

# WILLOUGHBY SHARP: GUEST-CURATING, “EARTH ART,” SILENT FILM, and AVALANCHE

By Pamela Seymour Smith Sharp

January 2014

“We are dedicated to the total distribution of artistic information in all media.”

Willoughby Sharp and Paul Maenz,  
Kineticism Press, New York, 1966 <sup>1</sup>

Willoughby Sharp (1936-2008), guest-curated the “Earth Art” exhibition at the invitation of Tom Leavitt, director of the Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art at Cornell University in 1969. Sharp and Maenz co-founded and registered Kineticism Press as a business in 1966 in New York State. Black and white publicity portraits show both men clean-shaven, wearing dark jackets, white shirts, and ties. Sharp’s hair was just long enough to curl over his ears. He was 30 years old.

As director of Kineticism Press, Willoughby Sharp conceived and promoted art exhibitions to an international network of museum directors and gallerists that he’d built up beginning in the late 1950s. An aesthetic activist for new art, by 1968, Sharp had employed all available media while a guest-curator in Europe, Mexico, and the U.S. He drew on an international roster of artists, wrote essays for and produced exhibition catalogues, film-documented his traveling exhibition *Air Art*, lectured widely, was a correspondent and contributor to U.S. and international art publications, and co-produced a film of his artist interviews that was broadcast on West German television.

“Earth Art” was the second in Willoughby Sharp’s planned series of exhibitions devoted to the four natural elements, air, earth, fire, and water. In late summer 1968, Sharp had returned to New York from Mexico City after installing “Kineticism: Systems Sculpture in Environmental Situations” for the 1968 Summer Olympic Games. He’d left Mexico under great duress having witnessed the violent onset of the student revolution. He “became

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<sup>1</sup> Kineticism Press statement, Paul Maenz and Willoughby Sharp, 1966.

radicalized” in Mexico City.<sup>2</sup> His exhibition “Air Art,” had traveled to several U.S. cities since March. Tom Leavitt wanted “Air Art” to travel to Cornell in early 1969, but the show was already scheduled by Peter Selz to travel to the newly-renovated University Art Museum in Berkeley. Sharp asked Leavitt if, instead, he would let him curate “Earth Art.” Tom Leavitt agreed and invited Sharp to guest-curate “Earth Art” at Cornell.<sup>3</sup> Sharp’s curatorial fee was \$1,000.

Since 1964, Sharp personally knew, exhibited, wrote about, and interviewed many of the artists on the international list of artists he prepared for the “Earth Art” exhibition. He didn’t go to their studios to select and procure works to travel to Ithaca. Instead, his curatorial directive took the form of an invitation to the artists, sent out by Cornell, to come to Ithaca, choose a location outdoors or indoors, or both, and make a work. “Each artist had to touch dirt.”<sup>4</sup> To participate in the show, the artists were compelled to relocate from their studios to make a work in situ in Ithaca.

“Willoughby Sharp was an artists’ curator. His comfort zone was with the artists. And they were comfortable with him....He had tremendous stamina...He upped the ante of your energy coefficient.... I was always grateful that he paid attention to me.”  
Dennis Oppenheim, 2008<sup>5</sup>

As the artists made trips to Ithaca to meet with Sharp and choose locations for their work, beginning in late 1968 and into January 1969, Sharp realized that the show was important, and that a print catalogue couldn’t be produced for the opening of “Earth Art.” He decided that moving image documentation of the artists while they made their ephemeral works had to be done. Sharp asked around Cornell who could shoot film. He was put in touch with a Cornell student at the time, Marilyn Rivchin, who shot film for sports events. Sharp gave Rivchin a large portion of his curatorial fee, asked her to buy film stock to use in her wind-up Bolex camera, and directed her to go out and cover the artists doing whatever they were

<sup>2</sup> Willoughby Sharp, *The VideoBook: Willoughby Sharp’s Oral Art History*, 2006, Berlin, by Pamela Seymour Smith Sharp. 24 one-hour videotapes, color, sound.

<sup>3</sup> Reviews of the “Earth Art” exhibition in 1969 in the *Ithaca Journal* and the *Cornell Chronicle* do not include Willoughby Sharp’s name.

<sup>4</sup> Willoughby Sharp, *The Earth Art Interviews*, 2008. A film by Bil Thompson including interviews with Dennis Oppenheim and Willoughby Sharp. 20-mins. Color, sound.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Dennis Oppenheim, 2008.

doing. Rivchin shot the “Earth Art” artists making their work outdoors and inside the A. D. White Museum. Approximately 6,000 feet of black and white, silent film exist.<sup>6</sup> The “Earth Art” film compilation screened here in “Beyond Earth Art,” is a fraction of that footage, edited by Willoughby Sharp in 1985.

While writing this essay, I heard that a hundred years ago Ithaca was the silent movie capital of the world.<sup>7</sup> Ithaca gorges have seen their share of film stunts. In 1914, silent film producers “The Whartons shoot their most famous stunt...for the movie, *A Prince of India*. They buy an old trolley car from Ithaca Traction Corporation, rig a track, and film the car careening off the Stewart Avenue Bridge. Trolley car #305 lands in the Fall Creek Gorge without a hitch, to the awe and amazement of over 1,000 spectators.”<sup>8</sup> In the silent “Earth Art” film, the artists making their work in the Ithaca landscape takes on a stunt-like quality: Dennis Oppenheim, wearing Beatle boots, walks on frozen Beebe Lake, perilously close to the edge of Beebe Falls, gets down on one knee within inches of the edge of the ice, and stretching his arm forward, holding the tip of a broom handle, pushes ice chunks along a pick axe-carved channel, to disappear over the falls; and Hans Haacke at the foot of Beebe Falls wading waist-deep carrying a cable to secure on the opposite bank, slips into icy rapids while stepping over snow-covered boulders as a cascade of freezing cold water crashes down around him.

The film shows that Earth art production at Cornell was not solitary. Both indoors and outdoors, the artists in the film consult, decide, supervise and execute their works with others. The absence of sound during the execution of the outdoor works vividly renders the Ithaca landscape a simultaneous and dramatic participant in the art-making process.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Willoughby Sharp, *The Earth Art Interviews*, 2008. A film by Bil Thompson including interviews with Dennis Oppenheim and Willoughby Sharp. 20-mins. Color, sound.

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Ward Morehouse III, whose grandfather was an actor in the silent film *A Prince of India* produced in Ithaca in 1914.

<sup>8</sup> Chronology, *Ithaca Motion Picture Project* website.

<sup>9</sup> Sharp’s archive contains a 7” reel-to-reel tape “Cinematography and the New Sculpture” a discussion on WBAI radio, October 19, 1969, with Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Robert Fiori, Dennis Oppenheim, Willoughby Sharp, produced by Jeanne Lieg.

“In a real sense, the first issue of *Avalanche* magazine, [Fall 1970] was pretty much my “Earth Art” catalogue, particularly since it had a 26-page interview with Smithson, Heizer and Oppenheim, an eight-page section devoted to Richard Long, a four- or six-page section with my interview of Jan Dibbets, mostly on Earthwork, particularly pieces he did at Cornell, and a section on Robert Morris....The important point is that *Avalanche* started at the same time as the “Earth Art” show, and they were in a lot of ways, inseparable. So here’s an instance where you could say, legitimately, that my curating the “Earth Art” show enabled me to curate the first issue of *Avalanche* magazine.” - Willoughby Sharp, 2006<sup>10</sup>

Sharp had wanted to do his own magazine since 1964.<sup>11</sup> A trained art historian, his writing was first published in 1962.<sup>12</sup> Sharp’s initiative to reveal art process with the “Earth Art” film was continued in probing, photographically-illustrated interviews with the “Earth Art” artists published in the first issue of *Avalanche*, Fall, 1970.

At Cornell, Sharp was already planning a fire show to follow “Earth Art.” He executed his own fire work, *Burning Ice*, in Ithaca. In a 3-minute, black and white, silent film, Sharp, carrying a gasoline container, walks out about two hundred feet onto a frozen Beebe Lake, slips, and lands flat on his back on the ice.<sup>13</sup> He gets up, walks a little further, pours 5 gallons of gasoline on the ice and tosses a lit match. Noxious clouds of black smoke quickly grow and rise above tree height. As the smoke abates, blackened ice is revealed. A few other people are seen out on the frozen lake, watching from a safe distance. A title card might be good here.

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<sup>10</sup> Excerpt from *The VideoBook: Willoughby Sharp’s Oral Art History*, published in *Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974*, 2012, p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> Willoughby Sharp in *The Avalanche Interviews*, John Perrault’s 1973 video interview of Willoughby Sharp and Liza Bear, co-founders of *Avalanche* magazine, shot by Andy Mann, for the 1973 exhibition **AVALANCHE DIE ENTWICKLUNG EINER AVANTGARDE- ZEITSCHRIFT**, Cologne Kunstverein, March 23 to April 23; Hanover Kunstverein, May 27 – July 22; Munster Kunstverein, Fall 1973; Frankfurt Kunstverein, Fall 1973.

<sup>12</sup> *Rauschenberg*, by Willoughby Sharp, *ART USA NOW*; CJ Bucher, 1962.

<sup>13</sup> *Burning Ice* by Willoughby Sharp was screened during the exhibition, *Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974*, in LA and Munich, in 2012.