

Thorsten Knaub

Outpost, Norwich, UK
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Reviewed by Isaac Mace-Tessler



Thorsten Knaub, *The Cinema Machine*, Installation view, 2006, Courtesy the artist and Outpost Gallery.

The concept behind *The Cinema Machine*, the title of Thorsten Knaub's video installation at Outpost that formed his first solo show in the UK, sounded like a film buff's dream: one hundred films in one hundred minutes. One was reminded of all-night horror film marathons, or weekend triple-bill arthouse programmes, where a deep love and knowledge of cinema is as crucial to the viewing experience as pure stamina and endurance.

These were attributes well suited to an appreciation of Knaub's latest project. Stepping into a dark and curtained space, the viewer was met by a row of five theatre seats facing a large screen. The films that flashed-by at break-neck

speed were selected by Knaub from a range of 'top one hundred' lists, and each had been retimed to fit into a sixty-second window, with the opening and closing moments being seen in real time. The soundtrack to each film was also audible in surround sound and sped up to match the pace of the images (the effect was similar to pressing the fast-forward button on a CD player). The films span the entire twentieth century and unfold in chronological order from *Intolerance* (1916) to *The Matrix* (1999). Along the way the viewer encountered Hollywood as well as World Cinema classics: films by Buster Keaton, Sergei Eisenstein, Charlie Chaplin, Orson Welles, Jean Renoir, Yasujiro Ozu,

Ingmar Bergman, Vittorio De Sica, Satyajit Ray, Akira Kurosawa, Federico Fellini, Alfred Hitchcock, David Lean, Stanley Kubrick, Andrei Tarkovsky, Sergio Leone, Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese, and Ridley Scott.

The word 'encountered' is used deliberately here, because the viewer's engagement with each fragment was both as fleeting and as intense as a distant memory. By the time a film had been recognised (titles are only occasionally visible) and we had started to anticipate certain scenes, we were already hurtling into the next. While snippets of narrative were discernible, it was the compositional and tonal essences of each section of Knaub's work that remained. Impressions were formed out of images and sounds: a baby carriage rolling down the steps to Odessa harbour (*Battleship Potemkin*), Dorothy walking the Yellow Brick Road (*The Wizard of Oz*), Bogart and Bergman in front of a propeller plane (*Casablanca*), the twang of John Wayne's voice (*The Searchers*), the screech of a chainsaw (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*), John Travolta strutting on the dance floor (*Saturday Night Fever*), the endless hallways of the Overlook Hotel (*The Shining*), Indiana Jones cracking his whip (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*). Like a character in a film watching their life flash before their eyes, we are left with the feelings and emotions of a lifetime of cinema going - or rather, of the lifetime (up to the present) of cinema itself.

Crucially, an overwhelming number of the images and sounds that lingered in one's mind after a viewing of *The Cinema Machine* are iconic and part of our collective cinematic memory. Through this Knaub questions what we believe to be individual memory and knowledge. Is our memory being confirmed or

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refreshed? Are we the viewers of our own machine, or merely a cog in a larger, mass-controlled cultural mechanism? Must we submit to the endless flow of pre-packaged information and data that surrounds us at an ever-increasing speed, or can we attempt to break free and fly away - as Neo does at the end of *The Matrix* in the final image of the one hundred minutes?

Knaub's practice often concerns itself with how technology affects society as well as the artist and his processes. Previous projects include *GPS Diary* (2003), an online archive that recorded his daily movements during a yearlong period using the Global Positioning System, and the *Stationary Play Series*, which explores moments of player non-interaction with the virtual characters of video and console games (i.e. not touching or controlling the buttons, joysticks, etc.). In this context, *The Cinema Machine* could be understood as a useful and inspired tool for artists and society at large. Much like a dictionary summarises language, an encyclopedia condenses general knowledge, or a book on the history of art displays the work of hundreds of artists from dozens of centuries between its covers, so *The Cinema Machine* offered a similar condensed experience. Using cutting-edge technology and with Herculean effort (the project took two laborious years to complete) Knaub has created a film of 'film' itself.

The Cinema Machine may seem like some kind of experimental psychological environment or apparatus, hell-bent on overloading its viewers, but it is arguably a truthful representation and reflection of each and every one of our interior minds. Knaub has confronted us with ourselves and it remains up to us to decide whether the resulting eye-opening experience is pleasurable or not.