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Art Now LA

Mungo Thomson
Time Life
Drawing Viewers In and Holding Their Attention
Karma Los Angeles
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by Jody Zellen



Time Life is an installation by Mungo Thomson consisting of eight short stop motion animations that cycle through pages of books accompanied by soundtracks composed by Andrea Centazzo and Pierre Favre, Laurie Spiegel, Sven-Åke Johansson, Lee Ranaldo, Ernst Karel, Pauline Oliveros, Adrian Garcia, and John McEntire. *Time Life* has myriad associations— the iconic magazines *Time* and *Life*, as well as a series of books (published between 1961 and 2000) spanning various topics from art and photography to science and history.

The title of the show brings to mind the works of Matt Lipps, who created a series of photographs based on the 17-volume book set, *Library of Photography*, published by Time-Life Books in 1970-1972. For this series, Lipps cut out and assembled pictures from the actual books, placing the black and white fragments on shelves and then re-photographing them against colored backgrounds. Printed large, these arrangements explored how new spatial and conceptual relationships could be created through the juxtaposition of unrelated images. Lipps was also interested in the connections between the analog and the digital, a subject that Thomson also explores.

Thomson's eight films touch on a range of seemingly arbitrary topics: *Volume 1. Foods of the World* (2014–22), *Volume 2. Animal Locomotion* (2015–22), *Volume 3. Flowers (Nahbild)* (2015–22), *Volume 4. 1000 Questions*(2016–22), *Volume 5. Sideways Thought* (2020–22), *Volume 6. The Working End* (2021–22), *Volume 7. Color Guide* (2021–22), *Volume 8. Seashells (for Shane)*. In each fast-paced film, the reproductions fly by at such speed that it is often impossible to read or retain what is depicted. Each work is carefully composed and choreographed in addition to being syncopated with a unique soundtrack that enhances the flow of information.

Flowers In the first film *Volume 1. Foods of the World* (2014–22), snippets of pages from cook books are presented ranging from fragmented recipes, pictures of food— wine, fruits, vegetables, all kinds of meals— as well as titles and other details from the various pages. As the film cycles through the images, it becomes obvious that they have been photographed at different orientations so some pictures are on their side or even upside down. Many are cropped to create a quasi-narrative that moves in close, then further back to isolate different aspects of the pages. Sometimes the grid of the copy stand is present, alluding to the apparatus used to create the work.

A similar disorientation occurs in *Volume 2. Animal Locomotion* (2015–22), where Thomson captures images of both men and women doing various types of exercises (the title refers to the famous photographic series by Eadweard Muybridge). For *Volume 3. Flowers (Nahbild)* (2015–22), the sequence moves through reproductions of flowers while oscillating between close-ups where the printed dot screen becomes an abstract pattern to images of the flowers with their names pictured in the landscape, or in gardens. In *Volume 4. 1000 Questions* (2016–22), every question from a 1992 book set called *Understanding Science and Nature* bombards the screen, whereas in *Volume 7. Color Guide* (2021–22), the entire frame is filled with colors culled from more than 2,000 Pantone swatches that appear to extend across the room while creating an ever-changing glow in the space.

As the current news is filled with stories about AI and machine learning/vision, it is easy to imagine accumulations of data like Thomson's collection of images being fed to a computer. That his starting point is printed rather than digitized source material resonates. It also brings up questions between the digital and the analog, especially with respect to how-to manuals. For example, when still images are filmed in sequence, they become animated and when they were originally created, the aim was to provide step-by-step instructions, whereas today if one wants to learn how to cook, or tie a knot, or perform a certain stretch, thousands of videos can be found online.

Although Thomson's films are fast-paced, they harken back to a bygone era and retain the CMYK dot patterns of pre-digital mechanical reproduction. The films are mesmerizing and sophisticated and hard to turn away from. While one can imagine a machine being instructed to scan through and preserve millions of pages from books, Thomson's films are handcrafted to appear mechanical and use a carefully sequenced progression of imagery and sounds to draw viewers in and hold their attention. They are amazing progressions that resonate formally, structurally, aesthetically and conceptually long after the screen goes dark.

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