As I walked around Park City, Utah, in January 2011, I listened to directions over my cell phone from a calm voice with a slight British accent: “Stand nearer the curb as you are in a close-up”; “Look for the Union Bank on the right side of the street”; “Cross over toward the entrance, look at the teller window but go past to the lobby.” I did what I was told, but was I acting or actually being asked to rob a bank? Was I in a movie or about to be arrested?

I was participating in a work titled A Machine to See With by Blast Theory, an artist collective from England, presented in the New Frontier section of the Sundance Film Festival. It was a ticketed event, yet—unlike going to the cinema—you were never actually being filmed—once you handed over your cell phone number you were placed in the artists’ hands. While you were never actually being filmed, as you learned later, so much of what we believe about cinema came into play vividly, as if it were a real movie. We trust cinema until we are pushed past our own boundaries, to a new frontier. As we go into uncharted territories, we ask, Can we trust our vision, our understanding of the cinematic experience?

A broadly realized project, New Frontier is curated by Shari Frilot as a convergence of film, performance, new media and technology. Showing artists from around the world, it has come to be recognized widely for its cinematic innovation.

New Frontier, now celebrating its 10th year, transformed an existing programming section at Sundance that had been called simply “Frontier.” Always known for pushing forward more experimental work, Sundance was formed in 1985 by Robert Redford, who has been the steadfast champion of independent filmmakers. Focusing mainly on narrative features made outside the Hollywood system and documentaries that define the complexity of our social and political world, Frontier became the category meant to expand these traditional forms of cinematic storytelling. The name also served as a code for the audience to readily identify a film that experimented with nontraditional narrative, boldly radical styles or challenging storylines. The programmers had a place for films that did not fit easily within the evolving “indie” movement. Of course, being situated in the American West, Frontier conjured another meaning: the idea that this category actually became a corral of sorts for renegade artists.

By 2007 the Sundance programmers found filmmakers and moving image artists expanding the boundaries even further as they worked within the ideas of the cinematic but did not play by filmmaking rules.

That year, Sundance announced the New Frontier initiative. Shari Frilot explained it as follows:

New Frontier on Main was a hybrid space drawing from the art gallery scene, microcinema culture and the seductiveness of the DJ lounge atmosphere and then designed to look and feel very distinctive from the rest of the Festival. We wanted to cultivate an artistic and social environment to disarm people when they entered the space. It was a way of unlocking inhibitions and encouraging audiences to think about opening themselves up to the new rules and cinematic suggestions which the New Frontier artists are inviting you to consider.

Quickly recognized for bringing the art world and the film festival world together, New Frontier tracked the developing performative cinema movement, the fast-paced tech advances and visual artists who used moving images as part of their work. It became a festival inside a festival.

In the area of performative cinema, we might ask: Is film inherently performative? Blast Theory used our belief in what an actor does on screen to get the audience to participate. Live performance’s long history onstage as well as staged happenings opened the door for Sam Green (January 2010) to make a live documentary film, Utopia in 4 Parts. Using the stylistic form of documentary film (although the work is actually more like early educational...

television with an authoritative voice-over, images created or culled from history, and a soundtrack to build emotional connection to the topic), Green shook up the system by never actually making a film but instead performing his text live. The audience watched him edit the images pulled from his laptop onto the screen, all to a live musical score by Dave Cerf.

In *This World Made Itself*, Miwa Matreyek used rear projection to create a stage space (2014). The projector, sitting about 20 feet behind the screen, provided the audience a large-screen cinema feel. This space also gave Matreyek room to move between the projector and screen to form larger-than-life silhouettes made by her body movements interacting with the filmic images. To further reshape the concept of performative cinema, choreographer Bill T. Jones took on 3D cinema to interpret *After Ghostcatching* for the 2011 New Frontier, and performance artist Jacolby Satterwhite perched himself above the 2014 festival scene, watching us even more than we were watching him at the New Frontier opening event.

The past 10 years have seen exhilarating changes in technology. Some film projects become an interactive experience via technology. As an example, Eve Sussman’s *whiteonwhite:algorithmicnoir* is both a feature film and a nonending story that edits itself in front of your eyes via an algorithmic program and multiplied tagged clips. A word in one scene will trigger what is chosen for the next scene; a movement across the screen will trigger another. The film is based on a tale set in mid-century Eastern Europe but is never the same sequence of events and so never the same story.

Another example of how technology morphs film and performance is Joseph Gordon-Levitt’s hitRECord.org, an evolved film production company that assembles an independent social media community that comes together to crowdsource the making of films under Gordon-Levitt’s direction. These films are exhibited in various ways, almost always incorporating Gordon-Levitt’s performance, as well as activating and incorporating crowdsource-produced elements generated during the exhibition. hitRECord.org is a unique cinematic expression that is at once social media discussion, crowdsourced production and performance. It completely ruptures conventional narrative traditions.

New Frontier looks as much at artistic practice as at final projects when following the struggles, love, fun and risks artists use to create work that opens up the boundaries. So we ask: Do we need a frontier? Many artists consider themselves sans frontières, without disciplines, without boundaries to push. The more definition, the more there is to resist. I have been in Park City for all 10 years of New Frontier. In fact, I started to go to Sundance in 1992 and have only missed a few years. Having seen this evolution, I know that it is more comfortable for some artists to stay within the frame of film. After all, this is a film festival. But just as I recently changed the name of the Film/Video department at Walker Art Center to Moving Image, it is time that the format-driven names *film* and *video* give up their ghosts. Film once equaled cinematic experience, and video was for artist installations; but those terms have grown tired and out of date. Now we have performative cinema, whether filmed or live; versions of 3D that

![Image](http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/LEON_a_01198)
go beyond watching projections while wearing glasses in the dark; the Oculus Rift sense of virtual reality where you turn your head and body to see a full 360 degrees and know the action might be behind you; or the reshaping of on-screen strategies by the video-game-playing generation of artists.

I asked Shari Frilot her thoughts about her 10 years with this exciting program:

We brought the worlds of film, performance, visual art and technology under one roof in a social setting to reinvigorate the conversation about the potential for the cinematic image, and we had hoped that something larger than the sum of its parts would emerge. And emerge it did—gestural forms of editing film, audiences authoring the film itself through active participation, video games that are documentaries, performances that double as simply the act of living in an immersive digital environment, and a powerful reincarnation of Virtual Reality, a fully immersive medium that hybridizes video and theater to deliver a deeply convincing sense of liberty and presence in the moment.

For 10 years, New Frontier has been on the forefront of visual awareness. At its very foundation it is about learning new ways of seeing and giving artists space and time to hone their work and change the way we see Moving Image.

Story is how we understand ourselves, our society and the world around us. But story doesn’t exist until it is shared through the mediums we use to communicate—our communication architecture. Today that architecture, which affects the form and practice of storytelling as much as the content itself, stands on the verge of a massive paradigm shift, one that will impact storytelling at a scope and scale that is breathtaking.

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A view inside New Frontier at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival.
(© 2008 Sundance Institute. Photo by Rachel Thurston.)

The inaugural year of New Frontier was presented in 2007 in the basement of the Main Street Mall (Park City, Utah), directly across the street from the signature Egyptian Theater, so that art, film and technology would converge in Park City for the first time. This experiment in festival exhibition generated palpable excitement and not only blossomed to become one of the major points of interest at the Sundance Film Festival but also inspired the creation of an Institute-wide initiative. In 2011, the Sundance Institute established artist development programs for New Frontier artists that include the Story Lab, Artist Residency, granting, alumni support and Day Labs. For more information, visit <sundance.org/programs/new-frontier>.

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