

OBITUARIES

Paul J. Sharits, 50, dies; avant-garde filmmaker

The art community is mourning the death of Paul J. Sharits, 50, an internationally acclaimed avant-garde filmmaker and a professor of film at the University at Buffalo for nearly 20 years.

He died unexpectedly Thursday (July 8, 1993) in his home on Buffalo's West Side.

A memorial service is planned at a time to be announced this fall at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, where his work currently is part of an exhibit on Fluxus, a renegade 1960s art movement that he joined in 1965.

"He was one of the key figures in American avant-garde film," says John Hanhardt, curator of film and video at the Whitney. "He was really an artist working within the medium of film, not in storytelling, but in directly visual ways."

"His main contribution," says Jonas Mekas, director of the Anthology Film Archive in New York, "was in the abstract direction. While others explored the possibilities of poetry, surrealism and collage, he was very much interested in color and light. He explored more than anyone else how the individual frame worked on the viewer, how colors affect us and which moods they create."

One of his best-known works, "N:O:T:H:I:N:G," features a light bulb and a chair.

He wrote of it: "The film will strip away anything (all present definitions of 'something') standing in the way of the film being its own reality, anything which would prevent the viewer from entering totally new levels of awareness."

He gave the following explanation of another one of his works in a letter to The Buffalo News in 1990:

"I am a spiritual person and respect the (actual) statements of Jesus. . . . Nevertheless, I burned a copy of 'The Good News Bible' myself a few weeks ago, not in disrespect for Judaism or Christianity, but as a necessary element in a sculptural installation piece, 'Non-Attachment,' which also includes a (still to be) burned Buddhist bible.



Paul J. Sharits

"These two books, still intact, will float in a vibrating pool of blackened (and variously drugged) alcohol: they will gently bang into each other in an endless dance. The piece, a statement about world society, has to do with the mysteries of Christ's and Buddha's parables and the concept of 'giving up' as a form of respect.

"Despite the philosophic-religious nature of the work, I doubt that it can be appreciated in America, so it will be exhibited in Europe. I believe it is aesthetically and ethically proper to utilize any material object in a serious work of art."

Although his work could seem obscure, startling or upsetting, Sharits' methodology was highly systematic, his son, Christopher, relates.

"Everything he did that seemed illogical had a very logical procession about it," he says. "It was so well thought-out and mapped out so precisely that it was almost like painting by numbers."

Sharits drew his approach to filmmaking from his early studies as a painter. Born in Denver, he earned a bachelor of fine arts degree in painting in 1964 from the University of Denver and went on to receive a master of fine arts degree in visual design from Indiana University.

He made his earliest films while still in college at Denver, founding the Denver Experimental Film Society in 1962 and a similar group at Indiana University in 1965.

"He was like the younger brother of the other avant-garde filmmakers," says Gerald O'Grady of UB's Center for Media Study, who compares his importance to that of Jackson Pollack. "He got there when he was 19 years old."

Sharits had one-man exhibitions, including multiple-screen endless loop installations, at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery and other galleries and museums throughout the world.

The Albright-Knox also presented a retrospective of his films in 1976.

O'Grady brought Sharits to Buffalo in 1973. Prior to that, he had been an art instructor at the Maryland Institute of Art in Baltimore and an assistant professor at Antioch College.

He received several filmmaking grants, including two from the Ford Foundation and four from the National Endowment for the Arts. One, "Declarative Mode," was for a bicentennial film project in 1976. He also received fellowships in Berlin in 1988 and 1989.

As funding for filmmaking became scarce in the 1980s, he returned to painting, receiving one-man shows at the Nina Freudenheim Gallery in Buffalo and at other galleries in Los Angeles, Miami Beach, Fla., and Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

In recent years, he also renewed his interest in Fluxus, producing fashion items, films and paintings. Last year, he and colleague-performer Lynn Watkins gave Fluxus performances throughout Europe.

"What Fluxus is varies with the artist," Buffalo News Critic Richard Huntington wrote in a review of a Sharits exhibition here in 1991. "In Sharits' hands it is a raucous assault. It assaults artistic conventions and it assaults social restraints.

"The 'Rape' and 'Vaginal Spasm' paintings are pointedly aggressive despite their clock of jolly color and festive brushwork. The objects — the glass shard jewelry, for instance — even with their funky humor suggest pain and violence."

A colorful and controversial figure, "no matter what situation you put him in, he was the center of attention," Christopher Sharits noted.

Nevertheless, the extreme gestures of his art and his life sometimes landed him in trouble.

In 1990, he was charged with menacing and criminal possession of a weapon after he produced a jackknife as he argued with a motorist whose car was blocking his in a UB parking lot. Sharits pleaded guilty to a lesser charge of disorderly conduct and was fined \$100.

In 1976, Sharits was stabbed in the back by a woman during an argument at Delaware Avenue and West Chippewa Street. In 1982, he was mistaken for another man and shot in the stomach by a patron who had been arguing at a Fillmore Avenue tavern.

At the time of his death, he was involved in a lawsuit against UB, which relieved him of his professorship in January 1992 over an angry, rambling telegram he sent to media study chairman Brian Henderson.

Surviving, in addition to his son, Christopher, of San Francisco, are his father, Paul Edward Sharits of Canon City, Colo., and two grandsons.

SHARITS—Paul J.

July 8, 1993 of Buffalo, NY; father of Christopher (Cheri) Sharits; grandfather of Gregory Paul and Jeffrey Patrick Sharits; son of Paul E. (Grace) Sharits and the late Florence Mae (nee Romeo); brother of the late Gregory Sharits. A memorial service will be held at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City in the fall. Arrangements by ANTHONY M. CASTIGLIA.