

Art in America

MUNGO THOMSON

JOHN CONNELLY

Long interested in both the subtext and paratext of, well, everything—from Road Runner cartoons to NASA images of outer space—Mungo Thomson has built a career on pulling back curtains to reveal the mechanics of production and reception. For “The Varieties of Experience,” the artist used predigital tools to expand on his tried-and-true themes and strategies.

Best illustrating this return to older technology was the 2009 *Untitled* (Margo Leavin Gallery, 1970-), 2009, Super 16mm film, approx. 5¼ minutes; at John Connelly. As they spin around, the Rolodexes flip through the names of thousands of contacts the gallery has made since it opened: artists, electricians, framers, collectors, customs officials—all the people that exist around and between artwork and its audience.

Sharing the exhibition's title, the other film in the show (from 2008) used Nam Jun Paik's *Zen for Film* (1962-64) as a negative from which to make a new print. In Paik's piece, a clear 16mm film leader becomes increasingly dirty as it attracts dust from the space in which it is shown; the dust appears as dark spots on the screen's white ground. Noting that dust is largely composed of human skin cells (meaning that the dirty film is a composite of artwork and audience), Thomson reversed Paik's film, transforming the clear space into a black ground, and the dust/audience into white specks reminiscent of stars in a night sky.

The vinyl LP *b/w* (2008) sustained the Zen vibe via ambient relaxation sounds—with a twist. For one side of the record, Thomson sped up humpback whale song until it sounded like birds chirping; for the other, he slowed down birdsong until it mimicked the sound of whales. The resemblance is downright spooky—you would never realize the swap without reading the press release—and knowing you can be so easily fooled is equally unsettling.

—Casey Ruble

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