Shadows and Light. Ernie Gehr Exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art

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SHADOWS AND LIGHT.
ERNIE GEHR EXHIBITIONS AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

by
SEAN FULLER

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2016
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies satisfying the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

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This thesis examines exhibitions and media installations of Ernie Gehr’s work at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), beginning with the pivotal 1970 show Information, which presented four films by Gehr. Wait (1968), Transparency (1969), Reverberation (1969), and History (1970) were screened alongside work by other avant-garde filmmakers and video artists in a circular viewing booth in the gallery space, in a show featuring works now considered masterpieces of conceptual art. It also considers the two site-specific video works, MoMA on Wheels (2002) and Navigation (2002), which Gehr created for the lobby space at MoMA QNS, the temporary home for the museum during construction for a major expansion project. Finally it explores Gehr’s two major solo exhibitions, Panoramas of the Moving Image: Mechanical Slides and Dissolving Views from Nineteenth-Century Magic Lantern Shows from 2007, and Carnival of Shadows from 2015. Descriptive analysis of each film or installation, inflected with methodologic devices of film history, art history, and philosophy, grounds discussion of the works within the surrounding context of the Museum.
Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my deepest thanks to Ernie Gehr, who spent valuable time with me: screening work, discussing art and ideas, and supplying answers and images. The quality of his work is only surpassed by the quality of his character. I also would like to thank Professor Robert Singer, who served as my Matus on this mind-altering journey, never allowing me to listen to the talking lizards. So many people from The Museum of Modern Art Film Department deserve thanks, especially Anne Morra, who first introduced me to Ernie and provided me lots of useful information, Ashley Swinnerton, who pulled archival materials and arranged multiple screenings, Kitty Cleary, Sophie Cavoulacos, Ron Magliozzi, and Josh Siegel. From the MoMA Library, I would like to thank Milan Hughston, David Senior, and Jenny Tobias. Special thanks to the following people who provided their help in various, vital ways: Pierre Apraxine, Noël Carroll, Johnny Gore, Matthew Gold, Katherine Koutsis, Alejandro Merizalde, and Jacob Waltman. My cat, Jasper C. Cat Johnson Johns, provided much needed companionship during the writing process. My deepest gratitude goes to R.A. Manes and Nancy Walsh Manes, who supplied encouragement, love, and countless suggestions and corrections across multiple drafts. The support I consistently received from Cara Manes throughout this process has been invaluable, but when did love not try to change the world back to itself?
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Introduction

Sitting in the artist’s chair, a solid office desk chair on casters with an uncertain date of manufacture, clearly older, but not out of fashion, I felt a tingling nervousness crawl up my back. I tried to channel it all into the equally strong feeling of excitement. In front of me was Ernie Gehr’s workstation: a desk, a 27” monitor, a large tower computer and several auxiliary hard drives. Over the next few hours that spring afternoon, Gehr screened a selection of works for me, giving a brief introduction before each, but not telling me too much so as not to spoil the surprise, and then leaving me alone to watch. Every piece blew me away and when Gehr would return to answer any questions, I felt unable to articulate my thoughts, let alone ask worthwhile questions. Instead I was only able to regard the boxes filled with pre-cinema devices and film equipment. He is kind, patient, and has a warm sense of humor and biting wit. I would ask what I now realize were naïve questions, or questions I have since read Gehr answering countless times. In his work there is so much beauty, depth, and otherworldliness, an extraordinary feat considering Gehr trains his lens on the most familiar places and objects. He twists them, flips them upside down, and minimizes their representational resonance in order to reveal the devices that allow for their realization onscreen.

On Gehr’s computer screen, multiple versions of one work occupied a single Final Cut Pro timeline. Gehr mentioned that if he were a painter, he would show all the versions of a work. What if Gehr were a painter? I did not ask him that question, but at his dining room table, we sat and talked extensively about his love of painters such as Piero Della Francesca, Johannes Vermeer, and Paul Cezanne. These artists, like Gehr, found different ways to call attention to the
two-dimensional rectilinear space within which they worked. Unlike Gehr, however, these artists all had many opportunities to share their work during their lifetimes (though Cezanne faced difficulty at times due to the radical nature of his work). As a film and video artist, Gehr has had relatively few occasions to show his work. In fact, despite Gehr’s recognition as a key figure in American avant-garde filmmaking, his films and videos are rarely screened. As a film studies undergraduate, I read about his work in various standard texts, but the possibility of actually seeing it was scarce. For me, he became a mythical figure, of sorts. In 2007, Gehr’s installation, Panoramas of the Moving Image: Mechanical Slides and Dissolving Views from Nineteenth-Century Magic Lantern Shows (2007), opened at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). I was two years into my now eleven-year tenure there. I remembered how unsure I was if that video installation was by the same filmmaker I had read about in film classes, since the work was decidedly contemporary and its subject seemingly extraordinarily un-experimental. I was unaware of how Gehr had changed as an artist and embraced new cinematic technologies, finding new things to say at every turn.

Gehr welcomed me into his home a few more times, patiently walking me through many of his works. During one of these visits, Gehr, knowing I worked at MoMA, spoke to me about his upcoming show there, Carnival of Shadows. He conveyed particular aspects of the fast-approaching installation, trying not to give too much away but seemingly interested in talking through concerns as varied as wall color, projector alignment, and what audiences will think of the conceptual photography included in the show. Ultimately, Gehr confided that this would likely be his last show at MoMA, or at the very least, his last opportunity before needing “a cane or a walker.” Hearing Gehr regard this experience as his institutional swansong helped me understand its stakes.
The relationship between filmmaker Ernie Gehr (b. 1941) and The Museum of Modern Art was forged early in Gehr’s career and developed steadily. Today, some 45 years later, it is stronger than ever, nurtured over time by a mutual respect between artist and institution for each other’s efforts toward investigating and preserving the legacy of modern film history and commitment to pushing the medium’s boundaries, whether by creating or by collecting and exhibiting experimental film.

Gehr’s work was first shown at MoMA in 1970, in the exhibition Information: four films made between 1968 and 1970 were presented in a viewing vestibule in the galleries alongside masterpieces of conceptual art. Since then, the Museum has organized two major exhibitions around Gehr’s work, Panoramas of the Moving Image in 2007 and Carnival of Shadows in 2015, and included two site-specific works, Navigation (2002) and MoMA on Wheels (2002), in the lobby of MoMA QNS, the Museum’s temporary exhibition space in Long Island City, Queens during a two year (2002-04) large-scale construction project at MoMA’s main site on 53rd Street in Manhattan. This thesis will center on a focused, specific subset of Gehr’s work: films and installations made for and/or exhibited in an expanded gallery setting at The Museum of Modern Art.

Earlier scholarly efforts have tended to cast Gehr solely as a self-taught, structuralist filmmaker. Indeed, his contributions toward the scholarly conception of cinematic structuralism is notable: Wait (1968), Shift (1971), and most notably Serene Velocity (1970) have all found their way into chapters on experimental film in a host of film history textbooks. Serene Velocity, which pictures a basement hallway at Binghamton University - State University of New York
shot at manually alternating focal lengths at four frame intervals to stage a cinematic experience that calls into question the very philosophical nature of the moving image. American philosopher and film scholar Noël Carroll used *Serene Velocity* as the case study example in support of his claim that film as a medium can assert philosophical propositions.¹ At first this may seem like an uncontroversial statement, since countless examples of philosophical films come to mind immediately, examples as varied as Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* (1972) or Derek Jarman’s *Wittgenstein* (1993), a biopic of the eminent 20th century Austrian philosopher. These films inarguably deal with explicit philosophical themes, but Carroll contends that films not only restate existing claims and themes (as in the two examples just given), but also can actually put forth novel philosophical claims—in other words, *do* philosophy. It is not by mistake or chance that Carroll chooses *Serene Velocity* as his example.² Carroll’s examination of *Serene Velocity* is revealing and affecting. It explores the work from a unique philosophically minded vantage point that I find particularly useful when thinking about Gehr’s work overall. I will apply this philosophical lens to the discussion of certain films and videos, where doing so enhances an understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of Gehr’s works and/or the specific conditions under which they have been presented.

Gehr is best known for his early film work. Since 2000, Gehr has shot exclusively on digital video, and to date has made more than 70 digital works and at least 10 multi-channel media works.³ If we were to assign all of Gehr’s works a signature style, uniting the films and videos is a desire to present commonplace imagery, in ways that call attention to the act of

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² Carroll studied film with experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage at NYU and made a number of experimental films before turning to film studies and philosophy. He was also on the editorial board of *Millenium Film Journal*, an important source of information on avant-garde film and media art.
³ Ernie Gehr later released two films: *Passage* (2003) and *Precarious Garden* (2004). However, the filmed footage was captured before 2000.
cinematic viewing and creation, while purposely avoiding narrative, as well as psychological and emotional manipulation. In spite of their ordinary imagery, Gehr’s films dazzle the senses, but are not merely eye candy. They touch deeper themes of human perception and consciousness, while at once subverting and calling attention to the illusion of continuity and movement that the apparatuses of motion picture technologies typically create for the viewer.

Gehr has been reluctant to talk about his personal history. Perhaps he does not want his work to be somehow viewed or written about as autobiographical. It is not about that, although Gehr admits that it is impossible not to inject his personal experience into his work.⁴ He was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1941 to German-Jewish immigrants. In his film Signal – Germany on Air (1985) he seems to allude to his parents’ history without offering overt commentary, instead filming train tracks and the old Gestapo buildings in West Berlin. Gehr has offered anecdotes about his early exposure to the moving image, recounting, for example, how frightening his first encounter at age three or four with the larger-than-life onscreen image had been, and how through adolescence he would “sometimes just look up at the beam of light traversing the space from the projection booth to the screen, watching the undulating patterns and dust particles.”⁵

Scholarly accounts have tended to focus on the films intended for a traditional theater setting.⁶ However, he has also contributed to and created exhibitions for gallery and outdoor spaces, including a commissioned project shown in Madison Square Park, Surveillance (2010), and a large-scale solo show, Bon Voyage, at the Centre d’Art Conemporain Genève in 2015.

Gehr’s first solo media exhibition, Brother, Can You Spare Some Time, took place in 1995 at the

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⁴ Gehr, in discussion with author, July 29, 2015.
⁶ Most scholarship on Gehr has in fact tended to focus on the film work made prior to 1975, and most often Serene Velocity.
McBean Gallery at the San Francisco Art Institute (where Gehr taught at the time). The exhibition was prompted after Gehr won the Adaline Kent Award, which was given annually to a visual artist living in California. Due to the compressed installation schedule, Gehr was not able to put the show together he envisioned. Still he used the gallery space to present the evolution of moving image media in different forms, including video pieces he shot using the school’s video equipment. Gehr says that his primary focus for Brother, Can You Spare Some Time, was the “…changes that the moving image had gone through over time, including those brought about through the then-growing availability of films on VHS tapes, many of them of very poor quality.” This show laid the conceptual groundwork for Gehr’s shows at The Museum of Modern Art, Panoramas of the Moving Image and Carnival of Shadows, which both recreate pre-cinema modalities digitally. By restricting the key works under discussion to those presented at MoMA in an expanded gallery context, I hope to reveal another trope of Gehr’s work, still dormant in the literature: the cinematic environment. Toward that end, I will invoke relevant philosophical arguments where appropriate.

Gehr premiered his first digital work, Cotton Candy, at MoMA in 2001. The work was commissioned to be part of the show Modern Contemporary (September 2000 – January 2001), a survey of contemporary art since 1980. However, it was not screened until November 3, 2001, ten months after the show closed. He used the money from the MoMA commission to purchase a digital camera, a computer, and digital editing equipment. The 54-minute video was recorded in the Musée Mécanique in San Francisco. Gehr trains his digital camera on mutoscopes, an early moving image device that spun through a circular rung of images, and coin operated mechanical toys. Film critic J. Hoberman writes, “Gehr has always been interested in the ephemeral, and

7 Gehr also taught briefly at Binghamton University in the 1970s and Harvard University in 2012.
8 Gehr, in Bellini, 19.
9 Ibid., 19-20.
Cotton Candy could well be his most preservationist film. Also the most epic—the automata provide the filmmaker with his largest-ever cast. (This is also the first time he's ever had to pay his actors.)"¹⁰ His video Glider (2001) also uses a digital recording of a pre-cinematic device: the camera obscura located near the Cliff House in San Francisco.¹¹ The 37-minute long video features the cliffs, sandy beach and ocean bending in time and space, as if the gravity were not predictable, the surface of the earth bending, twisting and elongating without warning. By gliding his digital camera along the edge of the camera obscura disc, the image distorts, bends, and appears to fold in on itself. In her book New Digital Cinema: Reinventing the Moving Image, media art scholar Holly Willis writes of Glider: “With its disembodied camera and depiction of visceral, fluid flows of imagery captured inside a seaside camera obscura in Northern California, the video expresses an essentially digital experience of motion, filtered through two radically divergent technologies of vision.”¹² In its normal state the camera obscura reproduces the image outside in a way that is easy to comprehend. The mobility of the digital camera allows the camera to explore the disc in new ways that are bewildering and sublime.

Gehr has never sought out gallery representation, nor does he mine opportunities for self-promotion. He has relied on relatively few curators and institutions to show his work through the years. Despite his early success and recognition, Gehr has been sensitive to where and how his films are presented, and strictly controls the distribution of his work.¹³ Gehr has relied on curators he trusts, such as Annette Michelson, who included Gehr in her New Forms in Film exhibition in 1974 in Switzerland, and former Whitney curator John Hanhardt, who has

¹¹ The camera obscura at the Cliff House and the Musée Mécanique were slated to close around the time of both works creation. Gehr’s impetus for creating these works was preservation.
¹³ Hence the reason I was at his home in the first place.

Gehr’s relationship with MoMA has cut across multiple generations of curators for 45 years, beginning with Kynaston McShine, who included his work in Information in 1970. In Chapter 1, we will investigate the context for Gehr’s inclusion in the show, and broader themes the show explored. The show included four films by Gehr, Wait, Transparency (1969), Reverberation (1969), and History (1970). I provide a brief description of each, before taking a deep dive into Wait. Gehr’s films were presented alongside others in a circular viewing booth specially designed for the show. Gehr also had a sustained fruitful working relationship with the longtime MoMA film curator and preservationist Mary Lea Bandy. In 1980, she became the director of the film department and in 1994 became its chief curator. Bandy commissioned Gehr to create MoMA on Wheels and Navigation for MoMA QNS in 2002. In Chapter 2, I will examine both site-specific works broadly, through formal and philosophical lenses. In 2007, Film Curator Jytte Jensen and then-Assistant Curator Ron Magliozzi organized Gehr’s first solo exhibition at MoMA, Panoramas of the Moving Image, which will be discussed in Chapter 3. And most recently, in 2015, Magliozzi, now Associate Curator, and Curatorial Assistant Sophie Cavoulacos organized Gehr’s second solo show at MoMA, Carnival of Shadows, which is a sequel of sorts to the Panoramas exhibition and will be the focus of Chapter 4. By imposing a tight restriction on the thesis’ key discussion points to Gehr’s expanded cinema work at MoMA, I will be able to address the aforementioned issues in detail. To do so, I will provide a robust descriptive analysis of the works in each presentation. At times I will take detours discussing related artists, associated topics, or other of Gehr’s works screened in different contexts.
Chapter 1: Information, 1970

In July 1970, The Museum of Modern Art mounted an ambitious exhibition titled *Information*. Organized by then Associate Curator of Painting and Sculpture Kynaston McShine, the show included work by more than 150 artists from 15 countries, and was intended to serve as an overview of young contemporary artists. In her book *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, historian Mary Anne Staniszewski writes, “More than any other exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art, *Information* manifested the issues of this brief and volatile moment in modern art history.”\(^14\) The show was important for MoMA and the art world at large, signaling a dynamic shift by contemporary artists from plastic art forms and aesthetic concerns in general to conceptual, language-based “information” art. McShine asked artists to contribute works of their choosing to the show and in addition many artists created text-based pieces that were included in the exhibition catalog for the show. Recognizing the importance of film and video in contemporary art, McShine included a broad selection of media works in *Information*. The show included four works by Ernie Gehr, *Wait* (1968), *Reverberation* (1969), *Transparency* (1969), and *History* (1970). Gehr’s apolitical minimalism and focus on the metaphysics of the moving image make their inclusion somewhat at odds with the stated purpose of the show.\(^15\) Nevertheless, it was through this show that Gehr’s work was introduced to MoMA’s audience. It was also the first time Gehr’s work was shown as


\(^{15}\) Gehr asserts that his work makes a political point through his refusal to use the medium of film to make a political point. The partisan discourse surrounding the Vietnam War frustrated Gehr. Coverage always seemed to present a particular viewpoint, instead of providing reliable information. According to Gehr, all work is political in some sense. Gehr, in discussion with author, January 13, 2016.
part of an installation in a gallery setting, albeit in what would perhaps be a less than ideal situation.

McShine writes in the show’s catalog that the work is “spirited, if not rebellious,” a condition he finds necessary for art being made in the strained political atmosphere of the time. He writes, “It may seem too inappropriate, if not absurd to get up in the morning, walk into a room, and apply dabs of paint from a little tube to a square of canvas.”

16 American writer Frederick Barthelme, known for his gritty, minimalist novels, uses his inclusion in the show as an opportunity to actualize the sentiment toward painting expressed by McShine, withdrawing any ties whatsoever to aesthetic endeavors of any sort. About Barthelme, the press release reads, “In accordance with the wishes of the artist, who feels that ‘intellectual and sensorial decoration seem particularly fatuous at this time’ his space (a table) will be used for informative literature of various kinds.”

17 These statements may seem a trite dismissal of painting, but they are not necessarily so. As a means of generalizing trends in painting during the year of Information’s organization and display, consider just a handful of paintings made in 1970 that reside in MoMA’s collection: Roy Lichtenstein, Mirror #10, and untitled works by Cy Twombly, Blinky Palermo, and Mark Rothko (who also committed suicide that year). Each of these works is a spectacular aesthetic object, but each rehashes formal concerns from the previous two decades and do not attempt to address pressing political concerns, nor do they consider the evolving media landscape. McShine believes painting as a medium of expression fails to captivate in a

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18 A standout counter-example is Benny Andrews’ No More Games, a work that makes a powerful political statement, one which, unfortunately, is still prescient today: a depiction a black man sitting on a box next to a body of someone of unknown ethnicity is covered in a tattered American flag.
19 Canadian philosopher of media, Marshall McLuhan had a major influence on the work in the show and its overall conceptualization, in fact, McShine mentions him by name multiple times in his essay for the catalog. Two books
time when the pictures from the Vietnam War, student uprisings, and political revolutions around
the globe are being broadcast into peoples’ homes.

Even if an artist does not strive to make a political statement, the power of paintings to do
so is mitigated, McShine contends, since the work is bound to be buried in a sea of countless
images. The only painting included in the show was Walter De Maria’s *The Color Men Choose
When They Attack the Earth* (1968), a huge 82 5/8 × 238 inch canvas surface area painted in the
bright yellow color of the Caterpillar Company, with a small plate at center inscribed with the
titular phrase. De Maria uses the recognizable aesthetics of Minimalist painting to raise larger
environmental concerns, using painting as a semiotic signifier (or a new means of artistic
communication) in old dress. McShine writes, “Inevitably for art film and videotape are growing
in importance. It is quite obvious that at this point they are major mass media. Their influence
has meant that the general audience is beginning to be unwilling to give delicate responses
needed for looking at painting.”20 The organizing principle of *Information* is based on one simple
idea: artists need to use new means of artistic communication if they wish to remain relevant.21

This dematerialization of art was recognized and cataloged by critic Lucy Lippard, who was
included in the show as an artist, and whose writing McShine used as a basis for his exhibition
checklist.22 As a result, *Information* included some of the most prominent conceptual artists,
photographers, and land artists of the time, such as Vito Acconci, Carl Andre, John Baldessari,

originally published in 1967 in 1968 respectively, were particularly relevant: Marshall McLuhan et al., *The Medium
Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (London: Penguin Group (USA), 1967. and McLuhan, Quentin Fiore, and
Jerome Agel, *War and Peace in the Global Village: An Inventory of Some of the Current Spastic Situations That

20 McShine, 140.
21 For a nuanced exploration of the conceptual ideology of the show, see Eve Meltzer, “The Dream of the
University Press, 2004), 144-168.
22 Lippard’s own writings, documentation, and interviews with artists from this time period are collected in an
(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
Robert Barry, Joseph Beuys, Mel Bochner, Dan Graham, Hans Haacke, Michael Heizer, On Kawara, Joseph Kosuth, Richard Long, Bruce Nauman, Yoko Ono, Ed Ruscha, Robert Smithson, and Lawrence Weiner. While the work of these artists and others took form in one way or another in the galleries, an odd and innovative means of presenting video art and film work was created.

Famed Italian architect and designer Ettore Sottsass devised a circular viewing device with 40 separate viewing stations. It was branded the Olivetti “information machine” or “visual jukebox,” having been lent to the exhibition by the Italian company Sottsass had worked with during the previous decade. The information machine cycled continuously, daily, through more than 40 films, varying in length from three minutes to the eight hour long Empire (1964) by Andy Warhol, with most pieces clocking in less than 30 minutes.

The film and video selections exhibited great variety, but McShine writes that they all can be, “…described as ‘minimally structured,’ which means that the content is non-narrative and that the style, while being an extension of cinema vérité, is like so much of the other work in the show, simply a method of distributing the visual information that interests the artist.”

Curatorial Assistant Cintra Lofting compiled the film and video checklist. Pierre Apraxine is acknowledged in the catalog as having organized the film portion of Information, and did indeed help select film works by Marcel Broodthaers and Stanley Brouwn, but was living abroad at the time and served mainly as a European liaison for McShine. Lofting and McShine developed the checklist in consultation with Film Department Director Willard Van Dyke and Associate Curator of Film Adrienne Mancia, who had together championed the work of contemporary

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23 McShine, 140-141.
24 Pierre Apraxine, email message to author, December 8, 2015.
avant-garde filmmakers during the previous two years.\textsuperscript{25} The list of filmmakers and video artists is just as impressive as the physical media artists I list above. In fact, some of those artists also showed moving image work, Baldessari, De Maria, and Ono, for example. The show also embraced some of the most renowned experimental filmmakers of the time, including Robert Breer, Bruce Conner, Hollis Frampton, Ken Jacobs, George Landow, Standish Lawder, George Markopoulos, Paul Sharits, Michael Snow, Joyce Wieland, and Ernie Gehr.

It is easy to understand why these filmmakers would want to be included in a high-profile show at MoMA, but disappointingly, their work was shown primarily in the Olivetti information machine, and therefore not conventionally presented. The press release mentions screenings were also to take place in the auditorium, but Gehr does not recall any of his works being shown this way.\textsuperscript{26} The Olivetti machine was a unique design concept, using an array of mirrors to project 40 different films into 40 individual viewing bays (Fig. 1). Staniszewski describes the device as “[t]he ‘jukebox,’” claiming its “avant-garde ancestors were those film-viewing contraptions created by Sergei Eisenstein for\textit{Film und Foto} in 1929.”\textsuperscript{27} While Staniszewksi traces a lineage for the viewing booth in museum spaces, the Olivetti ensemble resembles the Kaiserpanorama, a device popular in the 1880s in Berlin. The Kaierpanorama allowed up to 25 spectators to individually view stereoscopic slide shows at rates of their own choosing. The spectators sat around the large circular device and a series of lights and mirrors allowed for individualized experiences for each. The Olivetti machine attempted this mode of viewing with film and video.

\textsuperscript{25} Scott MacDonald, \textit{Avant-Garde Film: Motion Studies} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 11.

\textsuperscript{26} Gehr, email message to author, December 2, 2015.

\textsuperscript{27} Staniszewski, 282.
However, due to many unforeseen technical difficulties, many of the films selected were not shown at all during the run of the show. The Olivetti offered visitors opportunities to view myriad video and film work in a short time within the gallery space alongside the non-media work, but it did not offer ideal viewing conditions under which do so; the viewer was required to crouch forward in order to watch a small screen (Fig. 2). Especially problematic for the avant-garde work—such as Snow’s *Wavelength* (1967), Sharit’s *Ray Gun Virus* (1966), and Gehr’s films *Wait, Reverberation, Transparency*, and *History*—was that to experience their power, one would need to view these works in space, on a large screen and at a certain distance. The main concern of these works is the very set of conditions for film’s creation. Viewing these works on the Olivetti is like viewing them online today. In such viewing conditions it is still possible to recognize the inventiveness and aesthetic beauty these works possess, but their true conceptual weight and power is mitigated, if not eliminated.

Although a few early film works by Gehr can be viewed online through various sources, Gehr himself has been hesitant to release his film works digitally because they were created for viewing on a big screen in a theater, their very meaning being directly tied to their physical construction. As film scholar Dario Marchiori asserts, *Wait, Reverberation, Transparency*, and *History* can indeed be understood as unique examinations of the specific material features that form filmic experience, with each work examining “an elementary aspect of the cinematic apparatus,” including different light exposure intervals in *Wait*, projector mechanics in *Reverberation*, changes in shutter speed in *Transparency*, and film grain in *History*.

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28 McShine, 193.
29 Gehr, in discussion with author, April 29, 2015.
30 Dario Marchiori, “Film Form as Film History: An Introduction to Ernie Gehr,” *Cinéma & Cie* 9, no. 1 (2009), 118.
Although each work included in *Information* is unique, I will focus primarily on *Wait*. I will explore this work in some depth as an entryway that I hope reveals the complexity and beauty of these four early film works as a group. But first, I will discuss the other three works in brief.

In *History* (1970), Gehr gives the viewer nothing but film grain to contemplate. Removing the lens, Gehr exposed the film stock to light through black cheesecloth (Fig. 3). Throughout the final edit’s 40 minutes, the viewer is given no representational elements, but rather exclusively continual changing patterns of light and film grain. As Michael Snow proclaimed, “At last, the first film!”\(^{31}\) We call it film, yet in most films, the filmstrip itself is invisible, yet here the film itself—the materiality of the celluloid—is the star in all its textural beauty. In an interview with Gehr, Italian film scholar Adriano Aprà says, “You made *History*, which is just nothing, or everything, it is just the grain of film: it is an experience I have with some Rothko’s paintings. It is just something to meditate on, it is a painting about perhaps myself: some of your extreme films are films about ourselves, we can see whatever we want.”\(^{32}\)

This work is a simple structural statement about film in general that develops for the viewer into a grand metaphysical declaration about the nature of your own reality. Being surrounded by a darkened theater without anything but the “image” is essential for this to garner power. It is difficult to imagine that it has the same power viewed crouched over the Olivetti jukebox viewer; the urge to walk away from infinity seems too great.

*Transparency* (1969) will reemerge later for discussion in Chapter 2, but it should be noted here that in this work Gehr explores film and shutter speed by photographing speeding cars

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\(^{31}\) *Film-Makers’ Cooperative Catalog*, no 7 (1989), 188.  
from the edge of a busy highway. In this 10-minute film, the cars appear as phantoms, blurs of light onscreen, while objects in the background appear solid.

*Reverberation* (1969) is a 23-minute long film originally shot on 8mm film and then projected at a slower speed and reshot using 16mm (Fig. 4). The construction site of the World Trade Center is used as a backdrop, where Gehr films his friends, Canadian actress Margaret Lamarre and avant-garde filmmaker Andrew Noren. Whole blocks were being razed to make way for the new development. In his seminal interview with film scholar Scott Macdonald, Gehr said, “I was moved and saddened by the power of the destruction taking place,” and that “It was quite a spectacle and I was moved to work with that, though I didn’t want to document it.” The slowed speed of the projection, coupled with the unsteadiness of the 8mm projection, emphasizes the individual frames and the gaps between frames. Film Scholar Adams P. Sitney writes that as, “…the couple’s gestures dissolve in prolonged gaps” and the “…space they occupy flattens, and they seem dwarfed by the newly emphasized monumentality of the stonework behind them.” Space and time are distorted throughout, further warped by the abstract, resonant soundtrack. Like in *History*, the film grain is highly visible and the image of the couple seems to recede. Sitney writes, “In high-contrast, black and white texture the grain pattern of the film stock becomes visible and the bright shapes of people and stones seem almost arbitrary configurations within the grain.”

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36 Ibid.
In 1967, Gehr shot the footage for *Wait* (1968) along with that for *Morning* (1968), the first two films he completed and screened publically. Of the two, only *Wait* was shown in *Information*, but it is useful to explore *Morning*, since the conditions of its creation inform those of *Wait*. *Morning* is a four-minute long film that uses the light from a window as the sole source of lighting for the scene. The window is at the center of a bedroom, and a bed (with feet visible at its end), a sleeping cat, and a sewing machine occupy the landscape.

Gehr intends the window to be seen as a metaphor for the aperture of the camera—a metaphor he believes is, perhaps, overstated. “Even before I finished recording the footage for *Morning*, I didn’t feel entirely satisfied with my choices,” says Gehr. “I began to think that perhaps the room as a metaphor for the camera chamber and the window as a metaphor for the lens was a little too obvious, even though I had not yet seen any of the footage.”

Even if the metaphor is a bit too obvious, the film is sensually vibrant: a sensorial pleasure fest. The projected image of a calm domestic space becomes a hypnotic flashing of images that range from underexposed nearly black frames to frames that have been so overexposed they are almost clear leader. By manually changing the length of exposure at each frame, Gehr creates an intense flicker effect, which is further intensified by projecting the film at a slower 16fps. Scott MacDonald wrote about the effect in *Morning*, finding that the “the powerful flickering of the light flooding through the apartment window is reminiscent of the experience of looking directly into a movie projector while it’s running.” The obvious question for anyone who has not seen the film might be: *How can staring into a movie projector be a sensual pleasure fest?*

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37 Both works were completed in 1967, but not shown until 1968. Gehr, in MacDonald, *Critical Cinema 5*, 365.
38 Gehr, in MacDonald, *Critical Cinema 5*, 366.
39 MacDonald, “Ernie Gehr: Camera Obscura/Lens/Filmstrip,” *Film Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (July 1, 1990), 10–16.
The short answer is to say, “try it!” Stick your face in the lens of a running projector, and aim to recognize the power that the changes in your newly lighted environment have on you. Contrast this to how you get tired when it’s dark, or feel like a soulless automaton in your cubicle under the steady blue-tinted light of your computer and/or the overhead fluorescent lighting. Gehr recognizes the power of light, not only on the filmstrip, but also on human perception. He uses light to great effect, creating interplay of extreme white light and darkness, interspersed with flicker that is a stimulant to the senses. Even if the viewer does not directly grasp the film’s intended metaphor of filmic construction, the work still affects the viewer’s senses.

For his second film, *Wait*, the work shown at MoMA, Gehr does something similar and equally as sensual as he did in *Morning*. He again shows the primacy of light in film production, but does so without relying on the obvious metaphor used in *Morning*. In an interview with filmmaker Jonas Mekas, Gehr says about *Morning*, “the light and illusionary three-dimensionality is more literal than in *Wait,*” and “the image is a bit too dominant, too direct.”

So, in *Wait*, in addition to the enhanced flicker, Gehr also uses filmic devices to reduce the illusion of depth and to flatten the picture plane.

Gehr depicts another quiet domestic scene (facing the camera in the opposite direction from where he filmed *Morning*), showing two people sitting at a dining room table under a lantern fixture, suspended by a cord, and illuminated by a single 75-watt light bulb. The filmmaker uses these elements to stage a dynamic, frenetic, flickering, and self-reflexive, seven-minute light show. The footage distinctly calls attention to the individual, static images that all filmic constructions rely on to create the illusion of motion. *Wait* also highlights the impressive

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impacts that variances in exposure to light have on photographic emulsions and their resultant images. This film wears its own construction on its sleeve: its jumps, sputters, shifts, and flashes continually call attention to its own artificiality (Figs. 5 and 6).

Ernie Gehr worked methodically, shooting manually, frame by frame, on a 16mm Bolex, leaving the aperture wide open, changing the duration of each exposure, and occasionally moving the camera’s position slightly. He filmed the work over the course of three nights, shooting multiple rolls of film (400 feet of raw footage). He exposed each frame at different intervals, from less than a second to more than a minute and did most of the editing in camera. Some post-production alterations were made, changing the ordering of sequences, and discarding unusable footage, but there are fewer than ten edit points.41

To stage the scene, he enlisted the help of his friends Gary and Shannon Smith, who at the time were allowing Gehr to stay in their home. During each session, Gary and Shannon would sit at the table in a position that was comfortable for them, and they would try to stay as still as possible, notifying Gehr if they needed to move or take a break.

The composition of the image is simple and purposely mundane. In fact, Gehr uses the scene of the banal domestic drama to stage a different kind of story altogether. In an interview with film critic Scott Macdonald, Gehr said about Wait, “…I saw a way to take the psychological drama out of the situation and turn it into a drama of light and filmic combustions in which the human form would have a place but would be in a different relationship to everything else within that pictorial field.”42 The final work features Gary, (image left), seated at the table with Shannon opposite him as their respective postures and gazes change throughout the film’s duration. For

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41 Gehr, in discussion with author, January 13, 2016.
42 MacDonald, Critical Cinema, 366.
example, for a short sequence Gary is seen to be reading a newspaper, and then looking up in another.

In the far right of the image, a crib is visible, where Gary and Shannon’s infant son Kerlin slept. Kerlin makes a dazzling wakeful appearance midway through the film. His movement through the space is so rapid that he shows up in one position in one frame and then is absent from a few frames, reappearing again a few frames later, flickering and moving like an apparition. A chair and clothing items move in the space seemingly without human involvement, although that intervention is implied. Film scholar Maureen Cheryn Turim points out in her 1985 book, *Abstraction in Avant-Garde Films*, this activity hints at an underlying narrative:

This scene of representation is also a scene of action, actions so reduced that they border on inaction, but it is not true that nothing happens, that nothing changes, that there is no proairetic code (series of actions) in this film. The narrative changes are just hidden from notice by the framing and lighting shifts (just the reverse of the classic editing system where continuity in actions hide the cuts— in *Wait*, discontinuity, disjunction in the image hide the actions).  

The central focus of the “narrative” film space is the single source overhead light. The people and objects in the film seem to dance around it, giving it vast, almost transcendent power over the scene. Depending on the length of the filmic exposure, the scene is filled with an intense glow like the domestic interiors of Vermeer or, at other intervals, light that feels hollowed out, but solid, like the lighting in Edward Hopper’s paintings. Sometimes the light coming from the lantern is more dispersed and seems incapable of lighting the space. But at other times the light is so immense and bright that it seems like it could burn a hole through the film stock as light overwhelms the entirety of the scene. But, (alas?) this is all an illusion. The actual light in the space is unchanging. The single light source did not flicker or glow for any of the people who were in the room during the film’s creation (including Gehr). At the time of the filming, they were unaware of the actual magic captured on celluloid in the Bolex.

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Wait has a very distinctive color palette, in spite of the extreme variances in light. Gehr used outdoor color film stock because he wanted to shoot in color, but he wanted to mute the effect color plays in allowing the visual perceptual system to distinguish between objects. Gehr explained, “…colors tend to identify and segregate objects from one another, and in this case I didn’t want to give any particular importance to any particular object. I wanted everything in the overall picture to have equal value.”

Gehr wanted to do something similar to what Cezanne did in his paintings. He wanted to push objects typically perceived (and depicted) at varying distances to a single plane. For Gehr, this is another important tool that shows viewers that they are watching a constructed two-dimensional image, not an actual representation. Meanwhile, the film object subsumes the visual experience and betrays any attempts to view the film through a strict narrative lens. As Gehr said to MacDonald, “I was interested in neutralizing the primary focus in cinema: the human figure. I wanted to pay attention to other things as well as the human figure.” The viewer can choose to focus on any aspect of the film, but if the focus is only on the domestic drama and the figures, the real magic will be missed. Wherever the viewer focuses their attention, the work holds majestic sway. Filmmaker and scholar Wheeler Dixon writes, “Coupled with the use of slow zooms, pans, time exposures, and straight shots without the ‘flicker effect,’ Gehr produced a completely new visual look for the new American cinema.”

These early films by Gehr are key examples of his fascination with the structure of the cinematic illusion, finding ways to reveal the instrument of film’s creation in overt, yet subtly beautiful ways. Their inclusion in a show of conceptual art seems problematic in that these works

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44 MacDonald, Critical Cinema, 367.
45 Ibid.
exist outside the stated purpose of the *Information* show. These works question their material construction the same way painters had questioned the material construction of painting since Cezanne. This is not to say that these early works are not conceptually challenging; it is to say that their primary modality is toward self-reflexivity. *Information* brought Gehr’s work to MoMA and its audience and did so in a gallery setting. MoMA hosted theatre screenings of Gehr’s films in the years since, although Gehr’s work would not again be shown outside the theaters at MoMA until 2002.
Chapter 2: MoMA on Wheels and Navigation

From June 29, 2002 to September 27, 2004, while the 53rd Street location of The Museum of Modern Art underwent a significant expansion and renovation designed by Japanese architect Yoshio Taniguchi, museum operations and exhibitions were relocated to the former Swingline Staples factory in Long Island City, Queens. The temporary space was dubbed MoMA QNS. During this time MoMA’s Department of Film and Media would have to limit its usual robust programming schedule owing to the lack of theater space at MoMA QNS. Film screenings took place instead at the Gramercy Theatre on 23rd Street in Manhattan. In order to maintain a departmental presence in the new space, multiple film works were projected in the lobby, including *Navigating the Void* (2002) by Melinda Morey, *Thisplace* (2001-02) by Pia Lindman, and a selection of films shot in New York by Edwin Porter, Irving Browning, Jay Leyda, and Helen Levitt. Director of the Department, Mary Lea Bandy, asked Ernie Gehr to create a work meant to be included in the lobby offering. In response Gehr created two video works, *MoMA on Wheels* (2002) and *Navigation* (2002). Gehr admits that he offered Bandy *Navigation* (originally titled *Modern Navigation*) in case she did not like *MoMA on Wheels*.

After seeing them, Bandy requested both. Gehr chose to present *MoMA on Wheels* over the ticket desk and *Navigation* in an adjacent lobby area Gehr liked because of the unique lighting conditions. The works remained on view in the MoMA QNS lobby through November 30, 2002.

MoMA on Wheels

*MoMA on Wheels* presents a wide-angle shot of MoMA’s old 53rd Street entrance from a low angle (Figs. 7 and 8). The camera is tilted up slightly, situated on the ground across the street, but still seemingly in the street. A dull aluminum grey column bisects the vertical axis of the screen,

47 Gehr, in discussion with author, June 10, 2015.
breaking the space in left and right halves, and providing a matte surface that does not reflect the camera and creator the way the glass doors to the left and right of the column would have.

Although the entrance is the fixation point for the camera for the entirety of the 12.05-minute continuous shot, it is rarely seen uncovered by the endless westbound vehicular and meandering pedestrian traffic on 53rd Street. The effect is such that vehicles overwhelm the screen, sometimes streaking across in bursts, sometimes idling in the frame for some time, creating a rhythm that resembles purposeful editing. Imagine placing your head on the pavement just out of harm’s way on a busy one-way street, so close to the cars that you can smell, even taste their exhaust fumes. Although projected silently at MoMA QNS, the work’s soundtrack is diegetic, but immense, because of the close proximity of the microphone to the automobiles. Wheels take up the entire screen and then inch out of the picture, yielding to the undercarriage of a commercial truck, then a cab, then a sedan, then another cab. There are brief breaks from vehicles and a long line of museumgoers can be seen to the right. Other people streak through the frame, determined to get to Fifth Avenue; a few people linger outside the museum entrance, some looking nowhere in particular with bored anticipation of a companion’s arrival; others look like confused tourists, not sure if they are walking North or West or even what street they are on. At times cars and trucks sit idle in the screen and pedestrians’ feet can be seen cut off at the shins, disembodied shoes offering the only access to space across the street. The presence or absence of cars continually obliterate and open the illusion of space created by the camera. The action of the cars and pedestrians are somewhat predetermined by the linearity of the street and sidewalk, but the tight framing never allows the viewer to fully grasp the scene. The sound of an engine sometimes belies an approaching commercial truck, but the frame only registers an old blue Buick’s rear wheel. The video is enthralling because of how the seemingly familiar subject
matter is transformed by the camera's unique viewpoint, where location and object are discernable, but never entirely so.

On the surface, the conceptual conceit of MoMA on Wheels seems overt and obvious. The title is a pun about the transitory period for MoMA, and by projecting the video above the ticket desk at MoMA QNS it connects the new space to MoMA’s permanent home in Manhattan. Film scholar Ken Eisenstein points out, the placement of the work made it feel as if, “…the 53rd Street location had been scooped up by a gigantic excavator and left to levitate inside the new location, greeting the public with a familiar face that also reminded them of where they were not.”

Considering that MoMA on Wheels was presented in an interstitial space, the work was probably viewed in these terms by most visitors queuing for tickets, while maintaining conversations and anticipating their turn in line, sometimes gazing high above their heads, a perspective that emphasized the low camera angle and added to the enormity of the feel of the vehicles on screen (Figs. 9 and 10). Viewed in distracted, brief glances, the work holds power in its seeming simplicity.

In Gehr’s work, this sort of simplicity and accessibility is often present, but it is rarely the entire story. For example, Gehr’s thematic interest in automobiles in motion is on spectacular view here. He created multiple automobile films prior to MoMA on Wheels, including Shift (1972-74) and Transparency (1969). In fact, Transparency uses the same low-angle camera set-up at the edge of the road as MoMA on Wheels, but to wildly different effect. In Transparency, Gehr positions the camera at the edge of the West Side Highway, where vehicles move at much faster speeds (outside of rush hour, when pedestrians could outpace cars). By manipulating the speed of the film, the speeding cars register, variously, as either solid physical structures or

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spectral, abstracted streaks of color on screen. In his interview with MacDonald, Gehr says, “The incredible combustion and explosion of forms, shapes, and colors are the result of a cross between the constant speed of the projector and the variable speed at which the images were recorded. Were that not the case, we would end up with just footage of cars passing in front of the screen.” In *MoMA on Wheels* we just have cars passing in front of the screen. Digital video technology captures the images of the vehicles as solid structures even at their fastest. Gehr does not manipulate or try to undermine this quality of digital technology, but instead uses it dramatically, to emphasize the presence and the heft of the vehicles.

Gehr also employs distinct framing as a device, using formal tactics, which require the viewer to explore the perimeter of the rectangular picture plane. He pushes viewers to the edge as a constant reminder that the images onscreen are illusions taking place in a constructed space. Moreover, everything about the filmic experience is an illusion and Gehr requires the viewer to acknowledge this through subtle perceptual reminders like this. *MoMA on Wheels* forces the viewer’s attention to the left- and rightmost portions of the screen because the tightness of the frame is such that the entirety of the cars cannot be viewed. There is also a dynamic push-pull effect between the bottom of the frame, since so much of the “action” takes place at the bottom third of the screen where wheels and feet are constantly turning over, and the top of the frame, where the image of the car rarely extends above the door handle until it gives way to the building’s doorway.

Let us unpack the significance of the conceptual conceit of the film: the transference of the image of the Museum in its native setting to its new home in Queens, or what Ken Eisenstein called the “familiar face” that reminded MoMA QNS visitors “where they were not.” By

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reminding visitors that they were at MoMA, but they were not at MoMA, Gehr is stepping into some interesting philosophical territory. It should be noted here that the old entrance of MoMA as the subject of focus could also be seen as another one of Gehr’s attempts, like framing, to remind the viewer that the image is a constructed one: the entrance no longer exists, but neither does the image as an object; it is just digitally encoded light. Through inventive editing, exposure length, or digital manipulation, Gehr frequently attempts to break the illusion of objective physical presence cinema creates. In *MoMA on Wheels* he uses the translocation of a familiar architectural space to achieve a similar effect.

During the rebuilding phase, MoMA was being transformed, growing and changing, but somehow staying the same, staying MoMA. It could be thought of as the Ship of Theseus. The rebirth of MoMA was taking place on 53rd St, while the artwork and employees were temporarily relocated to Queens. Therefore MoMA “existed” in two places at once. Gehr’s use of the Museum’s former entrance highlights this temporal and relative identity disconnection and therefore begs the question, what is The Museum of Modern Art? MoMA is no stranger to identity crises like this and has, since its founding, sought ways to be innovative while holding onto what the institution deems historically significant. Gehr highlights this institutional identity conflict by using the old entrance in the new, but temporary, space. Not only are the viewers confronted with “where they are not,” but they are also being asked to question where they actually are.

After his brief description of the MoMA QNS works, Ken Eisenstein posits, almost in passing, that “the question of whether *MoMA on Wheels* could be wheeled into any other locale

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without losing some of its flavor is a compelling one.”\textsuperscript{51} It was within this alternate scenario that I was fortunate to have a private viewing of \textit{MoMA on Wheels}. I saw the work in the plush Time Warner Screening Room located in MoMA’s Cullman Education Building on 54\textsuperscript{th} Street. The meta-viewing experience of watching the work in a theater in the newest MoMA building, at a time when MoMA is planning another vast expansion project, was not lost on me. How does the work play in this (or any other) new location? The work certainly has merit and power outside of its originally intended context, and even viewed at eye-level, the work continues to overwhelm and challenge. It would be great to see it in the current Film Entrance lobby or, better yet, after the new round of expansion is completed, high overhead above a sleek, new ticket desk.

\textbf{Navigation}

\textit{Navigation} (2002) is a two-channel work composed of uninterrupted, fixed shots of the Open Sea space at Monterey Bay Aquarium in Monterey, California (Figs. 11 and 12). A deep blue light illuminates the multitude of sea life behind a 90-foot window, and the entire screen is filled by this constructed aquatic landscape. The overall image is dark, but the lighting makes the shiny, silverfish skin pop out onscreen. Pacific sardines, bonitos, and bluefin tuna swim in large schools back and forth through the scene. Occasionally, a green sea turtle (the star attraction), swims into the picture, eliciting excitement among the aquarium-goers: cameras flash and shadows of arms point toward the creature. These videos were projected silently at MoMA QNS, but an audio track included with the video file features the diegetic, low chatter of visitors punctuated by audible “oohs” and “aahs.” Enthusiastic commands such as “look at the turtle” or “take a picture” can also be heard, virtually recommending where the video’s viewers should train their gaze.

\textsuperscript{51} Eisenstein, 31.
Even as the aquarium’s sightseers’ voices register clearly, their physical forms are recorded as faceless black masses. They are mere shadows inhabiting the mid foreground of the image. Their silhouetted presence automatically affords the video the effect of having two different marked planes, enhanced by the location of the video’s presentation in MoMA QNS. Gehr likely situated his work in the lobby space, above a pedestrian ramp, so that the shadows of MoMA’s visitors would cast themselves onto the recorded projection, creating a new and distinct layer of imagery (Figs. 13 and 14).

This conceit also, in a way, rendered Gehr’s work as interactive. It came to be viewed as an impromptu shadow play over an existing, cleverly recorded one. The two separate channels were projected next to each other, with first channel projected into the corner of two walls and the second projected to the right of first, sharing a wall, and creating the illusion of a continuous, yet distorted image across the two walls. The first channel has a running time of 13.03 minutes, and the second, 12.40 minutes. The subject matter is the same in both channels with the majestic, azure aquatic environment filling the screen, interrupted by shadowy figures, both in transit and in moments of pause. And yet, there are marked differences between the two channels, the most notable being the difference in camera position in each. In the first channel, the camera is at a further remove, out of the way of most aquarium visitors. The effect is that people are cast into shadow, and they appear small and unimposing. The figures pass in front of the camera, entering the image from right to left for the most part, frequently stopping to enjoy the exhibit, only to resume again. Their dark silhouettes move slowly, seemingly unaware of the camera recording their movements.

In the second channel, the camera is closer to the aquarium’s glass and nearer to the course of the spectator’s travel. Owing to the camera position, the viewer is made to feel like an
obstacle to the pedestrian traffic flow. The shadowy figures move close to the camera and sometimes their hulking forms engulf the entirety of the frame and black out the image. In the first channel, only a child breaks the fourth wall, gesturing toward the camera. In the second channel, this happens multiple times. A few visitors twist their posture, expressing a hint of hostility toward the camera. People also enter the frame from behind the camera, creating a tinge of menace as they appear. Even when the forms move perpendicular to the camera, they do so a few feet from the lens, appearing as colossal shadows. The proximity of the camera to the aquarium surface also adds to the size and sharpness of the fish on screen. The increased physical presence of both the fish and the shadows compresses the illusion of depth between the two, and the fish can even appear to subsume spatial supremacy in the foreground of the image. The differences between the two channels of Navigation are often subtle and are not easy to recognize at first; they might even go unnoticed by most viewers. Still, these differences add to the depth and feel of the work as a two-channel projection. The content of the two channels remain similar enough to create a tight visual cohesion, but it is the slight differences that creates dynamic tension and makes the work all the more duplicitous. As a whole, Navigation expresses a simple, aesthetic elegance. It is easy to get lost in the beauty of the aquatic life or the play of shadowy forms or the interplay between the two.

Independent film scholar Fred Camper posted his initial thoughts about the MoMA QNS displays of MoMA on Wheels and Navigation to FrameWorks, a forum for experimental film, and later shared an updated version on his personal website. He writes that Navigation is “…dark and mysterious, and seemed to me to be a witty and even slightly ironic comment on museum going and art viewing in museums, which interpretation Gehr confirms was part of his intent.”52

Gehr’s intention appears evident, but has multiple layers to it that are touched on, but not entirely explored, by Camper. By documenting spectators in an aquarium, Gehr highlights some stereotypical associations viewers may have about the attraction and its audience, namely that it provides family-friendly entertainment for the working class. Contrast that with the stereotype of visitors to a modern art museum as affluent and sophisticated. A key feature of both attractions is that similar types of working-class families slough through faceless crowds on a focused path with the aim of “seeing” spectacle. And because of the density of crowds in these spaces, the act of looking becomes secondary to the act of navigation.

Crowds certainly can make viewing art in popular museum spaces trying and difficult. Camper takes care to point out that MoMA QNS has a “circus-tent atmosphere,” drawing yet another crowded, spectacle-driven enterprise into the conversation. Museum crowds may or may not have a different demographic composition from those at circuses or aquariums, but navigating multitudes in any space renders people as faceless, anonymous shadows. As George, from famed British art duo Gilbert & George, rebutted, when asked in an interview if he had visited a particular museum show, ““Never! Why would I want to join a long line of middle-class twits? We want to see the world as it is, naked.” George is having a laugh, but he is also characterizing the museum experience in the same way I believe Camper wants Gehr to with Navigation. In an astute passage, typical of Camper’s writing, he elaborates on how he finds both MoMA on Wheels and Navigation to be ironic statements of this sort:

Both installations suggest the intrusiveness that others can have as they move through one's field of vision, something that one is especially likely to be aware of in an art museum, but that is a common phenomenon in urban environments. Their placement in a museum space, where crowds also move similarly, helps intensify one's concentration on the strange and multifarious implications of the movements of people in public spaces, a concentration that one can continue on

one's own in the Museum's galleries, in which cluttered spaces it's often difficult to look at art without being aware of the presence of fellow-humans.  

Although Camper’s inclusion of *MoMA on Wheels* in this characterization is arguable, he undoubtedly taps into a foundational idea Gehr had in mind while making *Navigation*. In museum spaces, interlopers often interrupt attempts at prolonged looking. The aforementioned “cluttered spaces” and “presence of fellow-humans” can make the museum experience “difficult,” but their presence can add “strange and multifarious implications” and dimensions to the experience and to the works on view. Gehr revels in the many ways spectators contribute additional dimensionality to spectacle. He makes their movements the central theme of the piece. The shadowy forms of spectators are the stars of *Navigation*, while the spectacle that captivates them remains partially obstructed for the viewer.

Gehr’s deliberate use of shadow also draws attention to theoretical ideas about the nature of movies. In his book *The Power of Movies: How Screen and Mind Interact*, philosopher Colin McGinn explores the similarities between movies and shadows, writing, “True, shadows result from the absence of light rather than its presence, but they are still creatures of light—weightless, projected from a light source, substantial, flat, and changeable. Your shadow is very much like a photographic image of you thrown onto a screen.” Gehr is throwing shadows onto the screen and inviting MoMA QNS visitors to do the same thing with their own shadows. He is calling attention to the idea that movies are only sophisticated forms of shadow play. The shadows onscreen and the shadows of the visitors are made from and exist through the same sorts of immaterial materiality. As McGinn puts it, “The movie image incorporates a dematerializing transformation—a process that subtracts the meat of the body and replaces it with splashes of

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54 Camper, [http://fredcamper.com/Film/Gehr2.html](http://fredcamper.com/Film/Gehr2.html) (accessed December 1, 2015).
light. The material is thereby rendered immaterial.” Gehr uses shadows projected (and cast) to remind the viewer that the video is not constituted of physical form, but is merely projected light. Those physical manifestations are merely illusions. They never existed. All that has ever existed onscreen is the presence or absence of light. Shadows and their importance to early and pre-cinema will be explored at length in Chapter 4, when we look at the 2015 exhibition Carnival of Shadows.

And while shadows feature prominently in Navigation, Gehr’s choice of the aquarium as setting also opens up a different set of considerations along the lines of those made by contemporary, analytic aesthetic philosophers. The associations between art and aesthetic beauty are so essential to the development of philosophy of art that the study is commonly known as aesthetics. However, philosophy of art and aesthetic beauty were not thought of as synonymous in classic philosophy. In fact, much classic philosophical writing refers to aesthetic principles of art or nature interchangeably. (A few important exceptions exist, such as David Hume and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.) Although a key feature of both nature and art is aesthetic beauty, in many cases the aesthetic quality of nature transcends that of art. Therefore, philosophical definitions of art, which position aesthetic features as a necessary condition, called aesthetic functionalism, must also stress the artificiality of art. American philosopher Monroe Beardsley offers a definition of this sort, writing that an artwork is: “either an arrangement of conditions intended to be capable of affording an experience with marked aesthetic character or (incidentally) an arrangement belonging to a class or type of arrangements that is typically intended to have this capacity.”

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56 Ibid., 64.
underscore the necessity of the hand of a creator in differentiating aesthetic objects in nature from artworks. I should note here that some contemporary philosophers, such as Noël Carroll, attempt to bring 20th-century avant-garde art movements, many of which are decidedly non-aesthetic and sometimes even anti-aesthetic, into the contemporary philosophical discourse around art, and therefore reject aesthetic functionalist definitions such as Beardsley’s outright.59

For the purposes of this paper, the important elements to keep in mind are how both art and nature have aesthetic features in common, and definitions of art that rely on aesthetic features as a necessary constituent must also differentiate art from nature by adding a second necessary condition, a creator. In *Navigation*, Gehr challenges both premises of aesthetic functionalism. By using sea life as the backdrop, he is calling attention to nature as another domain where aesthetic beauty is relevant and, feasibly, most prevalent. The transference of these images via video projection into MoMA QNS challenges the aesthetic supremacy or potency of the canonized and fetishized art objects in the nearby galleries. *Navigation* challenges the second premise by using an aquarium as a backdrop. An aquarium is a constructed, artificial environment intended to provide an opportunity to appreciate aesthetic beauty. It fuses aesthetic beauty and artificiality and seems to fulfill the necessary conditions of Beardsley’s definition, thereby serving as a counter-example of sorts.

Ultimately, *Navigation* is aesthetically beautiful, but this beauty is not what defines the work. Gehr does not use the beauty of the environment to elicit feelings of awe or sense of wonder (the way the aquarium does), but to disarm the idea that art needs to do so. Art offers a unique mode of seeing, aesthetic or otherwise, and the way Gehr purposely calls attention to the

artificiality of film and video here is something that often defines his work. He emphasizes the artifice, enticing the viewer to recognize the unique mode of experience offered by moving images. In *Navigation* he wants the viewer to recognize the artificiality of experience, not only in the individual artworks, but in The Museum of Modern Art itself.
Chapter 3: Panoramas of the Moving Image

Panoramas of the Moving Image: Mechanical Slides and Dissolving Views from Nineteenth-Century Magic Lantern Shows, Ernie Gehr’s first solo installation show at The Museum of Modern Art, was on view from September 12, 2007- March 10, 2008 on two different levels in The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1 and 2 Lobby Galleries. Having organized the installation of MoMA on Wheels and Navigation in 2002, Film Department Director Mary Lee Bandy originally commissioned this show as well.60 However, Bandy retired in 2005 before the show could be realized. In her absence, Department of Film Curator Jytte Jensen, and then Assistant Curator Ron Magliozzi, organized the show in collaboration with Gehr.

The central work in the show is Panoramas of the Moving Image: Mechanical Slides and Dissolving Views from Nineteenth-Century Magic Lantern Shows (2005), a multi-channel video work that features magic lantern slides in motion. Magic lanterns were a form of pre-cinema projectors that were popular in Europe since the 18th Century, which used focused light to project images on painted glass onto a blank wall. As lantern displays advanced they began to incorporate motion through mechanical means and cycling between multiple lenses. Sometimes the illusion of motion is seamless and other times Gehr emphasizes the mechanical nature of the movement onscreen by pushing the figures beyond the range of motion that maintains the illusion. The far left channel of the piece continually reminds the viewer of the constructed nature of the images in motion, displaying the mechanical slides from behind and at a remove so that the viewer can see the many levers, gears, and pulleys that allow the image the appearance of realized motion. This work reads like a documentary about how motion was created in the pre-cinema era, and some of the historical objects included in the show give the entire show the

60 Amy Taubin, "The Last Picture Show?: The Survival of Film in the Digital Age," Artforum 54, no. 2 (November 2015), 300.
sense that it is best suited for educational purposes. While Gehr, himself a longtime educator, would seem happy to offer an opportunity to share the history of pre-cinema, the video works and associated ephemera also serve a philosophical function, one that has troubled philosophers for as long as these objects have existed.

The show was introduced on the ground level in the Ronald S. and Jo Carole Lauder Building lobby, where visitors were greeted a bright blue painted wall, featuring screened yellow wall text for the show next to a poster for the 1905 French film *La poule aux oeufs d'or* (The Hen That Laid the Golden Eggs) (Fig. 15). The film is a masterpiece of early fantasy by Gaston Velle. And while the film itself was not on view, the poster art, painted by Brazilian-born, French-based illustrator Cândido Aragonez de Faria, captures all its humor and oddness. It features a giant hen at the center and a man pouring gold coins from a cracked egg into a smiling woman’s outstretched apron. The color palette complemented the color of the wall and wall text for the show, and also established a playful tone at the outset. The film itself features characters performing rudimentary behavioral motions and gestures—carrying objects, wagging their fingers and one might imagine its presence, conjured through the poster, serving as a reminder of the future trajectory of the pre-cinematic developments explored in the show. And in fact, an adjacent wall in the lobby space presented a photo enlargement of one of the magic lantern slides, a blue demonic looking satyr, cartoonish enough to be welcoming, but with a hint of threat.

Downstairs, featured in the Titus 2 lobby, were pre-cinema objects from the private collection of David Francis, including zoetrope strips and marvelous, colorful patterned
Phenakistoscope discs.61 There were also photo enlargements of objects from Gehr’s collection, including the following (Figs. 16 and 17):

- Multiple thaumatropes. Thaumatropes are discs with images on either side attached to string so that when the string is twisted the images appear to merge into one image.62
- A zoetrope. Zoetropes use picture strips placed into a circular drum, which is spun. The use of paper strips made it easy for the user to create their own strips or overlap existing paper strips to generate unique moving pictures.63
- A magic lantern projector. (I will go into further detail about magic lanterns below.)
- A phenakistiscope. Phenakistiscopes use discs with images that, when spun cyclically and viewed in a mirror, create the illusion of continuous motion.64

Phenakistiscopes, zoetropes, and thaumatropes are part of a group of objects referred to as “philosophical toys,” which became popular in 19th century households, but which were originally intended for use by scientists to prove perceptual theories, including those that claim these toys prove the “persistence of vision,”65 the optical illusion wherein distinct individual images are put into motion and perceptually blend into one continuous image. Scientists no longer consider persistence of vision a viable theory of apparent motion, although it still persists as somewhat controversial area of fascination for film studies.66 For our purposes we can be agnostic about its conceptual usefulness. What is important is that these pre-cinematic objects also help build Gehr’s thesis for the overarching show: that motion picture technology is not

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61 Collector Robert Bowen lent two phenakistoscope discs.
64 Huhtamo, Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 50.
65 For a detailed account of how these objects were used to influence perceptual theory of the time see Jonathan Crary, Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 97-136.
better as film or digital, just different. All of these objects exploit the perceptual apparatus, and this drive to create illusions of motion is key.

Dutch scholar Christiaan Huygens is widely credited with creating the first magic lantern in the mid 17th century. Magic Lanterns are optical boxes, usually wooden, meant to house a light source inside, and a glass slide would be placed at the end of a lens protruding from the enclosed space. The light would project the image from the slide onto a blank wall. Magic lanterns are believed to be the first projector. This form was widely used throughout Europe until the popularization of film cinema early in the 20th century. Magic lantern technology advanced through the years. Individual slides became complex mechanical devices which, when manipulated, created the illusion of motion. In the 1850s multiple lenses and shutter systems were added within the same lantern box, making it possible to create the illusion of a serial sequence of images. Soon after side-by-side double lanterns with special shutters that made the illusion of gradual “dissolving views” possible became popular.

Gehr uses both mechanical slides and longer dissolving views in Panoramas of the Moving Image. Visitors are introduced to the illusion of motion created by magic lanterns with an untitled 15-minute long video, looping on two monitors, side by side, across from the philosophical toy ephemera and photographs (Fig. 18). This video provides context for the nearby ephemera. The two monitors feature projections of the magic lantern slides in motion, edited versions of pieces on view in the main multi-channel work. The title is borrowed from a magic lantern slide included in both video works, which features a sleeping man opening and closing his mouth, the snoring is almost audible, only to have a rat run across the bed and climb

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68 Mannoni, 33.
into his gaping mouth, over and over again.

In the Titus 1 lobby, one level below, there are more zoetrope strips on view. The centerpiece of the show, Gehr’s *Panoramas of the Moving Image: Mechanical Slides and Dissolving Views from Nineteenth-Century Magic Lantern Shows*, a synchronous, five-channel video installation work of roughly 15 minutes, was projected along a single, long uninterrupted black painted wall (Figs. 19-24).\(^70\) The videos are composed of a total 87 magic lantern and dissolving view slides in motion.\(^71\) Recognized collector David Francis provided some of the source slides, but most came from Gehr’s own personal collection.\(^72\) Gehr told me that he started collecting magic lantern slides when he happened upon them at the New York Photographic Historical Society convention meetings near Penn Station during the 1970s, when he would go there to look for photography equipment.\(^73\)

The leftmost channel reveals how the mechanisms work, exposing the guts of the mechanical lantern slides to expose how the pins and pulleys and complex slide mechanism conjoin to create the illusion of motion. Often these pieces require multiple people, three or four hands, to make the image move in proper sequence. This channel is a constant reminder of how the magic of motion is created in the other four main channels to its right: at times, certain specific slides from this channel are later revealed as animations in the other channels.

Each of these four main channels cycles through approximately twelve sequences of magic lantern slides and dissolving views in motion. While the subject of each slide in each

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\(^70\) Gehr also created an edited, 19-minute single channel video projection of this work titled *19th Century Mechanical Magic Lantern Slides & Dissolving Views* (2009).


\(^73\) Gehr, discussion with author, July 15, 2015.
sequence is autonomous, the channels are thematically linked, and the pacing and duration of each sequence is by and large synchronized across the channels.

The first sequence of slides feature figures in silhouette in three channels, and a fully realized image of an old witch, not in silhouette, in the rightmost channel. The silhouetted figures in the leftmost channel are on parade, moving from left to right onscreen. But this is no ordinary parade, it is a demonic procession: silhouettes of turtles, birds, bugs and bunnies share space with decapitated women and grotesque giraffes. Simultaneously, the second channel presents a figure in a hat dancing on a stage, under a curtain. Timed to coincide with the movement to its left, the figure moves his feet slightly at first, building in more complexity, until his movement is so exaggerated that his legs end up above his head and the silhouette of the slide mechanism is rendered visible. Concurrently, the third channel features a silhouetted figure doing bar gymnastics in a savannah, twisting and turning over what appears to be a stump; again its pacing is set against the channels to its left. The far right channel features a witch conjuring different demons from a cauldron, who appear one by one in the steam coming from the pot, only to disappear above the witch’s head and then reappear in the steam above her. This sequence gives way to a second sequence of slides across all channels that change colors while the images remain static. In the far left channel, the color of clothing changes; in the second projection grapes change from grey to green to purple; in the right-center projection a butterfly morphs through a psychedelic palette; and in the rightmost projection, a vase and its content of flowers change colors over time.

Midway through the run of sequences, three channels present a long form dissolving view, where idyllic towns or country settings change from day to night, summer to snowy winter, and back again. Meanwhile, the far-right channel offers a playful gymnast in silhouette whose
legs move wildly as the figure flips around the screen. At other points there are colorful kaleidoscopic forms spinning wildly across all four channels. One sequence is laugh-out-loud funny: a man in the left-center channel amuses his family by training his dog to hold a pipe in its mouth, while in the right-center channel, a fiddler plays while his dog hops up and down on his hind legs. Other sequences entail multiple animations of the solar system and boats crossing rough seas. There is an animation of a clown being eaten by a large wolf that appears from an impossibly small pot, and another of a stereotypical cartoon portrayal of a Chinese man whose head pops off and re-attaches.

*Panoramas of the Moving Image* offers a statement on technology in flux. The depiction of the disassembly of the outdated apparatus of creation speaks to the way digital technology is today making antiquated and quaint the original film technologies. These pre-cinema lanterns and slides had hundreds of years of history but were rendered obsolete when the cinema of Edison came along. Gehr is sensitive to this change, but he is not bemoaning the death of celluloid. He is embracing the digital medium and using it to call attention to historical parallels with pre-cinema mechanisms and their irrelevance after the advent of cinema. Digital technology offers a means for cheaper and easier means of presentation than film. *Panoramas of the Moving Image* itself could have been made as a film work, but the associated costs would have been significantly higher. As the quality of digital picture technology improves, it displaces the use of film. But it is important to note that digital technology provides an altogether different form of moving image experience from film. This is not unlike the different moving image experience at the beginning of film technology as it displaced the pre-cinema devices Gehr uses. Each technology has its perks and idiosyncrasies. There exists a myth that somehow we arrived in the digital age and we are all better for it. Gehr examines how we are in a period of transition from
one technology to another. Digital technology has qualities that are unique, but so does film, and so do magic lantern projections and philosophical toys. They all operate on a fundamental perceptual trickery, which has long troubled philosophers and been an object of fascination for Gehr.

The show was originally slated to run three months, but was extended to five, then six months. However, for a show of this duration at a major New York arts institution, there was relatively limited press coverage or critical response, though, however, was positive. In a brief review for the Village Voice in October 2007, J. Hoberman proclaimed that the show was a “revelation.” He also included the work in his top ten films of 2007, contending, “MoMA should make it permanent.” There was also a brief 300-word review by Colby Chamberlain in Artforum. Chamberlain wrote, “It is at first surprising that this cluttered bric-a-brac of Victorian culture, rife with ornament and oafish caricatures, could inform a decidedly modern sensibility… their basic manipulations of light suggest the groundwork for Gehr’s examination of film’s structural properties.” And finally, Rachel Saltz wrote an affirmative, albeit very short review for the show in the New York Times in January 2008. It is typically harder to generate press coverage for experimental film, since the films have historically been shown in small non-profit spaces. In this case, Gehr has created a work of art that is not experimental in that it is abstract or difficult to follow. Rather, the work speaks for itself and is easy to access and derive pleasure from, but it is not the type of larger-than-life spectacle that will draw crowds.

I listed these few brief press reviews as a means to another end altogether. Around the time of *Panoramas of the Moving Image*, The Museum of Modern Art also commissioned two major spectacle-driven video art pieces that drew significant press coverage and critical acclaim. One was *Doug Aitken: SleepWalkers*, January 16 through February 12, 2007, which was co-commissioned by Creative Time, a New York based non-profit arts organization that produces public art projects around the globe; the other was *Pipilotti Rist: Pour Your Body Out (7354 Cubic Meters)* from November 19, 2008 to February 2, 2009. *SleepWalkers* comprised videos of recognizable figures such as actors Tilda Swinton and Donald Sutherland, and musician Cat Power. These aesthetically beautiful character studies were projected onto multiple facades of the museum in the evenings during the run. A *New York Times* art critic called the show “both dazzling and a bit bloodless.”\(^{77}\) *Pour Your Body Out (7354 Cubic Meters)* was featured in the large second-floor atrium which, as referenced in Rist’s title, occupies 7354 cubic meters of space in the museum building. Rist created a dreamlike environment in every meter of the space. At the center was a giant circular blue couch surrounded by an overwhelming multi-walled projection. In her *New York Times* review, Karen Rosenberg said that Rist “has turned the atrium into an enchanted space, or at the very least an inviting one.”\(^{78}\) Klaus Biesenbach, MoMA’s current Chief Curator at Large and Director of MoMA PS1, the Museum’s sister contemporary art space in Long Island City, Queens, curated both exhibitions, though at the time he was serving as Chief Curator of the Department of Media.\(^{79}\)


\(^{79}\) Video art had historically been the domain of the Film Department, which was later renamed the Department of Film and Media. In 2006, the Museum established an autonomous Department of Media, which expanded to the title of Media and Performance Art in 2009.
In *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, film scholar Erika Balsom declares that both “installations testify to the extent to which the moving image has been recruited as part of the ongoing becoming-entertainment of art that conceives of the museum-going experience as exhilarating, fun, and devoid of antagonism.”  

These works are prime examples of a type of art created as spectacle-based entertainment meant to appeal to the broadest ranging audiences. They are not meant to engage the viewer critically, but offer an environment that overwhelms them, or at least offers them a unique mode of viewing, something communal like a theater, but liberated from viewing conditions in theaters, where the spectator sits in a forward facing seat among rows of other captive spectators. Balsom contends, “*Sleepwalkers* and *Pour Your Body Out* indicate the extent to which the contemporary integration of cinema into the museum must be seen not only as a matter of protecting or commemorating an endangered institution, but also of mobilizing its accessibility and entertainment values in order to attract audiences.”

Regardless of the artistic merit of these works, MoMA presented these works in ways that reinforced their status as spectacles.

I happened upon a printed copy of a review in the MoMA Film Archives for *Panoramas of the Moving Image* that Ron Magliozzi saved for those files. It is from a blog attributed to Catalina Panoiu, still accessible online, but not active since 2007. She writes, “To an audience that demands visual stimulation created by means of the latest technologies, Gehr opposes themes taken from 19th century daily life, and preserves the nature of the imagery, while employing top of the line video tech.” I assume she means to say that Gehr uses the quaint 18th

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81 Balsom, 61.
and 19th century magic lantern technologies as subject matter because of their very quaintness. That is, magic lantern slides are limited to straightforward, simple narratives and most often display simple humorous activities enjoyable for the broadest range of people. However, the intended contemporary audience for Gehr’s work is accustomed to spectacular works that rely on 20th century cinematic conventions that were not available to magic lantern slide producers. Surely, Gehr demonstrates the possibility of dissolves with lanterns, but creating a digital dissolve is as easy as pushing a button or tapping a screen.

In a museum that often seeks out bigger and more extreme modes of presentation for video work, it is reassuring that there is also space for a moving image artist like Gehr, who chooses to focus on the historical corollaries and structural underpinnings of contemporary video. Gehr strips away the façade of artificiality, or better yet, he peels back its layers slowly, and if viewers are able to spend the necessary time and energy, the rewards can be greater than those from the larger than life video-based spectacles the museum uses to draw visitors and media attention.
Chapter 4: Carnival of Shadows

Ernie Gehr’s Carnival of Shadows opened at The Museum of Modern Art on November 21, 2015 and runs until April 30, 2016. The show occupied the same space in the museum as Panoramas of the Moving Image and in many ways built on that show’s philosophical and historical ideas. Associate Film Curator Ron Magliozzi, who also helped to organize Panoramas, together with Curatorial Assistant Sophie Cavoulacos, organized Carnival of Shadows in collaboration with Gehr.

The concept for this work, which came to Gehr while developing the installation for Panoramas, is developed around early paper cinema ephemera he had found 40 years prior. The centerpiece of the show is a five-channel video work, Carnival of Shadows (2012-2015), which uses the elongated paper strips illustrated with silhouetted drawings from early-20th-century shadowgraph toys, called ombres chinoises, as its source material. Each unique paper strip presents an element of an overarching six-strip sequence, and Gehr uses one narrative arc per channel, although his formal interventions ultimately eliminate any sense of narrative cohesion. In a second four-channel work, Street Scenes Panorama (2015), shown on three monitors seamlessly fitted together, Gehr allows the silhouetted figures on a busy street to move through the scene fundamentally unaltered. In addition to the video works, the show features the paper strips Gehr actually used to produce the video works; their outer packaging and other media featuring silhouettes, including paper media from Gehr’s and MoMA’s collection; a video of the German animator Lotte Reiniger’s 1922 Cinderella (Aschenputtel) and digital prints by Gehr which incorporate the gridded silhouetted imagery stills from the videos on a black background.

The show starts on the ground floor in the Lauder lobby, with the video work Street Scenes Panorama (Figs. 25 and 26). The 16-minute long, silent, black and white video work
serves as a kind of teaser for the rest of the show downstairs in the Titus 1 and Titus 2 film lobby galleries. Gehr blends four channels into one continuous image, sharing space across three monitors. Over a white background, thin, evenly spaced vertical black posts of an iron fence and eight street lanterns occupy the entire width of the mid-ground. The channel breaks are slightly noticeable because the rightmost posts move against the stationary posts that anchor the leftmost side of the succeeding channel. The texture of the paper is visible as a light grey surface, sliding across the white background. Silhouetted characters move from left to right onscreen, carrying out different activities in the foreground. Most of the animations are comical in nature: for example, a woman spraying a man with a hose, or a woman whose umbrella breaks repeatedly in the wind. The display captures the simple magic of movement that these paper toys must have created when viewed as they were intended. The work allows the viewer the opportunity to step back and view the scene a continuous whole. Gehr works to maintain this sense of completeness in the work, but at certain points in the video the entire scene resets, and new characters are found in different positions. The characters race in the far left channel only to disappear in the channel break; other moments find the far left channel devoid of characters altogether. In the following channels, characters slow to a stop or even reverse course slightly in the far right channel. However, these deviations do not break the overarching effect of continuity.

On the wall opposite Street Scenes Panorama is a postcard from MoMA’s collection titled Cakewalk Silhouette (1903). It features silhouetted Parisian figures dancing what now might bizarrely approximate “The Monster Mash” in exaggerated reclining posture with arms extended, giving the viewer a sense of an impending pirouette. To the right of the postcard is a full-page sheet featuring silhouettes from the German newspaper Münchener Bilderbogen (1850-1900), part of Gehr’s personal collection. The wall label refers to silhouettes as “humorous
shadow figures.” The silhouette at the top left depicts a person with a broken umbrella in a driving snowstorm. The caption reads *Ach, vergeblich ist die Müh’, ist kaputt das Parapluie.* (I’ve tried hard with no success, my umbrella is *kaput.* ) Another cartoon, second row, center, depicts two children holding forks behind their backs, staring at a big pot of dumplings. The caption reads *Welche Qual für jedes Kind, Wenn zu heiz die Gnödel sind.* (What agony for each child, if the dumplings are too hot). Most cartoons on the sheet are prime examples of *schaudenfreude,* pleasure derived from the suffering of another. The inclusion of the postcard and newspaper sheet give the museum visitor a historical context in which silhouettes emerged as a form of entertainment. Adjacent to the newspaper is a wall text featuring a quote by Gehr:

“In the eighteenth century the practice of silhouettes (a form of photography before photography) evolved in Europe. Out of this practice one sees a profusion of anecdotal serial shadow pictures appearing in European newspapers throughout the nineteenth century. It is this practice as well as interests in theatrical shadow plays, motion devices, and early film that eventually led to… the paper ‘films.’”

While the content of this large format silkscreened text quote offers the casual viewer a stated context for the nearby static works on view, it seems like an odd quote to use. Gehr says and writes many interesting things, but this is simply a matter-of-fact statement about the use of silhouettes in Europe. It might have been better deployed as an extended label text somewhere, and it is a shame that a quote that better captures Gehr’s trademark intelligent wit and humor was not used instead. Leaving criticisms of its strange placement aside, the quote does offer some insight into Gehr’s thought process in making these works. The paper films are unique objects combining ideas from different historical positions. Silhouettes were an alternative, inexpensive way of creating portraits and reproducing figures in print during the 18th and 19th centuries, before the advent of photography, although silhouettes were viewed as an important art form into the 20th century.83 Sometime between 1900-1905 the paper strips used for the show were

manufactured as children’s entertainment in France, well after the arrival of photography and cinema there. Shadow plays known as “Italian Shadows,” also known as *ombres chinoises*, were popular entertainment form in the 16th century as Italian showman performed throughout Europe. Beginning in 1772, noted performers such as François Dominique Séraphin used automated puppet silhouettes and backlit projection to create long form narratives onto a screen. The paper strips collected by Gehr are made on white paper stock that is thin enough to allow light through. The light would be set up behind the strip and as the strip moved across the solid bars of the cardboard set, the figures projected on a wall would appear to move.

The Titus 2 lobby gallery contains a series of conceptual photographs by Gehr. First is a single work, *Gulliver’s Travels* (2015), which features still images from the video projection (Fig. 27). The work is arranged in three rows, four frames across. The images are white on a black background. The picture is mounted on foam core and hung unframed, an inch from the wall. Occupying the wall opposite is *At the Circus* (2015), a grouping of five photographs, hung side by side, a few inches apart, that depicts a progression of images featuring two clowns attempting to move a stubborn mule (Fig. 28). The more they pull, the more the mule seems to resist. Each panel adheres to the same formal pictorial grid and white on black coloring as in *Gulliver’s Travels*. Gehr expressed reservations about including these works in the show, unsure how well they would work in the space. After multiple viewings I am certain they add to the exhibition. Gehr rearranges particular elements of the imagery, so the images presented are unique, and not actual video stills. Forms are broken or eliminated in ways that do not occur in the video works. *At the Circus* reveals how the illusion of motion is created in the video work, showing incremental frames in serial order. *Gulliver’s Travels* compresses the entire “narrative”

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85 Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion*, 44.
86 Gehr, in discussion with author, July 29, 2015.
sequence of the related video work into a single panel. Cinematic time is fixed at 18 or 24 frames per second, whereas photographic time is infinite. Serial photographic representations such as At the Circus allow Gehr to show 48 frames of a single sequence at once, or in Gulliver’s Travels 12 key frames from an entire piece all at once. Cinematic time is relentless and continually pushes forward. Photography is timeless, yet it is these single images that make up the entirety of the videos. In these two photo works, motion is highlighted by its very absence.

Each of the five channels in Carnival of Shadows has a different run time, but none lasts longer than 20 minutes (Figs. 29 and 30). The videos play asynchronously, offering a unique experience with each viewing. Each work depicts an autonomous scene: the leftmost channel is titled Gulliver’s Travels and depicts scenes from the novel by 18th century Irish writer Jonathan Swift; the left-center channel, Street Scenes, uses the same images as Street Scenes Panorama; the center channel, Carnival in Nice and the right center channel, Circus, both feature wild characters one would expect to find in an early 20th century carnivals and circuses; and the rightmost channel, John Sellery’s Tour of the World, follows the imaginings of the titular character’s sensational and often stereotypical vision of the world.

In conversation with film scholar Tom Gunning, Gehr mentioned that as a child, around eight or ten years of age, he remembers being fascinated with flipbooks: “As I was thumbing through the flipbook, I felt this little device was magical…. Here I could see, first of all, a moving image… and at the same time, also seeing sequential still images. This was phenomenal.” The similarities between the paper strips used in the creation of Carnival of Shadows and flipbooks are at once obvious, both being paper mediums that require direct tactical

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87 Only video works will be discussed for the remainder of the chapter. References to At the Circus and Gulliver’s Travels are to the video works with the same titles. Also while Carnival of Shadows has dual reference as the show title and the title of the work of the same name, from this point forward I will only be referring to the video work.

user input to create the illusion of pictorial motion. Although they are both paper mediums, however, the devices they use to create the illusion differ, with the flipbook layering successive images and the paper strips alternating between blocking and revealing pictorial elements. Gehr found the paper strips used for Carnival of Shadows in a Parisian store in 1974. He told Gunning “I was transfixed by them. I knew I wanted them…This was another cinema related to the flipbooks”

Gehr says he was interested in the way the images move between the positive and negative spaces, and moving the paper slowly or quickly allows for something unique, a different cinematic language.

These paper filmstrips are included in the Titus 1 gallery space alongside the video works (Figs. 31 and 32). The strips are framed together in a grid. The strips for Gulliver’s Travels and John Sellery’s Tour of the World use numbered explanatory French language titles to provide framework for the narrative imagery. Each of the six strips contains two different narrative elements. Roughly translated, the strips for Gulliver’s Travels follow this title sequence: 1. Shipwrecked on Liliput Island, he is tied down and transported in a vehicle 2. He becomes prisoner of an enemy fleet. 3. Gulliver's meal 4. Large reception in his honor 5. The march 6. Having found a rowboat abandoned by the fleet, he leaves his small friends. 7. Having landed, he is immediately chased by a giant 8. Gulliver dancing on the table 9. He is presented to the king 10. A frog nearly manages to capsize the rowboat 11. An eagle carries him 12. The eagle having let him fall, he is welcomed by sailors of his country. Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels has a long history in film, beginning with the 1939 Technicolor animation directed by David Fleischer, and recently with the 2010 Jack Black vehicle directed by Rob Letterman. And while Gehr’s version uses the narrative paper strips as source material for his Gulliver’s Travels, narrative continuity is relegated to the background to the point of insignificance (And, I contend, that the film still

89 Ibid.
manages to offer more humor and entertainment than a Jack Black movie.) Gehr’s *Gulliver’s Travels* is positioned leftmost of the five channels. There are some points in the work where narrative elements are clear, but narrative progression is abandoned in favor of formal invention. There are multiple breaks in the screen (Fig. 33). The top left portion and bottom left portion of the screen offer close-up portions of the central image, adding a sense of three-dimensionality. The characters appear and move at variable speeds, the figures are chopped and rotated and split by invisible and indiscriminate terminal points in the overall image. While the silhouetted figures become so distorted their form is almost unrecognizable, the mind is so keen to observe an identifiable objective form that a horse remains recognizable even though it is disassembled by Gehr’s formal interventions.

The left-center channel, *Street Scenes*, uses the same paper strip material as *Street Scenes Panorama* but the feel and look of the two works are entirely different. For much of *Street Scenes*, there is an invisible break in the center of the screen where figures grow from and appear like two-headed monsters or unrecognizable shapes. Gehr doubles the outer edges, which mirror each other facing center, and as the film progresses, the center section then mimics previous outer deviations. At times, Gehr tints vertical sections in blue. The color, the motion of characters, and the mirroring of imagery create a dynamic tension. The silhouetted figures appear at times to be violently colliding at some points and ripping each other apart at others. At times the image is void of figures and all that appears onscreen are vertical black bars moving slightly across the white background.

The center channel, *Carnival in Nice* has a vertical break about a quarter of the way from the left edge of the screen (Fig. 34). Characters appear offscreen right moving left until they disappear into this digital termination point. The other three quarters of the screen flips back and
forth, the expected left to right character orientation flipped opposite and back again. At some point this flipping stops, but the characters continue to collide at the invisible vertical axis point. Many of Gehr’s digital manipulations are subtle and it is hard to discern change. The silhouetted figures feature unique costumes of Carnival, including separate costumed characters with giant pig, rabbit, and duck heads, and even a figure blowing into the tail of a snake as if it is the mouthpiece of a saxophone. A remarkable sequence entails four characters riding a giant two-headed dragon, which is mirrored and doubled, until the dragon envelops the entire screen with its black form.

The right-center channel, *At the Circus*, features another grouping of zany characters, including a pig walking upright, a woman whose torso is wrapped by a snake, and dancing bears (Fig. 35). The center portion of the screen flips back and forth rapidly and the figures flip violently back into themselves. The flipping remains constant for the majority of the video. At times there remains enough space between the character and its double that the violence can be anticipated long before it occurs. There are very few overt violent activities portrayed onscreen, but the digital manipulations perpetrated by Gehr mangle the characters. When a shadow collides with another shadow there is no real harm, but the melding of forms generates new and surprising shapes.

The far right channel, titled *John Sellery’s Tour of the World*, has a different character from the others (Figs 36 and 37). As he does in *Gulliver’s Travels*, Gehr layers multiple images on top of one another, but here he differentiates the planes, which in addition to white are often tinted red, blue, green, or yellow. As in *Gulliver’s Travels* and a few times in *Street Scenes*, Gehr uses black matting to change the uniform rectangular shape of the image. But in *John Sellery* Gehr takes matting to a new level, blacking out chunks of the image, mainly in the top left and
bottom right corners, creating an off-kilter image split in the middle, with the left side lower and the right side higher. The paper strip series Gehr used to formulate this work is on a far wall to the right of the projection. The paper version features the serialized adventures of the imaginary titular character on a worldwide adventure that turns out to be a dream. On this imagined adventure, Sellery sees Russian dancers, a Hindu snake charmer, and admires the eruption of Mount Vesuvias, the volcano near Naples that famously destroyed the city of Pompei in 79 A.D. He also crosses the Sahara, and is pursued by a Gaucho and a Chinese Dragon on separate occasions. Sellery appears in most frames to be running frantically from danger. There are many animations of him running wildly with his arms held high. Gehr cuts the frame at the character’s hip, and the legs running back and forth are removed from their stationary bodies and also repeated at the top and bottom of the frame. The use of color, distinct framing, and ridiculous situations in which Sellery is placed make this channel a treat. The use of color hints at early film production in an era where film was supplanting magic lantern productions and *ombres chinoises* as a dominant form of moving image entertainment. Like early filmmakers, Gehr adds flat planes of color that cover the original black and white image. Gehr fractionates the image and multiple fields of color occupy a single channel.

Gehr conceived these works to be shown as a group or individually. Each channel has enough happening to captivate on its own. In MoMA, the projections are situated close together on a single wall. These viewing conditions make it hard to focus on a single channel without being distracted by dazzling bursts of movement on nearby channels. However, grouped together they create a panorama, and a new dimension emerges. Each channel speeds and slows at different times or every channel explodes to life at once. The five channels envelope the viewer and even at a certain remove it is hard to take it all in. From this distanced, all-encompassing

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90 Gehr, in discussion with author, July 29, 2015.
vantage point *Carnival of Shadows* can be seen as an exercise in the rudiment of motion, and it also seems to somehow unveil the digital code that underlies the projected imagery. The alternating vertical lines can be seen as positive and negative spaces, which in turn, resemble the digital on/off patterns (or ones and zeroes). At first the vertical black bars that span the entirety of the screen feel like space between filmic frames, as if the entire piece was a giant film running horizontally. Unlike film, the illusion of motion is not created by projecting multiple images one after another. Instead, hiding certain segments and revealing others, and then moving the paper strip so the previously hidden element is revealed (and vise versa) create the sense of motion. Through this manipulation of visual elements being on and the off, Gehr is celebrating the capabilities of digital medium and showing that its conceptual underpinnings have deep historical roots in something as simple as the *ombres chinoises*. His use of digital effects such as the flipping, mirroring, and repeating of images, superimposition of scenes on top of one another, and asymmetrical framing and matting, all serve to further highlight the artificial, digital construction of these works. As in his film works, which often refer to the means of their own construction in overt ways, Gehr uses these effects to illuminate how digital media, just as film or *ombres chinoises*, relies on an illusion to create its cinematic form. Unlike film and paper strips, however, this illusion does not have physical form beyond the digitally encoded light projected onto the wall. There is no film or paper strip, only light and darkness.

Gehr uses superimposition in other digital works, too. In *Mist I & II* (2014), Gehr combines two earlier works, *Mist* (2010), a nine minute long tranquil single shot of boats in the Upper Bay from a fixed position onshore in the Red Hook area in Brooklyn, New York, and *Mist II* (2013), which uses the same footage, but digitally manipulates the image multiple ways, into a two-channel video projection (Fig. 38). Gehr liked the works as individual pieces, but he
believes they are stronger as a single work; he may at some point even withdraw the single channel versions. The first channel offers the calm seascape unaltered, sailboats and barges move through the hazy grey scene. Meanwhile, the second channel breaks the same image into four separate portions, with each quadrant implementing different lighting, exposure, timing, and image orientation. What occurs in the first channel then occurs through the distorted multi-planar picture of the second channel. A portion of Gulliver’s Travels where Gulliver is in a boat resembles an animated version of Mist I & II. The videos for Carnival of Shadows were created a few years before Mist I & II, and these techniques are repeated in other works from this time, a few of which will be discussed in a different context later in this chapter.

The most striking formal element of Carnival of Shadows is the use of silhouettes. In this context I would be remiss not to mention another renowned American artist, Kara Walker, who uses silhouettes extensively in her work. Using black figures on white backgrounds she creates often explicit, cartoony representations of the historical African American experience. She uses silhouettes to exaggerate stereotypical features of the black body and also reimagine graphic horrors suffered during the country’s long history of slavery. The use of silhouette at once exposes viewers to the thematic representation, and allows, or forces them to mentally fill in the imagery, playing out the scene’s details in their own minds. Her objective is to make viewers face their own biases. Silhouettes also offer another critique, in that they represent the dark shadowy past that is ignored or downplayed by history.

Gehr’s use of silhouettes differs immensely from Walker’s. Some of the source material, particularly those in the John Sellery’s Tour of the World series portrays characters in a

\[91\] Gehr, in discussion with the author, June 10, 2015.

stereotypical way. Gehr’s use of this material is probably not meant as a political gesture. Gehr is focused on the physical form these silhouettes take, namely their relationship to the physical object they are meant to represent. Gehr, like Walker, is fascinated with how silhouettes offer enough visual information in simplified dark forms that they are perceivable as not only people or objects, but distinct objects or individual persons. The brain goes a long way to fill in the rest of the image, using few external features as cues. This “filling in” relies on the viewer’s own experiences and level of familiarity with the subject matter, a fact that both Gehr and Walker relish. This power of the human perceptual apparatus to recognize myriad objects by outline shape alone, led to an intriguing philosophical idea put forward by Robert Hopkins in his book *Picture, Image and Experience.* He attempts to salvage theories of pictorial viewing that claim that viewing pictures is a twofold experience, one in which the surface of the picture is recognized as well as the object the picture depicts. This describes what happens but does not describe why this is the case. Hopkins claims that we are able to see the objects in photos as three-dimensional objects because of the similarity of their “outline shape” to an actual object. The outline shape of an automobile is the same experienced in space as it is projected onto a two dimensional surface. Hopkins thinks the outline of the object is fundamental to how we differentiate objects that the brain easily discerns outline shape in actual and mitigated examples. Therefore a strong representational outline is enough to create the perceptual identity of the object. Gehr uses silhouettes to pare down the illusion of cinema, to offer the viewer the bare minimum needed to recognize objective form.

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The works in *Carnival of Shadows* are of course not the first time shadows and silhouettes have figured prominently in Gehr’s work. In Chapter 2, I discussed the use of shadows and silhouettes in *Navigation* (2002). Other standout examples of this use of shadows include recent video pieces, the aptly named *Shadow* (2007), *Picture Taking* (2010) and *Bird’s Eye View* (2014). In *Shadow*, Gehr uses his hands to project shadows on the walls in different areas of his Brooklyn home, creating odd shapes and rhythms in uniquely lit environments. The work is a playful reimaging of the French shadow plays mentioned earlier in the chapter. He used a single source light to project the shadowy imagery onto the blank white walls, which are also framed in natural light from the windows. Gehr joked that he has a “bad habit” of putting his hands in front of the camera lens. The prime example of this kind of manual manipulation appears in his film *Rear Window* (1986-91). Gehr cupped his hand over the lens while filming sheets and towels hanging on a clothesline on a windy day, from the rear window of his old Brooklyn apartment. At times his hand blacks out the entire image, then his hand moves with relative quickness back and forth, creating dazzling effects where light floods the image only to be muted and reemerge. Coupled with slick, in-camera editing, the film adds expressionistic darkness and uncertainty to an otherwise banal domestic landscape, and is every bit as fear inducing as Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954). In *Shadow*, the light is present and forceful and the feel of the video is more playful. The play of shadows is rhythmic and almost appears to mimic animals mating. It is a joyful exploration of light and shadow that is similar to the works found in *Carnival of Shadows*.

In *Picture Taking* and *Bird’s Eye View*, Gehr used the access afforded him during the time his commissioned installation piece *Surveillance* (2010) was on view in Madison Square Park to effectively record a bird’s eye view of pedestrians traversing public space south of 23rd

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95 Gehr, in discussion with author, July 29, 2015.
Street in Manhattan. From atop a J-shaped high-rise building on the southeast corner, where Broadway and 23rd Street intersect at a 100 degree angle, he had uninterrupted views of Madison Square park to the north and the iconic, triangular Flatiron Building (formerly known as the Fuller Building), located just across Broadway. Gehr fixes his camera on the busy Flatiron Plaza, an open, tan-colored, paved area that occupies the space between Broadway and Fifth Avenue, extending from 22nd Street to 24th, forming a right triangle bisected by 23rd Street.

Picture Taking can be viewed as a three-channel projection or as a single, 9-and-a-half minute long projection (Fig. 39). The angles of the camera and sunlight are such that the shadows cast by the pedestrians pop forward and take on a life of their own. He photographs pedestrians from almost directly overhead. It is a strange angle from which to view people in motion, one which renders the expressive qualities of their gaits reasonably mute. But their shadows project far beyond them and not only capture their unique manners of movement, but also accentuate and dramatize them.

Tourists pause to photograph the Flatiron Building (Fig. 40). One man pauses and crouches, aiming his camera at the building off-screen for so long that he becomes the focus of the video at one point and no doubt is the reason for the work’s title. The shadows are central to the work, but Gehr also manipulates the comfortable rectangular picture plane, turning it vertically and layering the image on top of the negative image.

In Bird’s Eye View, Gehr uses the wedge-shaped space the pedestrians inhabit as a backdrop for formal exploration for 12 minutes and 40 seconds (Figs. 41 and 42). He uses the same vertical angle and focus on pedestrian’s shadows as in Picture Taking, but with more formal pictorial dissonance. He twists, turns, and layers the image, multiplying the street scene by repeating the same image within the existing image again and again, picture within picture
within picture. Busy 23rd Street is visible, and cabs and bicyclists buzz around the perimeters of each layer. In another shot, the green copper awning of the Flatiron building is visible, twisted, and multiplied, creating triangular shapes athwart the screen. The image is turned sideways and upside down, and situates itself over the same image turned vertically, nearly creating an X, while black fills the rest of the space. By digitally manipulating the image in these ways, Gehr subverts the conventional expectation that an artwork should take place within a rectangular area. He creates a constructed experience that reminds the viewer of its artificiality. Enhancing this effect is Gehr’s clever use of sound in Bird’s Eye View. The harsh diegetic sounds of the city give way to soothing birds chirping, an incongruous experience, to be sure. But from high above, at a safe remove, Gehr uses his camera to create a shadow play that seems reminiscent of the bird songs gentle rhythm and pattern. While Gehr has fun manipulating the viewing experience in Bird’s Eye View and Picture Taking, he seems to relish the opportunity to present a contemporary shadow play.

By stripping away the pictorial details found in these earlier videos, Gehr explores in the Carnival of Shadows videos the same recurring structural and formal themes, but this time, at their most elemental level. Gehr addresses pictorial illusions of depth and form, shadows and silhouettes, superimpositions and framing, and the cinematic illusion of motion in the plainest way possible.
Conclusion

This thesis has deployed The Museum of Modern Art as a stage, of sorts, a space within which a wide variety of Gerhr’s work could be explored. I chose to focus on Gehr’s projects that directly relate to the Museum and its programming (whether made for, or shown in a special exhibition context within the Museum walls) while leaving aside discussion of all works by Gehr in MoMA’s collection, a task that would require much more time and space than the parameters of this thesis affords. Originally, I was going to attempt to present individual works by Gehr as unique philosophical assertions, building on Noël Carroll’s argument discussed in this thesis’s introduction. The more of Gehr’s work I saw over the past year, the more varied and contradictory my own thinking about it became. And with my thinking so cloudy, I set aside my purely philosophical pursuits, although vestiges still appear throughout the paper. I also started, but abandoned two other avenues of discourse that should yield intriguing results, if traveled someday. Both ideas are touched on in the thesis, but not explored in the depth they deserve. The first idea centers on media specificity. Gehr has been prolific in film, digital media, and photography while maintaining a deep interest in early and pre-cinematic technologies. Gehr’s work could be used to explore the unique qualities of any of these technologies. Second, Gehr’s work would be well served by a rich formal analysis. He has a keen eye for framing and composition. Like many great painters, Gehr crafts aesthetically significant imagery, while creating spectacle out of its own artificiality. Gehr’s work can be viewed along a historical continuum of painters and sculptors, who wished to call attention to aesthetic experience and undermine it at the same time. Ultimately, all there is is variable intensities of light.

At the time of this writing there are 31 works by Gehr in MoMA’s collection. Anne Morra, email message to author, January 6, 2016.
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Figure 3
Figure 7
Figure 8
Figure 15

Figure 16
Figure 20
Figure 24
Figure 27
Figure 31

Figure 32