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FILM WITHOUT FILM

Considering Films as Objects

Given that the last 40 years have seen the medium of film becoming transferred from its analogue, celluloid-based material form into corresponding units of digital information, I am interested in what happens when the same path is followed in the opposite direction, moving from the idea of a "mental object" perhaps existing as a unit of memory to a physical one that occupies space and implies time. FILM WITHOUT FILM is the title of a series of chain-like wooden and plastic objects of a length of up to 5 meters and a diameter of up to 20 centimeters. Painted various colors, they can be arranged at random within space, with their individual structure and color patterning being derived from the editing patterns and sequences of scenes of individual experimental films from the 60s and 70s that can be found in the Arsenal archive. These objects serve to represent the films they relate to within a different medium, with a sense of recognition thus being created. Within the exhibition space, they lie around in casually decorative fashion, able to be observed and compared, one can imagine what it is going on within them. In principle, they could also be taken apart, carried around, combined, have new objects created from them at will, or be given new names, new imaginary films whose ideas will be collected at a different location, archived, supervised, detailed, sold, given away and lent...

There is a method that can be used to represent the temporal order of a film as a colored, digital filmstrip. Much like slit-scan photography, a large number of individual narrow vertical strips are placed in sequence to form a color-related representation of individual scenes. In this way, you can quickly find your bearings within the film's temporal order and easily jump to a particular bright, dark or colored point using the cursor.[1]

The Pictorial Representation of the Medium

The idea of a film comprising a colored strip within the "meta-medium" of the computer spontaneously recalls the conceptual minimalist wooden objects created by Romanian artist André Cadere called *Barres de bois rond* (1979–78). These rods consisted of hand-made cylindrical segments painted various colors continually placed in order according to different mathematical sequences, with an internal error always being contained in each respective arrangement. These objects were intended to form a commentary on and extension of painting, a "peinture sans fin". They possessed no top or bottom nor back or front and were carried from place to place by Cadere, with those in attendance able to change their position. A (film) archive is subject to certain classification criteria. Objects are collected, sorted, classified and administered. Yet the memory of the archive's contents and their significance is often highly subjective. Despite this however, attempts are made to retain the integrity of the individual films as far as possible, which equally applies to complicated copyright questions.

The films themselves are wound on rolls, while labeled film canisters are stacked along rows of shelves. A simple classification system allows a particularly film roll to be found quickly. It is within the standardized cinema set-up that the best possible screening of a film can take place, it is here that the audience can collectively experience the visual and sound events stored within a film and organized in linear fashion across the period of time that stretches between its start and finish. The screen is large and the sound fills the entire room. We are enticed into the cinema by film posters, newspaper recommendations or local rumors. When the people leave the darkness of the cinema auditorium, you can still see the sensory and emotional impressions on their faces, often still moving in hesitant fashion as they try to put what they have just experienced into words.

Film prints can travel. They are sent by post and hopefully don't get lost on the way. With each new screening, a new sense of connection is created based on the information originally stored in the film, a new context, a new interpretational

opportunity. Film prints can also be taken apart, most simply by removing individual frames, perhaps for technical reasons. The Arsenal film archive also contains a significant section of historical experimental films. These mostly comprise short works of a non-narrative, experimental character, often created in opposition to the fruits of industrial film production. Some of the strategies that underpin these films are of great interest as far as grappling with the current problems that arise from digitization are concerned. One example here is the 30-minute American surrealist film ROSE HOBART by Joseph Cornell from 1936. Cornell acquired a print of the Hollywood film *East of Borneo* at a flea market and then proceeded to re-cut it, shortening the film, adding new images and a new soundtrack in order to create an entirely original and independent statement – a method which radically challenges the idea of a film comprising an unassailable unit of intellectual property. This strategy can also be seen as a form of early sampling. Cornell also changed the color of what had originally been a black and white film by projecting it through blue glass at the first screening, all to a soundtrack of sentimental dance music played from record. For the print that he had made decades later with Jonas Mekas for the Anthology Film Archives, he decided on a red-violet colorization, with this provisional or perhaps now final version also to be found in the Arsenal archive. The soundtrack for this version consists of an audiocassette or mp3/CD with mambo music from the 1960s, which is played asynchronously to accompany each screening of the film. According to the Arsenal film database, ROSE HOBART is 142 meters long and weighs 0.95 kg.

A second film in the archive of interest to me in this context is THE EVIL FAERIE by George Landow aka Owen Land. This film is 4 meters long and weighs 0.05 kg, thus comprising only around 5 percent of the length and weight of ROSE HOBART. It was made in 1966 as part of George Maciunas' Fluxfilm initiative and forms part of the so-called Fluxfilm Anthology. Following a comprehensive title sequence, THE EVIL FAERIE only shows one single gesture by an actor whose identity remains unknown. The film is thus of a purely informative nature, only transporting this one not clearly decipherable gesture. Yet it is possible that the film's very existence also contains a flaw: some sources claim that Owen Land contested authorship of the film and that contrary to general claims and assumptions the film is actually by John

Cavanough, an American sculptor who had already experimented with flicker films in the early 1960s and whose work is also represented on the Fluxfilm Anthology. If Judith Hopf and Henrik Olesen's remake *The Evil Faerie* (2008) thus copied the exact structure and form of the original to suggest a different reading of the gesture that forms its core, their work can be regarded as a sort of modernizing bridge linking together two films made 42 years apart, with the same flaw forming part of the game.

Ephemeral films, defective and fragmentary films, films without authors, films not made for the cinema, films based on specific appropriations: today, this practice has found a platform on the internet. It is likely no coincidence that many of the experimental films now described as forming a canon work at the interface between film and visual arts. The speed with which information about the existence and essence of particular works could be disseminated continually increased during the 20th century, culminating in the rapid spread and internationalization of non-material, conceptual ideas by the start of the 1970s that occurred in parallel with the development of microcomputers and digital networks.[2]

Yet only a few years later, the heady revolutionary energy of the experimental art-film movement was to break down. "Avant-garde film" found itself in a crisis and confronted with some uncomfortable facts, with fundamental doubts demanding that its originally radical concepts be adapted, as feminism, performance and the availability and opportunities for manipulation offered by video all began to represent new challenges. It is during this period that the idea of film without film pops up for a short while, the conception of the cinematic experience (of time) moving beyond the boundaries of "expanded cinema" in order to be transferred to empty spaces (Long *Film For Ambient Light,* Anthony McCall, 1975) or painted screens that change color over a longer period of time (Yellow *Movies,* Tony Conrad, 1972/2009).

Exploring how such semantic boundaries could be crossed proved productive for the visual arts (fountain, pipe). It is interesting to imagine an empty room only modulated by the changing light within it as a "film". Yet a screen painted yellow clearly does not qualify as such according to standard criteria, with this likely

explaining why such works did not find their way into corresponding film archives. The conservation, continued availability and dissemination of information about historical experimental films enable a utopian "sub-history" of film to be created and continually expanded upon (Ernst Schmidt Jr. / Hans Scheugl). That this sustained process is frequently linked to disassembly, disruption and revision forms part of the artistic field's ability for self-regeneration. A comparison with musical sampling once again suggests itself here, with example of DNA sequence analysis also forming another appropriate example. My idea of transforming films into objects within the context of the Living Archive project is an attempt to draw attention to the existence of this precarious context in tangible form. The objects still carry the aura of a shared formal quality which makes them into a set or a mental unit. Their length and structure carry certain pieces of information – regardless of how they are taken apart or recombined, each individual segment can be related back to its original existence as a real, conserved film. They look somewhat unusual within the context of an exploration of audiovisual media, you can carry them around. They are intended to be flexible, not fully rigid.

 "Art that does not show change within our time-space of attending to it we tend to regard as 'object'. Art that does show change within our time-space of attending to it we tend to regard as 'event'. Art that outlives us we tend to regard as 'eternal'. What is an issue is that we ourselves are the division that cuts across what is essentially a sliding scale of time-bases. A piece of paper on the wall is as much a duration as the projection of a film. A static thing, in terms of impulses to the brain, is a repetitive event. Whether the locus for consideration is 'static' or 'moving', we deal with time-spans of attention, the engagement of cognition and memory within the context of art-behaviour.
Neither objects nor events are for the most part accessible. They are rarely 'on show'. Since they are intentional, meaningful signs, this is of no consequence: once an idea is established 'in mind', it has entered the circuit of (art) ideas, and it won't go away, except through debate within that circuit."
Anthony McCall, "Notes on Duration", *Festival of Expanded Cinema* catalogue, ICA, London, 1976

1 See http://0xdb.org/0189133/timeline

2 See for example Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years – The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* or Paul Schimmel (ed.): *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979*