

# Subtractive Cinema

## Clint Enns

By Tom Kohut

Filmmaker, new media artist, curator, critic and mathematician — Clint Enns's status as Canadian underground and experimental film's polymath is assured after nearly a decade of tireless enthusiasm and practice. Enns has been described as a practitioner of "Prairie Minimalism." Few of his films and videos are much more than two or three minutes in length, and they are marked by their formalism and adventurous use of outmoded and/or malfunctioning technologies to produce work that demonstrates wit, aesthetic and conceptual sophistication in addition to a certain ambivalence to the history of his medium: a certain mix of admiration and derision that is, perhaps, the mark of true cinephiles in their love of Cinema's potential and their disappointed anger when it fails to live up to its own ideals.

Having explored such fields as repurposed found footage and distressed video games and cameras, Enns has recently taken an interest in the history of algorithmic filmmaking — an approach that applies a strict formalization to the production of moving images and sound.<sup>1</sup> The results of this engagement were recently shown at the AceArt Flux Space in Winnipeg. Enns's "Post Cinema: Still and Moving Images" asks a number of questions about the ontology of the cinematic image, a task that puts Enns firmly in the tradition extending from Dziga Vertov to Jean-Luc Godard who explored the question of the specificity of the filmed image, its relation to sound and text, its essential mode of being.<sup>2</sup> Enns makes use of paradigmatic works in the history of algorithmic filmmaking: Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), Kurt Kren's 1964 short *Mama und Papa (Materialaktion Otto Mühl)*, Warhol's *Empire* (1964), the second section of Hollis Frampton's *Zorn Lemma* (1970), Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) and the most recent film, James Benning's *Ten Skies* (2004). All of these films are notable in their deliberate foregrounding of their editing structures; even the most straightforwardly narrative film (*Rope*) is infamous in cinematic circles for Hitchcock's attempt/stunt to make the film appear to be shot in a single continuous take. (In reality, as every Hitchcock fan knows, there are ten takes of ten minutes in length, each disguised by an artful dodge behind a character's back or through a close-up on a piece of furniture.)<sup>3</sup> So we have the postulation of a living canon, delineated as a sort of diagonal through Hollywood cinema, the American (and Canadian) Underground, Viennese actionism and contemporary digital filmmaking.

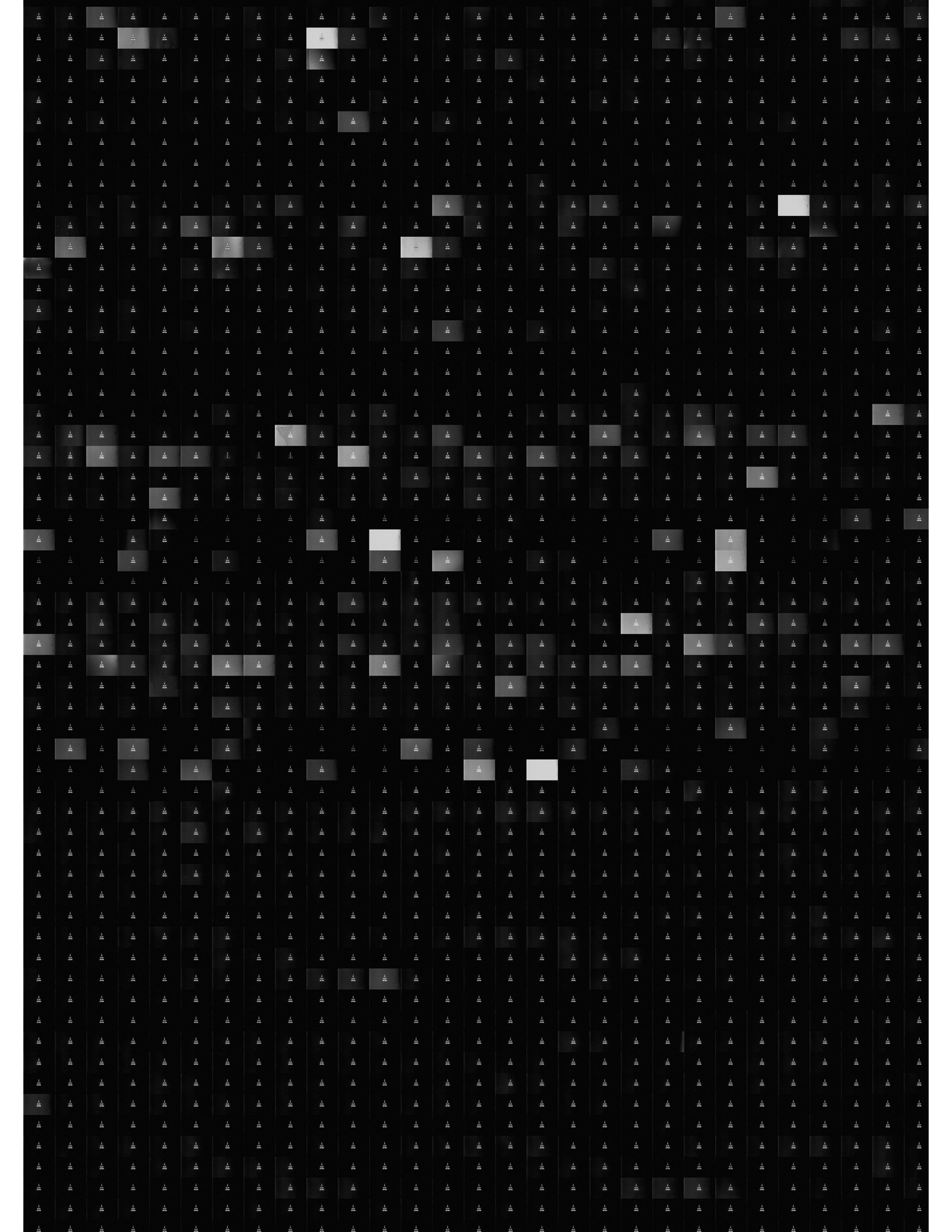
What does Enns contribute to this canon? A notable subtraction: Enns appropriates these films in order to produce two videos and six photographs that form the focus of the "Post Cinema" exhibition. In his artist statement, Enns asks: "What happens when cinema is reduced to a series of stills? What is cinema without time? What lies in the boundary between the photographic and the cinematic?" The question is a subtle one but also one that goes to the heart of the question of what a cinematic image is. For cinema is nothing if not a durational, diachronic art, one that unfolds in time; to paraphrase Godard, film marks its time from beginning, middle to end (if not necessarily in that order). Even these films, which flaunt their replacement of narrative structure with algorithmic process, may be said to replace narrative diachrony with what might be referred to as cinematic diachrony; their duration depends on nothing other than the time it takes to run the film, rather than any extraneous detail such as introduction, build-up or climax.

Enns's subtractive strategy develops along two modes manifested differently in the videos and the photographs. For the videos, Enns subtracts key focal elements of Kren and Benning's films; in the case of the former, the film's subject — a typically violent Otto Mühl "action," bodily fluids and all — is removed, retaining only Kren's splice lines.<sup>4</sup> The result is a video of red, yellow and black abstract lines moving across the screen, connoting an impressive violence in themselves. For Benning's more lyrical evocation of *Ten Skies*, Enns actually removes the image of the skies themselves, leaving only the movement of cloud patterns that also take on a curiously disjointed aspect. Enns refers to this strategy as *condensation*,<sup>5</sup> the result of which is a drastically abbreviated version of a longer, meditative work.<sup>6</sup> In both cases, what *subtraction* means is clear: a reduction of the cinematic field to figure without ground (in the case of the Benning-related video *Ten X Ten Skies*) and, in the case of the Kren work *Splice Lines*, a statement that there is no cinema that does not ontologically derive from the editing splice — the cut.<sup>7</sup>

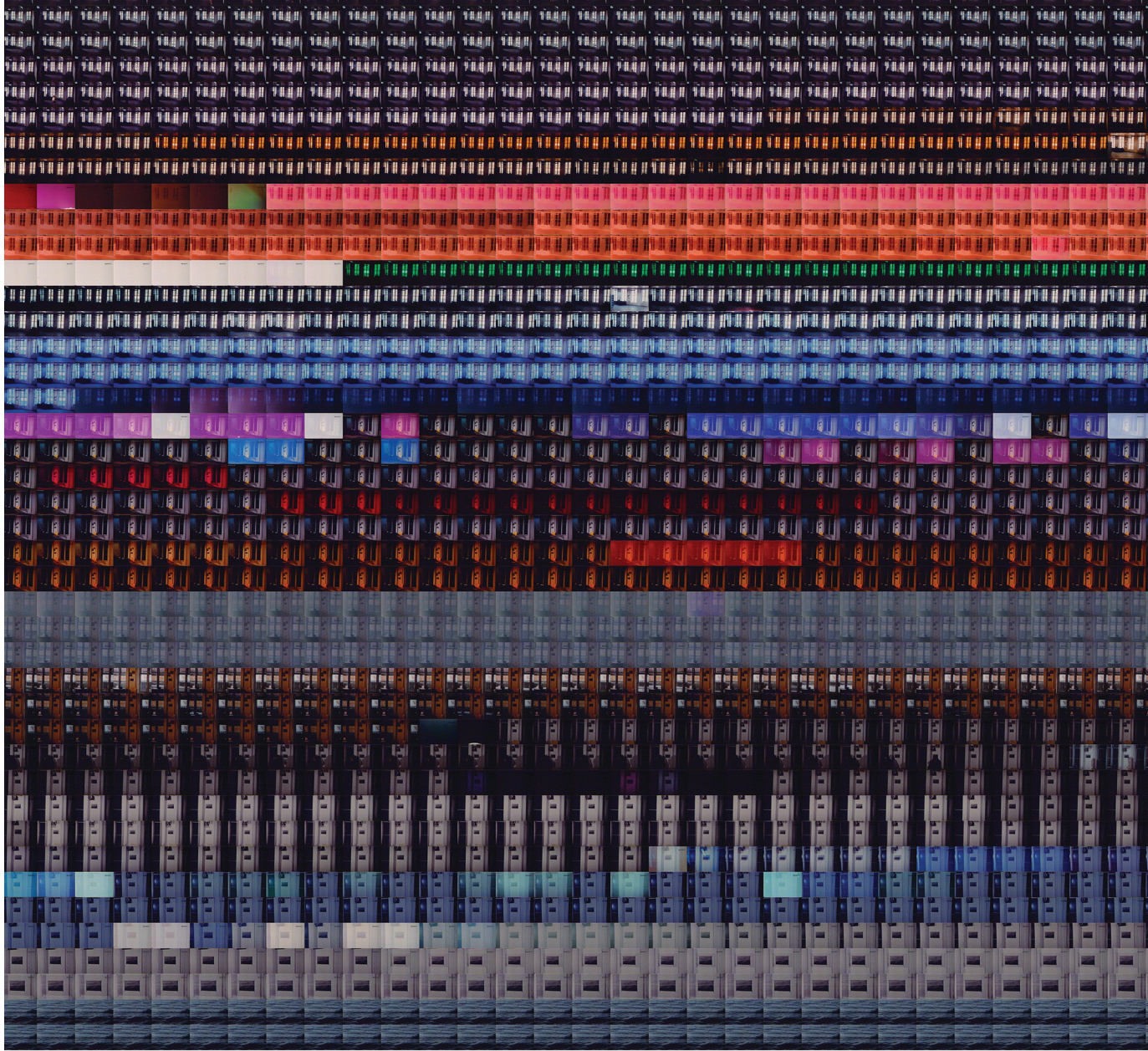
If the cut is foregrounded in the video work, what kind of subtractive strategy does Enns employ in his photographic works? The six works are, at first glance, very similar: a grid of small squares arranged as a mosaic. Adapting Open Source software designed by Lev Manovich,<sup>8</sup> Enns created a database of all of the frames in the films in question; using the software's algorithms, Enns generated a selection of the images arranged in grids. The printed results are what we see: a determinate number of square film stills arranged chronologically, sometimes horizontally or, as in the case of *Zorns Lemma* (2012), vertically. This last example is particularly interesting, insofar as it neatly encapsulates the import of Enns's work. On the one hand, we are able to take in the entire film (in fact, the second half) in a single glance, appreciating gradations in colour and form. On the other hand, we are able to grasp the algorithmic nature of the film, with its alphabetical frames, noting where this rigour is contaminated by seemingly aleatory shots of faces and activities. The colour and form of the film is emphasized by the minuteness of the individual frames; even Warhol's black and white minimalist *Empire*, in Clint Enns's hands, *Empire (abridged)* (2012) benefits from this treatment, the gridlike repetition of the Empire State building coming to resemble the regal stamp of a monarchy in terminal decline — indeed, a decayed empire.

Enns has clearly subtracted diachrony — the movement of time — from these films in favour of the synchronic relation of spatial location. In this sense, he has generated films that can be viewed in their entirety instantaneously. But there is something further to add, something that we can articulate by looking at the use he makes of Michael Snow's iconic *Wavelength*. There are, in fact, two versions of Snow's 1967 landmark film: the original version and a version produced by the author in 2003, *WVLNT (or Wavelength for Those Who Don't Have the Time)*. The original, 45-minute version is well-known; the second 15-minute, accelerated version is, for the most part, the original version split into three 15-minute blocks which are superimposed onto each other. In both cases, the sense of film as the succession of instants is highly attenuated, although not, it should be emphasized, completely

*Empire (Abridged)*, 2012







*Wavelength Without the Time*, 2012

exhausted. In the 1967 version, it is true that the zoom across the room is slow to the point of near imperceptibility, but there remains what might be called “the time of the zoom.” Day is followed by night; the man (Hollis Frampton) who enters the shot and dies, before the zoom passes over him, nevertheless *precedes* the woman’s telephone call to her friend reporting the incident. The situation is complicated in *WV-LNT* in which we have three different temporal successions overlaid onto each other. (Amusingly, the woman’s telephone call actually precedes Frampton’s expiration on the floor in this later version.) These attenuations are Snow’s attempt to examine the precise delimitation of photography from film, finding that even the most minimal difference in diachrony allows film to become its own notion; the photograph of the waves on which the zoom rests at the end of *Wavelength* (1967) might be said to function as a gauntlet thrown down by space in the face of time. This gauntlet is taken up by Enns’s *Wavelength Without Time* (2012). A few things are happening here. Firstly, there is an element of film analysis, that is, a (nearly) frame-by-frame examination of the 1967 film for which the term “structural cinema” was invented.<sup>11</sup> Hence, a further pedagogical effect: viewers are able to appreciate the blends of coloured gels, afterimages, the composition of the shots — in short, all of the “fine art” aspects to Snow’s film, whose visual pleasure

is the source of the colourful mosaic of the Enns photograph’s own visual pleasure. However, there is a further point to be made. Enns subtracts diachrony from *Wavelength* (whose attenuated sense of temporal progression perhaps made it slightly easier for Enns to do). What we are left with, then, is a diachronic progression rendered as a synchronic totality. If with the videos, Enns’s subtractive strategy served to isolate the ontological substrate of film as the editing splice, with the photographs, the subtraction of synchrony serves to foreground the structuration of these splices as the ontological essence of film itself. In effect, Enns’s work enables us to see that film is a structure of cuts, of sutured gaps, prior to any phenomenological after-effect. And I would argue something further: if the experience of film is coextensive with the experience of time, Enns’s work asks a troubling question: what if the human experience of time is in fact nothing more than the local effect of a determinate structure of images?

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## Notes:

1. cf. his essay "The History of Algorithmic Filmmaking" in Marshall McLuhan and Vilém Flusser's *Aesthetic and Communications Theories Revisited* (Winnipeg: Video Pool Media Arts Centre, forthcoming 2013).
2. More recently, this project has been taken on by the Winnipeg/Montreal filmmaker Isiah Medina in his films *Semi-Auto Colours* (2011) and *Le boulet n'est pas passé loin* (2013), among others.
3. D. A. Miller usefully schematizes these hidden edits in his psychoanalytic essay "Anal Rope," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (London: Routledge, 1991, 119-141), 141, f.18.
4. Kren's film is more than just performance documentation, but a heavily edited work that is at the very least a relatively autonomous work of art. Kren's edits were numerous but rather crudely executed, leading the filmmaker to fear that his film would not survive laboratory processing. According to legend, this was the least of his worries; the lab technicians, so disturbed by what they saw, gave him his film back and told him to leave the premises and never come back.
5. Email correspondence with the author; 29th of May, 2013.
6. Benning's original film is just under two hours in length; Enns's distillation clocks in at a brisk three minutes, although this is positively encyclopaedic by Enns's standards.
7. In fact, the same may be said of Enns's reworked Benning video. By accelerating the movement of the clouds, Enns interrupts the smooth flow

of the original film, thereby making the edits abruptly apparent.

8. Software available here: <http://lab.softwarestudies.com/> This software is designed to enable data visualization for film and video collections and databases, and is part of Manovich's shift from new media studies to the avant-gardism of software design itself. cf. *Software Takes Command* (New York, Bloomsbury, 2013).
9. In this context, it should be noted that the version of *Empire* that Enns used to generate *Empire* (abridged) is not the eight-hour version originally shot by Warhol in 1964, but rather an hour-long version released in Italy in association with the Andy Warhol Museum. I also offer a somewhat heretical opinion: I slightly prefer *WVLNT* to *Wavelength*.
10. In Deleuze's Cinema books, his brief discussion of *Wavelength* is found in the first volume concerning *The Movement-Image*, noting its exhaustion of the real space of the room in order to produce a generic "any-space-whatever". Giles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, (trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, Minnesota: U of Minneapolis P), 122.
11. In the chapter on "Structural Film," Sitney, who coined the term, states that "*Wavelength* may be the supreme achievement of the form...." P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943 – 2000* Third Edition.