EVENT HORIZON
Jeffrey Weiss on “Revisions—Zen for Film”

DEMATERIALIZATION. In an important text of 1968, Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler chose that word to describe the presumed disappearance of the aesthetic object in the context of Conceptual art. Dematerialization proved to be a useful myth: useful in that the term was convenient shorthand for the decline of the conventional art object (a painting or sculpture handmade by the artist-author); a myth in that so much advanced work of the period yielded a decidedly material proliferation of paperwork—handwritten or typed texts, contracts of ownership and certificates of authenticity, photographic documentation, inventories, and working drawings. Indeed, the surge of paper traces back several years to the advent of Minimalism, in which drawings and other documents routinely supported the production of sculptural objects made by studio assistants or small commercial fabricators.

The narrative of dematerialization was specifically intended to acknowledge the demise of the object. And indeed, after around 1960, categories of making had become porous and the precise identity of a work’s form—be it object or non-object—therefore often unstable. Performance practice, for example, was an explicit model for the realization of the so-called event, a kind of work originated by the Fluxus movement that was executed via the following of instructions, or “scores.” Yet the performance model also applies to objects produced for temporary display that, being replicable, are not meant to be preserved. Additionally, certain artworks that rely on time-based media such as projected film might be said to qualify as both object and event. The identity of one such work, Nam June Paik’s Zen for Film, 1962–64, recently received focused critical attention in a small but striking exhibition called “Revisions—Zen for Film,” organized by Hanna B. Hölling at the Bard Graduate Center Gallery in Manhattan this past fall.

In Zen for Film, which was conceived in 1962, light is projected through transparent film leader onto a screen. The resulting image, a rectangle of colorless light, is almost but never quite pure: Mediated by the running film strip, the light-image registers the strip’s mounting accumulation of scratches, dust, and grime. As Hölling discusses in her essay for the exhibition catalogue, such an image means to be both empty and full, a paradox partly derived from the tenets of Zen meditation practice, according to which emptiness of mind permits a conscious apprehension of the fullness of being. Yet, as a figure, the image that is empty yet full also corresponds to certain terms of modernist pictorial abstraction—terms brought to an attenuated extreme, and a temporary denouement, by Robert Rauschenberg’s White Paintings in 1951. (Those works were a touchstone for John Cage, whom Paik credited with motivating his own engagement with Zen.) Paik’s contribution could be said to recast the empty/full image: In Zen for Film, it has become a function of basic mechanical and material elements intrinsic to the medium of projected film. Produced through a virtually unmanipulated application of means, the light-image is now conditioned by elapsing time: In this way, it is both ever changing (a record of ongoing accumulation) and ever the same (being “blank”).

Having recited this brief art-historical narrative, I hasten to add that, though legitimate as far as it goes, it exemplifies a problem that plagues any single interpretation of Zen for Film: It takes for granted the very nature of the work. We are apt to refer to it, generically, as a projected film, but Zen for Film takes multiple forms that, together, complicate its identity. This problem, which lies at the heart of “Revisions—Zen for Film,” is inconvenient for historians and critics; nonetheless, it is one that curators and conservators, who are routinely faced with making practical choices about showing and preserving the work, may not ignore. That a variable material identity is not uncommon to work made throughout the 1960s further argues for the pointed significance of the Bard project. Overall, the implications in this regard are twofold: Just as historical interpretation cannot be separated from practical considerations regarding the material life of the work, so too museum practice must acknowledge that decisions regarding preservation and display are themselves acts of interpretation—and are philosophically freighted as such.

Hölling comes to the Paik project as a practicing conservator as well an academic historian (the exhibition was produced during her two-year visiting professorship in Bard’s Cultures of Conservation program). The word revisions in the exhibition title refers to diverse historical and conceptual vantages on Zen for Film, each instigated by a different incarnation of the work and/or changing conditions of preservation and display. To summarize the work’s history: Scant archival evidence suggests that the initial screenings of Zen for Film occurred at two events in New York City; these were sponsored, respectively, by George Maciunas (a six-week

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Fluxus festival in 1964) and Jonas Mekas (a film festival at the Film-Makers' Cinematheque in 1965). It is presumed that at the Cinematheque, the work was projected onto a large screen; a photograph from the Fluxus event shows that a small screen was used instead, the kind more commonly associated with home movies. In both cases, the type of film stock is unknown; a s is the manner of projection, which could have been either linear or looped (although it is presumed that each time the film was shown, the projector was exposed to view). The very fact that the work originated in two variant forms already represents a challenge to any new presentation of Zen for Film, with respect to determining parameters for appropriate viewing conditions as well as proper duration and scale. Beginning in 1965, moreover, several further versions of the work were produced, in both 8-mm and 16-mm film, for editions distributed by Fluxus. Zen for Film was also included in the so-called Fluxfilm Anthology, a grouping of thirty-seven short works by various artists assembled by Maciunas and made available through Fluxus for rent or sale. Much later, these versions of Zen for Film were digitized, a form in which—rightly or wrongly—the work is still sometimes shown. Conversely, at least one early 16-mm iteration of the work has been preserved and now belongs to New York's Museum of Modern Art, where it is held as an archival object in cold storage. Believed to have been screened at Fluxus film events, it has become too fragile to be run through a projector, although its original canister—today a relic bearing dents, rust spots, and other signs of use and age—is occasionally displayed in an environmentally protected vitrine.

This is how it was shown in the Bard exhibition, although there its status as relic or "mere" artifact was inherent to the topic at hand. Indeed, the installation at Bard was a model of clarity. The primary display—mounted in the fourth-floor Focus Gallery—consisted of only three things: the early film canister; a Fluxus edition of the work (a plastic box, a label card, and a clear strip of 8-mm leader); and a small black-box theater where Zen for Film was screened in 16 mm on a continuous loop. This succinct presentation took the form of a proposition: At a glance, the three-part display conjured a daunting variety of factors—including medium, duration, presentation, classification, nomenclature, and methods of distribution—that have contributed to the work's complex identity, which in turn is reflected in the disparate ways in which Zen for Film has been and will continue to be known. The show also included an admirable digital interactive display (thankfully kept apart from the installation) in which many themes addressed by Hölling in her catalogue essay were presented in the form of concise texts, including topics such as boredom, nothingness, chance, time, and trace. Numerous artists were also cited as historical counterparts to Paik, including Marcel Duchamp, Yves Klein, Andy Warhol, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, Christine Kozlov, and Tony Conrad, as well as Rauschenberg and Cage—a who's who of avant-garde proponents of duration, repetition, silence, and empty space.

Yet it is Hölling's examination, in the catalogue, of the close mutual dependency of historical, conceptual, practical, and material concerns that begs our attention. These issues are all implicated in the installation, which challenges any notion of a monolithic identity of Zen for Film; they are unpacked in detail in the catalogue, where Hölling is at pains to show that considerations regarding the logistics of making and mounting the work must not be separated from the project's governing formal and historical themes. What is Zen for Film? If it is primarily said to consist of the projection of transparent leader, do these pieces of film—which accumulate traces of use but then, growing brittle, become unprojectable over time—possess aesthetic value as conserved relics? If so, according to what institutional authority is such value ascribed? As Hölling observes, the very transience of the work "generates the urge to preserve and collect, which, in turn, expands the accumulating archive." Conversely, is preservation anathema to the work's event status? If so, does the work as event even permit migration to digital media—a mode of presentation seemingly inimical to the work's intent—or must Zen for Film remain filmic, materially true to its original medium? Given the slow demise of film technology in general, if the work cannot be perpetuated without migration, does it face inevitable death? Further still, do the multiple manifestations of the work implicate a form of "distributed authorship" (quoting Hölling citing Boris Groys), in which conservators, curators, and other stakeholders can be said to collaborate with Paik? If so, what role is there for the concept of authenticity? Questions such as these often possess no single answer, yet they remind us that all instantiations of the work are provisional. In this regard, Zen for Film is both object and event; since the two things contradict one another, it is also a paradox. This instability is not secondary to the work's significance, but—acknowledged or not—fundamental. As such, it conditions the work's history as well as its fate.

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