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Conceptualizing “The Original”:

Artifact, Intent, Experience, and Process in Avant-Garde Film Preservation

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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While the moving image archival field has devoted considerable attention to theorizing preservation practice for traditional narrative cinema, comparatively little emphasis has been placed on avant-garde film. By specifically considering hand-manipulated avant-garde film and expanded cinema, I argue for a malleable archival theory which represents contemporary efforts to preserve and exhibit these films in a manner philosophically, technically, and aesthetically appropriate to the work. Underwriting this archival theory is a model based on four central conceptions of “originality” which play a decisive role in the preservation of these films, namely Spectrum of Influence, Temporality, Degree of Translation, and Method. By illustrating these conceptions as two related model graphs, I am able to

plot, along four axes, decision points which have informed a range of contemporary preservations. In so doing, I conclude that the proposed archival theory successfully represents avant-garde film preservation practice, and has practical applications in the field.

The thesis of David Marriott is approved.

Allyson Nadia Field

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## Introduction

As the moving image archival field continues to mature into an increasingly professionalized practice, it has witnessed a concurrent growth in research literature underscoring the practical challenges and theoretical complexities inherent in 21st century preservation and exhibition. The lion's share of these studies, however, localize their focus in traditional, largely standardized, industry production practices. This, in turn, has resulted in a paucity of scholarship regarding "alternative" forms of cinema, chiefly within the realm of avant-garde film.

By specifically considering hand-manipulated and ephemeral/performative avant-garde film, I argue for a malleable archival theory which represents the contemporary efforts to preserve and exhibit these films in a manner philosophically, technically, and aesthetically appropriate to the work.<sup>1</sup>

Underwriting much of my study is the extent to which these avant-garde films can be said to make heightened claims to a medium-specific ontology, and the degree to which this informs current preservation and exhibition practice. While a sizable amount of debate in the field has been devoted to critically engaging the ontological

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<sup>1</sup>There are multiple names for the avant-garde film genre, each favored to varying degrees depending on the decade and the region. Mike Zryd notes that since the 1980s in North America *experimental film* and *avant-garde film* have both been employed frequently and interchangeably. Zryd, "Experimental Film and the Development of Film Study in America," in *Inventing Film Studies*, eds. Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008), 183–216. I employ the term "ephemeral" here to denote film that is fluid, rather than fixed, in nature (e.g. performative) as opposed to archivist Rick Prelinger's use of the term, which denotes "industrial, advertising, educational, amateur and government films." Lisa Rein, *CC Talks with Rick Prelinger*, Creative Commons, <http://creativecommons.org/weblog/entry/7064> (January 2, 2014).

implications of the digital revolution on “traditional” cinema (e.g. emulsion-based narrative feature films), my argumentation here addresses the specific impact on avant-garde films.

For the sake of clarity, I employ the term “medium-specific” rather than “materialist” as a classification for work demonstrating the aforementioned preoccupation with filmic materiality. Given that “materialist” popularly invokes the strain of Structural-Materialist experimental filmmaking in Great Britain during the 1960s and 1970s, I have employed “medium-specific” in an effort to cast a wider net. In so doing, I seek to address any avant-garde work wherein a concern with the material basis of the film strip can be said to constitute an essential component of the work, a focus former Whitney film curator John G. Hanhardt has identified as a central preoccupation of filmmakers across the history of the avant-garde.<sup>2</sup>

### Towards a Malleable Archival Theory

My argumentation here is largely indebted to the work pioneered by Giovanna Fossati in *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition*.<sup>3</sup> Identifying Film and Media Studies as the field generating competing theories best equipped to localize the ontology of film in the digital age, Fossati migrates these

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<sup>2</sup> John G. Hanhardt, “The Medium Viewed: The American Avant-Garde Film,” in *A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema*, ed. Marilyn Salinger (New York: The American Federation of Arts, 1976), 44.

<sup>3</sup> Giovanna Fossati, *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009).

notions into the archival sphere, implementing them as the basis of four interrelated and complementary frameworks for a contemporary moving image archival theory. Here it is important to note that Fossati's work can be seen as existing within a continuum of major scholarship which offers a theory for moving image archiving. In 2000, Paul Read and Mark-Paul Meyer published their seminal text *Restoration of Motion Picture Film*, which has subsequently served as the definitive textbook for photochemical film preservation technique.<sup>4</sup> In 2007, Karen F. Gracy published *Film Preservation: Competing Definitions of Value, Use, and Practice*, a text which built on Read and Meyer's technical literature, yet broadening the discussion to be inclusive of "why" films are preserved, rather than strictly focusing on "how" they were preserved.<sup>5</sup> I have chosen to focus almost exclusively on Fossati's archival theory for two reasons. First, I agree that introducing theory derived from Film and Media Studies into the larger discussion surrounding preservation practice is progressive and appropriate, given the growing debate surrounding how best to locate the ontology of film in the current landscape. Second, Fossati's approach deals explicitly with the integration of digital steps into film preservation practice at both the theoretical and practical level. Conversely, Read and Meyer, and to a lesser extent Gracy, take a largely operational approach in building their respective theories, each based chiefly in traditional photochemical practice.

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Read and Mark-Paul Meyer, *Restoration of Motion Picture Film* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Karen F. Gracy, *Film Preservation: Competing Definitions of Value, Use, and Practice*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007.

Fossati identifies the four frameworks which comprise her theory as *film as original*, *film as art*, *film as dispositif*, and *film as state of the art*. Here I have chosen to adopt, expand, and occasionally break with Fossati's *film as original* framework, as the medium-specific and ephemeral/performative avant-garde film informs varied conceptions of "originality" in preservation practice.<sup>6</sup> Within this framework, Fossati notes:

...the meaning of "original" can change depending on the theoretical framework one embraces. "The original" can be a conceptual artifact (e.g. one particular version of a film) or a material artifact (e.g. the original camera negative), it can refer to the film as it was originally shown to the audience, as well as the material film artifact as it was recovered by the film archive.<sup>7</sup>

Medium-specific avant-garde film preservation requires the conceptual malleability inherent to the *film as original* framework in negotiating an appropriate practice. By acknowledging that multiple notions of "the original" in preservation and exhibition

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to briefly address Fossati's *film as art* framework, which she associates with avant-garde film preservation. Fossati argues that within the *film as art* framework, medium-specificity and notions of the *auteur* (which she identifies as "creative intent") possess the most influence, and often work together to inform preservation practice. Here, however, I have chosen to build on the *film as original* framework, rather than the *film as art* framework, for two reasons. First, while I believe Fossati is correct in associating the avant-garde film with a *film as art* approach, it remains unclear how the medium-specific influence continues to exert power once digital steps are introduced. Second, Fossati identifies *film as art* as a complimentary dimension of the *film as original* framework. Consequently, in adopting the latter, I also engage the discussion surrounding the former.

<sup>7</sup> Fossati, 117.

might exist and be applied differently as the circumstances and materials dictate, it becomes possible to determine the notion(s) of “originality” dictated by the given avant-garde film work. This is especially important as the avant-garde film “genre” inspires arguably the greatest split between a preservation practice that is philosophically in keeping with the work and one rooted in the practical, market-driven realities of the field. Therefore, building on Fossati, I argue for a dynamic conception of “originality” in my archival theory, one which frames “the original” as *medium-specific artifact, intent, experience, and process*.

While inviting an adaptable reading of “the original,” it is equally important not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Although it is often stated within the field that all preservation is compromise and an act of translation, it also remains a matter of degrees.<sup>8</sup> Each case study chronicled here adopts an interpretation, or interpretations, of “the original” which allow for the greatest fidelity to the work given both the nature of the film and the practical “real world” contexts surrounding its preservation and exhibition. Consequently, this polyvalent notion of “the original” also functions along a spectrum of influence; with the *medium-specific artifact* at one extreme, applicable to work wherein the artifact is largely its own authority, and *artistic process* at the other, wherein the preservationist and curator are, out of necessity, fundamentally intervening in the work and translating it to much greater

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Toscano, “Archiving Brakhage,” *Journal of Film Preservation* 72 (November 2006), 13-26.

Bill Brand in conversation with the author.

extent.<sup>9</sup> The “original” *intent* of the filmmaker and the *experience* of the audience sit between these two poles. However, as I will demonstrate, it is seldom, if ever, the case that a film does not dictate multiple notions of “the original,” each functioning in some degree of partnership or hierarchy, and each requiring varying degrees of interpretation and translation. In this sense, the proposed theory also attempts to represent the temporal dimension which underwrites every act of translation in preservation. The temporal component exerts a multifaceted influence; most clearly in attempting to establish when a preservation has taken place (a project initiated in 2014, for instance, will often proceed quite differently than one undertaken in the 1990s). This temporal dimension also comes into play when attempting to locate the intent of the filmmaker, as there is seldom one fixed point in time from which this “original” intent can be said to have emanated. This theory, then, can be seen as invoking multiple axes around which a given preservation can operate, which account for the porous and collaborative nature of these notions of “the original.”

I therefore propose four separate conceptions which form a model for an archival theory of the medium-specific and ephemeral-performative avant-garde film. Each conception is framed below as the answer to a specific question.

1) Spectrum of Influence: What is the work? This conception functions as a way to identify which quality or qualities surrounding the work determine “the original.” Here I lay out the four notions of “originality” along a spectrum,

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted here that these notions are framed as extremities in a theoretical sense; certainly no artifact preserves itself in the same way that no institution creates a piece of art from scratch and dubs it preservation.

with materiality, or the *medium specific artifact*, at one extreme, and artistic *process* at the other.

2) Temporality: When is the work? This conception functions as a way to establish where the work is located in time. This is necessary as a work can be framed as existing at any number of points in its lifespan, beginning in the pre-release stages (i.e. writing, shooting, editing, printing), moving through to its release (i.e. release print, audience experience), and into its post-release afterlife (i.e. the archived artifact, filmmaker's "retroactive" intent).

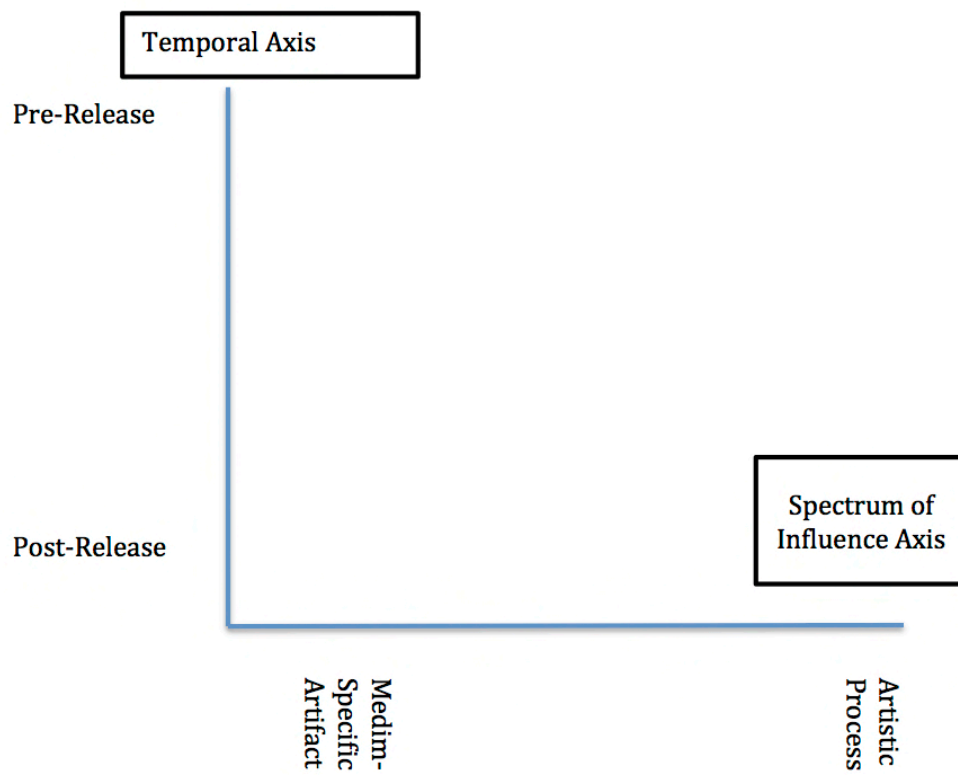
3) Degree of Translation: When is a preservation "event" a true preservation of the original, and when it is a transformation of the work? Given the Spectrum of Influence and Temporality, the resulting Degree of Translation functions as an avenue to consider much or how little the work has been translated.

4) Method: How is "the original" located? This conception accounts for the methods in contemporary preservation practice which attempt to recover "the original" *medium-specific artifact, filmmaker intent, experience* and/or *artistic process*.

Leveraging this model, it becomes possible to plot preservation decisions as points along two complementary model graphs. These model graphs localize which conception(s) of the "the original" exert the greatest influence, and where the work is conceptualized as existing in time. Moreover, given this plotting, it becomes

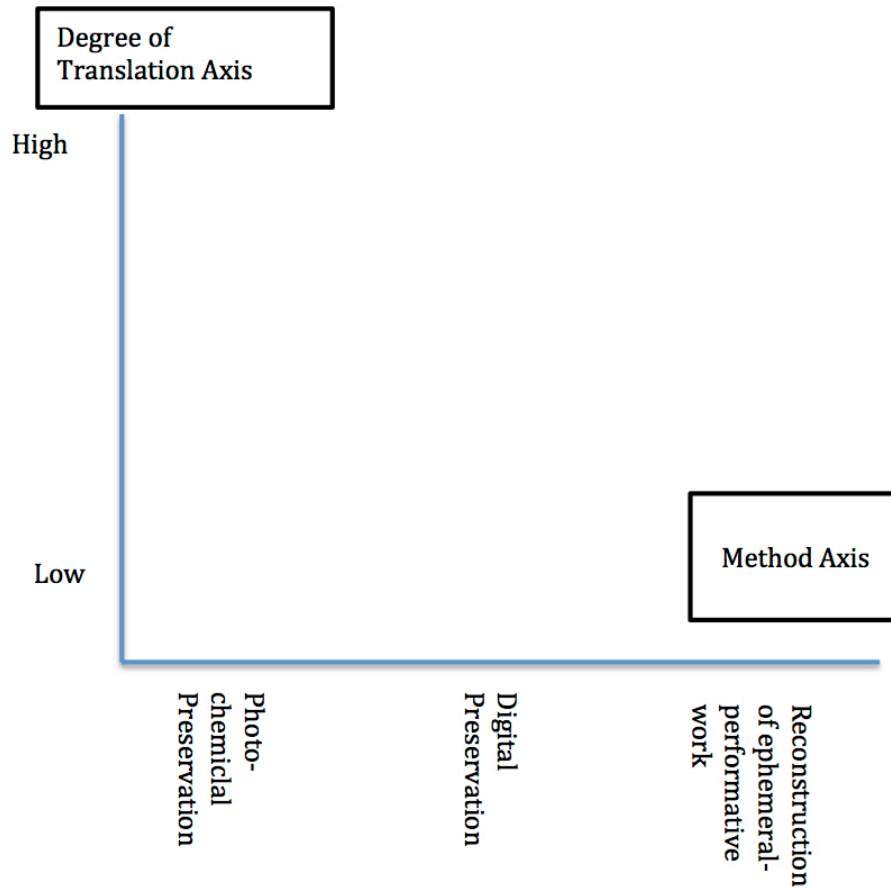
possible to extrapolate the Degree of Translation by way of its relationship with the given Method.

Model Graph A





Model Graph B



Gauging the degree of translation is especially important, as I diverge with Giovanna Fossati's belief that transition is an inherent property of all media. Rather, I argue, the nature of much avant-garde film, at a fundamental ontological level, remains rooted in medium-specify. In this sense, I contend that certain preservation practices are more in keeping with the nature of the work than others. Crucially, however, I refuse to subscribe to the unflinching medium-specific essentialism

advocated by Peter Kubelka in a climate wherein such a philosophy results in the loss of the work with the death of the material carrier.<sup>10</sup> Acknowledging, then, that the realities of contemporary practice in the field often require a workflow which can alter the nature of the work, however much out of necessity, it becomes essential to locate the ontology of medium-specific avant-garde film.<sup>11</sup> In so doing, we might attempt to establish the degree to which a given preservation has translated, and possibly transformed, the work. In other words, we can attempt to classify those qualities which must be lost or altered in order to save the work. In this sense, I propose that my model for an archival theory might be better suited to the medium-specific avant-garde film than Fossati's framework-based theory, as it can be used to negotiate the degree of translation inherent in workflows which result from varied conceptions of "the original." By mapping the case studies which follow onto these proposed model graphs, I attempt to test this claim through practical application.

### Medium-Specific Ontology

Although the field of Film and Media Studies is progressively turning away from medium-specific readings of film ontology in the digital age, and the archival field speaks more frequently of the necessary separation of a film's content from its

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<sup>10</sup> Fossati, 13

Juan Carlos Kase and Kirston Johnson, "Cinema as Artifact and Event: Peter Kubelka as Curator, Archivist, and Media Theorist," *The Moving Image* 13.1 (Spring 2013), 193-199.

<sup>11</sup> In using the term "workflow," I refer to the sequence of technical practices which underwrite a given preservation project.

carrier, much avant-garde film - arguably more so than any other cinematic genre - remains ontologically rooted in its material substance. Traditional readings into the nature of the photograph, chief among cinema's antecedents, offer useful inroads in establishing this relationship. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes identifies reference as the "founding order" of photography, an indexical potential licensed by the chemical process which evidences "that-has-been."<sup>12</sup> For Barthes, the light rays which emanate from the photographed object and are, in turn, inscribed into the photosensitized film strip, constitute a "literal...emanation of the referent," evidence of an object in space and time.<sup>13</sup> André Bazin also located the essence of cinema in its representational potential, identifying the mechanical "molding" of the emulsion

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<sup>12</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980).

<sup>13</sup> Importantly, Barthes writing in *Camera Lucida* expands on his earlier work, notably the seminal 1964 essay "Rhetoric of the Image." Within this essay, he builds on Ferdinand de Saussure's model of semiotics, outlining the relationship between the two central components of the sign: the signified, which operates at a conceptual level (and is therefore distinct from the referent which exists in time and space), and the signifier, which, in this case, is the photographic image. For Barthes, the signified operates at two levels of meaning, a denotative, "literal" meaning, and a connotative meaning, which is ideologically or socio-culturally constructed and therefore coded. Barthes argued that by foregrounding the denotative meaning, the photographic image cloaks the influence of the connotative meaning, which is always present, thus fostering the illusion that the photograph functions as a sign without a code or an ideology. Barthes later argumentation in *Camera Lucida*, however, operating in the shadow of personal trauma, reverses this earlier position, suggesting that a denotative meaning free of connotation is possible in the photographic image. To this end, Barthes developed the twin notions of *punctum* and *studium*, the former aligning itself roughly with denotative meaning and working to pierce *studium*, a concept which embodies connotative meaning. Roland Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 32-52.

as underwriting this “realist” strength.<sup>14</sup> D.N. Rodowick expands on this inscriptive power of film, casting the emulsion as constructive, “worked matter...a literal sculpting by light of hills and valleys in the raw film whose variable density produces a visible image.”<sup>15</sup> Rodowick goes on to note that pre-digital debates concerning film’s representational value have focused almost exclusively on the analog “photographic/cinematic process,” which has as its basis “a transformation of substance isomorphic with an originating image.”<sup>16</sup> Isomorphism here can be understood as both a one-to-one relationship between the light etched into the emulsion and its originating image and, at another level, between the negative and positive (or positive to negative) image in the photochemical film printing chain.

Abstract and hand-manipulated avant-garde film troubles this ontological basis in photochemical reference. The process of directly scratching or painting the strip of film, or abstracting the represented object, offers no proper etching-referent relationship, flouting, as John G. Hanhardt notes, the “dominant codes which assumes linearity and spatio-temporal cohesiveness...”<sup>17</sup> What remains is inscribed emulsion, the artifact. Peter Wollen identifies the estrangement of the signified-

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<sup>14</sup> André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” trans. Hugh Gray, in *What is Cinema? Volume 1*, ed. Hugh Gray (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1967), 9-22.

<sup>15</sup> D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 9.

<sup>16</sup> Rodowick, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Hanhardt, 25.

signifier-referent relationship in the avant-garde, localizing its precursor in the visual arts. Tracing an early break native to Cubism through to more radical subsequent developments in abstract painting, Wollen ultimately finds “the suppression of the signified altogether, an art of pure signifier detached from meaning as much as from reference...”<sup>18</sup> Wollen argues that by the 1970s this split pointed to an avant-garde that was effectively divisible into two camps. The first was an activist strain interested in exploring and experimenting within the realist illusion underwritten by the traditional photographic reference relationship. The second was the Structural-Materialist school (chiefly embodied by the London Filmmaker’s Co-op movement, although in Wollen’s analysis, inclusive of North American Structural film as well), which suppressed the referent and the signified altogether, fostering what Tess Leina Takahashi has called a “semiotics of self-reflexivity.”<sup>19</sup> Here, the material properties of the film medium were raised to the level of “pure” signifiers, renouncing the ideology inherent in film’s illusory potential.<sup>20</sup> Wollen offered, in light of this split, a double ontology of film, one

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<sup>18</sup> Peter Wollen, “The Two Avant-Gardes.” *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), 5.

<sup>19</sup> Tess Leina Takahashi, “Impure Film: Medium Specificity and the North American Avant-Garde: 1965-2005” (PhD Diss. Brown University, 2007), 14.

<sup>20</sup> While the Structural-Materialist school in Great Britain was underwritten by an anti-illusionist project, Structural experimental film in North America – what David James has called “pure film,” while evidencing a similar essentialist concern with the medium’s properties, was largely influenced by a strain of Modernism informed by theorist Clement Greenberg which posited different aims. Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism Volume 1*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 23-48.

extroverted, the other introverted, “one seeking the soul of cinema in the nature of the pro-filmic event, the other in the nature of the cinematic process, the cone of light or the grain of silver.”<sup>21</sup> Peter Gidal, a leading theorist and filmmaker in the Structural-Materialist school, describes an instance of Wollen’s introverted ontology in Paul Sharits’ color-field films. He notes that “the level of abstraction is to the point of totally abstract, within which then, “paradoxically,” the documentary truth of the represented film grain becomes the dominant factor, the narrative even.”<sup>22</sup> Avant-garde film, then, in its introverted ontology, evidences a modified representative potential even after the loss of the traditional referent by substituting it with what was essential in underwriting the referent’s “presence” in the first place, the photochemical medium itself. In this sense, medium-specific avant-garde work can be seen as demonstrating a distinctly filmic ontological nature.

Giovanna Fossati identifies the medium-specific interpretation of film’s ontology as an “indexical” reality-based approach, but casts it as poorly suited to framing film in the digital age.<sup>23</sup> While the ontological challenges to medium-specificity in the digital revolution will be addressed in detail throughout chapter 2, Fossati’s assertion demands an initial consideration here as she proposes an

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<sup>21</sup> Wollen, 97.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Gidal, *Materialist Film* (London: Routledge, 1989), 13.

<sup>23</sup> Notably, as we have seen, film in the “introverted” model capitalizes on the medium-specificity associated with an indexical ontology, and therefore might loosely fall under that umbrella, yet it is not predicated on traditional notions of representing reality.

alternative to a medium-specific reading of filmic ontology for the digital age. Fossati identifies this approach as the “mind/film analogy,” a dimension of the larger *film as dispositif* framework.<sup>24</sup> Through a reading of Tom Gunning and Christian Metz, Fossati argues that the defining quality of film can transition from an indexical, material-based representation of reality, into a reality underwritten by film’s movement, and its capacity to absorb an audience. Fossati notes that the approach is distinct from realism as it “does not trace the nature of film back to its power of representing reality but rather to its effect (what it does) on the spectator.”<sup>25</sup> The essence of film is then localized not in a *medium-specific artifact*, but, rather in the relationship between the viewer and the screen as the work is projected, a presence rather than a “that-has-been.” Implicit in this analysis, and explicitly noted by Fossati, is the notion that the film strip is always intended strictly for projection and is never to be considered as a physical material unto itself. Medium-specific hand-manipulated avant-garde films trouble this ontological interpretation as the work is often situated halfway between a traditional film on one end and a sculpture or painting in the fine art tradition on the other. Tony Conrad’s “cooked films,” for instance, were the result of live performances wherein the filmmaker cut up the film print and proceeded to, among other things, marinate and pan-fry the material. The resultant film strip(s), according to preservationist Bill Brand, have an essence themselves and are unlike more traditional films wherein

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<sup>24</sup> Fossati, 114.

<sup>25</sup> Fossati, 114.

the object - the film strip - has no qualities of its own separate from what appears on screen.<sup>26</sup> Paul Sharits' *Frozen Film Frames Series* (1971-1976), wherein 16mm strips from the filmmaker's stroboscopic work were encased in plexiglass and hung as fine art, function much the same way. As Yann Beauvais notes in relation to Sharits' work, "film can be projected, but it may also be approached as an object..."<sup>27</sup>

Consequently, these qualities of the medium-specific avant-garde film undermine Fossati's claim that all film is inherently transitory by nature. The continued relevance of the medium-specific avant-garde film's material properties, moreover, dictates that most original archival *medium-specific artifact* would offer the "purest" source for preservation efforts. This notion, however, frequently proves sound in theory and troubled in practice.

### The Camera Original

Ideally, much of traditional photochemical moving image preservation practice is rooted in a workflow beginning with the most original extant element(s) in usable condition.<sup>28</sup> It is important to note at the outset that the centrality of this method of preservation and, in fact, the centrality of preservation in general within the field, although seemingly a bedrock principle, is very much a product of 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Bill Brand in conversation with the author.

<sup>27</sup> Yann Beauvais, "Figment," in *Paul Sharits*, ed., Yann Beauvais (Dijon: les presses du réel, 2007), 7.

<sup>28</sup> Meyer and Read.



century archival discourse. As Caroline Frick and Janna Jones have noted, the moving image archival field in the United States has historically evidenced a tension between the prioritization of access and preservation.<sup>29</sup> Although preservation has proven itself the clear frontrunner for the past several decades, access has historically served as a foundational goal for many influential moving image archives and archivists. The most notable instances of this access-centric goal were, arguably, Iris Barry's efforts at MoMA and Henri Langlois' legendary tenure at the Cinémathèque Française. Frick identifies the more contemporary large-scale transition from an access to a preservation focus as a phenomenon of the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, American archives moved away from validating preservation activities within the logic of film as art, or film as history, and segued instead into an ideological partnership with a European (and specifically British) model of valuing film as national heritage.<sup>30</sup> In so doing, Frick argues, American moving image archives imported the archival ethos of Great Britain's national archive, the British Film Institute, as typified by a preservation-centric agenda.

Within this preservation model, it is assumed that the most original element will typically produce the highest quality final product in a photochemical workflow as it moves through fewer steps in the duplication process and consequently suffers

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<sup>29</sup> Caroline Frick, *Saving Cinema: The Politics of Preservation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Janna Jones, *The Past is a Moving Picture: Preserving the Twentieth Century on Film* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012).

<sup>30</sup> Frick.

less generational loss.<sup>31</sup> This workflow, coupled with the deterioration inherent to films stored on nitrate and acetate bases, underwrites the aim of traditional preservation: copy the most original element(s) onto newer and more stable film stock before they decompose. Subsequent conceptualization in the field has broadened the term such that a film is now conventionally understood to be preserved when it is “both (1) viewable in its original format with its full visual and aural values retained, and (2) protected for the future by ‘preprint’ material through which subsequent viewing copies can be created.”<sup>32</sup>

Often, the ideal in a photochemical preservation workflow based on the most original element(s) is the original camera negative (OCN), coupled with an answer, or release, print as reference. This logic, however, grafts uncomfortably onto the realities of avant-garde filmmaking. From an economic standpoint, for instance, many experimental filmmakers no longer have access to their original materials. As Jon Gartenberg, former curator at MoMA, explains:

Barely able to afford paying for the storage costs for their films, [experimental filmmakers] often leave their camera originals in the printing laboratory of their choice. With the slew of lab consolidations and closures that have

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<sup>31</sup> Read and Meyer.

<sup>32</sup> Library of Congress, *Film Preservation 1993: A Study of the Current State of American Film Preservation*, as quoted in Karen F. Gracy, *Film Preservation: Competing Definitions of Value, Use, and Practice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007), 21.

occurred since the 1970s, a substantial number of these camera originals are now lost.<sup>33</sup>

This workflow also presumes the existence, at some point, of a camera original negative, which is often not the case. Artist's producing material in small-to-medium-gauges (i.e. 8mm, Super-8mm, and 16mm) often worked with reversal camera stocks, wherein the negative develops directly into the positive image and consequently produces no original camera negative. While this might seem a negligible distinction as both are camera original materials, the negative-to-positive printing chain remains intact in contemporary laboratory work, while positive-to-positive printing has long been discontinued. Consequently, preservations based on reversal materials necessitate attempts to replicate, through variations in timing and printing, the "look" of reversal film on contemporary color print film.<sup>34</sup> As preservationist Ross Lipman notes:

Under current [photochemical] conditions, most restorations from positive source material are probably not so much preservations as translations to another medium, which vary widely in quality. A translation may be expedient, but should not be mistaken for actual preservation.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> John Gartenberg, "The Fragile Emulsion," in *Results You Can't Refuse: Celebrating 30 Years of BB Optics*, ed. Andrew Lampert (New York: Anthology Film Archive, 2006), 45-58.

<sup>34</sup> Bill Brand in conversation with the author.

<sup>35</sup> Ross Lipman, "Technical Aesthetics in the Preservation of Film Art," in *Big as Life: An American History of 8mm Films*, ed. Albert Kilchesy (San Francisco: Foundation for Art in Cinema, 1998), 89-93.

8mm and Super-8mm originals, both negative and reversal, prove doubly problematic as, due to a dearth of small gauge film stocks, they must be blown up to 16mm for preservation. This practice, although contrary to contemporary preservation's call for adherence to both original format and full visual values, is accepted throughout the field due to a lack of alternatives. Finally, as many hand-manipulated films were optically re-photographed in advance of their exhibition, the question of what then constitutes the most "original" element is brought to the fore and is seldom clearly defined.

Here we begin to see that while a preservation based in the most original elements is the most in keeping with the filmic ontology of handmade and medium-specific films, there are any number of practical obstacles which obstruct the artifact from serving as its own independent influence. Even in instances wherein preservation begins with an edited OCN – arguably the "purest" source requiring the least translation - the preservationist ideally involves him or herself by employing an answer or release print as reference. These reference material are used to verify, among other things, color timing and to ensure the negative reflects the final cut of the film. Therefore, while acts of translation are clearly embedded in even the most "pure" and medium-specific preservation practices, it is also important to note, again, that the issue can be framed as a matter of degrees. The workflow based on an edited OCN and reference print requires comparatively less interpretation on the part of the preservationist than the project based on an edited Super-8mm reversal camera original. In the former instance, the artifact arguably dictates the process to

a greater extent than the preservationist, whereas in the latter the two work as partners. In workflows with less straightforward - and less vocal - source materials, the preservationist must make more substantive decisions on behalf of the work, essentially acting as a translator for the filmmaker's *intent*. This ambiguous space finds the *medium-specific artifact* in and of itself unable to clearly inform a preservation path, and consequently, the judgment of the preservationist is called increasingly to the fore.

### Beyond Best Practices

Avant-garde film, as we have seen, often result in a range of source and reference materials for preservation that, to varying degrees, require subjectivity and interpretation on the part of the preservationist. While these demands are far from unique to the genre, experimental film's tendency towards challenging conventional production methods often results in materials that trouble the influence of the *artifact*. Ross Lipman observes a common challenge of this type in his seminal essay "The Grey Zone," noting that the rigid laboratory standards emblematic of Hollywood studio filmmaking often lend those materials a certain authority, as in most instances they clearly reflect the filmmaker's vision. Yet in the case of much avant-garde film, the lab work may well be what proved affordable and the filmmaker might have had little-to-no say in the matter.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, in the realm of avant-garde film, the preservationist is often in the precarious position of

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<sup>36</sup> Ross Lipman, "The Grey Zone," *The Moving Image* 9.2 (Fall 2009), 1-29.

towing a vague line between preserving and re-authoring, or transforming, a film. Given these types of challenges, a slim, although dense, body of professional literature has been generated over the past two decades. These texts are frequently, although not exclusively, written by preservationists at archives with substantive avant-garde collections, and consider ways in which best practices might be established for experimental film preservation.<sup>37</sup>

Jon Gartenberg offers perhaps the most comprehensive guiding principles for preserving experimental film. Largely artist-centric, he advises preservationists first know the history of the genre, and then establish a working collaboration between the filmmaker and laboratory, all the while remaining carefully attuned to the artist's creative process.<sup>38</sup> These guiding principles prove essential in acknowledging an influence beyond the artifact itself, wherein "decisions must be tailored in harmony with the artist's creative process and intent, not just with the product (the "finished film")."<sup>39</sup> Lipman echoes Gartenberg in demonstrating a reluctance towards considering release prints to be a filmmaker's definitive

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<sup>37</sup> As Mona Nagai notes, in the United States the work of avant-garde film preservation is largely addressed by six archives: the Academy Film Archive, Anthology Film Archives, the Center for Visual Music, the Museum of Modern Art, Pacific Film Archive, and the UCLA Film and Television Archive. Sarah Ziebell, "Preserving the Avant-Garde at the Pacific Film Archive: An Interview with Mona Nagai by Sarah Ziebell," in *Radical Light: Alternative Film & Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-2000*, ed. Steve Anker et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 322-328.

<sup>38</sup> Gartenberg, 48

<sup>39</sup> Gartenberg, 48.

statement as a rule, even in cases wherein the artist traditionally exerted a large degree of control over their process:

...even a filmmaker's approval of an old print doesn't always imply the print is definitive. A filmmaker as rigorous as Stan Brakhage approved dozens of inferior prints in the 1990s to maintain good relations with his lab, which was undergoing difficulties at the time.<sup>40</sup>

Importantly, a filmmaker's *intent* is gleaned through a host of factors, not simply by way of the artist. Although progressive in introducing the notion of *intent* into the process, Gartenberg's guidelines are a case in point as they prove problematic should the filmmaker be an unreliable judge of his or her own work, as is often the case.<sup>41</sup> Bill Brand, preservationist and owner of the photochemical laboratory BB Optics, has noted this issue in his collaborative preservation practice. Brand distinguishes between "original intent," which he classifies as the art itself and the context surrounding its creation, and "retrospective intent," wherein "the artist...will always want to revise the work either to create something new or to bring to the old work acquired experience and perhaps advances in technology and

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<sup>40</sup> Lipman, "The Grey Zone," 15.

<sup>41</sup> See Annet Dekker, "Enjoying the Gap: Comparing Contemporary Documentation Strategies," in *Preserving and Exhibiting Media Art: Challenges and Perspectives*, ed. Julia Noordegraaf et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 149-170.

materials.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore, although seemingly counterintuitive, the filmmakers involved in the preservation are not the de facto authority over their intentions at the time of the work’s creation. Brand’s work preserving the films of Hollis Frampton also highlights the role of context in establishing intent when a filmmaker is not involved in the process. In addressing the absence of Frampton, who passed away in 1984, Brand cites his longstanding friendship and familiarity with the filmmaker and his work as guideposts in helping establish preservation goals.<sup>43</sup> Mark Toscano, a preservationist working on the films of the late Stan Brakhage at the Academy Film Archive, also notes the importance of contextual documents like lab notes and artist talks, coupled with the films themselves, in working toward a better understanding of the filmmaker’s process and intentions.<sup>44</sup>

Although a conception of “the original” as filmmaker *intent* does cede authority to the preservationist, the *artifact* still has its role to play in the process. Bearing in mind Lipman’s discussion of avant-garde film’s often less-than-rigorous laboratory controls, Brand reminds us it is equally important to acknowledge the ways in which the *artifact* itself continues to contribute to the process, supplementing *intent*,

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<sup>42</sup> Bill Brand, “The Artist as Archivist,” in *Results You Can’t Refuse: Celebrating 30 Years of BB Optics*, ed. Andrew Lampert (New York: Anthology Film Archive, 2006), 71.

<sup>43</sup> Bill Brand, “Notes on Preserving and Presenting the Films of Hollis Frampton,” in *A Hollis Frampton Odyssey DVD Booklet*, ed. Elizabeth Helfgott (New York: The Criterion Collection, 2012), 38-40.

<sup>44</sup> Mark Toscano, “The Hair in the Gate: Preserving Brakhage.” in *By Brakhage: An Anthology Volume Two DVD Booklet*, ed. Elizabeth Helfgott (New York: The Criterion Collection, 2010), 38-42.



chiefly through those non-standard characteristics inherent to the materials themselves. Again discussing his work preserving the films of Hollis Frampton, Brand offers *artifact*-centric advice through the lens of technical knowledge, charging the preservationist with having:

a thorough understanding of film practices and materials to make critical decisions about color, exposure, and contrast, and to know when and when not to “fix” scratches, dust, visible splices, registration, development variations, and other qualities normally considered defects.<sup>45</sup>

The “original” *intent* of the filmmaker, then, is conveyed through a combination of familiarity with the history of the genre, the particularities of the artifact and, potentially, the filmmaker him or herself.<sup>46</sup> While this understanding of a filmmaker’s *intent* implies a greater degree of interpretation in preserving the work - and as such might prove ambiguous, piecemeal, and potentially limiting - it remains a necessary next step when the *artifact* itself proves less-than-definitive. Compounding these difficulties, however, preservationists are now faced with exceptionally powerful digital tools which add a new interpretive dimension to the process and return us to a discussion of medium-specific ontology.

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<sup>45</sup> Brand, “Notes on Preserving and Presenting the Films of Hollis Frampton,” 49.

<sup>46</sup> As Lipman notes in “The Grey Zone,” authorial intent is often a problematic guide for preservationists as traditional feature filmmaking is a collaborative medium, a situation which makes discerning any one “author” difficult. However, unlike many films made by large crews, much avant-garde film is artist-centric in the sense that the filmmaker often performs as many of the production roles as possible him or herself.

## Medium-Specificity in the Digital Age

The pervasive and accelerated restructuring of archival practices in the wake of the revolution in digital technologies challenges fundamental assumptions central to a preservation practice underwritten by a medium-specific conception of film ontology. From its early roots as an asset in the Hollywood studio system's post-production workflow, digital formats have quickly proceeded to eclipse film as the preferred medium for contemporary production and exhibition.<sup>47</sup> Within the moving image archival community, digital preservation and restoration steps are now commonplace to the degree that in growing instances, a film element's only presence in a restoration workflow may be as the original scanning source. Media purity is seemingly an increasingly outmoded concept and the burgeoning concern for archivists is now, according to preservationist Michael Friend, "the extent to which the physical values, the original aesthetic, of celluloid based moving images can accurately be captured and rendered – back to film and on digital screens."<sup>48</sup> In the face of this realignment in practice, critics and professionals often fall on either side of the aforementioned debate between film as a distinct medium wherein content and carrier are inexorably linked and mutually dependent in formulating

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<sup>47</sup> David Bordwell, *Pandora's Digital Box: Films, Files, and the Future of Movies*, (Wisconsin: The Irvington Way Institute Press, 2012.) Available online at [http://davidbordwell.net/8H5udw/pandora\\_bordwell\\_120716.pdf](http://davidbordwell.net/8H5udw/pandora_bordwell_120716.pdf).

<sup>48</sup> Michael Friend, "Michael Friend: Adjunct Professor, UCLA Moving Image Archive Studies Program," in *Tacita Dean: Film*, ed. Nicholas Cullinan (London: Tate Publishing, 2011), 72.

cinematic meaning, and a belief that content is divorceable from the film material upon which the work was produced.

Giovanna Fossati theorizes this debate as one which looks beyond the *film as original* framework. Here, she argues, we move past the medium-specific artifact as the guarantor of ontological integrity, and into a transitional realm wherein the preservationist, rather than the artifact, vouchsafes the ontology of film as the work migrates across mediums, from emulsion to digital.<sup>49</sup> For Fossati, maintaining the film's original look, often through digital steps, is a greater and more relevant priority than Mark-Paul Meyer and Paul Read's pre-digital goal of maintaining as much as possible of the original film format. Much of Fossati's argumentation is based in Walter Benjamin's notions of mechanical reproduction and the effect of cinema, its "most power agent," on the traditional value of cultural heritage.<sup>50</sup> For Benjamin, cinema's ability to reproduce the work of art as a plurality of technically processed (as opposed to hand-imitated) copies liquidated aura, that is the "authenticity of a thing...all that is transferable from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced."<sup>51</sup>

Reading Benjamin through Boris Groys, Fossati contends that:

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<sup>49</sup> Fossati, 115-117.

<sup>50</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 217-253.

<sup>51</sup> Benjamin, 221.

Film is indeed a serial product, a commercial release. On the other hand, a newly recognized authenticity originates when film enters the archive...the *film as original* framework defines the historical film artifact as the carrier of the film's authenticity, once it is re-territorialized by entering the archive."<sup>52</sup>

However, Fossati notes the space between a film's initial mass distribution by means of a series of copies and the subsequent archiving of the single element, finds the work in a transitional state, one which de-sanctifies the archival film's auratic dimension, in effect licensing its translation through digitization. For Fossati, the archival artifact's newfound authenticity is negligible, as it was originally one copy amongst many. This mass-produced quality casts the archival artifact's "uniqueness" as a circumstance, rather than a quality native to the work. In Fossati's estimation, therefore, the mass production infrastructure underpinning film distribution invalidates the rigid reading of an artifact's influence and invites a "perspective that focuses outside the material film artifact, for example on the human mediation provided by the film restorer by guaranteeing the verification of the new copy."<sup>53</sup>

Paolo Cherchi Usai stakes out a different conceptualization of the archival film in the digital age, giving voice to the opposite extreme in the debate and echoing a medium-specific reading of film ontology. Localizing the film artifact's decomposition as a chemical certainty inseparable from the conditions under which

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<sup>52</sup> Fossati, 211.

<sup>53</sup> Fossati, 123.

the work was produced, he theorizes that “cinema is the art of destroying moving images.”<sup>54</sup> He casts the act of preservation as a necessary mistake, and the notion of an authentic restoration as an oxymoron given the impossible circumstance of a film unaffected by history. For Cherchi Usai, the archivist ideally engages in the least interpretation possible, observing a code of “passive preservation” whose guiding principle entails “a relentless effort to minimize any intervention whose aim is to conceal the fact that the moving image has a genetically preordained history and a limited lifespan.”<sup>55</sup> Cherchi Usai’s philosophy finds a precedent in John Ruskin’s views of architectural restoration, an undertaking the critic characterized as equally impossible. Arguing for a form of passive preservation in the architectural domain, Ruskin acknowledged the building’s limited lifespan and, therefore, its inevitable demise, inviting society to “let [the end] come declaredly and openly, and let no dishonoring and false substitute deprive it of the funeral offices of memory.”<sup>56</sup> André Habib identifies value in this reading of authenticity, championing the “honorably” decomposed film artifact. Expanding on Cherchi Usai, he argues the decaying archival film evidences an integrity analogous to that of the ruin, an object

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<sup>54</sup> Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age* (London: BFI Publishing, 2001).

<sup>55</sup> Cherchi Usai, 107.

<sup>56</sup> John Ruskin, “The Lamp of Memory, II,” in *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, ed. Nicholas Stanley Price et al. (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1995), 322.

that embodies and wears the ravages of time, concretizing a sense of its passage.<sup>57</sup> Digital media, he argues, is inherently unable to embody or express this passage of time as it can only operate in two modes, a constant present while functional, and an unusable, unreadable state when corrupt or obsolete.

Here we find a tension between ontology and practice in the field. While as argued, a medium-specific reading of film ontology is applicable to these avant-garde films, Cherchi Usai's passive, medium-specific preservation theory is virtually unpracticed in the field at large. Fossati's theory, on the other hand, proves equally problematic, as handmade avant-garde film cannot be transitioned across mediums without a fundamental ontological compromise. Moreover, Fossati's argumentation within this framework casts a wide net, herding all film together as industrial commercial output in execution and intent, assuming a multiplicity of copies were widely distributed.<sup>58</sup> Medium-specific experimental film pushes back against this argument, as it was seldom mass distributed and, in some cases, was even exhibited

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<sup>57</sup> André Habib, "Le temps décomposé: l'imaginaire des ruines au cinema," (PhD Diss. University of Montreal, 2008), 26-31.

<sup>58</sup> Notably, Fossati's *film as art* framework addresses the medium-specific and non-industrial dimension of avant-garde film. Here Fossati notes "those archives that identify with the "film as art" framework can adopt an indexical approach to film ontology if they privilege the medium specificity argument and consider analog photographic film as the specific character of the art they strive to preserve." However, this reading implies a choice between digital and photochemical workflows, a luxury increasingly unavailable to preservationists. Therefore, given my contention that transition is not an inherent quality of hand-manipulated avant-garde films, and that passive preservation is largely unfeasible, it becomes necessary to approach the digitization of these films through the logic of the *film as dispositif* framework. Fossati, 126.

in its edited camera original form.<sup>59</sup> Crucially, however, Fossati's redefinition of ontology, or authenticity, as verified through human intervention, though problematic, warrants consideration as it reflects the increasingly digital-centric realities of contemporary preservation practice. Without completely aligning with this philosophy at an ontological level, medium-specific avant-garde film is nonetheless often preserved using the practices it underwrites in an environment where the infrastructure for photochemical work has become increasingly scarce. Here, the preservationist's capacity for communicating the *intent* of the filmmaker remains central as it informs the intervention which verifies the digital copy. However, while in the photochemical workflow *intent* worked as an adjunct to the influence of the *medium-specific artifact*, in the digital world, the preservationist's interpretation of a filmmaker's *intent* supplants the influence of the *artifact*.

As we shall see, these issues of fidelity versus practice and the degree to which they necessitate translation, or compromise, are hardly unique to preservation in the digital age and often find their reflection in the realm of exhibition.

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<sup>59</sup> As filmmaker Scott Stark has noted in reference to his own Super-8mm film production, "I just figure I'll just show them until they fall apart...I figure they just have a life. They look so much better as originals that I figure that's the way I want to show them." Stark quoted in Kathy Geritz, "I Came into an 8mm World," in *Big as Life: An American History of 8mm Films*, ed. Albert Kilchesy (San Francisco: Foundation for Art in Cinema, 1998), 47.

## Form and Context in Exhibition

Traditional preservation practice is often undertaken with the stated ambition of recreating a film's original viewing experience.<sup>60</sup> This goal also informs certain forms of access, underwriting what Mary Lea Bandy, former chief curator at MoMA, has called a respect for "the original filmic form and original cultural context" in archival exhibition.<sup>61</sup> Giovanna Fossati offers a broader, counter-interpretation suited to the nascent digital landscape, framing access through a "mind/film analysis" lens and arguing against static form and context dictating contemporary exhibition. Employing the *dispositif*, or "apparatus," theory pioneered by Jean-Louis Baudry, alongside more recent interpretations by Frank Kessler, Fossati argues that "film identity becomes a variable that realizes itself only within a *dispositif*, a situation if you wish, where the film meets its user."<sup>62</sup> Within this framework, Fossati argues that film identity proves itself both medium-independent and adaptable to myriad contexts. This argument returns us to the debate between content and carrier, although broadened now to be inclusive of a referendum on the value of original medium and original context, taken together as "the original" *experience*. I argue for an interpretation falling between Bandy and Fossati, one which acknowledges the strict impossibility of recreating the historic circumstances surrounding a film's first screening - what Fossati calls the "historical *dispositif*" -

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<sup>60</sup> Lipman, "The Grey Zone," 5.

<sup>61</sup> Bandy quoted in Jones, 99.

<sup>62</sup> Fossati, 127.



but nonetheless recognizes that an exhibition which strives to account for “the original” experience remains essential to the medium-specific experimental film. In other words, I contend that the nature of the medium-specific avant-garde film does not transition easily and equally to innumerable screening situations.<sup>63</sup>

Again, the genre’s predilection towards non-standard practices and gauges plays a decisive role here. Much 8mm, Super-8mm, and 16mm experimental film projection, for instance, transition out from the remove of the booth and into the audience. This experience marries the noise and physical presence of the projector to the film’s soundtrack and image, respectively.<sup>64</sup> Re-exhibiting a film originally screened in this manner, without the presence of projector in the room, fundamentally alters the film’s identity. Fred Camper, in detailing the distinction between 8mm and 16mm projection, also underscores the unique and non-transferable values of original form in exhibition:

The 8mm image does not have the presence possible in 16mm. Projected large, the image is inevitably too dark, or too fuzzy; if projected smaller and thus bright and sharp, the projected frame will typically take up less space in the

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<sup>63</sup> Both Janna Jones in *The Past is a Moving Picture* and Paolo Cherchi Usai in *The Death of Cinema* argue that a true recreation of the “original” exhibition of a film is impossible. For Jones this is due to the multiplicity of audiences which might be considered the “first” (e.g. east coast, west coast, audiences for different cuts), and for Cherchi Usai it is due to the act of damage inflicted on the film print during each instance of projection.

<sup>64</sup> For a detailed survey of the role of the projector in Avant-Garde film exhibition, see Kelly Egan, “The Projector’s Noises: A Media Archaeology Of Cinema Through The Projector,” (PhD Diss, Trent University, 2013).

viewer's field of vision...The tiny dust particles and scratches that inevitably accrue on a filmstrip are twice the size, on the screen, as in 16mm...The grain is bigger, and splices, when visible at all, are more visible too...These signs of the film's surface and the projector's light form a kind of almost-random scrim through which any representational image is inevitably seen.<sup>65</sup>

Taken a step further, certain avant-garde films incorporate multiple-projections, often performed "live" by the filmmakers through the use of analytic projectors, a phenomenon especially native to the original experience.

Having established the importance of medium-specific form and context in avant-garde exhibition, it becomes important to consider more broadly the possibilities for such analog-based environments in the face of the pervasiveness of digital projection. As David Bordwell notes in *Pandora's Digital Box: Films, Files, and the Future of Movies*, digital cinema, or D-cinema, has solidified as an industry standard and quickly cannibalized 35mm print distribution and exhibition infrastructure such that only a small minority of theaters in North America continue to show film on film.<sup>66</sup> The effects of the changeover have rippled into the repertory market, effectively fostering a climate of scarcity for film prints.<sup>67</sup> While

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<sup>65</sup> Fred Camper, "The Qualities of Eight," in *Big as Life: An American History of 8mm Films*, ed. Albert Kilchesy (San Francisco: Foundation for Art in Cinema, 1998), 27.

<sup>66</sup> Bordwell.

<sup>67</sup> For a detailed survey of the state of access to film prints, see May HaDuong, "Out of Print: the Changing Landscape of Print Accessibility for Repertory Programming," *The Moving Image*, 12.2 (Fall 2012), 148-161.

experimental film has traditionally been exhibited outside of the studio model Bordwell chronicles – often preferring alternative venues in the vein of clubs, lofts, galleries, micro-cinemas, etc. - the growing scarcity of film projection engendered by the industry’s digital changeover casts a large shadow, voiding the demand for the specialty parts and expertise essential in sustaining analog projection. As such, the growing consensus is that analog film exhibition will become an even more specialized affair, one largely within the province of museums.

Andrew Horwath, film critic, curator, and director of the Austrian Film Museum, advocates for the future of analog film exhibition through a pedagogical lens, in the form of the film museum. This model, in his estimation, becomes necessary not only to perpetuate the exhibition of film in the digital age, but also to educate the public as to its importance and singularity. In conversations with Paolo Cherchi Usai, David Francis and Michael Loebenstein transcribed as *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace*, Horwath envisions the future film museum as a historical-materialist endeavor wherein “the presentation machinery [is] part of the museum experience [and] visual contact with the machinery should be possible.”<sup>68</sup> While Horwath professes a vision for all film, his accounting for the display of “presentation machinery,” is especially relevant to the aforementioned medium-specific experimental film wherein the projector, whether incidentally or by design, is both the mechanism for image delivery and an active

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<sup>68</sup> Paolo Cherchi Usai et al., eds., *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace* (Vienna: Synema, 2008), 123.

participant in the work. Moreover, Horwath also advocates, albeit fancifully, for medium-dedicated screening spaces (e.g. a digital theater as distinct from a film-specific theater), an attempt to contextually distinguish between work born on film and their digital surrogates.

Here we again find the distinction between fidelity and practice. While arguably more appropriate to the work, relatively few institutions exist as dedicated film museums, and consequently much film-specific exhibition will likely take place at museums with a broader Fine Art focus and a less film-specific context. Caroline Gemma Bem, in her dissertation *Cinema and Museums: Encounters*, identifies, through a reading of Dominique Païni and Kerry Brougher, this challenge to film in museums as one of “comparativist curatorial (and spectatorial) experience.”<sup>69</sup> For Bem, museum curation “frequently impl[ies] the arrangement of the exhibition’s contents, not in terms of chronology or media but groupings, based on a specific problematic or theme.”<sup>70</sup> Unlike Horwath’s film-centric museum, cinema in the traditional museum is but one art form among many. Consequently, the work’s cultural context is broadened as the act of exhibition in the museum situates the film artifact within - and draws connections between - traditions of painting, photography, sculpture, and ultimately any of the arts the museum counts among its holdings. While experimental film has deep roots and a storied connection to the art

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<sup>69</sup> Caroline Gemma Bem, “Cinema and Museums: Encounters,” (MA Diss. McGill University, 2009), 8.

<sup>70</sup> Caroline Gemma Bem, 8.

world, this strong curatorial hand in museum exhibition can ultimately translate the cultural context.<sup>71</sup> In much the same way the preservationist's hand translates the ontology of film in migrating from emulsion to digital, here, the original experience and the contemporary engagement have the potential to be greatly estranged.

In this sense, I agree with Bandy's insistence on medium-specificity when approaching the re-exhibition of hand-manipulated and ephemeral/performative avant-garde film, while simultaneously acknowledging practical realities attendant to such an analog endeavor. These practical conditions, moreover, dictate that these screenings will increasingly occur, out of necessity and circumstance, at institutions which to varying degrees transform the original context, enacting new *dispositifs* in Fossati's sense. Therefore, while continuing to argue that exhibition should attempt to reasonably emulate a work's original viewing context, such an endeavor must occur within the realm of practical application, a fact which characterizes readings of "the original" *experience* as an interpretive act with an accompanying degree of translation.

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<sup>71</sup> As Jonathan Walley notes, "the first wave of canonical avant-garde filmmakers...all came to film from other art forms. The work of filmmakers like Maya Daren and Sidney Peterson has been interpreted in light of Surrealism, Brakhage's films in terms imported from Abstract Expressionist, and the Structural filmmakers were painters, sculptors, and musicians." Walley, "Paracinema: Challenging Medium-Specificity and Re-Defining Cinema in Avant-Garde Film." (PhD Diss. University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2005), 29. It also bears repeating that the North American strain of Structural filmmaking was largely informed by a Greenbergian Modernism with roots in the art world.

## Expanded Cinema

While it has been argued that much medium-specific avant-garde cinema exposes the limitations of a rigid conception of “the original,” performative multiple-projector work arguably constitutes the supreme challenge to any theory of a static, “original” work. Performed environments, as complemented by any combination of multiple-projection, analytic projectors operated live by the filmmaker, moving screens, mixed media (e.g. slides), complementary performances (e.g. dance), etc. are ephemeral works, by their nature remade with each screening. There is inherently no one “original.” These multiple-projection environments are an instance of what Gene Youngblood, in the late 1960s, dubbed “expanded cinema.” Youngblood identified this movement as a techno-utopist phenomenon which cast the filmmaker/artist as a “design scientist” and ecologist fostering environmental relationships by way of media.<sup>72</sup> Expanded cinema, in his estimation, worked towards an elevated global consciousness through what Janine Marchessault and Susan Lord have characterized as “an explosion of the frame outward towards immersive, interactive, and interconnected forms of culture.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: Dutton, 1970). Importantly, while this discussion focuses on film-based multiple-projection environments, Youngblood’s conception of expanded cinema cast a wide net indifferent to medium, and was inclusive of art based in film, video, and computer generated imagery.

<sup>73</sup> Janine Marchessault & Susan Lord, “Introduction,” in *Fluid Screens, Expanded Cinema*, eds. Janine Marchessault & Susan Lord (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 6.

This expansion beyond the singular, unified element unfixes the film and, as Julia Noordegraaf notes in *Preserving and Exhibiting Media Art*, raises fundamental questions concerning how best to locate the work for preservation and future exhibition.<sup>74</sup> As the volume's title suggests, the bulk of scholarship aimed at preserving and exhibiting expanded cinema is generated within the Media Art field under the banner of "time-based media" conservation, rather than in traditional film preservation literature. Noordegraaf argues that this process of locating – or relocating – the work is underwritten by an analysis "aimed at describing and interpreting the coherence between [the artwork's] material organization and conceptual layers, as well as linking them to the larger cultural and social contexts in which they appear."<sup>75</sup> Dario Marchiori offers a preservation methodology suited to this end, one based in a four-step analytic process of description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment, all rooted in documentation.<sup>76</sup> Although documentation plays a role in both digital and photochemical preservation, it is largely subservient to the film or digital artifacts themselves. Given the expanded nature of multiple-projection performative film screenings, documentation in this instance takes on a heightened and central role in its capacity to capture the

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<sup>74</sup> Julia Noordegraaf, "Introduction," in *Preserving and Exhibiting Media Art: Challenges and Perspectives*, eds. Julia Noordegraaf et al (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 123.

<sup>75</sup> Julia Noordegraaf, 124.

<sup>76</sup> Dario Marchiori, "The Analysis of the Artwork," in *Preserving and Exhibiting Media Art: Challenges and Perspectives*, eds. Julia Noordegraaf et al (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 127-147.

relationship between the work's ephemeral "concepts" and the material artifacts. Therefore, within this methodology, what was ephemeral during the performance is fixed at a secondary stage through written or visual documentation, introducing a new form of translation into preservation. Up until this point, I have argued that medium-specific avant-garde film resists workflows wherein artifact authority is relegated to secondary importance, while also recognizing practical realities within the field dictate that such actions are unavoidable to varying degrees. Performative medium-specific avant-garde film is unique then, as its ephemeral nature seemingly demands from the outset that the influence of the artifact be tempered by documentation if the work is to be preserved in any form.

This shift towards a focus on what Jon Ippolito has called "media-independent behaviors" is also evidenced in the principal documentation models for exhibition recreation, chief among them the Variable Media Questionnaire (VMQ).<sup>77</sup> A brand of artist's interview, the VMQ is more concerned with documenting an artwork's behavior and potential for translation across mediums. It uses information gathered from the artist, rather than any medium-specific characteristics fixed in space and time. As Annet Dekker notes, the VMQ "confirms the necessity to let go of traditional preservation methods that focus on the

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<sup>77</sup> Ippolito quoted in Dekker, 159. As Annet Dekker notes, while the Variable Media Network's VMQ is the most widely accepted model, there exist alternative documentation strategies, each with a different strength and focus. The Capturing Unstable Media Conceptual Model (CMCM), for instance, is tailored specifically to address newly created, rather than preexisting work.



recreation of the work as it originally appeared...”<sup>78</sup> Paradoxically, then, while the ephemeral-performative avant-garde work in this instance is arguably the most dependent on a medium-specificity in practice - a digital file cannot be “performed” on an analytic film projector – popular methodological approaches place it the furthest from any preservation or exhibition model based in the film artifact itself. Within the realm of multiple-projection expanded cinema environments, what might be deemed “the original” is the documentation, a record of the artist’s *process*, rather than the final work.

### Case Studies and Methodology

Bearing in mind the importance of testing my archival theory at a practical level, I have chosen a series of case studies wherein preservation decision points can be mapped onto the proposed four-part model. In so doing, I hope to classify what qualities surrounding the work, and which conceptions of the work in time, informed a preservationist’s reading of “the original.” Having established this, I also aim to reflect which methods the preservationist subsequently employed to preserve “the original,” and the resulting degree to which the work was translated.

Beginning with 16mm hand-manipulated films, Chapter 1 profiles the preservation efforts surrounding “*He was born, he suffered, he died.*” (1974), *The Dead* (1960), *Skein* (1974), as well as the currently unpreserved *Unconscious London Strata* (1982), all part of the Stan Brakhage collection at the Academy Film Archive (hereafter AFA). Each film represents a workflow, or lack thereof, largely rooted in a

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<sup>78</sup> Dekker, 160.

purely photochemical practice, with an early emphasis on the influence of the *medium-specific artifact*, and a subsequent need for this *artifact* influence to partner with an interpretation of filmmaker *intent*. Chapter 2 looks to 8mm and Super-8mm hand-manipulated avant-garde films. Here I speculate on plans for preserving Stan Brakhage's 8mm masterpiece *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* (1967-68), based on current efforts to preserve other small-gauge avant-garde work at the AFA. I also consider the completed work on Luther Price's *Home* (1990-98) at Anthology Film Archives (hereafter Anthology), framing the preservation as evidencing the current trend of digital-photochemical hybrid workflows. I argue this situation shifts the partnership between the influence of the *medium-specific artifact* and filmmaker *intent*, resulting in a new hierarchical relationship wherein the former is subservient to the latter. I close the chapter with an argument against Giovanna Fossati's *film as dispositif*-inspired "mind/film analogy" ontological approach when applied to the medium-specific avant-garde film. Chapter 3 turns towards the multiple-projection environments of expanded cinema. I look first at Anthology and BB Optics' work on Carolee Schneemann's *Kitch's Last Meal* (1973-1976), an instance of a traditional photochemical workflow adapted to account for the "expanded" dimensions of multiple-projection film. Here the situation requires the *medium-specific artifact(s)* to again work in service of various forms of filmmaker *intent*. I contrast this with the New Museum's 2012 recreation of Stan Vanderbeek's multiple-projection *Movie-Drome* environments (1963-65), a project I argue informs conceptions of "the original" based in audience *experience* and artistic *process*. I conclude this chapter by

advocating for a greater conversation and collaboration between traditional moving image archival practice and Media Art/time-based media methodology.

Importantly, the case studies have been selected for their relevance as vehicles to fully probe the feasibility of the proposed archival theory, rather than for their merit *per se*, or due to a specific grounding in any one movement within the avant-garde. Consequently, Stan Brakhage's output from the 1960s, a body of work most closely identified with the Lyrical mode in P. Adams Sitney's Romantic, "visionary" avant-garde cinema model, can be seen as sitting comfortably next to Stan VanDerBeek's multiple-projection *Movie-Drome* environments, an early instance expanded cinema.

The approach of my thesis is based on case studies. Therefore my field research was based on interviews that were semi-structured. Given that preservationist Mark Toscano directly administers the archival efforts surrounding the Stan Brakhage collection at the AFA, the information in chapter 1 is based on personal interviews with Toscano, and his writings on Stan Brakhage in *The Journal of Film Preservation* and other publications.<sup>79</sup> Much of the information in chapter 2 regarding the AFA's work is pulled from public lectures, while the technical details pertaining to *Home* were assembled from interviews with Anthology preservationist John Klacsmann. The lion's share of technical specifications concerning *Kitch's Last meal* in chapter 3 was compiled from interviews with Bill Brand at BB Optics.

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<sup>79</sup> Mark Toscano, "Archiving Brakhage," 13-25.

Mark Toscano, "The Hair in the Gate: Preserving Brakhage," 38-42.

Pertinent information concerning the New Museum's *Movie-Drome* recreation was culled from conversations with curator Gary Carrion-Murayari and Stan VanDerBeek scholar Gloria Sutton. These interviews are supplemented by primary and secondary historical documents, including personal papers, artists' manifestos, cinema studies and technical preservation journals, and film programs.

While I seek a substantive engagement with the subfield of avant-garde film preservation, I have also chosen to observe certain self-imposed parameters for the sake of length and feasibility. First, experimental films created using digital and video technologies, while posing their own unique set of preservation and exhibition concerns, fall outside the scope of this research. Second, while notable experimental work has certainly been produced on 35mm and even 70mm film gauges, my research is chiefly concerned with films captured on Super-8mm, 8mm and 16mm, the most common gauges for avant-garde cinema. Third, while funding underwrites the entire project of film preservation and should be understood as far from a tertiary concern, the focus of this study is grounded in the theoretical and technical issues facing the field. Finally, while casting a wide net with regards to literature review, the case studies limit themselves to institutions located in the United States.

### Conclusion

Shepherding much medium-specific avant-garde film through preservation to exhibition in a manner philosophically, technically, and aesthetically appropriate

to the work is a difficult gambit from the outset and a process which demands varying degrees of compromise, interpretation and translation. The nature of these films is deeply embedded within the film materials on which they were created – arguably more so than any other genre. As such, the moving image archival field’s traditional photochemical working theory, which holds that the most original medium-specific artifact constitutes the “purest” and most authentic preservation source, seems best suited to the work. The influence of this model, however, is often troubled as a result of avant-garde film’s non-traditional production methods, checkered storage history, and the mass discontinuation of film stocks. These realities, consequently, require the preservationist to interpret a filmmaker’s *intent* as a necessary adjunct to the material *artifact* itself. As digital tools are integrated to an ever-growing extent in preservation workflows, these notions of “the original” as based in *artifact* and *intent* are transformed from complementary into binary concepts and workflows. This results in a tension between impractical actions that conceptually resound with the work, and the practical realities of contemporary preservation practice. These tensions between fidelity and practice are equally present in attempts to preserve an audience’s original *experience* of these medium-specific avant-garde films in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as analog exhibition is increasingly available only through select venues which, to varying degrees re-contextualize the work at an institutional level. Finally, the movement away from *artifact* influence reaches its apex in the preservation of multiple-projection expanded cinema. As a consequence of its ephemeral nature, the work informs conceptions of “the original”

as artistic *process*, which, in turn, necessitate the greatest degree of translation in preservation and exhibition.

I intend to argue that while a case-by-case approach to avant-garde preservation remains necessary at a granular level, my proposed archival theory proves flexible enough to represent non-traditional, medium-specific avant-garde film at a more general level. At the base of this theory is a fluid, rather than partitioned, conception of “the original” based in a critical adoption of Giovanna Fossati’s *film as original* framework and supplemented with methodology derived from time-based media art conservation. I break with Fossati’s notion that *all* media is transitional by nature, and argue that the “soul” of these avant-garde materials is often deeply rooted in a medium-specific ontology. Contemporary circumstances and the materials themselves, however, frequently result in workflows which require compromise. Here the preservationist must often interpret and occasionally transform the work if the alternative is the loss of the film altogether. It therefore becomes crucial not to cast this compromise as a blanket term, but rather as a matter of degrees. By looking to case studies in the field and mapping them onto a four-part model, I propose a theory which reflects the variable intersection between the nature of the work, the circumstances surrounding the work, the method employed to preserve the work, and the required degree of translation.

## Chapter 1 – Medium-Specific Artifacts and Filmmaker Intent in the Photochemical Workflow

The ongoing project of preserving Stan Brakhage’s work at the Academy Film Archive (hereafter the AFA) offers fruitful inroads to chart notions of “the original” rooted in the medium-specific artifact and an interpretation of filmmaker intent. Bearing in mind, as always, Bill Brand’s maxim that each preservation is, to a degree, a unique proposition, I argue that by examining a constellation of case studies rooted in Stan Brakhage’s films, we can begin to see how the work’s material qualities can inform a workflow.<sup>80</sup> Here I contend that these material qualities, based in the medium-specific artifact, can function as either a primary influence in a preservation, or as a partner to a conception of filmmaker intent interpreted to varying degrees by the preservationist. The chapter opens with a brief description of filmic materiality and its importance in Brakhage’s practice, and proceeds to chronicle four relevant preservation projects. I begin with “*He was born, he suffered, he died.*” (1974) as an instance of artifact influence dictating workflow, then look to *The Dead* (1960) and *Skein* (1974) as instances wherein filmmaker intent plays first a small, then progressively expansive, role in the process. I close with a discussion of the currently unpreserved *Unconscious London Strata* (1982), a case wherein an interpretation of “the original” based in artifact influence and filmmaker intent has prevented a preservation effort, evidencing both the limits and safeguards of conceptualizing “the original” to practical preservation ends in the photochemical

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<sup>80</sup> Bill Brand in conversation with the author.

realm. This final case study also points towards chapter 2's discussion of digital integration. Finally, through these case studies, I argue that materials which dictate a conception of "the original" based in the medium-specific artifact, either as equal partner or guiding force, and are best served by a photochemical workflow which preserves the work in a manner which respects their medium-specific ontological nature.

Stan Brakhage, in a career spanning over 50 years and roughly 350 films, consistently explored and experimented with the material properties of the film medium as a central part of his artistic practice.<sup>81</sup> These techniques worked in service of a larger project, building what he dubbed a form of cinematic "closed-eye vision" – one which he hoped might move the medium away from the "track" of traditional film language.<sup>82</sup> To this end, Brakhage routinely combined multiple film stocks (color, black & white, negative etc.), chemically treated film in

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<sup>81</sup> Toscano notes that assessing the exact number of Brakhage films is difficult due to competing interpretations of whether certain films constitute a discrete work or are better understood as part of a series which itself would be classified as a single film with multiple parts. Mark Toscano in conversation with the author.

<sup>82</sup> Stan Brakhage, "The Camera Eye," in *Essential Brakhage: Selected Writings on Filmmaking*, ed. Bruce R. McPherson (New York, McPherson, 2001). While a survey of the critical writing surrounding Stan Brakhage's work falls outside the scope of this research, it bears noting that Brakhage's calls for a new type of vision in cinematic language forms the basis of P. Adams Sitney's "Lyrical Mode" in avant-garde film, a strain Sitney identifies as emanating directly from Brakhage's 1960s output. As Sitney defines it, the Lyrical mode "postulates the film-maker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film." P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 160.



unconventional ways (e.g. bleaching, baking etc.), and directly hand-manipulated emulsion through painting, etching, and various appliqué techniques. Brakhage's description of grain clusters in 8mm projection, while seemingly an overly pointed observation, speaks to the correlation between medium, technique, and "vision" in his work more broadly:

The 8mm film is given such a blow-up on the screen that you can see the grain of the film stock much more clearly than in 16mm high speed film. The crystals that make blue look quite different from those making red and green. For years I've baked film, used high speed film & sprayed Clorox on it so as to bring out grain clusters...I have been trying for years to bring out that quality of sight, of closed-eye vision.<sup>83</sup>

Notably, although Brakhage's practice is clearly rooted in a medium-specificity, it is also important to acknowledge that this focus emerged as an extension of his personal filmmaking philosophy, and as such remains distinct from the Structural or Structural-Materialist schools of avant-garde filmmaking, again underscoring the importance of filmic materiality across the avant-garde as a whole.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Stan Brakhage, "Eight Questions," in *Essential Brakhage: Selected Writings on Filmmaking*, ed. Bruce R. McPherson (New York, McPherson, 2001), 120.

<sup>84</sup> Stan Brakhage publicly debated Structural-Materialist advocate Malcolm Le Grice in 1978, outlining his arguments for a distinction between "Structural" and "Personal" filmmaking. Malcolm Le Grice, "Stan Brakhage and Malcolm Le Grice Debate [1978]" in *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age* (London: British Film Institute, 2008), 85-128.

It is equally important to note that Brakhage's medium-specific hand-manipulation practice exists within a larger continuum, that of the "direct film" tradition. Within the avant-garde, this practice is often cited as building out of Len Lye's pioneering animation work, with *Color Box* (1935) widely considered the first animated film created by painting directly on film to be shown to a mass audience.<sup>85</sup> Shortly thereafter, Norman McLaren, both before and during his legendary tenure with the National Film Board of Canada, produced scores of equally groundbreaking work based in camera-less animation techniques.<sup>86</sup> Finally, the first three films in Harry Smith's seminal *Early Abstractions* (1946-1957) cycle were largely based in a process of painting directly on 35mm film in elaborate batik-inspired patterns. Stepping briefly outside the avant-garde, the practice of painting directly on film also finds a lineage in silent cinema, which adopted as a regular practice hand-coloring and stenciling release prints frame by frame, processes which themselves have an historical antecedent in methods which were routinely used for coloring magic lantern slides.<sup>87</sup> However, despite this rich tradition of hand-manipulation, much of Stan Brakhage's work applied these techniques to more varied ends, often

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<sup>85</sup> Robert Russett and Cecile Starr, *Experimental Animation: An Illustrated Anthology*, (New York, Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1976).

<sup>86</sup> McLaren, in discussing his work, cited Len Lye as a touchstone, noting that "although I did not work in close proximity to Len Lye...and although I started direct drawing on film independently of him, his films have always put me in a state of dithering delight and therefore should be counted as a formative influence." Robert Russett and Cecile Starr, *Experimental Animation: An Illustrated Anthology*, (New York, Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1976), 117.

<sup>87</sup> Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: An Introduction*, (London: British Film Institute, 2000).

in concert with the aforementioned chemical treatments, unconventional film printing, and use of myriad film stocks. Brakhage is also distinct from his predecessors in his deeply personal approach to the medium. Hand-manipulation for Brakhage was more than a formal strategy; it evidenced his attempts to turn the film strip into an extension of his physical being, with every scratch functioning as both cinematic effect and evidence of his touch. This distinct approach, however, has resulted in archival artifacts which propose heightened preservation problems.

*"He was born, he suffered, he died."* (1974) offers an instance of a film which required relatively little translation as the influence of the medium-specific artifact can be said to have almost entirely dictated the preservation workflow. This influence, however, was far from clear at the outset of the preservation. Consisting of "found" Ektachrome color dissolves combined with chemically treated and hand-etched black leader, the original artifact proved complicated at first glance, as the chemical reaction on the black leader, initiated at some point prior to the film's completion in 1974, had never been fully arrested.<sup>88</sup> As Mark Toscano notes:

In the handful of sections of the film in which Stan bleached the black leader, apparently a few chemical remnants from this process had remained on the film for the 31 years prior to my inspection of it. Over those three decades, this

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<sup>88</sup> Mark Toscano, "Archiving Brakhage." *Journal of Film Preservation* 73 (November 2006), 24.

minute residue had continued to bleach small areas of the black leader, probably quite slowly over the course of many years.<sup>89</sup>

The existence of an internegative struck from the original in 1974 confirmed that the chemical reaction had, in fact, progressed during the intervening years.<sup>90</sup>

However, rather than using the intermediate element as the preservation source, the AFA opted to preserve the film from the original materials, including the progressive bleaching, as “using the internegative as a source would mean more grain and less detail, something that would be especially noticeable in the hand-scratched sections.”<sup>91</sup> In so doing, the preservation takes as its conception of “the original” not the film which was first shown to audiences or a medium-independent notion of the work, but rather the artifact itself as an organic substance which has changed over time.<sup>92</sup> Importantly, the artifact’s inherent, organic transformation is also a process which can be seen as largely independent from an act of translation

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<sup>89</sup> Mark Toscano, “Archiving Brakhage.” 23.

<sup>90</sup> Mark-Paul Meyer and Paul Read define an internegative as a “a duplicate colour negative film, especially one prepared from a reversal camera original or print.” *Restoration of Motion Pictures Film*, (Oxford: Butterworth & Heinemann, 2000), 328.

<sup>91</sup> Mark Toscano, “Archiving Brakhage,” 24.

<sup>92</sup> As I have argued, these notions of “the original” are porous, and the intent of the filmmaker has its role to play even here, in a preservation wherein the work overwhelmingly dictates an interpretation based in the medium-specific artifact. Beyond the superior image quality native to using the original elements over the internegative, the AFA’s decision was also informed by “a sense that Stan would have been interested and perhaps even excited at the idea that one of his films...had continued to live its own life long after he had released it into the world.” Mark Toscano, “Archiving Brakhage.” *Journal of Film Preservation* 73 (November 2006),15.

enacted by the preservationist. While a speculative interpretation of Brakhage's intent was a peripheral consideration, it served to bolster, rather than diminish, the influence of the medium-specific artifact. Here, the inherent "problem" of the ongoing chemical bleaching is recognized as having become an inherent characteristic of the artifact, and consequently the work itself. Respecting the ongoing bleaching of the film material is also in keeping with a dimension of the work's formal ambitions. Brakhage's filmmaking was in many ways an attempt to use the film medium as an extension of both his consciousness and his physical body. The flurry of hand-manipulations evidenced his touch in the same way his decision to abandon the tripod and embrace extreme hand-held photography embodied the influence of his physical movements. The fact that the film has continued to "evolve" as a living artifact neatly reflects the organic qualities Brakhage strove to infuse into much of his work. Here, then, we find a case study which takes medium-specificity as the work's defining quality along the Spectrum of Influence axis, and locates the film in the present day along the Temporal axis, respecting the current chemical composition of the archival artifact. These two conceptions of "the original" inform a photochemical preservation based in the original elements which requires a low degree of translation.

*The Dead* (1960) begins to activate more involved dimensions of translation as the work is structurally complex, requiring a consideration of documented filmmaker intent as an adjunct to the influence of the medium-specific artifact. Shot and assembled using multiple film stocks - a technique common throughout much of

Brakhage's mid-career output – *The Dead* variously employs black and white positive, black and white negative, and color reversal emulsions during its brief runtime.<sup>93</sup> The film also makes frequent use of superimposition techniques wherein “the black-and-white positive and negative have been printed on color stock, giving them a green-gray tint,”<sup>94</sup> The result is a frequent solarization effect, with “the simultaneous printing of negative and positive...causing an instant flash or leap of the image on the screen.”<sup>95</sup> Here, again, we find evidence of Brakhage's desire to mobilize diverse properties of the medium in service of communicating his vision, effectively allowing the tactile and physical nature of the film to function as an extension of his corporeal being. Shot in Paris with much of footage concentrated in the Père Lachaise cemetery, the plurality of film stocks neatly underscores an inherent sense of displacement. Meanwhile, the superimpositions, underwritten by negative/positive film combinations, arrive and depart without warning, echoing the prevailing sense of mortality which hangs over the film, beginning with its title.

In approaching the preservation of *The Dead*, the AFA made use of the original A/B rolls, a Kodachrome reversal master struck from the original, and the handwritten printing instructions Brakhage had sent to his laboratory, Western-

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<sup>93</sup> Mark Toscano in conversation with the author.

<sup>94</sup> P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 173.

<sup>95</sup> Sitney, 173.

Cine, while completing the film.<sup>96</sup> Although Brakhage was frequently predisposed to edit his films as single A-rolls – another dimension of his tactile, hands-on approach to filmmaking – Toscano notes that it was not uncommon for him to employ A/B-rolling techniques (or even A/B/C/D-rolls) in service of achieving a specific effect.<sup>97</sup> The A/B printing process was a widespread technique in the 16mm film chain, traditionally designed to hide splices in assembly. Meyer and Read detail the basic approach, noting:

...two rolls of negative are assembled. Each roll has alternatively a negative length and a piece of black film called spacing. The negative alternates between the two rolls. The overlapping splices are hidden on the black spacing at each join. The rolls are called the A roll and the B roll.<sup>98</sup>

With *The Dead*, Brakhage sidestepped the alternating black spacing, allowing image from the A and B-rolls to fall atop each other, working to create the unconventional superimpositions and tints noted above. While superimpositions are certainly not unheard of in traditional films, in conventional A/B printing one roll is biased - that is to say measured - to prevent a blown out image or one source taking over the other. Brakhage's note, however, expressly asked the laboratory to print the rolls "as they fell," bypassing the standard safeguards ensuring traditional image

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<sup>96</sup> Mark Toscano in conversation with the author.

<sup>97</sup> Mark Toscano, "Archiving Brakhage," 15.

<sup>98</sup> Meyer and Read, 37.

quality.<sup>99</sup> This decision represents an unconventional printing route, a dimension of the work which requires a more rigorous consideration of Brakhage's original intent as a necessary adjunct to the original artifact(s). To this end, in preserving the film the AFA sent the A/B-rolls to Colorlab in Rockville, Maryland with Brakhage's original instructions for printing. This essentially mimicked, as closely as possible given the contemporary setting, the circumstances surrounding *The Dead's* printing in 1960.<sup>100</sup>

Brakhage's unconventional approach to an industrial printing process also bears out Ross Lipman's earlier observation that avant-garde and independent film must often be considered outside the regimented and standardized processes which characterize conventional studio materials.<sup>101</sup> Annette Groschke, Martin Koerber, and Daniel Miller, expand on this movement away from strict artifact influence in avant-garde film preservation, noting:

With typical laboratory production practices, the edited 35mm negative usually represents the original of the final film. Reprinting or preserving such a film from the original negative is easy...However an experimental film that was printed on an optical printer with ABCD rolls [or] different additional treatments can be a problem because the different steps that lie in the process between source material and the final film are rarely documented...it is only

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<sup>99</sup> Mark Toscano in conversation with the author.

<sup>100</sup> Mark Toscano in conversation with the author.

<sup>101</sup> Ross Lipman, "The Grey Zone," *The Moving Image* 9.2 (Fall 2009), 1-29.



the filmmakers themselves who are able to clarify how they manufactured their films, how the specific effects were produced, and which techniques they used.<sup>102</sup>

Therefore, despite the presence of original materials and a complete, unfaded reversal master as reference, Brakhage's printing notes become the essential link between the these two points.

Notably, this is a case of filmmaker involvement that speaks to a direct and period-specific intent. This has two related implications in considering conceptions of "the original" and their attendant degrees of translation. First, given that the instructions are a written document fixed in time, the note represents Brakhage's intentions for the film while it was being constructed. In this sense, it does not constitute an instance of what Bill Brand has identified as "retrospective intent," that is, a decision, or set of decisions, enacted by the filmmaker at a later point in time long after the film's completion.<sup>103</sup> Interestingly, this also speaks to the role of the Temporality axis in to establishing a conception of "the original." As we have seen, intent can be localized during the production of the film, or at many points thereafter. However, as Groschke et al. imply, a filmmaker's intent during the production of the film itself cannot be conceived as fixed whole, but rather as a series of discrete steps - shooting, editing, printing etc. - which should be sub-

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<sup>102</sup> Annette Groschke et al., "Who Is Going to Look at That?" *The Moving Image* 12.1 (Spring 2012), 130-131.

<sup>103</sup> Bill Brand, "The Artist as Archivist," in *Results You Can't Refuse: Celebrating 30 Years of BB Optics*, ed. Andrew Lampert (New York: Anthology Film Archive, 2006).

localized. Consequently, Brakhage's note informs a conception of filmmaker intent native to the printing stage of *The Dead's* production rather than, for instance, the shooting of the film. Second, Toscano's ability to pass along the note directly to the lab represents an unobtrusive form of conveying "original" intent. Rather than involving a filmmaker in the process, or inferring intentions from less pointed documentation, the preservationist in this instance enacts a comparatively noninvasive form of interpretation. Here, the qualities of the work that inform a conception of "the original" along the Spectrum of Influence axis are still based largely within the materials, or medium-specific artifacts, yet the work also necessitates a non-invasive interpretation of filmmaker intent. "The original" is then localized at the printing stage of production along the Temporality axis, and informs a preservation method based on the original A/B-rolls and Brakhage's laboratory note. This method, finally, requires a relatively low degree of translation.

By way of contrast, in preserving *Skein* (1978) the AFA was faced with original materials in poor condition, which, in turn, required a more proactive translation of Brakhage's intent. Importantly, while *The Dead* made use of Brakhage's printing note, the excellent quality of the original elements created an environment wherein this unambiguous intent could be easily communicated. The original elements in *Skein* dictated a less straightforward workflow. Also comprised of originals in the form of A/B-rolls, the A-roll of dissolves and superimpositions was printed on Kodak Ektachrome Commercial (ECO) 7272, a reversal film stock which proved popular with many avant-garde filmmakers during the 1970s and

1980s as it offered a slow and versatile low contrast film, which consequently facilitated a duplication path without substantial generational build up.<sup>104</sup> Unfortunately, unlike its predecessor ECO 7255, the 7252 stock has demonstrated extremely poor color stability over the long-term and is prone to fading.<sup>105</sup> Consequently, the *Skein* A-roll original has faded well beyond the state which can be compensated for in photochemical color timing. The hand-painted B-roll, however, remains in excellent condition. An equally faded reversal master struck from the original, and an unfaded internegative, also exist for the film.<sup>106</sup>

In approaching the preservation, Mark Toscano outlined two possibilities, one more closely aligned with artifact influence, which would produce substandard aesthetic results, and the other a marriage of artifact influence and filmmaker intent which promised greater image quality. The first preservation path was relatively straightforward and would use the unfaded internegative as the source. Employing an internegative element struck from original materials is not uncommon in preservation practice, as it can occasionally be used as a substitute for color faded or damaged sections in otherwise high quality original elements should superior materials not be available. Employing an internegative as a preservation source for an entire film, as opposed to certain sections, however, is far from advisable as it

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<sup>104</sup> Mark Toscano in conversation with the author.

<sup>105</sup> John Klacsmann, "re: Question for a MIAS paper." Email correspondence with the author.

<sup>106</sup> Mark Toscano, "Archiving Brakhage." 21.

results in the same generational quality loss in grain and sharpness detail as discussed in reference to *"He was born, he suffered, he died."*

A second option was possible due to the film's relatively unconventional production path. The now faded A-roll was built from a set of earlier A/B/C/D-rolls, designed to create layers of superimposition which would later be combined with the hand-painted B-roll. The AFA has the A/B/C/D production rolls, which are all in excellent condition, and they can be used to "recreate" the original A-roll. As Mark Toscano notes:

We have the timing sheets, and can easily re-print them to create a new A-roll. As the ECO stock Stan used no longer exists, they would instead likely be printed to an internegative, and then perhaps to a low-contrast print or intermediate stock, to mimic the lower contrast of ECO stock. If this substitute A-roll matched well enough, it could be printed with the hand-painted B-roll to create a new preservation negative.<sup>107</sup>

Although recreating the final steps of the printing process is a necessary and common practice in photochemical preservation, returning to earlier production rolls to reverse engineer a surrogate original element constitutes a deep invocation

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<sup>107</sup> Toscano's comments regarding the ECO stock also point towards an act of translation inherent to any preservation that takes as its source reversal film. Given that the mass discontinuation of reversal film stocks and positive-to-positive laboratory printing infrastructure, internegative to low-contrast stock preservation paths, for instance, become necessary in an attempt to mimic the reversal "look." Fully recapturing the entire reversal aesthetic, however, remains an impossibility and therefore even those preservations which I have argued are dictated chiefly through an interpretation of "the original" as medium-specific artifact can also be understood as translated to a degree.

of Brakhage's original intentions and requires the preservationist embody the filmmaker as practicing artist. This is especially fraught in the case of Brakhage, given his tactile and deeply personal approach to every level of filmmaking. Here we return to the relationship between the Temporal axis and filmmaker intent, one which allows intent be localized and distinguished at various stages of production. In this sense, distinct conceptions of "original" intent rooted in each stage of production consequently demand different levels of translation, each with attendant ethical concerns. Broadly speaking, conceptions of "original" intent derived from earlier stages of production will generally require more translation on the part of the preservationist. The case of *Skein* is no exception, given that the A/B/C/D-rolls represent an early stage in the printing process. Here the preservationist, despite the presence of reference and timing sheets, must effectively act as the filmmaker in a creative capacity, rather than simply conveying documented intent. The process remains rooted in a photochemical workflow and consequently artifact influence persists; yet now, through a deeper and more active act of translation on the part of the preservationist, a conception of "original" intent works as a partner rather than an adjunct to the artifact. Recognizing the necessary compromise inherent to both preservation paths, the AFA took the unusual step of preserving *Skein* twice, once using the recreated A-roll and original B-roll as sources, and again using the internegative.<sup>108</sup> Therefore, in the latter instance, the conceptions of "the original" are based in the medium-specific artifact along the Spectrum of Influence axis and

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<sup>108</sup> Mark Toscano, "Archiving Brakhage," 21.

localized in the later printing stages of production along the Temporality axis. This method for locating these conceptions of “the original” is a preservation based on the internegative, which requires a low degree of translation. In the former instance, conversely, the medium-specific artifact and filmmaker intent function as partners along the Spectrum of Influence axis, and the work can be localized in both the early and later printing stages along the Temporality axis. The resulting method for preserving the work is based in recreating the original A-roll and combining it with the original B-roll source, a workflow which requires a higher degree of translation. Here, then, we find a case study which, more than any other, evidences the need for multiple conceptions of “the original” in an archival theory of the avant-garde, as a partitioned or streamlined approach would have proved unable to account for the AFA’s actions in this instance.

The larger issue of “rebuilding” aspects of a film using what I will call proto-original elements (i.e. those production elements, like the *Skein* A/B/C/D-rolls, which precede the “original” source element(s)) can also prove an impediment to preservation, as in the case of *Unconscious London Strata* (1982). Originally shot by Brakhage on Super-8mm during a trip to London, the film was subsequently blown up to 16mm for cutting and was later exhibited in that gauge. Consequently, despite the initial capture on Super-8mm, the work in this instance is understood to be the edited 16mm film. Unfortunately, the 16mm stock Brakhage used for the blow up was ECO 7252, and as a result it is faded beyond use in a photochemical

workflow.<sup>109</sup> An unfaded internegative struck from the original edited 16mm exists at the AFA, as do the unfaded Super-8mm proto-elements. Faced with these options, Toscano identified an aesthetic dilemma in using the internegative and an ethical problem in using the Super-8mm.<sup>110</sup> The internegative as source workflow, while as noted earlier is already an imperfect option, proves completely untenable in this instance due to generational loss. Given the original was blown up to 16mm from the smaller Super-8mm format - which pre-introduces “loss” in image detail - to move through the preservation process at the photochemical level beginning with this internegative element would, in turn, introduce even more build up in the production of a final master positive. As mentioned earlier, Brakhage was exacting in his manipulation of gauges, blowing 8mm or Super-8mm up to 16mm in order to achieve specific qualities in the film grain and color through the transition. In other words, the process was anything but incidental and the aforementioned loss in image detail was actually, for Brakhage, a transformation and evolution of the aesthetic. However, as a result, the 16mm elements now contain very little generational latitude. Given this fact, the photochemical route immediately proved a non-starter, as according to Toscano, the resulting image would no longer represent the original film.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Mark Toscano in conversation with the author.

<sup>110</sup> Mark Toscano in conversation with the author.

<sup>111</sup> Mark Toscano in conversation with the author.

Employing the Super-8mm rolls as a source, conversely, would result in superior image quality and therefore offer an aesthetic in some sense “truer” to the work. This path, however, would also require the preservationist, as with *Skein*, to intervene much more drastically in the work, actions which Toscano has identified as ethically complicated.<sup>112</sup> Unlike *Skein*, *Unconscious London Strata* remains unpreserved at the AFA as it is not a candidate for the former’s double preservation path given the lack of an acceptable internegative source option. Here, then, is an instance of a work that dictates a conception of “the original” based in the medium-specific artifact as adjunct to a deep interpretation of filmmaker intent, essentially the inverse of *The Dead*, one which has stalled rather than facilitated preservation.<sup>113</sup> While ostensibly revealing a limitation within the photochemical workflow when compared to digital steps which might easily color correct the internegative, this situation can also be seen here as safeguarding the film against a preservation which would interpret filmmaker intent to such a degree that it would risk compromising, or transforming the work, rather than preserving it.

By examining these Brakhage case studies, I have attempted to highlight the range of photochemical workflows in the preservation of medium-specific avant-

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<sup>112</sup> Mark Toscano in conversation with the author.

<sup>113</sup> While *Unconscious London Strata* is indeed currently unpreserved, Toscano notes that his personal preservation philosophy is that ethical issues, such as those inherent in using proto-elements, while important, should not ultimately stop the work from happening. Bearing this in mind, it seems likely that *Unconscious London Strata* will not remain unpreserved indefinitely.



garde film, while also grounding the decisions that guide the preservations within various conceptions of “the original.” The case studies evidence the way in which a robust material artifact influence, both in relative isolation and in partnership with filmmaker intent, underwrites preservations which respect the medium-specific ontology native to these works. “*He was born, he suffered, he died.*” finds the material proprieties of the medium-specific artifact dictating the preservation to such a degree that the chemical transformation of the artifact is both accepted and integrated into the workflow. Here we find a practice which recognizes and respects the organic nature of film, falling in line with Peter Wollen’s “introverted” medium-specific notion of ontology, wherein the “soul” of cinema is located in “the nature of the cinematic process, the cone of light or the grain of silver.”<sup>114</sup> *The Dead* is also heavily artifact-reliant, yet introduces an instance of filmmaker intent in the form of period-specific documentation. The fixity of this intent is essential as it demands relatively little active interpretation on the part of the preservationist and consequently the work continues to align itself closest to artifact influence. *Skein*, conversely, presents an interesting waystation between artifact and intent influence as the work was preserved twice, once leveraging the internegative and consequently erring closer to a conception of “the original” based in the medium-specific artifact, and again, by mobilizing proto-original materials and necessitating an active interpretation of filmmaker intent by the preservationist, one substantially more invasive than in the instance of *The Dead*. Finally, *Unconscious London Strata*

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<sup>114</sup> Peter Wollen, “The Two Avant-Gardes.” in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), 97.

speaks to the limits of a photochemical workflow, for although it also invokes similar ethical complications in interpreting intent through proto-original elements, it does not have the interneegative-based option of a double preservation, and as such remains unpreserved.

The *Skein* case study, while based in a photochemical process, also prefigures the challenges to medium-specific readings of film ontology once we enter in the digital domain. Moving forward, a split emerges between a preservation which adheres to conceptions of “the original” based in the film’s medium, one chiefly informed by the artifact, and one which adheres to the film’s aesthetic, chiefly influenced by an interpretation of filmmaker intent. *Strata* also points to the integration of digital steps, for it would be possible to restore the film’s color using digital tools, a method which would eliminate the need for a debate surrounding the use of proto-original materials. However, as I will argue, these digital steps compromise the ontological nature of the medium-specific avant-garde film and as such, the limits of the photochemical process can also be seen as safeguarding against a *transformation* of the work.

Therefore, work which dictates conceptions of “the original” based in the material quality of the film artifact as a primary, or highly collaborative, influence is best served by a photochemical preservation which, even through its limitations, respects the medium-specific ontological nature of these films. Moreover, by plotting these preservation decision points onto the proposed archival theory model,

we see that a continuous photochemical preservation, when possible, is often the best preservation workflow for these films as it both respects this filmic ontology and generally requires the least involved forms of translation on the part of the preservationist. However, both market forces and the films themselves often preclude a complete photochemical preservation, and as such, the following chapter turns to hybrid photochemical-digital preservation efforts. These hybrid workflow projects fundamentally realign the relationship between the medium-specific artifact and filmmaker intent influences, resulting in a greater degree of translation and a challenge to medium-specific readings of film ontology.

## Chapter 2: Filmmaker Intent and the Ontology of Film in the Digital Age

The introduction of digital steps into the preservation of avant-garde cinema can be viewed as a fundamental challenge to filmic ontology. Rather paradoxically, these steps are also increasingly necessary to ensure the survival of medium-specific work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As we have seen, employing proto-original elements in a workflow rooted in a conception of “the original” informed by filmmaker intent constitutes amongst the most invasive photochemical-based interventions in a work. However, in that instance, the medium-specific artifact(s) nonetheless continued to exert an influential role as well. The introduction of digital steps into a medium-specific avant-garde film preservation project changes that dynamic, as it demands a greater degree of translation by its very nature as a migratory process from one medium to another. Instead of creating a partnership, the influence of the artifact is supplanted in an unnatural manner by the preservationist’s interpretation of the filmmaker’s intent. Therefore, in this chapter, I argue that given the current climate, one littered with film laboratory closures and the ever-mounting discontinuation of film stocks (i.e. market variables), certain work dictates conceptions of “the original” which reverse the artifact/filmmaker intent influence hierarchy, with the latter now assuming center stage in the digital domain. Crucially, the work here is framed as *circumstantially* dictating, rather than *naturally* inviting, the integration of digital preservation steps for, as I will continue to argue, transition is not an inherent property of the medium-specific avant-garde film. However, as the loss of the film with its carrier is an unacceptable alternative,

preservationists continue to look for ways to perform expert and high quality work in the digital domain.

I begin the chapter by extending the discussion regarding the preservation of Stan Brakhage's work at the Academy Film Archive (hereafter the AFA). Here I speculate on plans to involve digital scanning steps in the preservation of *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* (1967-68), based on current efforts underway in addressing Lewis Klahr's *Hi-Fi Cadets* (1989). The following section chronicles the preservation of Luther Price's *Home* (1990-1999) at Anthology Film Archives (hereafter Anthology), another deeply medium-specific work which has dictated the integration of digital steps. In considering these case studies, I also return to a discussion of Giovanna Fossati's *film as dispositif* framework. In applying this framework to the digital domain, Fossati largely abdicates medium-specific artifact influence and medium-specific ontology in favor of an intent-based conception of "the original" guided by the preservationist. In so doing, Fossati argues that this intent-based interpretation points towards a new conception of film ontology, which she dubs the "mind/film analogy," one based in aesthetic rather than medium. While the "mind/film analogy," attempts to account for film in the digital age, I argue that an ontology of aesthetic cannot replace a filmic ontology within the realm of the medium-specific avant-garde film, and that the work here is consequently transformed out of necessity. By plotting these case studies onto the model graphs which underwrite my proposed archival theory, I attempt to both represent the conceptions of "the original" which

inform these preservations, while also acknowledging the increased degree of translation the resulting workflows require.

Stan Brakhage's "Songs" cycle, a series of 30 films shot between the years 1964 and 1969, constitute the filmmaker's first sustained foray into 8mm production. *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* is arguably the centerpiece of the cycle and a film routinely cited as among the landmark works in Brakhage's career. A meditation on the Vietnam conflict, the film was described by Brakhage as "an attempt to deal with the war in the way that it was forwarded into the environment of our home," namely through television.<sup>115</sup> *Branch* represents Brakhage - publicly and privately distraught during its production - at his most fatalistic. P. Adams Sitney famously described the work as "an apocalypse of the imagination," which evidenced Brakhage's tortured psychology in its flurry of hand-painting, etchings, and structurally complex cutting.<sup>116</sup> Arranged as two parts each running roughly thirty minutes, with the second part subdivided into six sections, *Branch* unquestionably stands as one of Brakhage's most involved efforts, including as it does "newsreel footage from before and during World War II, "home movies" of the Brakhage household and natural environs, and film that has been splattered with ink, painted

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<sup>115</sup> Stan Brakhage, "On 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch," *Brakhage Scrapbook: Collected Writings 1964-1980*, ed. Robert A. Haller (New York: Documentext, 1982), 110.

<sup>116</sup> P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 217.

in various colors, and stenciled with rows of black dots..."<sup>117</sup> As previously discussed, these techniques are well in keeping with Brakhage's approach to the medium, one which noted curator and professor Steve Anker describes as characteristic of "the last analogue artist," who "relished film as physical material...and took greater pains than anyone before him to imbue every frame with evidence of himself, either through the camera or directly, by hand, on the film stock itself."<sup>118</sup> *Branch* is an especially notable instance of Brakhage's physical approach to the film medium, as his growing psychological malaise literally manifests itself as a plea for help spelled out in hand-scratched letters on the film strip.

Paradoxically, however, this involved medium-specific engagement with the film surface has produced original materials which, due to their delicacy and gauge, resist a preservation which conceptualizes the artifact as "the original." Instead, the film dictates a workflow that will likely integrate digital steps and, consequently, will call upon the preservationist to interpret and translate filmmaker intent to a heightened degree. In preserving small-gauge film through a strictly photochemical workflow, best practice has long been to blowup - or enlarge - the 8mm or Super-

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<sup>117</sup> William C. Wees, "Words and Images in Stan Brakhage's 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch," *Cinema Journal* 27.2 (Winter 1988), 41.

<sup>118</sup> Steve Anker and Willie Varela, "Remembering Stan Brakhage: An E-mail Conversation between Steve Anker and Willie Varela." *Journal of Film and Video* 57.1/2 (Spring/Summer 2005), 9.

8mm film to 16mm on an optical printer.<sup>119</sup> An optical printer is essentially a re-photography device with roots in pre-digital special effects composition. In contemporary archival practice, it is often used to copy damaged, shrunken, or small-gauge film which cannot run through a standard contact printer.<sup>120</sup> Paul Read and Mark-Paul Meyer have outlined the optical printer process, noting:

The image of the original is focused onto the raw stock film printing aperture by a lens system between the two heads. In essence an optical printer can be regarded as a projector mechanism projecting an image of the original onto the print film which is transported by a camera mechanism. In some optical

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<sup>119</sup> The thorny issue of changes gauges in preservation has been discussed earlier as a necessary compromise born out of the dearth of available small-gauge film stocks and laboratory infrastructure. It is important to note, however, that this process entails significant aesthetic, contextual, and technical losses. Nina Fonoroff, for instance, argues that 8mm and Super-8mm offered a counterweight to the options afforded by larger gauge cinematography, noting small-gauge films “revel in a kind of comical pathos that inheres in the very attempt to achieve beauty and formal elegance through blunt instruments...” Nina Fonoroff, “Riff-Raff and Hooligans: Super 8 and Mass Art,” in *Big as Life: An American History of 8mm films*, ed. Albert Kilchesy (San Francisco: Foundation for Art in Cinema, 1998), 85. Steve Anker, moreover, identifies exhibition qualities specific to Brakhage’s 8mm work in its original gauge, activating a conception of “the original” as experience, noting “one of the marvelous things about his 8mm films is that their scale necessitated a home-movie setting, one which obviously conveys and depends on the magic of projected light, of a darkened room.” Anker and Varela, 20-21.

<sup>120</sup> Contact printers, commonly found in either Intermittent (also know as Step) or Continuous models, underwrite a duplication process whereby “the original...and the unexposed...film are brought together, emulsion to emulsion, onto a continuously rotating sprocket wheel.” Contact printing differs from optical printing in that a lens set is not involved. The contact process is less tolerable of damaged film, and can only duplicate identical gauges (i.e. it cannot support blow ups). Meyer and Read, 126-127.



printers it is easy to see the two separate parts which are often call[ed] the 'projector' and the 'camera' mechanisms.<sup>121</sup>

The original materials for *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch*, 10 rolls of 8mm held at the AFA, trouble this workflow as the intensity and frequency of Brakhage's hand-manipulations have rendered the artifacts too delicate to pass through the printer, even one tailored to fragile and "damaged" film.<sup>122</sup> Here the splices, part of an editing scheme which Brakhage himself identified as having "the most structured thought behind it of any film I've made," present the greatest hurdle in pursuing a conventional photochemical preservation.<sup>123</sup> P. Adams Sitney elaborates on the involved montage technique which, when projected, performed double duty in both hiding the splices and approximating the effect of human blinking:

[Brakhage] solved the problem of cluttering the screen with hundreds of splicing marks by introducing two frames of black leader between every shot, causing a rapid winking effect in the projection of the film but hiding the splices.<sup>124</sup>

While the black leader technique proved effective in masking splices during projection, it adds to the amount of splices in the artifacts themselves. Consequently, the materials which evidence Brakhage's greatest extension and exploration of the

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<sup>121</sup> Meyer and Read, 130.

<sup>122</sup> Mark Toscano in conversation with the author.

<sup>123</sup> Stan Brakhage, "On 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch," 112.

<sup>124</sup> Sitney, 217.

8mm film language dictate a conception of “the original” which migrates away from the influence and gauge of the artifacts themselves.<sup>125</sup>

Given these complexities, *Branch* is currently unpreserved as of this writing. The film remains an intriguing case study, however, as the AFA is currently preserving other delicate, small-gauge avant-garde films using digital-photochemical hybrid efforts, most recently Lewis Khlar’s Super-8mm *Hi-Fi Cadets*. While falling outside the direct scope of Stan Brakhage’s work, the AFA’s ongoing work with *Cadets* merits brief consideration here as, if proven successful, it is reasonable to assume it might serve as a template for preservation efforts surrounding Brakhage’s small-gauge work, including *Branch*. Part of Khlar’s larger *Tales of the Forgotten Future* series (1988-1991), *Cadets* was digitally scanned frame by frame at a post-production house in Los Angeles.<sup>126</sup> This process effectively replaces the role of the optical printer in the photochemical process, and produced a DPX file for each frame of scanned film.<sup>127</sup> Notably, following the raw scanning

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<sup>125</sup> Sitney, 217.

<sup>126</sup> Mark Toscano, (comments made during the Q&A portion of the “Preserving the Avant-Garde: The NFPF’s Avant-Garde Treasures DVD Set” screening, part of the “Back for the Future: Film Restoration in the 21st Century” series presented by the Academy Film Archive, Los Angeles, California, November 18, 2013).

<sup>127</sup> Steven Ascher and Edward Pincus define the DPX (or Digital Picture Exchange) file format as “a nonproprietary container file for uncompressed images...DPX supports multiple resolutions – HD, 2K, 4K – as well as timecode, metadata, and embedded audio.” Steven Ascher and Edward Pincus, *The Filmmaker’s Handbook: A Comprehensive Guide for the Digital Age* (New York: Plume, 2013), 43. Giovanna Fossati builds on this, noting that DPX files are commonly used in the Digital Intermediate process, which she defines as “digitizing film rushes or a film to be

capture, the AFA plans to return to film, rather than proceeding digitally.<sup>128</sup> This workflow requires what is known colloquially as a filmout, which is a process whereby digital files are written to film. Steve Ascher and Edward Pincus note that filmouts are generally accomplished using a film recorder, a system which employs “either a laser, a high-res LCD panel, or a cathode ray tube [CRT] to record high-resolution HD, 2K, or 4K images directly onto 35mm film.”<sup>129</sup> As Ascher and Pincus’ definition implies, while filmouts for 35mm remain a somewhat common practice in the film industry – a consequence of the (admittedly vanishing) major studio practice of creating photochemical color separations from both film and digital assets for long-term archival purposes – there exists a scant market for the process in the 16mm world. Consequently, many 16mm filmout set-ups - the lion’s share shooting off CRT monitors<sup>130</sup> - are far from standardized. The added vendor research and supervision inherent to the 16mm workflow, however, remains

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restored, or ingesting digital-born rushes, before post-production is carried out. DI can also be used to refer to the final result of such a process, which is the digital master used to create distribution copies (on film or digital).” Giovanna Fossati, *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 288.

<sup>128</sup> Mark Toscano, (comments made during the Q&A portion of the “Preserving the Avant-Garde: The NFPF’s Avant-Garde Treasures DVD Set” screening, part of the “Back for the Future: Film Restoration in the 21st Century” series presented by the Academy Film Archive, Los Angeles, California, November 18, 2013).

<sup>129</sup> Ascher and Pincus, 703.

<sup>130</sup> Ascher and Pincus elaborate on the CRT film recording, noting that it makes use of “a high-resolution back-and-white CRT whose image is projected into a film camera. Each film frame gets three exposures: one each through a red, a green, and a blue filter.” Ascher and Pincus, 703.

preferable to the standardized 35mm option in addressing small-gauge work for, according to Anthology preservationist John Klacsmann, an 8mm/Super-8mm blowup to 35mm greatly transform the quality of the original image.<sup>131</sup>

The notion of migrating the quality of the original image through a given preservation speaks to the larger sense in which the aesthetic of the work might supersede the influence of the film medium once digital steps are introduced into the process. Moreover, it is the hand of the preservationist which vouchsafes this process, guided by an interpretation of filmmaker intent. Interestingly, Toscano noted in 2005 that there were no plans to employ digital techniques in preserving Brakhage's work unless it was somehow deemed absolutely necessary, arguing:

Because Stan's films are so physical, so tactile, and so very filmic, it was decided that an important step in preserving the integrity of his work and his legacy would be to keep the films in pure celluloid as much as possible while film printing can still be done.<sup>132</sup>

While, as discussed in chapter 1, this remains the ethos in approaching Brakhage's 16mm work, should the *Cadets* workflow be applied to *Branch*, the 8mm artifacts would demand the preservationist play a much larger role, interpreting the intent of the filmmaker in an attempt to properly and accurately translate the aesthetic of the

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<sup>131</sup> John Klacsmann in conversation with the author. Klacsmann also points out, however, that there exists a compelling argument for preserving small-gauge films to 35mm as well, in that the expertise and infrastructure surrounding 35mm will likely last longer in the current climate than the equivalent for 16mm.

<sup>132</sup> Mark Toscano, "Archiving Brakhage," *Journal of Film Preservation* 73 (November 2006), 18.

work across mediums. That is to say, an active interpretation of filmmaker intent by the preservationist would supplant the larger influence of the artifact itself in the digital domain. By returning to film at the end of the preservation workflow, an attempt would be made to reintroduce an essential component of this artifact influence, namely the film medium itself. However, the movement through digital stages constitutes a breach of the isomorphic one-to-one film relationship between the originating image and the light rays which etch the film emulsion, the bond which licenses an indexical-based reading of filmic ontology. This breach, moreover, severs the “inverted” reading of film ontology as advocated by Peter Wollen, wherein the “soul” of the film is found in its original medium-specific qualities.<sup>133</sup> An unbroken photochemical through line, therefore, preserves those qualities essential in a medium-specific reading of film ontology, while the return to film after digital steps can be seen as a decision based largely in the aesthetic of the work.<sup>134</sup>

Integrating digital steps into this speculative *23rd Psalm Branch* preservation would also transform many of the film’s radical formal strategies, which found Brakhage exorcising an unprecedented degree of trauma through the film medium. As alluded to earlier, *Branch* contains among the most direct use of written text in

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<sup>133</sup> Peter Wollen, “The Two Avant-Gardes.” in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), 97.

<sup>134</sup> Alexander Horwath comments on this trend in preservation and restoration, noting “...today in digital restoration a film is being scanned, then worked on digitally, and then re-recorded on film. This can be criticized, of course, because we are changing the “genetics” of the work by using digital means in restoration, even if we record it back on film in the end.” Paolo Cherchi Usai et al., eds., *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace* (Vienna: Synema, 2008), 113.

Brakhage's filmography. Crucially, this writing manifests itself as both text etched in to the film strip by Brakhage's hand, and filmed text, that is writing on a piece of paper which was subsequently filmed. Within the film medium, these two types of text-based images, filmed and inscribed, neatly underscore and parallel the physical distance and emotional immediacy of the Vietnam conflict for Brakhage. Once the film is digitized, however, these two forms of writing exist on the same plain, essentially functioning as equals, and a key to their formal power is transformed.

Anthology's work on Luther Price's *Home* (1990) faces similar issues by introducing a digital scanning step into preserving the work of a filmmaker who, arguably, has grounded his practice in filmic materiality to an even greater degree than Brakhage. Emerging from Boston's then-thriving Super-8mm avant-garde community in the 1980s, Price's films are regularly burned, scratched, collaged, and chemically treated, evidencing a technique of employing extreme physical manipulation to communicate the deeply autobiographical nature of the work.<sup>135</sup> Perhaps the most pronounced instance of this hand-manipulation in Price's early work is his penchant for punching holes directly in the film and manually replacing the absences with new footage alien to the scene (e.g. images of a fly "collaged" into found footage of invasive surgery). Far from merely an aesthetic preference, Price's fascination with the organic and malleable nature of the film strip, his "insistence on

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<sup>135</sup> Nina Fonoroff notes "the filmmaking program at Massachusetts College of Art for many years encouraged the use of small-gauge formats, and became in the late 1970s and early 1980s an important locus of Super-8 filmmaking activity." Fonoroff, 83.

the “aliveness” of the film object,” is indelibly bound to his thematic concerns, namely mortality, corporeality, and repetition.<sup>136</sup> Price’s *Cancer Home Movie* film cycle, for instance, deals explicitly and impressionistically with the onset of the terminal disease which took the lives of many of his family members. The films themselves are hand-manipulated to the degree that they might not safely pass through the projector without risking malfunction, mirroring the sense of impermanence and foreboding which hangs over the work. Price’s thematic obsession with repetition also finds a perfect compliment in the circular shape the film reel, which can easily function as a “loop,” a form of endless natural repetition. *Home* is no exception to these themes of autobiography, repetition, and mortality, as Anthology preservationist and curator Andrew Lampert notes:

[*Home* is] a hammering collage of tableaux mordant constructed from [Price’s] own family photos and birthday party images re-photographed and reprocessed while an increasingly unsettling, endlessly repeated anecdote is told in the background...the images are violently burned – Price’s assaults on the film stock itself are a crucial part of the strategy – so the “happy ritual,” a recurring birthday party, has a drained, deathly look.<sup>137</sup>

In the preservation of *Home*, Anthology took the initial step of scanning Price’s Super-8mm original in 2k at Video and Film Solutions, a sister company on

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<sup>136</sup> Andrew Lampert, “Luther Price” *Bomb Magazine*.  
<http://bombmagazine.org/article/6622/luther-price> (n.d.)

<sup>137</sup> Lampert, “Luther Price.”

the Colorlab campus in Rockville, Maryland. John Klacsmann, the preservationist overseeing the project, notes that hand-manipulated films resist basic restoration techniques common, to varying degrees, in photochemical (and increasingly digital) workflows, namely cleaning the film, wet-gate printing, and re-washing.<sup>138</sup>

Klacsmann notes these techniques should be avoided as each could potentially dislodge appliques, unfix painted surfaces, and fill-in - or heal - scratches and other direct markings which, unlike more traditional films that have been damaged over time, are intentional and central to the work.<sup>139</sup> These hand-manipulated qualities, as discussed earlier, also frequently result in original materials that are inordinately fragile, with Klacsmann noting that most scanners, unlike optical printers, do not use sprocket holes to advance the film, a quality which greatly diminishes the potential for damaging materials. Digital scanners, moreover, are appealing for hand-manipulated work as they result in greater image stability than an optical printing process, the latter often evidencing jumps at splices or at other unconventional “additions” to the film (e.g. tape collages and other forms of thick

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<sup>138</sup> Meyer and Read describe wet printing as “contact or optical printing in which the original film is surface wet or immersed in a solvent to reduce scratches.” The most frequently used chemical in wet printing is Tetrachloroethylene, commonly known as “Perc.” The authors go on to describe re-washing as a process designed to treat scratches on the emulsion side of the film wherein the film strip is “immersed in water, allowing the gelatin to soften and swell...the edges of the scratches will anneal and as the film dries they will stay together.” Meyer and Read, 89, 340. Re-washing is far less common than wet printing, although certain labs continue to offer the service.

<sup>139</sup> John Klacsmann in conversation with the author.



material build up).<sup>140</sup> Following the initial scanning step, *Home* was put back out to film at Video and Film Solutions using a film recorder devolved in-house by Tommy Aschenbach which makes use of a 2k LED LCD process, as opposed to a CRT monitor. The result was a 16mm archival preservation negative, printed at 18fps in keeping with the original materials, which was approved by Luther Price.<sup>141</sup>

Again, we find an instance of the preservationist communicating the intent of the filmmaker by way of prioritizing the aesthetic over the artifact, with an attempt to account for the loss of the latter by returning to film. Here, Klacsmann can be seen as the principal influence meditating the retention of both the visual and experiential qualities of *Home*. Beyond insisting that the film be printed at its original 18fps speed, Klacsmann also ensured that the soundtrack, originally finished on an audiocassette which Price would play in tandem with the projected film, was preserved and made available as a separate CD, as opposed to being married to the image. Consequently, the CD now performs a similarly variable function to the cassette alongside the new 16mm print.<sup>142</sup> Moreover, in shepherding

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<sup>140</sup> John Klacsmann in conversation with the author.

Bill Brand offers an interesting counterpoint to this argument, noting that in his optical re-photography work he often embraces jumps at slices (provided they were inherent to the finished materials) as the film would have reacted the same way running through a projector during its original exhibition. Here, again, we find a conception of “the original” as experience. Bill Brand in conversation with the author.

<sup>141</sup> John Klacsmann in conversation with the author.

<sup>142</sup> Klacsmann notes that Anthology digitized Price’s original cassette to an uncompressed digital audio file, which functions as the archival element. This file

the film through the digital sphere back out to film, the preservationist, and not the artifact itself, attempts to guarantee that the qualities of the original work are not “lost” or irreparably disfigured by the myriad post-production image “enhancing” tools currently available. Here, then the intent of the filmmaker is the prevailing factor along the Spectrum of Influence axis, while the work can be located as the archival artifact in its present condition along the Temporal axis. These conceptions inform the decision to integrate digital scanning steps and return to film, a workflow which requires a high degree of translation, pointing towards the necessary transformation of the work in an ontological sense.

An interesting corollary of a conception of “the original” which prioritizes the aesthetic is the often made argument that a digital, or digital hybrid, workflow, also facilitates a greater retention of that very aesthetic. This has traditionally been argued by advancing digital steps as a preferable option to a continuous photochemical workflow. Klacsmann notes that, in addition to the stability afforded by the scanning process, Video and Film Solution’s film recorder underwrites image processing in real time, an option which allows the preservationist to adjust the monitor live and focus on the grain of the image to produce a heightened level of sharpness. The photochemical optical printing path, by contrast, is a process often undertaken “at the expense of contrast and definition,” for unlike contact printing,

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was ingested into a RAID 6 server and backed up to LTO tape. John Klacsmann in conversation with the author.

loss is introduced by the presence of the lens set discussed earlier.<sup>143</sup> Austrian Film Archive's Fumiko Tsuneishi echoes these concerns regarding optical printing, noting:

We are generally not very happy with the results from optical printing, because as a rule the contrast of the preservation element becomes higher than the source and thus loses certain details. In these cases, to preserve the original picture quality in the best way, digital methods can be a better solution than optical printing...<sup>144</sup>

Moreover, Look Up Tables (LUTs) are frequently employed in the transfer back to film, which helps to ensure the transition of color values from the digitized image to the negative stock.<sup>145</sup> Finally, the filmout process allows the preservation to move from digitized source negative "directly" to the negative in the film recorder camera, effectively bypassing the generational loss inherent to the optical printing workflow.<sup>146</sup> This line of argumentation, however, fails to address the fact that the

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<sup>143</sup> Leo Enticknap. *Moving Image Technology: From Zoetrope to Digital*. (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), 190.

<sup>144</sup> Fumiko Tsuneishi, "Wien: From a Wooden Box to Digital Film Restoration," *Journal of Film Preservation* 85 (October 2011), 63-72.

<sup>145</sup> Giovanna Fossati offers a definition, describing the Look Up Table (LUT) as a "conversion table that serves as a reference to transfer information between two related systems. In film post-production a LUT converts the color values of a grading system (both analog and digital) into the corresponding values for the film stock used to print and project the film." Fossati, 289.

<sup>146</sup> Notably this generational issue does not apply to instances wherein the finished work and scanning source is a camera original positive - as in the case of *Home* - but speaks more broadly to the "limits" of the optical printing process.

“losses” inherent to a photochemical process are traditionally qualities which the final answer and exhibition prints embodied. Scanning an original camera negative, for instance, will indeed produce a heightened level of sharpness and retain contrast and definition, yet these are aesthetic qualities native to the negative, an element which was never intended to be seen as such. By eliminating the generational “imperfections” caused by the optical or contact photochemical printing processes, digital scanning steps can actually undermine the very aesthetic they seek to retain.

More importantly, however, digital scanning steps fundamentally transform the nature of these avant-garde films. Setting aside arguments against digital’s capacity to ensure a heightened form of “fidelity” to the image, we are still left with a practice which ignores the medium-specific ontology native to the work. Here, then, it is necessary to revisit a discussion of competing interpretations of the ontology of film, and reestablish the manner in which hand-manipulated avant-garde film demands a reading based in medium-specificity. Noel Carroll has written extensively in defense of a movement away from a medium-specific ontology, an approach historically exemplified by the realism-as-essence school. The realist reading localized the nature of film in its inscriptive powers, that is the etching or “molding” of the emulsion by rays of light which emanate directly from the photographed object and produce a “realistic” or “indexical” image on the film strip. In mobilizing his counterargument, Carroll begins by directing much of his criticism towards a related strain of media essentialism advocated by Clement Greenberg. Greenberg’s theory, largely embraced by the gallery world and the Structural avant-

garde school in the United States, argued that a given art form must take those qualities that are unique to their medium - those at which it excels - as the central focus of the work, effectively fighting against subservience to any other “dominant” art form. Greenberg notes:

...when it happens that a single art is given the dominant role, it becomes the prototype of all art: the others try to shed their proper characteristics and imitate its effects. The dominant art in turn tries itself to absorb the functions of the others. A confusion of the arts results...However, the subservient arts can only be mishandled in this way when they have reached such a degree of technical feasibility as to enable them to pretend to conceal their *mediums* [emphasis in original].<sup>147</sup>

Carroll pushes back against this notion of media essentialism, arguing that it is impossible to designate what film does *best* and most uniquely, noting the “medium may support conflicting and even contradictory avenues of development,” evidencing the co-existence of both the montage-as-essence school (as advocated by Rudolf Arnheim and Lev Kuleshov) and the aforementioned realism-as-essence school (as advocated by Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer).<sup>148</sup> For Carroll, the artist is

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<sup>147</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism Volume 1*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 23.

<sup>148</sup> Noel Carroll, “Medium Specificity Arguments and the Self-Consciously Invented Arts: Film, Video, and Photography,” in *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 12. Carroll makes a more extended argument against the realist/indexical school of film ontology, which he calls “Re-presentational theory,” noting that the notion of “light patterns as a condition for a

not subservient to the medium; rather the evolution of the media is adapted to the artistic style, “the cultural purposes and projects we find for them.”<sup>149</sup> Carroll continues:

The genre, style or artistic movement a work inhabits determines whether one’s choices are appropriate or not. What hitherto have been identified as mediumistic questions are in fact stylistic questions.<sup>150</sup>

While this argument is compelling as catchall, it fails to convincingly address much hand-manipulated avant-garde work wherein, as we have seen, artists frequently *choose* medium-specific qualities as the bedrock of their preferred artistic style. Stan Brakhage and Luther Price do not embrace film casually or haphazardly, but rather develop signature techniques and approaches which are indelibly linked to the characteristics of their chosen medium. Here, then, it can be said that while the medium does not dictate the art form, its essential qualities retain their prominence and independence by virtue of having been selected by the filmmaker(s). A film,

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singular representation” is troubled by the fact that taking three shots of the same individual with three different lenses (focal lengths) will result in three distinct light patterns despite the representation being of a singular referent. Crucially, however, Carroll does concede that the theory might be redefined to say that “the process of projection re-presents the exact imprint of impression or light that was reflected by objects and people in the past.” Noel Carroll, “Concerning Uniqueness Claims for Photographic and Cinematic Representation.” in *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 25-37.

<sup>149</sup> Carroll, “Concerning Uniqueness Claims for Photographic and Cinematic Representation,” 48.

<sup>150</sup> Carroll, “Medium Specificity Arguments and the Self-Consciously Invented Arts: Film, Video, and Photography,” 14.

therefore, can be said to have a medium-specific ontology should the artist decide, through their practice, to appoint the medium to a position of prominence.

Giovanna Fossati proposes another form of medium-independent film ontology specifically tailored to the digital age, the “mind/film analogy,” which is borne out of the *film as dispositif* framework. Here Fossati argues through a reading of Jean-Louis Baudry, Walter Benjamin, and Christian Metz, that the ontology of film might be rooted not in the artifact itself, but rather in the informed hand of the preservationist who negotiates and transfers the essential characteristics of the work across mediums. Much like Carroll’s argument, the “mind/film analogy” functions effectively at a macro level, but fails to convincingly address the heightened claims made by much hand-manipulated avant-garde work. Central to Fossati’s argument is the notion that movement, rather than any inherent material quality or capability, is the essential characteristic of film. A necessary corollary to this movement-based ontology is an argument that the audience - the “subject” - generates meaning by way of perceiving motion, rather than through the physical film object itself.<sup>151</sup> Baudry speaks to this in discussing the ideological effects of the apparatus, noting:

The projection mechanism allows the differential elements (the discontinuity inscribed by the camera) to be suppressed, bringing only the relation into play. The individual images as such disappear so that movement and

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<sup>151</sup> In this respect, we also begin to see the *film as dispositif* model invokes a notion of “the original” that is also based in audience experience.

continuity can appear...Thus one may presume that what was already at work as the originating basis of the perspective image, namely the eye, the “subject,” is put forth, liberated...”<sup>152</sup>

Christian Metz, in discussing phenomenological approaches to film, builds on this idea, noting a psychological basis for the impression of reality experienced by the spectator in the cinema and identifying movement, rather than a medium-licensed “molding” of emulsion, as the action which underwrites this sensation. Metz goes on to observe an aesthetic, rather than material, basis for this impression in discussing the dissolution between the object and the copy, noting:

The strict distinction between object and copy... dissolves on the threshold of motion. Because movement is *never material but is always visual*, [emphasis added] to reproduce its appearance is to duplicate its truth.<sup>153</sup>

Adopting the aesthetic/movement relationship as the locus of meaning for film in the digital age, Fossati proceeds to sever the final ties with medium-specificity - namely the archival artifact’s auratic dimension - through an interpretation of Walter Benjamin by way of Boris Groys. Within the *film as dispositif* framework, Fossati identifies film as a serial product given its nature as a commercial release, that is a product initially released as multiple copies on an

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<sup>152</sup> Jean-Louis Baudry, “Ideological Effects of the Basic Apparatus,” in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 291.

<sup>153</sup> Christian Metz, “On the Impression of Reality in the Cinema,” trans. Michael Taylor, in *Film Language: A Semiotics of Cinema*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 9.



industrial scale. Fossati goes on to qualify this, noting that a new authenticity originates once one of these prints is “re-territorialized,” by way of being accessioned into an archive. However, Fossati continues, the space between a film’s initial mass distribution by way of a series of copies and its authentication as a unique archival object finds the work in a transitional state which de-sanctifies the archival artifact. This historical circumstance, she contends, thereby invalidates the unique and auratic quality of the artifact - its authenticity - and validates a workflow which focuses outside of its influence, namely digitization as supervised by the informed preservationist.

The hand-manipulated avant-garde film, and *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* and *Home* more specifically, push back against these arguments on several fronts. Baudry and Metz’s arguments for film movement as the essence of cinema presume the film strip itself possesses little capacity for meaning as an unprojected material object. Luther Price’s and Stan Brakhage’s work, however, are often valued through the lens of their object status in addition to their exhibition qualities. Chloë Penman, writing about Price at the LUX/ICA Biennial, localizes the sculptural, object-like qualities of his hand-manipulation technique, noting:

These words (burning, scratching, defacing, mutilating) presuppose a physical relationship with film as well as positioning it as a physical (almost

living) object. Price's particular treatment creates film as a unique object, a kind of sculpture...film here is a surface, rather than a conduit.<sup>154</sup>

It is equally telling that the *Brakhage Scrapbook*, a collection of the filmmaker's writing, begins with an image that reproduces all 190 frames of *Eye Myth* (1967) in a single photograph, an affirmation of the work's merit as both object and cinematic experience.<sup>155</sup> Price and Brakhage are also valuable counterexamples to Fossati's claims that film should be considered a serialized commercial release, a fact she argues invalidates the archival artifact's auratic claims. Brakhage's work, surely among the most widely-known and discussed in avant-garde filmmaking, remains a boutique proposition, at best, in terms of distribution, and is certainly a far cry from the industrial rollout which accompanies a Hollywood studio production. Moreover, film prints *en masse*, be they Brakhage or a Hollywood commercial release,

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<sup>154</sup> Chloë Penman, "Nine Films by Luther Price: Thomas Beard and Ed Halter at the LUX/ICA Biennial," *Real Reel Journal*, <http://realreeljournal.com/2012/06/07/lutherprice/> (Jun. 7 2012).

While, as noted earlier, Noel Carroll's larger argument against medium-specificity is troubled by much hand-manipulated avant-garde work, his notion that the arts may share similar characteristics without invalidating their status as art forms is well taken here, as both Price and Brakhage traffic in techniques indebted to painting and sculpture.

<sup>155</sup> Given this tendency among hand-manipulated avant-garde films to possess a dual object and projection value, it is perhaps unsurprising that many avant-garde filmmakers (Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, Stan VanDerBeek, Robert Breer, etc.) have also worked in flip books, a medium whose tactility and object status underwrite their capacity to generate meaning, for unlike the conventional cinematic image, the flip book requires the spectator engage with the object directly to produce the illusion of movement. For more on the role of avant-garde filmmakers in flip books, see *Daumenkino: The Flip Book Show*, eds. Daniel Gethmann et al. (Düsseldorf: Kunsthalle, 2005).

contradict Fossati's argument, as each possesses a distinct chemical composition through their grain structure, a unique DNA. Unlike digital formats, no two film prints are exactly alike "genetically," and, as such, the multiple copies which constitute a serial release are not, strictly speaking, exact copies.

Luther Price's cinema challenges the *dispositif* framework to an even greater degree, as much of his Super-8mm work is only exhibited as hand-manipulated originals which often struggled to pass through the projector.<sup>156</sup> Here we begin to see an instance of how the hand-manipulated avant-garde film might retain, more than any other cinematic "genre," traces of Walter Benjamin's cult value. In discussing the "liquidation of aura" which accompanied the age of mechanical reproduction, Benjamin identified "two polar types" in which works of art could be received and valued: cult value, which he associated with bourgeois classical forms of "high art" such as paintings, that required contemplation and ritualized viewing conditions, and exhibition value, which he associated with mass produced forms of art such as cinema. The cult value retains the unique auratic dimension of a work, although as Benjamin notes "when the age of mechanical reproduction separated art from its basis in cult, the semblance of its autonomy disappeared forever."<sup>157</sup> For

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<sup>156</sup> Most recently Price exhibited a series which included Super-8mm originals in a program entitled "Body and Flesh: The Tactile Cinema of Luther Price" at the Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater (RedCat) on April 7, 2014.

<sup>157</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Walter Benjamin: Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 227.

Benjamin, mass art embodied a revolutionary potential and a progressive political dimension, as it was both more democratic than “high art,” and fundamentally altered audience reaction, shifting the dynamic from one of worship to one of critique. Theodor Adorno, in his correspondence with Benjamin, countered this mass-art-as-revolutionary assertion. While echoing Benjamin’s larger project of demythifying classical and bourgeois art, he argued that Benjamin’s binary approach was overly romantic, noting that both “high” and mass art were inherently dialectical, that is each contained both auratic and democratic potential.<sup>158</sup> In this context, Luther Price’s cinema can be seen as activating the auratic potential within the mass art of cinema. Price’s work, by virtue of its inherent tactile/object value and the fact it often only exists as a unique, camera original element, situates itself equally between a classical sculpture in museum and a traditional film in a theater. Moreover, these dimensions result in a certain logistical difficulty in disseminating the work. As mentioned, many of Price’s hand-manipulated films, based on their material build up and unconventional assembly are extremely difficult to pass through a projector. Here, then, the tactility and medium-specificity of the film becomes an impediment to their projection, troubling their exhibition value. These traces of cult value, therefore, invoke and retain the very auratic qualities that Fossati dismisses in her *film as dispositif* framework, and mount a compelling counterargument to claims that the authenticity and nature of such films can be

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<sup>158</sup> Theodor W Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2001).

established by way of an ontological interpretation localized outside of a medium-specific context.

In closing, the preservation of hand-manipulated avant-garde work in the digital domain, as a consequence of the materials and the market, is largely rooted in conceptions of “the original” based in the preservationist’s informed interpretation of filmmaker intent, rather than the medium-specific artifact. Paradoxically, such a workflow simultaneously evacuates those characteristics which can be seen as essential in respecting the filmic ontology native to the work. Seen through the lens of a medium-specific ontology, digital workflows inherently *transform* these films, while a continuous photochemical process might better be seen as *preserving* them.<sup>159</sup> Luther Price and Stan Brakhage have not produced films which casually adopt the film strip, but rather work from the film strip out. Consequently, *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* and *Home* each represent formal and thematic strategies based directly in the film medium. In this sense, it is essential to note that Fossati’s *film as dispositif* framework cannot produce an ontology which accounts for these avant-garde films, as they are not transitory by nature. Moreover, attempts to generate a medium-independent interpretation of ontology with regards to these films are misguided, and seek to construct a false narrative wherein nothing “essential” is lost in the migration across mediums. Here, the Degree of Translation axis of my proposed archival theory is useful, as it recognizes that the films must be preserved,

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<sup>159</sup> This situation is, again, circumstantial and should not be seen as casting aspersions on the exemplary digital work undertaken by preservationists who are often left with few continuous photochemical workflow options.

while also acknowledging that a work can only bear so much translation before it is transformed. In this sense, by plotting digital-photochemical hybrid preservations onto the four axes which compromise my archival theory, we might begin to put parameters around an ongoing conversation that acknowledges and takes stock of those qualities which are lost and altered in taking the necessary steps forward in the digital age.

### **Chapter 3: Challenge and Potential in Preserving Expanded Cinema**

Ephemeral avant-garde films, considered here primarily in the form of multiple-projection environments, present both the most formidable challenge and greatest potential in conceptualizing “the original” in preservation practice. In chapters 1 and 2 I have, in part, attempted to arc the influences of the medium-specific archival artifact and filmmaker intent as conceptions of “the original” in a larger, malleable archival theory. Ephemeral multiple-projection avant-garde films, however, in expanding beyond the confines of the single screen and the discrete physical object, are by their very nature remade with each screening and, therefore, fundamentally trouble established notions of “the original.” The term “screening,” in fact, often reveals itself to be insufficient, with the exhibition of these works often better understood as performances. One is tempted, in the face of this, to consider abandoning any attempt at preservation, as such an undertaking ostensibly “fixes” the film(s) in one static form, undercutting the crucial, malleable dimension of the work. I argue, however, that this constitutes an unacceptable alternative, one akin to allowing a medium-specific avant-garde film to decompose with its carrier rather than introducing ontologically problematic digital steps to ensure its survival. In this regard, I maintain that while these inherent ethical issues should undoubtedly factor into the preservation, they should also not stop the work from happening. Moreover, I contend that conceptions of originality are possible in ephemeral avant-garde work, and although they require fundamentally realigning, or supplanting, those approaches considered previously, they ultimately result in the fullest range of

potential conceptions of “the original.” To this end, I look first to Carolee Schneemann’s *Kitch’s Last Meal* (1973-78) as an example of ephemeral avant-garde film preservation in the photochemical realm, an undertaking which revisits and renegotiates the influences of filmmaker intent and medium-specific artifacts, once again finding the latter working in service of the former. I then consider the New Museum’s reconstruction of Stan VanDerBeek’s *Movie-Drome* (1963-65), a project which, more than any other considered here, demands conceptions of “the original” which expand my proposed archival theory, extending the Spectrum of Influence axis to include audience experience and artistic process. Finally, I frame these two case studies as instances of traditional moving image archival preservation and Media Art/time-based media practice respectively, and argue for a greater integration of the two as a growing necessity in contemporary avant-garde film preservation practice.

Before moving forward, it bears noting that *Kitch’s Last Meal* and the *Movie-Drome* are both instances of a “genre,” or phenomenon, within avant-garde film known as expanded cinema. Brought to scholarly and public attention through the writings of Gene Youngblood and Sheldon Renan in the late 1960s, expanded cinema – a name VanDerBeek himself is often credited with coining – is a polymorphous umbrella term for a variety of film and video projection situations. Renan, writing in 1967, offered an early definition, noting:

Expanded cinema is not the name of a particular style of film-making. It is a name for a spirit of inquiry that is leading in many different directions. It is



cinema expanded to include many different projectors in the showing of one work. It is cinema expanded to include computer-generated images and the electronic manipulation of images on television. It is cinema expanded to the point at which the effect of film may be produced without the use of film at all. Its work is more spectacular, more technological, and more diverse in form than that of the avant-garde/experimental/underground film so far.<sup>160</sup> Given the centrality of multiple-projection approaches to both *Kitch* and the *Movie-Drome*, moving forward I will adopt the term “expanded cinema,” as opposed to ephemeral avant-garde film, with the understanding that I refer in these instances primarily to this dimension of Renan’s definition.<sup>161</sup>

Carolee Schneemann is easily amongst the most versatile and accomplished avant-garde filmmakers to have emerged from the fertile mid-1960s period in the United States. Having first worked in abstract painting, Schneemann soon transitioned to producing avant-garde films and performance art pieces, often combining the two. Arguably, her best-known work remains *Fuses* (1964-67), a heavily hand-manipulated 16mm film documenting Schneemann and then-boyfriend James Tenney having sex, superimposed over images of the natural

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<sup>160</sup> Sheldon Renan, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1967), 227.

<sup>161</sup> Although *Kitch* and the *Movie-Drome* both use film, as opposed to film-less projection, it should be noted that Stan VanDerBeek was an early pioneer of computer-programmed and computer-generated imagery and, as such, his work lends itself to this dimension of Renan’s definition as well. I focus here, however, primarily on the multiple-projection aspect of the *Movie-Drome*.

environment outside their home. *Fuses* marked the beginning of a film cycle alongside *Plumb Line* (1968-71) and *Kitch's Last Meal* (1973-78), which together comprise the filmmaker's *Autobiographical Trilogy*. Of the three, *Kitch* remains the least known publicly and, as Brett Kashmere notes, the least referenced in both academic avant-garde film scholarship and large-scale retrospectives featuring Schneemann's work.<sup>162</sup> The dearth of scholarship and spectatorship surrounding *Kitch* is almost certainly, at least in part, a consequence of the "expanded" quality of the film and the concurrent logistical screening difficulties. As Bill Arning has noted, often work embodying the qualities of expanded cinema, given their complex nature, are at a heightened risk of being forgotten, a situation which bolsters the earlier assertion that preservation of these works is essential, in spite of the attendant ethical quandaries.<sup>163</sup> The qualities that make *Kitch* difficult to screen, however, are also the dimensions of the work which underwrite its most revelatory strategies. Arranged vertically in the form of two dual-projected stacked screens, the top image is slightly larger than the bottom creating the impression of a windowpane. The film is further comprised of multiple Super-8mm reels which are projected two at a time at 18fps. The reels themselves are silent, and the film's soundtrack is generated from separate tape sound sources played alongside the images. *Kitch's* structural framework and complementary projection scheme result in a degree of variability

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<sup>162</sup> Brett Kashmere, "Seen Missing: The Case of *Kitch's Last Meal*," *Millennium Film Journal* 54 (Fall 2012), 64-71.

<sup>163</sup> Bill Arning, "Stan VanDerBeek's Currency," in *Stan VanDerBeek: The Culture Intercom*, eds. Bill Arning and Joao Ribas (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2011), 64-70.

inherent to every “performance” of the work. Kashmere elaborates on this point, noting:

The film’s variable length and modular design, double-system soundtrack, and dual-projected reels – which are difficult to sync precisely – ensures that every screening of the piece, in its Super-8 format, will be slightly different.<sup>164</sup>

These involved technical dimensions, moreover, operate as an extension and commentary on the film’s central themes of temporality, intimacy and, as J. Carlos Kase has observed, transcendence through the quotidian. Schneemann describes the form of the film as having emanated from her decision to shoot “one meal a week of [Schneemann’s cat] Kitch eating, so long as she lived; and to film what I saw her observing in the course of our daily life.”<sup>165</sup> These observations document Schneemann and then-partner Anthony McCall’s low-key country lifestyle - a quiet existence which finds the couple engaging in everything from their respective artistic practice, lovemaking, and hosting friends, to less exceptional but perennial household actives such as gardening, sweeping, canning jam, and chopping wood. These daily routines are accented by images of Kitch eating and moving through the house, a recurring train passing in the backyard, and the changing of the seasons. The film “concludes” with two dramatic and non-routine events: the death of Kitch -

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<sup>164</sup> Kashmere, 66.

<sup>165</sup> Carolee Schneemann, “Up to and Including Her Limits,” in *More Than Meat Joy*, ed. Bruce R. McPherson (Kingston: Documentext/McPherson and Company, 1979), 225

portentously alluded to in the film's title - and the dissolution of Schneemann and McCall's relationship. The accompanying soundtrack is a collage of ambient recordings taken in and around the house (again, often from Kitch's perspective) combined with extensive and deeply personal spoken word sections read by Schneemann covering a range of personal and cultural issues, with a special emphasis on gender politics within the 1970s avant-garde film community. The film's form can be seen as closely mirroring its narrative ambitions. Schneemann's choice of the Super-8mm gauge (both *Fuses* and *Plumb Line* were shot on 16mm), lends *Kitch* an immediacy and intimacy in keeping with its diaristic approach. The film's dual-projection effect neatly echoes the two halves of a couple, while the slightly larger "top" screen underscores the power dynamics at play in any relationship. Moreover, the windowpane effect, achieved through the small space between the two "stacked" screens, functions as a quiet but perpetual reminder that however candid the action, the position of the audience is that of an outsider looking in. Finally, title cards precede each "section" of the film, identifying the reel numbers and Kitch's age at the time of their filming. This explicit reference to the discrete reels which taken together form the film, coupled with the work's variable running time, counters the inevitable passage of "real" time by foregrounding the constructed nature of "film" time (to briefly adopt Schneemann's terms).<sup>166</sup> This

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<sup>166</sup> J. Carlos Kase elaborates on *Kitch's* variable duration, noting "in its exhibitions over time, different portions of the Super-8 work have been screened in durations varying from twenty minutes to almost five hours." J. Carlos Kase, "Kitch's last Meal: Art, Life, and Quotidiana in the Observational Cinema of Carolee Schneemann," *Millennium Film Journal* 54 (Fall 2012), 74.

“double” time is also reflected in the film’s soundtrack, which Schneemann notes intentionally “parallels the double film projection” by exploring themes “spoken from “interior” thought against the passage of “present” film time...”<sup>167</sup>

In 2007, Andrew Lampert and Anthology Film Archives (hereafter Anthology) undertook the preservation of *Kitch’s Last Meal*. The project unfolded as a two-pronged approach, which addressed the photochemical and “expanded” dimensions of the work, respectively. Lampert contracted the work to BB Optics, a film laboratory in New York City run by noted preservationist and Structural filmmaker Bill Brand. BB Optics initially received three pairs of color Super-8mm reels which represented the most complete existing work prints for *Kitch*. As such, it was suggested that they serve as the authoritative version of the film for preservation purposes. Having established, with Schneemann’s input and blessing, that the truncated 56-minute cut would constitute the version of the film to be preserved, Brand sought out the camera original source material from which the work print was struck in order to achieve the highest quality image through the Super-8mm to 16mm optical printing blowup process.<sup>168</sup> All six “original” reels were found, although as Brand notes, “these “originals” themselves occasionally

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<sup>167</sup> Schneemann, 226.

<sup>168</sup> Given the lack of laboratory infrastructure and available film stocks, it is archival best practice to preserve small-gauge (8mm and Super-8mm) film to 16mm through an optical blowup process. In these instances, as in most traditional photochemical preservation, it is advisable to use the most original elements to prevent unnecessary generational loss in duplication and, in this case, enlargement.

comprise[d] a combination of camera original and 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation prints.”<sup>169</sup> Interestingly, efforts were not made to retrieve the source materials for the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation materials spliced into the original rolls as these sections contained hand-painted frames and hand-scratches which were deemed worthy of duplication alongside the true camera original material. Here we see the medium-specific artifacts exerting their greatest influence, for by virtue of having been hand-manipulated, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation elements are elevated to the status of “the original,” and become more essential to the preservation than the untouched camera source footage from which these print sections were struck. Moreover, the medium-specific artifact influence is felt through the decision to preserve the film entirely within a photochemical workflow. This decision is entirely in keeping with the nature of *Kitch* as Schneemann, much like Stan Brakhage, worked intimately with the film medium and was fascinated with its organic properties. This tendency manifested itself both through her extensive hand-manipulation of the materials and frequent observations that the camera functioned as an extension of her own body.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Bill Brand, “History of Preservation: *Kitch*’s Last Meal by Carolee Schneemann,” (New York: BB Optics, 2007), 2.

<sup>170</sup> J. Carlos Kase elaborates on this point, folding the technique and medium-specificity back into *Kitch*’s narrative, noting “...Schneemann conceived of her relationship to her materials in organic terms, as extensions of her musculature and her bodily experience. To her, as to Brakhage, film is a tactile medium, to be engaged with by hand, to be held, touched, and created within the domestic space of daily life in which cats play, jam is put into jars...” Kase, 79.

Although the decision to adhere to a photochemical workflow does speak to both the influence of the artifact and the nature of *Kitch*, these are both challenged by the migration from Super-8mm to 16mm in the optical blowup process. The decision to remain in the photochemical space is admirable, as it is undoubtedly more in keeping with the work than the alternative of integrating digital steps. However, the fact remains that many of the aforementioned structural and thematic dimensions of *Kitch* are bound up not simply within the film medium, but within the Super-8mm gauge specifically. Schneemann has frequently stated as much, noting that *Kitch* “took its form due to the nature of the Super 8; close to the body, compact, cheap film, three minute cartridges – immediacy and simplicity, fixed durations.”<sup>171</sup> Here we are reminded of the archival maxim that all preservation is compromise, for before the work on *Kitch* began in earnest, the choice was already made, out of necessity, to “fix” the film’s variable running time and alter its gauge. Having accepted the gauge alteration, Brand took extensive steps to ensure that the 16mm preservation would attempt to mirror as many of the qualities of the Super-8mm original as possible, a situation which necessitated an interpretation on Brand’s part of Schneemann’s original intent. This manifested itself primarily through efforts to ensure the unconventional color and exposure of the Super-8mm were retained in the blowup, as well as the scratches and imperfections native to the condition of the

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<sup>171</sup> Schneemann, 225.

source material.<sup>172</sup> The photochemical migration between the Super-8mm materials and the 16mm preservation master can be seen as existing at a crossroads between the intent/artifact partnership in Mark Toscano's 16mm-to-16mm preservations of Stan Brakhage's work at the Academy Film Archive, and the artifact as subservient to intent relationship in Anthology's Super-8mm-to-digital-to-16mm work on Luther Price's *Home* at Anthology. Here, the alteration in gauge finds Brand interpreting Schneemann's original intent by recreating exposure and color on the optical printer and actively refusing to "clean up" scratches. However, the film-to-film relationship (in spite of the gauge change) ensures that the preservation retains a strong medium-specific artifact influence as well. *Kitch*, at this juncture, could then potentially be seen as another form of intent/artifact partnership, a variation on the 16mm Brakhage materials, yet one in which artifact influence is nonetheless complementary rather than subservient. Crucially, however, this reading erodes when the "expanded" dimension of the work is reintroduced, a situation which demands that the artifact again work in service of an interpretation of filmmaker intent.

In undertaking the preservation, Brand was keenly aware of the need to maintain some sense of the variable dimension of the work, while also realizing that any act of preservation would inevitably result in the creation of static relationships

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<sup>172</sup> Brand elaborates on this in his preservation report, noting "while minor surface marks were minimized through hand cleaning the original and through the use [of] light diffusion on the optical printer, in general, the "stressed" condition of the original (scratches, dings and scuffs) was considered a salient feature...therefore, the film was intentionally preserved without excessive "clean-up.'" Brand, 2.



between elements which were designed to be constantly in flux (the most conspicuous example being the film's running time). After consulting with Schneemann, it was decided that the three Super-8mm "top screen" reels would be preserved to one 16mm reel at 18fps, while the three Super-8 "bottom screen" reels would be preserved to a second 16mm reel at the same speed. In this way, the two reels could be dual-projected, maintaining some of the variability potential inherent in the original work by using non-synchronized projectors and allowing for a constantly fluctuating relationship between the top and bottom images. The soundtrack, transferred from five high bias master cassette tapes, was re-edited and remixed to fit the 56-minute preservation picture running time in a process overseen by Schneemann. The soundtrack now accompanies the 16mm reels as a discrete CD, mirroring the original independent cassette tape source.<sup>173</sup> In short, to "perform" the preserved version of *Kitch's Last Meal* in a contemporary setting, two 16mm projectors running at 18fps dual-project two 1600 feet 16mm reels in the stacked windowpane configuration, while the re-cut and remixed soundtrack plays separately from a CD.

Here we find the result of a partnership not between intent and artifact, but rather, two different strains of intent, namely the filmmaker's original intent as interpreted through the preservationist (in the form of Brand translating the Super-8mm qualities to 16mm), and the filmmaker's contemporary intent (in the form of

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<sup>173</sup> Brand, 4.

Schneemann approving the picture cut and remixing the soundtrack). The medium-specific artifact, by contrast, although viable during the traditional photochemical preservation phase of the project, proved largely neutered in reckoning with the work's ephemeral dimensions. Ultimately, then, filmmaker intent was the prevailing quality on the Spectrum of Influence axis, while along the Temporal axis Schneemann's "retroactive intent" located the film in her present day conceptualization of "the original" work. The preservationist subsequently located these conceptions of "the original" by optically enlarging the six Super-8mm camera source elements and consolidating them into two 16mm reels, with a discrete and remixed soundtrack source as accompaniment. This workflow, in turn, required a high degree of translation, given the variable nature of the work.

The preservation of *Kitch's Last Meal* can be seen as renegotiating the relationship between the medium-specific artifact and filmmaker intent, both established forms of influence in the photochemical and digital preservation realms. The New Museum's reconstruction of Stan VanDerBeek's *Movie-Drome*, conversely, undertaken as part of the 2012 *Ghosts in the Machine* exhibition, arrives at conceptions of "the original" by way of audience experience and artistic process, two complementary influences, with the latter based in the realm of Media Art theory. The artistic process conceptualization is especially notable, moreover, as it finds its basis not in the artifacts themselves, or an interpretation of these artifacts but, rather, through media-independent forms of documentation.

Arguably best known for his wildly innovative “collage” animations and pioneering multiple-projection events, to say nothing of his groundbreaking work in computer-generated imagery, Stan VanDerBeek stands today as a filmmaker whose innovation extended beyond any singular medium. Among VanDerBeek’s most ambitious projects, the *Movie-Drome*, constructed on a parcel of land near his home in Stony Point, New York during the early 1960s, was conceived as a prototype for a new type of “experience theater.” The 32-foot diameter spherical dome resembled a planetarium, with the entire interior curved surface designed as a screen for elaborately programmed projections. VanDerBeek envisioned the *Movie-Drome* as the preliminary step in a much grander utopian project of making “the world audience [sic] “self” conscious of itself,” a mindset he hoped would, in turn, bring about “peaceful [global] co-existence.”<sup>174</sup> Concerned that technological development was vastly outpacing society’s ability for “emotional-sociological” technical comprehension, VanDerBeek authored a landmark manifesto entitled “Culture: Intercom and Expanded Cinema,” wherein he called upon the world’s artists to “invent a new world language...a non-verbal international picture-language,” which might act as a unifying cross-cultural force.<sup>175</sup> While VanDerBeek’s ultimate goal

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<sup>174</sup> Stan VanDerBeek, Letter to Boyd Compton, Rockefeller Foundation, Nov 2, 1965. Stan VanDerBeek Collection, Museum of Modern Art. Box 7, File 1.

<sup>175</sup> Stan VanDerBeek, “Culture: Intercom and Expanded Cinema, A Proposal and Manifesto,” in *Stan VanDerBeek: The Culture Intercom*, eds. Bill Arning and Joao Ribas (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2011), 126. It should also be noted that VanDerBeek’s thinking during this period was deeply informed by the writing of communications theory pioneer Marshall McLuhan and futurist Buckminster

was a series of *Movie-Drome*'s dispersed around the world and linked in a networked fashion, the prototype in Stony Point would prove to be the only version ever constructed. Audiences attending "screenings" at the *Movie-Drome* would enter through a trap door in the floor and sit along the outer edges of the dome with their feet pointed towards the center. Multiple mobile 16mm and non-standard glass plate slide projections would line the spherical "screen," alternating at irregular intervals in a constantly variable sequence designed to recall the "collage form of the newspaper, or the three-ring circus."<sup>176</sup> Gloria Sutton, in her groundbreaking work on VanDerBeek and the *Movie-Drome*, describes the physical set-up of the shows which took place between 1963 and 1965, noting that "the space pulsated with the multi-directional movement of the projectors (they were affixed to a turntable or wheeled carts) and the distortion of mixed sounds and voices..."<sup>177</sup> The projected materials themselves were of a varied assortment, ranging from VanDerBeek's own films to old or "junk" materials in the form of "movie[s] or slides, film strips or clips, glass slides, newsreels, home-movies [and] Hollywood movies..."<sup>178</sup>

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Fuller. Fuller's popular geodesic dome architectural design was a clear influence, alongside the planetarium, on the shape of the *Movie-Drome*.

<sup>176</sup> Stan VanDerBeek, Letter to Boyd Compton, Rockefeller Foundation, Nov 2, 1965. Stan VanDerBeek Collection, Museum of Modern Art. Box 7, File 1.

<sup>177</sup> Gloria Sutton, "Stan VanDerBeek: Collage Experience," in *Stan VanDerBeek: The Culture Intercom*, eds. Bill Arning and Joao Ribas (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2011), 136.

<sup>178</sup> Stan VanDerBeek "Inventory," May 1965. Stan VanDerBeek Collection, Museum of Modern Art. Box 7, File 2.

In approaching the reconstruction at the New Museum, curators Gary Carrion-Murayari and Massimiliano Gioni based the lion's share of their decisions on documentation received from the Stan VanDerBeek estate, including correspondence, drawings, photographs, and notebooks containing original projection playlists.<sup>179</sup> The original 16mm film materials were largely digitized for projection in the museum, while the slides were analog duplications. Carrion-Murayari noted that despite going to considerable extremes to historically recreate the *Movie-Drome's* physical environment, he conceived of the project as an interpretation of VanDerBeek's work, rather than an "authentic" replication. He further emphasized his belief that there exists no "original" *Movie-Drome*, due both to its variable, ephemeral nature and the fact that the *Drome* screenings were more of a failed prototype than a fully realized "work."<sup>180</sup> Carrion-Murayari's sentiment and approach find an echo in Jonathan Walley's recent writing on recreating expanded cinema, wherein the author argues one way around the difficulties inherent to the reconstruction process is abandoning the notion of an "authentic" work altogether, noting:

Rather than attempting a point-for-point re-creation of a statically conceived "original model," we can embrace the variability that must be recognized as

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<sup>179</sup> Gary Carrion-Murayari in conversation with the author. The Stan VanDerBeek estate is largely administered by the filmmaker's children, Sara and Johannes VanDerBeek, both accomplished artists in their own right.

<sup>180</sup> Gary Carrion-Murayari in conversation with the author. The New Museum went so far as to source construction materials for the dome from VanDerBeek's original supplier.

an integral aspect of expanded cinema...[In this model] the emphasis shifts from [the] object to the experience around that object.”<sup>181</sup>

While Walley’s argument is both lucid and clearly borne out in Gary Carrion-Murayari’s curatorial practice, the conception - or model - of “the original” here is needlessly bound to the physical parameters of the film. The fact that expanded cinema moves beyond the discrete film object in any number of potential ways (performances, slides, multiple-projections, etc.) requires a more dynamic conception of “the original,” not an abandonment of the concept altogether. Curiously, Walley’s suggestion that the emphasis be shifted from the film or video object itself to the “experience” of these objects is, in fact, one major avenue for conceptualizing a notion of “the original” in expanded cinema.

Gloria Sutton’s recent writing is invaluable in this regard as she expertly reevaluates the *Movie-Drome* by way of its potential for generating meaning through the lens of audience experience. Sutton argues the *Movie-Drome* functioned as an interface for the audience to experience a type of “immersive subjectivity,” a phenomenon she locates squarely within the *Drome*’s refusal to tether itself to a system of meaning generated exclusively through a “singular apparatus of projection.” Rather, she concludes, VanDerBeek’s goal of establishing a pluralist “universal” visual language fostered an environment which produced meaning and

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<sup>181</sup> Jonathan Wally, “Re-creating Expanded Cinema,” *Incite Journal of Experimental Cinema* 4 (Fall 2013), 214.

generated experience through a form of phenomenological multi-sensorial immersion. Sutton elaborates on this, noting:

Within the domed sphere of the *Movie-Drome*, the arc of address was a complete 360-degree circle. Erasing the spatial boundaries of the screen and eliminating the conventions of narrative or authorship, VanDerBeek sought a non-mediated mode of communication...the screens above and around the participants took up almost the complete field of vision...the source of the sound and light was not centralized...there was no “front or back.”<sup>182</sup>

Through Sutton’s analysis we can see how this strain of multi-sensorial immersion, hinted at by Walley in his call to shift our focus from the object to the experience, can itself function as a dynamic conception of “the original.” Here Carrion-Murayari is correct in asserting that there exists no “authentic” *Movie-Drome* in the traditional physical sense, yet there can be an “authentic” or “original” experiential conception of the *Drome*. While the multiple-projections were indeed variable and in constant flux, VanDerBeek’s larger utopian goal of creating a universal non-verbal language was itself fixed and distinct. Consequently, the experience of the material results of this ambition can itself serve as a fixed notion of “the original” informing the preservation of the *Movie-Drome*, or perhaps more accurately, informing the reconstruction of the physical conditions which produce this experience.

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<sup>182</sup> Gloria Sutton, “Stan VanDerBeek’s *Movie-Drome*: Networking the Subject,” in *Future Cinema: The Cinematic Imagination After Film*, eds. Jeffery Shaw and Peter Weibal (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 140.

Here, “the original” quality of the work along the Spectrum of Influence axis is the experiential dimension, while the “the original” work along the Temporal axis are the initial screenings in the early 1960s. These experience-influenced conceptualizations of “the original” require a heavy degree of translation, as evidenced in the reconstruction of the *Drome*. Aside from negotiating its variable dimensions, the New Museum’s efforts translate the context of the *Movie-Drome* - originally a site-specific work - by relocating it into the museum setting. Practically speaking, this resulted in the dome receiving a mild “make over,” as the spatial logistics of the exhibition floor meant the structure was roughly five feet smaller than the original and could not accommodate the trap door entrance. However, in a larger sense, the *Movie-Drome*’s presence as one piece of art among many in a curated exhibition transforms the broader context in which the work is received.

Before moving forward, it is necessary to briefly revisit Giovanna Fossati’s *film as dispositif* framework within the context of expanded cinema. While my previous argumentation in chapter 2 claimed that medium-specific avant-garde film ontologically resisted a satisfactory conception of “the original” based, in part, on the experience of the embodied spectator in the *dispositif* framework, it is important to note that Stan VanDerBeek’s work is distinct from either Stan Brakhage or Luther Price in that VanDerBeek’s multiple-projection environments aimed to *erase*, rather than *foreground*, his chosen medium(s). Consequently, invoking a dimension of Fossati’s *dispositif* framework can be seen as valid in this instance, while it continues to prove unsatisfactory when applied to the introduction of digital steps in



preserving Brakhage and Price's work. Gloria Sutton's writing again proves invaluable in this regard. She notes that in addition to the multi-sensorial experience, a second form of psychological immersion was at play in the *Movie-Drome*, one wherein VanDerBeek "employ[ed] the available forms of media, film, video, sounds and lights in such a way that they vanish, are no longer noticed by the audience."<sup>183</sup>

The documentation which served as the basis of the New Museum's reconstruction of the *Movie-Drome* also points to a second, related dimension in which the *Drome* can be framed as having been influenced by a conception of "the original" along the Spectrum of Influence axis, in this instance through artistic process. Again, accepting Jonathan Walley's argument that an exact physical replication of the expanded cinema event is impossible, it becomes necessary to base a reconstruction, in part, on the artist's conception and execution of the work. While this form of influence might immediately strike one as simply trading one ephemeral notion for another, the notebooks, correspondence, photographs, and drawings which informed the New Museum's *Movie-Drome* are all fixed evidence representing varied corners of VanDerBeek's artistic process. In a sense, the documentation here functions as a sort of medium-independent artifact, concretizing VanDerBeek's conceptualization of the *Movie-Drome* and localizing the work in VanDerBeek's pre-production planning stages along the Temporal axis. Moreover, this process, as we have just seen, is a crucial touchstone in establishing a

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<sup>183</sup> Sutton, "Stan VanDerBeek's *Movie-Drome*: Networking the Subject," 140.

notion of “the original” based in audience experience. VanDerBeek’s conception of a non-verbal universal language, and the process by which he went about communicating it, effectively underwrites the audience’s experience of the *Movie-Drome*.

These conceptions of “the original” based in artistic process are largely informed by Media Art, or time-based media theory, which frequently leverages documentation as a tool to locate – or relocate – expanded cinema. Chiefly concerned with negotiating what Jon Ippolitio has called “media-independent behaviors” in artworks, this theory offers useful inroads for preserving complex media through a four-step analytic process of description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment, all based in documentation.<sup>184</sup> Given the project’s source materials, this methodology for mobilizing media-independent documentation can be seen as indicative of the New Museum’s curatorial approach in recreating the *Movie-Drome*. As such, it can be said that conceptions of “the original” actively informed the project. Interestingly, artistic process and its influence on the *Movie-Drome* recreation also points to another challenge in recreating expanded cinema, that of paltry documentation. While an infrastructure currently exists for preserving new complex media, older works must often be interpreted through a patchwork of

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<sup>184</sup> Jon Ippolitio quoted in Annet Dekker, “Enjoying the Gap: Comparing Contemporary Documentation Strategies,” and Dario Marchiori, “The Analysis of the Artwork,” in *Preserving and Exhibiting Media Art: Challenges and Perspectives*, ed. Julia Noordegraaf et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 149-170, 127-147.

records which were never standardized or comprehensive in the first place. This method for recovering “the original,” in turn, requires a heightened degree of translation on the part of the curator or preservationist.<sup>185</sup> The New Museum approached this problem by inviting Stan VanDerBeek’s daughter Sara to come onboard as a consultant, often deferring to her interpretation of the documentation retrieved from the estate.<sup>186</sup> Most notably, Sara VanDerBeek curated the sequence of projected images in the New Museum recreation, based on preliminary ideas and playlists contained in Stan VanDerBeek’s notebooks.<sup>187</sup>

In considering both *Kitch’s Last Meal* and the *Movie-Drome* environments, we can see how both works, despite their status as expanded cinema pieces which move beyond the discrete, unified film object, can and do dictate conceptions of “the original” which inform their preservation and recreation. Moreover, these case studies can be successfully mapped onto the model graphs which underwrite my proposed malleable archival theory. *Kitch* is informed by a robust strain of filmmaker intent and complemented by a tepid medium-specific artifact influence, both largely rooted in traditional photochemical preservation methodology. The

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<sup>185</sup> An interesting parallel exists between the past and present preservation of expanded cinema, or complex media. While work like the *Movie-Drome* must be interpreted largely through scattershot documentation, much contemporary media art is accessioned by museums or archives accompanied by a complete inventory of component parts, with detailed instructions regarding assembly and technical specifications furnished by the artist.

<sup>186</sup> Stan VanDerBeek passed away in 1984.

<sup>187</sup> Gary Carrion-Murayari in conversation with the author.

*Movie-Drome*, by contrast, dictates the adoption of a more elastic set of influences in the form of audience experience and artistic process, the latter with roots in Media Art documentation theory. Each method for locating these conceptions of “the original” requires an invasive form of translation at the hands of the curator and/or preservationist, a consequence of the medium-specific artifact exerting either a paltry influence in the case of *Kitch*, or being supplanted wholesale by documentation in the case of the *Movie-Drome*.

This process of relegating artifact influence to the sidelines, however, is symptomatic of a larger, and worrisome, split between traditional moving image archival preservation and burgeoning Media Art practice. This divide works to the detriment of both fields as each embodies methodologies which are increasingly necessary in the contemporary preservation landscape. The *Kitch* preservation, for instance, might have benefited from a dynamic conception of “the original” based in audience experience and artistic process as an adjunct to intent and artifact influence. This is not to detract from the importance of filmmaker intent, but rather, to suggest that this broader constellation of influences might have bolstered the artifact influence in the face of “retroactive” filmmaker intent. This might have resulted, for instance, in the variability inherent to the six Super-8mm reels being migrated to six discrete 16mm reels, as opposed to the consolidated two-reel version preserved at Schneemann’s behest.

This partnership might also be conceived as a two-way street, wherein traditional moving image archival practices complement Media Art methodology. The New Museum's *Movie-Drome* recreation, while attuned to experience and process, might have benefited from increased artifact influence. Digitizing some of the 16mm film materials, for instance, transforms both the character of the image and the dynamics of engagement. The sound of multiple films running through many projectors was an integral sonic component of the original *Movie-Drome*, to say nothing of the presence of the roaming 16mm projectors. While it might be argued that this digitization is justified when framed within VanDerBeek's desire to render his chosen mediums invisible to the audience, the New Museum's impetus to go to considerable lengths in historically recreating the physical dome itself might have been extended to completely recreating the medium-specificity of VanDerBeek's primary moving images.

Finally, a partnership between traditional archival practice and Media Art methodology would go some way towards bolstering the *film as dispositif* model proposed by Giovanna Fossati with regard to negotiating the transition of film work into the digital domain. Within Fossati's migration-based model, as I have previously mentioned, that the influence of the artifact is largely supplanted by the hand of the preservationist as informed by a conception of "original" filmmaker intent. The integration of principle Media Art documentation strategies such as the Variable Media Questionnaire into the *dispositif* model would drastically retrofit many of the pitfalls and vagaries inherent to negotiating filmmaker intent, although admittedly

would not lessen the irreconcilable ontological conflict native to migrating medium-specific avant-garde work into the digital space. A type of artist's interview, the VMQ is designed to pose questions of the filmmaker regarding an artwork's medium-independent characteristics and behaviors, with an eye to the potential, and likely necessary, translation across mediums in the future.<sup>188</sup> Although clearly of limited use for past work, interviewing the filmmaker at the time of a film's creation would eliminate the trappings of "retroactive" intent and lessen the interpretive demands placed on the preservationist in migrating film-born work into the digital domain.

In closing, while expanded cinema poses perhaps the most fundamental challenges to avant-garde film preservation, these very same hurdles can also be seen as underwriting and inciting a fuller range of possibilities, chiefly by activating experience and process as conceptions of "the original." Moreover, plotting these expanded cinema case studies onto the proposed four-axis model graphs demonstrates the full range of my proposed archival theory. Finally, expanded cinema works point to the necessity of increased collaboration between traditional film preservation and Media Art methodologies, a partnership which fosters more dynamic and collaborative approaches to avant-garde film preservation in the digital age.

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<sup>188</sup> Notably the VMQ is only one type of New Media artist's questionnaire; multiple options exist depending on the circumstance.

## Conclusion

In closing, while a case-by-case approach to avant-garde film preservation remains necessary at a granular level, I propose a malleable archival theory which represents the medium-specific avant-garde film and expanded cinema more broadly. While much attention has been paid to negotiating and theorizing the preservation of traditional narrative cinema, these films - by disposition and circumstance - evidence techniques, materials, and, often, an ontology which renders them a unique and non-traditional “genre,” one in need of a more dynamic archival theory.

The model I have put forth for such a theory is underwritten by a porous notion of “the original” based in a critical adoption of Giovanna Fossati’s *film as original* framework, and supplemented with methodology derived from time-based media art conservation. Within this model, I propose multiple conceptions of “the original,” based in the medium-specific artifact, filmmaker intent, audience experience, and artistic process. Moreover, the model also seeks to establish where different conceptions of “the original” work are located in time. These influences, in turn, inform the workflow adopted by the preservationist in addressing these films, and the resulting degree of translation inherent in this process. Taken together, these conceptions form a four-part model based in the Spectrum of Influence, Temporality, Degree of Translation, and Method.

In an attempt to test the practical functionality of this theory, the proposed model was split into two model graphs onto which a set of case studies could be plotted. These case studies represent a broad constellation of preservation types, including photochemical, digital-photochemical hybrid, and reconstruction workflows, which I take to be emblematic of the current avant-garde film preservation landscape. The Stan Brakhage case studies considered in chapter 1 featured work that informed conceptions of “the original” which fell between the medium-specific artifact and filmmaker intent points along the Spectrum of Influence axis. These works were also located at various points in time along the Temporal axis, ranging from pre-release printing stages through to the post-release contemporary archival artifact. The artifacts and laboratory printing techniques used to locate these conceptions of “the original” along the Method axis dictated preservations based in a photochemical workflow, which a required low to medium amount of interpretation on the part of the preservationist along the Degree of Translation axis. Luther Price’s *Home* informed a conception of “the original” largely influenced by filmmaker intent along the Spectrum of Influence axis, while the work was located within the archival artifact in its 2008 condition along the Temporal axis. A combination of original artifact, digital scanning, and filmout steps were used to located these conceptions of “the original” along the Method axis, resulting in a digital-photochemical hybrid workflow. This, in turn, necessitated a high degree of translation on the part of the preservationist. The speculative preservation of *23rd Psalm Branch*, should it be undertaken in the same fashion as Lewis Klahr’s *Hi-*



*Fi Cadets*, would result in a similarly high positioning along the Degree of Translation axis. Carolee Schneemann's *Kitch's Last Meal* informed a conception of "the original" based largely in filmmaker intent, although here the work was located in Schneemann's "retroactive," modern day conceptualization of the film, placing it at the post-release end of the Temporal axis. The combination of original artifacts and the optical blowup used to locate these conceptions of "the original" along the Method axis resulted in a photochemical workflow, which required a high degree of translation given the variable nature of the work. Finally, Stan VanDerBeek's *Movie-Drome* informed two conceptions along the Spectrum of Influence, one based in audience experience, and the other in artistic process. Along the Temporal Axis, the former was located in the initial 1963-65 screenings, while the latter was located in VanDerBeek's pre-release production process. Documentation, duplicated slides and largely digitized 16mm films were used to locate these conceptions along the Method Axis, and both required an extremely high amount of interpretation and intervention on the part of the curator along Degree of Translation axis. Having successfully represented each preservation project considered here within these model graphs, I argue that my malleable archival theory is both sound, and might serve a valuable practical role within the field at large.

Moreover, while I have based my thinking in Fossati's *film as original* framework, I content that my malleable archival model ultimately addresses work which is not fully represented in Fossati's theory. The critical distinction here is my refusal to subscribe to Fossati's notion that media is transitional by nature. To this

end, I argue that much hand-manipulated avant-garde film is rooted in a medium-specific ontology, more so than any other “genre,” and as such a photochemical workflow remains preferable to a practice which integrates digital steps. However, I also acknowledge that in the contemporary climate, wherein the alternative is the loss of the work altogether, avant-garde materials are often preserved in workflows which alter, rather than preserve, their “nature.” Therefore, by integrating a Degree of Translation axis into the model, which operates in conversation with preservation methods, my theory accepts the practical realities in the field while simultaneously deploying a loose metric which seeks to account for what is lost and transformed within these necessary workflows.

This model also addresses ephemeral, expanded cinema works, which I have demonstrated can resist any attempt at a “conventional” preservation, be it digital or photochemical. The malleability inherent to this archival theory represents these works as it acknowledges that “the original” can be conceived through the less tangible and established influences of audience experience and artistic process. Here the Degree of Translation axis is again essential, for although compromise and interpretation are requirements in the preservation of any film, they are especially necessary here.

It is also my hope that plotting preservation projects onto this archival theory model will serve as a springboard for wider-ranger debates. While I have addressed these points, there remains a larger ongoing conversation regarding an

ontology of the cinema and emerging digital archival tools, the agency of the preservationist and the influence of the work, and the collaborative potential between traditional moving image archival practice and emerging methodologies based in Media Art theory.

Finally, I would like to briefly address the scalability inherent to this model. Given that avant-garde film preservation is a niche undertaking in an already small field, the theory I have presented risks a certain circularity of argumentation. Namely, it risks parroting information back to the same select group of practitioners whose work underwrote the case studies which form the basis of the model. However, the task of preserving these films is not limited to a handful of major archives. It is my hope that this theory might also find an audience with those archivists who administer smaller regional and/or non-specialized collections, archives which, despite their mandate, nonetheless find themselves in possession of avant-garde films, often without a frame of reference for how to negotiate their preservation.

Hand-manipulated avant-garde film and expanded cinema works easily rank among the most inspired and groundbreaking pieces of cinematic history. However, often the very qualities that underwrite their formal, structural, and thematic innovations present fundamental challenges to established preservation practice. These difficulties are only exacerbated by the rapidly changing moving image archival landscape. By arguing for the validity of a new archival theory, I have

sought to address these circumstances while also furthering the cause of preserving these films in manner that accounts for the unique and revelatory nature of the work.

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