CineFiles
University of California
Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive

Document Citation

Title	**Ernie Gehr**
Author(s)	Jean-Edith Weiffenbach Julie Blankenship Ernie Gehr Bill Berkson J. Hoberman
Source	*San Francisco Art Institute*
Date	March 30, 1995 - April 30, 1995
Type	program
Language	
Pagination	
No. of Pages	35
Subjects	McCay, Winsor Snow, Michael Gehr, Ernie
Film Subjects	Hotel, Gehr, Ernie, 1979 Behind the scenes, Gehr, Ernie, 1975 Transparency, Gehr, Ernie, 1969 History, Gehr, Ernie, 1970 Serene velocity, Gehr, Ernie, 1970

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

Field, Gehr, Ernie, 1970

Three, Gehr, Ernie, 1970

Still, Gehr, Ernie, 1969

Eureka, Roeg, Nicolas, 1983

Listen, ,

Daniel Willi, March April May 1992, Gehr, Ernie, 1993

Side/walk/shuttle, Gehr, Ernie, 1991

Shift, Gehr, Ernie, 1972

Morning, Gehr, Ernie, 1968

Wait, Gehr, Ernie, 1968

Reverberation, Gehr, Ernie, 1969

Untitled, Gehr, Ernie, 1976

This side of paradise, Gehr, Ernie, 1991

Rear window, Gehr, Ernie, 1986

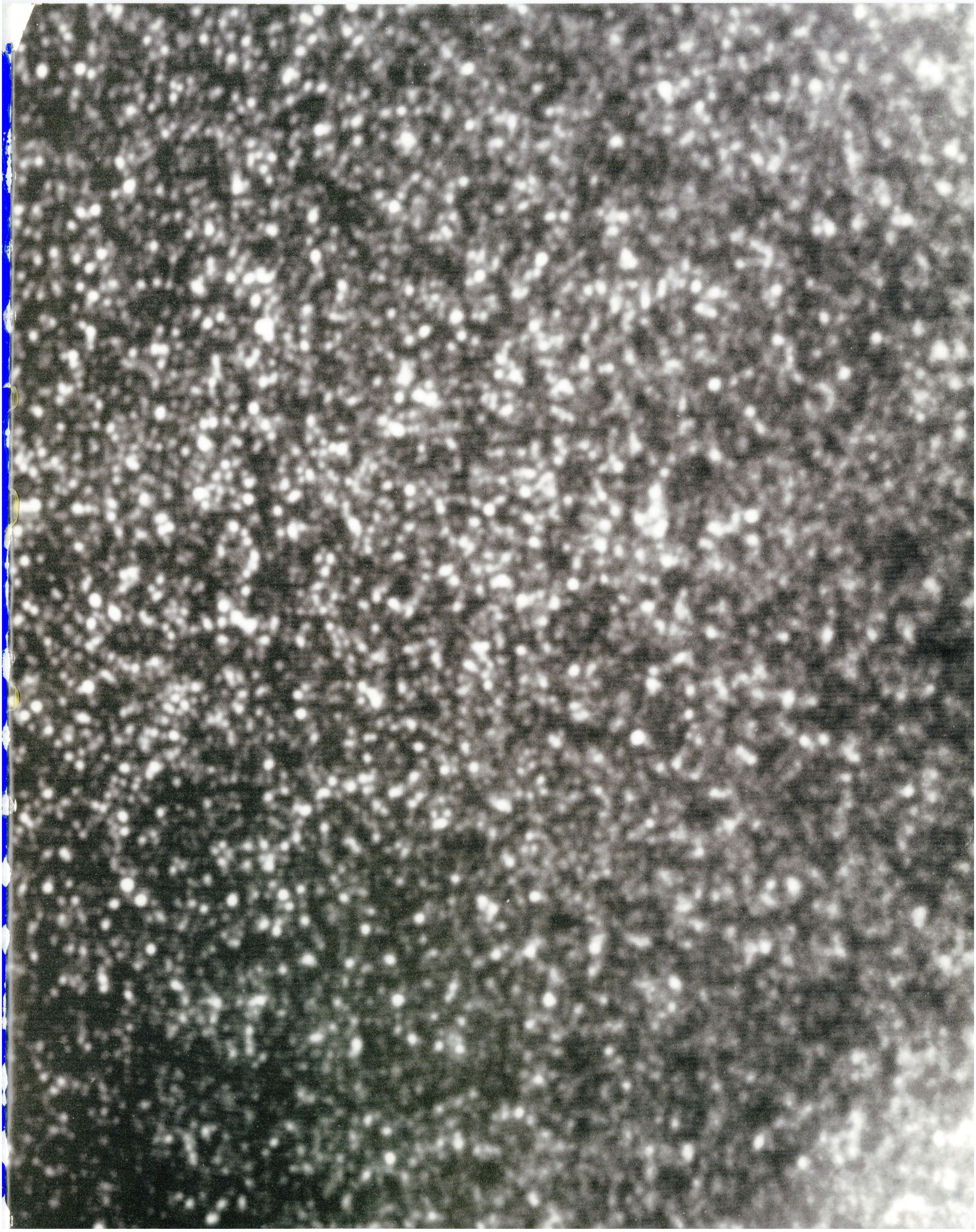
Mirage, Gehr, Ernie, 1981

Table, Gehr, Ernie, 1976

Signal - Germany on the air, Gehr, Ernie, 1982

Untitled, part one, Gehr, Ernie, 1981

ERNIE GEHR
ERNIE GEHR
ERNIE GEHR



WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

ERNIE GEHR

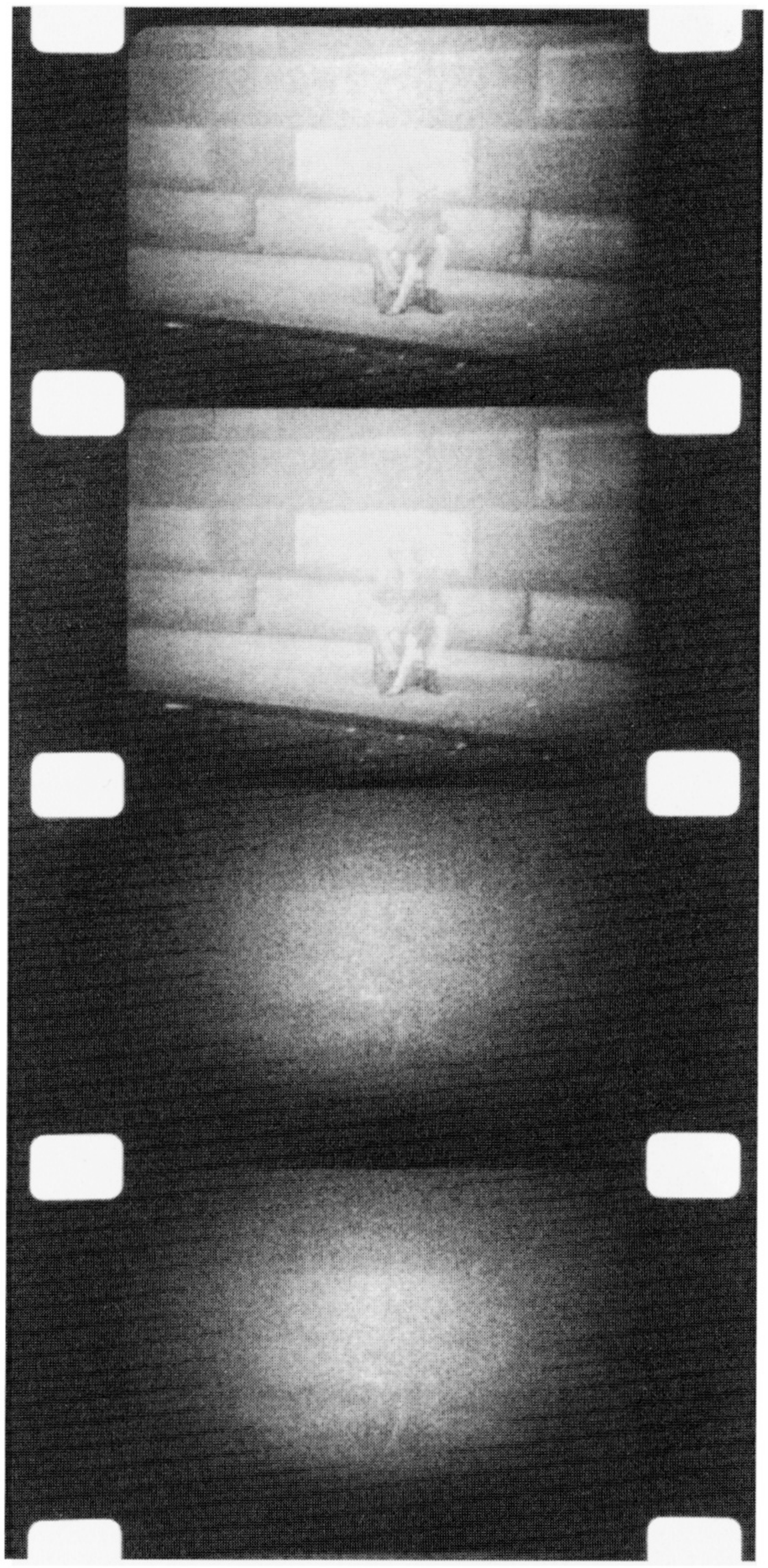
THE 1995 ADALINE KENT AWARD EXHIBITION

WALTER / McBEAN GALLERY

SAN FRANCISCO ART INSTITUTE

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)



ERNIE GEHR

The 1995 Adaline Kent Award Exhibition

Brother, can you spare some time

March 30 - April 30, 1995

Walter/McBean Gallery

San Francisco Art Institute

ABOVE: *Reverberation* (1969), 25 min., b/w, sound

OPPOSITE: detail, *Signal – Germany on the Air* (1982-85), 37 min., color, sound

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

Acknowledgments

In selecting Ernie Gehr for the 1995 Adaline Kent Award, the San Francisco Art Institute Artists Committee cited his extraordinary 26-year career as an experimental filmmaker, and spoke of his works' "moments of piercing beauty and sheer sensation" and his "focus on the phenomena of film itself." Noting as well his films' intellectual powers and likening Gehr to a "punk visionary," the committee praised *Side/Walk/Shuttle* (1991) as "a stunning essay on the relationship between land and culture, here at the edge of the western world and the twentieth century."

Gehr is the first filmmaker to receive the Adaline Kent Award. The award was established in 1959 in recognition of the support given to the San Francisco Art Institute by sculptor Adaline Kent and her husband Robert B. Howard. Including an honorarium and a solo exhibition in the Walter/McBean Gallery, the award is presented annually to a "talented, promising and deserving California artist." Previous awardees have included Armando Rascón (1994), David Cannon Dashiell (1993), Carrie Mae Weems (1992), Mildred Howard (1991), Mike Henderson (1990), Terry Allen, Joan Brown, Bruce Conner, Jay De Feo, Roy De Forest, Robert Hudson, David Ireland and Manuel Neri. Gehr was selected by Linda Gibson, Linda Goodman and Rigo 95, the 1995 Adaline Kent Award Committee of the Artists Committee. We would like to thank the committee for their conscientious and sensitive dedication to this task.

Brother, can you spare some time presents a series of reflections and meditations on cinema and changing technologies, as well as metamorphoses of memory and history. This is the first media installation of Gehr's career. A determined self-taught artist, Ernie Gehr began making films in the late 1960s and has since made more than 24 films. *Side/Walk/Shuttle* was named one of the top 10 films of the year by *The Village Voice* critics J. Hoberman (who has written an essay for this catalogue), Amy Taubin and Mahohla Dargis. Gehr's work has been shown internationally, including retrospectives at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, and the Musée du Cinema in Brussels. Gehr has been a participant in three Whitney Museum biennials. He has won numerous awards, including grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, a John Simon Guggenheim fellowship, and the Maya Deren Award from the American Film Institute. A member of the film faculty at the Art Institute since 1988, he has taught and lectured internationally.

This landmark project could not have taken place without the help and participation of the many people who contributed to it. We would like to thank J. Hoberman for his catalogue essay and Bill Berkson for the introduction, both pieces contributing to the considerable Gehr literature. Loida Sorensen, assistant director of exhibitions, deserves our gratitude for coordinating the complex installation; San Francisco Cinematheque, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art for lending video equipment; Wayne Smith for designing the catalogue; Patti Quill, director of communications, and Paul Dorn, assistant director of communications, for overseeing catalogue production; and installation team chief Bruce Brodie and student gallery staff members Reginald Cox, Damian De La Rosa, Todd Keller, Steve Will Kopp, Connell Ray Little and Peter Macon for their technical assistance.

JEAN-EDITH WEIFFENBACH
Director of Exhibitions

JULIE BLANKENSHIP
Chair, Artists Committee, 1994-95

OPPOSITE: *Reverberation* (1969), 25 min., b/w, sound

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

Filmmaker Ernie Gehr is "interested in seeing things." Indeed, his direct, piercing perception singularly grips the viewer, and gives us the feeling of truly seeing though his eyes. Focusing on light, color, motion, sound and time, Gehr manipulates and distills these basic elements to create works elegant in their simplicity. He incorporates his environment to reflect a sense of time and place which, since the 80s, includes his history and identity as a displaced person. Gehr's work, as he has noted, is a "valentine" of things that move him, which he leaves for others to enrich their lives.

In choosing Ernie Gehr as the 1995 recipient of the Adaline Kent Award, we not only recognize the brilliant vision of this important artist, but also expand the scope of this award to highlight the contribution of experimental film to contemporary art.

LINDA GIBSON, LINDA GOODMAN, RIGO 95

1995 Adaline Kent Award Committee
of the San Francisco Art Institute
Artists Committee

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

Brother, can you spare some time

The title for this exhibition, *Brother, can you spare some time*, a play on the 1930s song "Brother, can you spare a dime?," arose in the process of creating pieces suitable for gallery exhibition. A situation where time does not play the role it plays in film.

Subsequently, the song's association with the 1930s began to interest me as a sort of thematic undercurrent, which, if nothing else, I needed to keep quietly reverberating in the background as I worked out the pieces – a series of reflections and meditations; some on history, some on specific sites and others on aspects of the history and/or character of film/cinema.

I am very grateful to be the recipient of the 1995 Adaline Kent Award and would like to express my deep appreciation to its selecting committee: Linda Gibson, Linda Goodman and Rigo 95.

I am also much indebted for the patience and support of Jean-Edith Weiffenbach, director of exhibitions and public programs as well as Patricia Quill and Paul Dorn of the communications office at the San Francisco Art Institute. Steve Anker and the San Francisco Cinematheque generously lent us video equipment without which portions of the installation would not have come about. I am also very grateful to Bill Berkson for his introduction and Jim Hoberman for his catalog essay. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Jim for his interest in and support of my work over the years.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this exhibition to the memory of my parents,
Willi and Herta Gehr.

ERNIE GEHR

February 1995

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

Introduction
ON ERNIE GEHR

Bill Berkson

Ernie Gehr's films fascinate by the continual sense in them of probing – a seeking out, looking for the angle, the way in. It's like watching someone nervously insisting on arriving at an intimacy with the fabric of appearances, including the appearance of a film as Gehr himself puts it together. Perceptual art is often not so much about vision as such, but about human information, which leads us to consider how people know one another, how character is revealed – matters of empathy as much as of optical sensation.

History, the manifest of facts in time, is, so to speak, a human element. Gehr shows, among other things, buildings and traffic, which have, as he would say, abstract patterns. But he doesn't show abstract patterns; instead, we see the creases on the back of an old man's neck, or among many drab or muted details, the bright red paint of a butcher shop wall. Something else comes across: a kind of sympathetic resonance transmitted obliquely. The vantage point is sometimes a close-up intervention, getting into the thick of serendipitous detail: a pointed finger, a stroke on the back, how a woman fills her own shoes. The mystery is in the transmitting. In certain filmmakers the most unstyled, seemingly pointless cinematography permits a distinct attitude towards human existence to be felt. Gehr's films carry their loads of intentionality lightly. It's not as if we don't see what he means to make visible in any one film; there's always a signal. But given all the moves – turning the camera this way or that, flipping the frames, a sort of relentless, often very witty, editing – the perceptual part seems objective, and subjectivity seems reached through the showing of the film, a "projection" in every sense. The continual manipulation, Gehr's purposefulness, affects the viewer's orientation. (The mind reels.)

Two materials of film are light and gravity, two unsolved riddles of the universe. Light through celluloid striking a white screen, and the pull of each frame vertically through the projector gate. Consider the moment in *Shift* when the edge of a truck, seen from above as a parallelogram in motion, sweeps and "erases" the white traffic line on the street. Gehr's way of eliding directional – or directorial – guidelines lets us experience paradox as a humorous yet essential jolt, a necessary glitch in the perceptual cosmos.

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

Eureka (1974), 30 min., b/w, silent

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

Still (1969-71), 55 min., color, sound

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

ERNIE GEHR: A WALKER IN THE CITY

By J. Hoberman

I.

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling.

– WALTER BENJAMIN, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935)

The cinema is a century old and so, in a sense, is the world of Ernie Gehr. Gehr is a filmmaker's filmmaker whose movies are so tough-minded and lucid it is as if they were produced to demonstrate the marvels of the soon-to-be anachronistic motion picture apparatus.

Gehr has consistently addressed himself to the fundamental qualities of film as film: the paradox of apparent motion, the "anxiety" arising out of three-dimensional representation on a two-dimensional plane, the tension between the photographed image and its material base. At once austere and dynamic, his films are primers for movie perception – a kind of intensely focused meta-cinema.

No less than the Lumieres' youthful cameraman Felix Mesguich, documenting whatever came to hand as the film age dawned, Gehr has devoted himself to "the dynamism of life, of nature and its manifestations, of the crowd and its eddies."[1]

Yet, in the counter-tradition of Georges Melies, he is also something of a magician. As the means are nothing if not economical, so Gehr's results are often perceptually profligate. *Still* (1969-71), for example, uses static double exposure (shot with a static camera over the course of a year) to effect a unique synthesis of Lumiere documentary and Melies camera magic – transmuting a banal stretch of midtown Manhattan into a sumptuous, mystifying mix of "solid" and phantom forms.

Gehr is the most dynamic practitioner of what has variously been called "minimal," "reductivist," or "structural" filmmaking – coaxing spectacular effects out of everyday material is one of his special-

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

ties. The films that established his reputation in the late '60s and early '70s are distinguished by their rigorous deployment of one or two formal devices to transform the screen into a field of concentrated energy. *Morning* and *Wait* (both 1968), used varied time-exposures to change static, domestic interiors into percussive flicker films. His third movie, *Reverberation* (1969), refilmed a few shots from an 8mm home movie– retarding the motion while accentuating the film grain – so as to "re-present" the original images in a haunting pointillist vortex.

In *Transparency* (1969), Gehr created rippling, sensuous bands of color against a blue sky by undercranking his camera from a fixed position alongside Manhattan's (no longer extant) West Side Highway. For the black-and-white *Field* (1970), he moved the camera so rapidly over a landscape that even bucolic nature was recorded as a mad, machine-made diagonal onrush of lines and shadows. But nothing is quite that simple. Paradoxically, as P. Adams Sitney noted, "the hyperbolic speed of the images in [these two films] confers upon the rectangle that contains them an extraordinary stillness."[2]

It's arguable that Gehr has been able to achieve more with less than any other filmmaker in the history of the medium. To produce one masterpiece, *Eureka* (1974), he typically performed a few precise, utterly impersonal operations on several minutes of found footage, a 1903 tracking shot in which a camera mounted to the front of a San Francisco trolley travels down Market Street, thus creating a majestic interplay between film-as-representation and film-as-stuff.

Table (1976), to take a slightly more elaborate conjuring trick, converts an ordinary kitchen surface, a homely clutter of crockery and utensils, into pure visceral sensation – the celluloid equivalent of a Cubist still-life. For 15 minutes, Gehr alternates two slightly different points of view, accentuating individual shots through the use of blue or red filters (and sometimes no filter at all). His simple, if painstaking, procedure produces a stuttering, hypnotic shuffle: Some objects appear simultaneously in two positions, others flex their shimmering forms or collide their neighbors, while a few barely seem to "move" at all.

Because *Table* was shot over the course of a single day, the light is continually changing– shadows deepen, different objects catch the sun. Throughout, Gehr varies the amount of time each shot is held. When he picks up the pace, the overall movement resembles an animated cartoon cycle of objects chasing each other around the table. When he shifts into high gear, the screen starts to flash and ripple, barely able to contain the forces released in it. Rather than a simulation machine, Gehr has employed the motion picture apparatus as a cyclotron. The movies are pulverized into their constituent elements and then recombined.

Most famously, Gehr's *Serene Velocity* (1970) created a stunning, percussive head-on motion by systematically shifting the focal length of a stationary zoom lens as it stared down the center of an empty, institutional hallway – thus playing off the contradiction generated by the frame's heightened flatness and the composition's severely over-determined perspective. Without ever moving the camera, Gehr turned the fluorescent geometry of this literal *Shock Corridor* (in the then-new State University of New York at Binghamton) into a sort of piston-powered mandala.

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

If Giotto had made action films it would be this – in other movies, however, Gehr dispensed completely with Renaissance perspective. For *Mirage* (1981), the filmmaker replaced the lens of his Bolex with a half-spherical piece of translucent plastic found in a junkbin on Canal Street and filmed whatever came to hand around his apartment. This ecstatic negation of pictorial space alternately suggests a bizarrely striated sunset, a train rushing by at superhigh speed, and the textures of a highway as shot from the muffler's point of view on a truck doing 70 mph. Colors ebb and flow; the bands of light change their ratio or intensity, and – most peculiarly – appear to slide in front of, or behind, each other.

Although it's impossible to tell just what causes these shifts, much of the film's beauty derives from the knowledge that its patterns are logical, determined by the physical properties of Gehr's substitute lens. With *History* (1970), the filmmaker discarded the lens altogether, exposing the film through a piece of black cheesecloth. The result was 40 minutes of seething grain patterns, organized by the viewer's eye into a kind of cosmic vista: "At last, the first film!" wrote Gehr's colleague, Michael Snow.[3]

II.

Should the street be considered as one of the fine arts?

– FERNAND LEGER,
"The Street: Objects, Spectacles" (1928)

The elegance of Gehr's formal strategies is equaled only by his attraction to the chance collisions and harsh molecular energy of the urban scene. His most consistent source of inspiration has been the street – that "kaleidoscopic mingling of vehicles and pedestrians," per Siegfried Kracauer, "life at its least controllable and most unconscious moments, a jumble of transient, forever dissolving patterns accessible only to the camera."[4]

A walker in the city, a flaneur, who has more than once used urban traffic as a readymade energy field, Gehr appreciates, like Kracauer (or Baudelaire who saw the fugitive as hallmark of modernity), the street as "the arena of fleeting impressions and chance encounters... a place where the flow of life is bound to assert itself."[5]

From *Reverberation* on, many of Gehr's films are, in their ways, city symphonies (symphonies, that is, as they might have been conceived by as austere a composer as Webern or Berg). His movies not only represent but reproduce the accelerated tempo of urban existence; they suggest precisely that "intensification of nervous stimulation" which, together with a heightened degree of "punctuality, calculability, [and] exactness" sociologist Georg Simmel attributed to life in the metropolis. [6]

Shift (1972-74), one of Gehr's relatively few sound films, is a bird's eye view of automotive traffic that not only meditates on the shocks and jolts of the big city street, but slyly literalizes Sergei Eisenstein's notion of montage as the collision of two shots. A succession of cars and trucks, filmed from a height of several stories, perform on the drab, six-lane boulevard of New York's Houston Street. Gehr isolates one or two vehicles at a time, inverting some shots, so that a car hangs from the asphalt like a bat from a rafter, using angles so severe the traffic often seems to be slid-

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

ing off the earth, and employing a reverse motion of such abruptness that the players frequently exit the scene as though yanked from the stage by the proverbial hook.

The spastic ballet mecanique is accompanied by sparse score of traffic noises, obviously culled from a record of sound effects. Not only is the action but Gehr's deliberate camera movements are synched to the music of honking horns, screeching brakes, and grinding gears. The eight-minute film is structured as a series of obliquely comic blackout sketches: Trucks run over their shadows; cars unexpectedly reverse direction or start up and go nowhere. The general acceleration of the last third is signaled by the sound of an offscreen crash. Here, Gehr throws the film registration out of alignment so that parts of two frames are visible at once and the traffic becomes an ecstatic blur of opposing diagonals.

Shift is complemented by U*ntitled, Part One* (1981). These were Gehr's first movies to employ extensive editing – virtually all of his earlier works were created through the application of predetermined shooting systems and thus largely cut in the camera. In *Untitled*, for the first time in Gehr's oeuvre since *Reverberation*, the city's human inhabitants take center stage. The set is a shopping street in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, a neighborhood heavily populated by Russian-Jewish immigrants – a sort of asphalt shtetl. Here, pace Walter Benjamin, the flaneur "goes botanizing" on the pavement and "the crowd really is a spectacle of nature."

Untitled is a half-hour series of brief closeups of people on the street, shot from a high but still intimate angle, as though Gehr were working out of a first story window, a tenement stoop, or the stairs of an elevated train station. In a constant interplay of figure and ground, the film shows fragments of feet, heads, hands and elbows against the backdrop of an ancient sidewalk. (No one ever acknowledges the camera.) Gehr periodically blurs the focus to emphasize their shapes, editing to create imaginary interactions. At times, his subjects saw the air like magicians to conjure the next shot. Most frequently, Gehr practices a kind of visual rhyming in which different subjects of similar shapes "complete" each other's movements over the course of several shots – such match-cutting produces a heady, spiral rotation of human forms around an empty patch of weathered pavement.

Untitled is fast on the eye, with many shock cuts and stacatto camera moves. But, partially because the people in it are bundled up in winter clothes, one experiences it as a series of cushioned jolts – the collision of soft, bulky forces that, even more than the steel-and-chrome vectors of *Shift*, enter the frame from all directions. Gehr's subjects use their hands a lot, and these expressive, vulnerable, fleshy sensors take on a life of their own. In one sense, *Untitled* is a jagged assemblage of the most transitory gestures; in another, it is an exercise in Hals-like portraiture in which an entire character is evoked through isolated details (the back of a neck, a pair of swollen ankles, the angle of a hat).

"Anyone capable of being bored in a crowd is a blockhead," observed Baudelaire's Painter of Modern Life.[7] Even more than *Untitled*'s, *Eureka*'s fossilized street scene (a short "jumble of transient patterns") is crammed with a thousand-and-one transitory dramas: Dandies and Gibson girls stroll through the dense midday traffic; brand-new

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

streetcars with shiny, reflective surfaces barrel across the screen to create a score of additional frames; the wind ripples a curtain and someone waves to us from the back of a wagon; horses splash over the cobblestones. A boy races the camera to the very end of the line, circling the moving trolley like some erratic asteroid. The derbied driver of the sedan licensed #4867 cuts ahead no less than four times, raising the startling possibility that the anonymous original filmmaker may have anticipated *Still* by staging a few occurrences in the haphazardness of the street.

Gehr permits us to savor these events without arresting their flow – as, in an single, continuous take, the camera advances forward towards the increasingly massive tower of the Ferry Building – by optically reprinting each frame of the original four minute film eight times. A simultaneous increase in contrast causes the gray tonalities of the original to undergo a violent, mysterious shift with each eight-frame pulse. The background flickers, the image oscillates between abstraction and representation, and the viewer becomes acutely aware of every scratch or scar on the original emulsion. But, even as the material fact of the film is shoved smack up to the foreground, the eye is irresistibly drawn deep into the frame by the camera's headlong movement and the classic vanishing point created by the two parallel trolley tracks converging towards infinity. Given the exaggerated flatness of the image and the rigorous depth perspective it represents, one's perception continually rebounds from the surface of the film to that of the earth, from 2-D reality to 3-D illusion, and back.

Even more fortuitous than the appearance of the wagon emblazoned "Eureka California" which crosses the camera's path during the film's final 30 seconds, is the fact that this extraordinary footage found its way into the hands of a filmmaker so suited so appreciate its qualities. Gehr's interest in film as archeology, already pronounced in *Reverberation* and *Still* – is here even more apparent. The swarming grain whose patterns here echo the unconscious life of the street was itself the subject of *History*. By systematizing and abstracting the ur-Eureka's "arena of chance encounters" (as in *Still* or *Transparency*) Gehr coaxes out the same ambiguous depth and motion, the similarly heightened life of the frame present in *Wait* and, most particularly, *Serene Velocity*.

After 30 minutes, the camera arrives in the open plaza where its trolley will be spun around. Unlike the original filmmaker, Gehr elects to maintain forward momentum and end the ride here. *Eureka* ends as the camera comes right up to the Ferry Building's wall, curious passers-by scurrying to the side, smacking headlong into history to momentarily fix itself on a bronze plaque: "Erected AD 1896," the year the Lumiere brothers's cinematographe set out to conquer the world. From a dark recess in the frame there suddenly appears, like an apparition of Eadweard Muybridge (d. 1904), an old man whose long white beard is twice caught by a gust of wind. This last marvel completes our journey of pure science-fiction – a reality "accessible only to the camera" – with a sudden juxtaposition of the cinema's capacity to render the monumental evanescent and the evanescent monumental.[8]

Side/Walk/Shuttle (1991), Gehr's subsequent meditation on the streets of San Francisco, is a movie of high-altitude raptures and dizzy precipices. Here, Gehr uses the glass-enclosed,

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

outdoor elevator of the Fairmont Hotel on Sacramento and Powell as a readymade crane for a series of aerial views, producing a streamlined sense of disorientation by modifying camera speed and/or position (while, later, flipping the film). For 40 minutes, the viewer shoots straight up, then gradually falls, hovering above the downtown roofs as though doing a dead man's float over the sunken continent of Atlantis.

Accompanied initially by ambient sound (and subsequently sounds collected in New York, Geneva, Venice, London and Berlin), the camera pirouettes like an erratic satellite as the massive planes of the skyscrapers glide by, bisected by the cool shafts of light. The geography suggests those episodes of cartoonist Windsor McKay's "Little Nemo in Slumberland" where huge office towers are turned upon their sides. *Side/Walk/Shuttle* has the effect of a slow-motion roller coaster. The camera's stately swoops and stomach-dropping descents obliterate all sense of gravity – in a multiple reverse, weightless cars seem to press against the constraining "ceiling" of the inverted street.

Nor is this the only form of disorientation. According to Gehr, "the shape and character of the work was tempered by reflections upon a lifetime of displacement, moving from place to place, and haunted by recurring memories of other places, other possible yet unlikely 'homes' I once passed through."[9]

III.

Dreams nurtured by the big cities... materialized as pictorial records of chance meetings, strange overlappings, and fabulous coincidences.

– SIEGFRIED KRACAUER, *Theory of Film* (1960)

So viscerally transformed is *Side/Walk/Shuttle*'s San Francisco that Gehr might honorably have titled his movie *Vertigo*, especially as he had already named a previous work *Rear Window*.

This latter, a 10-minute view from a Brooklyn apartment sublimates Hitchcock's voyeurism into a frenzied engagement with the visible. The film varies exposure or racks focus so that the flickering, spatially ambiguous patterns that press the limits of the frame momentarily resolve themselves as tree branches or a fire escape or a shadow caught on the screen of someone's laundry rippling in the breeze. "I cupped one of my hands in front of the camera lens and attempted to make tactile to myself light, color, and image," Gehr explains in his notes, linking the film to his father's death and calling it a "hopeless attempt" to render the ephemeral tangible.[10]

It's a measure of *Rear Window*'s mystical autobiography that the sound of the storm that further dissolves the image during the film's last third was recorded in Berlin – from which Gehr's parents fled on the eve of World War II and to which he has several times returned, drawn to place which no longer exists, a city with a still non-existent center, constructed to a large degree around its own physical and historical absences.

Gehr's Berlin symphony, *Signal – Germany on the Air* (1982-85), is a 40-minute suite of "empty" compositions and puzzling pans, set mainly in a summery, but otherwise nondescript, urban intersection where five streets cross. The movie is deliberately anti-dramatic. As Benjamin wrote approvingly of Atget, Gehr's landscapes "lack atmosphere."[11] Like Atget as well, Gehr could be said to photograph the street as though it were the

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

scene of a crime. As minimal as its means, as empty as it may seem, *Signal* is a film about culture shock, about coping, about memory, about evidence, about the things that remain. (This latter notion is reinforced by the ebb and flow of pedestrian traffic past various clocks, lampposts, and fireplugs.)

A kiosk with an advertising poster of an eye, later replaced by an ad for a funeral parlor, notwithstanding, History as such first intrudes with Gehr's sudden shift to what appears to be a derelict factory on a barren lot. An unkempt multilingual sign identifies the building as the former Gestapo headquarters. Although this marker and the railroad tracks that Gehr also films may seem overemphatic in the wake of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (which *Signal* shares an underlying method – the discovery of the past in the present – as well a motif), the cutaways serve to underscore the anti-atmospheric cross-walks with a backbeat of menace.

Signal is not just the most autobiographical, but also the least determined of Gehr's movies. The intersection where most of *Signal* is filmed is like a metaphor for the movie as a whole. Some connections are made from shot to shot; more often, though, Gehr concentrates on the relationship between image and sound. The track is composed of chunks of ambient, asynchronous street noise, silence and excerpts from the radio – which, in the Berlin of 1985, broadcast in French, English and Russian, as well as German. Even more disturbing than the shots of Gestapo headquarters or the Berlin freight yards is a radio English lesson which teaches the phrases "You people are all the same," "Don't blame me," and "What are you accusing me of?" As a kind of answering apocalypse, Gehr concludes the film with a thunderstorm concocted out of audio effects and end flares.

Ultimately, *Signal* is not just about how subtly sound transforms image; it's a movie about ghosts and unseen forces in Berlin's obliterated "topography of terror." Gehr has always been fascinated with film as trace: "a photo-memory of persons/objects/their relationships in a cinematic force-field."[12] *Still* and *Eureka* literalized the past by representing the urban landscape, through superimposition or rephotography, as the arena of present and absent energies.

In *Signal*, the radio serves to make the invisible world concrete. As the signal shifts from station to station, the unfocused static deforms the placid bustle of the street. The radio waves could be the breeze stirring the trees. The pedestrians swim and bob among these visceral transmissions; the total image seems suddenly so ethereal that the film's title, taken from the Nazi equivalent of *Life* magazine, becomes fact. Is the sound emanating from the phone booths or contained inside people's heads? As usual, Gehr uses the simplest means to effect a subtle derangement in perception.

Phantoms rematerialize in tangible form with *This Side of Paradise* (1991), shot in West Berlin in the autumn of 1989, only days before the Wall fell. Wandering through the city along the still-standing divide, Gehr discovered in Potsdamer Platz (the void at the heart of cold war Berlin – an absence that will itself soon be absent) the so-called Polish market where new refugees who flocked to Berlin held the most desperate of all rummage sales. Having stumbled across this bedraggled souk (eureka!) in the midst of Berlin's

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

overgrown, debris-clogged Nowhereland, Gehr spontaneously shot five rolls of film with accompanying sound and, discarding as little as these refugees, used virtually all of it in his finished film.[13]

Almost ashamed to acknowledge its fascination, Gehr's camera is downcast. As the noise of crying babies mixes with Turkish music, soft Polish and pidgin German, Gehr focuses on hands and feet and the earth itself, rain puddles filled with (and mirroring) the market's miserable flotsam of crumpled papers, soda cans, and cigarette butts. Dwelling on the overlooked and unnoticed, Gehr's Berlin includes (and humanizes) that "wealth of sewer grates, gutters, and streets littered with rubbish" Kracauer admired in Walter Ruttman's 1927 Berlin, the *Symphony of a Great City* – itself a document of an earlier Potsdamer Platz.[14]

This Side of Paradise further evokes Kracauer's own primal cinematic memory:

> I was still a young boy when I saw my first film... What thrilled me so deeply was an ordinary suburban street, filled with lights and shadows which transfigured it. Several trees stood about, and there was in the foreground a puddle reflecting invisible house facades and a piece of the sky. Then a breeze moved the shadows, and the facades with the sky below began to waver. The trembling upper world in the dirty puddle – this image has never left me.[15]

Discovering a comparable realm of shadows in this most palpable of locations, Gehr again transforms raw landscape into elemental cinema. To watch *This Side of Paradise* is to journey into the underground, lose oneself in the beauty of sepia reflections. When Gehr inverts his camera, the world turns upside down no less drastically than in *Side/Walk/Shuttle*. The first film is the last film. Heaven and Earth change places. The mud above, the sky below – which side of Paradise, indeed?

---

1 Mesguich's description of his work is quoted in Kracauer, Siegfried, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960) p.31.

2 *Gehr* (Minneapolis/St. Paul: Walker Art Center/Film in the Cities, 1980), p.5. Noting that, in *Field*, the speed is so great it is difficult to determine direction of the movement, Sitney observed that Gehr transmuted the only wholly natural landscape in his oeuvre into "the very perceptual paradox which Faraday noted in the movement of spinning wheels and which subsequently became the theoretical basis of the phenekistoscope and all subsequent machines for presenting the illusion of movement, including the Lumieres'." (p.10).

3 "Program Notes by Ernie Gehr for a Film Showing at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, February 2, 1971, 5:30 P.M.", *Film Culture* #53/54/55 (Spring 1972), p.37.

4 Kracauer, op.cit., p.19, p.31.

5 Ibid., p.72

6 "The Metropolis and Mental Life," *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. and ed. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), p.410, p.413.

7 *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: NLB, 1973) p.36, p.62.

8 "The Painter of Modern Life," *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists* (London: Penguin Books, 1972) p.400.

9 *Eureka* has parallels to Michael Snow's *Wavelength* – in which a camera similarly penetrates space towards an increasingly dominant final destination– and Ken Jacobs's *Tom, Tom the Piper's Son* – which meditates upon a piece of prehistoric cinema. To have taken this primitive tracking shot and reinserted it into film history as a perfect synthesis of the two films generally acknowledged to have most influenced the New American Cinema of the '70s, is not the least of Gehr's paradoxical accomplishments.

10 "Notes on Recent Films," *Films of Ernie Gehr* (San Francisco: San Francisco Cinematheque, 1993) p.20.

11 Ibid., p.20.

12 "A Short History of Photography," *Screen* (Spring 1972), p.21.

13 "Program Notes," *Film Culture*, op.cit., p.37.

14 "Potsdamer Platz was the entertainment, commercial, and political center before and during World War II. It was the center of focus of much of the world: Hitler's Chancellery. It was the center of aim for thousands of bombs. [During the Cold War, Potsdamer Platz] was the periphery of West-Berlin. Being the periphery of West-Berlin all that was marginal and 'unwanted' moved there. Potsdamer Platz became a marginal and unacceptable site which attracted nomadic circus or immigrant markets of Poles and Turks... The crater is witness to all the violent, uncontrolled energy which moved the area from center to periphery to center." Steve Mankouceh, *Berlin Potsdamer Platz: The Awkward Moment of the Absence of Mastery* (Ithaca NY: Graduate Architectural and Design Studio of Cornell University, 1993) p.28.

15 Kracauer, op.cit., p.54.

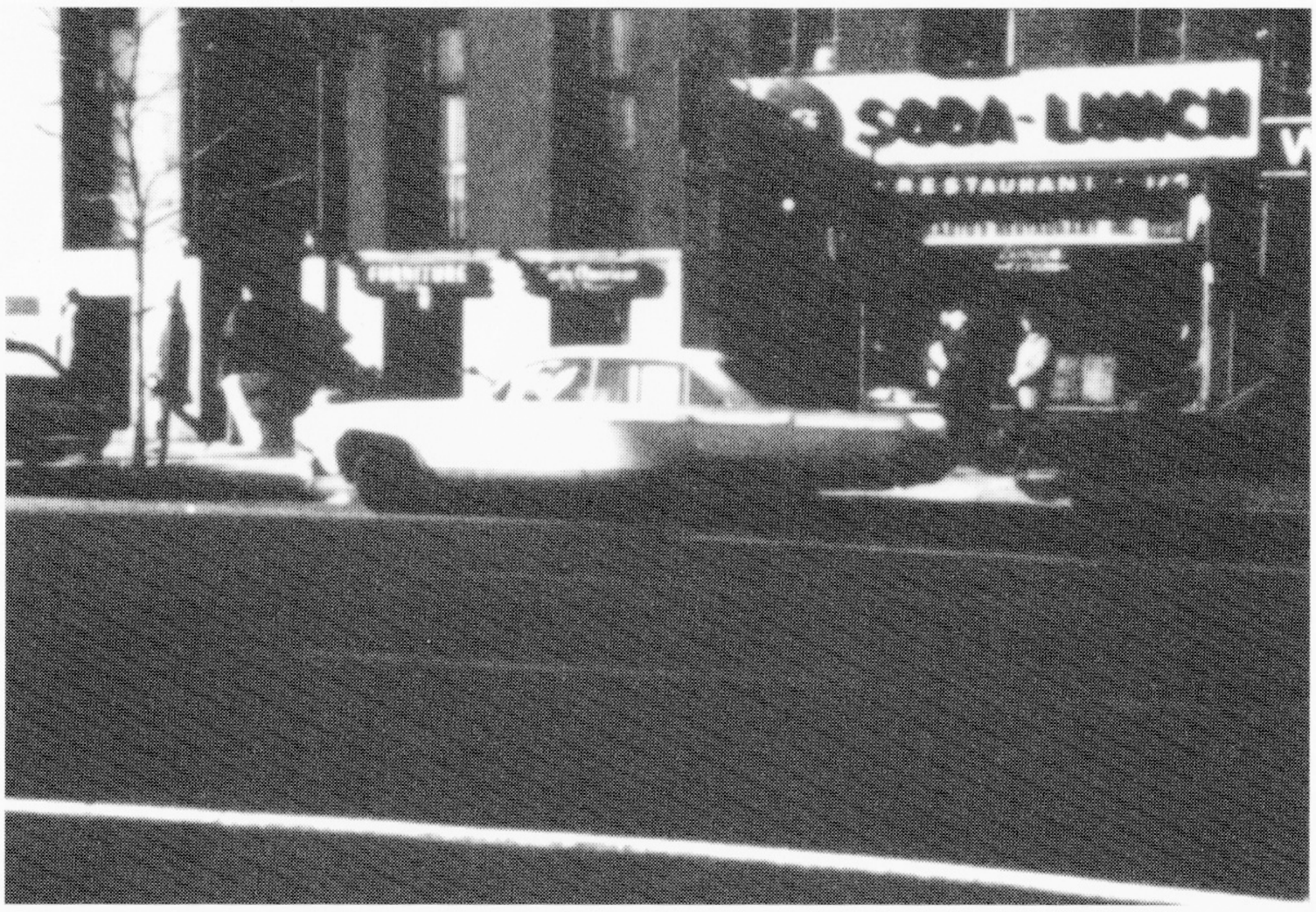
16 Ibid., p.x.

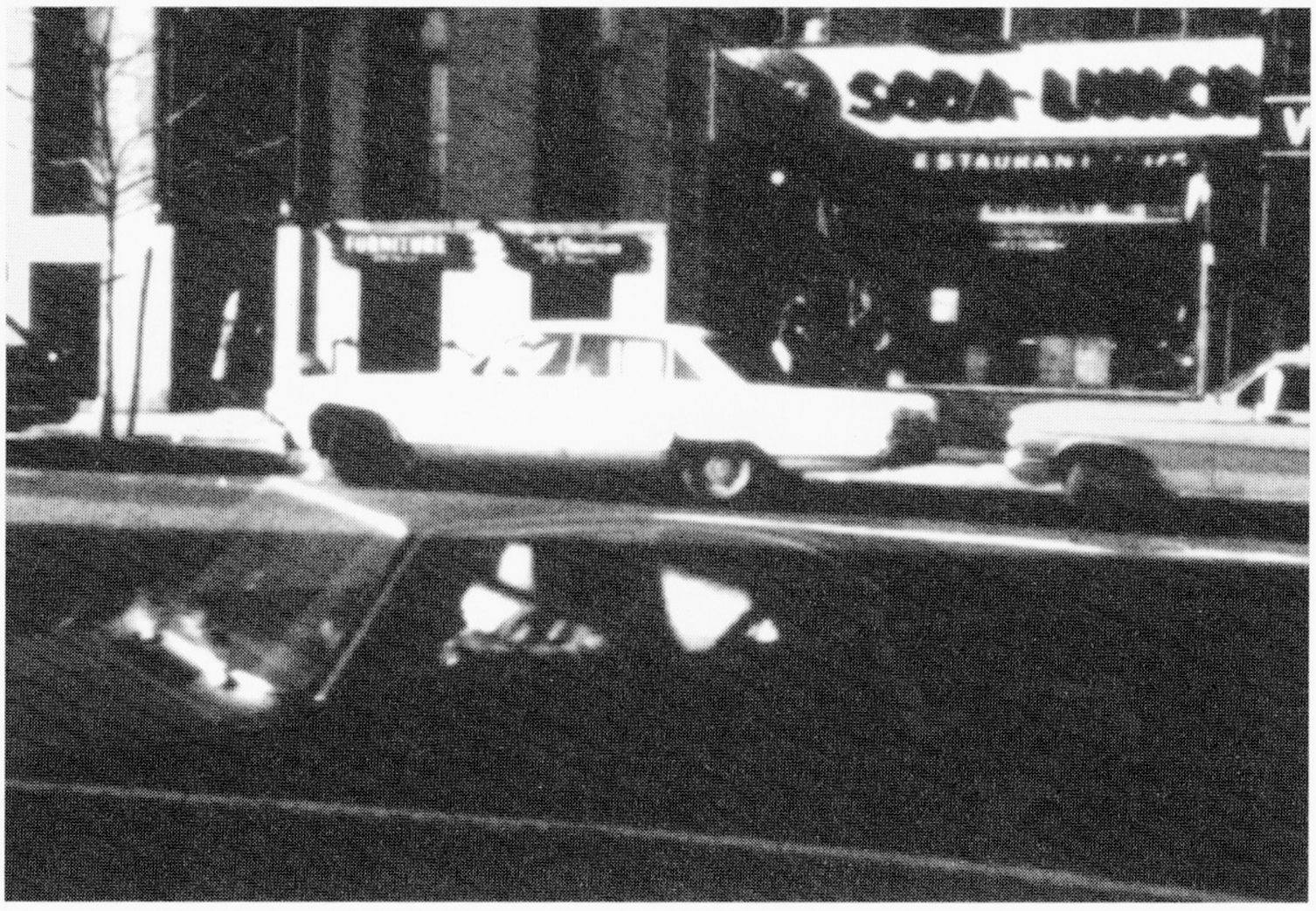
WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

ABOVE: *This Side of Paradise* (1991), 14 min., color, sound

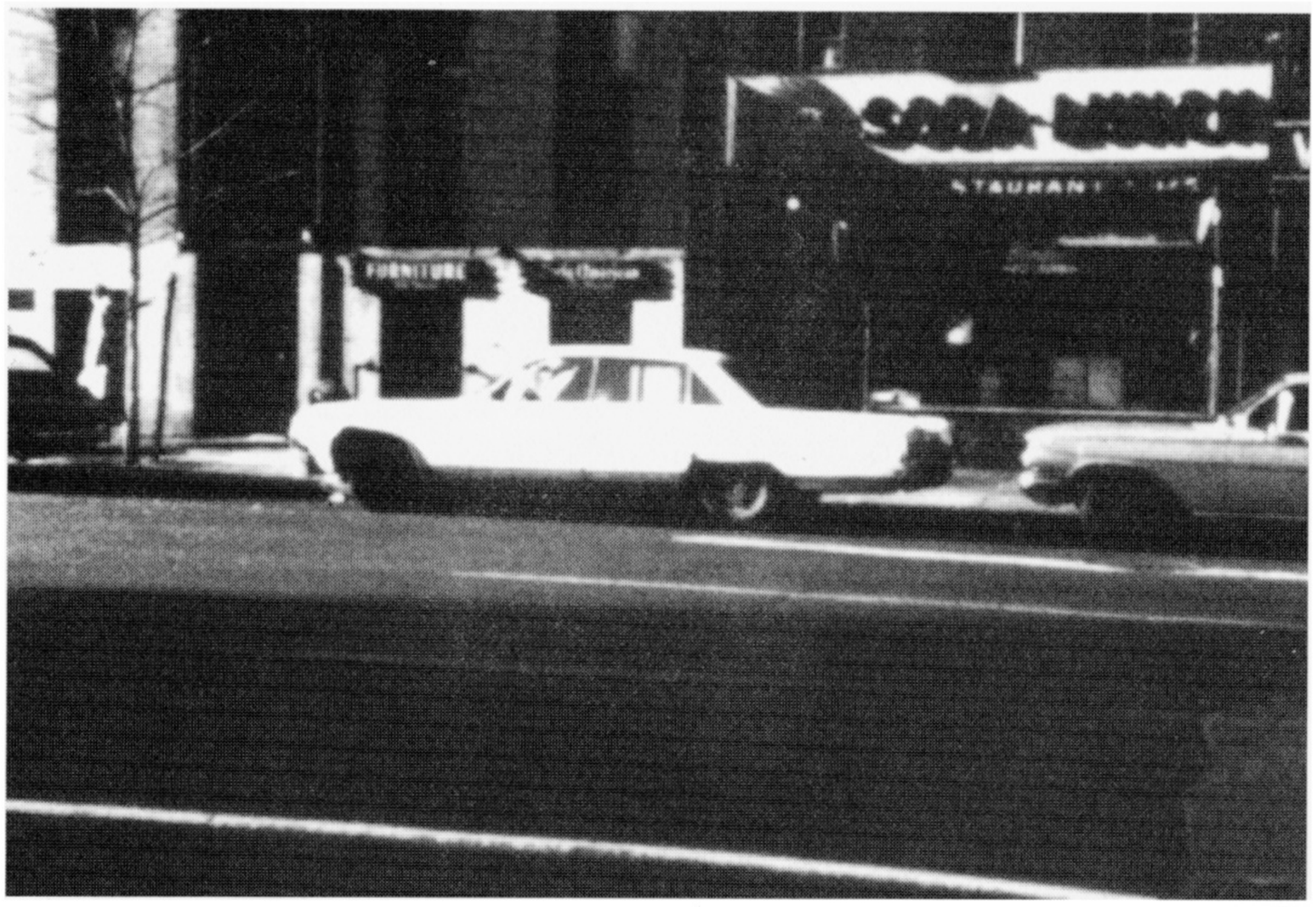
PGS. 20-23: *Still* (1969-71), 55 min., color, sound

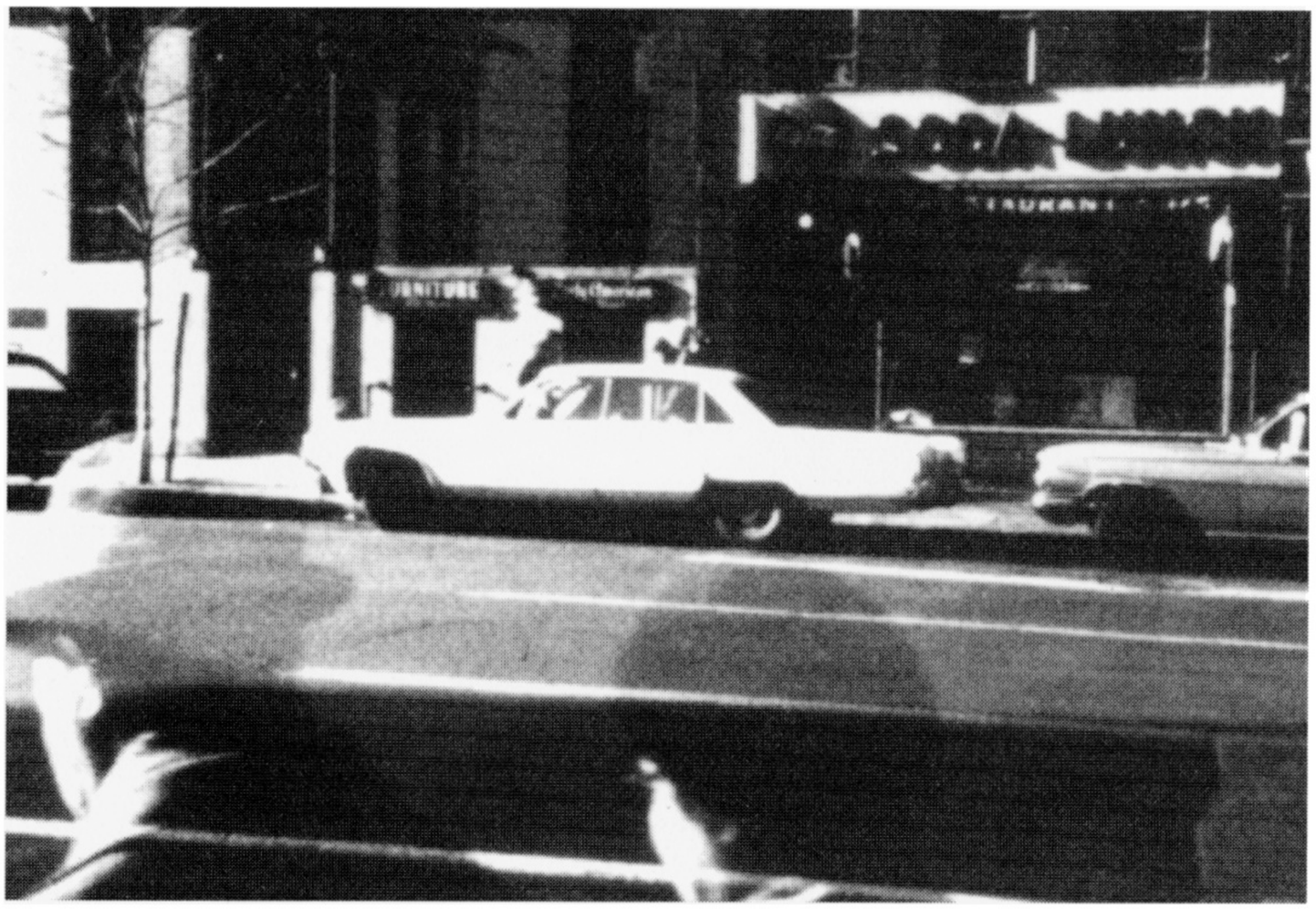
WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)





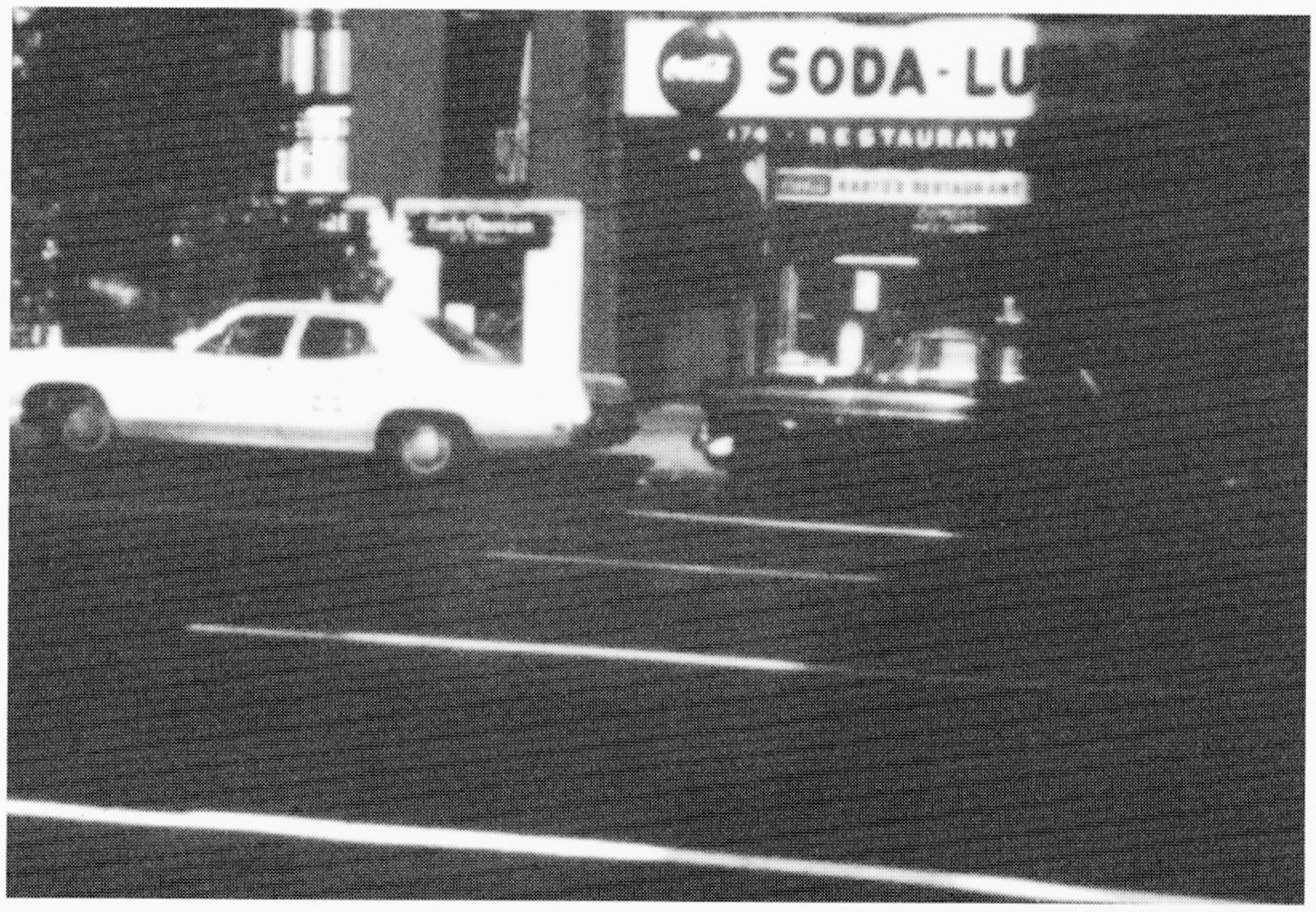
WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

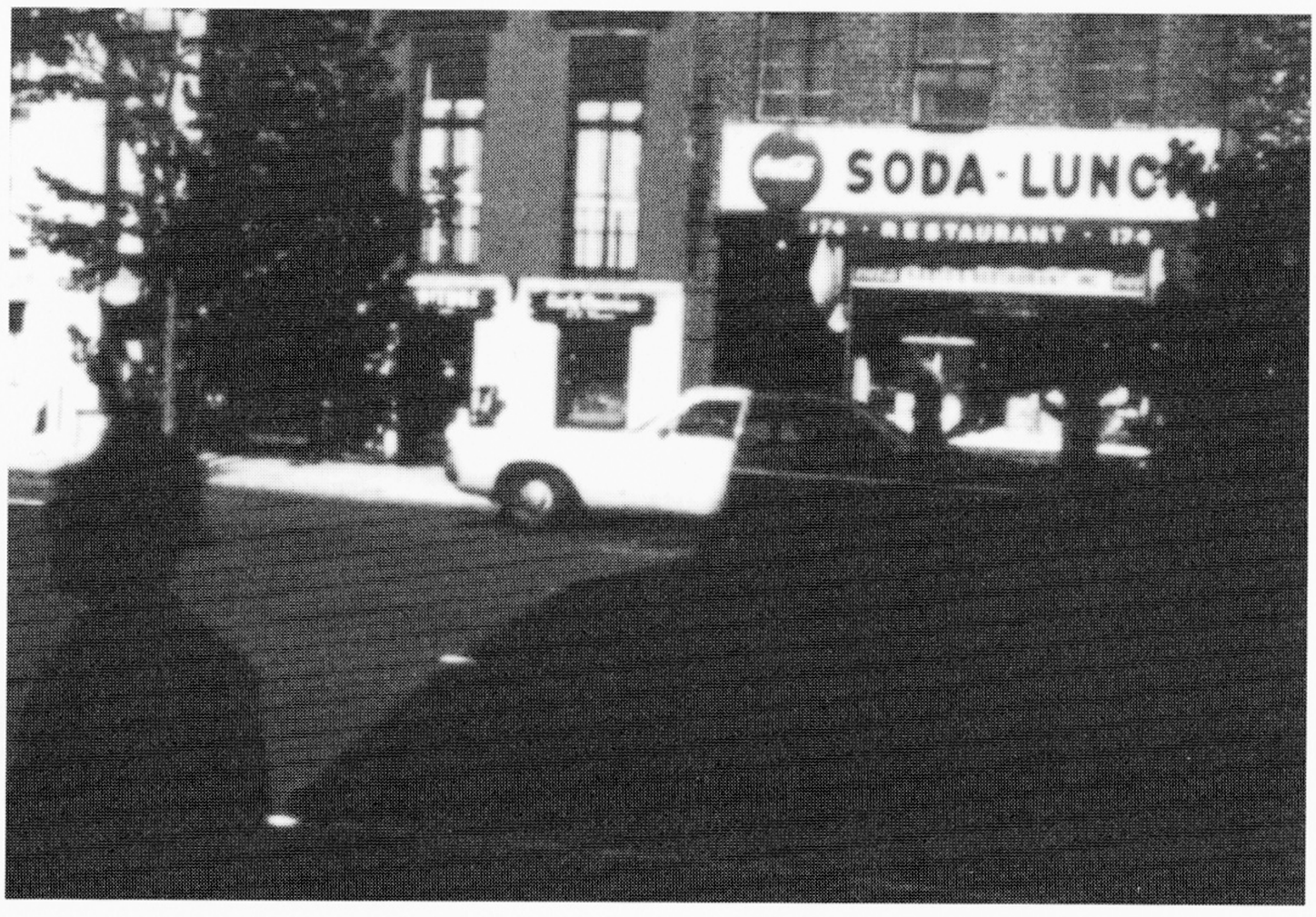




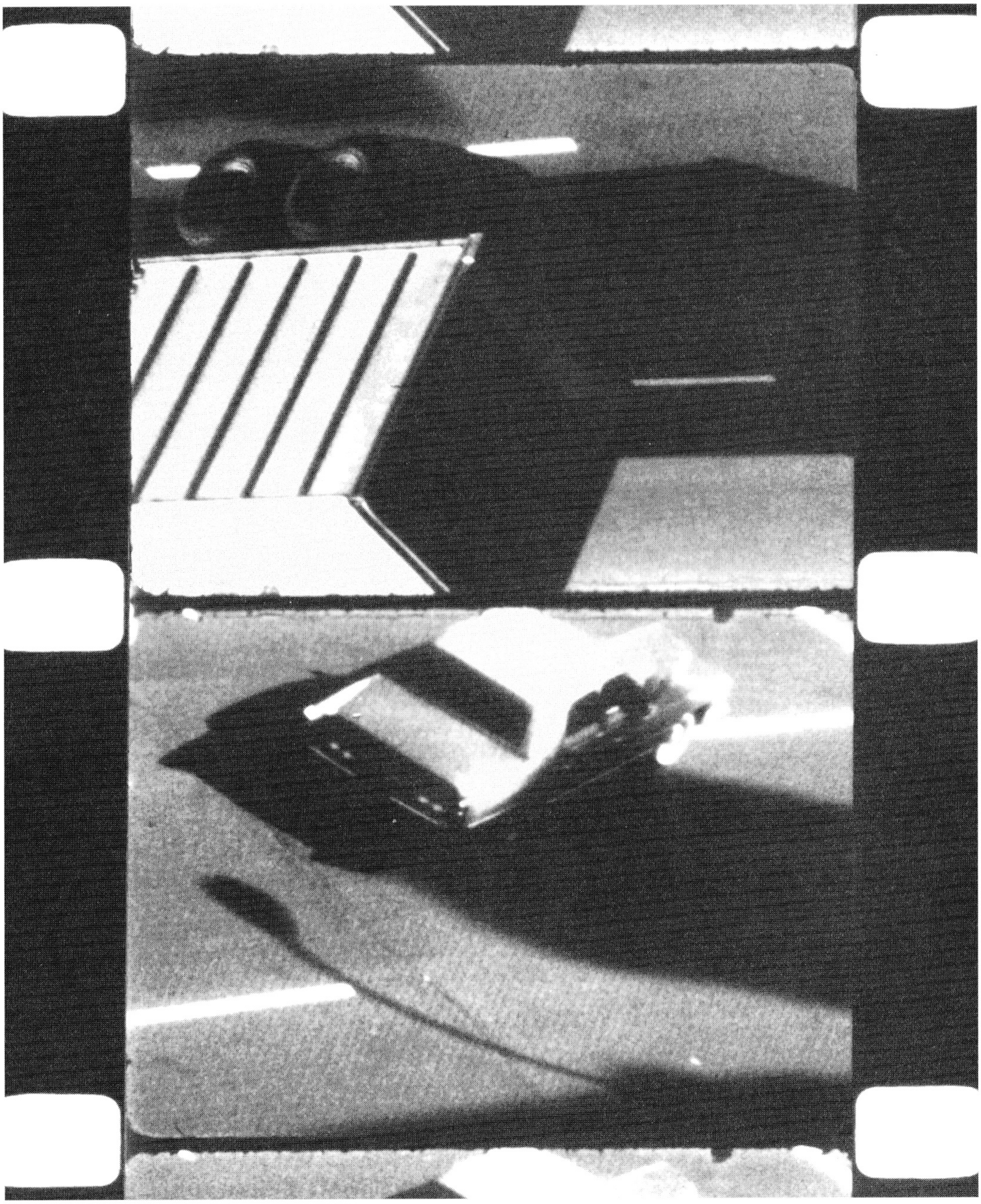
WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)



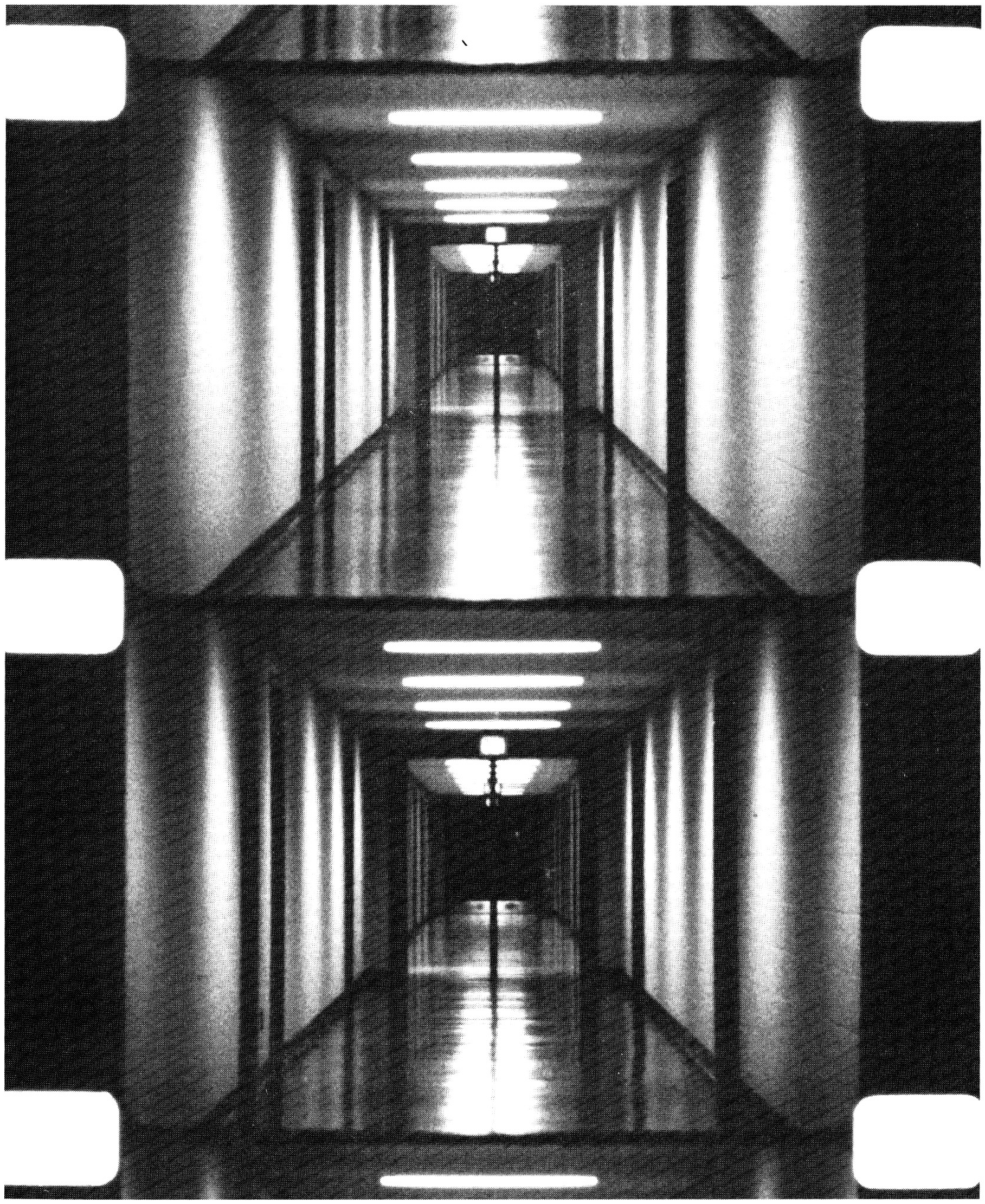


WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)



Shift (1972-74), 9 min., color, sound

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

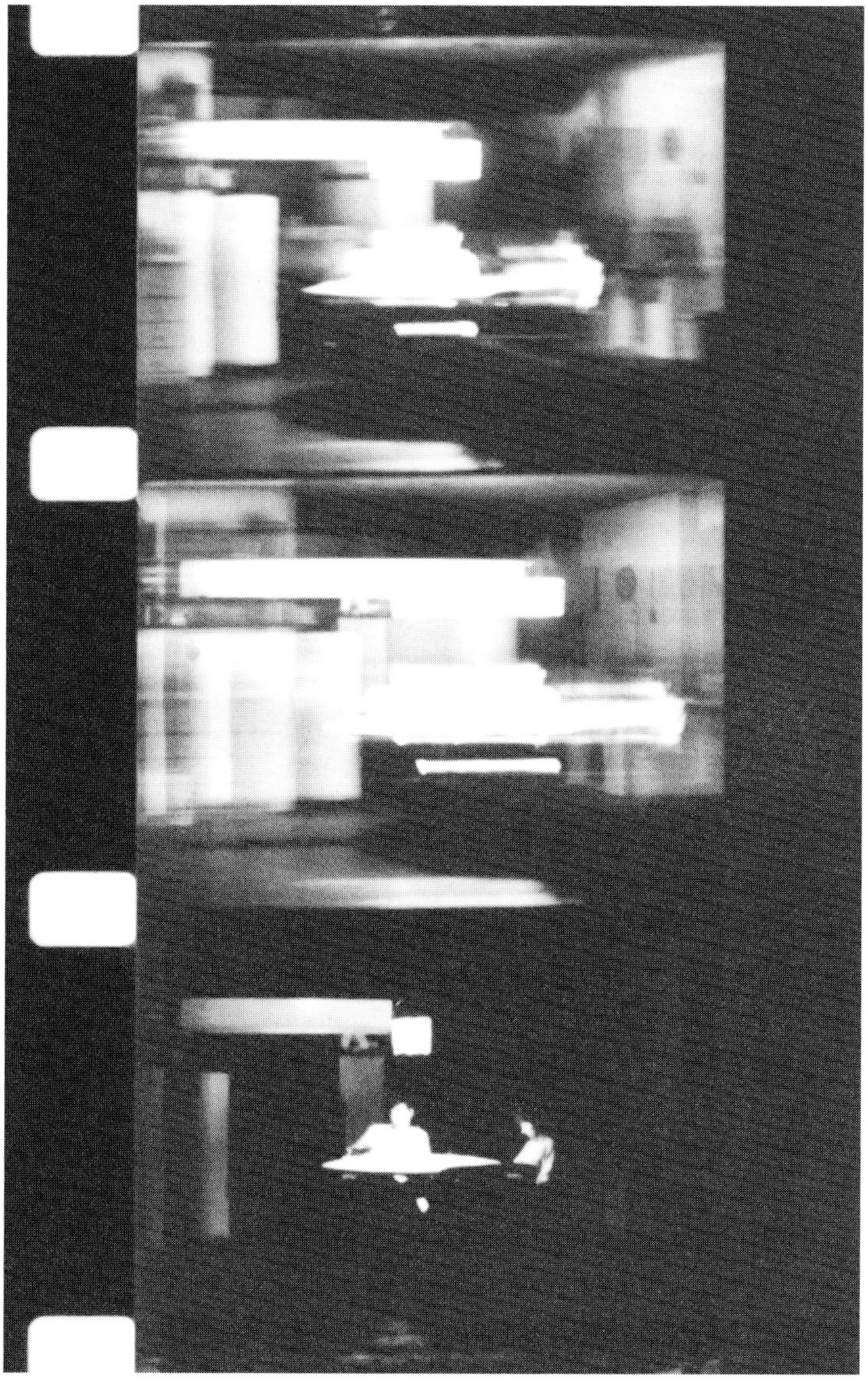


Serene Velocity (1970), 23 min., color, silent

PGS. 26 & 27: *Signal – Germany on the Air* (1982-85), 37 min., color, sound

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)



Wait (1968), 7 min, color, silent

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

Untitled, Part One (1981),
30 min., color, silent

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

ERNIE GEHR

Filmography

Morning (1968), 4 1/2 min., color, silent
Wait (1968), 7 min., color, silent
Reverberation (1969), 25 min., b/w, sound
Transparency (1969), 11 min., color, silent
History (1970), 40 min., b/w, silent
Field (1970), 19 min., b/w, silent
Field (short version) (1970), 9 1/2 min., b/w, silent
Serene Velocity (1970), 23 min., color, silent
Three (1970), 4 min., b/w, silent
Still (1969-71), 55 min., color, sound
Eureka (1974), 30 min., b/w, silent
Shift (1972-74), 9 min., color, sound
Behind the Scenes (1975), 5 min., color, sound
Table (1976), 16 min., color, silent
Untitled (1977), 5 min., color, silent
Hotel (1979), 15 min., b/w, silent
Mirage (1981), 12 min., color, silent
Untitled, Part One (1981), 30 min., color, silent
Signal – Germany on the Air (1982-85), 37 min., color, sound
Listen (1986-91), 12 min., b/w, sound
Rear Window (1986-91), 10 min., color, sound
This Side of Paradise (1991), 14 min., color, sound
Side/Walk/Shuttle (1991), 40 min., color, sound
Daniel Willi (work in progress), color, sound
Untitled (work in progress), color, sound

Awards

Awards have included the Maya Deren Award (American Film Institute), National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, Guggenheim Fellowship, New York State Council on the Arts Fellowship, Creative Artists Public Service Grant, New York Foundation for the Arts Grant, Film Arts Foundation Grant, Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) Fellowship, and Hohenberg Foundation Grant.

Selected One-Person Exhibitions, 1970-1994

Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York
Anthology Film Archive, New York
Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol, England
Arsenal, Berlin
Art Institute of Chicago
Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh
Carpenter Center for Visual Arts, Harvard University
Collective for Living Cinema, New York
George Eastman House, Rochester, New York
Filmoteca de la Unam, Mexico City
Frankfurt Filmmuseum, Germany
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.
London Filmmakers' Cooperative
Metropolis, Hamburg, Germany
Millenium Film Workshop, New York
Munich Filmmuseum, Germany
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
Museum of Modern Art, New York
Museum of the Moving Image, New York
Osterreichen Filmmuseum, Vienna
Pacific Film Archive, University of California, Berkeley
Rocky Mountain Film Center, Boulder, Colorado
San Francisco Cinematheque
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Selected Group Exhibitions, 1970-1994

The American Independent Film, Boston Museum of Fine Arts
Avant-Garde Film and Early Cinema, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
Berlin Art, Museum of Modern Art, New York
Berlin International Film Festival, Germany
Cine City: Film & Perception of Urban Space 1895-1995, The Getty Center, Santa Monica
Cinema Indipendente Americano e Francese, Cineteca Italiana di Milano, Milan
Film as Film, Hayward Gallery, London
First International Festival of Avant-Garde Film , Riga, Latvia
Form and Structure in Recent Film, Vancouver Art Gallery, British Columbia
Une Histoire du Cinema, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris
A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

Independent America, American Museum of the Moving Image, New York
Information, Museum of Modern Art, New York
International Found Footage Film Festival, Vienna
London International Film Festival
Masters of the American Independent Cinema, Filmex '76, Los Angeles
New American Cinema, Genoa
New York Film Festival
Options and Alternatives: Some Directions in Recent Art, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven
The Pleasure Dome — A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema, Moderna Museet, Stockholm
Rio Cine Festival, Rio de Janeiro
San Francisco International Film Festival
Sonsbeek '71, Netherlands
Torino International Film Festival, Turin
Vienna International film Festival
Whitney Museum of American Art Biennials (1981, 1983, 1985, 1993), New York
Zeitfluss '93 Film Festival, Salzburg, Austria

Selected Bibliography

Camper, Fred. "Ernie Gehr." *1990 Maya Deren Award Brochure*, American Film Institute, Washington DC, 1990.

Camper, Fred. "Ernie Gehr." In *The International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers*, Vol. II, edited by C. Lyons. Chicago: St. James Press, 1984.

Cornwell, Regina. " Works of Ernie Gehr from 1968-72." *Film Culture*, #63-64 (1977).

Cowan, Bob. "Letter from New York." *Take One*, Vol. 14, #1.

Eisenberg, Daniel. "Some Notes on the Films of Ernie Gehr." in *Films of Ernie Gehr*. San Francisco: San Francisco Cinematheque, 1993.

Feldman, Helen. "*Serene Velocity*." *A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema*, American Federation of Arts, New York, 1976.

Foreman, Richard. "On Ernie Gehr's Film *Still*." *Film Culture*, #63-64 (1977).

Gehr, Ernie. "Program Notes by Ernie Gehr for a film showing at the Museum of Modern Art." In *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*. New York: New York University Press, 1978.

Glick, Myrel. "*Eureka* by Ernie Gehr." *Film Culture*, #70-71 (1983).

Goldstein, Steve. "Ernie Gehr Edges into the Light." *Film/Tape World*, #51 (April 1992).

Gunning, Tom. "Signaling Through the Flames." *Millenium Film Journal*, #16-18 (Fall/Winter 1986-87).

_____. "Perspectives and Retrospective: The Films of Ernie Gehr." In *Films of Ernie Gehr*. San Francisco: San Francisco Cinematheque, 1993.

Hanhardt, John. Program notes for Ernie Gehr's retrospective. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1983.

Hoberman, J. "*Side/Walk/Shuttle, This Side of Paradise, Rear Window*." *The Village Voice* (October 13, 1992).

_____. *Vulgar Modernism – Writings on Movies and other Media*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991.

_____. "Explorations." *American Film* (June 1992).

MacDonald, Scott. "Ernie Gehr: *Serene Velocity*." In *Avant-Garde Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

_____. "Ernie Gehr – Camera Obscura/Lens/Filmstrip." *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 43, #4 (Summer 1990).

Mekas, Jonas. *Movie Journal – The Rise of the New American Cinema 1959-1971*. New York: MacMillan Books, 1972.

Pruitt, John. "Ernie Gehr's Recent Work." *Ten Years of Living Cinema*. The Collective for Living Cinema, New York, 1982.

Reveaux, Tony. "Ernie Gehr's New Films." *Artweek*, Vol. 23 #20 (July 23, 1992)

Sitney, P. Adams. *Ernie Gehr* (monograph). Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1981.

_____. *Visionary Film – The American Avant-Garde 1943-1978*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Sterritt, David. "*Signal – Germany on the Air*." *Christian Science Monitor*. (November 1985).

_____. "Film Akin to Poetry – The Films of Ernie Gehr." *Christian Science Monitor* (November 1983).

Taubin, Amy. "*Eureka*." *Artforum*. Vol. IX, #11 (Sept. 1980).

_____. "Street Life." *The Soho Weekly News* (May 14, 1980).

Thackrey, Susan. "A Flower Grows Out of the Mud: Ernie Gehr's *This Side of Paradise*." In *Films of Ernie Gehr*. San Francisco: San Francisco Cinematheque, 1993.

Tscherkassky, Peter. "In the Space of the Avant-Garde: About Ernie Gehr's film *Serene Velocity*." *Blimp*, #20 (Summer 1992)

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

36 pp #56731

San Francisco Art Institute
Board of Trustees

Chair: Jack Schafer
Vice-Chair: Beverly James
Vice-Chair: David Coulter
Treasurer: Christian Erdman
Secretary: Lydia Titcomb

Paule Anglim
Sara Bates
Nancy Boas
Agnes Bourne
Jack Bowers
Pegan Brooke
Enrique Chagoya
Daniel Foster
Gary Garrels
Marion Greene
Mike Henderson
Tom Holland
Mildred Howard
David Kaplan
Betty Klausner
Ellen Klutznick
Charles La Follette
Bruce McGaw
Richard Mickley
Harry S. Parker III
Jay Pidto
Celia Rabinovitch
Lucinda Reinold
Holli Dee Robley
Waldemar Rojas
Paul Sack
John M. Sanger
Catherine Schear-Newman
Richard Shaw
Paul Stein
Gordon Swanson
George D. Tuttle
Anthony J. Zanze
William Zellerbach

Emeritus Trustees

Gardiner Hempel
Margaret Olwell

Artists Committee

Julie Blankenship, *Chair*

Sue Anderson
Sara Bates
Mike Blockstein
Stephanie Cress
Jo Anne Ford
Linda Gibson
Linda Goodman
David Izu
Dennis R. Jennings
Betty Kano
Dona Lantz
Elliott Linwood
Connell Ray Little
Lex Lonehood
Meg Mack
Alfonzo Moret
Domingo Nuño
Jon-Eric Otter
Melissa Pokorny
J. John Priola
Celia Rabinovitch
Patricia Ravarra
Rigo 95
Allan Smith
Edward Esquivel Tywoniak
Josefa Vaughan
Kathryn Weinstein
Victor Mario Zaballa

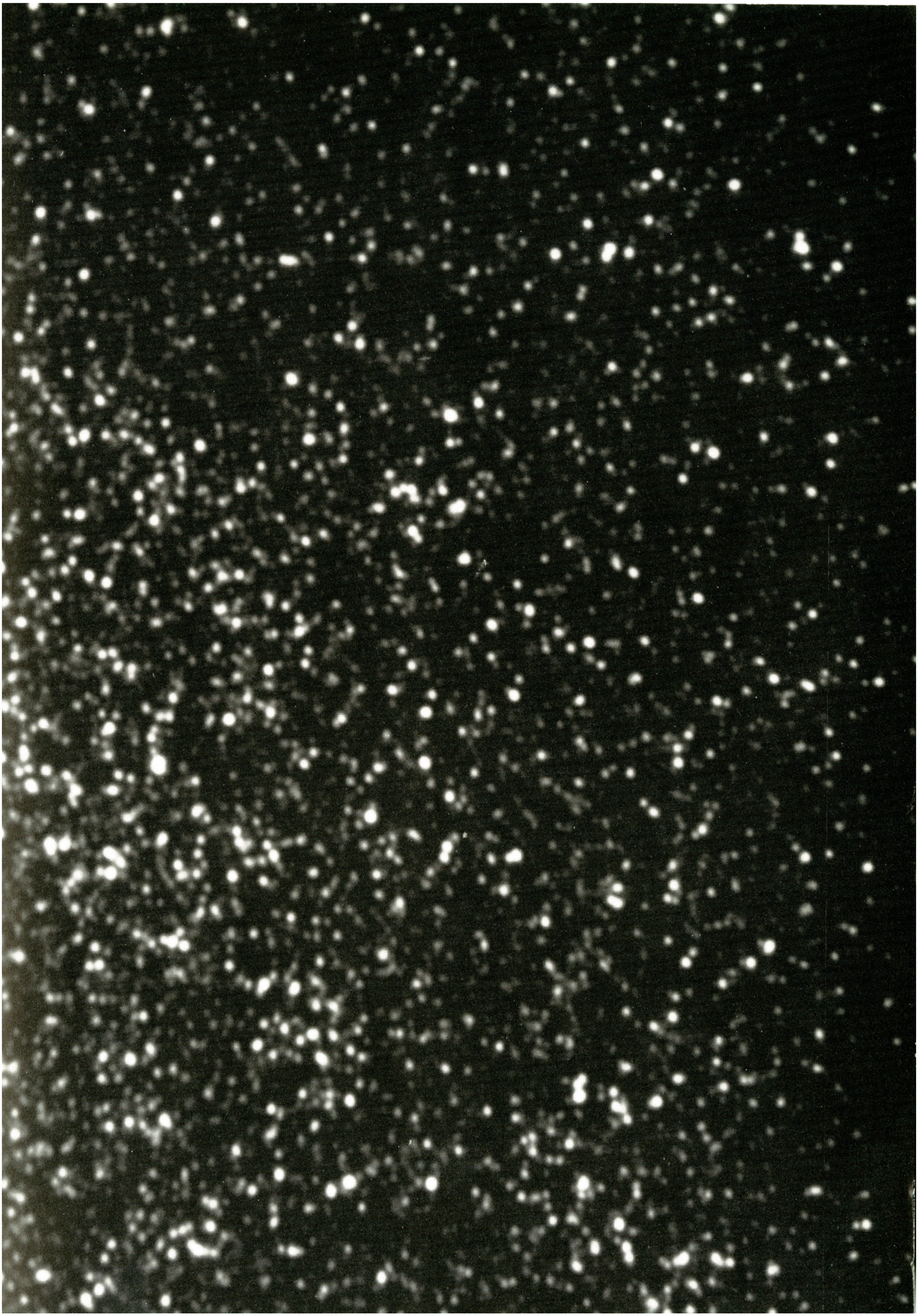
© San Francisco Art Institute 1995
Library of Congress
Catalog Card Numer 95-67729
IBSN 0-930495-26-8

Design: Wayne Smith
Printing: Vision, San Francisco

Walter/McBean Gallery
San Francisco Art Institute
800 Chestnut Street
San Francisco, CA 94133
415.771.7020

INSIDE COVER:
detail, *History* (1970),
40 min., b/w, silent

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)



WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

WALTER / McBEAN GALLERY

SAN FRANCISCO ART INSTITUTE

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)