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A Medium in the Making: Slicing Familiar Films Into Something New

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MILWAUKEE - Movie-loving artists divide roughly into two groups, fans and users. The fans flock to films, or the nearest video rental store, for both respite and inspiration; they discuss and sometimes write about what they see with distinctive intelligence. Their numbers are legion; their apotheosis is probably Manny Farber, the artist who had a distinguished career as a film critic before turning to painting full time.

The users are such impassioned, if not addicted, cinephiles that movies become the central component of their art. Films are not just inspiration for these artists; they are raw material that can be appropriated, manipulated and reshaped into another work of art, with their names on the credit line.

The user population, while hardly legion, is growing. Spurs to their expanding ranks include Pop Art and Andy Warhol's films; the widespread photo-appropriation of 1980's art (it is a short step from still to moving images); and the advent of digital video and computer editing. The last greatly increased the reach of video, although artists like Jack Goldstein and Dara Birnbaum were appropriating from film and television in the early 80's. Over the last 10 or 15 years, the recycling of existing films into art has been taken for granted.

Which makes it interesting that "CUT/Film as Found Object in Contemporary Video" at the Milwaukee Art Museum is the first exhibition in an American museum to focus on film appropriation in contemporary art, or more precisely, contemporary video. The show, which was first seen in December at the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami, Fla., has been organized by Stefano Basilico, a former adjunct curator of contemporary art at the Milwaukee museum who once ran an art gallery in SoHo and now works as an art adviser in New York.

With 14 works by eight artists that mostly date from 2000 or later, "CUT" is in many ways a small show of recent art. But with a spacious, well-choreographed installation that moves from lighter to darker galleries, it covers quite a bit of ground in terms of the ways, means and end results of film appropriation. It also includes some recent standouts of the genre, including Douglas Gordon's 1993 "24-Hour Psycho" (which is just that) and Christian Marclay's 2002 "Video Quartet," a rousing homage to the silver screen.

In addition, the exhibition gains in scale because movies and moving images in general are so much with us. They take up a lot of the cultural landscape, both reflecting and conditioning society, forming a kind of collective dream life. Needless to say, this gives artists a lot to work with psychologically, formally, narratively and in terms of spectacle, stereotypes, stars and the culture and protocols of moviemaking.

Of course borrowing from and, in essence, privatizing something as public and elaborately collaborative as a movie can be a particularly aggressive, even Oedipal, form of artmaking. But it can also be pure laziness. It gives an artist's work an instant worldly aura, and the viewer the reflexive thrill of finding a bit of Hollywood in a gallery or a museum. But then what happens?

Do artists exploit our susceptibility to the movies? Do they reshape their borrowings enough for their work to achieve a degree of autonomy? Or do you come away feeling that, when all is said and done, you would just as soon look at the original? All these reactions can be had in the darkened galleries of "CUT/Film as Found Object in Contemporary Video."

As the title indicates, Mr. Basilico has concentrated on artists who literally manipulate existing films, for the most part subjecting them to extreme editing or screening them in unusual ways. The galleries almost echo with Jasper Johns's famous working principle: "Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it."

Works by Mr. Marclay, an artist-musician and splicing genius, bracket the show. It opens with his 1995 "Telephones," which samples scenes from scores of Hollywood movies in which actors answer, talk on or hang up telephones and melds these moments, almost always turning points in the plot, into a single conversation.

It ends with "Video Quartet," a four-screen extravaganza that lifts musical sequences and various dramatically noisy scenes (war, people screaming from all sorts of movies, Oscar Levant playing the piano and Meryl Streep portraying a violinist) and arranges them in a delirious crescendo of song and emotion that gives the phrase "visual music" a whole new life.

Such adept slicing and dicing is a recurring technique here. It is least interesting in Michael Joaquin Grey's admittedly jewel-like "Blink," which miniaturizes bits of Leni Riefenstahl's "Olympia" to the tune of Bjork's version of "Leaving on a Jet Plane." In "CNN Concatenated," Omer Fast edits scores of one-word snippets spoken by various television newscasters into a monologue that no talking head would ever give.

In a major feat of cross-referencing called "Learning From Las Vegas," Kevin and Jennifer McCoy have taken 21 films set in that desert city and rearranged their scenes according to 120 categories, each on a separate DVD. (The piece has an elaborate carrying case/display station that includes a monitor.)

The "Learning From Upholstery" DVD was playing the day I visited; you can also learn from lingerie, fake monuments, stealing, cowboys, gold and even art. The piece applies Mr. Marclay's telephone principle with a somewhat monotonous anthropological precision, declining the conventions and set-pieces with which most movies are filled. Each DVD functions as a kind of chart, tracing the way these conventions change with time and according to the quality of the movie.

The weapon of choice of Candice Breitz, a South African artist, is shrinkage, achieved by much slicing but without any disruption of continuity. Her "Soliloquy Trilogy" trims "Basic Instinct," "Dirty Harry" and "The Witches of Eastwick" of everything but those minutes when the leads of those films - Sharon Stone, Clint Eastwood and Jack Nicholson - are on screen (or speaking just off camera). This brutal crunching creates a loose allegory about a fallen woman who finds her soul, a good man who sins, and the Devil, who never changes.

It also extracts the high voltage of the movie star and the function of a lead character; while never on screen for more than eight or nine minutes in total, each actor conveys the gist of the movie's narrative.

Paul Pfeiffer goes beyond eliminating or rearranging sequences to changing the images themselves. In his haunting "Long Count," three short loops on tiny monitors show films of Muhammad Ali's boxing matches with Sonny Liston, George Foreman and Joe Frazier. In all the figures of the boxers have been digitally erased. Their ghostly residue and the rapt audience exemplify Mr. Pfeiffer's disturbing yet magical meditations on the role of race and black athletes in American society.

Subtraction is not always the path taken. Mr. Gordon's "24-Hour Psycho" stretches Hitchcock's classic suspense movie into an excruciating yet oddly riveting nonsuspense experience. Mired in slowness, and projected on a double-sided screen in the middle of a gallery, "Psycho" acquires a monumentality that seems commensurate with its place in the popular imagination.

The most emotionally powerful work in the show is Pierre Huyghe's 1998 "L'Ellipse," a triple projection that is also the only one to add to an existing film. Mr. Huyghe has created a scene that was never actually part of Wim Wenders's 1977 movie "The American Friend," but was merely implied by that directorial staple of pacing and economy, a jump cut. The omitted scene is a 10-minute walk that would have been taken by Jonathan, played by Bruno Ganz, from his room in a Paris hotel, across the Seine, to a friend's apartment, where he learns that he has a fatal disease.

In the original film, the action jumps from the hotel scene, played on the first screen, to the elevator of the apartment building and Jonathan's subsequent reading of his doctor's report (which is false), a sequence that plays on the third screen. However, Mr. Huyghe's work pauses in between, on the

middle screen, to show us in a single tracking shot, Mr. Ganz, now 20 years older, taking the anxious walk Jonathan never took in the film. One result is an emotionally rich conflation; the 1977 fiction is extended in real 1998 time, when Mr. Ganz's own life is two decades further along, and undoubtedly more shadowed by the prospect of death.

Despite the literalness of its title, this show is not entirely faithful to its premises. Mr. Fast's CNN images are taken from television, while "Horror Chase," another work by the McCoys, is appropriation-free. Made from scratch but relying heavily on movie convention, it shows a terrified man, pursued by an unseen monster, hurtling endlessly through the rooms of a movie-set house, because the film repeatedly changes direction, running backward and forward.

Such fissures highlight the absence of works using found video like "Dial History," Johan Grimonprez's harrowing television news collage about airplane hijackings, or Seth Price's recent, rather brilliant usurpation of some raw video shot by Joan Jonas in the early 1970's. Also missing are those looser forms of appropriation that restate or refilm an existing film, as in Cheryl Donegan's remake of Godard's "Contempt"; Brice Dellsperger's cross-dressed versions of "Dressed to Kill"; Jon Routson's movie-house bootlegs.

Still, "CUT" brings needed curatorial clarity to an expanding genre that is challenging to survey. The catalog provides an expansive backdrop by flanking Mr. Basilico's lucid discussion of the works with essays by Rob Yeo, on the history of film appropriation in underground film (starting with Joseph Cornell), and by Lawrence Lessig, on the creative chill that recent changes in copyright law are bringing to the arts.

You come away from this show with a new sense of film as a found object; as an immense reservoir of untapped form and feeling; and as a highly charged raw material by which artists can celebrate, examine and stave off the deluge of images bearing down on us from all sides.