cinema that the single projected frame and the image therein is as static as a painting hanging on the wall, the combined physiological effect of the persistence of vision and the phi phenomena sets in motion the appearance of movement on the screen. Having a train come diagonally across the screen as if right at the viewer or making use of rapid-cutting to expand upon the time-space continuum are exhilarating cinematic experiences, but they are nowhere near as intellectually demanding as the expressive and distinct movement of colored shapes across the filmic plane. As one begins to understand the achievements of the abstract cinema, it becomes very apparent that complex ideas of great significance can be articulated solely through movement.

Oskar Fischinger, undeniably the greatest practitioner of abstract cinema, proved over and over again the primal power of amazement encompassed by the majestic sweep of multiple light glyphs arcing the entire length of the screen in tight synchronization with a musical accompaniment. Equally as inspirational is the omnipresent totality of form demonstrated by James Whitney's mystical abstractions. In *Lapis* (1963-66), Whitney made use of thousands of separately drawn dots unified through compositional designs to present the viewer with a non-verbal experience that isn't so much about a metaphysical idea as it is a metaphysical experience in itself. Stan Brakhage continues to enlarge the possibilities of vision, currently hand-painting thousands of individual frames of film in order to chart the path of abstract images streaming through his consciousness.

Visually and thematically, abstract art has developed along several lines of inquiry, such as spiritual, non-objective, abstract expressionism, and others, but abstractions also can be read outside of these constrictive nomenclatures as pure imagery set free of the constraints of incisive representational interpretation. Add to a stationary abstract composition the dimension of actual movement and the associated corollary element of time (movement in time is a given in film), and the abstract film shifts into the act of consciousness itself. Each person can read the films in a highly personal idiosyncratic manner somewhat akin to a psychiatric Rorschach test. Although an artist can claim authority over the content of his creation and its desired impact, the viewer's experience is dominated by their own impressionistic, moment-to-moment perceptual reading of the ribbon of images. Given the breadth of activity in psychological and psychiatric research during this century, it is surprising to find abstract cinema so overlooked as a vital working model of the inner mind.

Paul Sharits, a film artist who is represented in the retrospective by a "locational" dual screen-projection entitled *Dream Displacement* (1976), pursued the study of the physiological aspects of film perception and their relationship to the mechanics of film more thoroughly than any other filmmaker this century. His films are conceptually engaging but their real worth lies in the eloquent beauty of the images blazing in front of the spectator on the screen. The shared presence of moving colors, shapes and forms is the great legacy of abstract cinema. The waves of pleasure granted through the experience of watching is paramount to any understanding of human consciousness past, present or future.

Bruce Posner, Assistant to the Curator of Harvard Film Archive, Curator of *Articulated Light: The Emergence of Abstract Film in America*

# Articulated Light: An Appendix

Gerald O'Grady

When Lewis Jacobs published *The Rise of the American Film* in 1939, he did not mention experimental film. It was only in the second revised edition (1968) that he added an essay, "Supplement: Experimental Film in America, 1921-1947," which he had originally published in 1949.

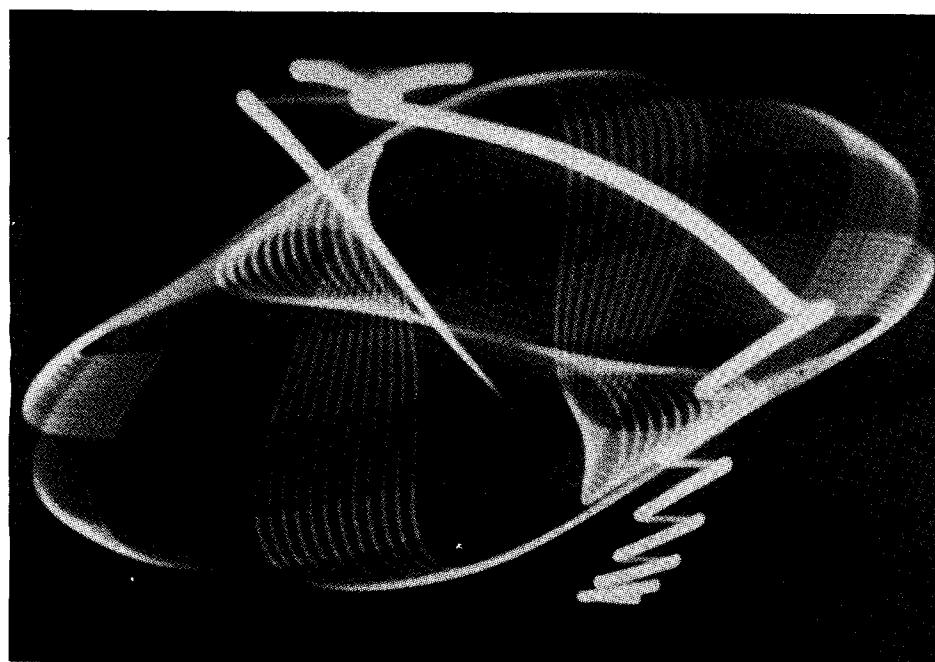
In a similar manner, to Volume 5 of the current *History of the American Cinema* under the general editorship of Charles Harpole, Tino Ballo's *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (1993), there is appended a tenth and last chapter, "Avant-Garde Film," written by Jan-Christopher Horak.

Abstract film, and other kinds of experimental film made in America, have always been marginalized, and the exhibition of *Articulated Light: The Emergence of Abstract Film in America*, "the most comprehensive retrospective of abstract film ever mounted," should serve as an occasion to radically redirect film scholarship in this area.

In between the publications by Jacobs and Ballo, film study became an academic subject, and was inflected (and inflicted) by semiotics, psychoanalysis, structuralism, political ideology, and the panoply of post-modern moves now known simply as "theory." It has been a scholarship largely committed to the dominant commercial narrative cinema and its distribution on Main Street and transmission on television, and has shown little interest in the works of visual artists which have been sustained by museums.

We are not without a few normative studies, such as Standish D. Lawder's *Cubist Cinema* (1975), Robert Russett and Cecile Starr's *Experimental Animation: Origins of a New Art* (1976), and William C. Wees' *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Films* (1992). There are also books by the makers themselves, such as Stan Brakhage's *Metaphors of Vision* (1963), John Whitney's *Digital Harmony: On the Complementarity of Music and Visual Art* (1980), and Len Lye's *Figures in Motion: Selected Writings* (1984).

The best resources for the study of abstract film continue to be the catalogues of art exhibitions, such as *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Paintings 1890-1985*, organized by Maurice Tuchman at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1986, which contains a superb essay on "Abstract Film and Color Music" by William Moritz, and even the current *Piet Mondrian 1870-1944*, organized for the National Gallery of Art and The Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1995 by Angelica Zander Rudenstein and others; it is worth noting that MOMA simultaneously mounted *Stan Brakhage A Retrospective: 1977-1995*. In his essay on Mondrian's career, "The Iconoclast," Yve-Alain Bois carefully elucidates the artist's life-long thinking on the "abstract-real" in painting and his comments on abstract film in "Trialogue," published in *De Stijl* in October, 1919, and readily available in translation in Martin James and Harry Holtzman, ed., *The New Art -The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian* (1986).



Abstronic by Mary Ellen Bute c. 1952: Museum of Modern Art Film Still Archive

It will not be possible for the films exhibited in *Articulated Light* to be properly explicated except by those willing to saturate themselves in the histories of art and of music. And much more. In the materials published here, Raúl Ruiz introduces perception, Stan Brakhage cognition (and much more), Oskar Fischinger creation, Mary Ellen Bute technology, and almost all refer to the other arts, as in Harry Smith's moving letter to Hilla Rebay on screening his films for jazz musicians and recording thirty tapes of the reactions. Many of the makers were also nurtured by philosophy and theosophy, just as Mondrian was, and James Whitney was influenced by mystical disciplines and contemporary physics.

Thus, the truly scholarly study of these works will be based on theories and experimental data on perception, cognition, and the creative process— anatomy, physiology, and psychology; a careful reading of philosophy, religion, and science; a commitment to a theory of aesthetics exploring all of the arts—emotions, feeling, and states of consciousness—light, motion, and rhythm—metamorphoses, gradations, and synergies; and a knowledge of the machines built by the artists themselves.

What is needed is a mind like that of Susanne K. Langer whose relevant work I briefly outline, since it has not been brought to bear on abstract film by anyone. Her first essay on the subject, "Abstraction in Science and Abstraction in Art," was published in Paul Henle et al., ed., *Structure, Method, and Meaning: Essays in Honor of Henry M. Sheffer* (1951), and later as an appendix to her own *Problems of Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures* (1957). She continued to put pressure on the concept of abstraction throughout *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (1953), then put forward her new findings on perception, cognition, the act of making, and aesthetics in "On a New Definition of 'Symbol,'" and "Emotion and Abstraction" in *Philosophical Sketches* (1962), and gave us the fullest development of her thinking in "A Chapter on Abstraction" in the first volume of her *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* (1967).

I do not put her work forward because she wrote on film; her one short essay, "A Note on Film" (five pages) was itself the appendix to *Feeling and Form* and her only other involvement was reprinting André Malraux's "Sketches for a Psychology of the Motion Picture" in her *Reflections on Art: A Source Book of Writings by Artists, Critics, and Philosophers* (1958). I put it forward because, with the exception of the technology, she treats all of the other topics with the kind of depth, complexity, and interaction between them that will be required of the scholars of abstract film. She herself was influenced by Ernst Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*; and he wrote on the *De Docta Ignorantia* of Nicolas de Cusa as well as on Plato and Kant; and both Cassirer and Langer would have been willing to read John Whitney's Pythagoras and Stan Brakhage's Abbess Hildegard von Bingen with care in order to provide proper illumination for their filmic art.

Gerald O'Grady, Visiting Scholar at Harvard University



Film still image by James Davis: Anthology Film Archives

## Cinema as an Art Form: Avant-Garde • Experimentation • Abstraction

Vlada Petric

Like all true art forms, cinema cannot progress on an aesthetic level without exploring new expressive means that are unique to the medium of film. A movie may include aesthetic elements belonging to other arts (e.g., literature, theater, music, architecture, design, still photography), and yet lack cinematic impact. It is the cinematic impact, above all, that is the core of film as an art form: to achieve it, the filmmaker must (a) have the sensitivity to convey his or her ideas, emotions, and visions in a way that is specific to cinema, and (b) possess the talent to aesthetically integrate the filmic devices within the overall film structure.

Experimentation has always been taboo in commercial production, and consequently experimenting in cinema has been carried on by avant-garde filmmakers who consider cinema as an art form. Limited by the dominant code of film production, other directors often "smuggle" the unconventional forms of cinematic expression into their narrative films. When they succeed in doing this, their films—or more often particular sequences—transcend a mere recording of action in front of the camera.

Avant-garde filmmakers refuse to be captives to the commercial production system. Consequently, they explore cinema as a unique expressive means with the intention of achieving an innovative aesthetic structure: they experiment with image and sound as autonomous elements, "liberated" from both narrative and representational functions, which often results in abstract structures. As in music, it is within the abstract framework that filmic devices begin to function on their own terms, often simultaneously representing form and content.

Abstraction in cinema is crucial for the aesthetic advancement of the medium, as it opens a new possibility for film creation, a possibility that can also be useful to directors who make narrative films that aspire to be artistic. As a result, the most powerful sequences in great films represent the highest levels of cinematic expression. Eisenstein admitted that his films, in fact, consist of several short avant-grade films which are connected and surrounded by a narrative discourse. Clearly, it is not enough to employ unconventional means to produce a great film, because novelty alone does not guarantee art. However effective and original they may be, filmic devices are insufficient per se: to function aesthetically they must be successfully integrated, first among themselves, then

with all other elements of the film structure. Only when executed in an aesthetic manner do they contribute to the artistic value of the film.

As lovers of cinema, avant-garde filmmakers are true artists who do not make concessions, even if offered great financial rewards. Their main concern is that their films generate a kinesthetic impact, and effect the viewers in an aesthetic manner. To achieve this, they immerse themselves in the reflexive interaction of numerous components that constitute the film structure; working from the inside to the outside, they search for unconventional cinematic forms and original structures, fully cognizant of the complexity of the medium, as well as of the difficulty in dealing with cinema as an art form. The best avant-garde—especially abstract—films generate the most powerful kinesthetic impact that cannot be achieved in any other medium.

Maya Deren explained that truly cinematic films represent a "vertical exploration" within the "horizontal progression" of the narrative. She compared them with the way in which sonnet-like passages function within the dramatic development of Shakespeare's plays, mostly at the climactic points of the conflict—expressing intense emotions and profound philosophical views. The cinematic form of these sonnets is essential to the thematic signification of the soliloquies—they make them "poetic," while at the same time expanding, deepening, and enhancing their meaning. The most successful avant-garde works are "cinematic sonnets," sometimes existing as entities in and of themselves, and sometimes as sequences included within narrative films. I have been dreaming of collecting all these cinematic sonnets, and compiling them into an epic cinematic poem; even though its duration would hardly last more than twenty hours, it would represent the cinematic essence of the entire history of film.

Avant-garde filmmakers are genuine poets of cinema. They follow their creative instincts in expressing their cinematic visions without caring for the popular success of their work. When their films prove to be original, cinematic, and artistic, they effect the viewers in the way that only cinema can, becoming outstanding achievements, which mark important phases in the evolution of the film medium. As Lewis Jacobs stated, "Everything that is unique in cinema begins and ends with the avant-garde." Many films in this retrospective are genuine cinematic sonnets.

Vlada Petric, Curator of Harvard Film Archive, from the forthcoming book, *Neo-Aesthetics of Cinema*.

# A New Realism - The Object (its plastic and cinematic graphic value)

Fernand Léger

Every effort in the line of spectacle or moving picture should be concentrated on bringing out the values of the object—even at the expense of the subject and of every other so called photographic element of interpretation, whatever it may be.

All current cinema is romantic, literary, historical expressionist, etc. Let us forget all this and consider, if you please: a pipe—a chair—a hand—an eye—a typewriter—a hat—a foot, etc., etc.

Let us consider these things for what they can contribute to the screen just as they are—in isolation—their value enhanced by every known means. In this enumeration I have purposely included parts of the human body in order to emphasize the fact that in the new realism the human being, the personality, is interesting only in these fragments and that these fragments should not be considered of any more importance than any of the other objects listed.

The technique emphasized is to isolate the object or the fragment of an object and to present it on the screen in close-ups of the largest possible scale. Enormous enlargements of an object or a fragment give it a personality it never had before and in this way it can become a vehicle of entirely new lyric and plastic power.

I maintain that before the invention of the moving picture no one knew the possibilities latent in a foot—a hand—a hat.

These objects were, of course, known to be useful—they were seen, but never looked at. They can be discovered—and they are found to possess plastic and dramatic beauty when properly presented. We are in an epoch of the specialization of specialties. If manufactured objects are on the whole well realized, remarkably well-finished—it is because they have been made and checked by specialists.

I propose to apply this formula to the screen and to study the plastic possibilities latent in the enlarged fragment, projected (as a close up) on the screen, specialized, seen and studied from every point of view both in movement and immobile.

Here is a whole new world of cinematographic methods.

These objects, these fragments, these methods are innumerable—limitless. Life is full of them. Let us see them on the screen.

The point is to know how to “exploit” them—the point is to find out the right way of using them. It is more difficult than it seems.

To get the right plastic effect, the usual cinematographic methods must be entirely forgotten. The question of light and shade becomes of prime importance. The different degrees of mobility must be regulated by the rhythms controlling the different speeds of projection—*la munition*—the timing of projections must be calculated mathematically.

New men are needed—men who have acquired a new sensitivity toward the object and its image. An object for instance if projected at twenty seconds is given its full value—projected at thirty seconds it becomes negative.

A transparent object can remain immobile, and light will give it movement. An opaque object can then be moved in rhythm with the tempo of the transparent object. In this way an enormous variety of effects can be achieved by the use of totally different objects having in themselves absolutely no expression, but handled with understanding and knowledge. Light is everything. It transforms an object completely. It becomes an independent personality.

Take an aluminum saucepan. Let shafts of light play upon it from all angles—penetrating and transforming it. Present it on the screen in a close-up—it will interest the public for a time, yet to be determined. The public need never even know that this fairy-like effect of light in many forms, that so delights it, is nothing but an aluminum saucepan.

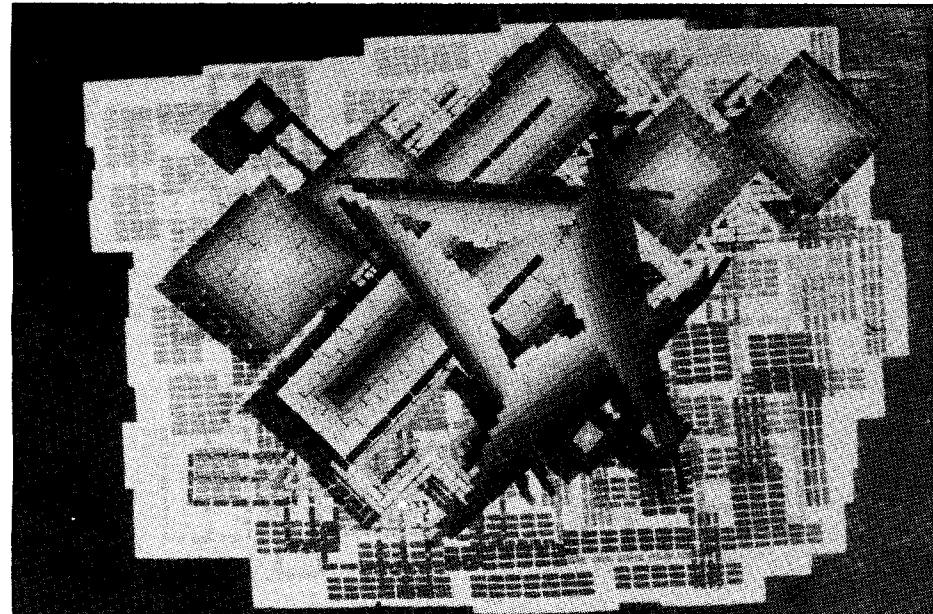
I repeat—for the whole point of this article is in this: the powerful—the spectacular effect of the object is entirely ignored at present.

Light animates the most inanimate object and gives it cinematographic value.

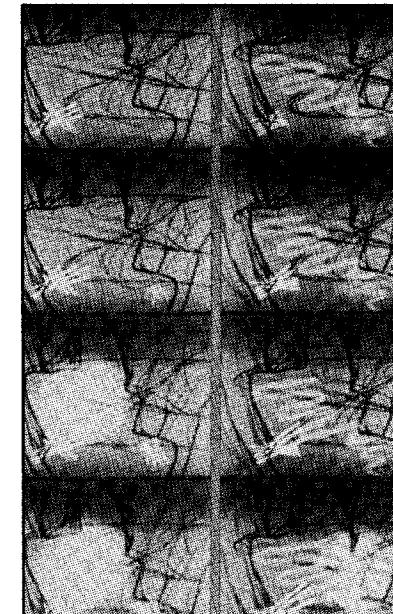
This new point of view is the exact opposite of everything that has been done in the cinema up to the present. The possibilities of the fragment or element have always been neglected in order to present vague moving masses in the active rhythm of daily life. Everything has to be sacrificed for an effect which bears no relation to the true reality. The realism of the cinema is still to be created—It will be the work of the future.

—*Little Review*, Winter, 1926.

Fernand Léger, "A New Realism - The Object," *Introduction to the Art of the Movies: An Anthology of Ideas on the Nature of Movie Art*, ed. Lewis Jacobs, New York: Noonday Press, 1960, 96-8.



Plexiglass Painting of Motion Painting No. 1 by Oscar Fischinger, 1947: Fischinger Archive



Composition #5, Fugue by Dwinell Grant, c.1949

## True Creation

Oskar Fischinger

At the beginning of the great unknown of all beginnings there is the Idea, a knowledge profound and unconscious, a feeling, a vision of the Ideal, a path to follow, of everything, of the conclusion and of the end—of which there never is one.

The arena of the experimental is the arena of consciousness that awakes and stretches, the time of searching, the discovery of a method of doing things, of developing methods and techniques—which must correspond to the meaning and harmonize with it. Unconscious vision of the beginning.

Then comes a period of studying the possibilities of a satisfactory or ideal technique, or of a method that will grow into the completeness, the recognition, the control of the means of expression until that it can become a work of art. Finally comes the moment to reject all that which becomes the tool of the creator—the humble hand through which the artist expresses and reveals himself.

If the cinema one day becomes an art form, we will owe it to poor, unknown men who have born great suffering within them: men comparable to Grünewald, Van Gogh, Rembrandt, Mozart, and Beethoven. These interpreters of the creator, the artists, will be recognized through their creations, some generations later, often after their bodies have rotted and disintegrated into the earth.

"We will only find true artists and masterpieces among the so-called experimental films and filmmakers. They actually use creative processes. The film isn't 'cut,' it is a continuity, the absolute truth, the creative truth. Any observer can verify that, and I consider myself an observer."

I worked nine months on a film, **Motion Painting No. 1**, without ever seeing a piece of it. All I did was check the exposure level of each roll that came back from the lab, so I only saw the film when the first color composite release print was ready. Fortunately, I was relieved to see that all my anxieties about those hundreds of "little technical devils" that could have spoiled so many months of work were quite unjustified, I was very happy, and felt a deep emotion that I cannot describe—but it is probably something that others feel on similar occasions.

I want this work to fulfill the spiritual and emotional needs of our era. For there is something we all seek—something we try for during a lifetime working at filmmaking, always unsatisfied, always cheated, always taken for an idiot by the film industry, but hoping despite all that, here and there, one day, perchance, something will be revealed, arising from the unknown, something that will reveal the True Creation: the Creative Truth!

The usual motion picture which is shown to the masses everywhere in countless motion picture theaters all over the world is photographed realism—photographed surface realism-in-motion... There is nothing of an absolute artistic creative sense in it. It copies only nature with realistic conceptions, destroying the deep and absolute creative force with substitutes and surface realisms. Even the animated film today is on a low artistic level. It is a mass product of factory proportions, and this, of course, cuts down the creative purity of the work of art. No sensible creative artist could create a sensible work of art if a staff of co-workers of all kinds each has his or her say in the final creation—producer, story director, story writer, music director, conductor, composer, sound men, gag men, effect men, layout men, background directors, animators, inbetweeners, inkers, cameramen, technicians, publicity directors, managers, box office managers, and many others. They change the ideas from being born, and substitute for the absolute creative motives only cheap ideas to fit the lowest common denominator.

The creative artist of the highest level always worked at his best alone, moving far ahead of his time. And this shall be our basic tenet: that the Creative Spirit shall be unobstructed by realities or anything else that spoils this absolute *pure* creation. And so we must cut out the tremendous mountains of valueless motion picture productions of the past and future—the mountain ranges of soap bubbles—and we must concentrate on the tiny golden thread underneath which is hardly visible beneath the glamorous, sensational excitement, securely buried for a long time, especially in our own era when the big producing and distributing monopolies control every motion picture screen in an airtight grip.

So only one way remains for the creative artist: to produce only for the *highest* ideals—not thinking in terms of money or sensational success or to please the masses. The real artist should not care if he is understood, or misunderstood, by the masses. He should listen only to his *Creative Spirit* and satisfy his highest ideals, and trust that this will be the best service that he can render humanity.

Translated by William Moritz

Oskar Fischinger, "La Veritable creation," *Le Cinéma: A Knokke-Le Zoute 1949*, Brussels: Festival Mondial du Film et des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, 1949, 35-37.

# Observable Forces

Harry Smith

Since I showed my films at the museum here using live musicians improvising from the images rather than from a score, the musicians who gather nightly in the back room of a cafe near here, to play for their own amusement, after they have their regular jobs, have asked me to bring my projector to their "Jam Session" several times, because now everyone wants to try playing while looking at the film. I am sending you some photographs taken at the museum of the musicians who played there, and who are the most advanced here. These people are now intuitively creating a new kind of music that will not be accepted by the public probably for 50 years. They are all really poor, sometimes hungry, because they would rather express what they call "soul" in their playing than hurt themselves by changing it to fit the backward standards of today's listeners. As you probably know, all the popular musical developments of the last hundred years (spirituals, ragtime, jazz, blues, "Boogie Woogie," Swing, Be Bop etc.) were made by intuitive, but uneducated, genuses's (sic) who died without getting any money or recognition because they were leaders and ahead of their time by fifty or seventy years. All of the types of music I list above are worthless because of their vulgarity and striving for effect. But now, due to the same forces that gave birth to real art after five thousand years of objective attempts, a great change, unsuspected, to the world is about to occur in music. This is too complex to discuss here, but I hope to be nearer to you soon and will then describe the evidence that I have. But to return to musicians—Stanley Willis, a piano player (wearing an Indian hat in the photographs) saw my music diagrams about a year and a half ago and

told other musicians about them. Those on the photo group all got very interested in my work at that time and most of them had played with the films long before the museum showing. Hardly any of these people can read music and many have trouble even reading and writing English, but for these very reasons they are often in unknowing contact with the true sources of creativity. None of them had ever heard of modern painting but they all appreciated it at once. The trombone player (seated far right), for example, pointed out many remarkable things I myself had not noticed in your "Royally" the very first time I showed it to him. Last month I luckily borrowed a tape recorder and made records of about thirty different performances of musicians following the films. By comparing these tapes with each other and with the films it has been possible to make a start toward an investigation of intuitive creation. By investigating these observable forces which effect man, but which are scorned by pedantic science, it will be possible for us soon to realize the final stages of man's development. It is not impossible that your Institute of Light is the "Fire" spoken of in the Bible (and in Leonardo's prophesies) as heralding Armageddon and the beginning of the new world I am using part of each day on these investigations and one of my most useful tools has been comparison of individual reactions to the films...

Harry Smith, from letter to Hilla Rebay, June 17, 1950, excerpted with permission of the Harry Smith Archives, New York.



Harry Smith in front of his sketches, 1950: Harry Smith Archives

## Images of Nowhere

Raúl Ruiz

The history of visual perception includes innumerable theories. I'd like to quote you two, from the studies of Molineux and Clérambault. Molineux asks: "If a man blind from birth suddenly recovers his sight and sees a sphere and a cube of which he has previous tactile knowledge, will he be able to tell them apart by sight alone?" This is a question which has provoked many contradictory replies. But whether we decide (as the nativists do) that like any other human being the blind man is equipped from birth with archetypal images of both shapes, or that the interconnection between tactile and visual experiences allows immediate recognition (the empiricist belief), or that a period of transition is required, or that visual objects appear as continuous surfaces (such that a joint operation of touch, sight, and movement is necessary in order to understand them), still the underlying principle of each of these responses will be the same, namely that reality can be articulated and reproduced. The outside world possesses a grammar which we can describe and use to invent an entirely artificial world, to which absolutely fresh experiences can be added, even if they are experienced only in that controlled reality which we call a utopian image. But the problem is not really to decide whether or not we are capable of inventing a world which can replace the entire world of our senses, but to discover what other mechanical worlds are accessible through this utopian vision.

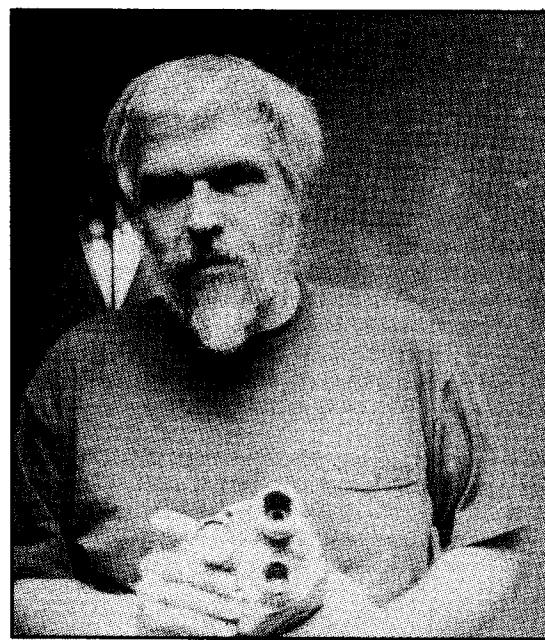
Here are two very simple examples which belong to the audiovisual world that prefigures utopian images. In his memoirs describing a cataract operation, Gaëtan de Clérambault says of the moment in which vision suddenly returns: "Naturally, at first there was a general impression of visual flux, as though underwater. Then, an imprecise notion of distance, bringing things into closer range: if I wanted to pick something up, I knew from experience I had to reach some ten centimeters further than where I saw the object.... Every source of light caused an imperfectly geometrical figure of constant form. My right eye saw something like a treble-clef, leaning backwards with the lower element obliquely elongated. At night, the brilliant light of the street lamps and display windows appeared like so many treble-clefs.... For my left eye, less affected, the false image was smaller: it was like a somewhat scalene raspberry, I mean with an oblique base, sketched out in glowing filaments.... When the light sources are numerous and close together, for instance watching sunlight

in the leaves of a tree, the whole forms a most curiously disciplined ensemble. All the figures seem to be resting on a singular kind of grid more intuited than perceived. For the right eye (the one seeing the treble-clefs) this grid is lozenge-shaped.... For the left eye (the one seeing the flaming raspberries) the links of the grid are square.... The eye from which the cataract was removed tends to modify all colors by the addition of a bit of blue.... Strong, dark colors are not changed; light colors change slightly in dominant tone, sometimes agreeably so: pink takes on a violet hue, a violet-pink turns a rarer color still; stark tones tend to disappear." A painter who had recently undergone a cataract operation described how he saw cylinders everywhere, and had lost the notion of right-angles: everything he saw was trapezoidal. It seems to me that the visual phenomena described by Clérambault are two kinds. The first, arbitrary, compensatory images remind me of Florenski's canonical signs. The other could be called aquatic images, or flux forms, which invade areas left empty by defective vision. This process of compensation is what preoccupies the architects of utopian images, which are better known as virtual reality or computer graphics. There is a superstition—or belief, or scientific truth supported by experiment—which says that cinema is the art of stimulating a part of the brain that normally functions during sleep, by bombarding it with static images juxtaposed so as to create the illusion of movement. Video, on the other hand, in which the image is liquid, is said to stimulate another part of the brain which functions only when the body is awake. Whether the distinction is scientifically valid or not is irrelevant here. What is interesting is the suggestion that we can intervene to provoke virtual images by using the brain's compensatory mechanisms. A group of people who are involved in manufacturing special effects for the Lucas company in Hollywood discussed with me the possibility of making "personalized" animated films exclusively out of such images. The principal obstacle is that the brain needs twenty to thirty seconds to process the first image, but once the first image is reconstituted the others can run off in an animated series using the same basic pattern. We went further, though, and from these flux-images we imagined film sequences in which abstract animated images would provoke different responses in each one of us. Each spectator would be watching a different three-dimensional film than his neighbor, for each would have visual uncertainties (fluxes) of his own.

Raúl Ruiz, "Images of Nowhere," *Poetics of Cinema: 1 Miscellanies*, Paris: Éditions Dis Voir, 1995, 38-40.

# TIME... on dit: Having Declared a Belief in God

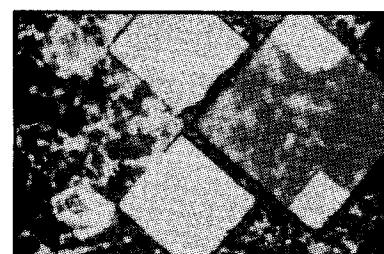
Stan Brakhage



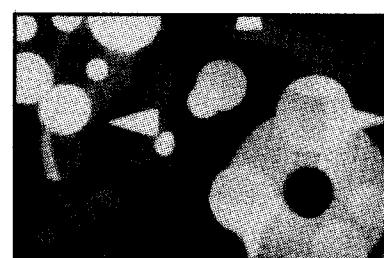
Stan Brakhage



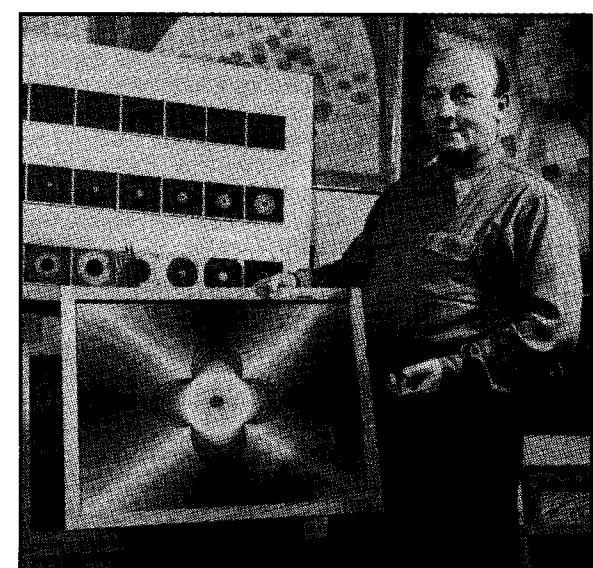
Film No. 1 by Harry Smith, 1946



Film No. 3 by Harry Smith, 1947-49



Film No. 5 by Harry Smith, 1950



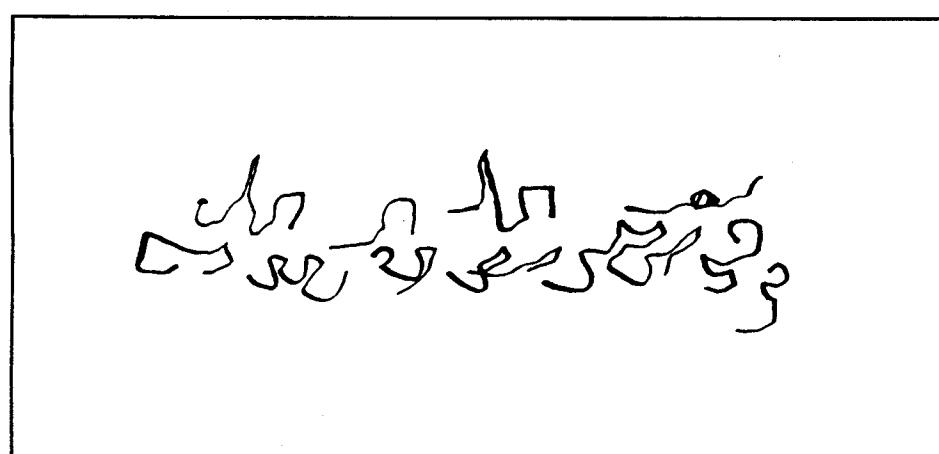
Oskar Fischinger with Motion Painting Originals, 1949

Having declared a belief in God, and God's presence in current human affairs and (however obliquely) human consciousness, I think it is incumbent (in times like these, times of varying styles-of-doubt) to attempt to write what I personally mean by the word "God." I'm no theologian, obviously, nor even an acceptable "cracker-barrel" philosopher. I theorize—and almost entirely in the field of aesthetics. Primarily I write to exhaust language on a given subject, to drive the mind beyond words, so that I can begin, and begin again and again where words leave off, veer their references into vision, each verbal connective synapse, to effect that my mind's eye have full sway so that I can commence my work: I am a filmmaker.

I have found, across years of photography and editing, that the verbal can open into the visual, like a swing gate in the mind, or sprung door, revealing plethoras of inexplicable and often utterly unexpected visitations. It is my only excuse for titling my films—that words can announce Light's life, as it were, and prompt a chaotic display of illumination into Vision...and at the same time can tutor chaos into rhythmic mimic of cathectic thought.

The twin aspects of seeing, (1) sheer reception of the entire fiery illumination of the world, its bounce-light, and (2) cathectis-of-such into visual thinking, can be guided (in imitation of language perhaps) to co-exist at once and one, like the yes/no or then/now of unconscious process. It is as if that sparks the meat-tongue and heaves the diaphragm into such shapings of air as we call "speech" can also cathect, haunt, invest light waves, sparkled optics and the electricity of thought into memorable coherency without any loss of one's sense of chaos (i.e. chaos: "a state of things in which chance is supreme," as Webster's has it).

"Oh God," "Dear God," and the like, as pleas, uttered in desperate nervous extremity, are the signifiers of illumination and envisionment at one, except inasmuch as the words stand shackled to wish. The aesthetic of such prayer might best be expressed "Oh/God," "OGod," so forth.



Drawing By Joan Miro

How can God be defined by our language except as some ultimate compound Good. Perhaps it should be compacted to "Gd," that it be grunt of the flute-throat trapped in the mouth of the sayer rather than social expression... (for as a saying, this word may be uttered easily immediately after, say, the act of slaying a helpless creature to no purpose; but as a term thrust to the arched roof of the mouth and curled upon the tongue, one would suppose it must adhere, in the mind, to benevolent kinship and Grace in the eventuality of thought).

But as God can be experienced as ecstasy passionately, then one must factor all pain plentifully into any equation. The fevers of being Human, The Wrath of God as experience of Life-on-Earth, invigorate any notion of deity with such trembling of the vocal cords and quake of mind as can be heard in barest whisper and felt as slightest thought. Yet this, too, must come to be known as a goodness—even if against all body's sensibility of well being.

How to picture such?...except, say, classically, as a stasis such as The Sphinx, or baroquely, as does Bach (with bass quaver at-one with theme engendering seemingly infinite variations) or romantically, as "A solid moving through an inferno" (as poet Michael McClure has it). None of these traditional formulas achieve a moving at-oneness. None permit both visual-chaos and envisioned-meaning coexistence (though each, at best, can be sensed as attempts at such resolve).

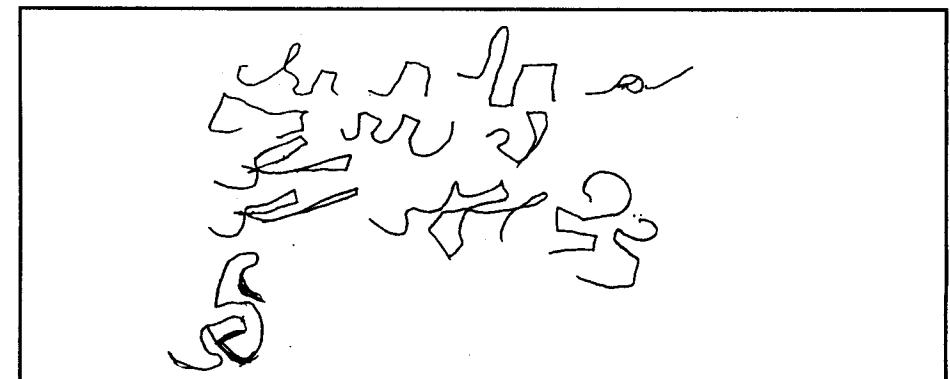
Fear, as an inward-looking condemnation of history's tradition-ridden forms, aborts outlook, creates props (defence) such as, for prime example, "subject matter." If the external be subject to one's self, and if self be, thus, possessed by oneself, then all expletive becomes such muttering as an echo-chamber might be said to engender: the visual corollary to this word-trap would be mirror reflecting mirror's imagery to some supposed infinitesimal macrocosm...I see myself seeing myself infinitely from a felt base-stance in diminishing, albeit solid seeming, variations which, at sight's limit, opt, naturally, enough, to be imagined and to be variably imaginable. The inverse of this imagined variability of one's diminished self, would most reasonably be a macrocosm in which one's self-shape didn't exist at all, coexistent with an imaged BEING, larger and even larger, multiply amorphous shape-shifting of oneself: this, then, is the classically baroque romance of self and God which Western aesthetics have engendered.

Let me draw a bit of an invented glyph. It is, to me at least, as if a drawer (pun unintended but certainly pertinent) in the "locked cabinet" of the page were opened. These (my crude copies of

Film No. 1 by Harry Smith, 1946

drawings by Miró) suggest an inhabitable space wherein God might be conceived?...inferred?—no!, "might be" (as if uttered) is better.

Why is that?



Drawing by Stan Brakhage

We are "in God's hands" we say, and sometimes feel an "I am" thus. It is earliest sense of cradling mother being evoked. It is a sensation of imagined space, really—space as a protective and comforting touch, as a tremolo length/breadth surface-and-interior entire self embodied...space which is, as touch, as caress and reverberating containment, realized by us as movement, an infinitely moving experience (of what is otherwise known only coldly unto mobility).

The axiomatic corollary experience is God-as-stillness, the ultimate sense of deity as all-pervasive and encompassing peace and protectiveness; but this, too, is a feeling of movement, of being so much at-one with an intricacy of cosmic rhythms, with felt radiant particle/waves (as Neils Bohr would have it) in cancellation of chaos and stasis at one once forever.

God dreams a tree, say; and the tree is in the brain of a human, any/all humans—this story a terrible fable to frighten little children into sleep...a tree enfolded within each slept child's mind, so that the dream of God and the dreams of the children are one. This, each, tree grows to a great height which (envisioned as branches) is/(are) in the stars—these heights and branches become the very dreamt limbs which straightway connect the, now, dreamt stars: however, the forms which these limb-lines delineate haven't finally any solidity separate from an ever extending dream-web of God's dreamt tree.

The forms must be named by The King (caught also in all gauze of dream) or by his sorcerers, wizards, poets, what-not-know-all's in/to order, that there be a reality...a royal way, or something that all can agree upon.

For a very long time, while all the forms and then the stars were being named, God's dream was taken for granted; but once the multitude of earthly shapes and shape-shifting animal life, had come closer to being entirely named (the shapes of the sky growing dim in themselves) the remembrance of God's dream began to prompt all dream thought; and the memory of that was too terrible for shape-sentient men and women to bear: it, the dreamt Tree of God was become superfluous to the naming game—was in fact terrifyingly antithetical.

Just as the composer Anton Bruckner could only utter the word "Gott" in whispers, so too the reverent dreamer couldn't imagine a word for God in the hush of dream. Some then cursed by way of that term by day and forgot all dream by night.

At all/(any-which-way) turns—MIRACLES...or so it seems to the awake-sleeping/sleep-awake human dreamer in seizure of waves, light-waves, sound-waves, the self-generated electrical waves of touch, the synaptic waves of scent-taste or taste impinging on brain—miracles, either as one is overwhelmed by sensation and/or senses chaos. The simplest logic posits order: the basest survival instinct is insistent to appeal for order, for primal form: the whole nervous system's constantly jostled continuities and particularities of thought prompt thought's ultimatum—ordered form (to degree of agnostic, atheistic negation/positivistic BELIEF) in "crystal clear," like we say—giving that "cluster" of, then, centered idea the word "God": gender, generatrix, generator, evermore.

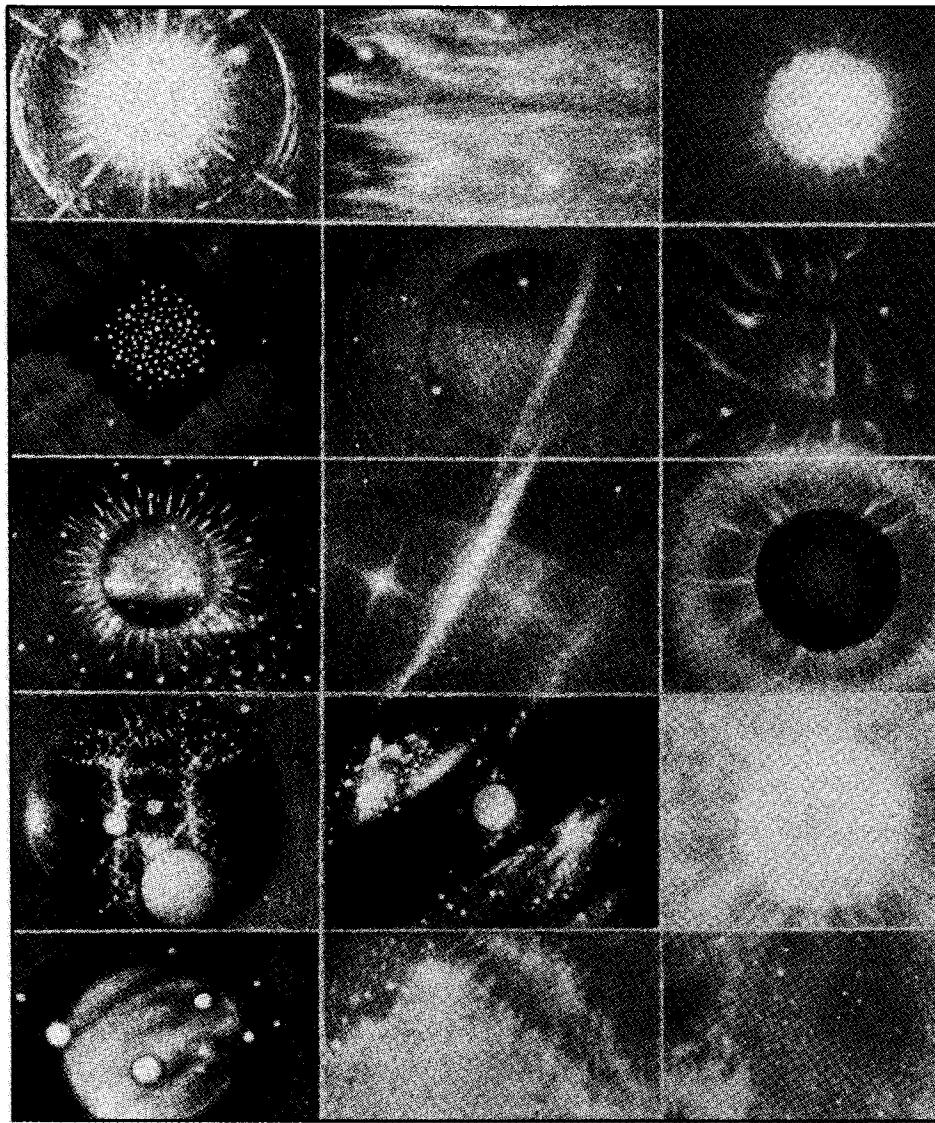
It is not, of course, as simple as that, nor nearly so complex either. You cannot say, "If there were no God one would have to be invented," because the absolute necessity for concept of "God" is, in itself, sufficient inference for the existence of a deity. It is the language which complexly signifies. The felt-need-for pervades each personal and all historical Human.

"With a great desire I have desired to come to you and rest with you in the marriage of Heaven, running to you by a new path as the clouds course in the purest air like sapphire": Abbess Hildegard von Bingen (d. 1170), poet, playwrite (supposed creator of "the morality play") and wondrous musical composer...myself wishing I could end this writ with one of her beautiful hymns—the intervals between her sung tones, the textures of her words, an audio equal to Miró's spacially charged doodling exhibited earlier in this (otherwise faulty) script.

Stan Brakhage, "TIME...on dit: Having Declared a Belief in God," *Musicworks*, No. 63, Fall 1995, 45-46.

# Hilla Rebay and the Guggenheim Nexus

Cecile Starr



Jordan Belson, *Music of the Spheres*, 1977

Hilla Rebay, Alsace-born artist and daughter of German Baron von Ehrenwiesen, came to America in 1927 and within a few years had painted the portrait of mining millionaire Solomon R. Guggenheim, convinced him to collect "non-objective" paintings and started plans for the New York Museum that now bears his name. Her role in promoting early abstract films in this country, though paltry compared to the work she did on behalf of Kandinsky, Chagall and Klee, deserves at least passing recognition in the history of American avant-garde film. That role is too often obscured by gossip, ridicule and scorn. Was she Guggenheim's mistress? I surely don't know. Many women have been the mistresses of millionaires but left no significant imprint on the world of art. Was she prone to outrageous attacks of criticism and rage? It appears so. Dwinell Grant, who worked as Rebay's assistant for about a year (1941-42), often said that he left the job to avoid having a nervous breakdown. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, one of her lifelong friends, remained undeterred by her outbursts and even learned how to calm her. Many art curators have had wildly uneven personalities; Rebay was the first in this country to show a passionate interest in abstract art and to include film as a serious, integral part of a major museum.

As early as 1930, Rebay had stated her intention to show abstract motion pictures in her proposed museum. She preferred the term "non-objective," her own translation of the German word *gegenstandlos*, which Kandinsky had used as early as 1911. Such art, she felt, had a spiritual origin, whether based on geometrical or freely-invented forms. When the Gallery of Non-Objective Painting opened in 1939 on East 54th Street (originally it was to have been called the "Temple of Non-Objectivity"), she planned to establish a film center there. Frank Lloyd Wright's plans for the now-famous Fifth Avenue museum included a basement floor devoted entirely to a Film Center and Light Institute which was to contain an archive of pioneering non-objective films and a studio where contemporary film artists could have free access to equipment to make films.<sup>1</sup> (It was also to contain a continuing automatic show of Charles R. Dockum's Mobile Color projections, the engineer-inventor's original system of controlled, repeatable compositions in colored light.)

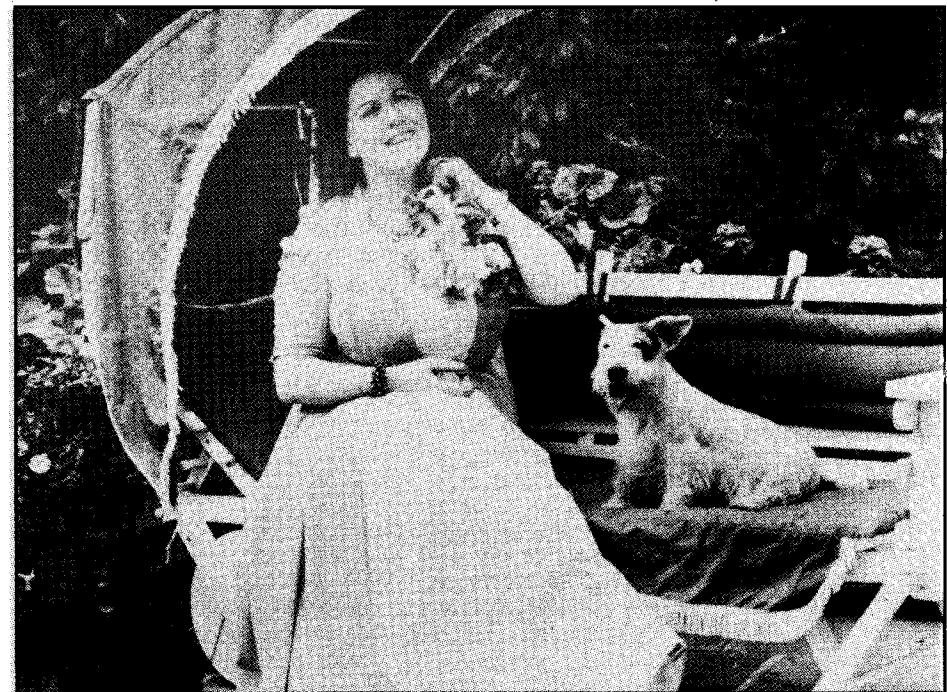
Three important filmmakers played major roles in Rebay's plans for the proposed film center: Hans Richter, Oskar Fischinger and Norman McLaren. Like Rebay herself, all three had begun successful careers in Europe before coming to the United States. Perhaps all three felt as she did when she first arrived here: "I am too modern for this country."

Rebay's association with Hans Richter began in 1913, when her first painting studio turned out to be next to his. Both were then portrait painters; their early drawings of one another are now in the Rebay Collection of the Guggenheim Museum. "Richter paints great things," she declared at the time, and when he was drafted as a cannoneer in 1915, Rebay wrote her father asking for help in getting Richter transferred to a less dangerous assignment. When Richter was severely wounded, then invalidated out of the German army, she wrote again with some concern: "...the poor fellow... does not have long to live."<sup>2</sup>

Independently, Rebay and Richter became converts to abstract art in 1916, and in January 1917<sup>3</sup> Rebay wrote to her brother: "We are now the innovative ones of an important period. My friend Arp is probably the best, and Richter is also one of them—wonderful artists." Richter introduced Rebay to Eggeling in Berlin, and she was among the first to see their seminal abstract films. Richter and Rebay lost touch with each other until 1939, when she helped him leave Switzerland (he'd become a refugee), by inviting him to lecture at the New York Museum she then headed. For the museum's film collection she purchased from him his *Rhythm 21* (1924) and Eggeling's *Diagonal Symphony* (1924-25). Within a year or so, Richter had become director of the newly founded Film Institute at New York's City college, where he remained for 15 years. The films he made in the United States were financed in part by Peggy Guggenheim, Solomon's niece, who also had a modern art gallery and collection, now administered by the Guggenheim Museum.

Oskar Fischinger had come to the U.S. in 1936, partly to get away from Nazi Germany (which had outlawed abstract art) and partly to continue his filmmaking work within the Hollywood industry. His efforts to fit into the routinized production systems at Paramount, MGM and the Disney Studio ended in Fischinger's withdrawal in each case. Hilla Rebay, who considered him the best of all abstract filmmakers, brought him to New York in 1938 to make recommendations for the planned film center. He advised among other things, a half-spherical auditorium, "like a planetarium," which would produce "a cosmic feeling of endless space without perspective." (The auditorium that was later built in the Frank Lloyd Wright museum bore a striking resemblance to Fischinger's recommendation.)

By 1940 Rebay had purchased ten Fischinger films for the museum's collection, and had shown them at the occasional "film concerts" held periodically at the museum. In return for his gift of a print of *An Optical Poem*, Rebay sent him a check for \$250. But when he wanted backing for a 100-minute abstract film that would cost between \$100,000 and \$200,000, that sort of largesse



Hilla Rebay, 1944

was out of the question. As Rebay explained later in her correspondence with John Whitney, Solomon Guggenheim was not interested in film as an art form; the small sums that she managed to send filmmakers in the form of stipends, grants and print purchases were about as far as she could stretch her personal prerogatives.

Norman McLaren, who had started his film career as a young Scotsman working in England for John Grierson's governmental documentary unit, came to the U.S. as a pacifist at the beginning of World War II. His two years in New York City might have been bleak indeed, had he not met Hilla Rebay at the 54th Street gallery. When she indicated that she would gladly look at some of his work, he quickly created two short films just for that purpose. These were *Loops and Dots* (1940), both of which he made by drawing pictures and sound directly onto 35mm film. When Rebay purchased a print of each and agreed to show them in an upcoming film program, McLaren went home and made three more—*Stars and Stripes*, *Boogie-Doodle* and *Scherzo*. (Later they were released officially by the National Film Board of Canada, where McLaren had accepted what he called: "a perfectly marvelous opportunity," once again working for John Grierson.)

McLaren also gave technical and general advice for the museum's first film shows, and even set up a fire-proof, sound-proof projection box in the gallery itself—which he felt provided better atmosphere and surroundings than a theater. Films by Richter, Eggeling, Fischinger and McLaren himself were shown at these "Concerts of Non-Objectivity." I once asked Dwinell Grant if his films had been shown, and his answer was no. He'd been there only as the projectionist. Marie Menken attended the programs too, as Rebay's secretary; at the time she was an abstract painter who hadn't yet ventured into filmmaking (and when she did, her film work would be as uncredited camera operator in 1943 for Willard Maas's semi-abstract *Geography of the Body*). Menken introduced her friend Francis Lee to Rebay on one occasion, and he was later awarded a stipend for filmmaking. Small grants also were given to John and James Whitney, Harry Smith and Jordan Belson in the mid-1940s.

"I had great difficulty to introduce film at all," Hilla Rebay wrote the young John Whitney in 1944, adding that Mr. Guggenheim was interested mostly in paintings. (Readers should keep in mind that in 1929, when Guggenheim had agreed to let Rebay buy a collection of Kandinskys and Kees and the like, he was the pity and scorn of his wealthy friends. They thought he was throwing his money away on worthless geometry from hateful, tasteless Germany, at a time when everything that was important in modern art had to come from Paris.)

"If I had the means," Rebay continued in her 1944 letter to John Whitney, "I would myself help the cinematic workers in order to make artists out of them and put them on the map—and so, at least get the world interested." She urged Whitney to look at Fischinger's films, to learn form and space relationships, to avoid decorative patterns. "The real issue," she concluded, "is to touch the soul."

Five years later Solomon Guggenheim died, and Rebay was removed from the museum's directorship. The museum's film collection of about two dozen films in various stages of disrepair and disintegration was eventually donated to the Library of Congress.

<sup>1</sup> Most of the information about Rebay cited or quoted in this article is drawn from Joan M. Lukach's biography, *Hilla Rebay, In Search of the Spirit in Art* (George Braziller, New York, 1983), to which readers are referred for a full account of this remarkable and enigmatic woman's career. Lukach cites Harvard's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts as an example on an expanded scale of how Rebay's film center might have developed.

<sup>2</sup> However, Richter survived until 1978, when he was 88 years old.

<sup>3</sup> Those concerned with Rebay's later personality difficulties may be interested in knowing that for a ten-year period she suffered one severe illness after another. In 1917 she was hospitalized with "an attack of nerves" after which she had migraines for a decade or more. In 1918 she twice had diphtheria, a disease which usually was fatal; that same year her tonsils were removed, resulting in throat ailments thereafter. (In 1919 she shared a studio with Rudolf Bauer, a painter who became her lover, mentor and tormentor, all in one.)

In 1921, at age 30, she wrote: "I did not achieve anything but infinite loneliness and hopelessness... to be always so unloved, so despised and hated, makes me sick at heart." In 1925 in Italy, she was hospitalized for three months and attempted suicide twice. At about that time she wrote to Bauer: "I have too much in me not to achieve something great even if I am only a stupid woman. I will achieve something anyway, preferably for others, but if not, then for myself."

"I will go to America," she wrote in 1925.

"I must go to America," she wrote in 1926. "Everyone says I should go to America."

In January 1927, she made her first trip to new York, ready to begin her mission.

# Mary Ellen Bute

Cecile Starr

In the mid 1930s, Mary Ellen Bute (1906-1983) was the first American to make abstract motion pictures, and in the early 1950s along with Norman McLaren and Hy Hirsh was among the first to explore electronic imagery in film. Starting as a Rosa Bonheur-style painter in Texas, she came east at age 15 to study painting in Philadelphia (where she first saw Kandinsky's work); later she studied stage lighting at Yale (in the first class to which women were admitted); made a round-the-world dance and drama tour as a teacher-lecturer; worked with Joseph Schillinger on his mathematical projections and with Leon Theremin on his electronic musical invention. Her first attempt with abstract film was in collaboration with Joseph Schillinger and Lewis Jacobs on the unfinished *Synchronization* in 1932. Bute's introduction to Ted Nemeth (who became her husband in 1940) led to a partnership that produced 12 short musical "seeing-sound" abstract films, several commercial TV ventures, a live-action featurette, and a full-length film version of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.

## Statement I

Mary Ellen Bute

I was a painter in Texas [and] lived on a ranch [until my Houston art teacher] arranged for a scholarship for me at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. That was a whole new world for me. Practically all of the articles and journals that had reached my part of Texas were very against modern art. [So] when I went to Philadelphia I was so deeply impressed by the wonderful Picassos, the African art, the [Paul] Klees, the Braques, the Kandinskys... He [Kandinsky] used abstract, nonobjective elements so you could experience a canvas the way you experience a musical composition... Well, I thought it was terrific... [but] these things should be unwound in time continuity. It was a dance. That became my [objective]... I came to New York and tried to find the technical means. The most developed thing at the time was stage lighting. I went to an art school where we did many things with lighting, but it wasn't adequate, an art medium per se. Then, by a fluke, I got into Yale... and they had a fabulous switchboard, and of course I became one of its runners, reaching for my kinetic art form. From Yale I got the job of taking drama around the world... and got to see, oh, the Noh drama of Japan, and the Taj Mahal in India [where gems surrounded the building]. I looked into the gems and saw reflected the Taj Mahal, and the lake, and the whole thing appealed to me enormously... because it was romantic and because it was a kinetic, visual thing. I started entertaining myself by imagining these designs and patterns all in movement. Back in New York I related all of this to Thomas Wilfred, who by that time had developed a color organ. This was in 1929... Then I heard about Leon Theremin... and apprenticed myself to his [sound] studio to learn more about composition. He became interested in my determination to develop a kinetic visual art form, [and helped me with experiments]. We submerged tiny mirrors in tubes of oil, connected to an oscillator, and drew where these points of light were flying. The effect was thrilling for us—it was so pure. But it wasn't enough. Finally we got a Bolex camera, and started analyzing, to make my first film, *Rhythm in Light* (1934). It was mostly three-dimensional animation. Pyramids, and ping pong balls, and all interrelated by light patterns—and I wasn't happy unless it all entered and exited exactly as I had planned.

Mary Ellen Bute, from a talk given at the Chicago Art Institute, May 7, 1976



Mary Ellen Bute and Ted Nemeth in their studio, c. 1935

## Dwinell Grant

Cecile Starr

Dwinell Grant (1912-91) came to abstract filmmaking through painting, anthropology, Gestalt psychology and theatrical stage lighting. After living in the midwest for nearly 30 years, Grant came east to New York where he worked for one year (1941-42) as assistant to the director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation of Non-Objective Art (now the Guggenheim Museum). The body of his independent film work, made between 1941 and 1949, remained virtually unseen by the public until he was "discovered" by Anthology Film Archives, working as a script writer and director of medical and scientific films. In 1986 Grant made his last film, *Dream Fantasies*, combining abstract imagery and still photographs of female nudes with his own electronic musical soundtrack.

## Statement Dwinell Grant

In 1937, I was 25 years old, did not yet own a camera, and had not begun to think about films. That all began a couple of years later.

However, in 1941-42, I did make a series of tests and abstract animation experiments, most of which were never used in the later films. (I don't know why.) This stuff is now together in a piece about 7 minutes long [*Abstract Experiments*]...

There is, included in this non-composition, a short bit of me standing in front of a work bench. I look very much embarrassed, and it always gets a laugh from the audience...

I have never understood why Anthology [Film Archives] make such a thing out of technical tests. Any more than I can understand why they insisted on making that purely exploratory series of color changes into "Color Sequence." I was just trying to learn something in both cases—not trying to be creative. Film art is different from painting. The film artist can imagine until his brain is numb, but he doesn't really know how something will look until it's on a screen. You'd be surprised how much time and thought have gone into film testing of ideas for the latest composition.

Dwinell Grant, Letter to Cecile Starr, January 28, 1984

## Statement II

Mary Ellen Bute

The Absolute Film is not a new subject. It is concerned with an art which has had as logical a development as other arts, perhaps slowly but naturally.

This art is the interrelation of light, form, movement, and sound—combined and projected to stimulate an aesthetic idea. It is unassociated with ideas of religion, literature, ethics or decoration. Here light, form, and sound are in dynamic balance with kinetic space relations.

The Absolute Film addresses the eye and the ear. Other motion pictures, although making use of sensations of sight and sound, address not the eye and the ear but the intellect. For example, in realistic films, the medium is subordinate to story, symbol or representation. We view an Absolute Film as a stimulant by its own inherent powers of sensation, without the encumbrance of literary meaning, photographic imitation, or symbolism. Our enjoyment of an Absolute Film depends solely on the effect it produces: whereas, in viewing a realistic film, the resultant sensation is based on the mental image evoked.

Cinematographers, painters and musicians find a common enthusiasm in the absolute film. Through using the motion picture camera creatively, cameramen find a seemingly endless source of new possibilities and means of expression undreamed of while the camera was confined to use merely as a recording device. But we must turn back to painters and musicians to find the ideas which probably motivated the Absolute Film into a state of being.

Work in the field of the Absolute Film is accelerating both here and abroad. The foundations for it were laid years ago, and it was more recently anticipated by Cezanne and his followers with whom we have an abstract art of painting taking form. Cezanne used the relationships between color and form, discarding the former mixture of localized light and shade by stressing relationship, he lifted color from imitating objective nature to producing a visual sensation in itself. His paintings of still lifes: apples and tablecloth, are not conceived in a spirit of objective representation; they are organized groups of forms having relationships, balanced proportions and visual associations. His use of color on a static surface reaches a point where the next step demanded an introduction of time sequence and a richer textural range.

The Cubists tried to produce on a static surface a sensation to the eye, analogous to the sensation of sound to the ear. That is, by the device of presenting simultaneously within the same visual field the combined aspects of the same object views from many different angles or at different intervals. They tried to organize forms distantly related to familiar objects to convey subjective emotions aroused by the contemplation of an objective world.

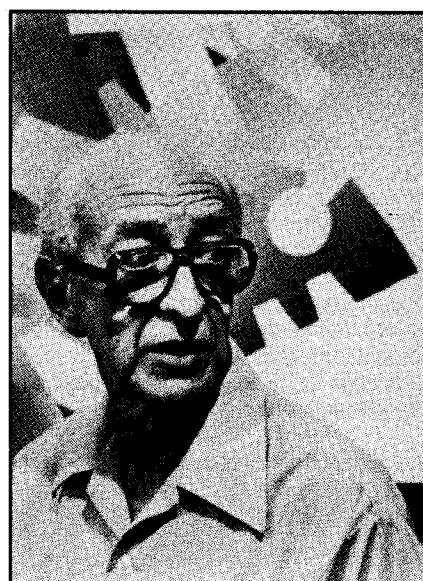
The element of music appears in the paintings of Kandinsky. He painted abstract compositions based on an arbitrary chromatic scale of the senses.

The word color appears often in the writing of Wagner. In the "Reminisces of Amber" (1871) he writes: "Amber made his music reproduce each contrast, every blend in contours and color—we might almost fancy we had actual music paintings."

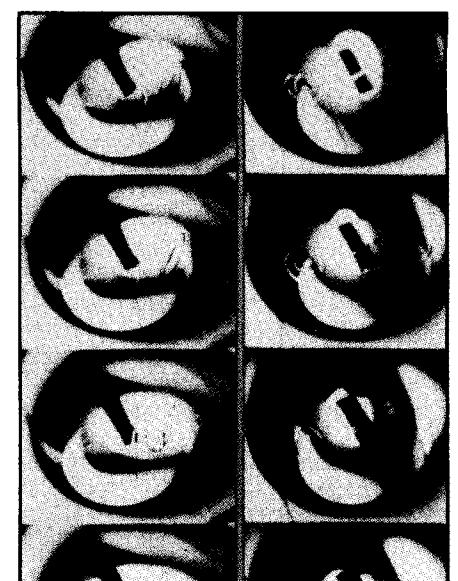
There is simply no end to the examples which we might cite. Some musicians have gone on record as having color associations with specific instruments.

These experiments by both musicians and painters, men of wide experience with their primary art material, have pushed this means of combining the two mediums up into our consciousness. This new medium of expression is the Absolute Film. Here the artist creates a world of color, form, movement, and sound in which the elements are in a state of controllable flux, the two materials (visual and aural) being subject to any conceivable interrelation and modification.

Mary Ellen Bute, "Light • Form • Movement • Sound," *Design*, New York, c. 1935



Dwinell Grant, c. 1980: Robert Haller



Composition No. 3 by Dwinell Grant

## Poem

The paper,  
the canvas,  
are all  
fields  
with almost unlimited potentials.

The possibilities  
for  
organizing

forms,  
colors  
and movements

within  
these fields  
are

endless,

and  
the  
variety depends only on the experience and imagination of the  
artist.

There is no need to repeat.  
There is no need to develop a formula.

Dwinell Grant, *Spiral*, No. 9, October, 1986, Pasadena, back cover

# Oskar Fischinger

William Moritz

Oskar Fischinger (1900-67) must count as one of the greatest artists of this century, yet the upheavals of that very century conspired to blight his artistic career at every turn. Nonetheless, his films and paintings have long enjoyed the status of cult icons, influencing a whole generation of California artists, and continuing anonymously to serve as model for computer graphics and MTV video-clips. Finally, in the closing years of the century, he begins to reach a wider popular acclaim: a recent retrospective at the German Film Museum in Frankfurt proved the most popular exhibition in its history, had to be extended several times, and is scheduled to travel to other European cities.

So charming and brilliant are the color films, and so serene and lovely many of the paintings, one can only regret that their creator died in relative obscurity in 1967. Had he not been harassed and displaced by European politics, had he been able to communicate better in America, perhaps his output would have doubled and reached a wider popular audience during his lifetime. In any case, as the century comes to a close, we can see that Visual Music was really the new artform of this era, and Oskar Fischinger was its Old Master.

## Oskar Fischinger in America

William Moritz

Between the time Oskar signed his Paramount contract and his arrival at the studios in Hollywood (1936), Ernst Lubitsch withdrew from the post of Production Manager, so his plans for Oskar never materialized. Oskar was assigned to create an animated episode for a feature *Big Broadcast of 1937*, one of a series of thin-plotted anthology films designed to show radio celebrities on screen. Oskar, not yet speaking English, was thrilled by the support resources of the Paramount Studios: the possibility of layering cels and using inkers and painters to fill in his designs, which could mean greater intricacy and complexity. He designed an exquisite three-minute abstract animation to a symphonic jazz composition called "Radio Dynamics" by studio composer Ralph Rainger. Only when Oskar requisitioned color film to shoot on did he finally realize that the studio wanted only a black-and-white film—and preferably one incorporating some "special effects" like walking cigarettes! After a month of arguments (including a black-and-white print of Oskar's abstract animation, which looked muddy and confused, with all the dark hues, red or green, melting into the same black), Oskar's Paramount contract was terminated after only 6 months. Oskar's animation did not appear in the feature.

Oskar went suddenly from a regal \$1,000 per month salary to no job, no income at all—a dangerous situation since he risked being deported back to Nazi Germany if he could not support himself. Other German emigrants, agent Paul Kohner and director William Dieterle, helped arrange a contract for him to produce a color animated short for MGM, *An Optical Poem*, which he worked on during 1937 and MGM released in theaters during 1938 and 1939. For *An Optical Poem* Oskar built a set near the MGM lot, and suspended hundreds of geometric paper cut-outs by invisible fishing line from a scaffolding; for each movement, the cut-outs had to be moved slightly, then steadied with a chicken feather on the end of a broomstick. The young John Cage worked with Oskar for a few days as the man who moved and steadied; while John struggled with his task and Oskar waited to make the exposure, Oskar told John about his *Ornament Sound* experiments and his Buddhist-inspired notion that all objects contained a sound that merely needed to be released—which John credits as having set him on the path toward his later "New Music" of noises and silence.

When *An Optical Poem* was finished, Oskar traveled to New York for some shows of his oil paintings, and to seek a commission for an hour-long animation of Dvorak's *New World Symphony* to be shown at the Worlds Fair (but unfortunately no funding came through). He met there Baroness Hilla Rebay von Ehrenwiesen, the temperamental curator of the Guggenheim Foundation and founder of the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (which would later be re-named Guggenheim Museum), who would subsequently offer him various grants from the foundation and exhibit some of his paintings at the museum. But in the meantime, Oskar was summoned back to Hollywood November 1938 to work for Walt Disney on his feature-length concert feature *Fantasia*.

Oskar had met Leopold Stokowski already in Berlin, and again at Paramount (Stokowski also had a sequence in *Big Broadcast of 1937*). Oskar had long cherished the idea of making a feature-length abstract concert film, and had discussed the idea with Stokowski. How disappointed Oskar was to find himself hired by Disney as an animator for one sequence at a modest salary, while Stokowski was starring and listed as Disney's collaborator. Oskar felt depressed at being betrayed (whether it was true or not), and his faltering English made him an object of fun at the Disney Studio, which made his daily work anguish. Furthermore, it soon became clear that, despite the fact that Oskar's films were regularly screened for the entire staff during lunch hour for inspiration, Oskar's own abstract designs were all altered by committees: designs simplified, colors changed, with various representational details inserted in every scene so that it "looked like something."

Despite his unpleasant experiences at Disney, Oskar continued to work there because he was desperate for the money, but when Germany invaded Poland in September 1939 and World War II

began, other studio personnel painted a swastika on the door of Oskar's room, and Oskar asked to be released from his contract.

Oskar was again without means of support, but fortunately the Baroness Rebay arranged to advance him money to make a patriotic film based on Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever" march, which she hoped would be a financial success as a short in theaters—as well as proving that Oskar (and herself), although of German extraction, were enthusiastically American now. Once again, however, Oskar encountered problems with music rights, which were not cleared for several years, during which time he could not screen the film commercially.

Baroness Rebay subsequently gave Oskar a grant to buy the rights to his Paramount sequence "Radio Dynamics," and shoot it in color, but she disliked the title, so Oskar renamed it *Allegretto*. Meanwhile, Orson Welles hired Oskar to work on a new project of his, *It's All True*, which was to be an anthology film with short episodes about Jazz. When The United States entered the War in 1941, Oskar became an "enemy alien" and could not legally be employed in the media, but Welles continued to pay Oskar secretly for nine months. Since the exact nature of Oskar's assignment for Welles was not yet established (after the war began, the focus of the feature changed to Latin American music), Welles let Oskar paint cels for *Allegretto* and work on a second film, intentionally silent, that used the old *Radio Dynamics* title. When the full-color *Allegretto* premiered February 1943, it was clear to everyone, including the Baroness, that it was a masterpiece, the subtle color gradations and multiple layers of imagery corresponding with uncanny exactness to the lively music.

When Orson Welles' production unit was discontinued in 1942, Hilla Rebay again offered Oskar a grant, this time to prepare an animated film synchronized to Bach's "Brandenburg Concerto No. 3." The amount of money that Rebay offered as a stipend, however, was not really enough to fund a complex cel animation like *Allegretto* but, at 10 minutes, more than three times as long. Oskar finished *Radio Dynamics*, which equals *Allegretto* in intricacy and style, but was meant as a meditational mandala, and, as a silent film, was rarely shown, never commercially. After several attempts to find an economical animation technique that would make the Bach music practical, Oskar finally hit upon the idea of filming himself painting, shooting one image each time he made a brushstroke. He worked on *Motion Painting* for nine months, without being able to see how the film was turning out—but, having made millions of drawings for animation films and hundreds of oil paintings, he felt confident, just as confidently as he could draw exact straight lines and perfect circles free-hand. When the film was finished in 1947, and released the following year, Abstract Expressionism was just coming to prominence in the press, with special emphasis on Jackson Pollock's pouring and dripping of paint. Oskar quipped that he felt sorry for someone so disturbed that they had to toss and spill at random to express themselves—Oskar was so at peace that his stream-of-consciousness perfect balance of free-hand geometrical figures expressed him.

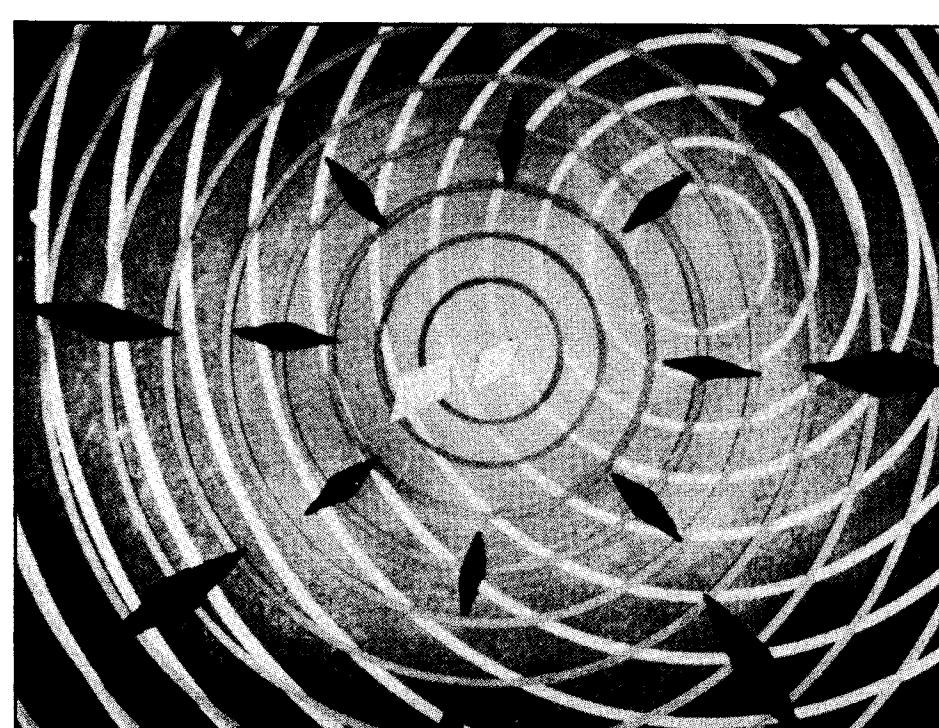
*Motion Painting* won the Grand Prize at the Brussels International Experimental Film Festival in 1949, but Rebay despised the film (she really had wanted a long film like *Allegretto*), and refused to give Oskar any further grants. *Motion Painting* would be his last film, although he lived 20 years after it was finished. He never again received a grant from any source, although he applied. He prepared proposals for a stereoscopic film during the 3-D craze of the early 1950s, and additional "Motion Painting" films. He made a few advertising films. He invented an instrument, the Lumigraph, which allows someone to create colored light patterns with hands or objects in real time, but he was not able to license it for production or distribution. He painted many more canvases, and sold them through galleries; some now hang in the National Gallery in Washington D.C., and other museums in America and Europe. He also enjoyed a quiet cult celebrity during the 1940s and 1950s: young artists who saw his films (especially at the Art in Cinema festival in 1946 at the San Francisco Museum of Art) were inspired to take up abstract filmmaking, so that a whole "school" of California Color Music artists, including James Whitney, Jordan Belson, Harry Smith and Hy Hirsh, flourished.

William Moritz, Excerpted from "Oskar Fischinger: Artist of the Century" with permission of the author, 1994.

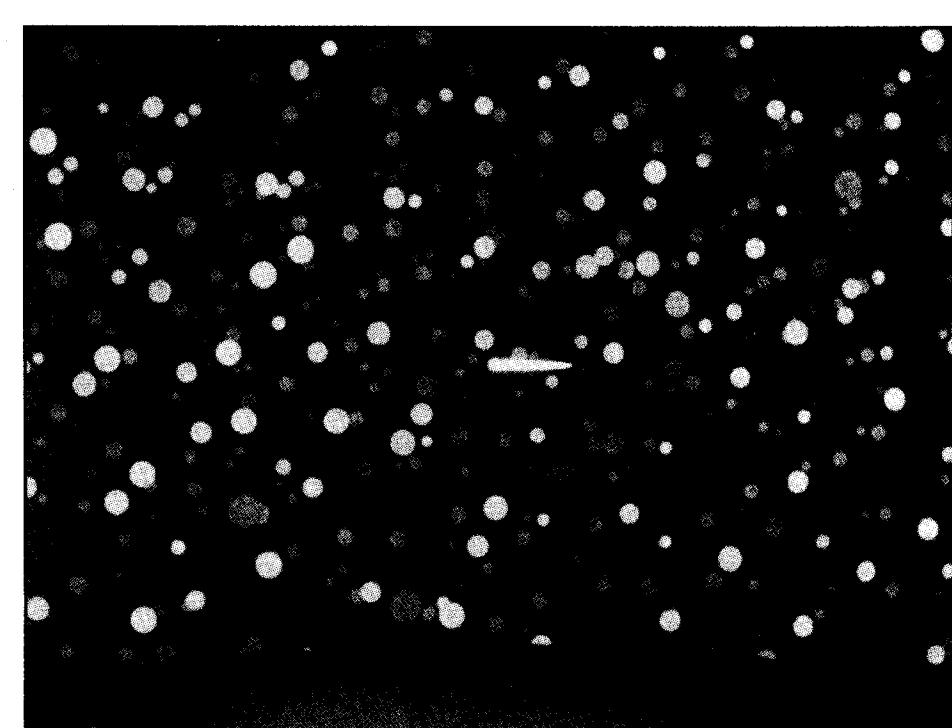
## Oskar Fischinger Harry Smith

You can tell how much I admire Fischinger: the only film of mine that I ever gave a real title to was *Hommage to Oskar Fischinger* (Film No. 5, in the current scheme of things). I learned concentration from him—visiting his home and seeing how he could sit serenely in that small house, crawling with what seemed like a dozen children, and still paint those stunning pictures. That great film *Motion Painting* makes the process seem deceptively simple—and it was simple for him: the images really did just flow from his brush, never a ruler or a compass, all-freehand—but you can't see all the obstacles he had to overcome in order to even work at all. Something so wonderful happened in that film, and in those paintings, something so much better than all the Pollocks and other stuff that the museums fight to get hold of. Did anyone ever fight to save Fischinger's things?

Harry Smith, from an interview with William Moritz



*Allegretto* by Oskar Fischinger, 1936/43: Museum of the Modern Art



*An Optical Poem* by Oskar Fischinger, 1937: Fischinger Archives

# James Davis

Robert Haller

James Davis (1901-74) was an artist whose films of light reflections in the 1950s and 1960s were a unique articulation of abstract images of energy. Not until the 1970s did comparable imagery again appear on motion picture screens. Meanwhile Davis was an inspiration to Stan Brakhage who made one of his important films, *The Text of Light* (1974), in Davis' honor.

Davis was born to a distinguished West Virginia family (one cousin, John, would be Democratic candidate for President; he later—reluctantly—made the losing argument before the Supreme Court in the 1954 desegregation case "Brown vs. the Board of Education"). Davis studied painting at Princeton and in France, became a painter with what could be called Cubist and American impressionist phases. In the 1930s and early 40s he began working with a new material—plastic. After first painting on it, Davis became intrigued with the way molded plastic could be used to transform light, to create moving pools of color. In his Princeton studio he constructed mobile-like, light-modulators (years before he met or apparently knew of Moholy-Nagy) so he could give live performances of his "visual chamber music."

Davis initially turned to film so he could make documentary records of these light concerts, but rapidly realized that with film he could create visual effects far beyond what was possible in real time. His waves and streams of light, images of "the causative forces of nature," were not only beautiful but were also perceived by some observers as expressions of the new physics which had just a few years earlier provided science with atomic energy and explained the forces that fueled the sun. He made 19 films that were released for distribution. (Anthology Film Archives has recently discovered over 100 films among the Jim Davis estate.)

Though he had influential friends—Alfred Barr and Edward Steichen of the Museum of Modern Art, architect Frank Lloyd Wright and painter John Marin—Davis was an introspective, private figure who declined to try to promote his films. When interest in visionary cinema began to grow in the late 1960s, Davis was too shy and too ill, and too poorly represented, to claim his place next to comparable artists like Jordan Belson. Ironically, though he knew that Brakhage was making his feature-length *The Text of Light*, Davis died before he had the opportunity to see it.

In July 1967 he wrote in his journal about his "abstract" films that:

*These artificially invented effects of dynamic reflections [and] refractions... are so mysterious that indeed they do suggest the great flux and flow of energies, or impulses, in nature that precede and*

*follow, the state of being, which is life... This is why they have such great emotional impact...*

More than 15 years earlier, in an article published in *Films in Review*, Davis had dismissed the media of painting and sculpture as being inadequate to depict "the complexities of the twentieth century." Instead, he declared:

*After thirty years as a painter and sculptor I have come to the conclusion that the only recording medium with which a visual artist can express the ideas of our time... is motion picture film.*

Davis' films, as well as scores of paintings, photographs, light sculpture, and much written material, were given to Anthology in 1991. Anthology has published one book of Davis' writings (*The Flow of Energy*) and is restoring and reissuing his films. A second book, about his documentary projects with Frank Lloyd Wright and John Marin, is about to be published in early 1996.

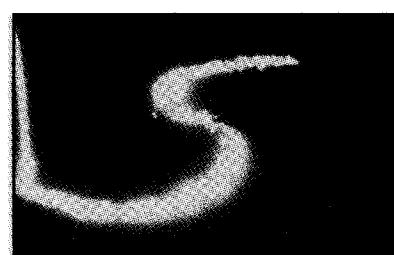
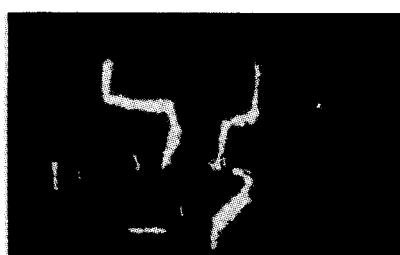
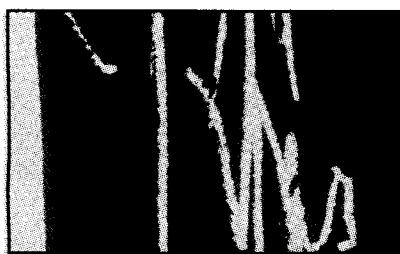
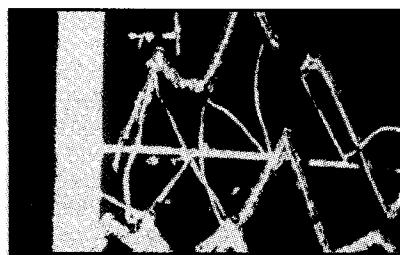
On December 21, 1966 he wrote in his journal about how he perceived his work:

*Strange, but the great discoverers of light were: Rembrandt, Caravaggio, Le Nain, and Vermeer. After them came Turner, long after, and then Monet and the French Impressionists.*

*But, even more important are the first experimenters in using light itself, rather than pigment. Scriabin was the beginning, and [Thomas] Wilfred and his Clavilux was next. Today there are a few who carry this trend to its fulfillment. I think that I am perhaps the foremost of those artists who utilize light as the most important medium of our time.*

In 1954 Cecile Starr visited Davis' Princeton apartment, and described it for an article published that year:

*What was once a living room is now his main workshop... he generally works near an open window using a mirror to catch the natural sunlight and reflect it onto the area to be photographed. He [sometimes] does use special lights, however, to illuminate his plastics. The kitchen in Davis' house is bare of everything except darkroom and editing equipment. In the sitting room (formerly for dining) a 16mm Kodascope sound projector sits on a low table.*



Free Radicals by Len Lye, 1979



Jim Davis, 1971: Jay Paris

## Len Lye

Cecile Starr

In an article for *Art in America*, Adrienne Mancia and Willard Van Dyke (of The Museum of Modern Art) wrote: "Len Lye's films must be seen to be believed: an exquisite and subtle range of vibrating color: an enchanting and original synchronization of visual images and gay music: a brilliant interweaving of live action shots, special photographic effects such as photomontage, solarization and silhouette, and lettering, drawing, stenciling, stippling, painting, all done in direct technique. His films are made with a perfect sense of rhythm, pace, and composition, and best of all they possess a quality often lacking in the experimental film—wit."

Of all animators, Len Lye (1901-80) has been the most unpredictable and free-wheeling. All other animators are called by their last names, if they are at all known: but Len Lye is always Len Lye. (And if you have met him even once, he is "Len" from then on.) "When you start a film, what is your basic goal?", an interviewer once asked him. "Happiness," answered Len Lye, "Great happiness and great art."

Len Lye was born in New Zealand and became interested in motion as a young boy. He invented exercises for himself such as sitting in a slow-moving horse drawn cart and sketching the clothes of the passing people, or making mobile constructions with pulley wheels and an old phonograph handle. At 21 he learned cartoon animation in a studio in Australia, then spent two years in Samoa, where he was captivated by primitive life and art.

Subsequently he turned up in London, "a rolling stone in art, journalism, poetry, and philosophy," as a friend later described him. The London Film Society put up the money for his first film—his only cartoon film—which took him two years to complete. It was titled *Tusalava* (1929), the Samoan word meaning "things go full cycle."

Later, beggaring discarded clear film from friends at Ealing Studios, he persuaded John Grierson and Alberto Cavalcanti at the Government Post Office Film Unit to let him make abstract designs synchronized with rhythmical popular music. These captured public attention in movie theaters with such messages as "Cheaper Parcel Post," and "Post Before 2 P.M." Among these short films are the titles: *A Colour Box* (1935), *Trade Tattoo* (1937), *Swinging the Lambeth Walk* (1939), and *Musical Poster #1* (1940).

In design, color, rhythm, and spirit, they are truly amazing. *Trade Tattoo*, for example, combines live-action photography of workers and machines with stunning color designs painted or stenciled over them—fiery red flames, blue or gold grids. The designs are always in motion, moving magically from image to image, from slogan to slogan, ending with the impish plea that you mail your letters early in the afternoon.

Since 1944, Len Lye has lived in the United States. Until 1951, he worked as a director for *The March of Time*. Since then, he has freelanced. It seems incredible that none of his rich inventive talents has been used by American advertisers and television networks, or even recognized by the givers of grants and public honors.

As a result, in recent years, Len Lye has devoted much of his attention to designing and constructing electrically motorized metal sculptures. He has found himself more successful in selling these than in getting money for films.

His latest film was made in 1958 and sent to the International Experimental Film Exposition at Brussels, where it won the \$5,000 first prize. Entitled *Free Radicals*, it was etched with a needle, frame by frame, making white figures jiggle rhythmically on black leader, to a sound track of African drums and chants. I asked him: Did you use an electric needle? He bent over an imaginary work bench to show me how he had tensed his fingers, hand, arm, and body to create, in pantomime, these fantastic images, one by one.

The film has been shown infrequently in this country because Len Lye feels people who want it should be willing to pay for it. "A museum will pay several thousand dollars for a piece of sculpture," he says, "but it asks the artist to loan or give his films for nothing." The art museum in Kansas City thus far is the only one to offer an acceptable price for a print.

What does Len Lye think of audiences? "I've never heard of an audience," he says, "I don't even know what an audience is. It's a whole lot of other people who are basically a unique version of individuality like me, so I'm only interested in me. Art is a question of 'you be me'... My excitement in life is to discover something that's significant to me... and not to think, 'Well, I wonder if so-and-so's going to like this.'"

Still, using his own time and resources, Len Lye is working from time to time on another film, tentatively titled *Particles in Space*. He describes it as a sort of extension of the technique developed for *Free Radicals*. A "free radical," Len Lye has said, is a "fundamental particle of matter that contains the energy of all chemical change, very much like a compressed spring before release." I can't think of a better answer, at least a partial one, to the question, "Who is Len Lye?" More than anyone else in the world, he seems to be the living spirit of animation—past, present, and future.

Cecile Starr, "Films Without Actors: The Art of Animation," *Popular Photography*, December 1968, New York, 162-164.

# James Whitney

William Moritz

James Whitney (1921-81) was born December 27, 1921 in Pasadena, California and lived all his life in the Los Angeles area. In the early 40s, while still in his teens, James began collaborating on abstract films with his older brother John (1917-95). Their series of *Film Exercises*, produced between 1943-44, are a remarkable achievement—visually based on modernist composition theory (like Schoenberg's a-tonal and serial music) with carefully varied permutation of forms manipulated with cut-out masks so that the image photographed is pure, direct light shaped, rather than the light reflected from drawings of objects in traditional animation. The eerie and sensuous glow of these forms is paralleled by a pioneer electronic music sound score composed by the brothers using an elaborate pendulum device they invented to write out sounds directly onto the film's soundtrack area, with precisely controlled calibrations. At that time, before the perfection of recording tape, these sounds—with exotic “pure” tone qualities, mathematically even chromatic glissandos and reverberating pulsations, were truly revolutionary and shocking. The brothers won a Grand Prize at the 1949 Brussels Experimental Film Competition for the *Film Exercises*.

After the *Film Exercises*, John began to pursue technological, theoretical, mathematical, architectonic and musical ideas which eventually led him to his masterful pioneer work in Computer Graphics. Meanwhile, James became increasingly involved in contemplative, spiritual interests—Jungian psychology, alchemy, yoga, Tao, Krishnamurti and consciousness expansion—which became the subject matter of the four films on which he has worked for over 30 years. James shares this spiritual preoccupation, by the way, with Kupka, Kandinsky, Mondrian, Rothko and many other non-objective artists.

William Moritz, excerpted from 1984 *Toronto Film Festival* catalogue

## Statement

James Whitney

I'm following the thread of insight back to the beginning before fragmentation. I'm examining the “quick,” that amazing thin line weaving between the known and the unknown. I'm trying to capture the first “difference” not as an illusion (memory) but as a fact. It is an immanent, not transcendent “seeing.”

My primary concern now is to discover whether there is or is not something that is not put together by thought, which is memory. Ultimately, I see this as leading to silence and imagelessness; seeing without an image—hearing without a sound.

James Whitney, “Towards Being Choicelessly Aware, Conversations with James Whitney,” 1974

## James Whitney

William Moritz

James Whitney's early films carefully explore formal possibilities along rigorously planned permutations, drawing on the model of Arnold Schoenberg's theories of musical composition. The 8mm *Variations*, made between 1940 and 1942, use primary geometrical figures—circle, rectangle, triangle—that appear and disappear (as do the figures in Viking Eggeling's *Diagonal Symphony*, 1924), alter colors, and overlap in patterns and sequences which constitute inversions and variations on a basic visual theme. The last and most complex of these, *Variations on a Circle* (1941-42), is in three movements, with an all-blue “nocturne” in the middle, foreshadowing the second movement of his *Film Exercise No. 4* (1944), for which he also composed an impressive musical score using the pendulum system that allowed the composer to draw precisely calibrated tones on the soundtrack area of the film. The images for *Variations*, drawn and airbrushed on paper, appear less luminous on film, although James uses flickers of contrasting colors and alternations of complementary colors

to give them vibrancy. The images in the *Exercises* consist of light shaped by mattes and recorded directly by the camera, so they glow with an uncanny, neon intensity.

After learning that he had unknowingly participated (as a draftsman) in producing the atomic bomb, James retired from filmmaking to intensively study various philosophical, mystical disciplines and contemporary physics. During this period he resolved to limit all future films to the basic building block of a dot, and stayed true to this resolve in his six completed films.

*Yantra* (1950-57) consists of dots drawn on paper in various configurations and motion sequences. These were photographed in black-and-white, then optically printed in various colors, in different combinations and in diverse forward/backward motions—sometimes in flickering alternations of values. James developed the exposed film by hand so he could solarize certain sequences to give them irregular, aleatory textures. These elements—an imploding/exploding circle, a gyrating spiral, a spray fanning open and closed, a cluster splitting in two, etc.—function as dynamic icons in a meditation on creation and entropy.

*Lapis* (1963-66) again uses hand-painted dot patterns, but James filmed them using a computerized animation stand [the first “Motion-Control” camera, invented by his older brother John] which could shoot very precise multiple exposures in calibrated displacements that turned 100 dots into thousands of dots in variegated colors with intricate changing patterns created by transitory trajectories. Unlike the seething activity of *Yantra*'s choreography, *Lapis* presents calmly pulsating mandalas which astonish by their complexity and hypnotize the viewer into contemplation of relationship between the “individual” dot and the collective configuration. James again uses blue duration to exploit the eye's fatigue and render subsequent images vibrant, and in the second half of *Lapis* he integrates the black “negative” spaces between the dots as counter rhythms and patterns, enlarging the dialogue to “being and nothingness.”

James' final series of films continued the alchemical imagery of *Yantra* [vessel/machine] and *Lapis* [philosopher's stone] into a meditation on the interdependence of the four elements: *Dwija* (1974) [rebirth/Fire], *Wu Ming* (1977) [“No Name”/Water], *Kang Jing Xiang* (1982) [“Resembles bright ecstasy” or “Empty Mirror Image”/Air] and *Li* (unfinished) [grain pattern/Earth]. Only the first three of these films were completed before his death. *Dwija* uses line drawings [linear arrangements of dots into patterns] of eight images of alchemical vessels containing matter (symbolized by a bird) in the various stages of transformation—sublimation, putrefaction, condensation, etc. James repeats these eight drawing in an endless loop (even as alchemists must boil and re-boil matter to purify it), but again solarizes the film for aleatory variations in color and texture, and then superimposes layers of such solarized imagery to create flame-like ambiguity in every frame, and a dazzling, evanescent transience about the 25-minute whole.

In its opening passages, *Wu Ming* further aligns dot patterns into more nebulous formations by re-photographing the solarized images out of focus, so that circles and lines seem as waves and bubbles of watery texture. Out of these flowing currents emerges a single large black circle which slowly implodes until it disappears as a tiny point in center screen, demanding an uncompromising fixed gaze. A moment later, rippling circles explode outward from this center, as if the black circle were a stone thrown into the old pond of Basho's classic haiku. But this grand, audacious gesture also accesses the particle/wave ambiguity of Heisenberg's quantum-mechanical uncertainty principle.

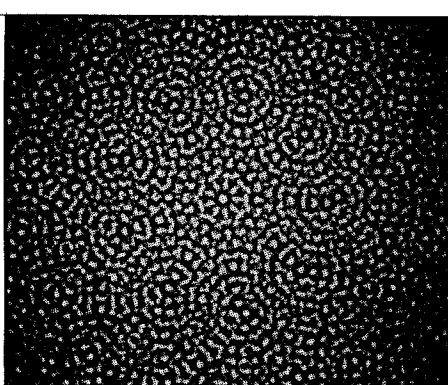
*Kang Jing Xiang* combines the vigorous cluster icons of *Yantra* with the nebulous veils of *Wu Ming* and the alchemical icons of *Dwija* in transparent layers that sensitize us to illusions of spectatorship, also enhanced by the repetitive drifting through the frame of cloud-like patterns that vary subtly in coloration and density. James exploits again color duration, negative space and flickers to engender heightened perception.

Even in an unfinished state, this trilogy (nearly an hour in length) presents a powerful, provocative experience, rich in contemplative opportunities, and fascinating, exquisite visual sensations. Combined with the dynamic range and physical beauty of James' earlier creations, they constitute the finest, most challenging achievement of abstract cinema.

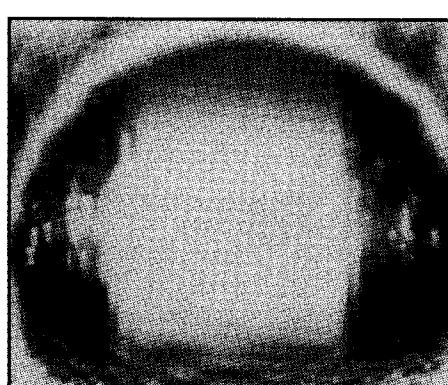
William Moritz, Musée du Cinéma: Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1996



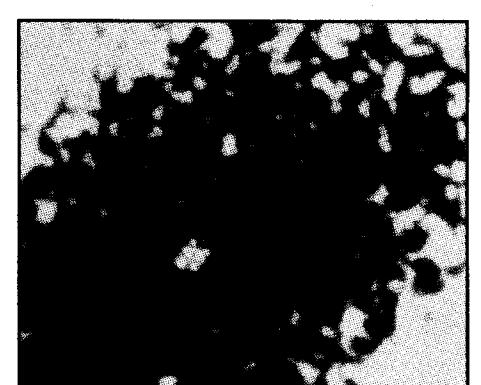
Yantra by James Whitney, 1950-57



Lapis by James Whitney, 1963-66



Wu Ming by James Whitney, 1977



Kang Jing Xiang by James Whitney, 1982

## Harry Smith

Rani Singh

Harry Smith (1923-91) was a respected, and acknowledged master in so many artistic fields it boggles the sensibilities; yet, he remained virtually unknown to many during his lifetime. Innovative filmmaker and legendary folk archivist, ethnographer, anthropologist, linguist, occultist, the list goes on. His work has influenced artists and scholars in a broad range of disciplines.

Smith was born May 29, 1923 in Portland, Oregon according to his birth certificate. From here things get difficult to ascertain.

Harry claimed “My mother came from Sioux City, Iowa: but my grandmother had a school that was supported by Czarina of Russia in Sitka, Alaska...,” and “My father had run away at an early age to become a cowboy.” Harry said his father gave him a fully equipped blacksmith shop for his twelfth birthday and told him he should turn lead into gold.

We'll never be able to separate the truth of Harry's background entirely from myth, but we can be sure that from early childhood there was instilled in him a driving curiosity and an appreciation of alchemical principles with the synthesis of the arts and sciences.

Harry studied anthropology at the University of Washington for five semesters between 1942 and 44. After a weekend visit to Berkeley during which he met a number of bohemians, intellectuals and artists (including Woody Guthrie), and experienced marijuana for the first time, Harry realized he could no longer be content at college and relocated to San Francisco.

His first hand-painted films immediately predate this period. He was surprised to find that others had done similar frame-by-frame processes, but none had matched the complexity of composition,

movement and integration of his own work. His processes required years of intricate labor. Ironically, Harry always considered himself primarily a painter rather than a filmmaker.

Smith's work in collecting and preserving American song literature and artifacts is unparalleled. In 1952, Folkways Records issued his multi-volume *Anthology of American Folk Music* (Smithsonian/Folkways 2951-3). These six discs are recognized as having been a seminal, primary source of the folk music boom of the 50s and 60s. Bob Dylan has acknowledged Smith's work as a major influence.

Harry spent years living with American Indian tribes and recorded the peyote songs of the Kiowa Indians (Folkways: *Kiowa Peyote Meeting* 4601).

Harry's broad range of interest resulted in a number of collections. He donated the largest known private paper airplane collection in the world to the Smithsonian Institute's Air-Space Museum. He was a collector of Seminole textiles and Ukrainian Easter Eggs. He was the self-described world's leading authority on string figures (Cat's Cradle, etc.) having mastered hundreds of forms from around the world. Harry studied many languages and dialects, including Kiowa sign language and Kwakiutl. He compiled the only known concordance of the Enochian system (forwards and reverse). He also made a study of the underlying principles of Highland Tartans, correlated it to the Enochian system, and painted elemental tablets that combined them.

He received a Grammy award for his contribution to American Folk Music in 1991.

Harry spent his last years (1988-91) as “shaman in residence” at Naropa Institute in Boulder, where his life's work culminated in a series of lectures, audio tape recordings, and continued collecting and research.

# Hy Hirsh

Robert Haller

Like Man Ray, Hirsh (1911-1961) seemed to thrive on the challenge and new perspectives that Europe offered to the expatriate artist. I say "seemed" because Hirsh's life is full of questions. So many that we are unlikely to be able to clarify his motives, let alone the original form of his films.

My principal sources of information on Hirsh are interviews with Sidney Peterson who knew him in San Francisco, Stan Brakhage who knew him at the end of his life in Europe, and Bill Moritz' published essay in the catalog Film on Film. Each of these three looked at Hirsh from a different angle and saw somewhat different men.

Hirsh was born in Chicago in 1911, died in Paris of a heart attack in 1961. A still photographer with considerable technical skill, Hirsh was an actor in *Even as You and I* in 1937, assisted Sidney Peterson on *Horror Dream*, *The Cage*, and *Clinic of Stumble* in 1947, and also worked with James Broughton (*The Adventures of Jimmie*) and Harry Smith (on some of his *Early Abstractions*); Jordan Belson used some of his footage as part of the Vortex Concerts in the late 1950s. Hirsh did not begin to make his own films until 1952. Then, in a sustained burst of activity he made at least twelve films over the next eight years, until his sudden death in Paris.

Sidney Peterson knew Hirsh and his wife Marie in the 1940s. Hirsh loved music; both he and his wife loved to cook. But they had fundamental psychological problems. The couple had, Peterson recalled, very negative personalities. They "could depress anyone who came into contact with them." Marie did not like her face and took the drastic step of having her skin peeled—with the results worse than when she started the process.

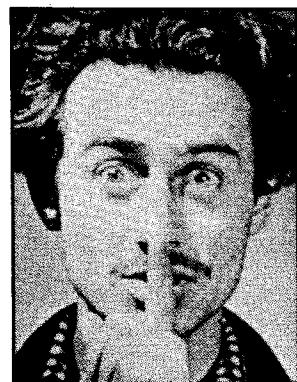
Hirsh, Peterson remembers, "had the brakes on him for some reason." In the 1940s, working on his own, Hirsh "could not seem to finish anything." As a still photographer he would often make hundreds of exposures, but not go on to make a single print.

In 1952 Hirsh 1) broke out of this cycle and 2) subsequently moved to Europe in 1955. Stan Brakhage says Hirsh claimed he was a victim of McCarthyism, and that this is what made him leave San Francisco for Amsterdam. Peterson scoffs at this, doubts Hirsh was of any political interest; Peterson says Hirsh was "building his own legend." (Though Moritz says Hirsh was involved with left-wing films in California in the 1930s.) Meanwhile, in 1951, while still in San Francisco and using a hand-made optical printer, Hirsh completed his first film, *Divertissement Rococo*. The presence of the experimentally-oriented Art in Cinema series at the San Francisco Museum of Art—it was already presenting films by Broughton and Smith—may have motivated Hirsh. His second film, *Come Closer*, in 1952, was shown at Art in Cinema. Then, after making *Eneri* in 1953, Hirsh moved across the Atlantic (in 1955), spending most of the rest of his life in Amsterdam and Paris, where he made ten more films.

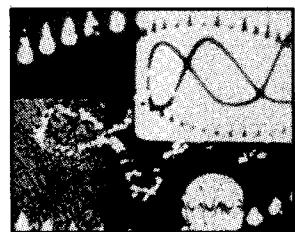
The dating and form of the films is problematic. For this there are two reasons. First, Hirsh altered the films, often re-editing them from screening to screening. Second, his filmic estate was very disorganized because of a police search after his death. Hirsh had been selling drugs, transporting them in film cans. When Robert Pike reassembled the films, Moritz says, Pike made errors.

There are two published filmographies for Hirsh. They compound the confusion. Scheugl and Schmidt in their *Lexikon des Avantgarde* (1974) provide the filmography in the left column. Moritz, in *Film As Film*, proposed a different filmography, but it was seriously flawed by printer's errors. As this essay goes to press, I have received another Hirsh filmography that Moritz copied from Hirsh's own handwriting, one that makes more sense and appears in the right column:

Scheugl and Schmidt	Moritz
1952	<i>Divertissement Rococo</i>
	<i>Come Closer</i>
	<i>Couleur de la Forme</i>
195?	<i>Change of Key</i>
	<i>Chasse de Touches</i>
	<i>Djinn</i>
	<i>Experiments</i>
	<i>Mad Nest</i>
	<i>Défense d'afficher</i>
	<i>Post No Bills</i>
	<i>Récherche</i>
	<i>Scratch Pad</i>
1958	<i>Gyromorphosis</i>
	<i>Autumn Spectrum</i>
	<i>Double Jam</i>
	<i>Eneri</i>
	1951
	<i>Divertissement Rococo</i>
	<i>Come Closer</i>
	<i>Eneri</i>
	<i>Gyromorphosis</i>
	<i>Autumn Spectrum</i>
	<i>Défense d'afficher</i>
	<i>Chasse des Touches</i>
	<i>Scratch Pad</i>
	<i>Décollages Recollés</i>
	<i>La Couleur de la forme</i>
	<i>Etude Anatomique du Photographs</i>
	<i>Récherche</i>
	1952
	<i>Come Closer</i>
	1953
	<i>Eneri</i>
	1957
	<i>Gyromorphosis</i>
	<i>Autumn Spectrum</i>
	<i>Défense d'afficher</i>
	<i>Chasse des Touches</i>
	<i>Scratch Pad</i>
	<i>Décollages Recollés</i>
	<i>La Couleur de la forme</i>
	<i>Etude Anatomique du Photographs</i>
	1960
	<i>Scratch Pad</i>
	1961
	<i>Décollages Recollés</i>
	<i>La Couleur de la forme</i>
	<i>Etude Anatomique du Photographs</i>
	<i>Récherche</i>



Hi Hirsh in *Even As You and I*, 1937: William Moritz



*Eneri* by Hy Hirsh, 1953: William Moritz



*Autumn Spectrum* by Hy Hirsh, 1957: Creative Film Society

These two lists differ in many ways. 1) Moritz says that *Mad Nest* is not by Hirsh at all but by Baird Bryant and Tajirir Shinkichi who were Hirsh's neighbors in Paris. 2) *Défense d'afficher* means "Post No Bills," yet the S&S filmography lists it and the translation as separate films! 3) Another difference is that *Djinn* and *Change of Key* are performances, according to Moritz. 4) Finally, Moritz now dates Hirsh's death date as 1961, contrary to all previous citations as 1960.

## Statement

### Hy Hirsh

*Gyromorphosis* strives to bring into actuality the inherent kinetic qualities seen in the construction-sculpture of Constant Nieuwenhuys of Amsterdam. To realize this aim I have put into motion, one by one, pieces of this sculpture and, with colored lighting, filmed them in various detail, overlaying the images on the film as they appear and disappear. In this way, I have hoped to produce sensations of acceleration and suspension which are suggested to me by the sculpture itself.

### Hy Hirsh

#### William Moritz

The brilliance of Hy Hirsh's films often arises not so much from their technical originality as from their canny coupling of imagery with music that perfectly matches its mood. Hirsh's homemade optical printer and oil wipe instrument were copied from John Whitney's originals, but the intricacy of what Hirsh did with them in films like *Eneri* (1953) and *Chasse des Touches* (1959) (with their duplicated, layered abstract imagery sometimes printed into several simultaneous smaller "screens" that contrast in push-pull colors) far exceeds Whitney's use of these same tools. Hirsh knew McLaren and Lye before he scratched and painted directly on film, but his *Scratch Pad* (1960) has a witty jazz expressionist personality different from his predecessors. Lye had used the optical printer for synthesizing surreal clusters of imagery, but again Hirsh's complex interface of imagery in his final four films create a more radical and ironic world view [fireworks turning into an H-bomb blast, a cat watching football while walking backwards, autos racing through a woman's nude body, Chaplin pratfalls repeated in loops until they become menacing] that belongs more to the Post-Modern vision of Bruce Conner and Pat O'Neill than to the formalist/modernist past.

In the visual music films of Hirsh his exquisite taste shows up most strongly: in the parallel between the impossible three-dimensional occlusions of ribbons in *Come Closer* (1952) with wild infectious Caribbean carnival music, or in linking the jagged moving camera and staccato cutting of images of Paris posters in *Défense d'afficher* (1958-59) with an equally frenetic Cuban jazz. Similarly the mellow Modern Jazz Quartet sounds that accompany the fluid reflections in Amsterdam canals of *Autumn Spectrum* (1957) or the layers of metallic reflections from Constant Nieuwenhuys' sculpture in *Gyromorphosis* (1957) seem so perfectly matched as to render comparison with predecessors like Ruttman's *In the Night* or Moholy-Nagy's *Lightplay Black White Grey* (1926) irrelevant. One should also note that Hirsh recorded his own sound from live performances so that they are not exactly equivalent to the appropriation of commercial recordings so common in later films.

Hirsh's use of the oscilloscope pattern as a source of non-objective figures and movements may well be the earliest (though experiments by Norman McLaren and Mary Ellen Bute were developing at about the same time) as well as the most inventive in its variations, such as, in *Eneri*, the spectacular rolling lissajous in front of vertical ribbing, the fragmentation into texture for larger figures, as well as the sub-screens—all of which scrupulously corresponds to the complexities of African drumming rhythms.

William Moritz, Musée du Cinéma, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1996



Hy Hirsh, 1957: Creative Film Society

## Jordan Belson

### William Moritz

Jordan Belson (1926-) studied painting before seeing Oskar Fischinger and the Whitney brothers' films at the 1946 Art in Cinema screenings at the San Francisco Museum, whereupon he increasingly devoted himself to the moving abstract image. His early films animated real objects (pavements in *Bop-Scotch*, 1952) and scroll paintings prepared like film strips with successive images (*Mandala*, 1953). Belson subsequently withdrew these films from circulation as imperfect and primitive, but they already reflect his refined plastic sensibility, fine color sense, and superb sense of dynamic structure. They also foreshadow his more accomplished expressions of mystical concepts, *Bop Scutch* seeming to reveal a hidden soul and life-force in "inanimate" objects, and *Mandala* presenting a compelling version of the centering meditation image.

Between 1957 and 1959, Belson collaborated with composer Henry Jacobs on the historic Vortex Concerts, which combined the latest electronic music with moving visual abstractions projected on the dome of Morrison Planetarium in San Francisco (and also the Brussels World Fair in 1958). These pioneer Light Shows used filmed imagery (by Belson, his wife Jane, James Whitney and Hy Hirsh) as well as multiple projections of geometric and polymorphous light phenomena produced by non-filmic means. Together with the contemplative Lumia of Thomas Wilfred (slowly-evolving polymorphous light projections), the Vortex experience inspired Belson to abandon traditional painting and animation in favor of creating visual phenomena in something like real time, by live manipulation of pure light—which has been the technological basis for his more than 20 films from *Allures* (1961) to *Northern Lights* (1985).

The second major well-spring of Belson's mature films arose from his increasing involvement with mystical and contemplative philosophies. During the 1950s, he had been an integral part of the Zen Buddhism of San Francisco's North Beach Beat scene (indeed, Belson still lives in North Beach). The mature films frequently express aspects of Indian mysticism and yoga, reflected in the titles of his masterpieces *Samadhi* (1967) and *Chakra* (1972), which render the actual visual and auditory phenomena that Belson experienced in heightened states of meditative concentration. They also explore the relationship between scientific theories and human, spiritual perception (*Phenomena* [1965], *Light* [1973]). Many of the films share certain images which Belson regards as "hieroglyphic-ideographic" visual units that express complex ideation not easily stated in verbal terms.

Because the essence of Belson's artistry depends on subtleties of changing form and color, he has experienced great difficulties in preserving his films. Many copies of the films from the 1970s printed on Eastmancolor stock have faded or changed color so much as to be meaningless. Five finished films from the 1980s have never been printed or distributed, although Belson incorporated selected imagery from them (moments that retained their integrity on electronic reproduction) in a half-hour videotape, *Samadhi*, which is commercially distributed by Mystic Fire in the United States.

William Moritz, Musée du Cinéma, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1996

# James Sibley Watson, Jr. and Melville Webber

## Bruce Posner

Dr. James Sibley Watson, Jr. (1894 -1982) is one of the few examples in our century of a Renaissance man. With his friend Scofield Thayer, he was the publisher and the guiding spirit of *The Dial*, the most outstanding literary and arts magazine in American History, from 1920 to 1929. He, along with collaborator Melville Webber, was the creator of two important avant-garde American films, *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1927-28), and *Lot in Sodom* (1929-32). He played an important role in the development of X-ray cinematography and of optical printers for motion pictures. In addition, he was the friend and supporter of Kenneth Burke, E.E. Cummings, Gaston Lachaise and Marianne Moore. James Card of the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House noted that "what he turned to, he became extremely good at."

Melville Webber (1895-1947) pursued parallel careers in art history, archeology, painting, and directing motion pictures. After graduating from Harvard in 1917, he completed a monograph on the Romanesque frescoes at Tavant, France and then returned to Harvard for graduate study in art and archeology. He was appointed in 1926 Assistant Director of the Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester and also taught there as Assistant Professor of Art History until 1928. In November 1926, he suggested to Dr. Watson that "he would like to try his hand at sets for a photoplay." This results in the genesis of two experimental film classics, *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *Lot in Sodom* as well as several other uncompleted film productions between Watson and Webber. During 1933-34, Webber worked in a Manhattan hotel room collaborating with Mary Ellen Bute and Ted Nemeth on the abstract film *Rhythm in Light*. Soon after fortunes shifted for Webber, he suffered a complete nervous breakdown from which he never fully recovered and died in an institution in Canandaigua, New York.

## Statement

### James Sibley Watson, Jr.

Melville Webber and I started to work on our first entertainment film in the winter of 1926-27. Melville was scenarist, idea man, scene painter, costume designer, make-up man, director, and also played the part of The Visitor. My part was cranking the camera, lighting the sets and the actors, developing, printing, splicing, and projecting the film. Our preliminary experiments left us with many feet of discards. On the other hand, we had managed to assemble a number of "properties" that were to be extremely useful when we finally settled down to retelling Poe's story. The "properties" included a home-made coffin, a cardboard flat painted by Melville to represent the facade of the house of Usher, a short flight of fairly normal steps, and a long flight of steps in miniature. We had also acquired from Scott Sterling, of Bausch & Lomb, prisms and distorting lenses that could be rotated in front of the camera lens. Rotating the latter device causes the subject to appear successively short and wide and then tall and thin, an "effect" employed to give a sort of rhythm to the scene in which a black-gloved hand

smooths Madeline's burial robe as she lies supine in her coffin. In another scene, The Visitor is reading to Roderick. Here certain key words are emphasized by reflecting the letters in the polished surface of a platter turning on a monograph turntable, making the syllables ripple.

In *Lot [in Sodom]*, distortion is often used to keep reality, or rather its appearance, from disturbing the film's mood. And in the final scene the distortion makes Lot's daughter seem not only different but formidable as she grasps the wine cup.

All of the effects in *Usher* had to be done with, or in, the camera. For *Lot*, however, we had an optical printer, enabling us to make changes in a scene after it had been shot. Run-ups and pull-backs made with the printer are nearly as good as those made by moving the camera, and if mistakes occur they can be corrected without retaking the scene. Nowadays run-ups and pull-backs can be quickly accomplished with a zoom lens, though the moving camera is still much in evidence, whether mounted on a car, or copter, or on the end of a massive camera-crane on wheels.

Many of the transitions in *Lot*—fades, dissolves, etc.—were put in with the optical printer; also split screen effects. True prismatic effects are few, although there is one such, a comically sinister scene in which people dancing in a circle are "truncated" so to speak, to the extent that each one appears as a head and shoulders capering on a pair of legs, sans trunk.

*Usher* was strictly amateur; none of us had any experience with professional film production, least of all myself. It was only recently that I had become obsessed with the idea of making movies. My first camera was a Sept, a small clockwork affair that ran thirty-six feet of film at a loading. Later I bought a second-hand Bell & Howell "studio" camera and a speed movement for it. The standard B. & H. movement could be adjusted to run two films, and it was in this way that we were able to superimpose a moving horse and rider on a background of moving clouds, the opening scene of our film.

...

By the time we had given up on a film entitled *The Dinner Party* as being too difficult and were ready to begin work on *Lot*, two new members had been added to our group, Remsen Wood and Alec Wilder. Remsen wanted to use our equipment in making a sound film of objects moving in time to the music of Stravinsky's *Fire Bird*. In return he agreed to help us with *Lot*, and help us he did. It was through him and his friends at Kodak Park that we obtained a sound on film recorder. He kept our new optical printer working, made valuable suggestions, and, most important of all, he helped Melville with the difficult task of synchronizing our film with its sound track—the musical score composed and conducted by Louis Siegel and played by students from the Eastman School, among them the Oboist Mitchell Miller. Though crudely recorded, this music gives to portions of the film an impact and a meaning that would be badly missed if the projector's sound system were to break down. The same can be said of the Wilder score for *Usher*.

James Sibley Watson, Jr., "The Films of J.S. Watson, Jr., and Melville Webber: Some Retrospective Views (I)," *The University of Rochester Library Bulletin*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 2, Winter 1975, 74-75.



*The Fall of the House of Usher* by James Sibley Watson, Jr. & Melville Webber, 1927-28: Museum of Modern Art Film Stills



*Lot in Sodom* by James Sibley Watson, Jr. & Melville Webber, 1929-32: Museum of Modern Art Film Stills



James Sibley Watson, working on a film: George Eastman House

## Dudley Murphy

### William Moritz

Of the six or more "Visual Symphonies," short films synchronized to classical music, which Dudley Murphy (1897-1968) made between 1920 and 1922, only one seems to survive, *Danse Macabre* to the Saint-Saëns music. Unfortunately, it is atypical in that it records Adolph Bolm's stage dance performance, while the others were shot more filmically: the 1920 *Soul of the Cypress* [probably Debussy's "L'après-midi d'un faune"], for example, was praised for its excellent lyrical photography of landscape, and was cited by *The New York Times* as one of the best films of the year. Murphy also made a feature comedy *High Speed Lee* (1923), and studied lens technology at college so he could design his own "special effect" lenses with irregular, beveled surfaces that created kaleidoscopic imagery.

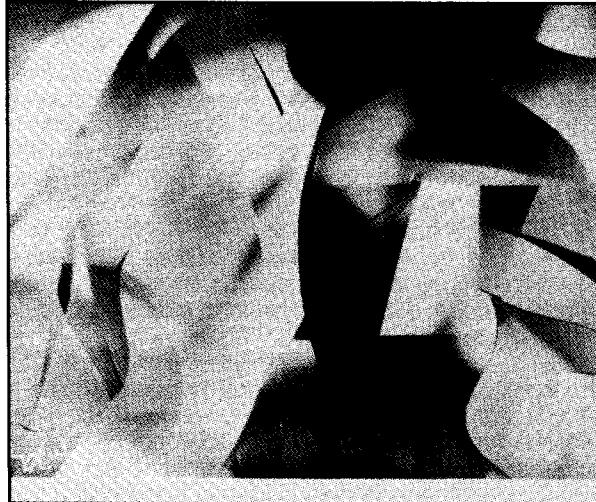
Murphy's desire for more accurate synchronization led him to Paris where he met Man Ray and proposed a collaboration on a more adventurous film. Together they shot scenes on the street (including store windows and a washerwoman walking up stairs) and in Luna Park, scenes of Kiki in white mime make-up and Katherine Murphy in romantic poses, footage of machine parts pumping to be intercut with erotic scenes, and shots of cake molds and other utensils taken through Murphy's lenses—before running out of money. When Murphy resolved to ask Fernand Léger for finishing funds, Man Ray demanded no mention of his name in connection with the film, as he feared a

mishap in the hands of the humorless Léger. The resulting film, *Ballet Mécanique* (1924), is Murphy's most famous work, albeit under the name of its financial backer, Léger, who had no practical knowledge of such filmmaking techniques as camerawork, lighting, lenses and editing.

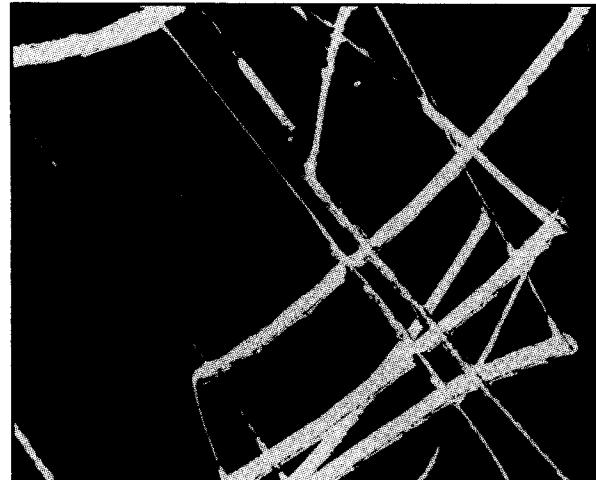
Murphy returned to America where he made "special effects" of montages and kaleidoscopic illusions for the Gloria Swanson film *The Love of Sunya* (1927), wrote films like *Last Command* (1928) and *Dracula* (1931), and directed some dozen features including the Paul Robeson *Emperor Jones* (1933), the musical *The Night is Young* (1935) and the socialist protest film *One Third of a Nation* (1939), as well as two successful features in Mexico. He also continued to make musical short films, including the Bessie Smith *St. Louis Blues* (1928), the Duke Ellington *Black and Tan* (1929), and ten "soundies" (juke box films) including *Lazybones* (1941) with Hoagy Carmichael and Dorothy Dandridge. Throughout this commercial work, Murphy was regarded as something of an experimentalist, and he persisted in trying to give dynamic and musical qualities to the camerawork and editing. The "kaleidoscopic" lenses used in *Ballet Mécanique*, for example, were further used for dance sequences in *Black and Tan* (where the mirrored floor of the Cotton Club provides even more complex facets) and in *The Sport Parade* (1932) (where there is no real necessity for a musical number).

William Moritz, Musée du Cinéma, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1996

# Abstract Cinema in America: Selected



*Light Rhythms* by Francis Bruguiere, 1929-30:  
National Film Archive



*Free Radicals* by Len Lye, 1979: Anthology Film Archive



Publicity still for *Mood Contrasts* by Mary Ellen Bute, 1953

## Filmography

The following list was compiled by Bruce Posner and Sabrina Zanella-Foresi from various sources provided by William Moritz, Cecile Starr and Robert Haller. Since many of the films have incomplete and/or conflicting data, i.e. Hy Hirsh, Harry Smith, Watson & Webber, etc., it is suggested that their veracity be subject to more detailed research. In other cases, a complete listing of films proved beyond the space limitations of this publication, e.g. Brakhage over 250 titles; James Davis over 113 titles, etc., so a partial listing of titles relevant to abstract filmmaking is presented. Unless otherwise noted, the original productions are 16mm sound films made in United States of America.

### Jordan Belson

- (b. 1926 – )  
*Transmutation* (destroyed) • 1947  
*Improvisation #1* • 1948  
*Bop-Scotch* • 1952, 3 mins, color  
*Mandala* • 1952, 3 mins, color  
*Raga* • 1958, 7 mins, color  
*Allures* • 1961, 8 mins, color  
*Re-entry* • 1964, 7 mins, color  
*Phenomena* • 1965, 7 mins, color  
*Samadhi* • 1967, 6 mins, color  
*Meditation* • 1971, 7 mins, color  
*Chakra* • 1972, 8 mins, color  
*Light* • 1973, 8 mins, color  
*Music of the Spheres* • 1977, 7 mins, color  
*Fountain of Dreams* • 1984, 8 mins, color  
*Northern Lights* • 1985, 8 mins, color

### Francis Bruguiere

- (b. 1879 – d. 1945)  
*The Way* (unfinished)  
*Light Rhythms* • 1931, Great Britain, 35mm, 6 mins, bw, silent  
**Stan Brakhage**  
(b. 1933 – )  
*Thigh Line Lyre Triangular* • 1960-61, 5 mins, color, silent  
*Mothlight* • 1963, 4 mins, color, silent  
*Dog Star Man: Part IV* • 1964, 5 mins, color, silent  
*The Horseman, the Woman, and the Moth* • 1968, 19 mins, color, silent  
*Eye Myth* • 1972, 8 seconds, 35mm, color, silent  
*The Wold-Shadow* • 1972, 2.5 mins, color, silent  
*"He Was Born, He Suffered, He Died"* • 1974, 7.5 mins, color, silent  
*Skein* • 1974, 4 mins, color, silent  
*The Garden of Earthly Delights* • 1981, 2.5 mins, 35mm, color, silent  
*Hell Spit Flexion* • 1983, 1 min, 35mm, color, silent  
*Loud Visual Noises* • 1986, 2.5 mins, color, silent  
*Nightmusic* • 1986, 30 secs, 35mm, color, silent  
*The Dante Quartet* • 1987, 6 mins, 35mm, color, silent  
*Rage Net* • 1988, 30 secs, 35mm, color, silent  
*Glaze of Cathexis* • 1990, 3 mins, color, silent  
*Delicacies of Molten Horror Synapse* • 1991, 10 mins, color, silent  
*Interpolations I-V* • 1992, 12 mins, 35mm, color, silent  
*Autumnal* • 1993, 5 mins, color, silent  
*Ephemeral Solidarity* • 1993, 4.5 mins, color, silent  
*Black Ice* • 1994, 2.5 mins, color, silent  
*Chartes Series* • 1994, 9 mins, color, silent  
*Elementary Phrases* • Co-Directed with Phil Solomon, 1994, 38 mins, color, silent  
*I Take These Truths* • 1995, 18 mins, color, silent  
*We Hold These* • 1995, 12 mins, color, silent  
*Spring Cycle* • 1995, 10 mins, color, silent  
*I...* • 1995, 25 mins, color, silent

### Mary Ellen Bute

(b. 1908 – d. 1983)

#### Ted Nemeth

(b. 1911 – d. 1986)

#### Synchromy No. 1 (Synchronization) (unfinished)

- Collaborators: Joseph Schillinger, Lewis Jacobs, 1932
- Rhythm in Light** • Collaborators: Melville Webber, Ted Nemeth
- Music: Grieg's "Anitra's Dance" from *Peter Gynt* 1934, 5 mins, 35mm, bw
- Synchromy No. 2** • Collaborator: Ted Nemeth • Music: Reinhard Werrenrath sings "The Evening Star" from Wagner's *Tannhäuser* 1935, 5 mins, 35mm, bw
- Dada (Universal Clip)** • Collaborator: Ted Nemeth, 1936, 3 mins, 35mm, bw
- Parabola** • Collaborators: Rutherford Boyd, Ted Nemeth, Bill Nemeth • Music Darius Milhaud's *Creation of the World*, 1937, 8.5 mins, 35mm, bw
- Escape (Synchromy No. 4)** • Collaborators: Ted Nemeth, Bill Nemeth • Music: J.S. Bach's "Toccata" from *Toccata and Fuge in D Minor*, 1937, 4 mins, 35mm, color
- Spook Sport** • Collaborators: Norman McLaren, Ted Nemeth
- Music: Saint-Saëns' *Danse macabre*, 1939, 8 mins, 35mm, color
- Tarantella (Synchromy No. 9)** • Collaborator: Ted Nemeth
- Music: Edwin Gerscheski, 1940, 4.25 mins, 35mm, color
- Polka Graph (Fun with Music)** • Collaborator: Ted Nemeth
- Music: Shostakovich's *Age of Gold*, 1947, 4 mins, 35mm, color
- Mood Lyric** (missing, possibly part of *Mood Contrasts*)
- Collaborator: Ted Nemeth • Music: Rimsky-Korsakov's "Hymn to the Sun" from *The Golden Cockerel*, 1947, 3 mins, 35mm, color
- Color Rhapsodie** • Collaborator: Ted Nemeth • Music: Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2*, 1948, 6 mins, 35mm, color
- Pastoral** • Collaborator: Ted Nemeth, Hilary Harris • Music: Leopold Stokowski conducting Bach's *Sheep May Safely Graze*, 1950, 6 mins, 35mm, color
- Abstronic** • Collaborator: Ted Nemeth • Music: Aaron Copland's "Hoedown" from *Billy the Kid & Don Gillis' Ranch House Party*, 1952, 5.5 mins, 35mm, color
- Mood Contrasts** • Collaborator: Ted Nemeth • Music: Rimsky-Korsakov's "Hymn to the Sun" from *The Golden Cockerel* & Shostakovich's "Dance of the Jugglers" from *The Snow Maiden*, 1953, 6.5 mins, 35mm, color
- Imaginations** • Collaborator: Ted Nemeth, 1958, 2 mins, 35mm, color
- RCA: New Sensations in Sound** • Collaborator: Ted Nemeth, 1959, 3 mins, 35mm, color

#### Jane (Belson) Conger

(b. ?? – d. ??)

#### Logos

• Music: Henry Jacobs, 1957, 2 mins, color

#### Odds & Ends

• 1957, 5 mins, color

#### Douglass Crockwell

(b. 1904 – d. 1968)

#### Fantasmagoria I

• 1938

#### Fantasmagoria II

• 1939

#### Fantasmagoria III

• 1940

#### Glens Falls Sequence

• 1946, 8 mins, color, silent

#### The Long Bodies

• 1947, 4 mins, color, silent

- Jim Edward Davis**  
(b. 1901 – d. 1974)
- Transparent Plastics** • 1946, 11.25 mins, color
  - Paintings and Plastics** • 1948, 33.5 mins, color
  - Light Reflections** • 1948, 14 mins, color, sound by Edward Muller
  - Reflections No. 3** • 1949, 7.25 mins, color
  - Reflections, Mobiles** • 1949, 10 mins, color
  - Reflection-Flexed** • 1949, 4.5 mins, color
  - Shadows and Reflections** • 1949, 4 mins, color
  - Path of Motion** • 1950, 8 mins, color

#### Color and Light No. 1: Plastic Objects, Shadows, and Reflections

• 1950, 9 mins, color

#### Color and Light No. 2: Objects and Illuminations

• 1950, 8.5 mins, color

#### Reflections (No. 11)

• 1950, 6.5 mins, color

#### Reflections No. 6 & No. 12

• 1951, 6 mins, color

#### Reflections No. 13

• 1951, 7.75 mins, color

#### Refractions No. 1

• 1951, 6.5 mins, color

#### Light Reflections (short version)

• 1948-52, 6.5 mins, color

#### Evolution No. 1

• 1953, 6.25 mins, color

#### Analogies No. 1

• 1953, 9.5 mins, color

#### Like a Breeze

• 1954, 8.5 mins, color, silent

#### Evolution

• 1954, 7.75 mins, color

#### Water Reflections

• 1954, 11 mins, color

#### Abstract & Mirrored Dances

• 1956, 2.5 mins, color, w/Arthur Hall

#### The Flow of Water

• 1957, 9 mins, color

#### Energies

• 1957, 9.5 mins, color, sound

#### Reflections 1958

• 1958, 9.5 mins, color

#### Ashtray & Water Refractions—Prism

• 1959, 7.5 mins, color

#### Impulses

• 1959, 9.25 mins, color

#### Death & Transfiguration

• 1961, 9.5 mins, color

#### Prism Reflections Flexed

• 1961, 5 mins, color

#### Fathomless

• 1964, 11 mins, color

#### Prismatic Variations

• 1965, 11 mins, color

#### Phantasmagoria

• 1965, 10 mins, color

#### Reflections

• 1965, 10.5 mins, color

#### Transformation

• 1966, 10 mins, color

#### Figure & Shadows

• 1972, 10.5 mins, color

#### Oskar Fischinger

(b. 1900 – d. 1967)

#### Wax Experiments

(fragments) • Germany, 1921-23, 6 mins, 35mm, bw, silent

#### Orgelstäbe/Sticks

(fragments) • Germany, 1923-27, 35mm, bw, silent

#### Spirals

• Germany, 1926, 4 mins, 35mm, bw, silent

#### R-1, Ein Formspiel von Oskar Fischinger

(fragments) • Germany, c. 1927, 7 mins, 35mm, color tinted, silent

#### Seelische Konstruktionen/Spiritual Constructions

• Germany, c. 1927, 10 mins, 35mm, bw, silent

#### Study No. 6

• Music: fandango "Los Verderones" by Jacinto Guerrero, Germany, 1930, 2 mins, 35mm, bw

#### Study No. 7

• Music: Brahms' "Hungarian Dance No. 5," Germany, 1931, 3 mins, 35mm, bw

#### Study No. 8 (unfinished)

• Music: Dukas' "Sorcerer's Apprentice," Germany, 1931, 4 mins, 35mm, bw

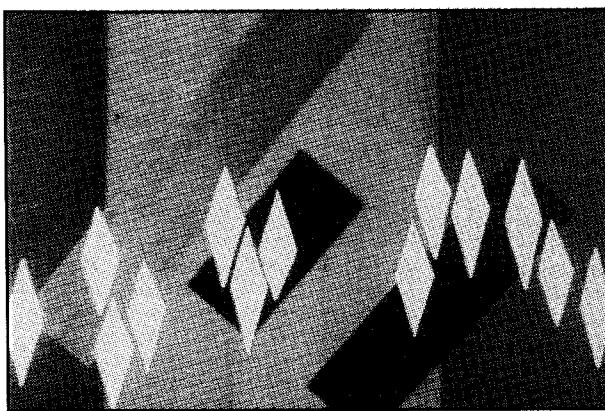
#### Study No. 12

• Music: Torch Dance from Rubenstein's "Bride of Corinth," 1932, 4 mins, 35mm, bw

#### Kriese/Circles</

# Filmography and Bibliography

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## Hy Hirsh

(b. 1911 – d. 1961)

- Divertissement Rococo** • 1951, 12 mins, color  
**Come Closer** • 1952, 7 mins, color, also available in two print 3-D version  
**Eneri** • 1953, 7 mins, color  
**Gyromorphosis** • Holland, 1957, 7 mins, color  
**Autumn Spectrum** • Music: Modern Jazz Quartet, Holland, 1957, 7 mins, color  
**Double Jam** • 1958, 4 mins  
**Défense d'afficher/Post No Bills** • France, 1958-59, 8 mins, color  
**Scratch Pad** • France, 1960, 7 mins, color  
**Chasse des Touches** • France, 1959, 4 mins, color  
**Décollages Recollés** • France, 1960, 9 mins  
**Etude Anatomique du Photographe** • France, 1961  
**La Couleur de la forme** • France, 1961, 7 mins, color  
**Recherche** • France, 1961, 8 mins

## Francis Lee

- (b. 1913 – )  
**1941** • 1941, 4 mins, color  
**Le Bijou** • 1943, 7 mins, color  
**Idyll** • 1947, 9 mins, color  
**Sumi-e** • 1976, 8 mins, bw  
**Ch'an** • 1983, 7 mins, bw

## Len Lye

(b. 1901 – d. 1980)

- Tusalava** • Great Britain, 1929, 9 mins, 35mm, bw, silent  
**Experimental Animation (Peanut Vendor)** • Music: "Peanut Vendor" by Red Nichols and his Five Pennies, Great Britain, 1934, 3 mins, 35mm, bw  
**A Colour Box** • Music: "La Belle Creole" by Don Baretto and his Orchestra, Great Britain, 1935, 3 mins, 35mm, color  
**Kaleidoscope** • Music: "Biguine d'Amour" by Don Baretto and his Cuban Orchestra, Great Britain, 1935, 4 mins, 35mm, color  
**Rainbow Dance** • Music: "Tony's Wife" by Rico's Creole Band, Great Britain, 1936, 5 mins, 35mm, color  
**Trade Tattoo (In Tune with Industry)** • Music: Lecuona Band, Great Britain, 1937, 5 mins, 35mm, color, sound  
**Full Fathom Five** • Great Britain, 1937, 9 mins, 35mm, color  
**Colour Flight** • Music: "Honolulu Blues" by Red Nichols and his Five Pennies, Great Britain, 1938, 4 mins, 35mm, color  
**Swinging the Lambeth Walk** (often confused with Charles Ridley's *The Panzer Ballet*) • Music: "Lambeth Walk," Great Britain, 1939, 4 mins, 35mm, color  
**Musical Poster No. 1** • Music: British jazz groups including "Bugle Call Rag," Great Britain, 1940, 3 mins, 35mm, color  
**Color Cry** • Music: "The Fox Chase" by Sonny Terry, 1952, 3 mins, color  
**Rhythm** • Music: African music of the Zetzeekula and Zinkil tribes, 1957, 1 min, bw  
**Free Radicals (first version)** • 1958, 5 mins, bw, sound, music by Bagirmi Tribe of Africa;  
**Free Radicals (revised version)** • Music: Bagirmi Tribe of Africa, 1979, 4 mins, bw  
**Particles in Space** • Music: *Storm King and Twister* by Lye's kinetic sculptures, also, "Jumping Dance Drums" by the Bahamans and drum music by the Yorba of Nigeria, 1979, 4 mins, bw  
**Tal Farlow** • Completed by Steven Jones • Music: "Rock and Rye" by Tal Farlow, USA/New Zealand, 1980, 2 mins, bw

## Patricia Marx

(b. ?? – d. ??)

- Obmaru** • Music: Kaye Dunham, 1953, 4 mins, color  
**Things to Come** • Music: Dizzy Gillespie, 1954, 3 mins, color

## Norman McLaren

(b. 1914 – d. 1987)

- Color Cocktail** • Great Britain, 1935

- Scherzo** • Music: synthetic painted sound, 1939, 2 mins, 35mm,

color

- Loops** • Music: synthetic painted sound, 1939, 3 mins, 35mm, color

- Dots** • Music: synthetic painted sound, 1939, 3 mins, 35mm, color

- Spook Sport** • 1939, see Mary Ellen Bute filmography

- Stars and Stripes** • Music: "Stars and Stripes," 1941, 3 mins, 35mm, color

- Begone Dull Care** • Music: Oscar Peterson, Canada, 1949, 8 mins, 35mm, color

- Around Is Around** • Canada, 1951, 3-D, 35mm, color

- Lines – Vertical** • Directed by Norman McLaren & Evelyn Lambert

- Music: Maurice Blackburn, Canada, 1960, 6 mins, 35mm, color

- Mosaic** • Directed by Norman McLaren & Evelyn Lambert

- Canada, 1965, 5.5 mins, color

- Spheres** • Directed by Norman McLaren & René Jodoin • Music:

- Glenn Gould, Canada, 1969, 7.5 mins, 35mm, color

- Synchrony** • Music: synthetic sound, Canada, 1971, 9 mins, 35mm, color

## Dudley Murphy

(b. 1897 – d. 1968)

- The Soul of the Cypress** (visual symphony) • Music: Debussy's "Afternoon of a Faun," 1920, 35mm, bw, silent

- Aphrodite** (visual symphony) • 1920, 35mm, bw

- Anywhere Out of the World** (visual symphony) • 1920, 35mm, bw

- The Way of Love** (visual symphony) • 1921, 35mm, bw

- The Romance of the White Chrysanthemum** (visual symphony)

- Music: Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata," 1921, 35mm, bw

- Danse Macabre (Dance of Death)** (visual symphony) • Music:

- Saint-Saëns' "Danse Macabre," 1921, 5 mins, 35mm, bw, silent

- Ballet Mécanique** • Directed by Dudley Murphy & Fernand Léger with uncredited assistance by Man Ray • Music: George Antheil's "Ballet Mécanique," France, 1924, 19 mins, 35mm, bw, silent

- St. Louis Blues** • With Bessie Smith, Isabel Washington, Rosamond Johnson, 1928, 15 mins, 35mm, bw

- Black and Tan (Black and Tan Fantasy)** • With Duke Ellington and his Cotton Club Orchestra, 1929, 19 mins, 35mm, bw

- Ten "soundies" (juke box films) • 1941

## Man Ray

(b. 1890 – d. 1976)

- Le Retour à la raison/Return to Reason** • France, 1923, 3 mins, 35mm, bw, silent

- À Quoi revient les jeunes films/What Do Young Films Dream About?** • Directed by Man Ray & Henri Chomette, France, 1924, 35mm, bw, silent

- Ballet Mécanique** • 1924, see Dudley Murphy filmography

- Emak Bakia** • France, 1926, 18 mins, 35mm, bw, silent

## Paul Sharits

(b. 1943 – d. 1993)

- Ray Gun Virus** • 1966, 14 mins, color

- Razor Blades** • 1965-68, 25 mins, 2 projector, color

- T.O.U.C.H.I.N.G.** • 1968, 12 mins, color

- S:TREAM:S:S:ECTION:S:ECTION:S:S:ECTIONED** • 1968-71, 42 mins, color

- Axiomatic Granularity** • 1972-73, 20 mins, color

- Declarative Mode** • 1976-77, 39 mins, color

- Synchronoussoundtracks** • 1973-74, locational installation, color

- Shutter Interface** • 1975, locational installation, color

- Dream Displacement** • 1976, locational installation, color

## Harry Everett Smith

(b. 1923 – d. 1991)

- Film No. 1 (A Strange Dream)** • Music: Dizzy Gillespie's "Manteca," 1946, 2:20 mins, 35mm, color, silent

- Film No. 2 (Message From the Sun)** • 1946-48, 2:15 mins,

- 35mm, color, silent

## Film No. 3 (Interwoven)

- Music: Dizzy Gillespie's "Guarachi Gurao," 1947-49, 3:20 mins, 35mm, color, silent

## Film No. 4 (Fast Track)

- 1947, 2:16 mins, bw

## Film No. 5, Circular Tensions, Homage to Oskar Fischinger

- 1950, 2:30 mins, color

## Film No. 6

- 1948-51, 1.5 mins, , 3-D, color

## Film No. 7 (Color Study)

- 1952, 5:25 mins, color

## Early Abstractions (Films No. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 10)

- Music: The Beatles, 1939-56, 23 mins, color

## Film No. 10, Mirror Animations

- 1957; 1962-76, 3:35 mins, color, silent

## Film No. 11, Mirror Animations

- 1957; 1962-76, 8 mins, color, silent

## Film No. 12, Heaven and Earth Magic Feature

- 1959-61, 66 mins, bw

## Film No. 14, Late Superimpositions

- 1964, 31 mins, color

## Film No. 16, Oz, The Tin Woodman's Dream

- 1967, 14.5 mins, 35mm, color, silent

## Film No. 18, Mahagonny

- 1970-80, 141 mins, 4-screen process

- 16mm, color

## Denver Sutton

(b. 193? – d.???)

## Abstractions 2 & 4

- 1956, 3 mins, color

## James Sibley Watson, Jr.

(b. 1894 – d. 1982)

## Melville Webber

(b. 1895 – d. 1947)

## The Fall of the House of Usher

- Directed by James Sibley Watson, Jr. & Melville Webber • With Hildegarde Watson, Herbert Stern, Melville Webber, Friedrich Haak, Dorthea House • Music: Alec Wilder 1927-28,

# ARTICULATED LIGHT

December 7 – 11 • The Emergence of Abstract Film in America

Thu, 12/7 8:30pm  
**BEFORE MAYA DEREN**  
**RESTORED MILESTONES**  
**OF AMERICAN**  
**AVANT-GARDE CINEMA**

Introduction by Vlada Petric

USA 1920-41 (132 mins)

"The American film avant-garde established itself in the 1920s and 1930s, contrary to the standard histories which date its beginning to 1943 with Maya Deren." (Jan-Christoph Horak) These films present a backdrop against which one can posit the origins of Abstract filmmaking in America.

**MANHATTAN** • DIRECTED BY PAUL STRAND & CHARLES SHEELER (USA, 1920, 6 mins, 16mm, bw, silent); **LIGHT RHYTHMS** • DIRECTED BY FRANCIS BRUGUIERE (Great Britain/USA, 1928, 6 mins, 16mm, bw, silent); **DANSE MACABRE** • DIRECTED BY DUDLEY MURPHY (USA, 1921, 5 mins, 35mm, bw, silent); **LITTLE GEEZER** • DIRECTED BY THEODORE HUFF (USA, 1930, 10 mins, 16mm); **FOOTNOTE TO FACT (AS I WALK)** • DIRECTED BY LEWIS JACOBS (USA, 1933, 5 mins, 16mm, bw); **MR. MOTORBOAT'S LAST STAND** • DIRECTED BY JOHN FLOREY (USA, 1933, 10 mins, 16mm, bw); **POEM 8** • DIRECTED BY EMLER ETTING (USA, 1935, 15 mins, 16mm, bw); **LA MER** • DIRECTED BY OVADY JULBER (USA?, 1936, 16 mins, 16mm, bw); **EVEN AS YOU AND I** • DIRECTED BY LEROY ROBINS, ROGER BARLOW, HARRY HAY (USA, 1937, 12 mins, 16mm, bw); **OBJECT LESSON** • DIRECTED BY CHRISTOPHER YOUNG (USA, 1941, 12 mins, 16mm, bw); **PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG MAN** • DIRECTED BY HENRY RODAKIEWICZ (USA, 1925-31, 35 mins, 16mm, bw, silent)

Fri, 12/8 7:00pm  
**MARY ELLEN BUTE & DWINELL GRANT**

Lecture by Cecile Starr

USA 1934-53 (90 mins)

Mary Ellen Bute (1906-83) and Dwinell Grant (1912-91) worked simultaneously but separately in New York City during the early 1940s. Grant worked alone within the confines of the art scenes that surrounded Hilla Rebay and Peggy Guggenheim. Bute in partnership with Ted Nemeth produced 35mm "seeing sound" films visualizing popular music for presentation at Radio City Music Hall.

**DIRECTED BY MARY ELLEN BUTE:** **RHYTHM IN LIGHT** (USA, 1934, 5 mins, 16mm, bw); **PARABOLA** (USA, 1937, 8.5 mins, 16mm, bw); **ESCAPE** (USA, 1937, 4 mins, 16mm, color); **MOOD CONTRASTS** (USA, 1953, 6.5 mins, 16mm, color)

**DIRECTED BY DWINELL GRANT:** **COMPOSITION #1: THEMIS** (USA, 1940, 4 mins, 16mm, color, silent); **COMPOSITION #2: CONTRAHEMIS** (USA, 1941, 4.5 mins, 16mm, color, silent); **COLOR SEQUENCE** (USA, 1943, 3 mins, 16mm, color, silent); **THREE THEMES IN VARIATION** (USA, 1945, 5.5 mins, 16mm, color, silent)

Fri, 12/8 9:15pm  
**OSKAR FISCHINGER & THE CALIFORNIA SCHOOL OF COLOR MUSIC**

Lecture by William Moritz

USA/Germany 1934-76

(90 mins)

The presence of Oskar Fischinger (1900-67) in Hollywood (where he arrived from Germany as a refugee in February 1936) helped inspire a generation of California artists, especially through the Art in Cinema programs at the San Francisco Museum of Art 1946-49.

**COMPOSITION IN BLUE** • DIRECTED BY OSKAR FISCHINGER (Germany, 1935, 4 mins, 35mm, color); **ALLEGRETTO** • DIRECTED BY OSKAR FISCHINGER (USA, 1936/43, 3 mins, 35mm, color); **RADIO DYNAMIC** • DIRECTED BY OSKAR FISCHINGER (USA, 1941, 4 mins, 16mm, color, silent); **FILM NO. 3** • DIRECTED BY HARRY SMITH (USA, 1947-49, 3 mins, 16mm, color, silent); **MOBICOLOR PROJECTIONS** • DIRECTED BY CHARLES DOCKUM (USA, 1961, 5 mins, 16mm, color); **OBMARU** • DIRECTED BY PATRICK MARX (USA, 1953, 4 mins, 16mm, color); **ABSTRACTIONS 2 & 4** • DIRECTED BY DENVER SUTTON (USA, 1956, 3 mins, 16mm, color); **LOGOS** • DIRECTED BY JANE CONGER (USA, 1957, 2 mins, 16mm)

Sat, 12/9 10:00am  
**SPIRIT STREAM STORM**

35MM PRINTS OF HAND-CRAFTED ARTISTS' FILMS

Introduced by Stan Brakhage

USA/Georgia/Spain/France

1967-95 (100 mins)

Besides a generous sampling of Brakhage's hand-painted gems, the program features short films by other contemporary masters that question the push-pull between abstract and representational imagery in film.

**IMPRESSIONS FROM THE UPPER ATMOSPHERE** • DIRECTED BY JOSE ANTONIO SISTIAGA (Spain, 1989, 7 mins, 35mm, color); **INTERPOLATIONS I-V** • DIRECTED BY STAN BRAKHAGE (USA, 1992, 12 mins, 35mm, color, silent);

**SAPPHO AND JERRY:PTS 1-3** • DIRECTED BY BRUCE POSNER (USA, 1977-78, 6 mins, 35mm, color); **GIRAGLIA** • DIRECTED BY THIERRY VINCENTS (France, 1968, 5 mins, 35mm, color); **ORGASAMATIC** • DIRECTED BY BRUCE POSNER (USA, 1984-95, 4 mins, 35mm, color); **FALTER** • DIRECTED BY KURT KREN (Austria, 1990, 25 secs, 35mm, bw); **CALLOT** • DIRECTED BY CHARLES & RAY EAMES (USA, 1974, 3 mins, 35mm, color); **CONFESSION** • DIRECTED BY SERGEI PARADJANOV (Georgia, 1990, 8 mins, 35mm, color); **THE DANTE QUARTET** • DIRECTED BY STAN BRAKHAGE (USA, 1987, 6 mins, 35mm, color, silent); **GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS** • DIRECTED BY STAN BRAKHAGE (USA, 1981, 1.5 mins, 35mm, color, silent); **HELL SPIT FLEXION** • DIRECTED BY STAN BRAKHAGE (USA, 1983, 1 min, 35mm, color, silent); **EYE MYTH** • DIRECTED BY STAN BRAKHAGE (USA, 1967, 8 secs, 35mm, color, silent); **NIGHT MUSIC** • DIRECTED BY STAN BRAKHAGE (USA, 1986, 25 secs, 35mm, color, silent); **RAGE NET** • DIRECTED BY STAN BRAKHAGE (USA, 1988, 25 secs, 35mm, color, silent); **TAUSENDJAHRE-KINO** • DIRECTED BY KURT KREN (Austria, 1995, 3 mins, 35mm, color); **THE ANALECTS** • DIRECTED BY BRUCE POSNER & AMANDA KATZ (USA, 1987-95, 19 mins, 35mm, color, silent)

Sat, 12/9 1:00pm  
**FOUR MASTERS**

**GRANT, MCLAREN, LEE, CROCKWELL**

USA 1939-49 (60 mins)

A brief but insightful overview of four pioneer abstract filmmakers who made films in America throughout the 40s and onward that expanded the language of creative filmmaking.

**DIRECTED BY DWINELL GRANT:** **ABSTRACT EXPERIMENTS** (USA, 1941-42, 8 mins, 16mm, color, silent); **COMPOSITION #3:SPELEAN DANCE** (USA, 1942, 2 mins, 16mm, bw, silent); **COMPOSITION #5: FUGUE** (USA, 1949, 8 mins, 16mm, color, silent);

**DIRECTED BY NORMAN MCLAREN:** **LOOPS** (USA, 1939, 3 mins, 16mm, color); **PEN POINT PERCUSSION** • PRODUCED BY NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA (Canada, 1949, 6 mins, 16mm, bw)

**DIRECTED BY FRANCIS LEE:** **LE BIJOU** (USA, 1943, 7 mins, 16mm, color); **IDYLL** (USA, 1947, 9 mins, 16mm, color)

**DIRECTED BY DOUGLASS CROCKWELL:** **GLENS FALLS SEQUENCE** (USA, 1946, 8 mins, 16mm, color, silent); **THE LONG BODIES** (USA, 1947, 4 mins, 16mm, color, silent)

Sat, 12/9 2:00pm  
**CAN LANGUAGE DESCRIBE ABSTRACT FILM?**

Panel Discussion with Films

USA 1937-81 (60 mins)

**OPTICAL POEM** • DIRECTED BY OSKAR FISCHINGER (USA, 1937, 6 mins, 35mm, color); **COLOR RHAPSODY** • DIRECTED BY MARY ELLEN BUTE (USA, 1948, 6 mins, 35mm, color); **GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS** • DIRECTED BY STAN BRAKHAGE (USA, 1981, 1.5 mins, 35mm, color, silent)

Sat, 12/9 3:00pm  
**MARY ELLEN BUTE**

USA 1934-53 (60 mins)

In the mid 1930s, Mary Ellen Bute was the first American to make abstract motion pictures, and in the early 1950s the first person in the world to use electronic imagery in a film. She studied with experimental music pioneers Joseph Schillinger and Leon Theremin. Bute's introduction to Ted Nemeth led to a partnership (and marriage in 1940) that produced 12 short musical abstract films.

**DIRECTED BY MARY ELLEN BUTE:** **DADA (UNIVERSAL CLIP)** (USA, 1936, 3 mins, 16mm, bw), **TARANTELLA** (USA, 1940, 4 mins, 16mm, color); **RCA: NEW SENSATIONS IN SOUND** (USA, 1959, 3 mins, 35mm, color); **SYNCHROMY NO. 2** (USA, 1955, 5 mins, 16mm, bw); **SPOOK SPORT** (USA, 1939, 8 mins, 35mm, color); **IMAGINATION** (USA, 1958, 2 mins, 16mm, color); **PASTORAL** (USA, 1950, 6 mins, 16mm, color); **POLKA GRAPH** (USA, 1947, 4 mins, 35mm, color); **ABSTRONIC** (USA, 1952, 5.5 mins, 35mm, color)

Sat, 12/9 4:00pm  
**LEN LY**

Great Britain/USA/New Zealand 1929-80 (90 mins)

Len Lye (1901-80) produced "compositions of motion" during the 30s in Great Britain and later in America. He was a pioneer practitioner of "direct" film techniques whereby images are directly placed onto or scratched into celluloid without the aid of a camera.

**DIRECTED BY LEN LY:** **TUSALAVA** (Great Britain, 1929, 9 mins, 16mm, bw, silent); **KALEIDOSCOPE** (Great Britain, 1935, 4 mins, 16mm, color); **A COLOUR BOX** (Great Britain, 1935, 3 mins, 16mm, color); **THE BIRTH OF THE ROBOT** (Great Britain, 1936, 7 mins, 16mm, color); **RAINBOW DANCE** (Great Britain, 1936, 5 mins, 16mm, color); **SWINGING THE LAMBETH WALK** (Great Britain, 1939, 4 mins, 16mm, color); **MUSICAL POSTER NO. 1** (Great Britain, 1940, 3 mins, 16mm, color); **COLOR CRY** (USA, 1952, 3 mins, 16mm, color); **RHYTHM** (USA, 1957, 1 min, 16mm, bw); **FREE RADICALS** (USA, 1979, 4 mins, 16mm, bw); **TAL FARLOW** (New Zealand, 1980, 1 min, 16mm, bw)

Zealand, 1980, 2 mins, 16mm, bw); **TRADE TATTOO** (Great Britain, 1937, 6 mins, 16mm, color); **COLOUR FLIGHT** (Great Britain, 1938, 4 mins, 16mm, color); **PARTICLES IN SPACE** (USA, 1979, 4 mins, 16mm, bw)

Sat, 12/9 7:00pm  
**JAMES WHITNEY**

Lecture by William Moritz

USA 1941-82 (90 mins)

James Whitney (1921-81) began collaborating on abstract films with his older brother John (1917-95) (see Sunday at 3:00pm) in the early 40s. James became increasingly involved in contemplative, spiritual interests—Jungian psychology, alchemy, yoga, Tao, Krishnamurti and consciousness expansion—which became the subject matter of the films on which he labored for over 30 years.

**DIRECTED BY JAMES WHITNEY:** **VARIATIONS ON A CIRCLE** (USA, 1941-42, 9 mins, 16mm, color); **YANTRA** (USA, 1950-57, 8 mins, 16mm, color); **HIGH VOLTAGE** (USA, 1957, 3 mins, 16mm, color); **LAPIS** (USA, 1963-66, 10 mins, 16mm, color); **WU MING** (USA, 1977, 17 mins, 16mm, color, silent); **KANG JING XIANG** (USA, 1982, 13 mins, 16mm, color, silent)

Sat, 12/9 9:15pm  
**JAMES DAVIS & HY HIRSH**

Lecture by Robert Haller

USA 1949-66 (90 mins)

James Davis (1901-74) and Hy Hirsh (1911-61) constructed kaleidoscopically beautiful films that had no parallels or precedents in the arts. Whether Hirsh was rapidly editing images made on an optical printer, or Davis descending into the planes of light created by his illuminated plastics, both men made films which existed outside of tradition, but anticipated films made decades later.

**DIRECTED BY HY HIRSH:** **DÉFENSE D'AFFICHE** (USA, 1958-59, 8 mins, 16mm, color); **SCRATCH PAD** (USA, 1959, 7 mins, 16mm, color); **CHASE DES TOUCHES** (USA, 1959, 4 mins, 16mm, color)

**DIRECTED BY JAMES DAVIS:** **IMPLESSUS (PROCESSES)** (USA, 1959, 9 mins, 16mm, color); **JERSEY FALLS** (USA, 1949, 7 mins, 16mm, color); **DEATH & TRANSFIGURATION** (USA, 1961, 9.5 mins, 16mm, color)

Sun, 12/10 10:00am  
**ANALYTICAL ABSTRACTIONS BEYOND THE SCREEN**

Introduced by Gerald O'Grady

France, Germany, USA 1923-76 (90 mins)

European influences on the American abstract film came from multiple sources. One such thread follows images that have been abstracted to the point of appearing to step off the screen.

**BALLET MÉCANIQUE** • DIRECTED BY FERDÉR LÉGER, DUDLEY MURPHY, MAN RAY (France, 1924, 19 mins, 16mm, bw, with restored sound track); **RETURN TO REASON** • DIRECTED BY MAN RAY (France, 1923, 3 mins, 16mm, bw, silent); **RECREATION** • DIRECTED BY ROBERT BREER (USA, 1957, 1.5 mins, 16mm, color); **H2O** • DIRECTED BY RALPH STEINER (USA, 1929, 11 mins, 16mm, bw, silent); **RHYTHM 21** • DIRECTED BY HANS RICHTER (Germany, 1924, 5 mins, 16mm, bw, silent); **LIGHT PLAY IN BLACK**, **WHITE, GRAY** • DIRECTED BY LASZLO MOHOLY-NAGY (Germany, 1926, 6 mins, 16mm, bw, silent); **DREAM DISPLACEMENT** • DIRECTED BY PAUL SHARITS (USA, 1976, 25 mins, 16mm, color)

Sun, 12/10 1:00pm  
**HY HIRSH**

USA 1952-61 (60 mins)

Hirsh's films developed a masterful mix of sound and image via oscilloscope electronics and optical printing synchronized to his homemade recordings of jazz and Afro-Caribbean music. He was an influential figure of the West Coast film scene and manifested himself in front of, and behind, the camera for films by Sidney Peterson, Harry Smith, Jordan Belson and others.

**DIRECTED BY HY HIRSH:** **GYROMORPHOSIS** (USA, 1957, 7 mins, 16mm, color); **COME CLOSER** (USA, 1952, 7 mins, 16mm, color); **DEFENSE D'AFFICHE** (USA, 1958-59, 8 mins, 16mm, color); **SCRATCH PAD** (USA, 1959, 7 mins, 16mm, color); **AUTUMN SPECTRUM** (USA, 1957, 7 mins, 16mm, color); **CHASE DES TOUCHES** (USA, 1959, 4 mins, 16mm, color); **LA COULEUR DE LA FORME** (USA, 1961, 7 mins, 16mm, color); **ENERI** (USA, 1953, 7 mins, 16mm, color