

paul sharits

by stuart liebman

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Film In The Cities
2388 University Avenue
St Paul, MN

Design: Laurence Joel Bricker
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Fourteenth in a series of monographs written for the series Filmmakers Filming, co-sponsored by Film In The Cities and Walker Art Center.

paul sharits

More than ten years have passed since Paul Sharits neatly transcribed three short sections from Wittgenstein's "Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics" into the hectic assemblage of notes for his film **S:ream:S:S:ection:S:ection:S:S:ectioned.**

for p. adams sitney

- 1 165 What, then—does it just twist and turn about within these rules?—It forms ever new rules: is always building new road for traffic; by extending the network of the old ones.
- 1 166 But then doesn't it need a sanction for this? Can it extend the network arbitrarily? Well, I could say: a mathematician is always inventing new forms of descriptions. Some, stimulated by practical need, others, from aesthetic needs,—and yet others in a variety of ways. And here imagine a landscape gardener designing paths for the layout of a garden; it may well be that he draws them on a drawingboard merely as ornamental strips without the slightest thought of someone's walking on them.
- 1 167 The mathematician is an inventor, not a discoverer.¹

These quotations, presented without comment, establish a space of tranquil speculation amid the corroded, punning prose recounting Sharits' random thoughts and myriad anxieties. Despite their isolation, however, they are drawn into the dynamic of an evolving drama whose theme is familiar even if its terms and its setting are new. An artist struggles to establish his voice in an historical landscape defined by the powerful representatives of an admired tradition. Although the drama has been reenacted countless times in the work and intimate thoughts of strong creative artists, the interest and poignancy of Sharits' struggle is diminished neither by the existence of precedents nor by his inability to formulate the theme explicitly.

1. These quotations were omitted from the notes for the film published in "Film Culture" 65-66. The original notes are in the file of Anthology Film Archives, New York City.



Scratch notations for S:ream:S:ection:Section:S:ectioned (1968-71)

At the root of the drama lies what the literary critic Harold Bloom call "the anxiety of influence," the acute sense of belatedness an artist experiences when confronting the brilliantly creative achievements of a vital artistic tradition.² The artist struggles to establish grounds for his own difference so that he can pursue creative work without the oppressive fear that, in T.S. Eliot's words, "everything that can be done has been done."³ In different configurations, the animus and purpose of this anxiety is woven into the fabric of Sharits' texts. Its presence can be sensed in the Wittgenstein quotations for they implicitly propose a polemic, less against the masterworks of the avant-garde film tradition than against the categories from which they drew their strength: iconic imagery, narrative, the representation of the self. For several years, the first of his artistic maturity, models derived from the discourses of music (serialism) and art criticism (Greenbergian modernism) sustained Sharits in his attempt to distance himself from these categories. Now, in the years between 1968 and 1970, a "pivotally transitional" moment of "personal and aesthetic transvaluations" in his career, Sharits needed an even more abstract and rigorous model for the pure cinema of uniquely cinematic materials, processes and ideas he aspired to create. Encouraged by the example of Wittgenstein's mathematician, Sharits intensified his search for a set of prime cinematic signs as abstract and self-referential as numbers which could be refashioned and recombined by procedures modelled after the arbitrary formal protocols of mathematical speculation. From these premises, Sharits generated the radically distilled space and time of masterworks distinguished for their formal elegance and by the new horizons of theoretical speculation they open.

Sharits is one of the most significant artists of a generation of American filmmakers who came to cinema in the 1960s when two decades of independent efforts had finally established the idea of a tradition of avant-garde filmmaking. The early 1960s was a period of astounding and unpreced-

2. Harold Bloom, "The Anxiety of Influence" (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). For a more complete consideration of the historical origins of this anxiety, see W. Jackson Bate, "The Burden of the Past and the English Poet" (New York: Norton, 1972).
3. T.S. Eliot, "What is a Classic?" "On Poetry and Poets" (New York: Noonday, 1961), p. 58.

ented growth for the avant-garde film movement in the United States. Deren had died in 1961, and Sidney Peterson and James Broughton had stopped making films for various personal or economic reasons. Another early exponent of the tradition, Kenneth Anger, however, broke a decade-long silence and began to make films in the United States again. Robert Breer also returned from Europe. Markopolous, Brakhage, and Harry Smith created their longest and most ambitious films. There were also important new debuts by Jack Smith, Ken Jacobs, Jonas Mekas, and Andy Warhol. The strong filmmakers of Sharits' generation—Frampton, Landow and Snow, and somewhat later, Noren, Sonbert, and Gehr—came to maturity in full, and conspicuously uneasy awareness of these diverse and impressive achievements.

Born in 1943, Sharits encountered the work of earlier avant-garde filmmakers at least as early as 1962 when he founded the Denver Experimental Film Society while still a student of painting at the University of Denver. Until 1965, he made films that echoed already established thematic and formal idioms. The raw black and white solipsism and the temporal dynamics respectively characteristic of "trance" and "lyrical" films seems to have presided over his attempt to recreate "personal feelings, stress moods, anxiety—experiences of bleakness, non-linear, temporal suspension, loss of 'objective' mind set (grey, grainy, claustrophobic—highly filmic, a black and white landscape)."⁴ I write "seems" because these films—among them **Event**, **Winter course**, and **Illumination Accident**—no longer exist. With a single exception, Sharits destroyed all of them in 1966 "in a rage of non-narrative committment."

Sharits' destructive "rage" did not result solely from an uncontrollable emotional impulse, and it was not directed only against narrative as a structural principle in films. It was equally provoked by considerable reflection about film as an aesthetic medium and his objections extended to the entire range of cinematic discourse. Even the avant-garde was not exempted from his criticism.

After several years of "experiments" with film, in 1965, i discovered that "Cinematic" was an "expression" meaning more than "creative editing" (i.e. space-

4. Paul Sharits, "Movie Cookbook," (1966), "Film Culture" 65-66 (Winter 1978): 109.

time manipulation and/or imagistic-metaphoric inventiveness) or "sensitive camera control" (i.e. expressive camera movement, framing, compositional tonality, et al) because in each of these instances, "Cinematic" meant "cinematic treatment" of a non-filmic "subject." So, i began to look to the actual materials-processes of my medium, in the most basic-obvious modalities, for "subject" matter and for appropriate overall structural principles.⁵

The theoretical issues at stake in these remarks are less considerable, but it is the manner in which Sharits defines himself with respect to the avant-garde film tradition that I want to consider first. His tone is curiously aggressive. Sharits writes as if earlier vanguard filmmakers failed to grasp the true nature of the "cinematic" which he poses as a condition of any claim to aesthetic seriousness. The "creative editing" and innovative camera movement which provided the foundations of formally advanced film practice in the United States from the 1940s through the mid-1960s (that is, from the early work of Maya Deren through Stan Brakhage's lyrical and mythopoeic films) are characterized merely as so many "treatments" of inappropriate subjects. The efforts by many filmmakers—preeminently Deren, Markopolous, and Brakhage—to ground their cinematic practice in theories defining the strategies and structural principles they believed unique to the medium are not mentioned.

His reading—or rather, misreading—of avant-garde film history is so cavalier and unfair, in fact, as to suggest the existence of some underlying animus. This animus has recently been given a name: it is the "anxiety of influence," and its defensive aim is to establish for Sharits a space apart from the tradition in which his own originality can flourish. This anxiety is present even when Sharits ostensibly praises the achievements of earlier filmmakers. Consider his assessments of the films of Brakhage and Warhol. First presented publicly in 1970 in his important lecture "Words Per Page", Sharits' comments reflect concerns which he has been grappling with since 1965.

Stan Brakhage's massive work is too expansive in its

5. Sharits, "-UR(1)N(ul)LS:TREAM:S:SECTION:S:SECTION:S:SECTIONED(A)-(lysis)JO: '1968-1970,'" "Film Culture" 65-66 (Winter 1978):13.

implications and richness to discuss here except to mention that his use of the camera as a behavioral extension, his forceful modulation of disjunctive, "distractive""mistakes" (blurs, splices, flares, frame lines, flash frames) and his decomposition—reconstitution of "subjects" in editing, because of their cinematically self-referential qualities (they reveal the system by which they are made), bring cinema up to date with the other advanced arts. And, in another manner, Andy Warhol has demonstrated in his early work that prolongations of subject (redundant, "nonmotion" pictures), because they deflect attention finally to the material process of recording-projecting (to the succession of film frames, and by way of consciousness of film grain, scratches, and dirt particles, to the sense of the flow of the celluloid strip), it is perhaps as revealing of the "nature of cinema" as is consistent interruption of "normative" cinematic functions. (Emphasis in original).⁶

Despite the apparant generosity and laudatory tone of this tribute, the text implicitly argues that Brakhage and Warhol did not pursue the implications of their innovations either far enough or with sufficient rigor. Their self-referential gestures and tautological declarations of filmic materials were a beginning, but only a beginning. It is as if they proceeded correctly up to a certain point, but then swerved away when they should have moved precisely in the direction that Sharits aspires to move.⁷ Through this spectacular act of misprision, all films, even those of admired precursors, become anticipations of the cinema Sharits himself will make. His films, his texts broadly hint, will be crucially different because they will be the first to exploit the materials and processes of the medium correctly. His will be completely and authentically cinematic: the first films.⁸

In 1965, as Sharits became increasingly dissatisfied with

6. Sharits, "Words Per Page," "Film Culture" 65-66 (Winter 1978):34. Sharits' reading of their work strikes me as extraordinarily reductive, still another sign that a creative misprision is at work.

7. Harold Bloom has called this type of misreading "clinamen." Op. cit., p. 14

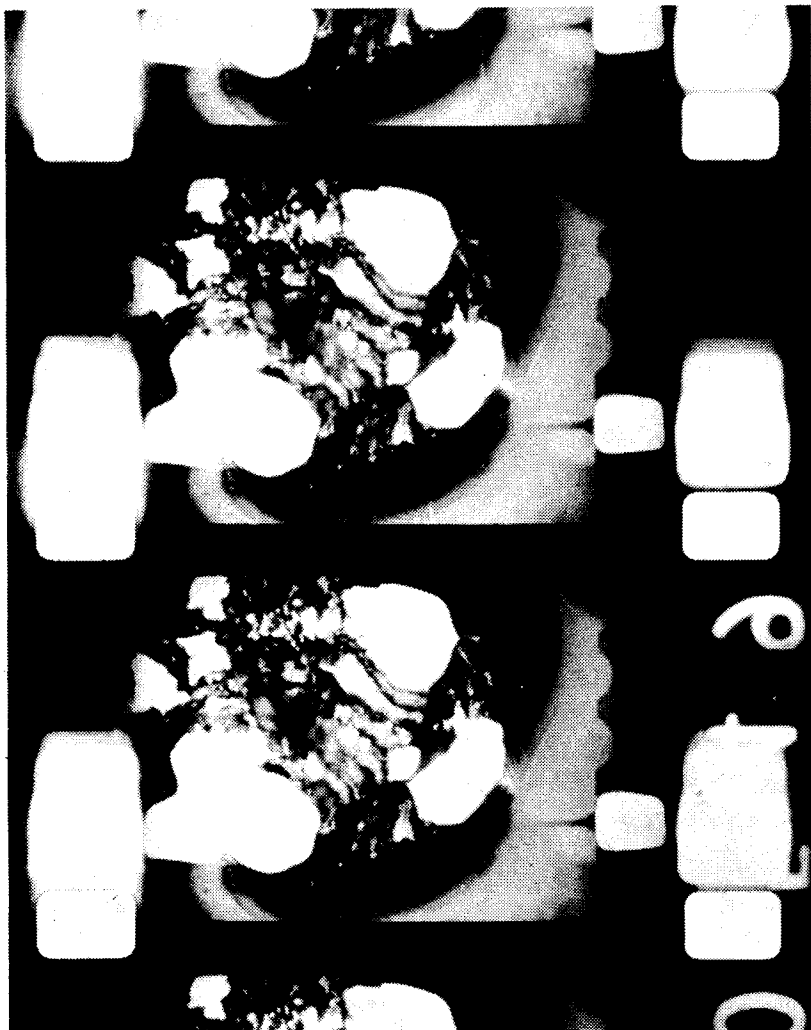
the films of earlier film artists as well as with his own, he became aware of a particular conception of the purpose and value of modern visual art whose foremost exponent was the art critic, Clement Greenberg. In his article, "Modernist Painting," which he published in 1965, Greenberg definitively formulated the fundamental premise of his influential theory of modernism. "Each art," he wrote,

had to determine through the operations peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself. By doing this, each art would, to be sure, narrow its area of competence, but at the same time it would make its possession of this area all the more secure. It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique to the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thereby each art would be rendered "pure," and in its "purity" find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. "Purity" meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance.⁹

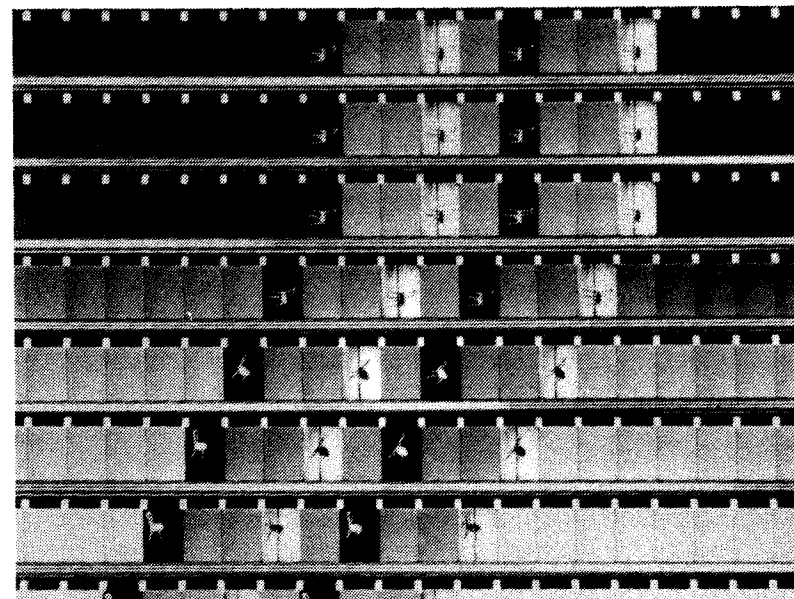
Because of Greenberg's influence in certain "advanced" critical circles, the quest for purity was institutionalized as the force animating modern art's history, and self-definition became the central standard of value against which contemporary aesthetic achievement had to be measured.

8. My purpose in considering the anxiety of influence at such length is neither to disparage the merits of his theoretical claims, nor to diminish the extraordinary beauty of his films. I think it is also clear that Sharits found much in Brakhage's and Warhol's films that influenced him in the conventional sense we use the term. Their example confirmed the possibility of a formal vocabulary based on cinematic materials. I suppose too that Sharits must be believed when he emphasizes that he discovered the antimony of stasis and motion so central in his mature work in the opposition of single frame and flowing strip he believes to be embodied in Warhol's long-take style. I want only to suggest some of the hidden exchanges, often as perverse as they are disciplined, that underlie the historical developments in a mature art form.

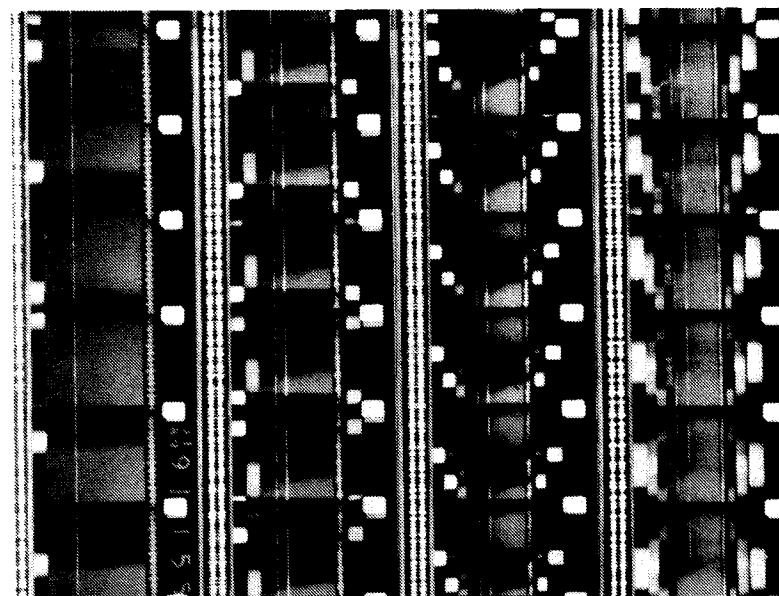
9. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," reprinted in "The New Art," ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1966), p. 102.



Analytical Studies II Unframed Lines (1971-76) Final image.



N.O.T.H.I.N.G. (1968)



Episodic Generation (1976)

Greenberg's theory of modernist art intensified Sharits' disaffection with the works he modelled after those of other filmmakers and encouraged him to define the "cinematic" as a kind of categorical aesthetic imperative. Work on his films, **Ray Gun Virus**, **Word Move**, **Razor Blades**, and **Peace Mandala/End War**, complemented by extensive research in the phenomenology of cinematic perception, enabled him to formulate a programmatic statement for the Fourth International Experimental Film Festival at Knokke-Le-Zoute in 1967.

I wish to abandon imitation and illusion and enter directly into the higher drama of: celluloid, two dimensional strips; individual rectangular frames; the nature of sprockets and emulsion; projector operations; the three dimensional reflective screen surface; the retinal screen; optic nerve and individual psycho-physical subjectivities of consciousness. In this cinematic drama, light is energy rather than a tool for the representation of non-filmic objects; light as energy is released to create its own objects, shapes and textures. Given the fact of retinal inertia and the flickering shutter mechanism of film projection, one may generate virtual forms, create actual motion (rather than illustrate it), build actual color-space (rather than picture it), and be involved in actual time (immediate presence).¹⁰

Sharits formulated this lucid program to establish the limits and to isolate the unique expressive potential of his medium. Like the modernist painters who explore the canvas' surface and shape in the belief that these parameters constitute the essential terms of painting's discourse, Sharits proposes to use as the prime vehicles of his aesthetics statements only the perceptual processes and formal elements which constitute cinema. His films, therefore, exploit the dynamics of retinal response to modulated light and color, and they elevate the normally invisible materials of film—sprocket holes, the flat screen, the individual frames, etc.—into the principal objects of vision. Developed and refined with astonishing resoluteness and inventiveness, this pro-

10. Sharits, "Notes on Films/1966-1968," "Film Culture" 47 (Summer 1969):13.

gram informs all the work Sharits has produced during the last fifteen years.

Declarative Mode, a two-projector, single-screen "flicker" film, illustrates the remarkable continuity of Sharits' concerns. Commissioned for the Bicentennial Year's celebration of American values, **Declarative Mode** extends the explorations of "the fact of retinal inertia and the flickering shutter mechanism of film projection", which Sharits had begun nearly a decade before in such works as **Peace Mandala/End War** and **T:O:U:C:H:I:N:G**. The "flicker effect" for which these films are named is an intrinsic but ordinarily unnoticed feature of the phenomenology of film viewing. Films create the illusion of objects moving on screen by projecting a rapidly pulsing (flickering) beam of light through a series of still frames that are transported intermittently past the light source.¹¹ Each frame contains a phase of an action (either photographed or animated) and these phases must be coordinated (for example, they must be consecutively ordered) so that, when projected, they fuse into the perceived image of an object moving continuously through a stable setting.¹²

In his flicker films, Sharits disrupts this process. He replaces the consecutive phases of action with solidly colored or black or white frames. The effect is literally dazzling. The viewer sees often violent bursts of light whose color and intensity are functions of the speed at which the colored frames and the complementary colors of spontaneously induced afterimages change. The oscillating colors not only foreground the pulsing light beam, they also reflexively remind the viewer of the physical limits of the frame and of the surface on which films are projected. When colors change slowly, a flat, undifferentiated field fills the entire image. As the speed increases, however, random shapes appear that seem either to sink into an illusory depth or to

11. The lens must also be properly focused. For more detailed discussions of these issues, see Joseph and Barbara Anderson, "Motion Perception in Motion Pictures," and Bill Nichols and Susan J. Lederman, "Flicker and Motion in Film," in "The Cinematic Apparatus," eds. Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (New York: St Martin's Press, 1980), pp. 76-95, and pp. 96-105 respectively.

12. The perception of camera movement has been discussed by David Bordwell, "Camera Movement and Cinematic Space," "Cine-Tracts" 2 (Summer 1977: 19-25.)

project into the auditorium space. A dynamic, purely optical space, shifting between two and three dimensions, which is characteristic of our perception of the space in all films, is created.¹³

In **Declarative Mode**, Sharits exaggerates all these effects by superimposing one flicker film within the frame of another. The color changes cause the spatial relationships of the two fields to vary dramatically. When the color of the inner field abruptly matches that of the framing field, for example, it radiates rapidly to the limits of the outer screen. At other times, the sequence is reversed as the outer rectangle collapses into the smaller frame. Contrasting colors on the inner and outer screen also create the illusion of a truncated pyramid bulging forward or backward. As the speed increases, film image and screen surface fuse into the illusion of a taut membrane flexing in a rhythm that suggests a heart beating excitedly.

Sharits originally planned a soundtrack to accompany **Declarative Mode**. A computer was to have been used to construct variations and juxtapositions of phonemes and then morphemes from a spoken text of the "Declaration of Independence." Eventually the entire unmodified text would have been heard. The film is now distributed without a soundtrack, and any explicit relationship to Jefferson's declaration is no longer apparent. We see only a visual structure which, according to Sharits, gradually moves

from a measured poise towards an ecstatic level of color-light pulsation (ending in micro-oscillations around 5 cycles per second, which is at once the primary fade-wave cycle possible in sound speed 16mm film and is also a rhythm associated with certain neuron pulses during expansive, inspirational states of consciousness).¹⁴

Even the rhythmic structure alone, however, sustains Sharits'

13 The psychologist Hugo Munsterberg was the first film theorist I am aware of who characterized the perception of cinematic images in this manner. "The Film: A Psychological Study" (1916; reprint edition New York: Dover, 1970), pp. 18-24.

14. Sharits, unpublished proposal for Bicentennial Film Project, 1976, cited in notes for a screening at the Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute on September 20, 1977.

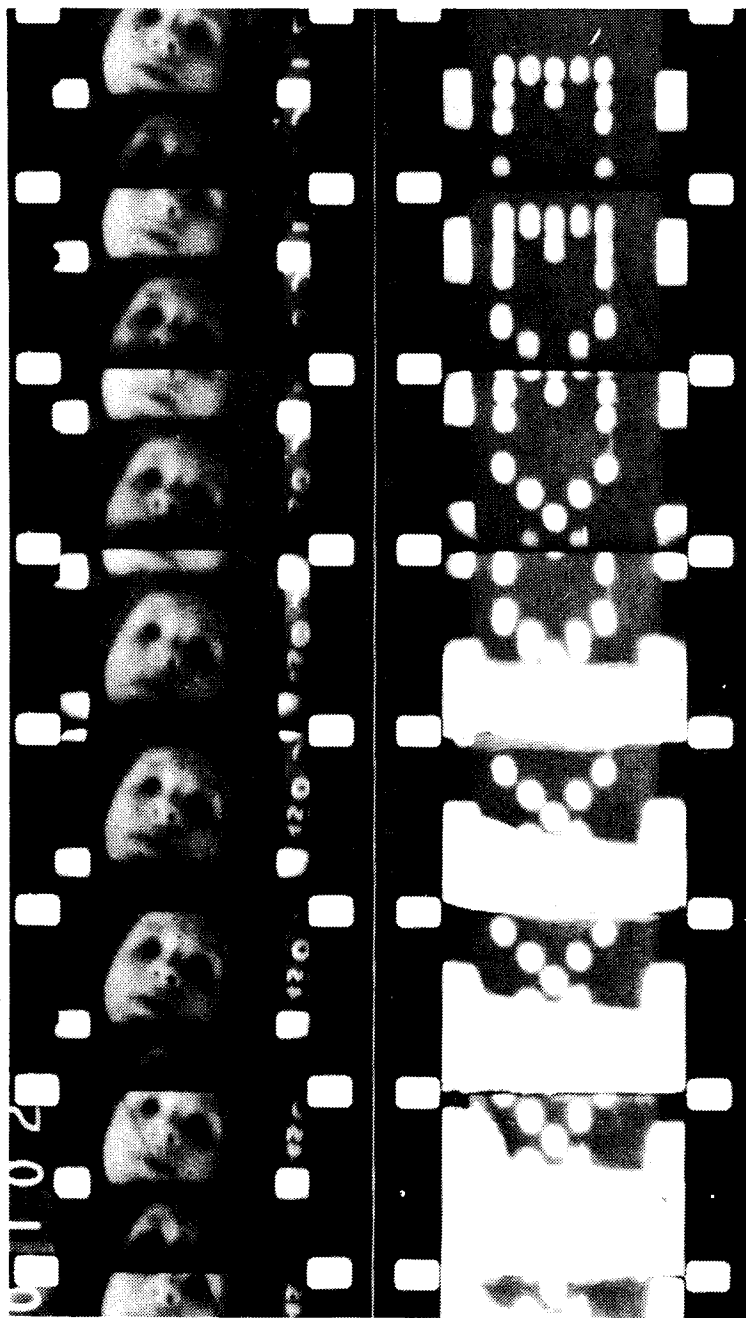
purpose in making **Declarative Mode**: to celebrate the grand scale of sentiment inscribed in Jefferson's ringing declaration of human liberty.¹⁵

In his 1967 statement, Sharits emphatically rejected any "imitation and illusion" of reality in cinema. He did not mean to exclude representational images entirely, however, and, in fact, such images have often played important roles in his films. In **Peace Mandala/End War**, for example, single-frame shots of a couple making love motivate the gradual shifts in the flickering color patterns surrounding them. **S:TREAM:S:SECTION:S:ECTION:S:S:ECTIONED** used superimposed images of a stream flowing over rocks as an echo of the metaphor of film as a "stream" dammed by splices he proposes. As these example suggest, Sharits has always insisted that representational imagery be translated into the optical terms and structural modes of his medium, and the effect of this translation has been to subvert any illusion of reality the images might suggest.

After a hiatus of nearly six years, representational images reappeared in Sharits' work in the two versions of **Epileptic Seizure Comparison** and in **Tails**, both completed in 1976. Only three minutes long, **Tails** is Sharits' shortest, but one of his most beautiful works. This deceptively simple film is divided into eight sections. In each, an iconic image appears. The second, fifth, and seventh sections present images of people (respectively a nude woman, a woman in a feather boa, and a child). The identities of the other subjects are less clear, but I discern consecutively a blurred image of a green field, a rephotographed film strip, a nocturnal fire, a shot through the window of a moving train, and, finally, another film strip.¹⁶ The film allows just enough time for these images to be deciphered before they are swept away in a flare of light as the film seems to run off the projector leaving the screen filled with pure white light.

15. There is often a wide gap between the accessible meaning of Sharits' films and the private significance they appear to have for him. For example, his diaries and notes for "Declarative Mode" suggest that the color flickers of individual sections represent his experience on particular days in Hydra and Monticello.

16. Most of Sharits' more intimate texts—his journals, diaries, and letters—suggest that each subject represented in the film's images—nature, journeys, children, women, burning, and strips of film running across the screen—are obsessive sources of wonder for him.



Tails (1976)

The punning title provocatively suggests that these images, icons of an indefinite past time, may represent the phases of a narrative, albeit a highly elliptical one.¹⁷ Sharits invokes this possibility, however, to open a sophisticated polemic about the incompatibility of narrative time and an authentically cinematic temporality. In order to construct the "real" time of a narrative in film, individual images must be focused towards a totalizing temporal horizon that establishes their significance as a moment of an ordered sequence of events. The "tail" constitutes the tale, so to speak.

Tails ironically parodies these ideas. The reflexive markers of "reel time," the gloriously luminous flares terminating a reel of exposed film, compose the primary structure of the film. They erupt into the real time of the single long takes in each section to corrupt the illusory presence of the depicted subjects, and to set up a play between the pastness of the image and the emphatic presence of its cinematic inscription. The brilliantly lit screen that follows each flare creates a gap between images that effectively inhibits any inference of a causal network uniting them. Deprived of an orienting temporality, each image must be read as a self-contained monad to be experienced in its full temporal indeterminateness until it bursts into luminous climax. Sharits underscores his polemical point by concluding **Tails** with a witty rhyme. As the last rephotographed image begins to flare out, the film recording this image also flares out, superimposing yet another layer of time onto those inscribed within the film.

Both the single-screen and four-screen versions of **Epi-sodic Generation** engage the topic of imagery and temporality in cinema, although at an even higher level of abstraction. Both works are composed of the same four sections. The sections are approximately eight minutes long, and each presents an original specimen flicker film subjected to successive stages of rephotography. In section "A," a central band of colored frames is flanked by a row of sprocket holes on one side and by the modulated black and white contours of an optical sound track on the other. A scratched line runs across the color frames. In Section "B," two new rows of sprocket holes are added at the edges of

17. It may be possible to read these images as a rarefied representation of events in Sharits' life as he discusses it in "Postscript As Preface," *Film Culture* 65-66 (Winter 1978):2-3.

paul sharits: filmography*

SEARS CATALOGUE (b&w, 2-screen performance work, 1964)
RAY GUN VIRUS (1966) 14 minutes, color, sound
WORD MOVIE/FLUXFILM 29 (1966) 3¾ minutes, color, sound
PIECE MANDALA/END WAR (1966) 5 minutes, color, silent
RAZOR BLADES (2-screen, 1965-68) 25 minutes, b/w & color, stereo sound
N:O:T:H:I:N:G (1968) 36 minutes, color, sound
T.O.U.C.H.I.N.G (1968) 12 minutes, color, sound
S:TREAM:S:S:ECTION:S:ECTION:S:S:ECTIONED (1968-71) 42 minutes, color, sound
INFERENTIAL CURRENT (1971) 8 minutes, color, sound
AXIOMATIC GRANULARITY (1973) 20 minutes, color, sound
ANALYTICAL STUDIES III: COLOR FRAME PASSAGES (1973-74) 29 minutes, color, silent, 16 fps
COLOR SOUND FRAMES (1974) 26½ minutes, color, sound
APPARENT MOTION (1975) 30 minutes, color, silent, project silent speed only
ANALYTICAL STUDIES I: THE FILM FRAME (1972-76) 25 minutes, color, silent
DECLARATIVE MODE (2-screen projection, 1976-77) 40 minutes, color, sound.
ANALYTICAL STUDIES II: UNFRAMED LINES (1971-76) 25 minutes, color, silent
ANALYTICAL STUDIES IV (1973-76)
EPISODIC GENERATION (single-screen version, 1976) 30 minutes, color, sound
EPILEPTIC SEIZURE COMPARISON (single-screen version, 1976) 30 minutes, color, sound
TAILS (1976) 3 minutes, color, silent
TIRGU JIU (2-screen performance work, 1976)
SOUND STRIP/FILM STRIP (2-screen performance version, 1972-81)
FIVE MEXICAN PYRAMIDS (work in progress)
PASSAGES (work in progress)
POISON (work in progress)

locational film pieces

SOUND STRIP/FILM STRIP (1971)
SYNCHRONOUSOUNDTRACKS (1973-74)
VERTICAL CONTIGUITY (1974)
DAMAGED FILM LOOP (1973-74)
THE FORGETTING OF INTENTION AND IMPRESSIONS (1974)
SHUTTER INTERFACE (1975)
DREAM DISPLACEMENT (1975-76)
EPILEPTIC SEIZURE COMPARISON (1976)
EPISODIC GENERATION (1979)

*The most extensive filmography of Paul Sharits appears in "Film Culture" 65-66 (Winter 1978): 115-124.

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This monograph is made possible by grants from the Minnesota State Arts Board from funds appropriated by the Minnesota State Legislature and from the National Endowment for the Arts.

*A thorough listing of all articles by and about Sharits through 1978 appears in "Film Culture" 65-66 (Winter 1978): 130-133.

the frame and the remaining elements appear somewhat condensed toward the center of the image. A fresh scratch is cut into the surface of the new image. Section "C" continues this process, but other kinds of changes resulting from the rephotography are introduced. The red, black, and green colors appear more somber, and the jagged edges of the soundtrack and scratch marks become smoother. By the last section, "D," the image has become a dense, unstable configuration of blurring sprocket holes, yellow stripes, and bands of synthetic colors. At certain speeds, even the linear orientation of the elements disintegrates as momentarily preceptible regularities in direction, color, or shape create new visual patterns.

The soundtrack is subjected to a series of transformations analogous to those of the visual track. A didactic text discussing the production of sound through an optical sound system is initially heard. This text is progressively condensed by a computer, and by the third condensation, only random words can still be identified. By the fourth stage, the text is so accelerated that its meaning dissolves into a rhythmically undulating aura of sound.

Although they use the same elements, the experience of the two versions of **Episodic Generation** is astonishingly different. In the single-screen version, the sections are presented consecutively. This ordering establishes an inexorable, logical movement toward some future moment when the image will be so congested that the initial configuration of elements—indeed, the elements themselves—will no longer be identifiable. When the four sections are set side by side and presented simultaneously in endlessly repeated cycles, as they are in the four-screen "locational" version, the progressive temporal thrust of the single-screen version is lost.¹⁸ Occasionally, when the alignments, speed, and directions of moving elements momentarily match, the screens fuse into a unity and the entire wall seems to lead the eye from the past toward the future as the compositional elements move from left to right. Abrupt decelerations or even minor shifts in position, however, suffice to suspend this totalizing

18. Other changes in presentational format include the rotation of the images ninety degrees to the left so that the sprocket holes appear at the top and bottom, rather than at the right and left sides of the frame. The "locational" version of "Episodic Generation" is also projected by projectors standing within the space of the work. One's experience of the work is far more complex than my brief description can suggest.

movement. As the separate identity of the individual screens is reaffirmed, the impression of a unifying temporal vector is shattered into the experience of four incompatible temporalities that are simultaneously present.

Permeated by the dirge-like buzz of the soundtracks, the room is a site of dynamic activity in which rhyming and dissonant patterns, movements and counter-movements, constitute, dissolve and reconstitute an infinite variety of significant configurations. The volatile permutations of cinematic signs create a space of pure potential that uncannily recalls the dramatic arena Paul Valéry imagined as the space of consciousness itself. "Within the mind," he writes,

a drama takes place. Drama, adventure, agitation, any words of the sort can be used provided that several of them are used together, so that one is corrected by another The actors in the drama are mental images, and it is easy to understand that, if we eliminate the particular features of the images and consider only their succession, frequency, periodicity, varying capacity for association, and finally their duration, we are soon tempted to find analogies in the so-called material world, to compare them with scientific analyses, to postulate an environment, to endow them first with continuity, velocities, properties of displacement, then with mass and energy. Thereupon we may realize that many such systems are possible, that any one in particular is worth no more than another¹⁹

That such an abstract work generated by quasi-mathematical procedures insists on being read as a metaphor for the mind reveals the power of the avant-garde film tradition. Sharits' attempt to evade the burden of its impressive accomplishments by inventing new formal codes and strategies has, ironically, made him into one of that tradition's central figures.

19. Paul Valéry, "Introduction to the Method of Leonardo da Vinci," "Leonard Poe Mallarme," translated by Malcolm Cowley and James R. Lawler (Princeton: Bollingen, 1972) pp. 10-11.