





# The End of the Real 1960s Experimental Cinema, and The Loss of Cinema Culture



Cinematheque poster by Greg Shartris

The 1960s were an extraordinary time for the arts, and for film in particular. But it's easy to forget this—and it's very easy for contemporary students to miss it completely. In the wake of the demise of 16mm as a production and distribution format, the birth and death of the experimental film movement in New York in the 1960s seems both remote and essentially unknowable, in large part because the bulk of work created during the period was shot in 16mm format, and today, there are no more 16mm projectors—even at universities and in most archives.

We also live in an era that has witnessed the demise of books, magazines, and most printed material, in favour of

streaming media. I browse the web on a daily basis, and maintain a blog site that I update regularly, but there's a world of difference between something viewed online, and settling down with a print book, where you can turn the pages, read the text, and actually touch the material physically.

The end of film as a format means the end of an embrace of the real. You can't hold up the frames of a film to the light anymore, and see what's there with the naked eye, because you're forced—*forced*—to work in video. You're further removed from the vision you documented by the intervention of digital technology, which reduces everything to 1s and 0s.

There's no real image to see, unless you use technology to do so. There's an essential unreality to the digital images that you can't overcome, no matter how hard you try. Nothing is fixed; all is ephemeral. It's not for nothing that the major Hollywood studios routinely cut a 35mm negative of all the materials from the digital films they produce for long-term conservation. For the 16mm filmmakers, and the "orphan" films they produce, there is no future, and no present—only the past.

During the 1960s, experimental cinema exploded around the globe, centering in New York, San Francisco, and London. The cinematic culture of New York during this era was incredibly rich, embracing women and men, gay and straight, of literally every race and creed, making completely independent films for nothing at all in a seemingly relentless floodtide of raw vision. As I wrote in an essay entitled "On The Value of 'Worthless' Endeavor" in 2012,

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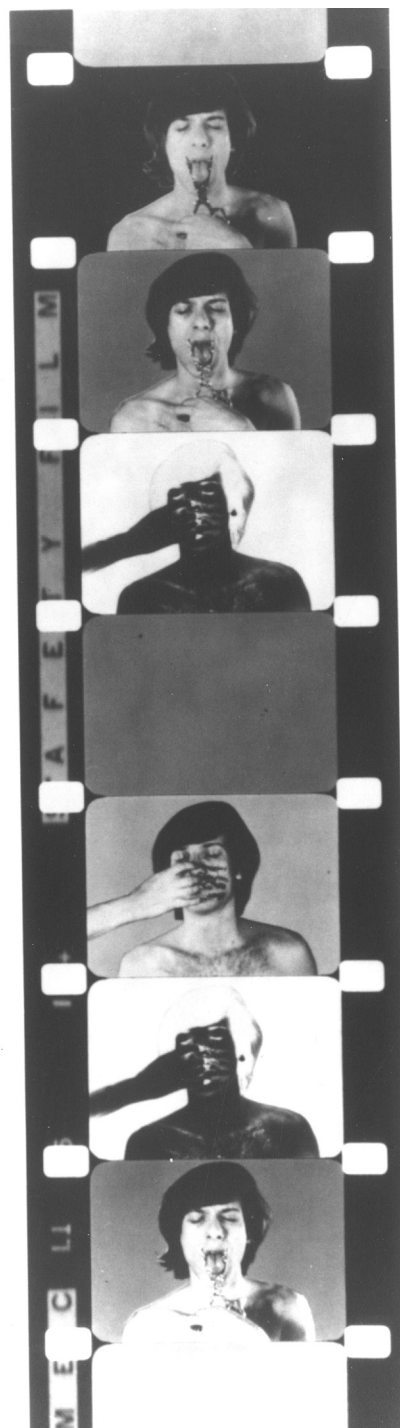
in the 1960s, working in New York, I was part of a group of filmmakers who created films out of almost nothing at all; outdated raw stock, ancient cameras that barely functioned, often borrowed for a few days from someone else, a few lights, the barest outline of a script, and “financing” that consisted of donated labor both in front of and behind the camera . . . [we] worked a variety of odd jobs to keep the wolf from the door, and plowed nearly everything we made back into films; films that had no market, no commercial value, and were so resolutely personal that it seemed that no one, outside of a small circle of friends, could ever possibly find them of value, worth or interest

...

And yet now these films are, almost without exception, classics. They far outstripped what Hollywood was creating during the same period. The “underground” filmmakers who worked in this period were as varied as the subject matter could possibly allow. They were artistic outlaws, making the films that no one else had ever dreamed of, much less attempted to create. Some of the most important figures of the 1960s include Barbara Rubin, Robert Nelson, Stan VanDerBeek, Paul Sharits, Robert Breer, Ben Van Meter, Warren Sonbert, Ron Rice, Kenneth Anger, Maya Deren, Marie Menken, Gerard Malanga, Jud Yalkut, Scott Bartlett and many others.

All of these filmmakers shared one thing in common: a highly personal and deeply felt vision of a new and anarchic way of looking at film and video, fueled by the inexhaustible Romanticism of the era, and the fact that film and video were both very “cheap” mediums in which to work during the 1960s. Andy Warhol’s early sync-sound 70 minute features, such as *Vinyl* and *My Hustler* (both 1965) cost just \$200 to final print, since Warhol shot his films on an Auricon camera which created an optical soundtrack directly on the film as it was being shot. Even his epic split screen film *Chelsea Girls* (1966) cost just \$1,200 to final print, shot in much the same manner.

Gerard Malanga, Warhol’s assistant during the 1960s, produced many films of his own, including the stunningly beautiful works *In Search of the Miraculous* (1967), *Preraphaelite Dream* (1968), and *The Recording Zone Operator* (1968); the last film mentioned was shot in Rome, Italy in 35mm Technicolor /Techniscope in the winter of 1968, and featured members of The Living Theatre in the cast. A different vision is that of Ron Rice, whose feature film *The Flower Thief* (1960), was shot in 16mm black and white using 50” film cartridges left over from aerial



Paul Sharits's *T.O.U.C.H.I.N.G.* (1968)

gunnery equipment used during World War II. Rice’s *Senseless* (1962), and *Chumlum* (1964) are equally daring; Rice’s early death in Mexico City in 1964 robbed the New American of one of its most audacious and uncompromising talents.

New-Narrative filmmaking in the Independent American Cinema can be seen in Stanton Kaye’s *Georg* (1964) and *Brandy in the Wilderness* (1969); Larry Kardish’s 80 -minute *Slow Run* (1968) is a relaxed and sensual narrative possessed of enormous power and intelligence. The pio





Andy Warhol and friends in Robert Breer's studio

neering montagist Max Katz should be remembered for his dazzling editorial construct *Wisp* (1963), as well as his 77 minute feature film *Jim the Man* (1970).

The late José Rodríguez Soltero produced *Jerovi* (1965), *Lupe* (1966), an elegiac remembrance of Hollywood actress Lupe Velez, and the rigorously formalist feature film *Dialogue with Ché* (1968), which was successfully presented at the Cannes and Berlin Film Festivals in 1969, and widely reviewed.

Vernon Zimmerman's *Lemon Hearts* (1960) stars the gifted actor Taylor Mead in no less than eleven roles, and is an improvisational comedy shot on a shoestring budget in San Francisco. Ray Wisniewski's *Doomshow* (1964) and Bud Wirtschafter's *What's Happening?* (1963) are documents of "happenings" (partially staged theatrical events) featuring such pioneering New York artists as Allan Kaprow, Yvonne Rainer, La Monte Young and Dick Higgins. Ben van Meter's *S. F. Trips Festival: An Opening* (1967) is a gorgeously multiple exposed record of a "happening" on the West Coast, and has much in common with Wisniewski's and Wirtschafter's work.

The late Jud Yalkut, originally a New York based filmmaker associated with the USCO Lightshow group,

continuously made films since the early 1960s, of which *Kusama's Self-Obliteration* (1967), a record of a "happening" conducted by Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, and *US Down By the Riverside* (1966) are perhaps best known. A few years before his death, Yalkut had a comprehensive retrospective of his films at The Whitney Museum in New York, but since then, they've gone back into our collective unconscious.

Masao Adachi's *Wan: Rice Bowl* (1962) is an early example of Japanese expatriate American cinema, as is Edd Dundas's *The Burning Ear* (1965). Robert Downey Sr., whose popularity was widespread in the 1960s, produced the satiric narratives *Babo 73* (1964) and *Chafed Elbows* (1966) earlier in his career; they have not been screened publicly for more than a decade but are some of the very, very few films of this era now available on Criterion/Eclipse DVD. Satya Dev Dubey's *Barriers* (1967), shot in 35mm, is the work of an Indian expatriate in New York.

A group of influential feature films by New American Cinema artists seldom screened today includes Jock Livingston's Dadaist-influenced comedy *Zero in the Universe* (1966), David Sector's *Winter Kept Us Warm* (1968), revolving around a gay love affair on a Canadian college

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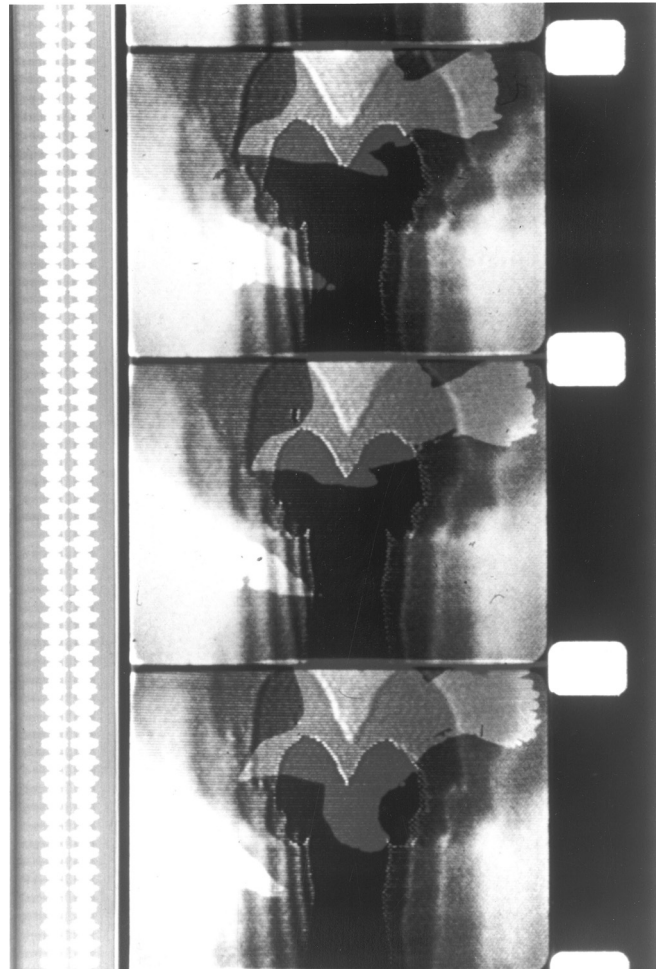
campus, Dick Higgins’s *The Flaming City* (1963), a hard-edged “Beat” epic about Manhattan life on the margins and Robert Kramer’s *Ice* (1969) dealing with a futurist cell of political revolutionaries; all of these films are certainly worthy of revival.

Christopher MacLaine’s films *Beat* (1958), *The Man Who Invented Gold* (1957), *Scotch Hop* (1959) and *The End* (1953) are all documents of the San Francisco “Beat” era; seldom screened today, these films provide a tantalizing peek into the world of a vanished yet still influential subculture.

The late Scott Bartlett’s films *Metanomen* (1966), *Off/On* (made in collaboration with Tom DeWitt, 1967) and *Moon* (1969) exemplified San Francisco’s preferred form of cinematic discourse for a later generation of artists, poets, writers and videomakers; indeed, Bartlett and DeWitt’s *Off/On* is one of the first films to mix film and video imagery together into a spatial congruent image mix. The visual structures of *Off/On* influenced the images we see on MTV today, as well as the digital special effects employed in many contemporary feature films. During his life, Scott Bartlett was sponsored by such filmmakers as Francis Ford Coppola. Yet today, despite their undiminished impact and undeniable influence, Bartlett’s films are seldom shown.

The works of Shirley Clarke and Maya Deren are well-known, but the films of their contemporary Storm De Hirsch are often marginalized. De Hirsch’s *Goodbye in the Mirror* (1964), to pick just one film from De Hirsch’s considerable body of work, is a 35mm feature film shot in Rome dealing with the lives of three young American women living abroad; screened at the Locarno and Cannes Film Festivals in 1964, this transcendent and ambitious narrative film is only one example of early Feminist cinema that led to the later work of Yvonne Rainer, Jane Campion, Sally Potter, Julie Dash and others.

Dorothy Wiley and Gunvor Nelson’s *Schmeerguntz* (1966) and *Fog Pumas* (1967) operated in a zone of feminist discourse that has been more widely appreciated abroad, particularly in Sweden, than in the United States. Carolee Schneeman is best known for her films



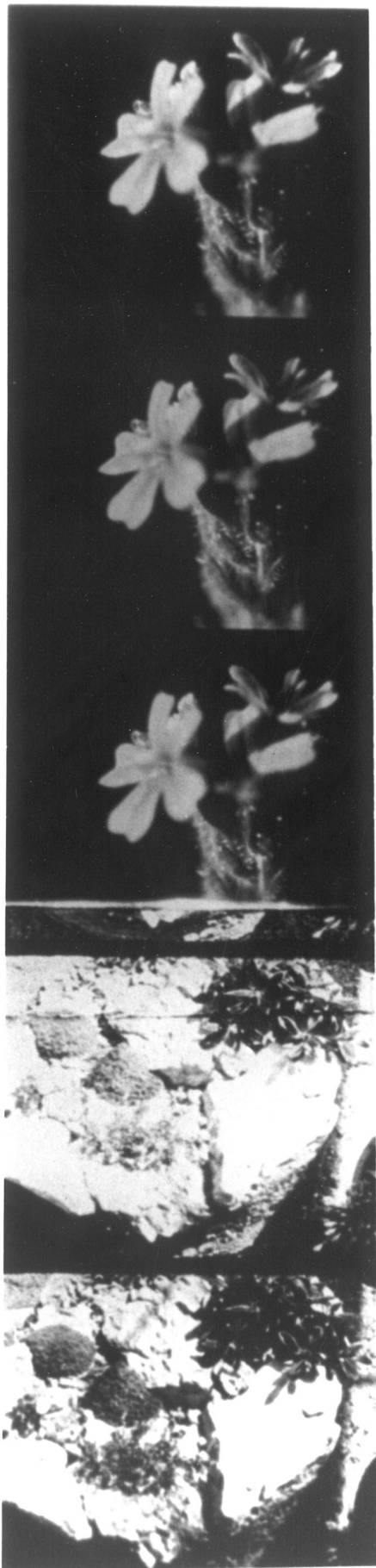
**Scott Bartlett and Tom DeWitt’s *Off/On* (1967)**

*Fuses* (1964-68) and *Plumb Line* (1968-72), which both deserve wider exposure. Naomi Levine, Marie Menken and Barbara Rubin have also created works of considerable depth and beauty. This list of women in the world of experimental cinema could be extended with other names of individuals who have worked in the cinema for many years, but who have yet to receive the sustained canonical inclusion their work so clearly deserves.

But try to see these films today – go ahead, just try. Many are still available from The Filmmakers’ Cooperative in New York City, or from Canyon Cinema in San Francisco, but in nearly every case, only 16mm copies of these groundbreaking films are available. When I wrote my book *The Exploding Eye: A Re-Visionary History of 1960s American Experimental Cinema* roughly fourteen years ago, one had the choice between 16mm prints and video (either VHS or DVD) to use in the classroom. Today that choice is gone, and with it, nearly all of the films described above. If you can’t see them, they might as well not exist.

In a 2003 interview with Gwendolyn Audrey Foster published in *Senses of Cinema*, talking about the New York





City underground film community during the 1960s, I noted that

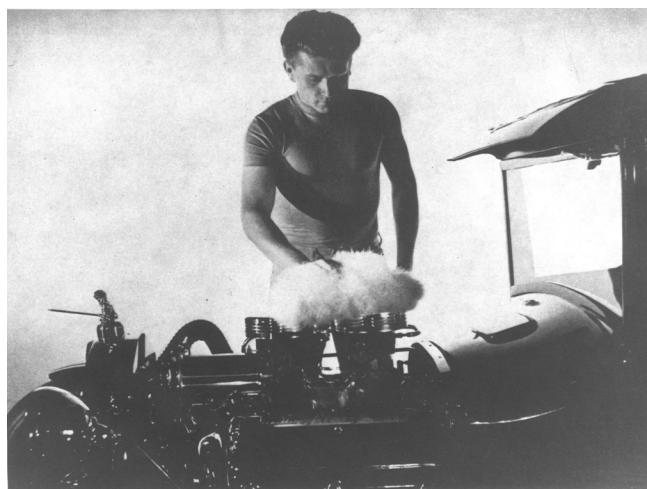
We lived a communal experience. You could crash at people's apartments by just calling them up and saying, "I need a place to sleep." People shared equipment, they shared talent, they shared time. People were allowed to be themselves, and we were all considered outcasts. We were all living on the margins of society . . .

I think we all thought of ourselves as making different kinds of movies, but that we were all part of one gigantic entity that was making movies together with a common purpose. We all thought we would live forever, that time was somehow frozen. We would never get older, and we would keep making art for the rest of our lives on the margins of society . . . It was inexpensive to live in New York City. If you didn't mind living on the Lower East Side, you could rent an apartment for about 50 bucks a month. Can you imagine that today?

No, I can't imagine that today, when two bedroom apartments on in the Lower East Side of Manhattan rent for \$4,000 a month, not including utilities. I well remember "housewarming" parties on Avenue A, B and/or C—"Alphabet City"—the worst part of the city in the 60s and 70s.

A bunch of people would get together with hammers and a pail full of twenty penny nails—essentially large spikes—and drive them through the front door of the apartment from the *inside*, literally creating hundreds of pin points to discourage junkies from kicking down the door, despite the Fox police locks, which didn't always work.

**Right:** Marie Menken's *Glimpse of the Garden* (1957)  
**Below:** Kenneth Anger's *Kustom Kar Kommandos* (1965)





#### Ron Rice and Jack Smith

New York City was dangerous, but it was full of possibilities. Nobody had any money, but nobody cared. We made all our work from the castoff materials of society—Jack Smith, for example, made his landmark film *Flaming Creatures* on film that was literally *stolen* from a New York photo store, Camera Barn, and then processed the film with stolen developing mailers—he simply had no other way to make the films he wanted so desperately to create.

But now all that has changed. When simply *existing* in Manhattan costs so much—when museums now charge \$25 at the door to get in—when everyone sits at home and stares at their laptops and there's no real sense of physical community—where will the new work—the *dangerous* work—come from?

Today, filmmaking schools turn out reliable drones to create films for the mainstream cinema, whether in Hollywood or any other commercial cinema capital. The truly independent model of cinema has been lost—films that break all the rules intentionally, and are made solely out of a burning desire to get even a rough sketch of one's vision on film.

There will never be a return to the 1960s—the truly maverick vision of film—partly because the medium itself has vanished, and also because the films themselves are impossible to see. As late as 1997, I could run an entire semester's worth of experimental films as a course, and rent and screen almost all of the films mentioned in this essay. Today, with the death of 16mm, that possibility has evaporated.

What will the future hold when the past is so closed off to us? What can we do when the work of so many talented women and men has essentially been erased by a society that lives only in present, and celebrates only mainstream pop culture on a widespread basis?

The best new work – the most innovative new cinema, or music, or painting, or poetry— anything—always comes from the margins. But we live a society where the margins have been erased. What will we do when the past is no longer available to us? Make no mistake—we are living a new Digital Dark Age, in which an entire culture of cinema—as just one example—has been wiped from our collective social memory. Where will the new work come from? What will we do now?

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*Note: For those with 16mm projection capabilities, the films discussed in this essay, along with many more, can be rented from:*

The Film-Makers' Cooperative: <http://film-makerscoop.com/>

and

Canyon Cinema: <http://canyoncinema.com/>