Two Nights with Ernie Gehr: 
Early Films and New Digital Works

Ernie Gehr’s unsurpassed body of films and videos from the past 43 years combines richly conceived and rigorous cinematic structures with a profound sensitivity for the physical world around him. This two-program series begins on Monday with four recent digital works: Crystal Palace (2002/2011), Auto-Collider IX (2010), Thank You for Visiting (2010), and Abracadabra (2009). The quartet features, according to Gehr, “Lake Tahoe on steroids, aerobic eye exercises in San Francisco, Brooklyn’s Red Hook after midnight, and for those with a special weakness for the baffling mysteries of early cinema: spiritualism, crashing through stone walls, a remake of the sinking of the Titanic, and, as a grand finale, the dance-of-the-century!” Tuesday’s screening revisits Gehr’s earliest 16mm films: Morning (1968), Wait (1968), Reverberation (1969), Transparency (1969), History (1970), Field (1970), and Serene Velocity (1970)—one of the few experimental films included in the Library of Congress’ National Film Registry as an American landmark. These rarely screened shorts are elegant, concise and acutely observed explorations of cinematic space, and established Gehr as one of our foremost avant-gardists.

In person: 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 motion picture apparatus.” —J. Hoberman

ADVANCED CURATORS NOTES

Monday, November 14 | 8:30 pm
Ernie Gehr: New Digital Works

**Abracadabra**
2009 | 39 minutes | Color/b&w | silent

*Abracadabra*’s realization is a miracle of sorts. Contemporary and very digital, it also celebrates the thrills and spirit of early cinema; especially the excitement and bewilderment that once hovered over the possibilities of film; its acceptance of accidents and reflections on the medium; breath-taking and space-breaking phantom rides; the contradictory mirror-held-up-to-nature character of “actualities”; and of course, the magic of hand-tinted photographic moving images. (EG)

**Crystal Palace**
2002/revised 2011 | 28 minutes | Color | Sound.

An ode to digital interlace, which is to video what intervals between frames are to film. As I began to work with video, digital interlace seemed to hold the possibilities for a potent, and exciting new form of moving image rendering. Unfortunately, the industry was quick to replace it with “progressive.” After *Crystal Palace* was completed, the work sat dormant for nearly a decade because its play with interlace could not be projected properly in progressive mode. Now, however, thanks to the help of Thomas Dexter, the interlace of *Crystal Palace* can finally be shown as it was meant to be seen. Of course, after all this time I couldn’t bypass the opportunity to also revise the work. So, here it is, fresh, improved, and more delightful then ever. Footage was originally recorded at Lake Tahoe in February 2000. (EG)

**Thank You For Visiting**
2010 | 12 minutes | Color | Sound.

A tone poem. As haunting as the place where the footage was recorded. An image appears on screen, often with the “memory” (photo-memory) of a previous image/sound. It’s messed up a bit and
then reconfigured. In our everyday lives, we do this all the time (project), but here in this work, it is “created” and the work takes on a moody, evocative, interpretive character; blurring definitions of objects and spaces, mixing opaque with transparent, large with small, one activity/image/space with another. Often creating a rich tapestry that cannot be totally picked up on a single viewing. Yet for all that, there is still a certain kind of logic and coherence. Footage was recorded in Red Hook (Brooklyn, New York). (EG)

**AUTO-COLLIDER XIII**
2011 | 13 minutes | Color | Sound.

**Tue Nov 15 | 8:30 pm**
**Ernie Gehr: Early Films**

**Morning**
1968 | 5 minutes | color | silent | 16mm | 18 fps

**Wait**
1968 | 7 minutes | color | silent | 16mm | 18 fps

"The first time I saw Morning and Wait, they seemed like light events. On second viewing, they began to appear to be two light narratives. ...Two people sitting in a room. Silent. Nothing seemingly happens. They slightly change positions from time to time. Window. Room. Furniture. Action between the frames. And the light, between them, around them, over them. The story is not told by way of usual situations, because it is not the usual one. It’s happening on some mental level. The light, no doubt, is the key to it, it punctuates the events, it tells the story, it sets the tone."
– Jonas Mekas

**Reverberation**
1969 | 23 minutes | b&w | 16mm | 18 fps
With Andrew Noren and Margaret Lamarre.

"Reverberation is one of the most rigorous examples I know of that growing body of film that sets out to examine materials in such a way that the 'phenomenon' under consideration finally glows with the grace of a lucid quality of observation which lifts us into the realm of quite genuine 'illumination' at the same time that it asserts ever more forcefully the pre-eminence of the simple 'being-thereness' of the materials under the camera-eye." - Richard Foreman
**Transparency**  
1969 | 11 minutes | color | silent | 16mm | 24fps

An "action" movie in which the processes of recording and projecting of moving images are the protagonists. The field of action is the rectangle screen within, where cinematic ripplings and combustions are offered for immediate sensual pleasure and enlightenment.

**History**  
1970 | 14 minutes | color | silent | 16mm | 24 fps

"I'd like to say more, but words fail me. This is historically reductive. That won't do. One makes choices. Choices are made. The opacity has been tapped. The black quivers, the matter is set in motion. There is light. It's primeval. Pre-historic. At last, the first film! It trembles in the eye-mind. Unique." -Michael Snow

**Field**  
1970 | 9.5 minutes | b&w | silent | 16mm, 18 fps

"The frame encloses a rush of diagonal streaks in black and white without any distinguishable depth or recognizable imagery. The speed is so great and the optical highlights so homogenous that it is very difficult to determine whether the movement is downward from the upper left corner of the screen or upward from the opposite corner.... Curiously the natural sublime sneaks back into the film by association. The rush of lines and the spires of shadows suggest cascading waters, mountains and pine forests." - P. Adams Sitney

**Serene Velocity**  
1970 | 23 minutes | color | silent | 16mm, 18 fps

"A literal 'Shock Corridor' wherein Gehr creates a stunning head-on motion by systematically shifting focal lengths on a static zoom lens as it stares down the center of an empty, modernistic hallway. Without ever having to move the camera, Gehr turns the fluorescent geometry of his institutional corridor into a sort of piston-powered mandala. If Giotto had made action films, they would have been these." - J. Hoberman

**Ernie Gehr** began to work with film with *Morning* (1968), and with digital media with *Cotton Candy* (2001).
He is a recipient of a Stan Brakhage Vision Award (Denver International Film Festival, 2009), a Princeton University Humanities Fellowship (2007), and a Maya Deren Award (American Film Institute, 1990). A recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, Gehr has also received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, New York Arts Foundation, California Council on the Art, as well as commissions for standard single single-screen work (Museum of Modern Art, 2000; Vienna International Film Festival, 2003), and digital installations (Museum of Modern Art, 2002, 2005; Madison Square Park Conservancy, NY, 2010). Retrospectives of his work were presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art; Arsenal, Berlin; Centre Pompidou, Paris; San Francisco Cinematheque; International Film Festival Rotterdam; Pesaro International Film Festival, and at the American Museum of the Moving Image in New York.

Gehr will begin teaching at Harvard University in Spring 2012 and has taught at various institutions across the country, including S.U.N.Y Binghamton, S.U.N.Y. Buffalo, Bard College, University of Colorado at Boulder, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, University of California, Berkeley, and the San Francisco Art Institute.

His 16mm film Serene Velocity (1970) was one of only a handful of experimental films named to the National Film Registry and many of his films are in the collections of major museums throughout North America and Europe.

“[Ernie Gerhr's films are] paradise found in the kind of detachment that is most deeply involving.” – Gilberto Perez, The New York Times

Curated by Steve Anker and Bérénice Reynaud

The Jack H. Skirball Series is supported in part by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.