

Original Copies: How Film and Video Became Art Objects

by ERIKA BALSOM

Abstract: This article examines the sale of film and video as art objects, with particular attention to the development of the limited-edition model throughout the twentieth century. It offers an explanation for the ascendance of this model in the 1990s and explores both the support and criticism it has received.

In the early 1930s, gallerist Julien Levy had a brilliant idea: to sell film prints as art objects. Levy is primarily known as the New York dealer who represented the surrealists; like them, he had a passion for cinema and for challenging what counted as an artistic medium. He was a powerful advocate for the filmic experiments of artists, hosting the first American screening of *Un chien andalou* (Luis Buñuel, 1929) on November 17, 1932. He exhibited works such as *Rose Hobart* (Joseph Cornell, 1936) and *Anemic Cinema* (Marcel Duchamp, 1926). In 1932 and 1933, he served as the president of the Film Society of New York, a not-for-profit organization that aimed to show films that might be too unconventional to attract a broad public. Taken by this enthusiasm for cinema, Levy wrote in his memoirs, “As part of my program to promote camera work as an art I hoped to be able to sell short films in limited editions to collectors.”¹ He saw this model of sale as essential to the valorization of cinema as an artistic medium: “I had formed a collection of films reprinted on 16mm stock, with two purposes in mind: films conceived by such important painters as Duchamp, Leger, or Dali should command much the same value as a canvas from their hand, and if a collector’s market could be organized, I thought to persuade other painters to experiment in this medium.”² Levy tried to promote the venture, but there is no record that he ever succeeded in selling a single print.³

1 Julien Levy, *Memoir of an Art Gallery* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2003), 68.

2 *Ibid.*, 168.

3 A letter from Joella Levy, Julien’s wife, to Paul Vanderbilt dated April 18, 1932, reads, “We do give performances of short Avant-garde and Amateur movies in the Gallery, they are all on 16mm film, and we do rent them and sell copies.” Joella Levy lists *Ballet mécanique* (Fernand Léger, 1924), *L’étoile de mer* (1928), *Le Château d’If* by Man Ray (1929; which one presumes is *Les mystères du Château de Dé*), *Spirale* by Marcel Duchamp (presumably *Anemic Cinema*, 1926), and *Sportfilm* by V. Albrecht Blum (presumably *Quer durch den Sport*,

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Levy's initiative may be understood as participating in two seemingly contradictory impulses that marked the era: first, the desire to claim for cinema the status of art, something associated with French impressionist film theorists and filmmakers, as well as burgeoning film society movements in France and the United States; second, the desire to use cinema, with its basis in mechanical reproducibility and mass culture, to challenge the institution of art, something one might align with the filmmaking activities of the historical avant-garde. Steven Watson describes Levy as a "Harvard modernist," an individual who, like Alfred Barr Jr., "saw the traditional art hierarchy—which granted museum status only to painting and sculpture—as insufficient and inaccurate."⁴ Although Levy's interest in cinema perhaps best embodies his desire to confound high and low and to rethink the status of the art object, his questioning of the hegemony of painting and sculpture extended beyond his involvement in avant-garde film. He sold books and periodicals, as well as found tchotchkes he called "kinack kinacks."⁵ Levy was keenly interested in the sale of photographic prints, but it never generated enough income to keep his gallery afloat—this duty fell to the tried-and-true medium of painting.⁶ Given the lukewarm reception collectors gave Levy's photographic offerings, the notion that there might be a market for limited-edition film prints seems unthinkable. After all, like a photograph, film problematizes the notion that the work of art is founded in uniqueness, but unlike a photograph, a film print cannot simply be hung on a wall.

How different the situation appears today. Over the past two decades, as the popularity of film and video in contemporary art has soared, the limited edition has finally proved itself as not only a viable model of distribution but also as perhaps *the* model of distribution for moving-image art. Today, films and videos are regularly sold as art objects, most often in an edition of three or four plus artist's proofs.⁷ Though still nowhere near the salability of more traditional art objects, film and video are attaining a new market viability that has drastically changed the ways in which moving-image art is bought, sold, valued, and seen. Though most editions are sold to institutions, a growing private collectors' market for moving-image art nevertheless exists. In 2005, the *New York Times* profiled San Francisco video-art collectors Pam and Dick Kramlich, who have numerous works of video art installed in their home: "As eccentric as the Kramlichs' domestic situation may seem today, 10 years ago it would have been a downright oddity. . . . But now, video art is widely bought and exhibited by collectors

1929). She quotes a rental fee of \$10 for *Ballet mécanique* but writes that "for the others we have to arrange a price as we've never rented before." According to Marie Difilippantonio of the Jean and Julien Levy Foundation, this is the sole extant reference to the sale of films as art objects. Joella Levy to Paul Vanderbilt, April 18, 1932, letter, Levy Gallery Archives, courtesy of Marie Difilippantonio.

4 Steven Watson, "Julien Levy: Exhibitionist and Harvard Modernist," in *Julien Levy: Portrait of an Art Gallery*, ed. Ingrid Schaffner and Lisa Jacobs (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 86.

5 See Ingrid Schaffner, "Alchemy of the Gallery," in *Julien Levy: Portrait of an Art Gallery*, ed. Ingrid Schaffner and Lisa Jacobs (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 22–23.

6 On Levy's difficulties in selling photographs, see Levy, *Memoir*, 59, 68–69.

7 The artist's proof—often abbreviated as "AP"—is a term that comes from printmaking. It originally designated a print made to test quality but has since come to refer to copies retained by the artist that exist outside of the numbered edition and are generally not for sale. They do, however, sometimes appear on the secondary market, where they can attract higher prices than the numbered edition.

and museums alike, and there are those who say flat screens may soon be as common on household walls as picture frames.⁸ Film and video art is now collected like painting, and central to this enterprise is the artificial imposition of scarcity effected by editioning.⁹ The widespread espousal of the limited-edition model represents a reining in of the inherent reproducibility of moving-image media and its wholesale recuperation into the symbolic economy it once compromised, that of the unique work of art. Authenticity—a concept that had never mattered much to film and video—becomes paramount. For some, this represents a betrayal of the specific qualities of film and video and the utopian hopes invested in them; for others, it represents the only way that film and video will be taken seriously as artistic media, and the most viable economic model to support the livelihood of moving-image artists.

When purchasing a video edition, the collector usually receives an archival master (often Digital Beta); exhibition copies in a current format; digital files; a signed and numbered certificate of authenticity; and a contract specifying the rights to exhibition, duplication, and format shifting. In the case of film, the collector usually acquires a master in the form of an internegative; a number of prints; a digital preview copy of the work; a signed and numbered certificate of authenticity; and a contract specifying the rights to exhibition, duplication, and format shifting. In some cases, the technological support required to display the work might be included as a part of the edition, though such a practice is relatively rare. Editions sometimes also include ancillary materials such as still photographs or sculptural packaging, included so as to endow the work with objecthood, but more commonly such objects (when they do exist) are sold separately from the edition. When one buys an edition, one purchases a rather curious combination of rights, content, and technical support—the specifics of which are all closely regulated by the contracts accompanying the acquisition. This makes the accession of film or video into a museum collection distinctly more complicated than would be the case with most traditional artworks. Though moving-image media do possess a kind of objecthood, it is crucial to recognize that what is for sale is less this object *per se* than a set of permissions, privileges, and responsibilities concerning the exhibition and guardianship of a given work over time.

Between Levy's inaugural attempt to sell film prints and the recent embrace of the limited edition, there have been a host of efforts to sell film and video as art objects. This article examines the roots of the limited edition in late-nineteenth-century printmaking and bronze sculpture before tracing its persistent rearticulation in relation to film and video throughout the twentieth century, by Bruce Conner in California, Gerry Schum in Düsseldorf, Castelli-Sonnabend Tapes and Films Inc. in New York, and others. Although these attempts to edition film and video differ in their geographical and historical locations, they share something in common: they were failures. The limited-edition model fails and fails again until the 1990s, when it finally begins to meet with success. How can one explain this particular trajectory? Concentrating

8 Edward Lewine, "Art That Has to Sleep in the Garage," *New York Times*, June 26, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/26/arts/design/26lewi.html>.

9 It is worth noting that true, rather than artificial, rarity also exists in moving-image art, whether because of the financial cost of striking prints, the availability of film stock, or aesthetic choices (such as the decision to work in performance or with camera originals). I plan to explore such rarity in my future research.

primarily on the American context but offering a broader international perspective when possible, the following pages advance several hypotheses in an effort to account for this important shift in the distribution and valorization of the moving image in art. To conclude, the article examines both the benefits of this model and the criticisms it has provoked.

Questions concerning the sale and pricing of art are frequently left out of scholarly discourse; they are presumably thought to be vulgar and tasteless, a disavowed part of a business that never wants to recognize itself as such. However, as the following will show, such practices in fact have an intimate relationship to the symbolic value attached to a given art object, as well as a direct impact on how that object may be collected and archived. As Isabelle Graw has noted, the notion that there is a strict separation between the lofty ideals of art and the more earthly concerns of the market is patently false, though often assumed.¹⁰ Although not isomorphic, the financial valorization of art and the cultural and symbolic valorization of art are inextricably tied together. The discipline of cinema studies, whether dealing with experimental film or a blockbuster megaproduction, has consistently embraced questions concerning the economics of circulation in a manner that has largely eluded contemporary art history.¹¹ When dealing with an interdisciplinary object like artists' film and video, it is imperative that one follow the enthusiasm of the former rather than the reticence of the latter. Understanding editioning is key to making sense of the past, present, and future of moving-image art and to parsing the distinctions between the two strands of artistic practice that are encompassed by that heading, experimental cinema and artists' cinema. It sheds light on art's ongoing fetishization of the unique object and on how conceptions of the authenticity, reproducibility, and value of film and video have changed over time and continue to change in our present moment.

Origins. The practice of escalating the price of the art object and inciting consumer desire through the artificial cultivation of rarity existed before the moving image was used in an art context, but it is curiously contemporaneous with the invention of cinema. The turn of the century saw the development of this model in the arena of bronze sculpture and prints. These first instantiations of the limited edition display several key characteristics that would reappear as film and video artists adopted that model of sale in the late twentieth century. Throughout the nineteenth century, reproducible artworks were largely issued in unlimited editions. As Élisabeth Lebon notes in her study of French bronze foundries, at that time “the impulse was not to limit production—on the contrary. Fairly early in the century, some founders simply tried to

10 Isabelle Graw, *High Price: Art between the Market and Celebrity Culture*, trans. Nicholas Grindell (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009), 9.

11 Exceptions include Graw's *High Price* and Noah Horowitz's *The Art of the Deal: Contemporary Art in a Global Financial Market* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011). In the domain of cinema studies, the body of scholarship that would fall under such a heading is far too large and diverse to cite here. However, of particular relevance are Lucas Hilderbrand's *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009) and Haidee Wasson's *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Many discussions of the economics of circulation in experimental film take place in informal channels—such as the Frameworks e-mail Listserv, which has been the site of lively debate on the issue of the limited edition in recent years—but even here, the issue remains underexplored.

number their casts without limiting how many could be made, something that can only be understood as an attempt to better manage production.¹² When clients became reluctant to purchase a bronze with a high number stamped on it, the initial move was not to restrict the size of the edition but to eliminate numeration altogether.¹³ Artistic production at this time inhabited what Rosalind Krauss has termed an “ethos of reproduction.”¹⁴ At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, this was to change. As images attained a new reproducibility, the attributes of scarcity, authenticity, and originality began to be prized as never before.

According to Walter Benjamin, the advent of mechanical reproducibility threatened an economy of art founded in aura and uniqueness.¹⁵ With the invention of photography and cinema, cult value gave way to exhibition value, and the work of art was made possessable through the proxy of its reproduction. The history of bronze editions and fine-art prints suggests a different narrative: a shift from an unrestricted number of castings to a largely artificial imposition of scarcity, precisely as the reproduction of images and goods attained a new facility. Rather than a preexisting value that was compromised by reproducibility, originality emerges as something *produced* by reproducibility. It was amid the new threat of the copy, of endlessly reproducible images, that originality took on the status that it retains today, even after decades of vanguardist assaults on its hegemony. In a world of surfeit, rarity triumphs. Or in Krauss’s words, the copy is nothing other than “the *underlying condition of the original*.”¹⁶

The limited edition was, then, a turn-of-the-century invention that rescued compound arts such as bronze sculpture from succumbing to the degraded status of mere copies in a new economy of desire. Henceforth, the number of objects produced would be restricted so as to generate an aura of quasi uniqueness. In the case of the compound arts, value was ensured by what Jean Chatelain has called “systematic rarefaction”;¹⁷ though artificial, this rarity possesses a true market agency, particularly as it becomes convention through consensus of the actors involved. The practice of numbering editions as, for example, “1/3” dates only from the first decade of the twentieth century, at which time Ambroise Vollard began to sell limited-edition bronzes. In a striking prefiguration of later attempts to sell film and video as art objects by drawing on the artist’s established reputation in more traditional artistic media, Vollard also began to sell limited-edition engravings made by painters such as Cézanne and Munch. These prints participated in the new culture of reproducibility by extending high art into the domain of bourgeois accessibility. But they did so while

12 Élisabeth Lebon, *Dictionnaire des fondeurs de bronze d'art: France, 1890–1950* (Perth, Australia: Marjon Editions, 2003), 56 (translation mine).

13 *Ibid.*, 57.

14 Rosalind Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 153.

15 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version,” trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 101–133.

16 Krauss, “Originality,” 162 (original emphasis).

17 Jean Chatelain, “An Original in Sculpture,” in *Rodin Rediscovered*, ed. Albert E. Elsen (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1981), 278.

reconfirming the values of rarity and artistic originality produced as a reaction to this culture of consumption, by insisting on the limited availability of prints. In a second parallel between Volland's moment and our own, just as the tectonic realignment of image circulation proper to the late nineteenth century spawned rearguard efforts to reconstruct uniqueness, so the new mobility of images following the digitization of media in the 1990s would result in the countermovement of restricting the circulation of moving-image artworks by instituting the limited edition as market standard.

In the early twentieth century, however, the limited edition was not simply a question of rarity for rarity's sake. Until the passage of a French law in 1968 that would restrict bronze casting to an edition of eight plus four artist's proofs, the most frequent edition size was six, something that Lebon speculates is in all likelihood linked to the life span of the gelatin mold.¹⁸ In the case of lithographs, limiting the edition size could also be justified as guarding against the possibility of degraded prints. In its initial employment, then, the "systematic rarefaction" of the limited edition was both a question of fabricating the status of a quasi original and of ensuring quality control—which, in something of a catch-22, would have been increasingly important when dealing with the augmented prices that resulted from limiting the size of the edition. Here one encounters a crucial difference from moving-image media, which can produce many more copies before image degradation becomes a concern. In the case of bronze sculpture and certain printing processes, editioning finds partial motivation in the material limitations of the media involved; in the case of film and video, it goes against what is the most potentially revolutionary attribute of their material base. Nevertheless, in another echo from the turn of one century to another, the rhetoric of ensuring the quality of the work will quite interestingly reappear, *mutatis mutandis*, in the 1990s as a justification for the necessity of restricting moving-image art to a limited-edition model of sale: major galleries will insist that editioning is necessary to ensure that a given work will not be viewed in unfavorable circumstances, such as on a laptop screen or in a highly compressed digital file format. In a span of roughly one hundred years, the very media that exemplified the supreme threat and radical promise of the copy would be, through a series of expectations and agreements, transformed into *de facto* originals.

An Economy of the Multiple. In 1957, a year before making his first film, *A Movie* (1958), Bruce Conner wrote a letter to his gallerist, Charles Alan:

New horizons, Unexplored territory. There is a potential patron of The Experimental Film. He hasn't been touched. I don't mean [a] patron who finances a film. Someone who buys a "print" of a film. People can be found who will purchase experimental films as they would a print or a painting. They have to know that these films can be considered as valid works of art as well as paintings and sculptures and musics and dances etc. This means apart from the mass public phenomena called movies.¹⁹

18 Lebon, *Dictionnaire*, 67.

19 Bruce Conner, letter to Charles Alan, April 1957, in Alan Gallery Records at the Archives of American Art, reprinted in Kevin Hatch, "Looking for Bruce Conner, 1957–1967" (PhD diss., Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, 2008), 115.

Resurrecting Levy's dream of a model of film distribution that would be more aligned with the realm of fine art than "the movies," Conner put into writing his plans for the sale of such films before even having one ready to offer to collectors. Kevin Hatch notes that the Alan Gallery "stopped short of investing money in selling artist-made release prints. In short, it is fair to say that Conner's letter did not prompt the sea change he had envisioned."²⁰ Once more, a proposition to sell prints as art objects—though not specifically as limited editions—remained unrealized. While this failure might be in part because of the lack of an established market for the sale of prints, it is also linked to the absence of a provision to limit the number of prints that would be available, as well as to the proposition that the collector would purchase a single print for exhibition rather than a master format (such as an internegative or interpositive) from which prints could be made. Celluloid film is an eminently fragile material, inescapably subject to wear and the possibility of damage at each projection. What motivation would a collector have to purchase an artwork that would degrade each time it was exhibited, particularly one that countless others might own? The model of the film limited edition that emerged in the 1990s would provide solutions to both of these problems by limiting the number of certified copies and providing collectors with a master from which to strike exhibition prints.

Nonetheless, the notion that a viable distribution model for experimental film could be found in selling prints to private collectors was not something that Conner immediately abandoned. In his 1963 application for a Ford Foundation grant, Conner reiterated his conviction: "I do not rent my films. I sell prints. I conceive of them as an engraver might conceive of an etching and then sell copies of it in a gallery. . . . I consider film distribution, as it is now, to be antagonistic to artistic process."²¹ Conner believed that his films were best suited to repeat viewings in a domestic setting, so that the viewer might discover something new each time. There is, however, an element of disingenuousness in the statement that Conner did not rent but rather sell prints. Rather than a private collectors' market, rentals from distributors such as Cinema 16, the Museum of Modern Art, the Film-Makers' Cooperative, and later Canyon Cinema constituted the primary method of circulation for Conner's films from the time they were produced until close to his death. His statements on the possibility of selling prints as art objects nevertheless serve as a reminder of an untaken path of experimental film history; for one of the primary characteristics that distinguishes experimental film from artists' cinema is the former's commitment to a rental model of distribution rather than a limited-edition model of sale.²²

20 Ibid., 155–227.

21 Bruce Conner, Application for a Ford Foundation Grant in Film Making, 1963, BANC MSS 2000/50 c, Bruce Conner Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2.

22 My distinction between artists' cinema and experimental film follows Jonathan Walley's in "Modes of Film Practice in the Avant-Garde." The term *artists' cinema* by no means suggests that experimental filmmakers are not artists; rather, it designates a mode of production tied to the economic structures of the art world that makes use of the museum and gallery as primary sites of exhibition. For a further elaboration of this distinction, see Jonathan Walley, "Modes of Film Practice in the Avant-Garde," in *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton (London: Tate Publishing and Afterall Books, 2008), 182–199.

The origins of experimental film's rental model of distribution are found in the late 1940s. As an increasing number of individuals began to make what would come to be known as avant-garde or experimental films, it became necessary to build distribution networks to support this fledgling field of practice. Amos Vogel's Cinema 16—which took on *A Movie* immediately after its release—was founded in 1947 and became the first major distributor for contemporary experimental films in the United States. At a time when film was by no means an accepted medium of institutionalized artistic practice, the channels of distribution and exhibition developed to nurture the emerging art were by necessity outside of the gallery context. Rather than imitating the art world and selling prints as collectible objects, Cinema 16's adoption of a rental model based on a per-screening fee mimicked an organization with which it had much more in common: the circulating film library established at the Museum of Modern Art in 1935.

Cinema 16 served as a crucial precursor for the establishment of artist-run organizations such as the New York Film-Makers' Cooperative (1962), the London Film-Makers' Co-op (1966), and Canyon Cinema (1967, of which Conner was a co-founder), which would support experimental film as a distinct mode of production that continues to this day. Such organizations charge a per-screening rental fee, determined largely by the format and length of the work. That fee is split according to a preexisting agreement between the distributing organization and the filmmaker.²³ Institutional sales sometimes occur, but they constitute a small fraction of overall income.²⁴ Central to the founding ethos of the cooperative model was an emphasis on access and the conviction that film possessed a democratizing potential. Rather than being sequestered away as the private property of a wealthy collector, a film could be shown to the public for a modest admission fee. However, the result of this belief in the democratizing status of the film medium was severe financial difficulty. Experimental cinema has historically been marked by financial hardship, with most filmmakers turning to other forms of employment, such as teaching, to supplement the meager income gleaned from rental receipts.

Though many experimental filmmakers defined their practice in opposition to feature-length narrative filmmaking, they also staked out an often-antagonistic position with regard to the established art world—a sphere in which film was beginning to make significant inroads. The entry of film into fine-art practice occurred under the sign of democratization and a leveling of hierarchies. The Fluxus artists, for example, turned to film precisely for its capacity for circulation and reproduction: issuing unlimited film editions as a part of the Fluxboxes was a way of intervening in the symbolic economy of the work of art, of refusing the notion of the original in favor of the industrially produced multiple. Fluxfilms were available for sale both on their own and as a part of the Fluxboxes; in 1965, for example, *Zen for Film* (Nam June Paik, 1964–1966) was

23 Currently, the New York Film-Makers' Cooperative returns 60 percent of rental income to the artist; Canyon Cinema returns 50 percent.

24 In 2006–2007, the last year for which data are available in Scott MacDonald's *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor*, Canyon made \$11,225 from film sales, \$6,860 from video sales, and \$112,395 from rentals. See Scott MacDonald, "Appendix 2: Canyon Cinema's Gross Rentals and Sales, from 1966 until 2006–2007," in *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor*, ed. Scott MacDonald (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 433.

sold on its own as a loop in a small plastic box for \$3 (roughly \$20 in 2010) or as part of a Fluxkit for \$100 (\$683 in 2010).²⁵ In addition to these initiatives, the films were shown at festivals and deposited with the Film-Makers' Cooperative in New York City for rental distribution. At this time, the moving image provided a way of pursuing the same dematerialization of the art object that was occurring in performance, happenings, and conceptual practice alike. Even Warhol's prolific film production remained outside of any real sales initiative: despite the mention of plans to sell 8mm loops of selected screen tests as "living portrait boxes," no such thing took place.²⁶ However, despite this emphasis on accessibility and the desire to reconsider what counted as "art," the Fluxus artists nevertheless prefigured later efforts to edition moving-image art by conceiving of film as an object that could be sold and possessed rather than simply experienced. With their 8mm loops and handheld viewers, the Fluxfilms suggested that, despite conventional thinking on the matter, film was something that could be owned. Within a decade, the unlimited, quasi-industrial mode of production the Fluxus artists had embraced would begin to be rejected in favor of the limited-edition model of sale that dominates today.

Pioneers: Schum and Castelli. The advent of video drew an increasing number of artists to the moving image. Though the new medium was by no means wholly accepted by the artistic establishment at the time, it did enjoy a closer relationship to the gallery world than did experimental film, largely because many of its practitioners simultaneously produced work in other, more salable media. Like experimental film, early video did not derive funding from the sale of individual works. But whereas experimental filmmakers often held teaching positions to secure an income, video art was largely funded by grants, residencies, and the sale of the artist's nonvideo works. Despite these differences, video shared with experimental film the sense that it was a noncommodifiable, reproducible medium invested with a democratizing potential that would revolutionize artistic production. Both these utopian hopes and the medium's subsequent recuperation by the regime it sought to challenge are clearly visible in Gerry Schum's twin ventures in Düsseldorf, the Fernsehalerie (1968–1970) and the videogalerie schum (1970–1973). With the Fernsehalerie, Schum escaped the objecthood of the work of art and the elitism of the gallery; rather than a physical location, the Fernsehalerie consisted of films and videos broadcast on television. Schum's first commission, *Land Art*, was broadcast on the West Berlin television station SFB on April 15, 1969, and included artists such as Walter de Maria and Robert Smithson. To introduce the program, Schum explained, "The Fernsehalerie was born of a wish to directly confront the broadest possible audience with the current trends of international

25 Jon Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998, 72–73).

26 In 1965, a reporter for the *Nation* wrote that John Palmer and Gerard Malanga informed him (while Warhol was on the telephone) of some films in progress, including 8mm loops of *Living Portrait Boxes* (i.e., the screen tests), "which might sell for \$1,000 or \$1,500 each." See Howard Junker, "Andy Warhol, Movie Maker," *Nation*, February 22, 1965, 206–207.

art production.²⁷ Some one hundred thousand viewers watched the broadcast.²⁸ After a second commission, *Identifications*, in 1970, Schum was unable to secure the necessary continued support of broadcasting agencies and reconceived his enterprise with a striking about-face. The videogalerie turned away from dematerialized mass dissemination and issued videotapes in both limited and unlimited editions, complete with signed and numbered certificates of authenticity, as well as a precisely formulated pricing model. Schum believed that the relative simplicity of video technology made moving-image art into a saleable object in a manner that was impossible with film: “Crucially, one doesn’t have the same problem with video that one has with 16mm film. . . . The problem with films is that one has to have a darkroom and someone who knows how to project the film. Television is, by contrast, a part of our everyday milieu: there are no difficulties with its presentation since one is familiar with the medium.”²⁹ A 1971 price list for the videogalerie schum shows unlimited editions priced between DM500 and 800, while an edition of six of *Filz-TV* (Joseph Beuys, *Felt TV*, 1970, shown in *Identifications*) is listed at DM9800 and an edition of four of *The Nature of Our Looking* (Gilbert and George, 1970) is priced at DM4800 and declared sold out.³⁰

Ian White has proposed that Schum’s videogalerie embraced “an effectively untested financial model” in its foray into the video limited edition.³¹ It is a model, however, that would have to undergo its true test not in Düsseldorf with Schum but in New York with Leo Castelli: Schum decided to close the gallery as a result of financial difficulties in late 1972, and he committed suicide in March 1973. Castelli, meanwhile, had begun to deal in film and video in 1968 for the simple fact that several of the most prominent artists he represented—such as Bruce Nauman and Robert Morris—had begun to produce work in those media. In 1974, a joint venture with Ileana Sonnabend would legitimate the sale of videotapes as art objects while still keeping a foot in the rental model of distribution. Run by Nina Sundell and Joyce Nereaux and initially based in a loft on Greene Street, Castelli-Sonnabend Tapes and Films Inc. became the first organization devoted to selling moving-image art in the United States, offering both film and video for sale to private collectors and institutions. *Art-Rite* magazine publicized its inauguration:

Most of their tapes sell according to length and whether they are b & w or color (rather than by the status of the artist). Prices tend to be under \$250.

27 Gerry Schum, “Einführung in die Sendung,” in *Ready to Shoot: Fernsehgalerie Gerry Schum, videogalerie Schum*, ed. Ulrike Groos, Barbara Hess, and Ursula Wevers (Düsseldorf: Kunsthalle Düsseldorf and Snoeck, 2003), 69 (translation mine).

28 Ursula Wevers, “Leibe Arbeit Fernsehgalerie,” in *Ready to Shoot: Fernsehgalerie Gerry Schum, videogalerie Schum*, ed. Ulrike Groos, Barbara Hess, and Ursula Wevers (Düsseldorf: Kunsthalle Düsseldorf and Snoeck, 2003), 31.

29 “Video Tappa Gerry Schum: Interview mit Gerry Schum in der Zeitschrift *Data* (Mailand), Marz 1972,” in *Ready to Shoot: Fernsehgalerie Gerry Schum, videogalerie Schum*, ed. Ulrike Groos, Barbara Hess, and Ursula Wevers (Düsseldorf: Kunsthalle Düsseldorf and Snoeck, 2003), 313 (translation mine).

30 Converted to 1971 US dollars, the unlimited editions would be priced between \$144 and \$230.40, the Beuys at \$2,822.40, and the Gilbert and George at \$1,382.40. Conversion calculated at a rate of DM0.288 to the dollar, per the 1971 average interbank exchange rate given at <http://www.oanda.com/currency/historical-rates>. This price list is reprinted in Groos, Hess, and Wevers, *Ready to Shoot*, 300.

31 Ian White, “Who Is Not the Author? Gerry Schum and the Established Order,” in *Afterthought: New Writing on Conceptual Art*, ed. Mike Sperlinger (London: Rachmaninoff’s, 2005), 69.

A distribution system is just beginning to be set up. Castelli-Sonnabend will control the showing and rental of the tapes (and film) while other galleries will be able to buy for resale at a gallery discount. The market at this time is almost exclusively universities and museums, but the number of collectors who are interested is slowly growing.³²

Like many bronze editions in the late nineteenth century, prints and tapes were numbered solely for administrative purposes and produced as the demand presented itself. If a purchase became damaged or worn, the collecting institution could have it replaced for the cost of copying and shipping. In most cases, only a handful of copies were produced, and even the most popular offerings—such as *Vertical Roll* (Joan Jonas, 1972) and *Television Delivers People* (Richard Serra, 1973)—made it to just over fifty.³³ The organization also issued a very small number of videotapes (but no films) as limited editions of twenty, priced at \$1,000.³⁴ Interestingly, although these are marked as such in volume one, number one, of the Castelli-Sonnabend catalog, by 1982 none of the works marked as editions of twenty retains that designation—though all retain their elevated price. The financial records of the organization show that rentals far outweighed sales and that the artificial scarcity imposed by limiting the number of tapes available did not incite increased demand; on the contrary, the editioned tapes did not sell as well as many of the uneditioned tapes, presumably because of their inflated prices. As early as 1977, the venture was experiencing serious financial difficulty. A memo dated September 30, 1977, states that the organization had \$14,415.23 in outstanding bills and owed \$29,539.33 to artists. By February 1979, there was serious discussion about alternative ways of running Castelli-Sonnabend, which consistently posted an annual deficit of some \$10,000. The ideas floated included obtaining not-for-profit status or reabsorbing the organization back into the Leo Castelli Gallery. Despite these ongoing difficulties, Castelli-Sonnabend continued its activities until ceasing operation on July 1, 1985.

After the shuttering of Castelli-Sonnabend, video found continued support in public and private granting agencies and in not-for-profit distributors. Uneditioned works could be rented through organizations such as Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), founded in 1971 by Howard Wise after the closure of his eponymous gallery, and Video Data Bank (VDB), founded in 1976. In fact, after the dissolution of Castelli-Sonnabend, many of the tapes distributed by that organization found their way to EAI and VDB,

32 "Castelli-Sonnabend Tapes and Films, Inc.," *Art-Rite*, no. 7 (Autumn 1974): 21.

33 Castelli-Sonnabend numbered its copies by assigning each a letter of the alphabet. While most tapes didn't make it past D, Serra's *Television Delivers People* goes up to copy UU, his *Hand Catching Lead* (1968) to EE, Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) to FF, Jonas's *Vertical Roll* to AAA, and William Wegman's *Selected Works: Reel #4* (1972–1973) to PP. These listings include all copies sold, available for rental, lost, or destroyed from wear. All information on Castelli-Sonnabend is courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery Records, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.

34 Volume 1, number 1, of the Castelli-Sonnabend catalog shows nine videos offered as limited editions of twenty: Vito Acconci's *Full Circle* (1973), *Stages* (1973), *Theme Song* (1973), and *Walk-Over* (1973); Christian Boltanski's *Life Is Gay*, *Life Is Sad* (1974) and (*Some*) *Memories of Youth* (1974); Joan Jonas's *Merlo* (1974); Richard Landry's *Terris Split* (1974); and Charlemagne Palestine's *Body Music* (1973–1974). Simone Forti's *Untitled* (1973) was offered as an edition of 100, priced at \$470. *Castelli-Sonnabend Videotapes and Films*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1974.

where they were made available for rent.³⁵ In the British context, video also stayed outside the commercial gallery circuit. David Curtis notes that although galleries such as Lisson Gallery, Nigel Greenwood, Jack Wendler, Robert Self, Angela Flowers, and others began to dabble in video in the early 1970s, they soon became aware that no market for it existed.³⁶ Furthermore, Curtis writes that the arrival of selections from Castelli-Sonnabend at the Video Show: First Festival of Independent Video in 1975—evidence that a commercial gallery might stand behind video—was at odds with the UK experience: “Interest by British galleries had been limited; many British artists disapproved of limited-edition works in principle; certainly any hope that a market might develop in Britain proved premature.”³⁷

In experimental film, though the rental model stayed strong, some individuals began to display frustration about the limited possibilities for remuneration stemming from that form of distribution. Seeing the increased acceptance of film and video in the art world, certain experimental filmmakers began to look to that realm for financial support. In the late 1970s, Kenneth Anger made a series of limited-edition films for private collectors that were never publically exhibited.³⁸ After a visit to Amsterdam, where he had come into contact with successful efforts to sell film prints, Larry Jordan published a polemic titled “Survival in the Independent—Non-Commercial—Avant-Garde—Experimental—Personal—Expressionistic Film Market of 1979.” Jordan advocated not joining the art world *per se* but adopting some of its practices, such as the sale of films to private collectors. “Film artists,” he wrote, “have been too long intimidated by their own counter-cultural identifications on the one hand and fear of the art ‘establishment’ on the other.”³⁹ Jordan ruefully acknowledged that the elevation of a work’s monetary value can lead to an augmented respect and to increased possibilities of archival preservation, as well as the fact that the sale of films as art objects was perhaps the only way that filmmakers would be able to secure a livelihood from their practice without resorting to other forms of employment, such as teaching.

Unlike Conner before him, he recognized that the sale of a film for the life of that print only would not succeed:

Purchase of film *prints* has never greatly interested art collectors for the very real reason that a *print* is of no real value as an investment. Only one-of-a-kind originals (from which the collector can make prints or not) have saleable value—saleable, that is, at prices which will be of any sort of real help to the

35 Some film prints went to Anthology Film Archives and the Film-Makers Cooperative, some films and videos were returned to the artists, and works by artists represented by the Leo Castelli Gallery continued to be available for sale and rental from Castelli.

36 David Curtis, *A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain* (London: BFI Publishing, 2007), 20.

37 *Ibid.*

38 These include *Senators in Bondage* (edition of thirteen, 1976) and *Matelots et menottes* (edition of twelve, 1977).

39 Larry Jordan, “Survival in the Independent—Non-Commercial—Avant-Garde—Experimental—Personal—Expressionistic Film Market of 1979,” originally published in *Cinemanews* 79, nos. 2–4 (1979), reprinted in *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor*, ed. Scott MacDonald (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 337.

film artist. Progressive collectors *will* collect films (as they do Video) under the right conditions.⁴⁰

Jordan recognized that collectors wanted to be able to display their acquisitions while also maintaining the work in pristine condition—something that would be impossible through the sale of prints alone. He also acknowledged the pull of the unique object. Though Jordan does not elaborate on what would count as a “one-of-a-kind original”—the negative, perhaps?—he identifies solutions to two key problems that had obstructed the sale of films as art objects in the past. If film were to become collectible, it would have to bend to the demand for scarcity proper to a collector’s market, much as video had done before it. Jordan’s proposal received no substantial attention within the experimental film community. And yet he looked forward to the day when the “first sale of a five minute film original for \$10,000 or more” would change “the face of the art world. . . . Film would be a valuable commodity, which at present it is not. And no one could ever shrug it off again.”⁴¹

Toward Market Viability. The 1990s witnessed a tremendous explosion of moving-image art. With improvements in projection technology, video was no longer restricted to the small image of the television monitor. The digitization of media spurred a new mobility of images and offered artists a new ease with production and postproduction techniques. Analog film found itself under threat of obsolescence and reappeared as a major component of artistic practice for the first time since its displacement by video. Moving-image art had finally accumulated an aesthetic history, with pioneers such as Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra, and Andy Warhol firmly canonized. Many of the decade’s most prominent emerging artists, such as Matthew Barney and Douglas Gordon, worked extensively in video, and major museums endorsed the moving image as never before.

Amid this flurry of activity, the old idea of the limited edition, which had never entirely disappeared, gained new life—and this time, both private and institutional collectors were ready to invest. Major New York galleries such as Barbara Gladstone, Marian Goodman, and David Zwirner began to represent an increasing number of film and video artists and to edition their work. As moving-image art began to increasingly mimic the structures of independent film and production costs soared, this investment was more necessary than ever.⁴² After roughly sixty years of existence at the margins of the art market, what accounts for the ascendance of the film and video limited edition in the 1990s? Three factors of varying importance worked together to create market viability.

40 Ibid., 334.

41 Ibid., 338.

42 Walley has noted that rather than the artisanal mode of production that characterizes experimental film, “a more proximate point of reference for artists’ films might be independent art cinema, as it is there that the division of labour in production is subsumed under the rubric of the *auteur*.” See Walley, “Modes of Film Practice,” 186.

The first factor is economic. Noah Horowitz emphasizes the crash of 1990 as instrumental in the creation a new market for video. He writes, “Galleries increasingly began exhibiting video largely because, according to Barbara London, associate director in MoMA’s Department of Film and Video, ‘they had nothing to lose’; sales had dried up and the opportunity cost of showing video and other alternative practices diminished.”⁴³ While the new viability of cheaper, less object-oriented work may be ascribed in part to the severe price deflation at this time, other key factors were at play. These factors demonstrate the extent to which market valorization is never a matter of economics alone but rather is deeply shaped by elements of the art world—elements which, at first glance, operate far from the transactions taking place at auction houses and commercial galleries.

The second factor is linked to technological innovation and changes in the speed and facility of image reproduction and circulation. While the mainstream adoption of the Internet in the early to mid-1990s spurred a significant artistic trend of remaking and recycling existing cultural forms, it also resulted in a qualitative leap in the transportability of images and sounds that induced a crisis of authenticity comparable to that of the late nineteenth century. Just as was the case for printmaking and bronze sculpture in the late nineteenth century, the film and video limited editions that emerged at the turn of the millennium were attempts to reconstruct authenticity and (near) uniqueness amidst a new proliferation of copies. During this period, edition sizes shrink dramatically: while Castelli-Sonnabend Tapes and Films offered editions of twenty, by the 1990s this number had dropped to fewer than ten and often as few as three. At a time when images were more mobile than ever before, the limited edition provided a way of guaranteeing that the work would circulate only within authorized channels and would be seen only in the proper setting. While it was, of course, always possible to duplicate videocassettes, the 1990s and 2000s heralded a qualitative shift in the ease of moving-image reproduction. Jack Valenti of the Motion Picture Association of America had cause to assert that his organization was fighting its “own terrorist war” against copyright infringement—a war it continues to lose.⁴⁴ Unlike the film industry, the art world had access to radical measures that would successfully ensure the integrity of its product. Rose Lord, director of Marian Goodman Gallery, has stated, “All our artists want their works to be shown under very specific circumstances, where every aspect is carefully calibrated. That’s why we have collectors sign purchase agreements that insure that the works will be shown as per the artist’s wishes.”⁴⁵ The open circulation of a Steve McQueen work on DVD would result in a flood of copies of varying quality that could be consumed on laptops or as ambient background at a loft party. It is in this manner that quality control is asserted as a motivating factor behind the limited edition, albeit in an entirely different way from the bronze sculpture or

43 Horowitz, *Art of the Deal*, 44.

44 Jack Valenti, quoted in Amy Harmon, “Black Hawk Download: Moving beyond Music, Pirates Use New Tools to Turn the Net into an Illicit Video Club,” *New York Times*, January 17, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/17/technology/black-hawk-download-moving-beyond-music-pirates-use-new-tools-turn-net-into.html>.

45 Rose Lord, quoted in Paul Young, “Black Box White Cube,” *Art+Auction*, February 2008, <http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/26655/black-box-white-cube>.

lithograph before it: the rarity of the work is constructed not simply to entice collectors but also to guard against the possibility of a degraded image.

The third and perhaps most important factor in the rise of the limited edition is again a matter of technological change, but also one of institutional politics: it concerns the advent of high-quality, low-cost video projection and its tremendous institutional endorsement from the early 1990s onward. The moving image might have once challenged the traditional museum, but in the 1990s, endowed with a new, large-scale mode of display, it was recruited by museums to secure relevance in an increasingly competitive marketplace demanding breathtaking, immersive experiences. And where institutions go, the market follows. Institutional endorsement can have a profound effect on the price of an art object, a fact clearly demonstrated by the controversy surrounding the New Museum for Contemporary Art's *Skin Fruit* exhibition of trustee Dakis Joannou's private collection in 2009.⁴⁶ In the case of photography, the J. Paul Getty Museum's June 8, 1984, purchase of five major private collections of vintage prints for a reported twenty million dollars forever changed the market possibilities of the medium.⁴⁷ While no single event comparable to the Getty purchase may be cited in the case of moving-image art, the 1990s and 2000s saw an institutional investment in film and video without parallel in the history of art. The cavernous spaces of newly opened or newly renovated museums, many of which are devoted exclusively to contemporary art, called for colossal installations and big box-office receipts.⁴⁸ The turn away from monitor-based presentation and toward projection resulted in a greater sense of monumentality and an increased assertion of presence in the space of the gallery. It pulled video art away from associations with television and its domestic banality, and instead aligned it with a medium by then possessing increasing cultural cachet, the cinema.⁴⁹

While projection had been possible since even before the invention of video recording technology, it was seldom used in art practice until cheap, bright, crisp projectors came to market in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1992, video installation featured heavily at Documenta IX, the biggest, costliest, and best-attended Documenta since 1959.⁵⁰ As a major international exhibition occurring once every five years and tasked with taking stock of contemporary artistic practice, Documenta provides a useful barometer for evaluating the changing status of the moving image. Responding to Documenta IX, one critic wrote that the curator Jan de Hoet "knows that there is an almost desperate need now to bridge the worlds of high art and popular culture in a new way, and that using massive exhibitions like this one to attract hundreds of thousands of

46 See Deborah Sontag and Robin Pogrebin, "Some Object as Museum Shows Its Trustee's Art," *New York Times*, November 10, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/11/arts/design/11museum.html>.

47 See Peter C. Jones, "High Times and Misdemeanors," *Aperture*, no. 124 (Summer 1991): 68–70.

48 The *Treasures of Tutankhamun* exhibition organized by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1976 is frequently cited as the beginning of a trend in museum exhibition to favor the guaranteed box-office revenues provided by accessible material and a well-stocked gift shop.

49 Dominique Paini has selected 1990 as the year that signals a change in the conception of cinema from one tied to mass culture to something that possesses a patrimonial value. The transformation is, he writes, "one from industry to art." It is also a time that sees a generalized waning of direct political investment on the part of many video artists. See Dominique Paini, *Le temps exposé: Le cinéma de la salle au musée* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 2002), 26.

50 David Galloway, "Documenta 9: The Bottom Line," *Art in America*, September 1993, 55.

people is certainly a part of that process.⁵¹ In 1996, both *Hall of Mirrors: Art and Film since 1945* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles) and *Spellbound: Art and Film* (Hayward Gallery, London) were huge shows bringing together contemporary video artists with Hollywood directors in a drive for accessibility. Museums such as the Museum of Modern Art, the Tate Modern, and the Whitney Museum of American Art greatly expanded their moving-image holdings during this time, purchasing historical and contemporary work and also commissioning temporary projects from moving-image artists.⁵² Christopher Eamon, former curator of the Kramlich collection, has stressed the extent to which the institutional endorsement of the installation format—rather than the 1990 market crash—is key to understanding the ascendance of video art within the 1990s and 2000s art market.⁵³ An installation, after all, cannot be easily rented, and it more clearly asserts its difference from mass circulating films and tapes through its claiming of gallery space. It was a reciprocally beneficial situation: major museums looked to the moving image for scalar intensity and relevance and began making commissions and purchases, and in turn, this institutional legitimation accorded the moving image a new status on the primary market.

Opposition and Advocacy. The increased visibility of the limited-edition model has brought with it increased criticism. For some artists, such as Martha Rosler, the solution is to opt out, to continue to issue unlimited editions that will be distributed through organizations such as EAI and VDB.⁵⁴ For others, the popularity of the limited edition is something to be attacked outright. Produced anonymously and distributed online by the activist and artist collective @TMark (pronounced “art mark”), *Untitled #29.95: A Video about Video* (1999) is a fifteen-minute work that constructs a schematic history of video art based on the changing relationship between the medium and the market. It embraces a low-tech collage aesthetic that appropriates various clips of the video art of the past forty-five years and rephotographs them from television monitors. On the soundtrack, a computerized female voice-over offers a narrative of the medium as subject to a tragic fall into market exploitation. As *Untitled #29.95* would have it, upon its introduction to artistic production, video was used to “challenge the authority of the mass medium and the materialism of the art world.” The narrator continues, “Video was born under radicalism and from the beginning it was used as an instrument of resistance.” A brief interval of black gives way to Martha Rosler stabbing a fork into the air, with her *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) playing on a television screen. Castelli is singled out as the great villain who tried to commodify video by making it

51 Dan Cameron, “The Hassle in Kassel,” *Artforum*, September 1992, 86.

52 For a full list of collections of the Tate and the Whitney and the dates of acquisition, see Horowitz, *Art of the Deal*, 218–256.

53 Eamon sees the market-crash account as too New York-centric, especially given that the key figures in early 1990s video are not “New York painters turned video artists” but come from other parts of the world, such as Canada (Stan Douglas), Scotland (Douglas Gordon), and Switzerland (Pipilotti Rist). Interview with the author, March 8, 2011.

54 On Rosler’s opposition to the limited edition on the grounds that it reduces access, see Ilana Stangler, “Interviews with Visual Artists: Martha Rosler,” New York Foundation for the Arts Business of Art Articles, <http://www.nyfa.org/level4.asp?id=120&fid=1&sid=51&tid=167>.

into a limited edition, but the narrator tells us, “It didn’t work. Thank God. Perhaps they thought video was too much like TV, the ultimate in low-brow culture.”

Untitled #29.95 follows the development of video through the late 1970s and 1980s, asserting it as a rich, and decidedly anticommercial, field of practice closely linked to activism. The video posits the decimation of National Endowment for the Arts funding for media art as the event that put an end to politicized video practices circulating outside of the institutional art world. In its place, a gallery-bankrolled video art emerged that eschewed political commitment in favor of productions deemed decadent (Matthew Barney) or trivial (Lucy Gunning).⁵⁵ The video cites a 1998 *New York Times* article by Roberta Smith, “Art of the Moment, Here to Stay,” as signaling the new acceptance of this brand of video in the gallery establishment. Smith proclaims the importance of 1990s video art by comparing it to pioneers like William Wegman and Bruce Nauman. The narrator intones, “She does not even mention the eighties, as if an entire decade of incredible video production around race, class, gender, sexuality, media, politics and power relations never even existed. Now videos are being sold in limited editions in New York galleries and not for \$29.95.” White text scrolls on black screens, listing works that have been editioned and their prices: “Stan Douglas, *Overture*, \$150,000, limited edition of 2. Diana Thater’s *China* \$60,000. *Cremaster* by Matthew Barney, limited edition of 2, \$25,000. Gillian Wearing’s *10-16 I heard* went for \$60,000. It’s just a videotape, for God’s sake.”

Untitled #29.95 is not alone in arguing that the existence of the limited edition fundamentally contradicts the medium-specific qualities of video. Pierre Huyghe has said, “For videos, editions are fake. . . . When Rodin could only cast three sculptures of a nude before the mold lost its sharpness, it made sense. But all my works are on my hard drive, in ones and zeros.”⁵⁶ And yet Huyghe issues his films and videos in limited editions through Marian Goodman Gallery, which suggests that despite being “fake,” editioning is still worthwhile. In a similar vein, Dieter Daniels has remarked that “the principle of the signed, limited-edition video cassette or DVD is absurd. A signature does not impart an image carrier with the character of an original, but only stands for a commercial agreement to limit the edition to a certain number of copies, whose extent depends not on the reproducibility of the medium as for woodcuts or etchings, but merely on market-strategy factors.”⁵⁷ Certainly, the aura of rarity that surrounds the limited-edition film or video is an artificial construction—but it is one with real effects, both positive and negative. Editioning is no more “fake” than the convention of delaying the DVD release of a film until after its theatrical run has been completed; it is, like the delayed DVD release, a mechanism to generate value. These are conventions that

55 As Cynthia Chris has noted, the advancement of this art historical narrative both conflates media art and media activism—overlapping but distinct areas of practice—and neglects to consider the real persistence of activist video into the present. See Cynthia Chris, “Video Art: Stayin’ Alive,” *Afterimage* 25, no. 7 (2000), <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-61535391.html>.

56 Pierre Huyghe, quoted in Greg Allen, “When Fans of Pricey Video Art Can Get It for Free,” *New York Times*, August 17, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/17/arts/art-architecture-when-fans-of-pricey-video-art-can-get-it-free.html>.

57 Dieter Daniels, “Video/Art/Market,” in *40yearsvideoart.de, Part 1. Digital Heritage: Video Art in Germany from 1963 until the Present*, ed. Rudolf Frieling and Wulf Herzogenrath (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2006), 46.

are agreed on by market actors, conventions that possess a certain truth despite their status as historical constructs.

The critique of editioning advanced in *Untitled #29.95* greatly oversimplifies the relationship between moving-image art and the market that exists today. Nowhere does the video confront the difficult question of how artists might make a living from their art if not by editioning. The recent movement of many individuals associated with the experimental film tradition into the gallery context testifies to the possibility of the financial support that private and institutional collectors can provide. Isaac Julien, Jonas Mekas, Ben Rivers, Leslie Thornton, and Emily Wardill are but a few examples of individual artists who have decided to edition their work. Matthias Müller, another such filmmaker, has stated that, because of financial realities, “there is no alternative *but* a gallery, which demands that works be sold as limited editions.⁵⁸ Similarly, although Anthony McCall has expressed that he has “some problems with the idea of editioning: The scarcity value is created quite artificially since there is no technical limit to the number of copies that could be made,” he simultaneously recognizes it as a sustainable model that allows the sale of one work to finance the next.⁵⁹ It resolves the problem that had perennially faced avant-garde film: the lack of a viable economic framework.

At stake in the sale of film and video as limited editions is not only the artist’s present but also the artwork’s future. When a collector buys a limited edition—sold not as film print or as DVD but as a set of archival materials and rights governing the usage of those materials—he or she also takes on responsibility as to the care and preservation of that work. Many museums, such as the Tate Modern, will collect only editioned artworks—which means that the limited edition is not simply a way of cashing in but also a way of ensuring that the artwork will be amenable to institutional structures that participate in the writing of art’s histories and that enable the preservation and exhibition of the work for posterity. It is without question that much work remains to be done to grapple with the particular challenges that film and video pose to the practices of acquisition, collection, and exhibition at major institutions, and there may be cases in which such institutions will have to adjust their policies to cater to the needs of these media. However, the limited edition constitutes a site at which film and video art is meeting art institutions halfway—and vice versa. While certainly some rental-based distribution organizations, such as Electronic Arts Intermix, are engaged in serious preservation activities, the involvement of collecting institutions is necessary to ensure the stewardship of vulnerable media artifacts. Freely circulating VHS tapes, DVDs, or high-compression computer files are unable, for reasons of quality and longevity, to function as archival masters. It is expensive and time consuming to engage in processes of digital migration from format to format. Preservation is a costly business, and an institution is more likely to invest in a given work if it has the secure knowledge that it is one of a limited number of stakeholders in that work. For the films and videos that

58 Matthias Müller, quoted in Scott MacDonald and Matthias Müller, “A Conversation,” in *The Memo Book: The Films and Videos of Matthias Müller*, ed. Stefanie Schulte Strathaus (Berlin: Verlag Vorwerk 8, 2005), 255.

59 Anthony McCall, “Round Table: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art,” *October*, no. 103 (Spring 2006): 95.

currently circulate as moving-image art, editioning is perhaps the best way of ensuring long-term safekeeping.

Like any good manifesto, *Untitled #29.95* ends with a call to action. Over rephotographed footage of *Cremaster 5* (Matthew Barney, 1997), the viewer is told that by going to the @TMark website (<http://www.rtmk.com>), he or she can purchase “liberated” copies of limited-edition videos for only \$29.95. Viewers are also asked to send whatever “liberated videos” they may have in their own collections to the @TMark website so that they can be made available for free downloading.⁶⁰ The Robin Hood(s) of Chelsea, the maker(s) of *Untitled #29.95* plan to “steal video art from the rich and give it away for free, or at least for the reasonable cost of \$29.95.” The viewer is advised, “Remember: video was meant to be a democratic medium.” Since the release of *Untitled #29.95* in 1999, many works of moving-image art have indeed been “liberated,” though not precisely as urged in the video’s closing call to action. Alternative economies of circulation have emerged precisely as the limited-edition model has gained in popularity. Though *Untitled #29.95* proposes its initiative as an intervention that would contest the way that videos are “held captive” by editioning, these unauthorized channels of circulation exist parallel to the sale of official editions rather than in any antagonistic relationship with it. The circulation of editioned artworks on the Internet is exceedingly common, whether through illegal YouTube postings, DVD trading networks, or members-only BitTorrent sites. Artists frequently supply screeners of editioned works—neither a part of the edition nor a designated artist’s proof—to curators and scholars. Through these unofficial channels, interested individuals can access the works for their personal and/or professional use—with no harm done to the official editions in the possession of galleries and museums. Without the signature or certificate—inscriptions imparting authenticity and uniqueness—a DVD copy is simply a DVD copy.

Rather than an overturning of the limited-edition model, Sven Lütticken has advocated for the growth of this parallel economy of distribution grounded in the notion of “viewing copies” that would be distinct from collectible, certified copies.⁶¹ Lütticken notes that the viewing copy tends to circulate “confidentially and in semi-secrecy” rather than through official channels of distribution. And yet these unsanctioned copies tend to be more common than official DVD releases. *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* (Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno, *Zidane: Un portrait du 21^e siècle*, 2006) was issued as a mass-market DVD and as a limited edition of seventeen that paired a DVD of the film with rush footage from one of the seventeen cameras trained on Zidane throughout the football match, but this case is something of an exception. In an effort to come to terms with why this may be the case, Lütticken has speculated, “The emergence of over-the-counter viewing copy editions was halted not so much by fears that the ‘real’

60 As of May 14, 2012, the @TMark website had not been updated since 2004. The site for “liberated videos” (<http://www.rtmk.com/2995repository.html>) states, “This page is continuously updated with new ‘liberated’ art videos made available for download or streaming,” but the only two listed are Barney’s *Cremaster 5*, with a price listed of US\$25,000, and Lucy Gunning’s *Climbing Around in My Room* (1993), with a price listed of US\$4,000. The links to the videos are broken.

61 Sven Lütticken, “Viewing Copies: On the Mobility of Moving Images,” *e-flux journal*, no. 8 (September 2009), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/75>.

work would be tainted artistically and/or financially, but by the fact that there was big money to be made from exclusive limited editions. Even if unlimited viewing copy editions do not threaten the aura of such gallery pieces, why bother with them when the returns are bound to be marginal at best, or, more likely, non-existent?"⁶² Indeed, while in 1997 the David Zwirner Gallery had a waiting list for Stan Douglas editions costing up to \$150,000, a group show of uneditioned videotapes priced between \$20 and \$100 sold only five copies.⁶³ These uneditioned tapes do not promise the same return on investment as a Douglas edition might; issuing mass-market DVDs promises no lucrative financial returns, simply the exposure of moving-image art to potentially less-than-favorable viewing conditions. However, in the case of artworks that do not rely on substantial installation components, such viewing copies can serve as important resources for scholars and educators. At present, it remains difficult to teach contemporary moving-image art given the very limited availability of many of the most significant works produced during the period. If prominent commercial galleries wish to truly support artists' film and video, ensuring that such works are available to students and scholars is of utmost importance.

In the meantime, LUX, the London-based not-for-profit distributor of artists' film and video, has proposed another way of mediating between the exclusivity of the limited edition and the conviction that film and video are democratic media. LUX was founded in 2002 as an amalgamation of three predecessor organizations: the London Filmmakers' Co-operative, London Video Arts, and the LUX Centre. As such, it has a strong historical connection to the rental model of distribution and its focus on access, often taken to be antithetical to the practice of editioning. And yet LUX has not eschewed editioned works altogether. Director Benjamin Cook has said, "We realized a few years ago that [the cooperative] model was becoming increasingly anachronistic in terms of the market and the institutional art world, which is informed by the market. We really felt like we needed to re-think our position in relation to those things."⁶⁴ The result involved devising a novel compromise that acknowledges the financial and archival benefits of editioning while also insisting on the need to ensure availability and circulation. Though LUX does not sell editioned works, it partners with artists and galleries to serve as a renter of such works, thereby forging a hybrid space between two otherwise-separate modes of distribution. If, for example, a work is issued in an edition of three plus artist's proofs, one of those artist's proofs will be deposited with LUX and be available for rent. While this model is suited only to single-channel works, it represents a true step forward in the attempt to find innovative solutions in the collection and display of moving-image art. It preserves the cooperative spirit while making use of the benefits of the limited-edition model, without succumbing fully to its fetishization of rarity. As Cook puts it, "We really believe that one thing about film and video, in its very nature, is that it needs to circulate and be seen. What we are trying to do here is to create a system that equally values the need for works to be sold in limited

62 Ibid.

63 Marina Isola, "An Uncertain Market for Video Art," *New York Times*, February 15, 1998, <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/02/15/arts/an-uncertain-market-for-video-art.html>.

64 Benjamin Cook, interview with the author, November 29, 2010.

editions—in a way so that the institutional art world can understand the value of those works—and that has built in a respect for the fact that these are theatrical works that need to continue to circulate in the world.”⁶⁵

The example of LUX and its hybrid model is instructive: it speaks to the need to move beyond existing models to develop better and more sophisticated ways of collecting, preserving, and exhibiting moving-image art. Commenting in 2010 on his 1979 proposal to sell experimental films as originals, Larry Jordan remarked, “I never thought that the exact idea I proposed in that article would be *the* idea, but I wrote the article to provoke those ideas. The mechanics were up for grabs.”⁶⁶ Without a doubt, the mechanics remain up for grabs today. Though initiatives such as Matters in Media Art have done crucial work in setting out guidelines for the acquisition and loans of media art, a clearer set of best practices is necessary.⁶⁷ There is still a considerable amount of trepidation and uncertainty concerning the sale and acquisition of media artworks, particularly to private collectors. The narrative of the ascendance of the limited edition presented here is not one of unqualified triumph; when compared to painting, sculpture, and photography, film and video remain relatively unsaleable. Ensuring the market viability of film and video as artistic media among others involves building a knowledge base and advocating for greater transparency at all stages in the process. Writing the history of attempts to edition film and video is a first step in this direction.

Since its invention, the moving image has espoused a plurality of modes of distribution and exhibition that variously operate parallel to, in tandem with, and in opposition to one another. This remains the case today more than ever, when the most unregulated forms of circulation, such as BitTorrent, coexist with the most restricted, such as the limited edition. As new technologies revolutionize the dissemination of the moving image, understanding the institutional, economic, and medium-specific dynamics of distribution networks is more necessary than ever before. Cinema studies scholars have done well to chronicle and investigate numerous forms of moving-image circulation, whether they are traditional or untraditional, legal or illegal, mainstream or underground. The brief history of editioning presented here is intended as an addition to this rich body of work and a contribution to ongoing efforts to understand the historical and contemporary relationships between artists’ cinema and the sphere of practice known as avant-garde or experimental film and video. It is, however, only a beginning. Substantial research remains to be done concerning the history of the limited-edition model in other geographic contexts beyond those considered here. Theoretical questions of value, authenticity, reproducibility, and medium specificity should be explored at length. Continued attention must be paid to the ongoing adoption and evolution of this model and whether it will meet with success on the secondary auction market, where it, as of yet, has no substantial presence. Specific case studies deserve close

65 Ibid.

66 Benjamin Cook, interview with the author, December 10, 2010.

67 This project was initiated in 2003 as a collaboration among the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the New Art Trust; and the Tate Modern. For more information, see <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/majorprojects/mediamatters/>.

scrutiny: the Barbara Gladstone Gallery's 2008 acquisition of the Jack Smith estate and its 2010 offering of a set of eleven of Smith's films in a retroactive edition of ten to institutional collectors is an ideal starting point. In short, the end of the narrative of failed attempts to sell film and video as art objects is merely the beginning of new set of questions and research problems confronting scholars in both film studies and art history. *

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