Alfred Leslie
The Killing Cycle …

Alfred Leslie & Frank O'Hara
The Last Clean Shirt
“The Killing Cycle is not primarily about any one thing. Not only about death or Frank O’Hara or about the loss of American innocence or about the defiling of the seashore or about the brutality of the automobile or a lecture to the avant-garde or the demise of a hero or the depiction of a single instant in time or multiple figure painting or the loss of my work by fire…or…or… What this work is really about I can’t say, except that formally it is meant to be multi-leveled with its implied meanings focused enough that they are all fighting for ascendency. And that these jostling meanings seek out the viewer’s perceptions to combine and recombine with each person so that no one interpretation succeeds. This is how I thought The Killing Cycle should function and where, for me, the texture of meaning can be found.”

ALFRED LESLIE
Acknowledgements

Few individuals have a lasting impact on the way we relate to a medium in its entirety, that is, there are seldom artistic contributions of such merit that they forever alter our understanding of what a painting or sculpture or film can be. Alfred Leslie has accomplished this feat in cinema, abstraction, and figurative painting. Leslie’s large-scale abstract works from the late 1950s, his experimental films like *Pull My Daisy*, 1959, and his iconic, haunting portraits demand that the viewer reconsider their perceptions of these respective idioms. The opportunity to share two extremely important aspects of his practice—film and figure painting—provides an occasion to celebrate a skillful genius whose work remains prescient today. The film *The Last Clean Shirt*, a collaboration with the poet Frank O’Hara, explores the intermingling of text and image in service of a multivalent delivery. The exhibition *Alfred Leslie: The Killing Cycle…*, comprised of paintings and watercolor studies, offers an open-ended narrative of the events surrounding O’Hara’s untimely death. Both projects ask the viewer to navigate dense, seamlessly constructed works that eschew a hierarchy of meaning in favor of multiple points of view. This process amounts to nothing less than a radical rethinking of how we receive, experience, and process information.

Alfred Leslie is a man of immense talent, keen intellect, and boundless energy, and this exhibition most certainly would not have been possible without his ongoing interest and support. Leslie’s artistic curiosity and unwavering commitment to his practice, now in its seventh decade, make him a fruitful collaborator and a dynamic subject for a museum exhibition. The Haggerty would like to thank him for sharing his work with us and our audiences.

The museum would also like to thank all of the lenders to the exhibition, including Alfred Leslie, Stanley and Barbara Grandon, the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis and The Saint Louis Art Museum, and Anthology Film Archives, New York. Additionally, we would like to acknowledge the many people who lent their time and talent to facilitating the exhibition and producing the catalog contents: Janet Borden and Matthew Whitworth at Janet Borden Inc., Timothy and Pamela Hill at Hill Gallery, Christian Viveros-Faune, critic and curator, Josephine Pryde and Mike Sperling, representatives of The Estate of Ian White, Andrew Lampert, Curator of Collections at Anthology Film Archives, and WNET New York. We are especially grateful for the generous support of the Sadoff Family Foundation, which has made these exhibitions and their related programs possible.

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Major support for this exhibition is provided by the Sadoff Family Foundation. Additional support is provided by a grant from the Wisconsin Arts Board with funds from the State of Wisconsin and the National Endowment for the Arts.
Alfred Leslie (American, b. 1927) is a multidisciplinary artist and filmmaker who first gained attention for his Abstract Expressionist paintings and collages. In the 1950s and ’60s, he was associated with an emerging community of avant-garde artists and writers, including Joan Mitchell, Larry Rivers, Robert Frank, Frank O’Hara, and Jack Kerouac, with whom he often collaborated. By 1962, Leslie had shifted his attention away from abstract painting to focus instead on the creation of large-scale representational images. He is considered a central figure in the revival of American figurative painting.

In the fall of 1966, a devastating fire destroyed Leslie’s studio-home and all of its contents. This personal loss, as well as the death only a few months earlier of his close friend poet Frank O’Hara, provided fertile ground for artistic inspiration. That year, Leslie began work on The Killing Cycle, a series of paintings and drawings that synthesize fact and fiction to describe the beach scene car crash that ended O’Hara’s life. This narrative tableaux, or suite of “painted stories,” as Leslie terms them, would occupy his attention for the next fourteen years.

The intermittent process of revising and reconfiguring this body of work—originally conceived as a single canvas, The Killing Cycle was expanded to include seven paintings and eventually edited down to three—is, for Leslie, a separate and parallel artistic endeavor. This exhibition contains preparatory works that record his evolving ideas and provide insight into his artistic process. It reunites, for the first time in over twenty years, the six extant canvases that originally comprised The Killing Cycle. Textual elements now accompany the paintings The Cocktail Party and Morning Light, alterations that reflect Leslie’s continued engagement with the material and underscore the open-ended nature of the project.
1966 was not Alfred Leslie's year.

In late July, as he screened footage of his most recent film and geared up for his first major museum exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the artist received a phone call at his Broadway and 22nd Street loft-studio. The call was from the painter Larry Rivers and the news was bizarre. Frank O'Hara, his friend and collaborator on, among other projects, the 1964 experimental picture *The Last Clean Shirt*, had been fatally injured in the most absurd way possible. Coming back in a beach taxi from a night of hanging out with friends on Fire Island, the car he was traveling in broke down at the water's edge. After waiting around for a while, O'Hara wandered away from the lights of the stalled vehicle and into the dark. Somehow, before anyone could warn him, a municipal jeep appeared on the beach and ran him over.

Leslie's reaction to the news, as he told Judith Stein in 1989, was one of utter bewilderment. "My first thought was, 'What a stupid way for someone to die.' I thought of what an accomplished person he was and what a perfectly senseless death." 1

By the summer of '66, Leslie had already lost two friends to automobile accidents. There was Jackson Pollock, who drove his Oldsmobile convertible at 60 mph into the woods near Springs, Long Island, in 1956; and the Vulcan-like sculptor David Smith, who perished in 1965 while tailing painter Kenneth Noland's sports car on the way to an opening in Bennington, Vermont.

Now, there was the preposterously casual passing of O'Hara—dead, it seemed, from merely mooning around on the beach at night while contemplating the Atlantic Ocean. Leslie invoked modern-day furies to make sense of these serial tragedies—the demons of "life in the twentieth century, the ironies of our time…the barbarisms." 2 For a man who loved cars and had beaten John Chamberlain to the artistic punch in the use of automobile parts to make sculpture, Leslie, it seemed, had been given a front-row seat for an unstoppable recitation of the world's worst cosmic car jokes.

Then, the fire happened. On October 17, 1966, before his major retrospective was scheduled to open at the Whitney, all of Leslie's artworks—paintings, films, writings, his personal possessions—went up in flames. Leslie was in the building when the fire started and managed to escape with his wife and five year old son. Standing on the street corner, he saw one of his own self-portraits burst into fire. The image, like acetate film melting inside a movie camera, stayed with him, especially after his survey was cancelled. In the words of writer Phoebe Hoban, Leslie's career—which had shone brightly through fierce encounters with abstract expressionism, large-scale realist portraiture, and experimental filmmaking—was interrupted precisely at the moment when it should have crystallized. 3

2 Ibid, P. 16.
Homeless and at the end of his tether financially, Leslie took emotional and artistic stock, refocused, and then redoubled his efforts to make the kind of art that, in his words, produced a dynamic “depiction of a specific instance in time.” Setting aside film momentarily, he concentrated willfully on painting—but as seen through a director’s eye. “When my studio burned, I gave up filmmaking altogether and merged all my ideas into... painted stories,” he told Stein two decades later. “This metastasis of ideas was not unusual for me except for its suddenness.” The transition from film to painting and then, finally, to painting informed by film, proved key. What he had managed to discover following the events of 1966 was nothing less than a cinematic way to depict human tragedy with one of the world’s oldest technologies—oil and cloth.

The resulting works constitute a pivotal act in the rebirth of American figure painting. The challenge established by the misfortunes that savaged Pollock, Smith, O’Hara, and Leslie himself, literally forced the painter to rethink art’s ambitions. From history, he knew that painting had at times been called on to address human loss directly. For a few important cultural figures, Leslie included, the late 1960s and ’70s were one of those times—in epochal spades. His next batch of artworks, which he called “The Killing Cycle”—an epic suite of seven canvases, later edited to three, and nearly a hundred studies that “The Killing Cycle,” Leslie wrote the following: He screened at Lincoln Center prior to the fire in 1966, and Alfred Leslie’s Birth of a Nation (1965/1998), which was partially destroyed by the fire)—was an expanded sense of painting’s possibilities with regard to art’s content and its audience. In toggling between his two main artistic activities, Leslie clearly identified the gap between culture’s most aloof medium (visual art) and its most popular (the movies). Instinctively, he moved to bridge the two. The art historian Barbara Rose has rightly identified Leslie’s “The Killing Cycle” as shock-full of filmic borrowings. She also proposes that these epic works actively drew on classical sources like Caravaggio, Rubens, and Jacques-Louis David. “As large as the projections on movie screens,” she writes about the canvases’ powerful presence, “Leslie’s figures are seen in exaggerated close-ups influenced by cinematic images.”

Moving from what Leslie called his earlier “confrontational portraits”—giant Pop-like, transitional canvases done in grisaille—to outright narrative painting, the artist took yet another significant step in expanding his radically figurative subject matter. After making films and working abstractly from 1947 to 1963, and then, from 1963 to 1966, on giant versions of the human figure, Leslie sought out bigger themes that offered even more conceptual punch and greater visual immediacy. “I’d been looking for a heavy subject and I’d been thinking about going to Vietnam,” he said, by way of outlining one painterly conceit he later discarded. “I knew there were a lot of problems involved but I was waiting for a moment when something really felt right and I got a visceral response.”

What Leslie drew from his extensive experience directing films (these included the 1959 Beat classic Pull My Daisy, The Last Clean Shirt (1964), which he screened at Lincoln Center prior to the fire in 1966, and Alfred Leslie’s Birth of a Nation (1965/1998), which was partially destroyed by the fire) was an expanded sense of painting’s possibilities with regard to art’s content and its audience. In toggling between his two main artistic activities, Leslie clearly identified the gap between culture’s most aloof medium (visual art) and its most popular (the movies). Instinctively, he moved to bridge the two. The art historian Barbara Rose has rightly identified Leslie’s “The Killing Cycle” as shock-full of filmic borrowings. She also proposes that these epic works actively drew on classical sources like Caravaggio, Rubens, and Jacques-Louis David. “As large as the projections on movie screens,” she writes about the canvases’ powerful presence, “Leslie’s figures are seen in exaggerated close-ups influenced by cinematic images.”

What Leslie, ever the formalist, sought to do was to dramatically restore “narrative subjects to the practice and intellectual life of painting and painters, and to establish story as a formal element and process.” He found the means to do this by considering the effects of the moving camera—and applying its lessons to painting. No other art form, bar the novel, depends on storyline quite as meaningfully; to date, no other medium exploits scale and visual effects to similar heights. After repeated experimentation, Leslie devised an ideal painting-film fusion that included exaggerated, even stagy poses set inside shallow landscapes illuminated by non-natural light. Color returned to the artist’s previously restrictive palette. In effect, what the artist managed to invent before anyone could quite put their finger on its importance was a late twentieth-century big picture style, complete with complex symbolic content, cinematic scope, Technicolor hues, and filmic sequence.

In the narrative biography required for the Guggenheim Fellowship that made possible several years of work on the “The Killing Cycle,” Leslie wrote the following: He had just completed his “first history painting, The Killing of Frank O’Hara (1966)” (the artist would later retile the work The Accident, which “integrated everything he had done over the past twenty-three years.”) Besides referencing film’s spirit of gesamtkunstwerk, Leslie’s declared love of synthesis also revealed fundamental connections to the work of certain classical artists. Like Théodore Géricault in his lead-up to painting The Raft of the Medusa (1818-19), Leslie developed a meticulous research method for “The Killing Cycle.” He made multiple trips to Fire Island, interviewed people present at the accident, and, at one time, hauled a jeep up to a second-floor studio to work on The Telephone Call (1971-72). But few things illustrate the larger-than-life madness in Leslie’s method better than the finely rendered, faux-documentary, hallucinatory effects of this last painting—th, and his completed Guggenheim application. When asked, on the strength of a single canvas, to describe his goal as an artist, Leslie put simply: “the restoration of the painting practice.”

8 Stein, P. 28.
9 Ibid, P. 12.
10 Stein, P. 15.
11 Stein, P. 39.
14 Stein, P. 39.
15 Stein, P. 39.
16 The Accident, 1969 (detail)
The go-for-broke breadth of an epic like *Apocalypse Now*—or that accompanying other formidable creative endeavors, from Caravaggio’s *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* (1599-1600) and the *Calling of Saint Matthew* (1599-1600) to Wagner’s *Ring Cycle*—animates Leslie’s visual allegory of Frank O’Hara’s ridiculous death like a turbine engine. It achieves full power, for instance, in *The Accident* (1969-70), a decidedly surreal version of the poet’s smashup that includes three nude furies, a tilted perspective, a beach taxi with its brights on, and what a baleful astrologer would definitely call a killing moon. Additional black-humored dramatics arise in picturing the poet’s body and shoe flying through the air. Also of note: The scene’s unnatural strangeness wafts from the painting’s palette like movie-set fog. Sir Joshua Reynolds’s preferred colors—alizarin crimson, white, black, and yellow ocher—were employed. “They give it,” Leslie told Stein, “a heightened, reddish, very peculiar flesh tone.”

Subsequent paintings in the cycle, like *The Telephone Call*, also made brilliant use of Leslie’s evolving adaptation of the languages of film and history painting. This canvas, for instance, features a paraphrase rather than direct quotation from Poussin’s *The Massacre of the Innocents* (1626-27)—specifically in the placement of the poet’s torso next to the crushing wheel of the Jeep—and an ambiguous illumination scheme that locates the composition’s main light sources significantly beyond naturalism’s conventions: that is, outside the picture frame and, even more weirdly, underneath the vehicle’s chassis. Leslie has said that *The Telephone Call* was painted to look like a frozen moment from a “making-of” picture. It depicts, he declared, “the kind of filming in which you just show the camera people and everybody standing around watching it.” Its ultimate purpose is to fabricate a “certain kind of reality, which is a sign of reality, but not an actual instance of it.”

The emphasis on drama and stagecraft—i.e., artificial reality—typical of both narrative painting and movie conventions, continues throughout the remaining works in “The Killing Cycle.” There’s *The Loading Pier* (1975), with its emancipated women pallbearers in bathing suits and cutoff shorts, its shallow stage-setting, and its Caravaggesque enfilade of bodies; *The Cocktail Party* (1967-78), later removed from the official series, which locates an underdressed couple next to a trio of director’s chairs in the foreground, with O’Hara’s body, the taxi, and the jeep in the far-off distance; and *The Narrator* (1973), also removed from the series at a later date, a hieratic self-portrait of the artist with a shooting schedule in his right hand and a light meter hanging from his belt. Looked at properly, this last work is the closest Leslie has come to declaring outright the creative equivalences between film and narrative painting. After a decade and a half of hard work, this pioneering artist effectively signaled that he had successfully melded two independent if related aesthetic experiences into a single way of making and looking at contemporary painting.

Among other things, Leslie proved with “The Killing Cycle” that painting is uniquely capable of addressing modern-day tragedy through the use of oil, canvas, and the human figure. Then there’s the equally revolutionary idea that it’s still possible to capture life’s really big picture—its most important, affecting and complex stories—using art’s oldest technology. Leslie’s cussedly lyric works assure us that if a painter takes the long view, the artist is still, fundamentally, a storyteller.
Alfred Leslie
American, b. 1927

The Narrator, 1973
Oil on canvas
60 x 48 inches
Courtesy of Stanley and Barbara Grandon

Alfred Leslie
American, b. 1927

I Have The Other Idea About Guilt. It's Not In Us, It's In The Situation, 1967
Watercolor on paper
30 x 44 inches
Courtesy of the artist
Alfred Leslie
American, b. 1927

You Don’t Say The Victim Is Responsible For A Concentration Camp Or A Mack Truck, 1967
Watercolor on paper
30 x 44 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Ours Is A Moral Landscape. We Breathe Deeply, Crowded With Values, 1967
Watercolor on paper
30 x 44 inches
Courtesy of the artist
I have the other idea about guilt. It’s not in us, it’s in the situation. You don’t say that the victim is responsible for a concentration camp or a Mack truck.
Alfred Leslie
American, b. 1927
The Accident, 1969
Oil on canvas
72 x 108 inches
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis and The Saint Louis Art Museum
Gift of Robert and Lois Orchard
Alfred Leslie
American, b. 1927
The Telephone Call, 1971-72
Oil on canvas
96 x 100 inches
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis and The Saint Louis Art Museum
Gift of Robert and Lois Orchard
Alfred Leslie
American, b. 1927
The Loading Act, 1975
Oil on canvas
106 1/8 x 72 3/16 inches
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis and The Saint Louis Art Museum
Gift of Robert and Lois Orchard
Ours is a moral landscape.
We breathe deeply, crowded
with values.
Frank O’Hara (American, 1926 – 1966) is considered one of the most important postwar American poets and is often associated with the New York School, a group of artists, writers, and musicians that comprised the downtown avant-garde of the 1950s and ’60s. His interests and influences included jazz, the visual arts, theater, and film. In the 1960s he served as an art critic and assistant curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Painter and filmmaker Alfred Leslie (American, b. 1927) met Frank O’Hara in 1952, following his first solo show at Tibor de Nagy gallery in New York. In a 1960 letter to his friend, Leslie proposed a framework for “The Last Clean Shirt”:

We will shoot for two SEPARATE LEVALS on the film. One is the VISUAL, the other the HEARD...the spectator will be in TWO places or more SIMULTANEOSLY. NOT AS MEMORY BUT AT THE SAME MOMENT. PARALLELISM! MULTIPLE POINTS OF VIEW!

The film is divided into three sections comprised of the same single shot footage of a black man and white woman riding in a convertible through the streets of downtown Manhattan. The second and third sections contain text provided by O’Hara, which functions initially as a translation of the woman’s speech (in reality, Finnish gibberish) and then as a representation of the driver’s thoughts. O’Hara’s cryptic subtitles contain phrases from or references to many of his poems, published posthumously in the 1971 anthology *The Collected Poems*. By manipulating these lines and collaging them with moving images, O’Hara and Leslie create a layered, experimental work that blends highbrow and bohemian art, poetry, and film to comment on the social and political climate of the mid ’60s.
Alfred Leslie is a multi-disciplinary artist, having worked as a painter, film - and (more recently) video-maker since the 1950s - since before multidisciplinary practice had received any kind of artworld-sanctioned precedent. Radically intelligent, not least for their irreverence, his works define and continue to extend an extraordinary line between personal expression, hysterical mundanity, the allure of Hollywood, anecdotal incisiveness, formal experiment, abstraction and figuration, that is as much the description of one of the most important periods in twentieth century creative practice as it is of twenty-first century apollon.

A friend and contemporary of the Abstract Expressionists, a key figure in the social milieu of downtown New York’s artists and poets in the 1950s and 60s, Leslie’s own canvases were amongst the most revered of his peers - abstractions from which he dramatically turned away to produce giant hyper-real portraits of friends and colleagues with a generosity of spirit, a love of humanity and a ruthless, exacting gaze in equal measure. His early works in film were sui generis, a simultaneous decoding and reconstituting of sound, image and text into new relationships. They reflect the inimitable, multi-layered, casual precision of sound, image and text into new relationships. They define and continue to extend an extraordinary

We will shoot for two SEPERATE LEVALS on the film. One is the VISUAL, the other the HEARD. Unlike most films the sound track of this picture will be a SEPERATE continuity. It will relate of course and be part of the VISUAL circumstance but at the same time the spectator will be in TWO places or more SIMULTANEOUSLY. NOT AS MEMORY BUT AT THE SAME MOMENT PARALLELISM! MULTIPLE POINTS OF VIEW! [sic]

The letter was published in the Millennium Edition of Leslie’s 1960 ‘one-shot review’ The Hasty Papers – a publication that was fearless, personable and forthright in its invitations, with requests being made of Fidel Castro, Ernest Hemmingway, Jean Cocteau, Samuel Beckett and Norman Mailer alike, amongst a slew of others, with a final contributors list that included Jean-Paul Sartre, Allen Ginsberg, Jean Genet, John Ashbery and Barbara Guest. The energy of Leslie’s letter to O’Hara not only describes this social and artistic context and exhaustive enthusiasm for life, but also its celebratory, destructive and continuously regenerative impetus.

Frank O’Hara died after an accident involving a beach taxi on Fire Island in 1966 and is memorialized by Leslie in a series of 1967 paintings, The Killing Cycle. Remarkably, defying death, Leslie continues their collaborative relationship to the present day in recent video works that rearticulate O’Hara’s writing and as a modus operandi that testifies to his capitalized declaration ‘NOT AS MEMORY BUT AT THE SAME MOMENT’. In the same year that O’Hara died a massive fire ripped through the block that contained Leslie’s studio. Described on its 40th anniversary in the New York Times as ‘the heaviest loss of life in the Fire Department’s history’ until September 11 2001, the fire also destroyed practically the entirety of Leslie’s body of work; paintings, photographs, manuscripts, documents, films. Mere scraps were salvaged. It was an event that defined everything Leslie has made since; the reconstruction of lost works (both films and paintings), the representation of surviving ones, the perpetual examination of (his own) past, not as the nostalgic mourning for things lost, but as the relentless dissolution of the imaginary boundary between the past and the present. The tussle between the two links his concerns before and after the fire (before and after O’Hara’s death) and characterizes his work with a startling, surface-level immediacy, a dynamic made content that removes the affliction of chronological time for a continuous present. Leslie’s is a project NOT OF MEMORY BUT AT/IN/OF THE SAME MOMENT, the instant moment of making and of viewing his work, now, our moment.

[...] The Last Clean Shirt seems at first glance to be almost classical - if not structural - in its composition. Like Birth of A Nation 1965 (1965/1998) it is divided into three sections: that is, we watch exactly the same footage (including opening and end credits) three times. It consists almost exclusively of single shot (photographically composed and picture) taken from the back seat of an open-top car being driven around the streets of downtown New York –on the dashboard of which is taped a clock, a timer, as evidence of and a pun on the continuous shot – by a (silent) black man and a white woman who talks endlessly in a language we do not understand (it is actually Finnish gibberish). Her voice is muted and equal to the ambient street sounds and wind.

In the first cycle it is the margins of the frame that captivate - the unstaged buildings and street life of the city make this work as much a social documentary as a artwork. It is in the second - and third - cycles subtitles, written by Frank O’Hara for the project, that become a new visual element that he also exploits in Birth of A Nation 1965. First, the text, which is compelling, acts as a whimsical translation of the woman’s voice, flipping with melodramatic panache and skittish joie de vivre from her concern about outward appearances (hair, weight, style) to hysterial fantasies of “abroad” (China, Africa, Havana, Sweden, Liberia), peppered with European literary luminaries (D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, Proust) and undercut by nursery rhymes and nonsense that are juxtaposed with shimmery philosophical aphorisms: “I have the other idea about guilt/It’s not in us, it’s in the situation.” It is a conversation, relentless in pace, that is only mentally participated in by the driver whose often incongruous thoughts are revealed by the subtitles of the third cycle; random quotations, boredom, repetitions. The end of each cycle is marked by a man’s voice, incongruously intoning the funerary “... ashes to ashes, dust to dust” and Charlie Otis sings The Last Clean Shirt.
This is not absurdism for the sake of it, but marks something like the difference between the “real” time of the single-shot structure and the artificiality of its recording, of “film” time, such that time becomes like a poet playing the construction of himself. Dramatically, the final subtitled thought of the driver, reveals that he, like us, magically also hears Otis singing: “I hate this song/I told Leslie not to use it in the picture.” Suddenly, realities are flipped, the illusion of documentary revealed and replaced by the reality of the film as a construction, the film that we are watching. Time then is not as it is represented—the bell has tolled for that—but is instead the time prescribed in and by the watching of the film, our present in the theatrical auditorium or watching the work on a screen at home. As O’Hara’s female voice subtitle declares: “It’s the nature of us all to want to be unconnected.”

[…] Alfred Leslie is an artist wholly and uniquely engaged with his own legacy, but his reconstructions and recuperation of lost material assume a generative dynamic (and a sense of humour) that transcends self-aggrandisement. Far from fixing his works as historical monuments pegged by a spurious attempt at replicating what they were, to the contrary they are the subject of a continuous renewal. One not least signifies by the release of [Alfred Leslie COOL MAN in a GOLDEN AGE Selected Films] and the introductory quotations that, on it, now preface The Last Clean Shirt. In the first, from 1964, Philip French describes reactions to the film at the New York Film Festival as comparable to the mythological premiere of L’Age d’Or in Paris in 1930: a war zone of angry, confused and irritated viewers. In the second, from 1984, Blaine Allen heralds its ingenuity as astonishingly anticipating the canonised films of Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, Robert Nelson, Joyce Wieland, Jean Marie Straub and Daniel Huillet. The juxtaposition is of course an ironic testament to the vagaries of cultural consensus but, more significantly, extends the film—and Leslie’s work in general—to a status in which we, equally responding as the audience for this work now, are clearly, equally constitutive.

Excerpts from the 2007 essay Continuous Present by Ian White, reproduced courtesy of the Estate of Ian White. The full essay originally appeared in the booklet accompanying the DVD box set Alfred Leslie COOL MAN in a GOLDEN AGE Selected Films distributed by LUX.
Alfred Leslie and Frank O'Hara in Leslie's studio, 1965
Still from ARTS USA: POETRY #11 Frank O'Hara and Ed Sanders, 1966
Richard O. Morris/WNET
16 mm film, 15 minutes
Courtesy Thirteen/WNET New York