

TATE FILM

Warren Sonbert



WARREN SONBERT

Retrospective of seminal American experimental filmmaker

Tate Modern, Starr Auditorium

24–27 October 2013

Adults £5 / concessions £4

Season ticket £30

Warren Sonbert is one of the seminal figures in American experimental film. A precocious talent, he had his first career retrospective before he turned 21 years old, establishing his reputation early as a key innovator in New York's counter-culture during the 1960s. Encouraged to take up filmmaking by Gregory Markopolous, his early works were populated by denizens of Warhol's scene such as superstar René Ricard and Gerard Malanga, as well as art critic Henry Geldzhaler. Often characterised as diaristic, his films pay close attention to intimate details of his surroundings and relationships that evolved from his living in New York and San Francisco, but also developed a unique lyrical form that transcends their quotidian detail to explore our individual human position in the world at large.

Defined by many contrasting influences from rock-and-roll to opera, from Douglas Sirk's classic Hollywood melodramas to the montage theories of Dziga Vertov, his films constantly question the world around him and positions the minutiae of day-to-day experience in an epic, international framework. His complex editing style – cutting rapidly between time periods, cultures and continents – creates a polyphonic cinema embraced equally by film and by literary circles leading to his close association with the New York School and Language Poets from the San Francisco Bay Area (including Michael Brownstein, Larry Fagin and Anne Waldman as well as Carla Harryman and Charles Bernstein). The first complete retrospective of his work in the UK, this series will position newly restored works alongside films by his peers such as Stan Brakhage, Abigail Child, Nathaniel Dorsky, Gerard Malanga, Gregory Markopoulos, Jeff Scher, and Andy Warhol, as well as Douglas Sirk's feature film *Tarnished Angels* (1957).

Co-curated by Jon Gartenberg
with Tate Film.

Organised by George Clark,
Assistant curator: Film, Tate Modern

*Tate Film is supported by
Maja Hoffmann / LUMA Foundation*

WARREN SONBERT: AMPHETAMINE

Tate Modern, Starr Auditorium

Thursday 24 October 2013,

19.00–21.00

AMPHETAMINE

Warren Sonbert & Wendy Appel, USA

1966, 16mm, black-and-white, 10 min

First film, heavily influenced by Godard and Warhol – designed to shock.

Warren Sonbert, *Warren Sonbert Retrospective*, program notes, Museum of Modern Art, Oct 14–18, 1994

An insidious little film which critic James Stoller called 'a heart stopper'. Loop-like repetitions of adolescent junkies concentrating on their fixes, each caught in similar framing, cut together in jump-cut fashion, all more or less locked into the continuous 'rush', while, on the soundtrack the Supremes keep asking, 'Where Did Our Love Go', a powerfully cyclic montage of these adolescent boys fixing, nodding and embracing; the film imparts a feeling of existence replaced.

Warren Sonbert, *Film-Makers' Cooperative Catalogue*



Warren Sonbert and Wendy Appel,
Amphetamine 1967 film still
© The Estate of Warren Sonbert

NOBLESSE OBLIGE

Warren Sonbert, USA, 1981

16mm, 25 min

My new project, tentatively called *Noblesse Oblige*, is about journalism, reportage, news events that you might see on the six o'clock news report, how the news is created, how it might affect our lives, and journalists' responsibilities.

Warren Sonbert, 'Warren Sonbert Lecture, San Francisco Art Institute, August 1979', *Film Culture*

The style is relatively unchanged, but the images – press conferences, news events, disasters – convey his vision of the world in a new, direct, political fashion. Featuring startling footage of the City Hall riots after Councilman Dan White received a light prison sentence for slaying San Francisco Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk, *Noblesse Oblige* opens a new chapter on Sonbert's career.

David Ehrenstein, *LA Reader*,
April 16, 1982

CUT to wedding cake CUT – *noblesse oblige* – let 'em eat cake. The wedding contrasts with the film's pervasive mourning, funerals. It's a slice of life shot (journalists recording, artists transforming), and life's a slice of cake. Trouble in paradise already though – an argument at the slicing – disruption already implied amidst Union. A wrong turn from the work's possible paths: like the acrobats later on, starting out on the wrong foot (the marriage happened to last six months). Unlike the thread of the runners – or are *they* going anywhere.

Warren Sonbert, 'About Noblesse Oblige',
typed ms. n.d.

Note: See also entry for October 26 (15:00) screening of *Tarnished Angels*.

WHIPLASH

Warren Sonbert, 1995 (completed posthumously 1997), 16mm, 20 min



Warren Sonbert, Whiplash 1995, film still
© The Estate of Warren Sonbert

During the years preceding his death, Sonbert channeled his energy into making *Whiplash*. His vision and motor skills impaired, he gave his companion, Ascension Serrano, detailed instructions about the assembly of specific shots and the music to be used as a counterpoint to the images. Before his death in 1995, he asked filmmaker Jeff Scher (a former student of Sonbert's at Bard College) to complete the film.

Whiplash is a compelling, multilayered portrayal of the filmmaker's struggle to maintain equilibrium in his physical self, his perceptual reality, and the world of friends and family around him. In it, Sonbert articulated the ideas and values by which he intended to be remembered. Most important among these is the theme of love between couples.

Jon Gartenberg, *Canyon Cinema Film / Video Catalog*, 2000

1) Lawrence – Track 2 – 2 mins.: Jamie on skates, NY Parade. [?] contingent – Scottish POV [?]

Israelis on parade NY, Israelis kissing Torah at Wailing Wall, Parade 4th of July, idiot medals

2) Mambo West Side Story – Track 6 3/2 mins. – Spain, Dances, Bullfight

3) Gotterdamurung Disc 1 Cut 7 at 1:16 – 1 min.

4) The Sea Hawk Track 1 1 min.: Rousing, explosive

5) Creedence Track 10 6-7 mins. Grapevine: sxy. dance Porn
Ariana Jeff + Suzanne

6) Capriccio Last scene Moonlight Music – 3mins. – Serene

Warren Sonbert, *Typed notes for soundtrack of Whiplash*, n.d.

WARREN SONBERT:

THE BAD AND THE BEAUTIFUL
Tate Modern, Starr Auditorium
Friday 25 October 2013,
19.00–20.30

THE BAD AND THE BEAUTIFUL
Warren Sonbert, USA 1967, 16mm,
colour, 34 min

A collaborative exercise between the couples and myself.

Warren Sonbert, *Film-Makers' Cooperative Catalogue No. 7*, 1989

I've made a new film... It's a 32 minute epic called *The Bad and the Beautiful* I shot a 3-minute roll on 9 couples at home, in the country, at a horse show, etc. The film is entirely edited in the camera and it worked wonderfully I'm happy to say. Reaction to it has been very good (although it hasn't been shown publicly yet, just to a huge group of the cast, friends, critics).

Warren Sonbert,
Letter to David Curtis, n.d.



Warren Sonbert, The Bad and the Beautiful 1969,
film still © The Estate of Warren Sonbert

THE TUXEDO THEATRE

Warren Sonbert, USA 1968, 16mm,
colour, 21 min

New York again and some Morocco. First sketches of varieties of people, East West city country, rich poor, old young. Many levels. Less movement but more editing and geometric progressions. It's over before you know it.

Warren Sonbert, *London Film Makers Co-Op Catalogue*, 1993

Tuxedo Theatre (1969) is Sonbert's newest and best work. He has abandoned the scores of rock music that accompanied all the earlier films; and he has clearly placed the perspective in the first person singular. This film is edited, obviously so. Yet it preserves in tone and development the sense of a diary. The montage creates parallels and illusions (such as the television butterfly cut into the line of sight of the young man looking up in the park) and above all, radical displacements. For instance, the film-maker approaches an airplane, up the gangplank, there's a take off (logically of a different craft), a shot from inside the flying wing, a landing, and we are in a southern climate, perhaps California. Then suddenly after a few shots we are in a Moorish market, or overlooking a skyline of minarets. So the *Tuxedo Theatre* evolves a juxtaposition of traditional cinematic elements.

P. Adams Sitney, *Warren Sonbert: Where Did Our Love Go?; Tuxedo Theatre, 'The Avant garde Film Series at the Jewish Museum 1969; programme notes, 1969*

**WARREN SONBERT:
POSTCARDS FROM WARREN**
Tate Modern, Starr Auditorium
Friday 25 October 2013,
21.00–22.30

CARRIAGE TRADE

Warren Sonbert, USA 1972, 16mm,
colour, 61 min



Warren Sonbert, *Carriage Trade*, 1972.
Film still courtesy of Anthology Film Archives
© The Estate of Warren Sonbert

Magnum opus (and my first real silent) made up of sections of *The Tenth Legion*, *Truth Serum*, *Holiday*, *The Bad and the Beautiful*, *Ted and Jessica* and *Connection* (the latter two two-screen films – *Chelsea Girls* influence). The strategies of combining 'old' images with recent trips through Asian, North Africa, Europe and North America.

Warren Sonbert, 'Warren Sonbert Retrospective', programme notes, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Oct 14–18, 1994

The film I've got is called *Carriage Trade* – Jonas has a study print at the Anthology Film Archives of the 1972 edition (approx. 75 mins.).

Since then naturally it has been both shortened (60 mins. Silent but 24 fps) and augmented (trips to Egypt, Paris, west coast Bay area etc.) But as yet no print has been made...it has been streamlined & reedited since that print so that it's quite different...Basically it's in the same tradition

of my earlier work & indeed contains some similar material that you are already familiar with only shifted around – of course placement & length changes an on-going time form. Usually each showing entails a different version but I'm getting pretty fed up with it and for the past 6 months I've been shooting footage for an entirely different project which isn't anywhere near completed even as far as filming is concerned.

Warren Sonbert, Letter to Simon Field and David Curtis, April 14, 1973

A 16mm 60 minute 6 year compilation of travels, home movies, documents shown silent. Not strictly involved with plot of morality but rather the language of film as regards time, composition, cutting, light, distance, tension of backgrounds to foregrounds, what you see and what you don't, a jig-saw puzzle of postcards to produce varied displaced effects.

Contrapuntal textures in using 8 or so different stocks of film – color and B & W, negative & dyed shots. Film as music without music, each shot a cluster of notes striking a reaction in viewer. Editing does not quality positions of good or bad; it's all just there. Although there is both a flow and a contrast between shots, an image may not directly refer to the shot that has preceded it but rather perhaps to several shots before. Film takes in the changing relations of the movement of objects, the gestures of figures, familiar worldwide icons, rituals & reactions, rhythm, spacing & density of images. All to pull the carpet out from under you.

Warren Sonbert, 'Whitney Museum of American Art New American Filmmakers Series', program notes, Oct. 11–17, 1973

POSTCARDS FROM WARREN
Jeff Scher, USA, 1999, 16mm, 1 min

The postcards in this film were all sent to me by my friend and filmmaking mentor, Warren Sonbert, who died of AIDS in 1995. Warren was a great traveler and postcards were his preferred method of communication.

The images on the cards were picked as carefully as the images in his films, and the amount of space on the back was perfect for his microscopic handwriting or neat typing. He could fit a dozen lines on the back and give you his enviable itinerary, a travel anecdote, a terse opera or movie review and a bit of gossip, all for 15 cents postage. In our abrupt internet age the cards seem almost like Victorian relics, but in Warren's hands they were eloquent and witty windows onto his world.

While assembling these postcards, I almost felt as though I was making a posthumous self-portrait for him. Many of Warren's films were dense montages of footage he shot on his travels. The films are composed of hundreds of shots, rarely longer than five seconds apiece. Each of them was just long enough 'not to overstay its welcome and to leave you hungry for more,' as he used to say, which, ironically, also describes his short but splendid life.

One of the last things Warren said to me was, 'I'll send you a postcard.'

Jeff Scher, 'Postcards from Warren', *The New York Times*, March 10, 2008

This has been *Interlude* week with 3 screenings for friends in 5 days. I think a film of remarkable depth and subtlety and rather underrated in the standard Sirk canon. Surely an amazing use of Scope – haven't tired of it yet. Also great traveling Melies series – 3 separate showcases introduced by his granddaughter. Lots of tinted color ones, and for 1907 for so – surreal, prophetic of much of Keaton, Tati et al. A l'Opera a terrible cotton candy

Lohengrin but a nifty Pique Dame (I'll defend Tchaikovsky), so hopefully you'll be around end of Feb. on my next (fairly extended) trip in? Debut new MOMA theater. Hug to S. Best Warren

Warren Sonbert, postcard to Jeff Scher, November 1982



Jeff Scher, Postcards from Warren 1999.
Film still, courtesy of the artist

**WARREN SONBERT:
DOUGLAS SIRK'S TARNISHED ANGELS**
Tate Modern, Starr Auditorium
Saturday 26 October 2013,
15.00–17.00

TARNISHED ANGELS
Douglas Sirk, USA, 1957, 35mm, 91 min



Douglas Sirk, *Tarnished Angels* 1957,
courtesy of UIP / Ronald Grant

[In my film *Noblesse Oblige*, there are] Halloween children in death masks dancing. Halloween children in death masks dancing, part of Sirk theme the man interviewed at the end, while *The Tarnished Angels* appears on several video screens. *The Tarnished Angels* is about a newspaper reporter getting involved with a bunch of inept acrobatic air pilots, *flyers*. Their leader is an ex-hero (and an aristocrat of the spirit to Sirk) who dies in the end in a plane crash. Much of the evening's action of that film takes place during Mardi Gras with a stress on death and masks.

Warren Sonbert, 'About Noblesse Oblige', typed ms. n.d.

Sirk, the uprooted émigré, sees the world and the subjects he undertakes with an anguished objectivity; observing, absorbing, and reflecting his material. Like Ozu, Sirk takes on the least facile task of presenting the present; what is accepted by custom, mores and standards taken for granted, caste rules and stratifications, and qualifies them by his treatment and eye-of-God attitudes. No other Hollywood

director of the 50's – not even Hitchcock – so ruthlessly exposed the hollow cupidity and superficiality of middle class ideals of the Eisenhower years in America. These films are perfect time capsules. And yet these works are made universal by a sensibility encompassing an acceptance of the varied states of life, by benign contemplation and awe of the poetry of existence, as well as being viscerally permeated by an Olympian grace (a camera that glides); a Constructivist cinema deploying architecture to comment on the characters' iconography and their emotive stances. Take nothing for granted in a Sirk film: composition, cutting, color, light, sets (the textural diversity) – the control will guide you.

Warren Sonbert, 'Douglas Sirk and the Melodrama' program notes, Pacific Film Archive, April 3 – June 12, 1975.

**WARREN SONBERT:
HONOR AND OBEY**
Tate Modern, Starr Auditorium
Saturday 26 October 2013,
17.00–18.30

Film images, particularly accompanied by the absence of a track, are inextricably linked to language, if not to sound. To be confronted by a representational form evokes words, definitions, associations on a literary level, puns, verbal baggage that are as inescapable in cerebral effect as color, light, composition and movement and the kineticism of editing. The image if rendered and the associative juices of objects, verbs, nouns and adjectives start flowing. This is a concomitant of figurative images. To slight such rich associate tapestries is to drive in low gear.

Warren Sonbert, 'About Noblesse Oblige', typed ms., n.d.

DIVIDED LOYALTIES
Warren Sonbert, USA 1978,
colour, 22 min

Divided Loyalties is about Art and industry and contemporary lifestyles like Gays in San Francisco, and I think all these things come in for a lot of criticism and a lot of almost scathing mischievous sly treatment.

Warren Sonbert, 'Warren Sonbert Interviewed by David Ehrenstein, December 1978', *Film Culture*, 1983

So, again, the ambition might be seen as an attempt to hold finely balanced series of tensions in which one can read images of a variety of ways, sometimes in contradictory stances so that there are many possibilities of interaction...there is somehow a link, a chain, by the very act of editing, of putting shots/images next to one another, that says our pleasure is somehow at the expense of another's suffering. This is emphasized by the next image after the

dazed, bleeding man – which is a close-up of a Cezanne painting being cleaned. The image of art naturally refers back to the artist-filmmaker, saying that art is both objective and merciless, the filmmaker being both callous and opportunistic, sharing in the guilt, taking advantage just as much as the audience of other people's misfortune to build his argument...the artist is cool and detached, but the reason is to shake up and disturb.

Warren Sonbert, 'Warren Sonbert Lecture, San Francisco Art Institute, August 1979', *Film Culture*

HONOR AND OBEY
Warren Sonbert, USA 1988,
colour, 21 min

Quick editing (two weeks?) of a film on a dare for the NY Film Festival.

Warren Sonbert, 'Warren Sonbert Retrospective' programme notes, Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 14–18, 1994.

For Sonbert, one of the goals of the film was 'to get a classical balance amid chaos' – to present 276 images that are seductive and pleasing to the eye, to arrange them in patterns that are kinetic or rhythmic, but also to posit them in ways that suggest chaos and disruption.

'I'm one of these independent, experimental underground film makers who definitely feels [a film] should appeal to everybody,' he says, 'that it should be immediately gratifying in a sort of very lush sense: the colors, dynamics, momentum of a film should be very hypnotic and luxurious.'

The other half of that challenge, Sonbert adds, 'is to make a disturbing work within that pleasurable context.' It becomes disturbing, he says, when 'there's really nothing there quite long enough for you

to wallow in or luxuriate in. It's ripped away from you and something which is really quite other replaces it'...

That sense of dislocation, he says, is the central theme of *Honor and Obey*: 'It's very fragile, the way we look at the world', he says. 'What we expect from the world can never really be counted on. There's some sort of disillusion built in, some sort of destruction.'

Warren Sonbert, interviewed by Edward Guthmann, 'Experimetal Artist Warren Sonbert: Honor and Obey Creates Balance Amid Chaos', *San Francisco Chronicle*

A WOMAN'S TOUCH
Warren Sonbert, USA 1983,
colour, 22 min



Warren Sonbert, *A Woman's Touch* 1983, film still
© The Estate of Warren Sonbert

A backslide into earlier 'personality' scheme.

Warren Sonbert, 'Warren Sonbert Retrospective' programme notes, Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 14–18, 1994.

In my last completed work, *A Woman's Touch* (1983)...there is a given and then a series of qualifications, almost like a Theme and Variations. The initial set is a number of images of women involved in solitary action. All is presented positively, benignly, almost *too* complacently: Women at work, at play, constructing, striving, succeeding – a paean to independence.

The first variation is the introduction of men: Singly active as well and intercut with women. The men here are initially conceived as threats and tinged with negative associative imagery: Men drinking, men gambling, men ordering, pointing, bossing. There is a very brief (hence again hopefully disturbing) image of a man sharpening a knife. Other images show men carrying guns or dominating others within their sphere. After all this, no wonder the women might prefer to be on their own...Throughout the film there has been a movement toward domestication... In *A Woman's Touch* the men have the last word from the force built up via montage into this last image. The converging lines of the driveway represent a road, a passage, an escape – to free (like the converging lines of the railway station at the beginning of *Marnie*), but the cul-de-sac at the end of these lines divert/inundate/cancel this attempt at escape, at Independence."

Warren Sonbert, 'Narrative Concerns', typed ms., n.d.

**WARREN SONBERT:
WHERE DID OUR LOVE GO?
Tate Modern, Starr Auditorium
Saturday 26 October 2013,
19.00–21.00**

This programme will be introduced by writer Lynne Tillman and followed by a discussion with Tillman, James Boaden and Jon Gartenberg.

WHERE DID OUR LOVE GO?
Warren Sonbert, USA 1966, 16mm,
colour, 15 min



Warren Sonbert, *Where did our love go?* 1966,
film still © The Estate of Warren Sonbert

First pleasure romp: along the various venues of culture, circa 1966, New York.

Warren Sonbert, *Warren Sonbert Retrospective*, programme notes, Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 14–18, 1994.

Warhol Factory days...serendipity visits, Janis and Castelli and Bellvue glances... Malanga at work...glances at *Le Mepris* and *North by Northwest*...girl rock groups and a disco opening...a romp through the Modern. My second film.

Warren Sonbert, *Canyon Cinema Film/Video Catalog 7*, 1992

It is...a randomly edited 'home movie' in which the people I care for the most are inextricably linked together, flowing from one to another...The film is about the glamour of New York...New York

is the nostalgia of the present...for the soundtrack I used mostly old rock and roll – the most nostalgic music there is.

Warren Sonbert, *Film-Makers Cooperative Catalogue*

Where Did Our Love Go? feels like both a valentine and a farewell to a generation, as well as being simply a portrait which is tender, distant, accurate, somewhat high, and sad. In one brief and emblematic image near the end a group of kids huddles happily in a semi-circle on a sofa, neither really touching nor completely apart, and you can feel all the ambiguity and the uncertain liveliness of the teenyboppers in the street, the generation probably no one understands but which Sonbert, in a series of tender and moving moments, has revealed to us. I could watch this film a hundred times; it made me feel old, older than I am, but also it opened my eyes and my heart.

James Stoller, 'Films: Where Did Our Love Go', *Village Voice*, Nov 10, 1966



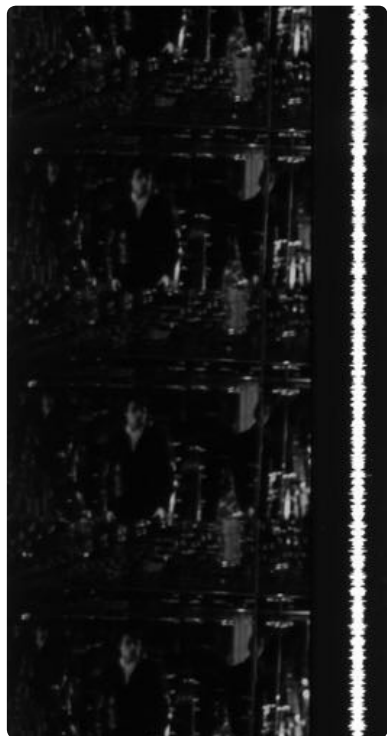
Warren Sonbert, *Where did our love go?* 1966,
film still © The Estate of Warren Sonbert

HALL OF MIRRORS

Warren Sonbert, USA 1966, 16mm,
colour, 7 min

NYU Editing (Carl Lerner) class spin off of 'correcting' dailies from Michael Gordon's 1947 (my birth year) *An Act of Murder* adding sequences (to end term and skip off to Europe) of Rene Ricard at home and Gerard Malanga amidst Pace Gallery's and Lucas Samaras's 'Hall of Mirrors'

Warren Sonbert, 'Warren Sonbert Retrospective', program notes. Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 14–18, 1994.



Warren Sonbert, *Short Fuse* 1992, film still
© The Estate of Warren Sonbert



Warren Sonbert, *Short Fuse* 1992, film still
© The Estate of Warren Sonbert

SCREEN TEST – REEL 3

– #10 GERARD MALANGA

Andy Warhol, USA 1964, 16mm, 4 min
&

SCREEN TEST – REEL 8

– #3 CHARLES HENRI FORD

Andy Warhol, USA 1966, 16mm, 4 min

Once Andy asked me to appear in one of his movies – as it turned out it was (modestly, the author notes) *The 13 Most Beautiful Boys*. As it turned out, I never was filmed by him, or maybe the movie didn't get made, just partially shot. But being around Andy was the thrilling collaboration in any case.

Despite the relentless bad press heaped on him over the years, about the lives he destroyed or his callous attitude, Andy really cared about people. I don't just mean his working in soup kitchens on weekends during those years when his fame was at its zenith – an admittedly 'People' [magazine] tidbit that in actuality only publicly surfaced after his death. Andy was curious, he listened, and he made you the center of your own universe. If you had dreams, to say nothing of delusions, he encouraged them. Looking at his 'Disaster' series of paintings you realize in fact how deeply he did feel and, perhaps, how necessary that glacial veneer was to his daily equilibrium.

Whether or not an artist is the salt of the earth and a dependable chum is all rather beside the point in any event. Andy Warhol was the greatest artist of our time...

Warren Sonbert, 'Factory Work: Remember life with Andy, Edie and the Warhol 'Superstars'', *Bay Area Reporter*

IN SEARCH OF THE MIRACULOUS

Gerard Malanga, USA 1967, 16mm,
sound 30 min

Dear Warren, hi:
Your most recent New York City newsletter of the week arrived a few days ago, and was like a supershot of methedrine dreams, a shock of New York's gravitational pull...For me Rome has become a cast of characters, an act of discovery. To express Rome means to understand and feel it in my eyes, in the beat of my heart, in my mind, and to simplify it, inescapably drawn into its people. It is the present I am concerned with to see through to the past in seeing the future. This is the expanding consciousness whose quality of the senses I will try to achieve in my new film, *The Recording Zone Operator*, as I tried to do in *Alla Ricerca del Miracoloso*: to express all things at once and at once. Is not reality far more fantastic than fiction?

Gerard Malanga, 'A Letter to Warren Sonbert from Gerard Malanga'

Warren was a godsend when he helped out with the cinematography for *In Search of the Miraculous*. He did all the opening color shots of the schoolchildren and of me dancing at the Columbia U. quad; the b&w shots of me in the antiques shoppe, and the concluding color shots of me on the Bridge in Central Park. Marie Menken, Mario Schifano, Andy Meyer, and Andy Warhol also made camera contributions. My goal was to extend the possibility and range of the 'film poem' as first proposed by Cocteau. Best regards, Gerard.

Gerard Malanga, e-mail to Jon Gartenberg, September 26, 2002

WARREN SONBERT: TRUTH SERUM
Tate Modern, Starr Auditorium
Sunday 27 October 2013,
15.00–17.00

THE TENTH LEGION

Warren Sonbert, USA, 1968, 16mm,
 colour, 30 min



Warren Sonbert, 'The Tenth Legion' 1968, film still
 © The Estate of Warren Sonbert

Tape Track...Interrelationships, portraits,
 repetition and identification...

Warren Sonbert, 'Lecture Topics',
 unpublished typed ms, n.d.

An amazingly talented example of the younger generation's ever mounting interest in films and filmmaking is prolific 19 year old Warren Sonbert... *The Tenth Legion* is a highly promising entry for specialized art houses. Telling no story, having no plot and no dialogue, Sonbert's 30-minute color film is merely an attempt to capture the spirit, mood, and activities of his generation. Inspired by Otto Preminger's directorial techniques, Sonbert's camera circles, tracks, follows, and observes his characters with a studied detachment which seem to say: this is us and this is how things are.

The Independent Film Journal, Vol. 59,
 No. 7, March 4, 1967.

MING GREEN

Gregory Markopoulos, USA, 1966,
 16mm, silent, 7 min

Sonbert: When I started seeing films it was a very exciting period in New York in the early and mid sixties. People like Markopoulos, who has since renounced this country and gone off to Europe; Brakhage in Colorado, Jack Smith was making films, Warhol and the Kuchars were working. Now all these people are dispersed...

Ehrenstein: In talking about film-makers whose concerns are similar to your own, we've mentioned Eisenstein, Vertov. Who has influenced you on the independent scene?

Sonbert: Certainly Gregory Markopoulos. I was his protégé for awhile and he did open up the entire new world of films for me...he is one of the great film-makers in independent film – really freeing film."

Warren Sonbert, 'Warren Sonbert
 Interviewed by David Ehrenstein,
 December 1978', *Film Culture*

KUSTOM KAR KOMMANDOS

Kenneth Anger, USA, 16mm, 3 min

So really film is basically musical: any movie with a soundtrack is already a very mixed-up medium, a hybrid, a bastardization. Of course sound tracks help carry matters along, do all the work, as it were. It's hard to think of Conner or Anger without their tracks – but that is exactly the acid test. Harry Smith's *Early Abstractions* and *Late Superimpositions* can survive without their early Beatles' goading, but *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* cannot (as witnessed by the recent pulling of the at least exotic and idiomatic Janacek Mass in favor of a very undistinguished rock track). Brakhage, Menken, Vertov have all shown that to purely watch the images is a much freer, broader experience than any track would add. The film can truly breathe this way – go many more places than it can anchored to sound. Somewhere along the line the divergent rhythms of film and sound get in each other's way...

Warren Sonbert, 'Warren Sonbert
 Lecture, San Francisco Art Institute,
 August 1979', *Film Culture*

TRUTH SERUM

Warren Sonbert, USA, 1967, 16mm,
 13 min. (Note: sound track missing)

An early teenage weekend film. Some material later incorporate in *Carriage Trade*. From the rock n roll period: 50s girl groups and 'The High & Mighty' theme.

Warren Sonbert, *Film-Makers'
 Cooperative Catalogue No. 7*

High spirited glances...at Coney Island,
 Appalachian trail, New Jersey, the Janis
 Gallery.

Warren Sonbert, 'Warren Sonbert
 Retrospective', programme notes,
 Museum of Modern Art, New York,
 October 14–18, 1994

All the prints of my films (there is only the original of *Truth Serum*) will be going out to San Francisco and Los Angeles for about a three week tour...There was a very nice article on *Truth Serum* in the Village Voice, the week of July 20th, by Jim Stoller...I really dislike 'prints' now. I'd rather spend the money on another film. And when the original goes, it goes. So what. I mean scratches and dirt and jump cuts on [the] original are into a whole other thing.

Warren Sonbert, Letter to David
 and Betty Curtis, ca. July 1967

HOURS FOR JEROME, PART 2
 Nathaniel Dorsky, 16mm, 25 min



Nathaniel Dorsky, 'Hours for Jerome, Part 2', 1980-2,
 film still, courtesy of the artist/canyon cinema

Dorsky's *oeuvre* brandishes at present a versatility not readily available in the current *avant garde* film scene. The mammoth *Hours for Jerome* is a representational montage work formally and a cinematic textbook visually.

Warren Sonbert, 'Program Notes for PFA
 on Nathaniel Dorsky', typed ms., n.d.

Hours for Jerome is simply the most beautifully photographed film that I've ever seen; here we enter the realm of the compassionate and the full achievement of what film can do cinematographically is achieved. It is a privilege to experience the thoughtful unfolding of these images.

Warren Sonbert, Canyon Cinema Film/
 Video Catalog, 2000

**WARREN SONBERT:
RUDE AWAKENING**
Tate Modern, Starr Auditorium
Sunday 27 October 2013,
17.00–19.00

RUDE AWAKENING

Warren Sonbert, USA 1976, 16mm,
colour, 36 min

Rude Awakening is about Western civilization and its work; activity ethic and the viability of performing functions and activities.

Warren Sonbert, 'Warren Sonbert Lecture, San Francisco Art Institute, August 1979', *Film Culture*.

Tautening this silent period's approach.

Warren Sonbert, 'Warren Sonbert Retrospective', Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 14–18, 1994.

Carriage Trade was about comparing different places, different people, different pastimes in different parts of the world, four seasons, four elements – really broad concerns. *Rude Awakening* continued along that line with things not working out, things not materializing, people having certain expectations, plans, input, and those *dissolving*. What does action mean, where does it get you? It doesn't get you anywhere. That's something about that in the first shot being this archer which is a pun on the Powell-Pressburger films, and the last shot which is a boy throwing sand in the air which is like the Sandman putting you to sleep.

Warren Sonbert, 'Warren Sonbert Interviewed by David Ehrenstein, December 1978', *Film Culture*, 1983

In *Rude Awakening*, I had these series of what I call 'directional pulls' in which, let's say, a character reaches across the screen

for a cup of coffee, and his hand goes in the direction of left to right; then the following image would be a plane taking off in that similar direction from left to right. One physical gesture will generate – in a widely different time, space, focal length, or exposure situation – something else. So there is that kind of continuum as well as contrast. The differences are immediately obvious – as you say, collisional. The idea is to pick up on what is the *connecting* link. In some cases it could be a geometric shape, or a color, or a narrative verbal pun. So the challenge is to make something which is going to pull you from one image to the next one and at the same time be a total division, a cutting-off point, a something other. Each shot, obviously, will stand out so much more if there is this total contrast, if one's still, one's moving, one's dark, one's light, if one's a close-up, one's wide-angle, if one has characters, people, portraits, and one does not, is more abstract."

Warren Sonbert, 'Conversation with Warren Sonbert' interview by David Simpson

WARREN

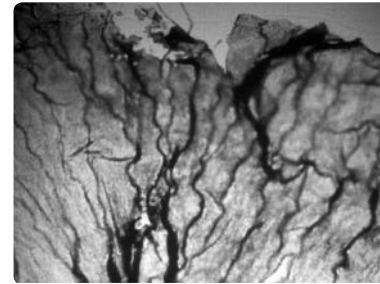
Jeff Scher, USA, 1991, 16mm, 3 min

Jeff Scher turns the table on his former teacher and mentor, creates an intimate dialogue between friends as well as a battle of directorial wills.

Jon Gartenberg, *Canyon Cinema Film / Video Catalog*, 2000

MOTHLIGHT

Stan Brakhage. USA 1963, 16mm, 4 min



Stan Brakhage, *Mothlight* 1963, film still
Courtesy: The Estate of Stan Brakhage and
LUX, London.

The great hero in film history is Brakhage, who "liberated" film. He made the tactile qualities the major concern and showed that "mistakes," errors could have an expressive, demonic, psychological function. Images could be overexposed (too bright) and underexposed (too dark). That dirt, splice lines, flare-ins and flare-outs, the dots that end and begin a three-minute roll of rushes, all could have a transforming purpose. He questioned the entire Nineteenth Century sensibility of the composed wide-angle art-gallery frame-work. He suggested that all budding film-makers take an icepick to their lens to destroy Renaissance perspective.

He also had this near equivalent of Pollock – these thick overlays of impasto, almost including the paint-tube caps, with his drawing, painting, scratching on film, scraping away the emulsion, using oil, water, ink, magic marker; even, in a film called *Mothlight*, to go so far as to crush the wings and bodies of moths and other insects onto a strip of film.

Warren Sonbert, *Warren Sonbert Lecture, San Francisco Art Institute, August 1979, Film Culture*

REASONS TO BE GLAD

Jeff Scher, USA 1980, 16mm, 4 min

My first night in Budapest as I walked into the only gay bar in town (pop. 2 million!) the bouffanted matron pianist immediately careened into a snappy rendition of the soundtrack of *Reasons To Be Glad*. Thought: 'So that's where it comes from.' Otherwise Budapest reminds me of Ankara - but without the charm. Stared at I guess for being the thinnest person in town – no postcards either.

Warren Sonbert, postcard to Jeff Scher and Suzanne Fedak, c. 1986



Jeff Scher, *Reasons to be Glad* 1980,
courtesy of the artist

SURFACE NOISE

Abigail Child USA, 2000, 16mm, 18 min

In *Surface Noise*, cobbled from found footage that Child describes as 'outtakes of outtakes', is a dense collage of images with a John Zorn-like soundtrack. Sometimes the images synch with the noise; the flailings of a salmon swimming upstream is coupled with a rimshot, and home movie footage of a man laughing is paired with a female opera singer. In most of *Surface Noise*, however, sound and image follow their own dialectical paths, creating a density which is Child's tribute (as a dedication at the end of the film makers clear) to the equally complex films of Warren Sonbert.

Lux online catalogue

Sonbert was a colleague and friend, arch, prolific (particularly when diagnosed with HIV), a companion for movies and the opera he loved. We talked of montage intensely and what I admired of his work was not only its richness of color, but its interlocking structure and the way political concerns began to increasingly appear in the works. I myself had trouble with the 'merely beautiful' and always felt the need in montage to go deeper into the culture – how things mean and affect us as citizens stemming from my college studies in ethnography or perhaps just coming through the 60s.

Abigail Child, 'Abigail Child: Films and a Lecture', programme notes, Harvard Film Archive, November 1–3, 2007

WARREN SONBERT: SHORT FUSE

Sunday 27 October 2013,
19.00–21.00

THE CUP AND THE LIP

Warren Sonbert, USA 1986, 16mm,
colour, 20 min

Further distillation (along with *Noblesse Oblige*) of later manner of editing/dislocation approach.

Warren Sonbert, 'Warren Sonbert Retrospective' program notes, Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 14–18, 1994

My best films are *Divided Loyalties*, *Noblesse Oblige*, and *The Cup and the Lip* – complete, succinct, and time proof. Though cases could be made for the exhaustiveness of *Carriage Trade*, the structural grid of *Rude Awakening*, the narrative explorations of *A Woman's Touch* and even the dogged hijinks of *The Bad and the Beautiful*.

Warren Sonbert, letter to David, January 18, 1988

Warren Sonbert

FRIENDLY WITNESS

Warren Sonbert, USA 1989,
16mm, 22 min



Warren Sonbert, *Friendly Witness*, 1989, film still
© The Estate of Warren Sonbert

Friendly Witness is comprised of material shot by myself over the last 23 years. The locales include Europe, North Africa, the South Pacific, Australia and Asia (including those hot spots Iran and Afghanistan). The work is in 5 sections or 2 parts (twice as long as the first part) is the remaining section. The first part then is lighter, gamier, with built in diversion like pre-feature genre relations to cartoons, trailers, newsreels. This sets off the high seriousness of the grand *Weltanschauung* [worldview] finale and the pairing is necessary to undercut the masterpiece syndrome of the conclusion. On the tracks the first part is devoted to preintellectual late 50s/early 60s rock while the world view is buoyed by a classical piece. There is a darkening then in the tone, mood and subject matter between the frothy first part and the more turbulent second part. Spectacle, public domain, objective (god's eye) point of view is the aesthetic approach with the constant idea that all this activity is perhaps occurring simultaneously.

Warren Sonbert, Letter to Sally and Helen, August 9, 1989

SHORT FUSE

Warren Sonbert, USA, 1992, 16mm
colour, 37 min

Warren Sonbert's brilliant *Short Fuse* expresses growing rage at gay suffering in the age of AIDS without losing the rich seductiveness of sound, image, and montage.

'Avant-Garde Visions' program notes, New York Film Festival, 1992

It was good to speak to you again today, and to agree that the BFI will distribute your latest film...As agreed, the BFI would like to take on *Short Fuse* for all UK (and Republic of Ireland) rights on a theatrical and non-theatrical basis...As I said, our first use for the film will be on the London Lesbian & Gay Film Festival regional tour, which will play up to 16 venues between March 1 and the end of June. On the matter of the tour, I hope that within the week I can give you the information you required on Leeds, Cardiff, etc...Thanks, Warren. I'm glad that we're going ahead with this.

Mark Finch (Acting head of BFI Film & Video Distribution), Letter to Warren Sonbert, November 3, 1991



Warren Sonbert, *Short Fuse*, 1992, film still
© The Estate of Warren Sonbert

SCREENING SCHEDULE

WARREN SONBERT: AMPHETAMINE
Thursday 24 October 2013,
19.00–21.00*Amphetamine*

Warren Sonbert and Wendy Appel,
USA 1966, 16mm,
black-and-white, 10 min

Noblesse Oblige

Warren Sonbert, USA, 1981,
16mm, 25 min

Whiplash

Warren Sonbert, 1995 (completed
posthumously 1997), 16mm, 20 min

WARREN SONBERT:
THE BAD AND THE BEAUTIFUL
Friday 25 October 2013,
19.00–20.30*The Bad And The Beautiful*

Warren Sonbert, USA 1967, 16mm,
colour, 34 min

The Tuxedo Theatre

Warren Sonbert, USA 1968, 16mm,
colour, 21 min

WARREN SONBERT:
POSTCARDS FROM WARREN
Friday 25 October 2013,
21.00–22.30*Carriage Trade*

Warren Sonbert, USA 1972, 16mm
colour, 61 min

Postcards from Warren

Jeff Scher, USA, 1999, 16mm, 1 min

WARREN SONBERT:
DOUGLAS SIRK'S TARNISHED ANGELS
Saturday 26 October 2013,
15.00–17.00*Tarnished Angels*

Douglas Sirk, USA, 1957,
35mm, 91 min

WARREN SONBERT:
HONOR AND OBEY
Saturday 26 October 2013,
17.00–18.30*Divided Loyalties*

Warren Sonbert, USA 1978,
colour, 22 min

Honor And Obey

Warren Sonbert, USA 1988,
colour, 21 min

A Woman's Touch

Warren Sonbert, USA 1983,
colour, 22 min

WARREN SONBERT:
WHERE DID OUR LOVE GO?
Saturday 26 October 2013,
19.00–21.00

This programme will be introduced by
writer Lynne Tillman and followed by a
discussion with Tillman, James Boaden
and Jon Gartenberg.

Where Did Our Love Go?

Warren Sonbert, USA 1966, 16mm,
colour, 15 min

Hall Of Mirrors

Warren Sonbert, USA 1966, 16mm,
colour, 7 min

Screen Test – Reel 3

– #10 Gerard Malanga
Andy Warhol, USA 1964, 16mm, 4 min

Screen Test – Reel 8

– #3 Charles Henri Ford
Andy Warhol, USA 1966, 16mm, 4 min

In Search of the Miraculous

Gerard Malanga, USA 1967, 16mm,
sound 30 min

WARREN SONBERT: TRUTH SERUM
Sunday 27 October 2013,
15.00–17.00*The Tenth Legion*

Warren Sonbert, USA, 1968, 16mm,
colour, 30 min

Ming Green

Gregory Markopoulos, USA, 1966,
16mm silent, 7 min

Kustom Kar Kommandos

Kenneth Anger, USA, 16mm, 3 min

Truth Serum

Warren Sonbert, USA, 1967, 16mm,
13 min. (Note: sound track missing)

Hours for Jerome, Part 2 (1980–82)

Nathaniel Dorsky, 16mm, 25 min

WARREN SONBERT: RUDE AWAKENING
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Warren Sonbert, USA 1976, 16mm,
colour, 36 min

Warren

Jeff Scher, USA, 1991, 16mm, 3 min

Mothlight

Stan Brakhage. USA 1963,
16mm, 4 min

Reasons to be Glad

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Surface Noise

Abigail Child USA, 2000,
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colour, 20 min

Friendly Witness

Warren Sonbert, USA 1989,
16mm, 22 min

Short Fuse

Warren Sonbert, USA, 1992, 16mm
colour, 37 min

BIOGRAPHIES

James Boaden is a lecturer in the history of art at the University of York. He is currently working on a book about the circle of Stan Brakhage from 1950-1965. He has curated film screenings at BFI Southbank, Tate Modern, and La Virreina, Barcelona and has published essays in *Art History*, *Oxford Art Journal*, and *Little Joe*. During 2013 he has been writer in residence at LUX: Artists' Moving Image.

Jon Gartenberg is a film archivist, distributor, and programmer. He worked for nearly two decades as a curator in the Film Department of The Museum of Modern Art, where he initiated the restoration of the films of Andy Warhol and acquired experimental films for the permanent collection. As Program Director of Film Preservation for the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS, he oversaw the restoration of the complete oeuvre of Warren Sonbert, as well as selected films by David Wojnarowicz, Curt McDowell, and Jack Waters. Since 2003 he has programmed experimental films for the Tribeca Film Festival. He has also produced short films by Ken Jacobs and Jeff Scher.

Lynne Tillman is a novelist, short story writer and critic based in New York. Her fifth novel *American Genius, A Comedy* was published by Soft Skull Press. Other novels include *Haunted Houses* and *No Lease on Life*, a National Book Critics Circle finalist in Fiction. Her most recent collection of stories, her fourth, is *Someday This Will Be Funny*. Currently, Tillman writes a bi-monthly column, 'In These Intemperate Times', for *frieze* magazine, and is at work on a new novel, *Men and Apparitions*. In January 2014, her second essay collection, *What Would Lynne Tillman Do?* will be published by Red Lemonade Press. Tillman is the guest editor of *The Happy Hypocrite – Freedom*, issue 6, published by Book Works launched in October 2013.

WARREN SONBERT

Retrospective of seminal American experimental filmmaker
24–27 October 2013

Co-curated by Jon Gartenberg with Tate Film.

Organised by Geroge Clark,
Assistant Curator, Film, Tate Modern

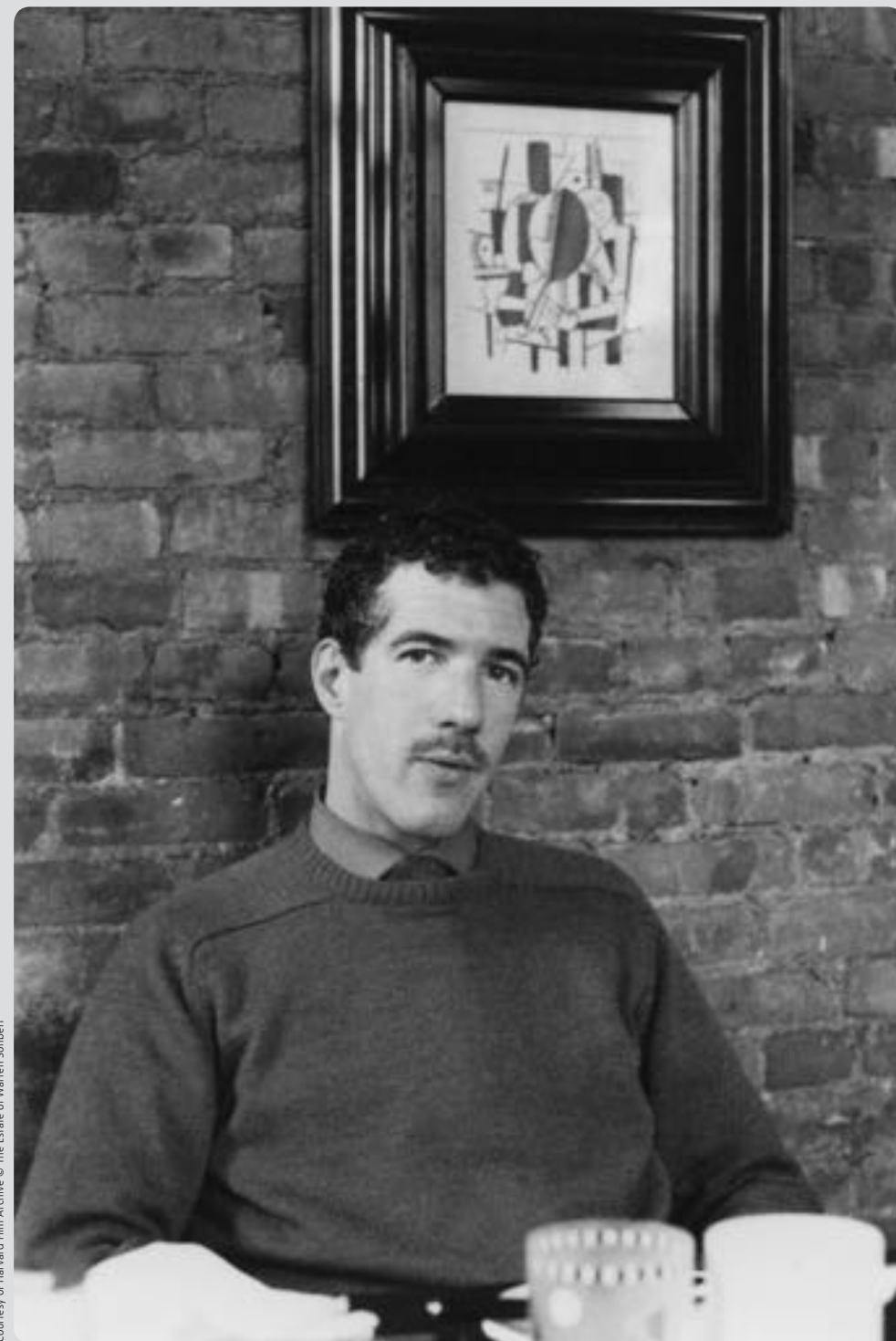
Booklet Notes compiled and edited by Jon Gartenberg,
from the papers of the Estate of Warren Sonbert (now in
the collection of Harvard University).
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Editorial collaboration: George Clark
Booklet design: Tate Design Studio



The films of Warren Sonbert were preserved through the efforts of the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS in cooperation with the Academy Film Archive. Archivist Jon Gartenberg developed this film preservation initiative with the support of Ascension Serrano (The Estate of Warren Sonbert) and John Hanhardt (former senior curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum). The prints of Warren Sonbert's films in this retrospective exhibition are made available through Light Cone (Paris), the European distributor of his films.

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Warren Sonbert, *Hall of Mirrors* 1966, film still © The Estate of Warren Sonbert

