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Mungo Thomson at Karma

January 14–March 4, 2023

During Mungo Thomson's recent exhibition of stop-motion animations, *Time Life*, Karma's white cube exhibition space was transformed into a womb-like interior. Padded walls blotted out ambient noise while blackout curtains shielded viewers from light sources that might distract from a large video projection spanning the far wall. Rhythmic drumming filled the room as images of hands folding pastry dough flashed on the screen. Images of baking tutorials gave way to diagrams of fish deboning and a series of ingredient lists from dessert recipes. Several videos in the exhibition progressed similarly, with arrays of kinetic imagery flashing in rapid succession, recalling what film theorist Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky has called "the process genre"—mostly found in cinema, the phrase describes work that represents the chronology of a given process, be it building an igloo, washing your body in the bath, working on an assembly line, or Thomson's case, decapitating a lobster.[1] Thomson, like Skvirsky, is fascinated by the aesthetic experience of mundane procedures. But while Skvirsky locates the magnetizing effect of the process genre in the linear flow of action, Thomson goes rogue, assembling instructive images so they are no longer continuous or didactic. In each of the eight "volumes" that screened on a loop at Karma, Thomson scrambles the process genre's syntax to produce a new, affective cinematic language that foregrounds bodily engagements with digital media.

Each video in *Time Life* comprises high-resolution photographs of images and text gathered from various print sources: often from the Time-Life Books encyclopedias (circa 1960–2001), but also from other sources, including Pantone's 2021 color guide and countless books featuring reproductions of Auguste Rodin's sculptures. After exhaustively photographing this source material, page by page, Thomson sutures the images together at a consistent, propulsive pace (eight, ten, or twelve frames per second). Then, the artist either cuts the video to music or scores the video after the fact; in either scenario, he cultivates a distinct emotional experience through his audiovisual marriages. In *Volume 1. Foods of the World* (2014–22), hands performing tasks, such as grinding a pestle in a mortar or beating eggs, are animated as though they were producing the video's clangy score. The images are stripped of their instructional context—or, perhaps they move at such a rapid rate that their context appears and disappears too quickly for viewers to process its meaning. Instead, the images dance to a rhythmic, percussive score layered with the types of jangles that might emanate from a kitchen. Edited together, the hands appear to make music, not moules-frites.

As a structural conceit, process does not just appear as the content of Thomson's videos, but also dictates their form: The works are meant to resemble the machinations of a high-speed scanner—the heartless stuff of machines—but they do so in a way that engages viewers in abstract emotionality.[2] *Volume 7. Color Guide* (2021–22), for instance, cycles through reproductions of all 2,161 Pantone colors, with every color swatch filling the entire screen. The grainy, microscopic photographs of the swatches quickly fade in and out like a beating heart. A textured, ambient electronic score complements the imagery, matching photographic noise with sonic noise and anchoring viewers in its persistent, high-pitched zipping sounds. During the exhibition's opening, Thomson revealed his intent to make viewers cry at the mere presentation of color. And, while color swatches might not offer a narrative process to remix, the process of their digitization here becomes the locus of a unique aesthetic and emotional experience, a weepie for the digital age.

While Thomson remixes imagery to produce novel, emotionally resonant videos, he simultaneously recalls early photographic and cinematic history. *Volume 2. Animal Locomotion* (2015–22) depicts images from a fitness- and health-themed book series produced by Time-Life. In it, men's and women's bodies run, row, strengthen, and lengthen in colorful sports apparel as an airy, staccato score complements the machinic qualities of the human body. The work's title directly refers to Eadweard Muybridge, who produced pioneering photographic studies of animals in movement. Like in Muybridge's early experiments, Thomson's source material arrests the body's movement through photographic capture. But through Thomson's reanimation, the bodies come alive, infusing the succession of images with a haptic fluidity.

The palliative effect of Thomson's rhythmic editing evokes similar responses from the viewer's body as do ASMR videos. ASMR relies on the "incredible affective charge" triggered by an almost synesthetic attunement to the sensations of mundane activities, like cutting a bar of soap or giving a haircut.[3] As with ASMR, in this exhibition, tactile or embodied experiences, like flipping through a T*ime-Life* book on exercise or actually stretching your hamstrings, are mediated only through the visual and auditory, still to a satisfying result.

The spectatorial pleasures of *Volume 2. Animal Locomotion* are distinct from the process genre's characteristic "effacement of toil." Skvirsky writes that "processual representation […] aestheticizes labor—or, put differently, it represents the labor it depicts as *approaching* the magic standard of zero labor."[4] Instead, Thomson's videos are evidently arduous, both in their production and in the labors they depict. Without witnessing the full process of a task or technique, we are instead left with images of tasks mid-completion. The soothing, gratification-by-proxy we might feel witnessing the uninterrupted flow of a task is refigured by Thomson as the comfort of digital experience.

1. Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky, *The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetic of Labor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

2. Cassie Packard, "Half-Analog, Half-Digital: Mungo Thomson Interviewed," *BOMB*, February 8, 2023,

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Mungo Thomson, *Volume 2. Animal Locomotion* (installation view) (2015–22). Karma, Los Angeles, 2023. 4K video with sound, 5 minutes, 21 seconds; edition of 5, 2 AP. Music: Laurie Spiegel, "Clockworks" (1974). Image courtesy of the artist and Karma. Photo: Elon Schoenholz.