

On Site

Exhibitions, installations, etc

Oskar Fischinger

1900–1967: *Experiments In Cinematic Abstraction*

EYE Film Institute, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Describing his work as “graphic paintings in motion”, German artist Oskar Fischinger helped expand the boundaries of early 20th century film making. His short animations brought abstract images to life through music and bridged the gap between cutting edge art and popular entertainment, simultaneously influencing John Cage and Walt Disney. New digital prints of his most important films are installed in a career-encompassing exhibition at EYE Film Institute in Amsterdam, co-produced by the Los Angeles based Center for Visual Music, which in recent years inherited most of Fischinger’s private archive.

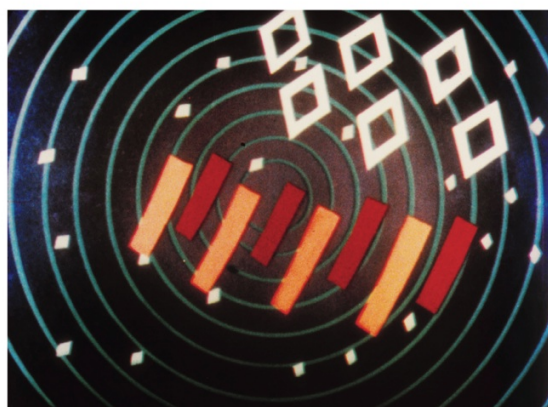
Fischinger, who died in 1967, tends to get lost between the jazz age and the space age, between Europe’s avant garde and Hollywood’s commercial boom and between hierarchical and cross-cultural views on art. Although well respected among fellow artists, he often lacked the financial support to realise his many ideas, which in hindsight seem far ahead of their time.

The slanted walls and dark, funnel-like rooms of the new, well-visited EYE building resound with Fischinger’s images. His films, black and white in his early Berlin period and brightly coloured after his move to Hollywood, form orientation points in this chronologically ordered exhibition, which culminates in the 11 minute colour film *Motion Painting No 1* from 1947. This is simultaneously the recognised highlight and the conclusion of his cinematic art. Painted on transparent panes and filmed

in stop-motion, the multicoloured patterns in the film appear to be dancing across the screen, guided by Bach’s *Brandenburg Concerto No 3*. Flocks of dots and lines form circular, tribal shapes or grid-like patterns reminiscent of De Stijl paintings such as *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* by Mondrian, who influenced Fischinger. Their movements correspond with rhythms, harmonies, dissonances and polyphonies in the music. The film’s finale, where the granular formations recall the pixelated graphics of 1980s computer games, perfectly demonstrates why Fischinger is considered one of the forebears of the music video.

Fischinger was formally trained as an engineer, but after founding his first studio in 1927 he made a living creating adverts and special effects, most notably for Fritz Lang’s 1929 sci-fi *Woman In The Moon*, which brought him to the attention of Hollywood. In 1936 he relocated there and briefly worked on Walt Disney’s *Fantasia*. He also met John Cage, who was particularly interested in Fischinger’s experiments with synthesized sound, documented in this exhibition through beautiful graphic scores. Cage even credited Fischinger for inspiring him to make the switch from traditional composition towards exploring percussion and sounds from non-musical sources. Fischinger mainly used existing classical, jazz and dance music for his films and never collaborated with Cage, but a hint of what that might have been like is the installation *Raumlichtkunst*, which sets silent Fischinger films to music by Cage and is simultaneously on display at London’s Tate Modern.

Marinus de Ruiter



Oskar Fischinger, *Allegretto* (film still), 1936–43



Gordon Monahan, *A Piano Listening To Itself – Chopin Chord*

Listen To Your City

Knippelsbro, Copenhagen, Denmark
Knippelsbro is a lifting bridge in Copenhagen forming part of a main traffic artery through the Danish capital that connects districts like the Free State Of Christiania with the cheesy tourist strip of Nyhavn and its surrounding shopping and restaurant area. Though the bridge is now rarely raised, and its twin control towers usually closed to the public, one of the towers was opened up last summer for a group exhibition, *Listen To Your City*, which continued until the end of 2012.

The result is mixed: a hodgepodge of works by 30 artists crammed into a tiny vertical space, many getting lost in the crush of tourists and Copenhageners in search of novelty and distraction. Add to this the fact that these numerous works are poorly noted on the exhibition guide, and it feels like a complete mess. But instead of resulting in a dull cacophony, the show somehow balances its disjointedness with an enthusiastic eclecticism.

The exhibition is dedicated to John Cage, and in the spirit of the composer’s intellectual and aesthetic restlessness, the art varies from video to graphic scores, kinetic sculpture, installations and drawings. Outside on the footpath Sabine Groschup and Georg Weckwerth’s playful sound installation *ding-a-ling, ding-a-ling* (100 Bicycle Bells For John Cage) invites passers-by to ring bike bells. Gordon Monahan’s surreal assemblage *A Piano Listening To Itself – Chopin Chord*, connects strings from a beaten looking upright piano on the canal wall below up to the tower’s top railings. Amplifiers on the tower transmit vibrations back down the wires, causing the piano to emit ghostly

sounds of some reconfigured Chopin compositions through its soundboard.

There’s an impressive roster of international artists in the show – Lee Ranaldo, Gary Hill, Jacob Kirkegaard – but some of the more interesting work is produced by relatively less seasoned creators. Inside the tower, Daisuke Kosugi’s network of kinetic hammer devices, *Attention*, takes over the spiral staircase. Small electronically triggered hammers randomly knock against the steel walls, the cold, hollow sounds confusingly rebounding about. In the tower’s crown, Kris Vleeschouwer’s *Goldfish II/Above* The Bridge uses infrared sensors to track several goldfishes in an aquarium. When a fish triggers a sensor, it rings a ship’s bell dangling outside.

A room at the top of the tower is stuffed with more Cage-related films, recordings, manuscripts, scores, and a shrine to the composer by Angélica Castello. Made out of old toy instruments, speaker cones, fairy lights and topped with a large fake fly agaric mushroom, this tacky plastic assemblage encapsulates the ramshackle and slightly crazed spiritedness of *Listen To Your City*. Rather than reiterating the triumphalism of 2012’s Cage centenary year and all its empty institutional trappings, the show conveys a raw enthusiasm for the potentials of sounds and how they affect people and their surroundings. Granted, there are some very strange choices in it: for instance, Robert Jacobsen’s red British phone booth with its receiver hooked up to a hydrophone – a fun idea, but rather displaced. At the same time, the show lets some wonderfully disorientating moments happen.

Nathan Budzinski

Center for Visual Music (Fischinger); Kay-Uwe Rosseburg (Listen To Your City)