

*HALF-ANALOG, HALF-DIGITAL: MUNGO THOMSON
INTERVIEWED BY CASSIE PACKARD*

by Cassie Packard



Mungo Thomson, *Volume 3. Flowers (Nahbild)*, 2015-22, 4K video with sound, 10:08 minutes Music: Sven Åke Johansson, "Nahbild" (1972), Installation view, courtesy of the artist and Karma.

Los Angeles–based artist Mungo Thomson makes conceptually driven, media-spanning works that explore the frameworks through which we encounter the world. His ambitious, ongoing *Time Life* project, begun nearly a decade ago, considers the defunct Time-Life Books encyclopedia series—popular in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s—through the eyes of a robotic book scanner. Hinging upon the charged moment when analog turns digital, the artist’s stop-motion video “volumes” flicker through a torrent of content on topics ranging from cooking, to flowers, to sculptures by Auguste Rodin. With exhibitions of *Time Life* videos on view at the Aspen Art Museum and Karma, Los Angeles, Thomson reflects upon the draw of the encyclopedic, the phase shift of digitization, and the curious operations of time.

—Cassie Packard

Cassie Packard: I would love if you could speak about the point when Time-Life Books entered your consciousness and your early encounters with the series.

Mungo Thomson: Time magazine and Time-Life Books were constant print presences in my house growing up. My dad had the *Time-Life Nature Library*, one of those series with twenty-eight volumes with different colored spines

all lined up on the shelf. And I would take them down one by one and sort of encounter the world through them. There's a way of thinking about Time-Life Books as an early analog internet. You know, they arrived in your home, and they covered every conceivable subject. Their tagline was, "Become an instant expert." Like the world is knowable, and through this framework it can be understood. That's all exploded, of course. Now the information is all coming from the user. But there was a promise in that which I think I found compelling.

CP: Do you feel that you're still culturally transitioning from analog to digital? How thick is that moment?

MT: I'm really dyed-in-the wool Generation X, and one of the things about my generation is that we are a half-analog, half-digital generation. The internet arrived in our twenties, and prior to that it had been a different kind of reality, a different relationship to objects, and media, and world events. And a lot of that information came through books and print media. We adapted, of course; but I think there is still this lingering feeling that digital space is not quite real. So a lot of my work is self-portraiture in that respect too. This project is very much a half-analog, half-digital project; and it talks specifically about the moment of digitization as the juncture between these worlds. And there's a seam in the middle where these films are getting made.

CP: How does this project conceive of the future of books?

MT: If books are just being scanned by high-speed book-scanning robots to become PDFs for the internet, what happens to the book object? I chose a high-speed book-scanning robot in Tokyo, which is the fastest in the world, as a sort of template for the project. It scans books at a rate of eight pages a second, but in doing so it destroys the book. So it really is a transformation of states. It goes from being a solid to a gas in a sense. It becomes data in that moment. And for me, that was a really rich transformation. And there was this way of thinking about that scanner as a filmmaking apparatus. It's going fast enough that it begins to trick the mind into seeing motion from these stills. And that's the same illusion that stop-motion produces.

CP: That brings us to your decision to use stop-motion, an old filmmaking method in which time is an animating or life-giving force.

MT: Right. In 2009 I made a stop-motion film of my art dealer's Rolodex (*Untitled [Margo Leavin Gallery, 1970–]*), and that is probably ground zero for the *Time Life* project. I kind of caught the stop-motion bug with that film. I love the way the image is being built in front of you; it's like a performance. It really is this crazy magic where you spend all day shooting, and you get twenty good seconds if you're lucky. It really compresses and expands time in this strange way. And then the way they play back at this high speed that's almost assaultive is part of the reason why the music has to be so perfect and so cut to the frame, because otherwise you'll just walk out. It risks being

unpleasant. So it was about finding a way for it to still be entertaining and still be all the things I wanted it to be and keep you glued to your seat.

CP: Sound—perhaps particularly sound that might be characterized as white noise—seems to be a longstanding interest for you. You’ve previously made an ambient room recording (*Room Tone* [1998]), an LP of bird and whale sounds (b/w [2008]), and an orchestral arrangement derived from cricket noises (*Crickets* [2012]). I’m curious about how you approached sound in *Time Life*, which features a number of experimental soundtracks made with musician collaborators.

MT: Yeah, this is definitely the most expressive sound I’ve ever used. I should mention that that book-scanning robot makes a lot of noise. You know, it’s shooting with three camera lenses; there are keyboard keys clicking; there are pages flapping; and it sounded like Free Jazz percussion to me. So the frame rate of my films is inspired by that robot, and the percussion soundtracks for my films are inspired by that robot. It was about marrying the visuals tightly to the sound. They really have to be sutured together.

CP: The suturing of Lee Ranaldo’s ambient recording of Hurricane Sandy with a barrage of search-engine questions was particularly riveting. It takes you to this place of cataclysm.

MT: Those are all questions from a Time-Life Books series called *Understanding Science and Nature*. It’s a book series for kids, and I wanted to pair that innocence and curiosity about the world with the sound of this thing bearing down on us. It’s relentless, like the weather now. I wanted it to be a little cruel in that way.

CP: Your project currently consists of eight volumes covering topics ranging from cooking to colors. I’m curious about your decision to work in volumes.

MT: For a long time these films were just happening in the background. No one was asking for them, and I was busy with other projects, so I wouldn’t touch them for six months or a year sometimes. So it was almost like a hobby in the background of my art practice. And then things would quiet down, and I’d work very steadily on them for a while and make some progress. At one point I imagined a single feature-length film. But trying to corral all that different material into one thing was kind of killing me. And then I remembered that Time-Life Books put things out in volumes, and I could just do that too.

CP: What do you think is the draw of archives and encyclopedic projects for you?

MT: I guess that impulse comes from the same place as this fetishism of Time-Life Books. Maybe it’s the idea that you could learn everything from this—you know, here’s a resource that contains all knowledge. But it’s also a

data dump. Like even if Leavin's Rolodexes were lost, you still have my film. And that's true with the *Time Life* films as well. If the body of Rodin's work goes away, and books go away, you still have my film. They're aggregates for some future where maybe we don't live in an analog world anymore. Maybe it is just an entirely screen-based world or a Neuralink world. And in that case, the Rodin film can be a substitute for Rodin's work in that world.

CP: How many volumes are there going to be?

MT: I don't really know. The number in my mind is twenty-eight, because that's the number of books in a lot of Time-Life series for some reason. And I wonder if it's because that's all the days of the shortest month, or is there some relationship to the calendar?

CP: There are so many layers of temporality built into this project, but I hadn't thought of calendrical time, which thickens the plot. It calls to mind your *Wall Calendars* (2019–), which are lightboxes in which the pseudo-cyclical time of the calendar is superimposed onto the geologic timescale of natural formations like mountains.

MT: When I was a student and I was working with John Baldessari, I had all these different kinds of projects going all the time, just like I do now. And I was like, "Can you help me understand how these are all connected?" And he said, "One day you're going to be embarrassed by how connected they are."

CP: So are you thinking that you'll keep working on *Time Life* in the background of other projects? And will it be another decade or two?

MT: It's kind of jumped to the foreground now. I have a bunch more that I'm working on and excited about. Some of the best ones are to come. Some of the most fun or beautiful or silly are underway.

CP: You said silly, which is interesting because I find there's something that's very funny about watching these books come to life. But then there's also the cruelty of the speed and the impossibility of the task: you're spending your life looking at these images, and your lifespan isn't long enough to digitize everything.

MT: Yeah. It really is a massive time-suck to make these pieces. I don't know if you've been watching this explosion of AI art, but the kinds of things that can be done now and the speed at which it's advancing are incredible; it takes no time at all to make a film using AI prompts. My project is like the analog version of that. And so naturally it has to take a ton of time because it's human hands performing machine learning. And that makes it even sillier in a certain way. More useless. But also more interesting.