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At Art Basel, Film Artists Get a Spotlight of Their Own

By Christopher F. Schuetze

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BASEL, Switzerland — Five years ago, Pat O’Neill, an experimental film artist in Los Angeles, was so despairing that his art would find a wide, paying audience that he was ready to give up on a 50-year career.

“I wanted to burn everything and take up something simple, like farming,” he said recently by telephone.

Today, Mr. O’Neill is represented by Cherry and Martin, a young, successful West Coast art gallery. More museums and galleries trade his works — a special license allows six different owners to have simultaneous rights to a single film — and the artist himself is invited around the world to speak about his work.

This Friday, three of Mr. O’Neill’s films — “7362” from 1967; “Runs Good,” from 1970, and “Trouble in the Image,” from 1996 — will be shown as part of the film program at the Art Basel fair. The 99-seat theater is expected to be sold out.

Film is an increasingly important part of this year’s Art Basel — and, by extension, of the collectible contemporary art world. The film program, organized by Marc Glöde and This Brunner and running until Saturday, features a world premiere, a European premiere, and retrospective and thematic evenings.

One particular draw is likely to be the European premiere of “Tim’s Vermeer,” directed and narrated by the performance artists and magicians Penn & Teller and shown on Saturday.

The program also offers short films focused on a theme, such as art in an institutional framework. A recent work by the photographer and filmmaker Anna Gaskell, “& Juliet,” shows a ballerina practicing the balcony scene from “Romeo and Juliet” without a partner, wearing gym gear and ear buds.

Although film has been part of Art Basel’s extensive side program since 1999, it was only in 2008 that film screenings were brought out of the fair’s exhibition space and into the Stadtkino, a repertory and art cinema behind Basel’s Kunsthalle on the west side of town.

The cinema allows the showing of films in virtually any format, including 16 mm, 35 mm and various digital formats. And taking the film program out of the bustling fair space and putting it in a proper movie theater has changed the nature of the event, said Mr. Glöde, who has been curating the show since its move to the Stadtkino.

“It’s a place where you can show these films adequately,” Mr. Glöde said.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

It was difficult to attract large audiences during the first years in the Statdkino. The cinema is at some distance from the buzz of the art fair, and the films were often shown during the valuable time slot of client dinners and V.I.P. receptions. But over time the side event has matured. Art Basel organizers said the film program had been growing in popularity, with a 41 percent increase in tickets sold from 2009 to 2013.

Although experimental film has a long and rich artistic tradition, the films have only recently become collectors' items. When institutions like the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art started buying Bruce Conner films after the artist's death in 2008, other collectors and museums started paying attention and opening their checkbooks.

Films made on film stock the old-fashioned way, with the filmmaker developing and manipulating the images by hand, are taking on a collectible sheen as technology allows virtually anyone with a good laptop and the right software to make movies. "With film dying so rapidly, you really need museums to take care of it, to make sure it is presented properly," Mr. O'Neill said.

The increasing popularity of experimental art film among collectors has also prompted artists, gallerists and curators to consider how to collect art on a medium that is so easy to duplicate. Besides buying the rights to the film, many collectors wish to have something more tangible. Some filmmakers include props from the film or unique packaging. "Collectors want to have objects," Mr. Glöde said.

Video art, the moving-image cousin of experimental film, is considered more collectible because the videos and the screens on which they play are often part of a bigger installation, not standalone media that need to be specially screened to be experienced.

Major video installations made it into permanent exhibits at museums decades before film. Nam June Paik's "TV-Buddha" — a Buddha statue looking at a video screen showing a feed of itself — was brought by the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam shortly after it was made in 1974. The Buddha stature is as much part of the art as the video feed.

Online versions of film art, whether licensed or pirated, can be problematic because of the intrinsic reduction of quality. Experimental film artists are keenly aware of both the merits and the dangers of having their artwork appearing online.

"People do take my films and put them on YouTube, which we then take off," Mr. O'Neill said. "We don't want to be totally overexposed."