

The New York Times

Art in Review

Published: March 20, 2009

Mungo Thomson
The Varieties of Experience

John Connelly Presents
625 West 27th Street
Chelsea

The Los Angeles-based conceptualist Mungo Thomson specializes in clever reversals and inversions, tweaking art and ideas of the 1960s and '70s to make them relevant today. This works about half of the time, if his current show is anything to go by.

In the title work Mr. Thomson obtained a dusty copy of Nam June Paik's "Zen for Film" (1962-64), a clear film leader that looks, when projected, like a blank canvas. He made a negative print of Paik's film, in which specks of dust flicker across a black rectangle. The transformation isn't sufficient, and the spirit of the original work remains intact.

"Untitled (Margo Leavin Gallery, 1970-)," a 16-millimeter film of the ancient Rolodexes once used by Mr. Thomson's Los Angeles gallery, works on a more profound level. Though clearly indebted to Rodney Graham's film of his 1930s German typewriter, Mr. Thomson's project meditates on a different kind of obsolescence: social rather than technological.

The Rolodex cards are set in motion by an invisible hand and filmed from various angles. There's a poetic equivalence between the spinning cards and the rotating film projector, but just as interesting are the contacts that flash by: artists, curators, dealers, critics, celebrities who happen to collect. It evokes a time when the whole art world could fit into a single card file. KAREN ROSENBERG