



THE INSTRUMENT MAKER

Philipp Fleischmann's Film Sculptures

Here is a harp, its strings replaced by a filmstrip.

The instrument does not make music. Instead of a soundboard, its heart is a lightbox that forms, shapes, and manipulates light. At the most basic level, the device in combination with a projector is a film looper. The filmstrip travels through the instrument and, in the process, projects a pulsating color composition. The Austrian artist Philipp Fleischmann presents his recent series of works not as technical devices but as film sculptures, implying that their functionality is not primary: that they are to be understood as aesthetic objects in themselves. The film sculptures are a celebration of the physical materiality, the thinness, of perforated photochemical film.

Consideration of the tenuousness and instability of the frame in analog filmmaking is central to Fleischmann's aesthetic. His work can be characterized as revising the conception of the film frame as a single moment in time. To this end, he rejects existing camera apparatus and instead designs capture devices which expose to light an entire roll of film in one instant.

Though the outputs of Fleischmann's light instruments are sometimes perceived as abstract and his art as conceptually driven, his working process is straightforward, collaborative, and craft-related. Conventional ideas of how we record and perceive the world by means of cinema are undercut by an alternative understanding of the so-called moving image.

Fleischmann works exclusively with standard analog film material, but the tools of his practice are not industrial film cameras with their lens-based optics. His starting point is that (in his words): "The material of film allows us to enter a space of negotiation." His work *Austrian Pavilion* (2019) is exemplary. It was created for the Austrian Pavilion designed by Josef Hoffman for the Venice Biennale in 1913, though construction was not completed until 1934. It is situated in the Giardini della Biennale, a park embodying history, value, power, and national identities, where the celebrated art exhibition has taken place since 1895. However, the internationally acclaimed Austrian experimental film tradition has not been represented within the context of

OPPOSITE, LEFT Philipp Fleischmann, *Film Sculpture (2)* (2022), installation view, Wonnerth Dejaco Gallery. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Peter Mochi.

OPPOSITE, RIGHT Philipp Fleischmann, *Film Sculpture (1)* (2022) detail of installation view, Wonnerth Dejaco Gallery. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Peter Mochi.

RIGHT Philipp Fleischmann, *Austrian Pavilion* (2019), installation view. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Susanne Miggitsch.

the Biennale. As a reaction to this exclusion, Fleischmann built a large wooden camera device in the shape of an arch with a filmstrip running through it, mimicking the architecture of the Austrian Pavilion.

The arch camera was prepared and constructed in Vienna, its components transported to the Giardini where they were reassembled inside the two main exhibition rooms of the Austrian Pavilion. Since the space is symmetrical, the 'light machine' was placed on the left and the right side of the pavilion. Additional cameras in the form of bars were attached in order to include light from both inside and outside the gallery. The film starts in front of the pavilion, travels through the main corridor to the back of the garden, entering the space again from the side pavilion, oscillating between the exterior and the interior. The camera focuses the light by means of pinholes arranged at regular intervals. Since there are no internal divisions with the camera, there are no defined frames or frame lines, so the entire photosensitive surface of the filmstrip is exposed as a single image. As for loading and unloading the film before and after exposure, Fleischmann explains: "The film is already introduced inside the arch at the time when the camera is put together. There are openings on each side of the wooden frame where one can thread new film. We use changing bags in order to not involuntarily expose the film."

When I watched the projection of *Austrian Pavilion* at the Film Museum in Vienna, I was reminded of endoscopy and similar medical imaging technologies designed to enable a camera to navigate through natural and surgical orifices into cavities and tubes inside the body. Orientation is almost impossible in such an environment. The visual becomes palpable.

In earlier works, Fleischmann's constructed cameras were used as tools "to reconfigure the image machine. ... Sculptural aspects were already important at the very beginning of my work with film." For his recent *Film Sculptures* (1-3), which were initially presented at the Wonnerth Dejaco Gallery in Vienna, at the 16th Lyon Biennale, and at the Museum of Modern Art (Mumok) in Vienna, he developed looping devices to convert film material into sculpture, such as the harp device described above. The 16mm film is not only guided through the projector, creating abstract animated images on the wall, but the filmstrip itself occupies a major part of the physical space where it is smoothly



transported through the interior workings of the instrument. The aesthetic result is an analog collage of manually produced forms, rhythms and colors.

Fleischmann's passion for analog film has its roots in Austria's alternative film culture. Since 2014 he has been the artistic director of the Friedl Kubelka School for Independent Film, having studied with Friedl Kubelka vom Gröller who founded the school in 2006 in Vienna. Since then it has been keeping analog filmmaking alive in Austria and beyond. In his words: "I work with the material of film, with the surface that is sensitive to light. Each space or environment asks for the development of a particular relationship."

As much a sculptor as a filmmaker, Fleischmann pushes through the "moving" image, to reveal its opposite—time distilled into space, thereby undercutting the rigidity of the time-space distinction, at least as regards the cinematic. Fleischmann's unconventional apparatuses, requiring analog photo-chemical procedures, challenge the hierarchies of value within and around the film frame, and actively reimagine the process of producing celluloid images.

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