

I meter of Austrian Pavilion

A response by Carla Gabriela Engler, Fabienne Liptay and Laura Walde

“35mm wide. Perforation holes for the apparatus transport 3mm apart, on both sides. A material carrier side, a photosensitive layer side. Film and photography share one and the same material base. In the case of the 35mm film strip even exactly the same. If we use this strip horizontally, we are working in photography. If we use this strip vertically, we make film. In photography, the 35mm film is called small format. In film, 35mm film is more or less already the royal class. What the focus on 35mm film strips shows is not only the indispensable close relationship between analog photography and film. It also shows how one and the same film strip can be thought of and used in different ways. (...) It has become necessary for me to decouple the filmstrip from the common cameras. In my view, there is a space between the poles of the most exact possible apparatus reproduction of reality (camera) and complete visual abstraction (camera-less). An in-between space in which the politics of a nightmarish pictorial (“albbildhafte”) representation seem negotiable.”

Philipp Fleischmann, “Der analoge Filmstreifen,” in: Philipp Fleischmann, Austrian Pavilion, 2019, 35mm color film, silent, 4min 8sec, exh. cat., 2019, p. 8



The Austrian Pavilion in the Giardini of the Venice Biennale is characterized by a long horizontal strip of window running along the top of the building's façade. Its shape resembles that of a film strip. Yet, the light that is directed through this strip of window from above onto the works displayed renders the projection of film nearly impossible. Only with two more recent exceptions was film exhibited in the Austrian Pavilion. We can only imagine, in the words of Dietmar Brehm, that the postwar film avant-garde would have been part of Austria's national representation at the Venice Biennale. It was not.

The Austrian Pavilion, conceived as an ideal exhibition space, was completed in 1954 and restored in 1984, but it had been designed and constructed by Josef Hoffmann as early as 1934. Around the same time, in the wake of nationalist and fascist rule, the Palazzo del Cinema was built on the Lido as a permanent screening venue for the newly established Venice Film Festival. It was the decade in which cinema became part of the Venice Biennale and, at the same time, institutionally separate from it.

Exhibition architecture, its negotiation between inside and outside, its direction of light and gaze, its navigation of movement and attention very much determines what is exhibited and what is not. Not only do artworks require specific settings according to their materiality and mediality, but these settings also constitute an “exhibitionary complex” in the sense that Tony Bennett gave to the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that define the artworks, their accessibility and experience along social and political lines. In this understanding, exhibition architecture is an institutional articulation of power relations through protocols of behavior and technologies of vision. Philipp Fleischmann's “Austrian Pavilion” is a site-specific intervention into the building's politics of light that is directed toward a conception of art which privileges sculpture and painting. Film as an exhibition object that has been significantly absent from this venue is subsequently transformed into an exhibition site of the institutional mechanisms of this absence itself. An exhibition to be seen in the cinema only.

The one-meter-long film strip taken from “Austrian Pavilion” that Philipp Fleischmann sent by mail shows a tree in the Giardini, its foliage seen from below against the blue sky. It was Siegfried Kracauer who, in his “Theory of Film,” made this image a profane icon for the new medium. The “beauty of moving wind in the trees” was both an ode to film's affinities to ephemeral reality and a gesture against art's abstraction. In using the film strip in ways that brush against the grain of standards, Philipp Fleischmann explores what lies beyond the dualism of realism and abstraction. In a wonderful coinage that is untranslatable, he calls his representational politics “albbildhaft,” evoking an abysmal or nightmarish gaze as a sort of deep optics of the cinema. In order to explore this optics, the film strip is replaced from the usual cameras and, thus, from the industrial norm of transporting film and recording a certain number of single frames per second. In Philipp Fleischmann's work there is no image equivalent to a rectangular frame or window to the outside world. There is instead a strip of film that can be thought of and used differently to remeasure the ways of world making, the representational and relational politics that are prescribed by film's standard technologies and formats.

As I unpack the envelope, open the plastic canister and unroll the 35mm film strip inside, I can't stop wondering: What are we supposed to do with this 1 meter of “Austrian Pavilion”? How are we to use it?



When video killed the radio star, no body was left behind for its creators to mourn, or for us coroners (theorists) to examine post-mortally. Instead, hundreds of thousands of airwave hours simply vanished into thin air, transforming into beams shot through an electron gun, ultimately hitting a phosphorescent screen to turn into images. This music is to be heard on the screen only. What violence there is in speaking of this transformation! Killing, vanishing, guns and shots. I have not seen Philipp Fleischmann's new exhibition “Austrian Pavilion.” It remains a void for me. “This exhibition is to be seen in the cinema only.” But where is cinema, in 2020? Access denied. Philipp Fleischmann, with his collaborators Bert Löschner and Salvatore Viviano, built three custom-made cameras to capture the Austrian Pavilion's architecture on strips of 35mm film. These camera sculptures, based on the principle of the camera obscura, are shaped like one of the pavilion's defining features, the tripartite arches. Constructed true to scale, the length of the film strip becomes a measuring rod of the building's architecture, silently questioning why in the 86 years of its exhibition history, the moving image has only been granted access twice in the pavilion's lineup.

We hope, dear Philipp, that you won't bear us a grudge for immediately thinking of a guillotine, this highly efficient killing machine, when looking at a picture of your camera object. But you are interested in liminal spaces, in moments of negotiation. So naturally, your guillotine – conceived by three men with names covering the entire associative spectrum between life (the living) and death (the butcher and the extinguisher) – does much more than simply signaling death or pointing out a lacuna. Your camera guillotine is one that, ultimately, teaches still images to come alive and to move once they have left the building. A structural antinomy, so to speak.

Thinking in more detail about the vocabulary we use in reference to this machine which records images that come to life – and kills bad people, as Roberto Rossellini showed us in “La macchina ammazzacattivi” (1952) –, we realize it is steeped in death. Did you know that the etymological root of gauge, the technical term used for analog film formats in English, lies in the Old English galga: a rod or beam applied as a fixed standard for measure (the German “Massstab” – measuring rod, literally – still retains this meaning). Galga, in turn, refers back to the Germanic galgōn – “Galgen” in modern German, meaning gallows. Gauge and gallows, then, share an etymological root.

Film and photography share a gauge. „If we use this strip horizontally, we are working in photography. If we use this strip vertically, we make film.” With his guillotine turned camera obscura, Fleischmann captures a still life. Run through a projector, cinema brings these images to life. The Austrian Pavilion has an impressively high vertical cutout as an entranceway to the building. This entranceway functions as the central axis connecting the two exhibition halls which one enters by passing through the large tripartite arches that run alongside the passageway. Impossible to think that anybody (or any body) should be prevented from gaining access – the entry could not be higher, larger or more welcoming.

