

ARTFORUM

SUMMER 2009

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

Mungo Thomson

JOHN CONNELLY PRESENTS

Elliptical has many meanings, from oval, egg-shaped, or oviform to cryptic, ambiguous, or obscure. It might also denote something that has been abridged or is laconic about its means (which is to say nothing of its effects). Less descriptive than functional, this term surfaced—sometimes obliquely—throughout Mungo Thomson's recent show, which was gamely titled "The Varieties of Experience" in dual homage to William James and Carl Sagan (James's seminal *The Varieties of Religious Experience* was taken up by Sagan as *The Varieties of Scientific Experience*, a 2006 publication based on his Gifford Lectures on natural theology). The resulting constellation indeed highlighted an "elliptical" tendency in Thomson's art—one that was explicitly shown on his announcement poster, which bore a negative image of a lunar cycle, and one that actively figured in his ambitious drawing project *The Ellipses*, 2009, an archive of predigital commercial drafting templates. Each template renders a particular oval in variously sized holes; each drawing is a stenciling of one template in black ink on white paper. In aggregate, the twenty-five notations trigger an optical phenomenon worthy of Bridget Riley while also evoking planetary rotation and the visual effluvia of cosmological events more generically.

Other works likewise relate to the celestial—at a particularly canny remove. Following the installation of his ongoing project *Negative Space* at the Hammer Museum last year (large-scale photographic murals of galaxies, culled from an online archive of copyright-free starscape shots taken by the Hubble Space Telescope), *The Varieties of Experience*, 2008, extended Thomson's wry mysticism. Where *Negative Space* converts black to white—the dark chasm of outer space becomes the antiseptic pallor of the gallery through Photoshop magic—this film in Super 16 mm is predicated upon a comparable, and comparably site-specific, inversion. Thomson sourced a copy of Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film*, 1962–64, that had been exhibited enough times to have collected a good amount of dust—as in actual traces of the audience—on its otherwise uncomposed celluloid (Paik's piece famously being either a cliché of Zen emptiness or its most profound articulation) and reprinted it in the reverse: a black film dotted with scattered white masses, a formal registration and physical index of those who had watched it in the past, now rendered as veritably new-agey stardust.

Untitled (Margo Leavin Gallery, 1970–), 2009, a film that screened on the wall opposite *The Varieties of Experience*, retrospects an obsolete instrument and the community it mapped. A voyeuristic foray into Thomson's LA dealer's old-school Rolodex—an archive-cum-sculptural object now that the gallery has gone digital—*Untitled*

Mungo Thomson,
*Untitled (Margo Leavin
Gallery, 1970–)*,
2009, still from a color
film in Super 16 mm,
5 minutes 11 seconds.



shows a lost art world, with its artists, framers, collectors, and the like flashing by on the cards as a collection of so many names. Some still legible, others wholly obfuscated by stray pen marks or the effects of time, these cards plot relationships among those who make, move, sell, buy, view, and write about artworks. Lest the work seem too nostalgic, an artist's book, *California City*, 2009, registers Thomson's deep ambivalence about representation and the faith that so often motivates it. The book centers around the namesake Mojave Desert locale, where, in 1989, Maria Paula Acuña claimed to have had an epiphanic encounter with the Virgin Mother, prompting pilgrimages in which people tried capturing their own spiritual visions by snapping Polaroids in the sunbeams. It so happened that December of 2008, when Thomson recorded these latter-day spirit photographs by taking his own pictures of them, "marked the end of instant film manufacture by Polaroid"—an elliptical tribute to holy relics of many kinds, ultimately as unwitting as it is Delphic.

—Suzanne Hudson