

Behind the Scenes. Notes on the films and paintings of Morgan Fisher Christophe Gallois

When asked in a recent interview to expand on the pivotal role of the film industry in his work, Morgan Fisher evoked a childhood memory, recalling his discovery, amidst the debris washed ashore by the tide, of a tangled roll of 16mm film on a beach.¹ But while he remembered being instantly enraptured by the sight of this lump of film, he pointed out that it was not because of the images imprinted on it – which had in fact mostly faded. Rather, it was the film itself, as an object, that seemed to elicit his reaction – the materiality of film, the regular succession of its perforations, the outlines of its frames.

This episode in many respects prefigures the films on which Fisher started working in the late 1960s. While revolving around cinema, they are not concerned with the works, actors or directors that make up its history. Rather, they address cinema from the angle of its devices, techniques, conventions and standards – all the elements surrounding film yet excluded from the cinemagoer's traditional viewing experience. This is what Fisher refers to as the double identity of cinema, attracting our attention to the fact that the enjoyment of its official facet – the film as we experience it in a dark room – implies, in a slightly schizophrenic relation, that its hidden facet – its technical characteristics – remains invisible. This relation is what his own films invert by bringing to the fore that which usually stays concealed behind the scenes. This approach is epitomised by films such as *The Director and His Actor Look at Footage Showing Preparations for an Unmade Film (2)* (1968), which, as its title indicates, focuses on the pre-production takes for a film that will never be shot, and *Production Stills* (1970), which, through a series of Polaroids placed in front of the camera as they are being taken during the shooting of the film, documents the circumstances of its own making by a team comprising a director, a camera man, a sound recordist and a stills photographer.

As suggested by the series of drawings entitled Film Cans and Film Boxes, which Fisher produced in 1968, the same year he started directing, film stock holds an emblematic position in this system. Because it links the different stages of production, from shooting to screening, it stands for the institution of cinema as a whole. Incidentally, Fisher notes, we are reminded of its power of evocation by the recurrence of perforated film strips on film festival posters.² The way in which film reels epitomise all the facets of cinema is the subject of *Standard Gauge* (1984), a first-person narrative constructed from bits of 35mm film collected by the artist while working intermittently in the film industry as a stock-film researcher, editor, assistant director and even stand-in actor. The individual pieces of film reel from which this film was assembled are displayed one by one on a light table, to such effect that their materiality remains manifest. Referring to various aspects of cinematographic production, they comprise rushes retrieved from the bins of film development laboratories or salvaged during shootings in which Fisher took part³ as well as elements used at different stages of the production process: film leaders, subtitles, reference shots used in colour correction, editing instructions etc. Describing their function, their history, the anecdotes that surround them, and the often fortuitous circumstances of their procurement, the accompanying off-voice commentary begins with a few sentences reminiscent of the previously mentioned story about the roll of film the artist once found on a beach. In this particular

1. See Jean-Philippe Antoine, Christophe Gallois, 'Conversation avec Morgan Fisher', *20/27*, no. 4 (2010), pp. 32–49.

2. Ibid.

3. Among others, *Standard Gauge* includes rushes from Fisher's work as a second editor on Roger Corman's *The Student Nurses* (1970) and as main editor on Willard Huyck's and Gloria Katz's *Messiah of Evil* (1973), a film in which he also has a cameo appearance as the assistant of a blind, deaf and mute art dealer.

instance, the subject matter is 35mm film, but the attraction it exerts is the same: 'The first time I ever handled 35 millimeter motion picture film was in the summer of 1964. The older brother of a friend of mine had been working on a film in Los Angeles, and he had brought back with him to the East Coast as a souvenir a short end of a black-and-white negative raw stock. [...] I remember how moved I was of being able to handle this roll of film. In the time since then I've worked around 35 millimeter on and off. I've never seen a piece of 35 that I didn't want to pick up and look at, and sometimes I've been free to keep pieces that I've come across.'⁴

Fisher readily acknowledges that using film to make work about the film industry complicates his position toward it: 'I regard the industry as a source of ideas and materials, and to some degree as a model, even though I also criticize it. My attitude towards it is ambivalent, to say the least.'⁵ This attitude has been much commented on – so much so, in fact, that it has come to be viewed as one of the defining traits of Fisher's cinematographic production.⁶ Because it stages the characteristic means of production of the film industry, *Production Stills* has for instance been described as 'an industrial production of a non-industrial film'⁷. Similarly, it has often been said that *Standard Gauge* was a 16mm film – the format of amateur, independent or experimental cinema – about 35mm film – the typical format of the film industry.⁸ Moreover, Fisher's approach has occasionally been criticised, as though by venturing too close to Hollywood, the declared enemy of experimental cinema, he risked burning his wings.

Since the early days of Fisher's career as an artist, his singular position in the field of cinema, which Mark Webber, in a recent essay, located in a 'filmic Bermuda Triangle'⁹ between the film industry, experimental cinema and contemporary art, has been equally marked by a continuing interest in visual arts. Although Fisher has often underlined his affinities with other West Coast filmmakers such as Thom Andersen, with whom he collaborated on several productions, the influential figures he cites in relation to his films are artists – Duchamp, Warhol, Sol LeWitt – rather than directors. This inclination toward the realm of visual arts finds an expression in his early drawings, the Film Cans and Film Boxes, but also the Pepsi Case Pieces (1968), which, on account of both their subject (industrially manufactured objects) and sculptural treatment (isometric perspective, grid), he situates at the crossroads between Warhol and Minimal Art. It further manifests itself, from the 1970s onwards, in the shift of his cinematographic practice from the projection room to the exhibition space, among others in a series of installations highlighting different aspects of the filmic medium. A case in point is *Color Balance* (1980), in which the interaction on a common screen of three randomly moving circles of light (effectively showing the same image, processed in red, green and blue, of a ping-pong ball set in motion by a stream of air), broadcast by three non-synchronised projectors, visualises the system of colour photographic reproduction developed by James Clerk Maxwell in the early 1860s. It eventually reaches its full scope in the paintings and installations Fisher has been producing since the mid-1990s. While formally speaking very different from his films – as they are mostly monochromes –, they nevertheless share several of their characteristics, starting with the interest in what could be termed the scenes behind the work: its ideological context, conventions and formats.

Similar to the text which, as a preamble to *Standard Gauge*, retraces the history of 35mm film since its invention in the early 1890s by an employee of Thomas

4. Morgan Fisher, 'Standard Gauge' [1984], script published in *Screen Writings. Scripts and Texts by Independent Filmmakers*, ed. Scott MacDonald (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 178–89.

5. Scott MacDonald, 'Morgan Fisher: An Interview', *Film Quarterly*, vol. XL, no. 3 (Spring 1987), p. 25. Further on in the interview Fisher also describes the industry as a 'point of reference and a source, in both a positive and a negative sense, something to move toward and at the same time to react to'.

6. See for instance David E. James, 'Hollywood Extras: One Tradition of Avant-Garde Film in Los Angeles', *October*, no. 90 (Fall 1999), pp. 3–24.

7. MacDonald, 'Morgan Fisher: An Interview', p. 30.

8. See for instance Alain Williams, 'Standard Gauge', *Film Quarterly*, vol. XXXIX, no. 1 (Autumn 1985), pp. 32–4, and Scott MacDonald, 'Morgan Fisher: Film on Film', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 28, no. 2 (Winter 1989), pp. 13–27.

9. Mark Webber, 'Escape from the Filmic Bermuda Triangle', *Tate Etc.*, no. 5 (Autumn 2005), pp. 62–3.

Edison's motion picture company, Fisher's painterly practice springs from a reflection on the 'standards' that define painting. This analysis unfolds around what Fisher calls 'painting as usual'¹⁰, a notion primarily defined by the conventional format of the rectangle – 'so conventional', in fact, 'as to become invisible': 'The way you ordinarily make a painting is that you begin with a rectangle, or sometimes a square, and then you do something to the surface inside the rectangle. But the ordinary way of making a painting makes an ordinary painting.'¹¹ Works such as the series of Italian Paintings (1995), whose complex formats are the result of a series of operations starting with books placed on a flat surface¹², therefore try to undermine the randomness of these choices, which more often than not condition the format of the work of art.

The use of monochrome colours in most of Fisher's paintings also partakes of his questioning of pictorial conventions. While the exclusive presence of grey in several series allows the artist to 'occupy space without meaning anything'¹³, the more engaging monochromes use borrowed colours, referring for instance to standards, as in the colours of the chromatic circle at work in the Pendant Pair Paintings (2007), or to external elements. The five buff, green, salmon, grey and blue panels from *The Times Atlas of the World, Mid-Century Edition* (2011), a series specifically devised for the entrance space at Raven Row, thus allude to the colours of the dust jackets of the five volumes that constitute the famous atlas published between 1955 and 1959, from which the work borrows its title. Arranged in an order that matches the chronology of publication, the coloured surfaces are exhibited alongside blue blocks whose colour and size reprise the distinctive features shared by the five books.

Other conventions implied by the notion of 'painting as usual' concern the dimensions of the work and the conditions of display. Following a logic reminiscent of *Screening Room* (1968), a film which is recreated at each screening so as to adapt to the context of its presentation¹⁴, one of Fisher's strategies to by-pass the conventions that generally condition these parameters consists of linking them to the architecture of the exhibition space. The size and shape of the grey monochromes from the series of Door and Window Paintings, which were produced for the artist's solo exhibition at the Neuer Aachener Kunstverein in 2002, was thus directly derived from the windows and doors in the exhibition space. When first shown, the paintings were furthermore hung in direct relation to the architectural elements that prompted them. In an essay on the Pendant Pair Paintings, Fisher relates his interest in the interactions between painting and architecture to 'a time before the easel picture emerged as the dominant form of painting'¹⁵, an era in which paintings were regularly produced in response to a specific space, generally as part of a commission. Fisher is therefore interested in the possible correlation between a work such as Jacopo Pontormo's *Vertumnus and Pomona* (1519–1521) and its architectural context, a lunette pierced by a splendid oculus.¹⁶ Fisher points out that whereas 'a painting of the usual kind requires a certain amount of empty wall around it'¹⁷, his paintings encourage the gaze to wander back and forth between the work and the exhibition context.

The installation *Portikus Looks at Itself*, devised in 2009 for the eponymous art centre in Frankfurt, establishes an even closer relation between the work and the surrounding architecture. When invited to intervene in this space, with its characteristically high ceilings, Fisher replied with an installation based on a relation

10. Morgan Fisher, 'No Painting As Usual', notes on his exhibition at China Art Objects Galleries, Los Angeles, 2002.

11. Ibid.

12. The books are in fact tourist guides, a genre that fascinates Fisher. They include the English Blue Guides and publications of the Touring Club Italiano. See Morgan Fisher, 'The Italian Paintings', unpublished note.

13. Ibid.

14. *Screening Room* is a site-specific film to the extent that it must effectively be shot anew for each presentation in order to adapt to the room in which it is screened.

15. Morgan Fisher, 'Pendant Pair Paintings', notes on his exhibition 'Pendant Pair Paintings' at Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne, 2007.

16. See Morgan Fisher, 'The Door and Window Paintings', notes for the presentation of his series the Door and Window Paintings as part of Art Unlimited, Basel Art Fair, 2008.

17. Ibid.

of reflection which, in the lower part of the gallery, reproduced the architectural features of its upper part: the footbridge running along the four walls, the rows of neon lights, the sequence of embrasure windows, the cross-shaped ceiling. While its implementation implied a series of transpositions such as turning the windows into a succession of grey monochrome surfaces, this work could not be considered separately from the architecture that generated it: 'The work is not the just duplicated elements, it is the totality of the relations between the original elements in the upper half of the architecture and the elements in the lower half that are their duplicates.'¹⁸ The same kind of relation marks Fisher's *Wedge Piece* (2011), created in response to an architectural detail in one of the gallery spaces at Raven Row. Here, too, the work cannot be grasped distinctly from the element to which it relates: 'The relation between the two is reciprocal, and together they are a work.'¹⁹

'There have to be reasons for my paintings to be as they are, but I don't want those reasons to come from me'²⁰, Fisher declared in a text he wrote about his *Door and Window Paintings*. In light of this statement the procedures on which his paintings and installations are based can be viewed as so many attempts to dissociate the choices that commonly underlie the production of a work of art regarding its format, content and display from the artist's own subjectivity. Indeed, Fisher's observation testifies to an affinity with the 'visual indifference' that lies at the core of Marcel Duchamp's readymades, aiming for a 'total absence of good or bad taste'²¹. This aspiration to stamp out the artist's subjectivity has in fact been a recurring element in Fisher's work since the beginning of his career, as witness his drawings from the late 1960s, in which the isometric perspective, known to offer a restricted amount of possible viewpoints, is used precisely for the constraints it imposes on the artist. Similarly, most of Fisher's films are conceived according to procedures defined prior to their actual making and unfolding over the duration of standard film reel²², thus eluding any conscious decision as to framing, editing or duration. In keeping with this line of thought, Fisher defines *Production Stills* as a readymade film originating from the encounter of two industrially manufactured products – a roll of 16mm film and a pack of Polaroid sheet film: 'a film that almost makes itself'²³. Here, another central figure in Fisher's work emerges: Sol LeWitt, whose famous statement that 'the idea becomes a machine that makes the art'²⁴ evidences the same desire to dissociate the origins of the work from the artist's subjectivity.

In an interview with Patricia Norvell, LeWitt is quoted as saying: 'I think that basically what my art is about is not making choices. It's in making an initial choice of, say, a system, and letting the system do the work.'²⁵ The implementation of such a system also guided Fisher in the making of his most recent film, *()* (2003). It consists of a quick succession of short, heterogeneous shots – showing such variegated images as a throwing of dice, a hand brandishing a knife, a close-up of a newspaper article, sand flowing through an hourglass or the lights in the cockpit of an airplane –, assembled without apparent logic. In cinema, as Fisher explains in a note on his film, such fragments are referred to as inserts – quick shots inserted in between the (narrative) master shots aiming to clarify the action by focusing on a detail, a gesture or an object. Fisher, who wanted to make a film based on inserts gathered from 16mm copies of various commercial films, had to solve the problem of assigning them an order without defining the ordering principle himself: 'I wanted cuts whose significance was something I did not intend'²⁶, he later recalled. The solution was to apply a rule which, irregardless of the content of the images, would do the editing for him, simultaneously determining the place of each shot and the structure of the film.

18. Morgan Fisher, quoted in the press release for his exhibition 'Portikus Looks at Itself' at Portikus, Frankfurt, 2009.

19. Morgan Fisher, 'An introduction to some of the works in the exhibition', in the present publication.

20. Fisher, 'The Door and Window Paintings'.

21. Marcel Duchamp, 'A propos des ready-mades' [1961], in *Duchamp du signe* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), p. 182.

22. The lengths of *Cue Rolls* (1974), *Production Stills* and *Standard Gauge* are thus 200, 400 and 1000 feet respectively – standard formats of 16mm film rolls at the time of production.

23. Morgan Fisher, notes on *Production Stills* published in *Fate of Alien Modes*, exhibition catalogue (Vienna: Secession, 2003), p. 58.

24. Sol LeWitt, 'Paragraph on Conceptual Art', *Artforum* (June 1967), p. 80.

25. Sol LeWitt, interview dated 12 June 1969 published in *Recording Conceptual Art*, ed.

Alexander Alberro and Patricia Norvell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 114.

26. Morgan Fisher, notes published in the framework of his exhibition '()/Film Cans and Film Boxes, 1968', Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne, 2004.

The cinematographic experience proposed by () is unsettling, to say the least. While viewers are initially tempted to construct a narrative from the images they are given to see, the very discontinuity and heterogeneity of the sequences soon thwart any attempt at making sense of them. For Fisher, this experience is akin to 'a deliberate refusal of the power of the cut'. Spectators are encouraged to look at the shots as such, to view them as separated visual elements, devoid of any message or connection with the images preceding or following them. This 'anti-subjective' approach in editing represents Fisher's answer to the ambivalent position of inserts in film as simultaneously necessary elements for the narrative to unfold and 'denigrated' takes in relation to the master shot, at times remarkably beautiful, but whose beauty is masked by their entirely instrumental status: 'They have a job to do, and they do it; and they do little, if anything, else. [...] That's the unhappy ideal of the insert: you see only what it does, and not what it is.'²⁷ By creating a film solely composed of inserts, and subjecting the editing to a rule that precludes any form of narration, the focus of this work lies on 'making them visible, to release them from their self-effacing performance of drudge-work, to free them from their servitude to story'²⁸.

Whereas Fisher has decided to withhold the exact nature of the rule that underlies (), he does provide viewers with a few hints. One of them is the connection he establishes between his films and the literary devices used by Raymond Roussel in several of his books, most notably *Impressions of Africa* (1910) and *Locus Solus* (1914). In what Roussel calls the 'procedure' one perceives in fact the same mechanical approach toward composition, the same thwarting of subjectivity, the same desire to liberate the words or images from their servitude to narration. More than anything else, Fisher, according to whom this is the 'lesson' Roussel teaches us, sees it as a strategy to undermine the power of imagination: 'Why confine yourself to something so limited and already ruled by convention as what your imagination can dream up, which in any case will almost certainly conform to an already existing model of construction?'²⁹ Ultimately, Fisher's encounter with the historical figures that populate his artistic universe, with Roussel, but also Duchamp and LeWitt, seems to hinge on this question. In their work one observes the same distrust of all things related to subjectivity, taste, imagination, the 'false coincidences of "inspiration", of fantasy, of the pen running on by itself'³⁰; conversely, one senses in it the same belief in the methodical use of chance, in 'aesthetic indifference', in the capacity of simplicity to generate complexity, of logic to produce irrationality. As Foucault put it in his essay on Roussel, 'as soon as this ordinary group of words is considered, a whole flurry of semantic differences is released'³¹. A similar flurry of meaning is at play in (), between the two brackets, the opening and closing signs that introduce and end the sequence of inserts. This desire to reach beyond the limits of the imagination is also what lies behind the use of procedures, the dismissal of composition and the breaking-down of subjectivity which, since the beginning of Fisher's career, have animated his films and paintings.

Translated from the French by Boris Kremer

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Michel Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth* [1963], transl. Charles Ruas (London/New York: Continuum, 2007), p. 41.

31. Ibid., p. 16.