Despite the precise parameters that define their rejections of cinema (as a medium for visual art or one for critical contemplation), the Dutch artist Jan Dibbets and the Hungarian cultural historian Arnold Hauser give voice, in the epigraphs to this chapter, to a much broader, systemic disavowal of the medium: film is undoubtedly visual, but is it art? This, of course, as Walter Benjamin understood more than a half century ago, is the wrong question. The right one asks, rather, how the existence of film has redefined the very way in which we understand the work of art. More than fifty years after Benjamin’s death and a hundred years after the birth of cinema, however, film continues to reside—now in the company of video, holography, and new forms of computer-based imaging—on a fault line discernible only well below the surface of the art-world infrastructure. It periodically rises to the surface, as when it is briefly embraced by artists who, in their youthful defiance of the procedures and proprieties of art-making, intuitively take up moving images for their disruptive potential. But, intrinsically difficult to display, market, or collect in the manner of more traditional art forms such as painting or sculpture, these experiments invariably recede into that art-historical netherworld in which they may be occasionally viewed, “en passant.”

On the eve of the centenary of the cinema, it is perhaps an appropriate moment to reassess the place of the moving-image arts within the wider body of visual arts.
practice and to examine their access to the institutional resources of the museum. This inquiry is less about the actual presence (or more frequently absence) of film, film departments, or screening facilities within particular museums—although it is this, too—and more a reflection on the hoarse whisper of the cinematic (and in more recent times, the videographic) voice within the aesthetic discourse of the museum.

The desire for inclusion within the museum, for parity with contemporaneous visual and plastic arts, rarely has been articulated by filmmakers themselves, although they have often wrestled with and sometimes succeeded in subduing some of the most challenging aesthetic concerns facing the visual arts. Even among video-installation artists, relatively recent arrivals on the art scene who have on occasion found a measure of institutional acceptance, frustration often outstrips theory. Typical is the succinct syllogism of the Spanish installation artist Francesc Torres, who rather baldly assesses matters as follows:

Despite the tools available to art through technology, the art world hangs on to its conventional practices and aesthetic strategies. Thus technology-based art exists in a marginal area in a technology-based society. Seen in light of this century's history, science and technology are perceived more as deliverers of death and ecological crime than as purveyors of insight and well-being. Within this perceptual frame, technological art is seen in an unflattering light while the traditional arts are viewed as a redoubt of the human spirit.¹

Before the electronic age and the array of technology it has made available for art, however, there was the machine age, which gave rise to the cinema and its photographic predecessors. Film emerged in the final years of the nineteenth century and exhibited an endemic interest in the increasingly machine-laden landscapes of the early twentieth century, as the links between the kinetic and the cinematic, between this new communications medium and new modes of travel, forged a natural partnership. This fascination seemed to culminate in The General (1927), Buster Keaton's sublime reflection on the pitfalls and possibilities of the individual ("a minuscule dot encompassed by an immense and catastrophic milieu") in a mechanized world.²

Nearly half a century later, the artist and cineaste Marcel Broodthaers reflected on this fundamental aspect of early cinematic practice by producing in 1972 a film fiction (a parallel to his museum fictions) in the form of a movie poster for an unmade film, Ein Eisenbahnüberfall. This work, appropriately produced as a multiple, consists of still photographs framed by sprocket-holed borders that picture specimen scenes in which the artist and an accomplice, in frock coats and hats, wait alongside a railroad crossing for the eventual arrival of a train.

Throughout the history of modernism in the visual arts, the machine has served as subject matter, but for the machine-based media (e.g., still photography, silk screen, metal fabrication, assemblage), institutional acceptance within the museum has been achieved only through a most ingenious array of disguises and dissimulations—elegantly abstracted in the photography of Paul Strand, caricatured in the sculpture of
Jean Tinguely, appropriated as cultural iconography in the large canvases of James Rosenquist, in ruins and exhausted in the metalworks of John Chamberlain, and most recently, expressionistically caricatured in the sculptures of Anselm Kiefer. A revealing history of modernism could be told in the elaborate strategies employed by artists and institutions to counter and deform the machine and mass-produced culture in general.

There have been less than successful attempts, however, at bringing the cinema into the gallery and into the museum collection. Like still photography, film is a mechanically reproducible medium, but unlike the photograph, a film is not detachable from its machine source. Rather it can be seen only if it remains tethered to a version of the apparatus that originally produced the work. Unhooked from its machine, a film is lifeless and empty, as Joseph Beuys demonstrated when he created a multiple of lead-clad reels from Ingmar Bergman’s *The Silence*. The occasions on which film has entered the collection of the art museum often find the ludicrous specter of its elements similarly exhibited in vitrines like moon rocks or relics from some alien culture, reduced to an objecthood ontologically at odds with its true aesthetic nature (be it Jean-Luc Godard’s “truth twenty-four times a second” or Stan Brakhage’s “visionary experience”).

Film as a mechanical medium has been less than readily accepted within the museum or within the art-historical discourse of modernity, perhaps because of the ominous associations that Torres described in connection to the uses to which allied technologies have been put in this century and perhaps because of mainstream cinema’s...
undeniable complicity in the wholesale transmission of repressive ideologies dressed in the glamour of the silver screen. Beyond these global dispositions, however, there are a number of structural, systemic biases that hinder its advancement in the art world. Curiously, it is precisely these structural “deficiencies” that have become points of departure for advanced film practice.

**Illusionism**

As a camera-based art form, film is defined by the indexical illusionism of the medium and as such remains, as the American filmmaker and theorist Hollis Frampton noted, “ontologically manacled” to its referents:

> [W]e are accustomed to deny them [photographs], in their exfoliation of illusion, the very richness of implication that for the acculturated intellect is the only way at all we have left us to understand (for instance) paintings. To put it quite simply, a painting which may be, after all, nothing but some paint splashed on canvas, is comprehended within an enormity which includes not only all the paintings that have ever been made, but also all that has ever been attributed to the painterly act.³

A photograph, however, is just a photograph, and by extension the products of the other camera arts are merely films and videotapes rather than, as Frampton posits for the plastic arts, “abundant metaphor[s] for one sort of relationship between the making intelligence and its sensed exterior reality.”⁴

Marcel Duchamp’s *Anemic Cinema* (1925) seized precisely on this aspect of film—its aesthetic void—through an extraordinary hyperbolization of both the spatial illusion of depth it achieves and the flat screen space of its projection. *Anemic Cinema* literalizes and cartoons the material workings of silent cinema—its mix of palpable three-dimensionality and the obligatory book-space passages of intertitles—suggesting a Faustian bargain in which the medium sacrifices interpretive depth for the visceral illusion of depicted depth. For Duchamp the cinema is a bloodless body, a spectral presence that has been robbed of both interiority and aesthetic dimension.

The legacy of Duchamp’s critique can be seen in a number of underground films of the 1960s and, in particular, in the interest in “expanded cinema” forms that developed powerful renunciations of the necessity of illusionism. These films activated the space of projection and by emptying the content of the image focused attention on the presentational rather than the representational. Tony Conrad’s stroboscopic *The Flicker* (1966), for example, which had its origins in the arena of Fluxus and concrete music, introduced a singularly nonillusionistic and yet powerfully kinetic film form. A similar cinema was referenced in Peter Kubelka’s ironic, imageless “portrait” film, *Arnulf Rainer* (1958–60). The imageless cinema has remained an area of particular interest to both visual and conceptual artists, beginning with the “white films” of Takehisa Kosugi and Nam June Paik in the 1960s and continuing with more contemporary works, such as a totally overexposed “landscape film” by the Belgian artist Mark...
Figure 2. Marcel Duchamp, *Anémic Cinéma*, 1925. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.
Luyten or the late English artist and filmmaker Derek Jarman’s sublimely monochromatic autobiography *Blue* (1993).

Such film projects may have engaged issues of representation and materiality germane to the visual arts, but they have entered the museum only occasionally and, of course, "en passant." On rare occasion, a film has managed to make it intact into the gallery—in the form of installation, of course—as is the case in the Walker Art Center’s acquisition in the early 1990s of a piece by the Irish artist James Coleman entitled *Box* (*Ahharetabout*) (1977). The work consists of a continuous projection of a seven-minute film loop made by adding segments of black leader to appropriated newsreel footage of a 1927 boxing match between Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney. By adapting some of the extracinematic aspirations of expanded cinema, Coleman’s rectified found footage creates a compelling metaphor for the experience of the medium. The presentational assaultiveness of the flicker highlights the materiality of the projection while the representational assault captured on the original footage etymologically references the ur-narrative of all illusionist cinema in the conflict of the boxers. But *Box* equally describes its own physical dimensions, which mime in miniature the specifications for all cinemas: the piece’s sculptural dimension as a spatial configuration—an installation, a container, a “box”—brings spectator and spectacle together. It is here that the final element, the work’s sound track, comes into play, introducing both the mediating figure of the artist (whose hoarse voice and breathing are heard throughout the piece) and the presence of the machine (given voice through a rhythmic thud marking each shot transition). Together, these announce the work’s attempt to realize an enduring metaphor of avant-garde cinema in which this most exterior of art forms provides access to the depth of an artist’s interiority and consciousness. In *Box*, as we watch an external historic moment flash past, we are simultaneously privy to the excited, libidinous voice of the artist responding to the imagery in a manner that is powerfully suggestive of the process of inner speech—that ongoing inner dialogue that gives voice to consciousness and maps the moment-by-moment attempts to interpret actuality within the matrix of memory and anticipation. At such moments, we are accorded an aesthetic experience as rich and varied, as visceral and intellectually engaging, as those proffered by the paintings and sculptures in the adjoining galleries of the museum.

**Temporality**

Film is as much a temporal art as it is a visual one. Within the simplest linear narrative, there are at least four determining temporal layers, including the story time, the time of its telling, the time of production, and the actual running time of the film. This multiple temporality is shared by video and remains one of the fundamental constraints on the reception and integration of film, video, and their installation forms into the galleries of art institutions. Media scholar Margaret Morse notes that “[a]s a spatial form, installation art might appear to have escaped the ghetto of time-
based arts into the museum proper,” but even with the privileging of the visual over
the temporal and the reduction of video elements to brief repeating cycles, moving-
image installations maintain a temporality at odds “with the dominant mode of per-
ceiving in museums and galleries.”

One of the first artists to address the issue of detemporalizing the cinema was the
American Joseph Cornell. In his first collage film, *Rose Hobart* (1939), Cornell at-
tended to counter the dominant cinema’s temporal structures, grounded as they are
in Aristotelian unities (space, time, action), theatrical dramaturgy (conflict, repeti-
tion, resolution), and the patterned narrative of folktales (equilibrium, disequilibrium,
which features the actress Rose Hobart, substituting recordings of Caribbean-style
dance music for the film’s original sound track, and tinting the black-and-white
footage a roselike hue, *Rose Hobart* reverses the typical relationship between decor and
narrative (where the former is exhausted in its service to the latter) and shifts attention
from plot and story to gesture, costume, and set design in creating a de-plotted, re-
versible meditation on the image.

This interest in film as decor is taken up again in the work of experimental film-
makers in the 1950s and early 1960s, particularly in the underground films (or what
Jonas Mekas presciently termed the “Baudelairian” cinema) of Ken Jacobs, Ron Rice,
and Jack Smith. Their work—particularly Smith’s notorious *Flaming Creatures* (1963)—
met with almost immediate resistance: they were as likely to be banned from the
avant-garde circles at Knokke-Heist as busted by the New York City vice squad. This
criminality had less to do with the depiction of male nudity and more to do with a full
frontal assault on linearity, coherence, and closure. Films like Jacobs’s *Blonde Cobra*
(1958–63), Rice’s *The Atom Man Meets the Queen of Sheba* (1963), and Smith’s *Flaming
Creatures* were by turns fragmented and endless, obsessive, and detached. Jacobs best
characterized such work in terming *Blonde Cobra* “an erratic narrative—no, not really
a narrative, it’s only stretched out in time for convenience of delivery.”

A converse development in temporality, which also derived from Cornell, brought
visual artists out of the gallery and into the cinema. The American painter Robert
Breer, for example, conducted experiments (including *Image by Images I* [1954], a film
loop in which every frame contained a different image) that temporialized his abstract
compositions and led him into a career in experimental animation. The West Coast
artist Bruce Conner began in the late 1950s working with found film material (much
as he had deployed found materials into his sculptures and assemblages) and subse-
sequently devoted much of his career to the production of collage-based experimental
films. In addition to his reinvigoration of the found-footage film (a form that he re-
defined in his seminal *A Movie* [1958]) and prefiguring by two decades the emergence
of music videos, Conner produced a key film installation, also recently acquired for
gallery installation by the Walker Art Center, that may well emerge as the missing link
between artist film and video art. *Television Assassination* (1963/1975) consists of an
8mm film projected onto the whitewashed screen of a vintage 1950s television set; it
repeats in slow motion footage of the televised assassination of Lee Harvey Oswald, a shooting that appears choreographed for the camera and that captured the tele-attention of the nation. Like Andy Warhol's use of serialized imagery in works like Sixteen Jackies (1964), Conner probes the formal aspects of the medium—its reproducibility, its endless repetitive potential—to create a work that extends the implied temporality of Warhol's painting into a concrete temporality in the gallery space. By opting to explore these issues within the context of the originating moving-image media, and thereby effectively short-circuiting the art-making/art marketing network, Conner anticipates Dan Graham's early work with mass-circulation publications.

Collaborative Production/Multiple Products

The social historian Arnold Hauser recognized the challenge that film production posed to artists—namely the "unusual and unnatural" situation of an artistic enterprise based on cooperation—and pronounced it "the first attempt since the beginning of our modern individualistic civilization to produce art for a mass public." While Hauser based his speculations on the workings of the commercial cinema, even a non-commercial, independent film made by an individual artist for a modest-sized public involves some measure of collaboration at each level of production—from the chemistry of the emulsion on the film stock to the optics of the camera lens to the lab work of developing and printing versions (work prints, answer prints, release prints) of the finished work.

The collaborative origins of the medium are matched in the nature of the finished work, which consists of unlimited multiples. Walter Benjamin prophetically read this aspect of the cinematic enterprise as changing the very nature of the work of art. It did not, however, change the nature of the art marketplace. It is not surprising, then, that film would be embraced most readily by artists associated with a loosely collaborative movement like Fluxus, which often engaged in comic combat with the forces most resistant to the Benjaminian shift, namely the commercial galleries, private and corporate collectors, and art museums. Fluxus impresario George Maciunas, who had overseen the production and assembling of several dozen short Fluxfilms, recognized the corrosive potential of film when in attempting to find something of scale to install within the gallery spaces for exhibitions, he proposed in 1967 a multiscreen installation piece, a Fluxus Film Wallpaper, which would bring together within a single viewing area loops of the Fluxfilms, works that had already registered a significant assault on convention.

A different type of collaboration is evident in filmmaker Chantal Akerman's massive film and video installation Bordering on Fiction: Chantal Akerman's D'Est. Based on D'Est (1993), her feature-length observational film that focuses on aspects of daily life within countries of the former Soviet bloc, the work engages in a dialogue about film and ideology. Although conceived as a gallery-based, artist-produced work, Akerman, in choosing to speak in the language of the cinema, has had to make use of
both the technology (cameras, tape recorders, lights, dollies, cables) and the techniques of the collaboratively produced film. This is not, therefore, sculpture that contains moving images, but rather a movie (with all that practice connotes) reconceived and deconstructed for spatial contemplation within the gallery.

In the early 1980s, the French director Jean-Luc Godard participated at the Walker Art Center in a dialogue about his films in which he screened excerpts of his work alongside clips from several Hollywood films. Following the presentation, someone in the audience raised a hand and acknowledged the significance of Godard’s work, but questioned the logic of including the American films the questioner apparently found sadly lacking—the work of Otto Preminger being dated and boring and Jerry Lewis seen as silly. Godard responded that the audience member was mistaken and that Godard’s own films were barely equal to the ones by the Hollywood directors. And he concluded with an analogy appropriate for the event’s setting within an art museum: “Otto Preminger . . . is Monet,” he proclaimed. “And Jerry Lewis . . . is Robert Rauschenberg.”

Such a perspective, however extreme, can lead, nonetheless, to speculation on the expanded exhibitions (not to speak of art histories) possible when film enters the gallery—when René Clair and Luis Buñuel rejoin Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst; when the kinetic abstractions of Mary Ellen Bute and Oskar Fischinger are shown with the canvases of Jackson Pollock; when Frank Tashlin’s satires mingle with Robert Rauschenberg’s combines; when Paul Sharits’s kinetic film installations are placed ad-
adjacent to the lightworks of Dan Flavin and James Turrell; when the works of Hollis Frampton converse with the texts of Joseph Kosuth; when the visual practice of Man Ray, Fernand Léger, Charles Sheeler, Paul Strand, Joseph Cornell, William Klein, Andy Warhol, Wallace Berman, Dieter Rot, Alfred Leslie, Bruce Conner, Jan Dibbets, Marcel Broodthaers, Lawrence Weiner, Richard Serra, Joan Jonas, and Kiki Smith re-connects with their filmmaking; when modernity and postmodernity are animated by the vitality of the seventh art.

Notes

This essay, based on a lecture given in January 1994 at the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam, originally appeared in Witte de With Cahier No. 3 (Rotterdam: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art; Düsseldorf: Richter verlag, 1995). The essay is dedicated to the memory of Paul Sharits (1943–93), an American artist and filmmaker who created a body of extraordinary moving-image works for both the gallery and the screen. I wish to acknowledge the Jerome, Dayton Hudson, and General Mills Foundations for a travel and study grant and the Cité International des Arts in Paris for providing me a residence during the grant period. Finally, I wish to thank Chris Dercon, former director of the Witte de With, for the opportunity to formalize these ideas into an essay, the current director Bartomeu Mari and his assistant Barbera van Kooij for their kindness in approving this republication, and the critic Nelly Voorhuis for her good counsel.


4. Ibid., 130.

