El Lissitzky’s Screening Rooms

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Fig. 1: Room for Constructivist Art, International Art Exhibition, Dresden, 1926. The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (950076). © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

In his 1925 essay “K. [Kunst] und Pangeometrie,” El Lissitzky wrote: “We are standing now at a period in which A. [art] is on the one hand degenerating into
a pastiche embracing all the monuments in the museums, and on the other hand is fighting to create a new expression of space.”2 Trained as an architect, Lissitzky worked out this concern with the expression of space across and between arts: painting, drawing, assemblage, photomontage, theater, typography, and exhibition design. However, despite his considerable work in photography and photomontage, he engaged little with one of the most popular new media forms of the interwar avant-gardes: cinema. While he praised Viking Eggeling’s abstract “absolute” films for using the medium “as a means of solving the problems of dynamic F. (form (Gestalt)) through actual movement,” he criticized film for ultimately being “only a dematerialized surface projection.”3 Cinematic projection indeed reduced three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional plane; and Lissitzky had already resolutely moved in the reverse direction in his Proun constructions, made of paint, wood, sandpaper, metal foil, and other materials, which he called the “interway station from painting to architecture.”4 His 1923 Prounenraum further extended the Prouns into architectural space, to cover three walls, corners, and the ceiling of a room at the 1923 Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung.5 Given this trajectory, how, in 1925, could cinema figure into the Constructivist “new expression of space” advanced by Lissitzky?

The role of cinema in Lissitzky’s artistic practice – and in particular the potential relationship between cinema and a “new expression of space” – remains undertheorized to this day, partly because of his overt criticism, and because he made no films as such.6 He did, however, work on a cinema. One year prior to “K. und Pangeometrie,” while recovering from tuberculosis in Switzerland, Lissitzky wrote to Sophie Küppers (his future wife): “Am working a bit on my cinema, unfortunately it’s very awkward coping with compasses when you are lying down […]. The next thing is my cinema (this will be dedicated to Lenin and will be called ‘The Lenin Building’). That is a work that will take a few years.”7 Lissitzky-Küppers succinctly notes that the project “overtaxed his strength” and “the splendid idea had to be abandoned.”8 With no further record of Lissitzky’s cinema, we can only conjecture about his approach to the architecture of screening and projection.9 Nevertheless, as my discussion endeavors, I believe the question of the relation between architecture and cinema in Lissitzky’s work holds considerable promise, notably in relation to the intriguing example of two of his Demonstrationsräume, or “Demonstration Rooms.”10 Designed by Lissitzky and built in 1926 and 1927 at the Dresden Internationale Kunstausstellung and the Hannover Landesmuseum, these exhibition rooms displayed works by an international cohort of avant-garde artists including László Moholy-Nagy, Pablo Picasso, Francis Picabia, Alexander Archipenko, Noam Gabo, Willi Baumeister, Oskar Schlemmer, and Piet Mondrian. As Maria Gough has illustrated in her essay “Constructivism Disoriented,” the rooms intertwined theater, architecture, and cinema into a dynamic exhibition of painting, sculpture, and prints – not as a singular installation or Gesamtkunstwerk but a novel means of Demonstration, intended by Lissitzky
to operate as a modular, standard exhibition model. By looking in depth at these remarkable exhibition spaces, alongside Lissitzky’s writings, I outline an approach to address the caesura of cinema in scholarship on Lissitzky’s multi- and trans-medial practice in the 1920s. By working with the concepts of an “expanded cinema” and “cinema by other means,” I find elements of cinema overpowering the boundaries of a singular definition of the cinematic. My approach is also informed by media archaeology in that I look for elements, material and metaphoric, of the medium outside of its traditional location (the cinema) and histories. Drawing from such work, I use “screening” as a critical concept for reading multi-media practice and attending to Lissitzky’s rich and problematic relation to cinema. Giuliana Bruno has theorized the screen as a threshold, a medium (an in-between) of material and medial/aesthetic encounters. Following Bruno’s approach, I furthermore read exhibition design as medium in both senses – as an art and as a form of mediation between arts – and offer an analysis of a particularly striking example of modernist intermediality through exhibition.

To begin, I will draw out Lissitzky’s critique of cinema in two ways, which centered around its qualities of dematerialization and illusion of three-dimensional space. For Lissitzky projection loses, in addition to three-dimensional space, the haptic and textural qualities to which he carefully attended in his practice across media. We can contrast his self-portrait as an artist-engineer, hand extending from his head to grasp a compass, with his portrait of filmmaker Dziga Vertov as the optical artist, the “kino-eye.” According to Lissitzky, film merely exploits a “limited” property of our visual capacity: “disconnected movements separated by periods shorter than one thirty-fifth of a second create the impression of a continuous movement.” He proposes instead an art based on continuous movement and vibration of material bodies: “When it [this body] is motionless it forms a unit in our three-dimensional space, and when set in motion it generates an entirely new object [...] a new expression of space which is there as long as the movement lasts [...]” He was likely aware of, and may have been referring to, contemporary works such as Duchamp’s Rotary Demisphere (Precision Optics) (1923) and Moholy-Nagy’s Light Prop for an Electric Stage (Light Space Modulator) (1922-1930), both of which used rotating disks to create sculptural studies of movement and light without the use of film.

On the other hand, Lissitzky critiqued cinema’s illusion of three-dimensional space. In his text on the Prounenraum, originally published in the first issue of the Berlin journal G: Material zur elementaren Gestaltung in 1923, he sets forth his redefinition of exhibition space:

The new room neither needs nor desires pictures – it is not in fact a picture if it is transposed onto flat surfaces. This explains the hostility of the picture-painters toward us: we are destroying the wall as a resting-place for their pictures. When the desire is to obtain the illusion of life within an enclosed...
space, then this is how I will do it: I hang a piece of glass on the wall; it has no painting behind it, but a periscopic device which shows me what is happening at any given moment, in the true color and with the real movement. 19

Lissitzky's critique of naturalistic, perspectival space and the "picture-painters" who create is tied to his combination of Suprematist and Constructivist theory, but particularly with Constructivism's advancement of materials and construction over composition and representation. 20 What makes this passage particularly interesting is his rather disparaging suggestion of a periscopic projection apparatus: if illusion is what people seek, he will turn the wall into a device that falls somewhere between a live-feed color television screen and a camera obscura – combined with an inverted periscope from the trenches. As transparent glass replaces and optically dematerializes the opaque wooden wall, it also becomes a moving-image screen. This invocation of the cinematic as merely a replacement for traditional representation speaks to his limited view of cinema's potential for art, compared to many of his contemporaries. 21 Recall that Lissitzky praised Viking Eggeling's work. Eggeling's films such as SYMPHONIE DIAGONALE (1924) and Hans Richter's RHYTHMUS 21 (1923), RHYTHMUS 23 (1923), and RHYTHMUS 25 (1925), which Lissitzky likely also saw, were made entirely by stop-motion animation of abstract, primarily geometric shapes animated against a black background. While using the medium to explore relations between rhythm, form, and movement, they remain within the domain of the circumscribed page or canvas, utilizing drawings (Richter) and cut-outs (Eggeling).

To return to Lissitzky's discussion of a "new expression of space" in "K. und Pangeometrie," he gives the example of "a glowing coal [which] while moving leaves the impression of a luminous line." 22 On the one hand, this spoke to early 20th-century cyclographic photography studies in psychotechnics and the choreography of labor, from Frank and Lillian Gilbreth's motion studies of small arms production in the United States, to Soviet neurophysiologist Nikolai Bernstein's analyses of workers' movements and pedestrian gaits. Produced in a long exposure, the resulting image traced the luminous path of light bulbs affixed to a subject's moving body. Lissitzky's example moreover anticipates post-war practices that isolate the projection of light, such as Anthony McCall's "solid light" films begun in the 1970s. In LINE DESCRIBING A CONE (1973), projected 16mm film and fog form a three-dimensional cone of light, inverting cinematic viewership by drawing attention away from a projected image and toward the beam of light as constituting an atmospheric, sculptural body. We could also look to Lisa Rhodes's 1975 Light Music, a work resonating with Richter and Eggeling's "visual music" films, in which spectators moved through a dark environment of projected light and smoke. In a similar gesture, Lissitzky's proposed glowing coal, although containing no actual piece of the cinematic apparatus, produces a "lu-
ominous line” through physical motion, dependent on the absence of competing light. Furthermore, its persistence is based not on the illusion of three-dimen-
sional space that Lissitzky critiques, nor on a succession of still frames, but on an illusion shared with the cinema, an afterimage of light.

Thus, we already find within Lissitzky’s critique of the medium the start of an opening to bridge a “new expression of space” and cinema. In the mid-1960s American filmmaker Stan VanDerBeek, followed by media theorist Gene Young-
blood’s 1970 book of the same title, used “expanded cinema” to refer to a body of experimental post-war installation, immersive multi-media environments, video art, light shows, performance, and cybernetic art. McCall’s work – and, as I will argue, Lissitzky’s – including important works without film projection, such as Landscape for Fire (1972) and Long Film for Ambient Light (1975), appears in an alternative genealogy of works that explored the limits of the cinematic medium and apparatus. By examining Lissitzky’s essay and the Demonstration Rooms in these terms, as I will do in the following pages, we expand this genealogy into key modernist works. Pavle Levi has already covered significant ground here by ex-
amining avant-garde works from the 1920s and 1930s, “experiments not only with but also ‘around’ and even without film,” such as Man Ray’s diagrammatic airbrush painting Admiration for the Orchestrelle for the Cinematograph (1919) and Aleksandar Vučo and Dušan Matić’s assemblage Frenzied Marble (1930). Levi de-
finies “cinema by other means” as “the practice of positing cinema as a system of relations directly inspired by the workings of the film apparatus, but evoked through the material and technological properties of the original nonfilmic me-
dia.” My argument only differs in that I look at how the cinematic operates in a space beyond authorial intention.

Several scholars have noted cinematic qualities in Lissitzky’s work. Levi briefly mentions Lissitzky’s multiperspectival Prouns, “bioscopic” book The Story of Two Squares (1920), and autobiographical sketches, “The Films of El’s Life,” as part of a “general cinefication” of work in the Russian avant-garde. However, Lissitz-
ky’s work does not figure further in his analysis. Lutz Robbers points out that Lissitzky illustrates the Prounenraum in G as a storyboard of a linear sequence of views, resembling Moholy-Nagy’s “film-manuscript” Dynamik der Gross-Stadt (1921-1922). Describing Lissitzky’s photomontage frieze Rekord (1926) (version with two runners), Margarita Tupitsyn aptly observes, “Lissitzky succeeded in infusing his frieze with cinematic qualities through the rendering of high-speed running, a doubling of the city landscape, and the spreading of white vertical stripes across the whole image.” She moreover suggests Lissitzky’s “surrender to the language of cinema and photography” in 1924 onward was largely a prod-
uct of his encounter with Malevich’s writings on cinema; indeed, that year Lis-
sitzky translated some of Malevich’s essays from Russian into German.\(^{30}\) While this relationship is indeed crucial, to only account for Lissitzky’s relation to film by influence of Malevich obscures Lissitzky’s remarkable perception, as is my concern, of the very architecture of screening. To this end, Gough subtly points to some cinematic qualities of the Demonstration Rooms, such as the “flicker” produced by the wall design.\(^{31}\) She also discusses Vertov’s visit to the Hannover Abstract Cabinet in 1929, an encounter he described to Lissitzky: “I sat there for a long time, looked around, groped [oschupval].”\(^{32}\) Gough interprets the filmmaker’s blindness, his senses reduced to an almost obscene, tactical grasping of the space, as the disorientation experienced by the spectator and “attention to the contingency of his or her corporealization.”\(^{33}\) My aim here is to further push on the matter of the cinematic as it operates materially, spatially, and architecturally.

In 1926, just one year after publishing “K. und Pangeometrie,” Lissitzky designed and built the Raum für Konstruktive Kunst (Room for Constructivist Art) at the Dresden Internationale Kunstausstellung, followed in 1927 by the Kabinett der Abstrakten (Abstract Cabinet)\(^ {34}\) at the Hannover Landesmuseum.\(^ {35}\) Although we should not view these projects as a direct application of his essay, they figure as an approach to the anti-monumental, “new expression of space” he calls for. He received the commission for the Dresden Raum from director Hans Posse and architect Heinrich Tessenow, who turned the Städischer Ausstellungs-Palast into a temporary summer exhibition as a collection of 56 sparse, neutral gray galleries surveying contemporary art from Europe, the Soviet Union, Japan, and the United States. Unlike most of his exhibition commissions, Lissitzky did not officially represent the Soviet Union, and had considerable autonomy over the design. He wrote to Sophie Küppers, who had helped secure the commission from Tessenow:

Posse writes and encloses a ground plan of the room which is placed at my disposal (6x6 meters). So it’s not the hall of modern painting, it’s a space [ein Raum] without specific function, with which I can do what I like? Yes, I must keep racking my brains, for it must (as you write) be art.\(^ {36}\)

It was the only gallery not organized by nation, and the only to show primarily abstract work. The art historian and Hannover Landesmuseum director, Alexander Dorner, commissioned the second Demonstration Room after visiting the Dresden exhibition. The Kabinett would be designed as a permanent exhibition room to hold primarily abstract works.

Lissitzky referred to both exhibition spaces as “Demonstration Rooms” and envisaged them as prototypes, which would “present a standard [Standard]\(^ {37}\) for spaces in which new art is shown to the public.”\(^ {38}\) They would replace typical crowded, carpeted salon-style exhibition rooms, which he compared to a “a zoo, where the visitors are roared at by a thousand beasts at the same time.”\(^ {39}\) He first
used the term for the 1923 Prounenraum but did not use it to refer to his other exhibitions from the 1920s, such as the well-known Soviet pavilion at the Internationale Presse-Ausstellung (Cologne, 1928). Some have translated the German Demonstration into “exhibition,” using it as a synonym for Ausstellung. However, this overlooks the meaning of Demonstration as not only to exhibit but also to demonstrate a particular vision of art. Moreover, as Gough explains, Demonstration was “at once broader but also more specific than Ausstellung: broader in that it meant political protest; more specific in that it also denoted the making – the unfolding – of an explanation or reasoned argument; yet more specific in that it signified, furthermore, projection (such as, for example, slide projection).”

Despite the provocative implication of slide projection, neither room contained projection equipment, nor film or photographs. Nevertheless, we should bear in mind how Demonstration, as distinct from Ausstellung, implies temporal and spatial processes of unfolding and transposition. These and other cinematic metaphors consistently permeate Lissitzky’s writings surrounding the works. Moreover, his design, while attending to every surface of the room, utilizes walls, curtains, blinds, and screens, and manipulates natural and artificial light, demonstrating cinema without filmic projection. In other words, I locate the Demonstration Rooms within an expanded body of “cinema by other means.”

To enter gallery 31 at the Dresden Internationale Kunstausstellung, the visitor had the option of two entranceways, each covered by a pair of sliding grey curtains. Photographs indicate that in the rest of the exhibition, bare entranceways allowed one’s gaze to anticipate the following gallery before physically walking through them. Gallery 31’s curtains arrested this look, perhaps arousing curiosity or trepidation. Much like contemporary moving image installations in galleries, the entrance curtains regulated the flow of light and sound and imparted a sense of division between one room and the rest of the gallery. They also recalled cinema and theater curtains that both block light and move to conceal or reveal the screen or stage. Having parted the fabric, visitors entered a wholly different kind of space. Stepping into the boxy room of roughly 6 x 6 square meters, they would first see Naum Gabo’s sculpture Model for “Rotating Fountain” (1925), resting on a pedestal at the room’s center. Designed on the principle of kinetic rhythm, the open frame and transparent plastic of Gabo’s work denied solid sculptural mass by which to orient one’s body.

Further ungrounding the spectator, the walls would have appeared to shift, “flicker,” and bend as they moved. This effect emerged from the modular lathe system Lissitzky installed across each grey wall. Placed at 7-cm intervals and reaching from floor to ceiling, the wooden modular lathes completely upset Posse and Tessenow’s design of the walls as a neutral, uniform support for pictures. By painting the left sides of the lathes white and the right sides black on a gray background wall, he produced a kinetic grayscale spanning the four walls. Photographs from the Hannover exhibition demonstrate how the same
picture – Lissitzky’s *Floating Volume* (1919) – appears from different angles as the supporting wall changes between white, gray, and black. Lissitzky described the effect as an “optical dynamic [optische Dynamik] [that] is generated as a consequence of the human stride.” As Gough writes, “The flicker destroys the spatial coordinates that would otherwise afford equilibrium.” As I explain later, some critics turned to metaphors of fluidity to explain the unfamiliar phenomenological effect. We can further imagine that the wooden lathes – Lissitzky would switch to Nirosta steel for the Hannover room – produced a heightened tactile contrast with the pleated folds of the curtains.

Hung unframed on the unstable optical ground, the paintings and drawings entered into a parergonal play that revealed and affirmed the spectator’s encounter of a work of art as never stable, but always immanent, perpetually unfolding through bodily motion. Anticipating postwar practices including Minimalism, installation, and performance, the walls of the Dresden Demonstration Room affirmed the contingency of a work’s appearance, always arising from the spectator’s aleatory physical position and motion. Lissitzky wrote, “if on previous occasions in his march-past in front of the picture walls, he was lulled into a certain passivity, our design [Gestaltung] should make man active.” This activation and “disorientation” of the spectator, as Gough has astutely theorized, worked through a logic of endless differentiation of the art work: activation through disorientation and disorientation through activation. In this way, Lissitzky found a way to challenge monumentality in favor of dynamism. As one critic later commented, “There is no suggestion of the absolute and eternal.” Benjamin H.D. Buchloh places the Demonstration Rooms in the framework of modernism’s “crisis of audience relationships”: the spectator enters a “phenomenological exercise that defies traditional contemplative behavior in front of the work of art.” What is more, Lissitzky designed the Dresden Room without knowing which artworks it would contain. It is therefore essential to view the Demonstration Room “[as] a site of substitution and exchange,” rather than a completed, fixed installation or total work of art. In other words, Lissitzky did not design the room for a set of particular art works, but as a fluid space in which art works could be rearranged or removed, and the room itself would be reproduced in new forms.
In the room’s corners, Lissitzky installed four two-tier steel display cases reaching from floor to ceiling, creating a break in the lathes. Each tier held one print or painting. Fastened onto runners, a perforated screen of sheet metal — which recalls the perforated metal sections of Moholy-Nagy’s Light Prop — could be slid up and down by the visitor to cover one of the art works and “regulate visibility”⁵⁰ (see Fig. 2). In archival photographs of the show, the screened painting remains somewhat visible, but also animated and seductive: indeed, Lissitzky described how the picture would “shimmer through” (Durchschimmern).⁵¹ Lissitzky-Küppers recalled, “The viewer’s eye did not tire, because not all the pictures were visible at the same time, but mere glimmers of them appeared intermittently behind the metal screens which partially concealed them.”⁵² One could consider this work within the domain of participatory art, but at the risk of suggesting that the visitor’s action amounts to a kind of mastery over the space.⁵³ Rather, “screening” becomes an action performed mutually by design and visitor, a means of activation and differentiation, seduction, and play. Lissitzky suggests this screening function himself: “the open-pattern masking surfaces [Deck-
flächen] are pushed up or down by the spectator, who discovers new pictures, or screens [verdeckt] what does not interest him. He is physically compelled to come to terms with the exhibited objects.\(^{54}\) The perforated metal also literally “screened out” Picabia’s collaged Dada-ist portrait of Raymond Poincaré: Lissitzky-Küppers wrote that when members of foreign consulates visited the room, “we were asked to hide the portrait behind the movable metal screen [Metallschirm].”\(^{55}\) In Hannover, Lissitzky again used the display cases but decreased the number to three while increasing the tiers to three, and added a “rolling Venetian blind” on the fourth wall.\(^{56}\) Gough notes how the shift from two to three tiers turned an architectural motif (a sash window) into a cinematic one (a film strip).\(^{57}\) Curiously, Lissitzky replaced the perforated metal screen with an opaque metal sheet that in effect always blackened, or canceled out one of the art works.

Beyond the remarkable lathe system and display cases, Lissitzky’s design encompassed every surface of the room and incorporated stretched textiles, curtains, venetian blinds, and lighting systems utilizing both natural and artificial light. He describes designing the rooms in terms of “creating the rhythm of the whole,” demonstrating a spatial and environmental concern that emphasized relations between parts over and above the art works on display.\(^{58}\) Above all, light could mediate the material elements and shape perception. For example, he repeatedly emphasizes the need to “regulate” the light because of its effect on paintings’ color. “Just as the best acoustics are created for the concert-hall, so must the best optics be created […].”\(^{59}\) In the Hannover Kabinett natural light entered through a window spanning nearly the whole wall: “My aim was to transform the window area into a tectonic lighting-agent, which would let in only the amount of light that was necessary.”\(^{60}\) Indeed, his description of the design is frequently highly cinematic, emphasizing the relationships between light and color above representation or exhibition content. He writes about the Dresden Raum in correspondence with Küppers:

I am thinking of having the daylight stream in through moving colored filters; so that the impression produced by the pictures also changes at intervals. For this purpose it would be a good thing to create artificial lighting for the room in the evening. After all we have more time in the evenings, and modern painting under electric light can produce a powerful impact with its color spectrum.\(^{61}\)

Like the passage of film frames through a projector, the moving colored filters would have regulated light in intervals, rendering temporal the experience of viewing the exhibited artwork. The membrane of each work – and the skin and clothing of each visitor – thus becomes a surface to receive the impressions of light: a screen, experienced in duration. Decades before McCall’s *Long Film for Ambient Light* (1973), the space would have drawn attention to the interior impres-
sion caused by a duration of exterior, natural light, thus performing a reduction of cinema to an architectural relation of light and time. The colored filters would have formed a projector outside of the filmic apparatus, casting exterior light into the dark room. Unfortunately, the space contained no windows for daylight and thus Lissitzky never built these colored filters. Alongside the lathe walls, the colored filters further “differentiated” each instance of viewing the work and allowed visitors to explore the play of colored light, art works, and the surface of their own bodies. They also would have formed a fascinating dialogue with the dynamic colored screens in Kurt Schwerdtfeger and Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack’s Reflektorishe Lichtspiele (1922-1923) at the Bauhaus, which Lissitzky could have seen when he, according to Walter Gropius, visited Weimar in the summer of 1923.

In place of colored filters in the Dresden Raum, Lissitzky altered the existing artificial overhead lighting by stretching unbleached linen over the ceiling to create a diffused “skylight” (Oberlicht). He dyed the fabric’s edges to effect the light’s tone: “I have colored this along one frontal wall with blue, along the other with yellow, so that one is coldly illuminated and the other warmly illuminated.” This cloth served as a scrim, a tensile fabric that becomes translucent when backlit: a material used in theater and film to filter and soften natural or artificial light. This light surface becomes a screen through which exterior light projects into the dark room, illuminating both art works and visitors’ bodies. The German Schirm – the term used by Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers to refer to the movable metal screen – has nearly the same meaning as scrim: a spanned textile, blind, or curtain, but also a cinema screen. Similarly, Leinwand, from Leinen (linen), also means canvas or screen. Giuliana Bruno argues that the contemporary screen is “conceptually closer to a canvas, a sheet, a shade, or a drape” than the common metaphors of a window or mirror. Although describing post-war and contemporary works by artists such as Robert Irwin and Krzysztof Wodiczko, her analysis of the screen speaks beautifully to the Demonstration Rooms. Her theorization of the screen as a medium (in-between) of material, medial and aesthetic encounters prompts us to look beyond the conception of the screen as an immaterial or neutral, receptive surface. Screens are often “tensile and textured” surfaces, folded and permeable. “Walking through the art gallery and the museum, we encounter webs of cinematic situations, reimagined as if collected together and recollected on a screen that is now a wall, a partition, a veil, or even a curtain.” In this sense, Lissitzky’s tensile surfaces literally screen light but also intimate the material and historical affinity of canvas, screen, and cloth in cinematic genealogies.

If “K. und Pangeometrie” anticipates a sculptural cinema without a screen, the Demonstration Rooms attend to the screen and projection and regulation of light without film projection. In their diverse “media archaeological” approaches, scholars including Giuliana Bruno, Erkki Huhtamo, and Marina Warner have
argued for a study of the screen that attends to fabric, canvas, clouds, walls, and other architectural and cultural forms across and between media. Huhtamo has proposed a “screenology” or “archaeology of the screen” as a new branch of media studies that would draw on the etymology of “screen” (écran, Leinwand, and so forth) and expand genealogies of the screen to forms prior to and beyond cinema, television, and computer screens. Like most media archaeological work, a central motivation is to open media studies beyond teleological trajectories and a “cult of the new,” to examine “processes of their becoming” and forgotten departures. Among Huhtamo’s finds are screens partitioning interior space and screening sight, heat, and wind, but also shadow theaters and panoramas. According to Huhtamo, these and other surfaces such as wallpaper and 19th-century lithophanes are all examples of projection-less proto-screens with complex relationships to architecture and design. The “focus should not only be on screens as designed artifacts, but also on their uses, their intermedial relations with other cultural forms, and on their discourses that have enveloped them in different times and places.”

Of course, merely describing Lissitzky’s work as “cinematic” or “filmic” is reductionist and risks obscuring the intimate, vital entanglement of architecture, theater, and design within the exhibition space and the artist’s theories. However, by working with a concept of an expanded cinema, prior to its coinage in 1970, we find elements of cinema expanding into other media and configurations. To borrow expressions from George Baker and Pavle Levi, Lissitzky’s Demonstration Rooms are both cinema “beyond its limits” and “by other means.” Like McCall’s Long Film for Ambient Light and other works, such as Man Ray’s Admiration of the Orchestrelle for the Cinematograph, the operation is an “expansion of film into entirely other forms.” Crucially, we have not found Lissitzky’s missing entrance into filmmaking and away from other media, but located a work that subtly demonstrates medium multiplicity at the porous limits of cinema. In demonstrating a new expression of space through exhibition design, the rooms also demonstrate an unexpected cinematic operation. While he opposed the “pure opticality” and “dematerialization” of filmic projection, Lissitzky’s designs tangibly and architecturally engage forms of pre or extra-cinematic screening processes. His work from the mid 1920s almost performs media archaeology by recalling the cinematic medium’s past prior to 1895, a past encompassing magic lantern shows, illuminated tensile fabrics, and interior design. The rooms demonstrate “screening” as an action and process, both a regulation of light and a means for the activated subject to engage with the art object. It is in this sense that I propose “Screening Rooms” as another term for Lissitzky’s Demonstration Rooms. Here, “screening” builds an architectural conception of relations between arts, and between art and an “activated” subject.

Working through this lens of “expanded” or “other” cinema and media archaeology offers an alternative to a common historical reading of the rooms as
a “dematerialized” space. After visiting the Abstract Cabinet, modern architecture historian Sigfried Giedion described a “fluid atmosphere” and praised how the lathes “dematerialize the wall to the point where it seems to dissolve completely.”75 Alexander Dorner similarly wrote that the lathes set the room “floating” (schwimmend) in free space.76 More problematically, Dorner later subjected the room to his museological model of Stimmungsraum or “atmosphere room,” built on Aloïs Riegl’s Kunstwollen, which called for a correlation between exhibition design and the art works of a historical period. As Noam Elcott explains, to Dorner the Kabinett created an atmosphere of dematerialization, mobility, and transparency that corresponded to the “massless tension” and multi-perspectival space of modernist abstraction – and most of all, cinema.77 Dorner expected that cinema would logically supersede painting: “The self changing character of Abstract art pushed it in the direction of the MOTION PICTURE […].”78 This conception of the cinematic as purely optical and immaterial is of course at the center of Lissitzky’s critique of the medium. Thus, by looking for cinema beyond the common trope of dematerialization, associated with immaterial screens, intangible projection, or smoke and mirrors, we find material reconfigurations and reverberations of screening architecture in new sites.

In his study of the relationship between Mies van der Rohe’s architecture and cinema, Lutz Robbers draws a distinction between two conceptions of cinema and architecture: “on the one hand, an architecture that both mimics and supports the cinematographic apparatus’ phantasmagorical ability to affect the audience; on the other hand, architecture that through the interaction of materials, forms, light and perception sets in motion an “interplay” of movements and bodies.”79 It is within the latter conception that, alongside Mies, Lissitzky’s work fits. As he re-fashioned the predominant models of art exhibition, perhaps Lissitzky drew upon his unfinished design of a cinema – consciously or not. Although he made no films, the architecture of the cinema – deconstructed and reconfigured as the regulated movement of light and tangible screen surfaces – provided means to resist qualities of monumentality and fixity in other mediums, and the exhibition space. If the Prounenraum formed an “interway station” between painting and architecture, the Dresden and Hannover Demonstration Rooms create interway stations between exhibition architecture and the cinema. They flicker between White Cube and Black Box, uncontained by either model, nor by an aesthetic of rigid medium specificity.80