

Research Article

**Embodied Curation:
Materials, Performance and the Generation of Knowledge**

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Research Article

ABSTRACT

The following essay unfolds as a conversation about the staging of a cinematographic tribute to Lou Reed and to the Velvet Underground's early involvement with Andy Warhol and with underground cinema. The conversation—between the curator-host and an anthropologist-filmmaker present in the audience—pieces together personal registers of the event to make a case for embodied curation—a series of trans-disciplinary and multisensory research and performance practices that are generative of new ways of knowing about, and through, historical materials. Rather than a didactic endeavor, the encounters between curator, materials, and audience members generated new forms of embodied knowledge. Making a case for embodied methods of research and performance, we argue that this generation of knowledge was made possible only through the particular constellation of materials and practices that came together in the staging of this event.

Keywords: Andy Warhol, Embodied Curation, Film Projection, Mechanical Reproduction, Sensory Scholarship, Visual Methodologies.

The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology.

-Walter Benjamin
“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”(1967: 233)



Figure 1: Curator and projections, Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, February 21, 2014.

On Friday, February 21st, 2014, the Film Love series hosted a cinematographic tribute to Lou Reed and to the Velvet Underground's early involvement with Andy Warhol and with underground cinema. The event was hosted at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, where Film Love events are staged periodically throughout the year. Warhol's 1966 film, *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, and other related films were projected simultaneously by curator Andy Ditzler from a line of 16mm film projectors. In a nod to these films' prior context in the Exploding Plastic Inevitable (EPI) multimedia shows which Warhol presented with the Velvet Underground in 1966, strobe lighting, music and sound on multiple channels, plastic gels converting black and white footage to different colors, and other effects were incorporated in the performance.

The experience of this tribute became a means of engaging with history through multiple channels. By maintaining the integrity of Warhol's medium, the curatorial strategy re-imbued a mechanically produced (and re-producible) object (film) with an affective bond to the particular constellation of historical, political, and cultural circumstances that informed its original creation. We refer to this set of choices and practices as embodied curation. As a methodological practice, we would like to argue, the staging of this event was generative of new forms of knowledge about Warhol, his contemporaries, and the material and political practices with which they engage. Rather than a didactic curatorial lesson, the encounter between curator-performer, materials, and audience members generated forms of embodied knowledge only possible through the interdisciplinary and multisensory practices that came together in the staging of this event.

We take up the evening hours of February 21st, 2014 as a moment from which to explore the potentials of a set of curatorial and performative practices that fall under the broad umbrella of 'visual methodologies.' These practices, in title at least, denote a primacy of the visual. But we would like to emphasize the multisensory implications of these rites and actions. For while the power of the visual in the curator-performer's multiscreen projection of Warhol's films was crucial to the event's success, the meaning of the event extends far beyond the realm of the visual and the ocular. Rather, it was the curation of not only films, but of space, light, and sound that triggered numerous profound and differing embodied reactions among audience members. Our consideration of embodied curation as a visual methodology is in many ways a response to recent calls by scholars, such as Grimshaw and Ravetz (2015:256), to "create a critical language that can encompass diverse approaches and perspectives – one that enables us to talk to one another; while, at the same time, allowing us to preserve and understand what is unique to the specific forms or media through which problems are engaged." Here we more closely examine a set of interdisciplinary and multisensory research practices as they coalesced in a single staged event, and the knowledges generated through it.

The following essay unfolds as a conversation between two participants in the events of February 21st, 2014: the curator and host, and an anthropologist and filmmaker present among the audience members. We present a conversation about the Velvet Underground

event and what we feel are its implications for thinking about not only visual, but also embodied methodologies and practices. The form of this text is slightly unconventional in that we alternate voices. At times we write collaboratively, and at times we speak from our individual perspectives. This essay was indeed born from a conversation between two practitioners of visual research, and yet, due to our respective histories, trainings, and theoretical formations, our discussions are not seamless statements, but generative dialogues. We intend for this formal quality of the essay to highlight the generative potential of dialogic encounters between practitioner, audience, and materials. Further, we argue that the space of conversation does not emerge between curator and audience alone. The sensuous qualities of the curated materials have a capacity to suggest new sorts of relationships and generate new forms of knowledge about both materials and histories.

Interlude

SS: *When I filed into the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center to see the Film Love event "The Velvet Underground," Andy had just finished his introduction, and had begun to let forth the deluge of sounds, images, and lights that would immerse the audience in the coming hours. The space was packed, and there was no seating left. I found standing room among the people clustered behind an impressive collection of simultaneously whirring projectors. Despite the barrage of moving images, lights, and sounds, I was immediately drawn to the imagery of Nico – her iconic profile recalling the cover of the Chelsea Girl album that had provided the soundtrack for some moody and confused periods of my late teens and twenties [wrap your troubles in dreams/send them all away/put them in a bottle and/ across the seas they'll stay]. A face, one could argue, produced as a fetish by Warhol himself.*

AD: *I don't want to claim that aura was central to the Velvet Underground at the time these films were made. They were not well-known at the time of filming; rather, Warhol was in the process of trying to make them famous (superstars). The distinction is important to me, because it's often missed curatorially. For example, even though Warhol filmed hundreds of Screen Tests, many of them great, curators almost always choose to show only the relatively few ones of celebrated people—Reed, Dylan, Sontag—which misrepresents Warhol as primarily documenting the famous. His interest, I argue, was in the conversion of people (some charismatic, some ordinary) to superstars, that is, in fame as a mechanism. Of course, my event traded on the latter-day notoriety of the people involved, but I want to preserve something of how these people were at the time of filming—an unknown avant-garde rock band from the Lower East Side, in the process of becoming Warhol stars—and also to preserve the EPI as a kind of research into sensory experience.*

SS: *But that's part of Warhol's whole thing, right? That was a game he played—could*

he produce a charismatic aura in ordinary objects? The soup cans, the Brillo boxes, the hipster musicians. That was his critique of capitalism—not explicit, but right there, he was an alchemist and his project was the magic of the fetish. And he wanted to see if he could make it himself. In that way, it’s the ultimate critique—making magic of objects as a critique of how objects are made magic. And it’s a success because, like you said, he made tons and tons of films but the same ones get shown again because they contain these iconic personalities, but they’re iconic only because he made them that way. And we’re all complicit in this because we’re there, watching the stuff, mesmerized by it.

But I get your point; or, rather, I got it during the event. There was something more going on than iconic tribute. Something in the confluence of temporal frames that felt different than watching cool old films of a cool old band. The pace of the film, and its extended focus on the limited actions contained within the frame, felt trance-like. Somehow the collision of temporal spaces—the historical period in which Warhol and the Velvet collaborated, the not so far away years when I played their albums as soundtracks to successions of messy apartments and uneasy feelings about the future, the present moment, months after Reed’s passing, where I stood, wedged between loyal Film Love attendees and curious fans of Reed—gave me what I can only describe as an embodied sense of the historical weight of the materials. The visibility of the multiple film projectors and lights, the explicitly constructed nature of the environment gave it a sort of honesty. Attention to objects like films and processes like projection demystified the fetish character of the technology; the animating actions of the curator, running between projectors, a laptop, and strategically-placed lights was integral to the experience of the event. The kinesthetic and sensory qualities of the labors of projection had filled the room with an aura.

The Aura Reconsidered

S.S: The sense of ‘aura’ that I experienced as an audience member at the aforementioned event is worth further consideration. For the duration of the event (roughly seventy-five minutes), I stood crowded between attendees in the standing room space behind the series of film projectors, lights, and laptop that Ditzler animatedly ran between. Yet rather than being distracted by these technologies, their presence was reassuring, reminding me of the material histories of the images that flickered before me and the lights and sounds that held me captive in the narrow space that I stood. The experience of aura combined with the notable presence of technologies of mechanical reproduction prompted reflection on Walter Benjamin’s classic essay.

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1968), Walter Benjamin proposed that technologies of mechanical reproduction destroyed the aura of a work of art. Sanctified in a museum or on chapel walls, art retained a sense of inaccessibility

and mystique that conferred as well a sort of elite privilege on its consumption. With the advent of mechanical reproduction, however, art could become popularized, and also politicized – a rebirth through which art could match the leveling of classes that Benjamin and his contemporaries envisioned. This destruction was creative destruction, and one that would strip from the experience of art its exclusivity and elusivity.

Warhol took full advantage of this formal shift in modes of artistic production and the social tensions latent within it. While he created exclusive spaces where works and happenings were crafted, he used these spaces to generate both still and moving images, which could be circulated and consumed by a wider public. Yet many of the choices that Warhol made—in his filmic works at least—documented and reproduced processes on a temporal scale that made their mass consumption as films challenging to popular audiences. While Warhol is perhaps best known for his screenprints reproducing iconic faces and objects of American popular culture, his filmic works pay tribute to processes (a haircut, fellatio, sleeping overnight) as they unfold. Despite the iconicity of Lou Reed and Nico in a contemporary context, the Velvet Underground films were not exclusively about the elevation of icons; they devoted equal attention to process, and the unfolding of events in real time (a theme to which, as a filmmaker, Warhol was deeply devoted). The relations between events unfolding in real time and the reproducibility of time through still and moving images was a tension integral to Warhol’s work. In the context of the Film Love event, I began to understand this different side of Warhol, one with more depth and tenderness than I had previously imagined. I attribute this to the auratic moment constructed by Ditzler through his attention to the film’s intended manner of projection and the performance required of him, as a host and curator, to realize this event.

If Benjamin argued that mechanical reproduction destroyed the aura of a work of art, why was the particular experience of aura, produced in an encounter between reels of film, turntables and laptops, and programmations of flickering lights, so central to my shifting experience of Warhol? Contemporary conditions of digital saturation had perhaps imbued something new into processes and materials produced from mechanical reproduction. For despite the widely hyped accessibility of digital materials, their abundance and ubiquity may conceal important aspects of their production, as well as a range of generative potentials latent in their consumption. While the digitization of mechanically reproducible materials such as films, photographs, maps, and drawings provides a sense of security against the potentials for physical decay or destruction, certain sensuous aspects of the objects’ materiality are lost. As practitioners who regularly create and consume digital images, we have come to understand this other nature of materials in an embodied way, through our own scholarship and creative practices. In an era of digital production and reproduction, attention to mechanical processes, and the materials produced from them, can become a way of knowing about—and through—history. This by no means *excludes* the digital, but incorporates it as a material form into a palette of practices by which we, as scholars, engage with

historical materials, and, in the manner of alchemists, attempt new combinations and practices in order to come to richer and more embodied understandings of them.

Visual Methodologies, Curation, Sensuous Scholarship

In this paper we consider embodied curation as a visual research methodology that is relevant for inquiries into art, history, anthropology, and performance studies. But in placing the performance/curation that we are discussing into the category of a 'visual methodology,' we do not wish to impose a primacy of the ocular on what we argue to be a multisensory praxis. The histories of visual research and methodologies share many of these multisensory dimensions and preoccupations. To contextualize this work, we here discuss the histories of visual methodologies, their slippages into other sensorial fields, and the potentials they have in generating new forms of knowledge and knowing through both research and scholarly production.

It seems as though there are multiple understandings of what constitutes a visual methodology, with a similar multiplicity of implications for their potential contributions to scholarly work. In the social sciences, visual methods became established largely as forms of visual documentation—via still and moving images—of research subjects. Margaret Mead (2003) advocated for the use of visuals in anthropology because she saw, in the camera, a previously unknown capacity for the documentation of cultural forms and practices. At the height of Mead's career as an anthropologist, and during the time when she was most interested in visuals, anthropology was informed by a fear that a great deal of the world's cultural diversity was disappearing due to the time-space compressions of a modernizing world increasingly linked through channels of transportation and communication, who were increasingly coming to share practices and materials of consumption and destruction. Mead, like many of her contemporaries, argued for the documentary abilities of the camera in the face of rapid cultural change. While much has changed from the days of anthropology as a discipline of cultural salvage, cameras—both still and moving—are largely used as documentary tools. This has been important in helping audiences visualize subject matter and come to better understand the material and aesthetic worlds of others. Yet this form of visual method has a limited potential to contribute to new ways of knowing, or generating knowledge. It is more supplemental or complementary method than research praxis.

Participatory visual methodologies emerged as a means of using images to create dialogues between researcher and subject. The most well-known and well-used participatory visual methodology, photo elicitation, was developed as a research technique by John Collier (1967), who used photographs as a means of understanding local categories of knowledge. Collier has noted that prior to the use of photographs, the research team found slippages between the structured categories of their study and the manners by which participants could identify with the terms laid out by the research

team. Photographs, however, could be used as a means of beginning conversation, and understanding how the same places, spaces, and objects could be understood in different manners by different people. By beginning from the common point of the photograph, differences in perception and meaning thereby became not only apparent, but productive for the researchers in their goals of understanding the subjective experience of participants. Advocacy for participatory visual methodologies has continued in disciplines such as sociology (Harper, 1998, 2002) and public health (Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004; Wang & Burris, 1997), where researchers have learned the value of understanding social problems from the perspectives of their subjects. The forms of knowledge they generate are more dialogic than depository, and emphasize, importantly, the co-production of information.

Yet there is a different lineage of participatory visual methodologies than the Collier/photographic one. Around the time of Collier's experiments with photo-elicitation, anthropologist and filmmaker Jean Rouch used his camera to co-create films with his subjects. These films were less about observation or authoritative statement than incitement of performance and dialogue, a means of engaging corporeally with viewers to stimulate new ways of thinking and forms of understanding (Grimshaw, 2001). The films were emergent from, rather than describing of, an encounter. Rouch famously described his process of engagement as a "state of transformation in the filmmaker" which he calls, "by analogy with phenomena of possession, the 'cine-trance'" (Rouch, 2003: 90). Rouch, as much an alchemist as an anthropologist-filmmaker, incited interactions between himself, his subjects (often flipping these roles around), and the material world around them. Set within a particular constellation of historical and political circumstances, the dialogues and performances that emerged from Rouch's catalytic actions became a form of research distinct from the canon of ethnographic film with which he is associated. For while Rouch's films are often cited as powerful statements about colonial and postcolonial Africa, the knowledges generated from them are not productive of a particular didactic message, but rather about the nature of the encounter as a form of knowing. Rouch, as a former French soldier and anthropologist, knew the weight of his presence in a West Africa on the edges of colonial revolt. His interactions with West African subjects, themselves well aware of the implications of the encounter, mimic a long history of encounters of difference. Rather than cloak this tension in a discourse of cultural relativism or mutual understanding, Rouch sought out this tension, encouraging it as a generative form of research and creation. While Rouch's methodological orientation is generally considered film, his research practices more closely resemble a process of alchemy particular to the historical and political space in which he enacted these rites. What is of interest to us, then, is the generative potential of Rouch's method, and how this potential is inherent to his research practices in different settings.

The set of decisions and practices necessary to stage the Velvet Underground event that we consider take the form of curation. But we would like to argue that this event's mix of disciplines (history, film studies, performance studies, anthropology, art history)

and methods (curation, film, performance, sound and music) generates distinct forms of knowledge about the materials and their histories. What we are referring to here as embodied curation involves a tension or slippage between curation and performance, and also between objects and interactions of a material, and not purely theoretical, nature. The mix of curatorial practices—choices of films, film and stroboscopic projection, DJing, and Ditzler's embodied presence moving between multiple film projectors, lights, laptop, and speakers—required a certain degree of spontaneity, as well as an implicit acknowledgement between curator and audience members that both were part of a happening. While the event was billed as a filmic tribute, the films were only a part of a larger sonic, ocular, and kinesthetic experience that drew both audience and curator to engage, on corporeal and multisensorial levels, with the historical materials presented. Like the alchemistic work produced by Jean Rouch, this 'tribute' to Reed and Warhol was generative of new ways of knowing about—and through—their materials.

SS: *I had always liked Warhol's work but felt like he was playing a big joke on me. Like there was his work, and it had this intense visual, iconic appeal, and it wasn't accidental—he was careful with what he did—but he made you choke on your own facility in consuming popular things. That was the Warhol that I was exposed to, at least, the stuff that got out into the mainstream. And I never took it upon myself to explore much further than that. So that was my orientation coming into this event: it would be a tribute to Lou Reed and the icons of that cool heroin Factory scene, who were by now mostly dead but who I remembered as living icons (when I was a waitress in New York City, Lou Reed once sat in my section, but I thought it would be too tacky to ask for an autograph), and whom I was eager to reflect on as one reflects on the passing of time and the material residues that remain in the forms of songs, videos, images. But now I realize that there was something different going on entirely—it seems like that very sort of nostalgia is what you were pushing against—and at some point I got it, I got something else from those materials, from that experience. I have a different understanding of those materials, of Warhol's affective bonds with them and of my own.*

AD: *I'm pleased that there was something else there. Curatorially, I certainly have my own ideas about Warhol - a desire to push back against the popular idea that he was some kind of con artist, or a shallow character mesmerized by famous people - but ultimately, I want my own curation of Warhol's films to do what the films themselves do. They leave room for diverse reactions and trajectories of responses, from boredom to amusement to rapt attention and epiphany to indifference - and often at the same moment among different people in the room. This couldn't be further away from not just what Hollywood films, but also what most films, seek to do - and how much more generous it seems once you open yourself to it!*

SS: *My desire to collaborate with you on this article was born out of my perception of the event: I experienced those materials—the films, the music, the temporal framing—in a way that I had not expected, and in a way that left me on the cusp of a new understanding*

of Warhol that I was eager to engage further. Although I am a filmmaker, my previous interest in Warhol was never in his films; if anything it was in his form of social critique. The films always felt inaccessible to me (and perhaps, in settings that preserve the integrity of the projection speed and format, they are). I had sat in on your screenings of Warhol's films Haircut and Blow Job and had not been moved in the way I was that night. But, as I later found out, you had long struggled to find the appropriate projectors and screening spaces that would allow the materials to be shown as Warhol intended them to be. And more and more I am understanding why this is so important. Because it is in those collisions of temporal framing - the films' fidelity to the unfolding of processes, the particular speeds in which they are shot and intended to be projected, the mashing of historical time with the temporal staging of an event or performance - that Warhol is doing something profound with the medium.

I came to understand this through my embodied experience as an audience member that night at the Contemporary. The staging of the event was clearly a performance, but more than that it also considered light, sound, motion, image, and interaction among bodies, as well as careful considerations of both time and space. Each of these components was critical to the multiple manners in which I was able to experience the materials and come to new understandings about, and through them. In the immediate aftermath of the event I was not able to reflect because I had to physically re-adjust to reality—the harsh gallery lighting, casual conversations, driving home through Friday night Atlanta traffic—but in the following weeks the experience followed me around. I remember writing you an email afterwards and sending you some pictures I had taken in hopes that this would keep up a conversation, and clearly we have.

Curator's Statement on Curating Warhol

Through the Warhol/Velvets screening, we consider this particular method of embodied curation as a form of sensuous scholarship (Stoller, 1997). We explore these practices of curation as a way of coming to know the meanings of materials: their histories, and the histories and future imaginings bound up in their original creation. Curation itself fixes visual representations of historical events, but it also has the potential to deal with transience, non-fixity, and unpredictability. Specific to our focus here, what is the relation between film's status as an artifact – a fixed, repeatable document – and the ephemeral qualities of its exhibition? And what does curation do with and in this space of difference?

A.D: Since January 2007, I have regularly presented screenings of Andy Warhol's films, concentrating on those made from 1963 to 1968, prior to the better-known and more widely available features made in collaboration with Paul Morrissey beginning in 1969. These screenings take place as part of an ongoing public curatorial project titled Film Love. Film Love events are based on screenings of rare or less-available but important films, and seek to preserve communal viewing. I curate the series, which involves not only

selecting and often projecting films, but introducing them and hosting the post-screening discussions with viewers that are always a part of the events. These discussions are less question-and-answers than a discursive form in which we as viewers communally examine the films we've just seen together. In this sense, these events are not only screenings, but also involve participation not unrelated to the artistic mode of social practice in which the human interactions that a work facilitates are more important than the production of an object.

As an independent curator of Warhol's film work, I quickly found myself enmeshed in a set of daunting yet enticing issues that in aggregate seem to apply to no other filmmaker. First, the available films represent only a fraction of his work, with many significant works still out of reach. Even among these, it is difficult to access the films outside of professional and scholarly channels. There is also an attendant confusion in Warhol scholarship, including a body of critical and popular writing that, for all its insight, is rife with errors and legends – and even at its best, is painfully aware of its own incomplete purview. Most relevant to this study are the issues of contemporary projection of Warhol's chosen medium of 16mm, not to mention slow motion and double-screen projection. To curate Andy Warhol's films in our present era involves a hands-on style of programming, exhibiting, and projecting; it is, in a very real sense, to curate projection itself.

As an example, consider the *Screen Test* series of films which Warhol made from 1964 to 1966. For these small films, of which there are hundreds, Warhol asked the subjects to sit and look into the camera lens in close-up, for the length of the three-minute film roll. While the films were shot at twenty-four frames per second (regular sound speed), he projected them at sixteen frames per second (silent speed). As we can see by projecting them this way today (usually at the now-standard silent speed of eighteen frames per second), this slows down the imagery on screen, increases the running time from three minutes to about four, and introduces a slightly visible flicker to the image. There are several curatorial implications to this. As Callie Angell has observed, in the *Screen Tests*, “the act of portraiture is stretched out over time and, therefore, becomes a kind of performance...instead of pseudo-photographs, what you get are some very intense performances, performances which emerge from the tension that is created when people are asked to behave as if they were their own image” (2002: 26-27).

In this way, consider also the audience for the *Screen Test* films, when they are properly projected at silent speed. Two durations—that of the event as filmed and that of the cinematic work as projected—become apparent, and both are perceivable by the viewer. The minimal nature of the events onscreen and Warhol's heightened attention to them make us aware of the extended duration of the original event, while through the slow-motion projection process we then undergo a further extension of the duration as viewers, compounding an already challenging experience of slowed time. In fact, as is the case with most of Warhol's silent films, as well as some of the sound films such as *Outer and Inner Space*, what happens in the auditorium is not a duplication or reproduction

of the original event, but the experience of *exceeding* it (the *Screen Tests* take longer to watch than they did to make). Viewers, as well as subjects, are asked to sit for the *Screen Tests*; we are, in this sense, asked to perform the viewing of Warhol's films. Inevitably, then, viewers are brought onto a plane equivalent to, if separate from, that of the performers in the films.

As we can see, the *Screen Tests* as cinematic works are not entirely inherent to the *Screen Tests* as reels of film. Projection does not simply animate and illuminate these images, as it does with most films. It also modifies them, in the process helping to create the work, as well as creating a doubled experience of time in the viewer—one that itself reflects the content onscreen. What, then, is the plane of the projectionist as the medium for this experience? Is projecting performing? To attempt to find out, I delve here into the practice of projecting Warhol's films—what it takes to do so, and where the activity locates curators and projectionists.

The independent programmer of Warhol's silent films, at least for public screenings, will very possibly be not only curator but also projectionist. The films are rented from the Museum of Modern Art in 16mm prints, the format in which they were made and exhibited by Warhol, and very few venues remain equipped for this format.¹ Further, as mentioned above, Warhol's silent films require a projector capable of silent speed. Both types of projectors can still be found, though they are no longer commonly serviced. The contemporary contingency of 16mm projection places Warhol's films, and those who care for their exhibition, back “underground.”

Case Study: *The Velvet Underground and Nico* at Atlanta Contemporary Art Center

The Velvet Underground event was planned partly as a tribute to Lou Reed after his death in 2013, and partly as an investigation into the Velvet Underground's relationship to Andy Warhol and especially their underdocumented relation to underground cinema in the 1960s.² I became especially interested in *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, Warhol's film of the band playing in the Factory in 1966. The band performs a roughly fifty-minute instrumental piece, staying in the same key and same tempo throughout. At the same time, Warhol's camerawork is its own performance – a dynamic mix of panning, zooming, and refocusing; sometimes all three at once. All the while, Nico's young son Ari freely roams the room. The three elements – child, band/music, and camera – exist on independent but related planes of action, until New York City police officers interrupt because of a noise complaint, and the music stops. Characteristically, Warhol seizes the opportunity for chance to influence a film during its making and keeps the camera running during the ensuing confusion. The remarkable final twelve minutes, which like the entire rest of the film is completely uncut, thus unexpectedly reverses the film's function. Whereas up to this point the camera had openly been the reason for the event

(the band had convened and played at the Factory specifically to make a film), the police intervention makes the camera a clandestine element, and converts the film midway from performance to secret documentary.

The way that the projection of Warhol's films multiply their thematic sense of performance was reflected in the curation of the Velvet Underground event; that is, elements of the film that I have described above—ambiguity between rehearsal (as the music in this film is commonly described) and performance (for the act of filming converts the music into performance), and the incorporation of contingency and accident—became the basis for presenting this event as a somewhat unpredictable multisensory screening.

The gear and films

As we have mentioned above, the event was explicitly termed a cinematographic tribute, due to its basis in film projection. I projected the films in their original 16mm format – still today the main format in which they are theatrically screened – and chose a form for presenting the films that honored the EPI's combination of light-show, music, sound barrage, cinema, performance, and other less-defined elements as much social as artistic. Without attempting to replicate the EPI, I wanted to channel the slippages between time and space, documentary and performance, and cinema and music implied in the EPI and in Warhol's film of the Velvet Underground and Nico.

For the screening, I chose one reel of ten *Screen Tests* that included both Nico and Reed and other prominent Warhol stars such as Baby Jane Holzer, and a shorter reel titled *Salvador Dalí*, which features *Screen Tests* of Dalí (a sometime guest at the EPI), Nico and Reed, and two short reels of the “whip dances” performed by Gerard Malanga and Mary Woronov at EPI shows. These were supplemented by *The Velvet Underground* (1966), a desultory two-reel film of the band members clowning with whips and food, but playing no music. All this imagery would be projected around *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, the only one of the films which would be continually centered on the screen and whose soundtrack would be dominant. In total, two reels of silent *Screen Tests* plus two different sixty-six minute films (four thirty-three minute reels total, all sound) necessitated two 16mm Kodak Pageant projectors for silent speed and four 16mm sound projectors – all potentially working at one time. Mindful of the sonic as well as visual complexity of the EPI, I included two turntables playing Velvet Underground records, mixable in and out of the films' soundtracks.

In addition to the multiplicity of imagery, stroboscopic light was utilized both as sensory experience and to underline the event as a mode of research. A seventh 16mm projector, with no film loaded, was used as a source of projected light, as a primal element. An external rotating shutter disc, similar to an electric fan blade and capable of variable rotation speed, was placed in front of this projector's lens. Acting in conjunction with the projector's internal rotating shutter, this external shutter produced a pulsating, flickering



Figure 2: Variable-speed rotating shutter disc used in *The Velvet Underground* event.

light; at certain very specific rates of speed, this pulsing produced a peculiar visual effect in which light seemed to envelop, more than illuminate, the room.³ This external shutter was portable, so at times during the event I also placed it in front of projectors which were running films, thus causing some of the filmed imagery to flash rapidly on and off the wall. At a certain peak of the proceedings, the pulse rate of the projector light was combined with the equally variable pulse rate of a freestanding strobe light which I also operated. Many different conflicting or reinforcing rates of flickering light were possible in the room then, although I used these quite judiciously. In addition, while the light from the film projector illuminated a standard cinema frame, the freestanding strobe illuminated the entire room, casting the audience's shadows on the wall. This is one

reason I refer to the use of stroboscopic light as a form of research: by making the viewers visible to themselves (via their shadows) it brought us all into the present “frame” of the event, hopefully undermining the event’s potential for nostalgia.

The elements, then, were: seven film projectors, all but the two main ones movable by hand so that their images could sweep across the wall, landing at center screen, or perhaps somewhere to the side of the main action; a wide variation of flicker speeds on the screen, as well as the interaction these flicker speeds would create with the pulse rates of the freestanding strobe light, itself variable; colored gels to hold in front of the projectors’ lenses; simultaneous music and film soundtracks; and the strobe light. This setup was intended as a mechanism to loosen these moving images of the Velvet Underground that subsequent histories of both music and film had fixed.

The venue

The screening room at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center is empty, free of fixed seating, and equipped for most any format that would be screened in a contemporary art center—that is, it is entirely digital. A film screening, then, required some reconfiguration of the room. Film projection, in fact, now almost always involves reconfiguring a room. A heavy eight-foot by four-foot platform was hauled from the storage room to provide some elevation for the bank of sound projectors. The screening room is open-ended at the back, so the platform was placed at what seemed to be the best spot, actually outside the normal confines of the room. Despite these challenges, I was grateful for the blank space, which allowed me to work with mobility of projectors and have a flexible setup. Instead of a screen, I projected onto the room’s blank wall, allowing me to use the entirety of its roughly forty-foot length. In this setup, the images from the movable projectors could sweep across the wall.

The screening/performance

In this section, I describe the process and some of the results of presenting this research as a public event (and public events as a form of research). The curation and exhibition of such a program involves detail-oriented technical and logistical problems, some of which may only be addressed improvisationally during the event. And there are sudden illuminations hard to separate from the mundanity of what it takes to bring them about. In this small way, the process is reminiscent of a Warhol film—so I will describe it in some detail.

Film Love: The Velvet Underground took place on February 21, 2014 at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center. The previous evening’s rehearsal had clarified details of timing: when to start certain films, when to have all the films running for a kind of “peak”—and how to treat the ending. I realized that, although much of the event was conceptualized around the chaotic visual and sonic immersion of the EPI, the twelve-minute ending of *The Velvet Underground and Nico* was best left on its own with no other visuals running. In other words, the 1966 police intervention on film would also

bring an end to the multiple stimuli of our 2014 screening, returning us to the single-screen theatrical experience—just at the moment that the film itself ceases recording the band and becomes a secret document of a police problem.

I drew a timing diagram for everything that was to be turned on and off and taped it to the projector table for consultation during the event. This was not only necessary for timing of events, but to keep me focused on pacing. Films were loaded onto the projectors, and records onto the turntables. The projector with no film and one of the slow-motion projectors were placed on a wheeled cart for movement. Cables were taped to the floor where people would be entering. I myself would have to be continuously mobile, traveling from projector to projector: there were colored gels to change, films to start and stop, the strobe light to lift and carry. And how to move the flicker machine from projector to projector? There was no good solution. I would just have to pick it up in real time—motor box in one hand, wheel in the other—and move it carefully, without breaking the delicate wire connection between the two elements or yanking the power plug from the wall socket (and of course, it needed a long enough extension cord in order to travel from one end of the setup to the other). I would also have to step around and over many cords and cables on the floor, as well as continuously step up to and down from the projector platform, and round the corners of the platform, all in uncertain lighting conditions. There was no central spot of control for the projection—nor, I now realize, for the curatorial control of the experience.

By start time, one hundred fifty people had arrived for a room that seats about eighty. Since the proper screening area filled quickly, additional chairs were placed to the side of and behind the projection setup. Those who arrived after all the chairs were full stood to the side of the aisles. The unforeseen effect of the overflow seating was to divide the audience into two planes, and two different experiences. Those who sat in front of the projectors saw what took place on the wall, in the manner of a normal theatrical screening (albeit one that disregarded the normal boundaries of the frame). Those who sat adjacent to or behind the projector setup saw the same screening but also its presentation: the projectors in motion, and my own activities among the projectors, lights, and sound sources. Thus, part of the audience experienced the Velvet Underground show as a curatorial performance. While I had anticipated that I would in some way be performing the screening, I had not expected to have a large audience in doing so. I decided the best route was to go about my work as usual. But in this, what was I performing, exactly, and what did this performance bring about for the films and for the audience?

It was my own motion, my own mobility among the projectors and turntables that catalyzes much of how I think of this event. The heightened embodiment of viewing this program—processing the optical and sonic effects such as flickering light and conflicting sound sources—extended to my own embodied movement as curator around the space

of projection. In this way I was externalizing the act of viewing these films, converting this act into a kind of movement.

Certainly, I meant the presentation to be reflective of the film. But in retrospect, I have the undeniable feeling that in moving around the space, I enacted a work that was inevitably distinct from the films, a kind of movement that could almost be mapped, as indeed, I am doing right now. I had been moving on a plane both related to and separate from the action in the film—as if two distinct sets of motion, my own around the projectors and Warhol's camera around the space of the Factory, were being superimposed in the screening room. Strangely, an act of embodiment had a distancing effect on me—from the audience, from the films, from the space—ultimately, from myself. Perhaps this is the distance of a theatrical performer from the emotions he or she portrays—or perhaps it was an acute feeling of the slippage I was inhabiting—perhaps embodying—between the cacophonous jam session, the on-point performance, the film, and even the not tripping over cables. This sense of embodied displacement was certainly fleeting. For me now, more than anything it evokes Jean Rouch's cine-trance (“by analogy with phenomena of possession” [Rouch, 2003: 90]), and also evokes the ephemerality of the visual effects created by the one-time-only conjunction of films, colors, music, sound, and light: a fragmentary glimpse into a plane separate from but related to that which is visible on the screen. Thus, though (as I have mentioned above) filmic elements of *The Velvet Underground and Nico* determined aspects of curating its screening, the planes of action in this film that I have described above have also come to be the basis for interpreting my own experience of the event as curator.

Conclusions - Materials and Embodied Practice

During the cinematic tribute that we discuss, the materials and practices integral to the event become channels through which historical and temporal depth can be understood. Here, the aura of a work of art is not at odds with its mechanical nature, and curation is not an invisible activity or transparent process at the end of which a film is presented as a kind of object. In an era of increasing digitization, history is acting on Warhol's film work in the same manner of accident that he had incorporated into his filmmaking method. The incorporation of accident and chance that were so fundamental to his filmmaking are here part of the showing of the films and integral to the curation of the event. This presentation of Warhol was less a screening than an embodied performance of Warhol's artistic ethic, and perhaps even his critique of the art world and capitalism.

In the preceding paragraphs we hope to have demonstrated how a series of trans-disciplinary and multisensory practices—what we have referred to as embodied curation—are generative of new ways of knowing about, and through, historical materials. Through our extensive discussion of the considerations of time, space, light, sound, image, and movement required to stage the event, we hope to have demonstrated how

these practices of embodied curation are alchemical processes that brought out “state[s] of transformation” (Rouch 2003: 90) in both curator/host and audience members. Rather than a didactic curatorial lesson, the encounter between curator-performer, materials, and audience members generated forms of embodied knowledge only possible through the particular constellation of materials and practices that came together in the staging of this event.

S.S. The screening concluded with a question-and-answer, none of which I remember. It was taking longer than I expected for my eyes and ears to adjust after a one-and-a-quarter hour immersion in sound and strobe. I found a group of my friends who had arrived early and secured seats near the front. One was nauseated and the other felt a migraine coming on. Can you imagine that this wasn't a bad thing? It was not a cruel or uncourteous assault on the senses, but rather an immersive experience that played with our groundings in time and space. I pressed my temples, gradually coming back to the present, my eyes and ears adjusting to the gallery lights and my mind coming back to practical matters: where should we all meet for a drink? Was anyone hungry (no!)—the trance of the preceding hours giving way to the grounding of relationships with the bodies around me.

A.D. I had started the screening by playing the beginning of my vinyl copy of Live 1969, with Lou Reed's spoken words: “Good evening, we're the Velvet Underground...” Along with this, I turned on the projector with no film, and gradually introduced the spinning shutter until the room was pulsing in light. I wanted the combination of Reed's very sweet introduction with the pure visual experience of the projector light and flicker. I find this flicker beautiful, but it's quite intense and reactions to it vary. I'm sure it caused some tension in the room, and I really used it only at the peak of the show, when there were many films, flicker, and sound channels going. As I look at pictures that people took of those moments, I can imagine that it might have been intense: non-campy S&M imagery, film frames flying across the wall, unpredictable sounds coming in and out, volume, strobe light flashing, all at once, and all underpinned by the relentless tonality and beat of The Velvet Underground and Nico's music, not to mention Warhol's wild camerawork which is intense all by itself.

After the show, I had a familiar post-performance feeling: simultaneously drained and exhilarated. Privately, someone came up to me afterward and remarked on the beauty of the flickering light, and I was so pleased.

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Filmography

- Outer and Inner Space. Dir. Andy Warhol, 1965.
- Salvador Dalí. Dir. Andy Warhol, 1966.
- Screen Tests (various). Dir. Andy Warhol, 1964-66.
- The Velvet Underground. Dir. Andy Warhol, 1966.
- The Velvet Underground and Nico. Dir. Andy Warhol, 1966.

Discography

- Nico. Chelsea Girl. V6-5032, Verve Records, 1967.
- The Velvet Underground. 1969 Velvet Underground Live with Lou Reed. SRM-2-7504, Mercury Records, 1974.

Endnotes:

1. I refer throughout this section to theatrical-style screenings of Warhol's films, which remain in 16mm, distinct from museum and gallery exhibitions, in which these films are almost always projected digitally.
2. I outline these relationships in more detail in program notes distributed at the screening event: http://www.frequentsmallmeals.com/pdf/FilmLove_VelvetUnderground.pdf
3. Effects and devices such as this are probably most associated with the filmmaker Ken Jacobs and his Nervous Magic Lantern series of performances utilizing film and projected light. This enveloping effect is also quite visible in the 1966 film *The Flicker* by Tony Conrad – another Velvet Underground connection, since Conrad played alongside Reed and Cale in a pre-Velvet Underground rock group, and is also indirectly credited with giving the Velvet Underground its name.