

STEP PRINT

16mm, 7:00, silent, color, 1976

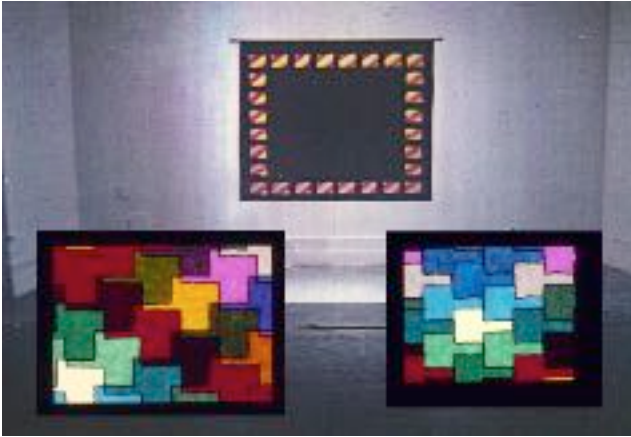


PHOTO COLLAGE. Foreground: 2 stills from the 16mm film, background photographed on site at Artists Space, 1977.



PHOTOGRAPH, 1977
right to left, 16mm loop cassette projector, suspended rear-lit screen, rectangular mosaic cycle of 28 step drawings, me at extreme left.

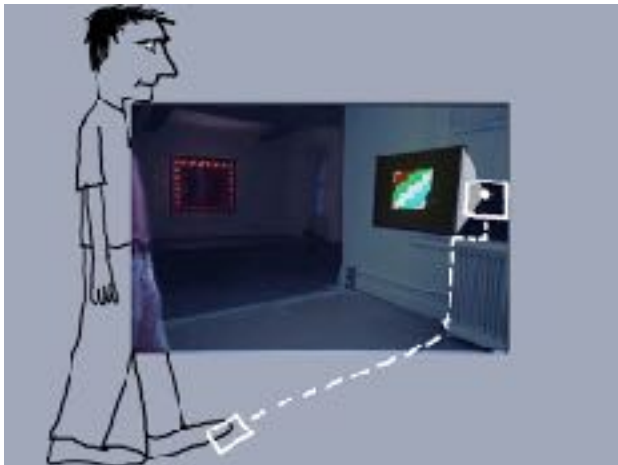


PHOTO DIAGRAM, 1980
Background as above with exposure compensation, and linear indications for projector, wiring, switch, and user.

FILM AS INSTALLATION

This film installation/project is a reminder of a period when I was interested in branching out from the theatrical, independent film context to the art world by placing animated frames within a gallery context. With very few exceptions (e.g. Paul Sharits) film was not accepted in galleries then. The projector was too complex, noisy, and needed constant attention. Motion pictures were also suspected to be a vulgar novelty ("If it moves it's not for us" sniffed John Canaday to Robert Breer, whose films and paintings received little more than a ripple of attention among critics of art or film. But the main reason might have been purely market-based: what was for sale. Who would want to buy a reel of film that had to be projected, and would only become brittle and fade? And besides, it would be a copy, not a unique, signed object made from a scarce material. (NFT, anyone?)

The independent short film paradigm was also problematic by association. We set ourselves up in contrast to the entertainment studio cartoon system which had all but disappeared in the '70s. We used more direct, experimental, reductive techniques, and dealt with more personal, poetic, and disturbing (adult?) material. But in relation to the world of cinema we were as irrelevant as a minnow to a whale. We used the same film, it passed through a projector at the same speed to land on the same screen, in the same darkened room with rows of seats and red "exit" signs. But the kinship was superficial.

I was determined to find a space where the viewer would be able to start and stop the film at will and could see the art outside of the cinematic time envelop, stopping on a frame and letting the color wash over and move you. The project was accepted by Artists Space, then situated in a suite of white washed offices at 105 Hudson St, long before the Tribeca real estate phenomenon. The space was actually two adjoining rooms, minimal, neutral, with garish fluorescent lighting and a window onto an air-shaft.

The installation had two parts, a film loop projector activated by the viewer with a foot switch and a composite "quilt" of sequence images rear-lit to emphasize their translucence. One could either stop and play the film for any length of time, or move into secondary space to examine the drawings.

FILM AS FILM

Sitting in a dark space with others, watching a fixed screen, my expectation was for a "show." No matter how many silent, non-narrative, avant-garde films I sat through at The Millennium, Anthology, or the Collective for Living Cinema, I could never comfortably accept the premise that this experience was not also a "show." The atmosphere always reeked of thwarted pleasure, constipation, hyper reverence. I just didn't get it, no matter how beautiful the image, or how profound the silence or the black screen. But in a gallery space the mood would be democratic, peripatetic, inquisitive. You were on the prowl, actively browsing,

grazing, a noble hunter-gatherer, not a passive serf, dependent on the whimsy of a tyrannical control freak artist.

The film was divided into 3 color sections, each containing a 28 drawing looped cycle. The drawings were freehand linear abstractions based on a simple step pattern found in weaving in cultures throughout the world. The colors were applied with permanent markers which bled through to the opposite side.

In traditional cartoon animation, drawing was a means to an end. To focus on its formal materiality would interrupt the flow of illusion and narrative, and drafting consistency is therefore also quite critical. But by treating the drawings as individual objects as well as sequential phases I was able to discover interesting varieties of permutation. The strategies were very simple: reversing orientation and reversing sequence direction as single and as doubled layers.

The experience of methodical, step-climbing animation was interrupted by intercut documentary shots, both live action and frame-by-frame, which illustrated the rather mechanical process. Traditionally, this was considered the least creative, yet most demanding technique in animation, but the boredom was relieved by viewing each drawing while being collated. With "Step Print" the shooting was similarly methodical, but followed a series of layered variations all at the same tempo. There was no sense of a preview as each frame of combinations looked pretty much alike. But upon projection the rhythms of the resulting patterns were surprising.

MUSIC

Oskar Fischinger was the primary reference for Step Print. During his richly influential career Fischinger gave us woozy cartoons in clay, marching cigarettes, color abstractions tightly synchronized to music as well as silent, and even experiments in concrete sound by drawing optical waveforms. His intention was to find a kind of visual equivalent to music: perhaps a quixotic task. His legacy is still a daunting challenge to any young animator familiar with synchronic processes. I could perhaps have organized my experiments beside a soundtrack, with serial music composed by Glass or Reich, but I felt the need to keep these experiments provisional, more like chapters in a logbook. I wanted to keep the camera running without looking over my shoulder to see if the viewer was getting anxious or bored, casting about for some other stimulus. I wanted the viewer to feel like he or she was simply observing an animator at work in his studio, no more, and to realize that it's often quite boring and absurd, but that you can hit upon a few unexpected moments, like that chord from Duke Ellington's piano.

FOOTNOTE FROM YEARS INTO THE FUTURE, 2023

In 1977, there was no opening, no announcement, no reviews, and only a few friends came by to see what I had done. A few days after after installation, an animator colleague happened to tell me that the light fixture behind the hanging sequence had fallen to the floor. I dashed off and fixed it. Why hadn't I been told by the gallery staff? At the close of the two week "show" the Artists Space director asked me if I was satisfied with the project to which I replied positively. I didn't tell her how disturbed I had been. Now I realize how ignorant I had been, experimenting in the Studio's back-room workspace, not mounted in a main gallery, not sending out invitations, not keeping close watch on the whole affair. But ever since 1977 I have tended to include the installation on most "Step Print" descriptions and resumes even if it wasn't listed by Artists Space as a regular exhibition. (There was a small reference on its website archive, at least until recently, but now even that has fallen off like a light fixture.) So now, perhaps it would be a good idea to delete this bogus reference.