“Scotch tape, spit, and glue” with which, Letinsky suggested in a short video interview, they are held together.

The paper-thin fragility of that original scene set up for the camera hinted at the precarious nature of the photographic medium’s own claim to truth. What is more, Letinsky’s assemblage aesthetic also disrupted the necessary stasis of the still life itself. In fact, these images were not still, but strangely animated. The torn paper edges and shadows created fluctuating depth and variable recession in the photographic field, introducing an ebb and flow that rendered the depicted objects weightless, floating in soft white fields. In Untitled #12, pomegranates sat on an apparently flat plane—a table whose linen-draped corners began to describe a three-dimensionality rapidly denied by the cut-off edges of the fabric, covering another apparently flat surface on which cherry pips seemed alternately to sit still, and then tumble down as they appeared to fall. Space was further confused by light bouncing off each fruit’s shiny skin, simultaneously casting impossibly mirror-like reflections in the textured cloth surface and contorted shadows against the background wall. To their right, a spoon hovered, suspended in mid-air; to their left, another was elongated to the point of distortion. Reminiscent of the anamorphic skull that appears as the unintelligible smear that we see, just one element in the cultural apparatus of reproduction through which our relationship to the world is ordered. Presenting an edifice as precarious as her own staged scenes, the illusion Letinsky offers reminds us of Susan Sontag’s still pertinent observation, in On Photography (1977), that the photograph places us in a privileged but ultimately spurious relationship to that world—one that feels like knowledge, and therefore feels like power. With their confusing space and oscillating scale, impossible shadows and sheering recession, the oxymorons and contrary truths offered by Ill Form and Void Full made clear that the photographic illusion is itself only ever held together by Scotch tape and glue. If that illusion threatens to come apart at the seams, we are no longer the master of all that we see. Momentarily losing control, we do not know where we stand.

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TRANSFORMING MEDIA

Rosa Barba: Subject to Constant Change
Cornerhouse
Manchester, UK
January 26–March 24, 2013

Turner Contemporary
Margate, UK
February 1–May 6, 2013

Rosa Barba’s work over the past decade has sought to engage with the physical materiality of film as a medium. She is part of a grouping of artist-filmmakers, including Tacita Dean, Ben Rivers, Fiona Tan, and London-based artist collective no.w.here, to name but a few, who have all sought, in different ways, to forefront the structural components of the dying medium of celluloid. The precarious nature of film itself is the lens by which we explore Subject to Constant Change—Barba’s largest solo presentation to date, presented uniquely as two constituent halves of one exhibition spread across two exhibition sites: Cornerhouse, Manchester, and Turner Contemporary, Margate.

It is in this way that this series goes beyond a solipsistic focus on the photograph as a self-reflexive space. Although her manipulation of the binaries of light and shadow, depth and surface, and truth and fiction introduce a concern for the materiality of the photograph as discrete object, Letinsky also considers the effects beyond the frame. She draws attention to the fact that what we see flattened to fit the photograph’s surface is never identical to the scene staged in her studio: the camera is never a passive conduit of representation, but one that transforms what and how we see, just one element in the cultural apparatus of reproduction through which our relationship to the world is ordered. Presenting an edifice as precarious as her own staged scenes, the illusion Letinsky offers reminds us of Susan Sontag’s still pertinent observation, in On Photography (1977), that the photograph places us in a privileged but ultimately spurious relationship to that world—one that feels like knowledge, and therefore feels like power. With their confusing space and oscillating scale, impossible shadows and sheering recession, the oxymorons and contrary truths offered by Ill Form and Void Full made clear that the photographic illusion is itself only ever held together by Scotch tape and glue. If that illusion threatens to come apart at the seams, we are no longer the master of all that we see. Momentarily losing control, we do not know where we stand.

At the heart of the presentation at Cornerhouse is a new work, Subconscious Society (2013), which, like the exhibition’s title, is a poetic reflection on our present state of digital revolution. In a world in which analog is slowly fading, Barba encourages us to consider the formal aspects of cinematic installation. At Cornerhouse, a 15-minute film is projected on a large-scale screen that hangs from the ceiling. Behind it, a 35mm projector emanates light onto its back. Sitting at the back of Cornerhouse’s third gallery, the girth and weight of this playback device feels bulky and weighted in this pseudo-industrial gallery, with its exposed pipes and its overhanging metal railings. Subconscious Society, it can be argued, is a physical manifestation of the filmmaker’s angst, and adds to this temporally charged space. On the other side of the screen, two 16mm projectors overlay the film with projected texts and sound fragments. The layers of cinematic artillery sit in tension with each other as the projectors angrily clink, churning and reeling, the sound echoing and reverberating through the high-ceilinged gallery.

Indeed, the theme of material obsolescence is echoed in the use of the celluloid itself, with Barba reputedly shooting Subconscious Society on one of the last available shipments of Fujifilm stock. In terms of narrative and subject, the story of the Manchester installation was filmed inside a former Methodist mission building called Albert Hall. Here, Barba assembled a varied cast who, in voice-over and performance, ruminate on the physical
history of this space. Each performs odd rituals, which include shuffling through debris for obsolescent goods and bartering off old radios.

The link between this derelict site of piety and the artist’s almost religious zeal for analog is no strange coincidence. Barba’s film functions in a twofold manner. On the one hand, by tracing the abandoned architecture of post-industrial Manchester, Barba is drawing a correlation between the death of cinema and the end of human-led industrial production. Laterally, by occupying a site of former divinity, Barba also posits a connection between the death of religion and the agnostic era of the freewheeling internet—whereby man-made software is able to play the role of the divine, with its limitless possibilities.

Poignantly, Barba’s work suggests that the weighted history of cinema is being eroded and that the digital is a space whereby history is subsumed into a free-flowing abyss. As new media proliferates at such speed, how do we maintain a sense of rootedness, an appreciation of the past, or indeed a textured understanding of the world around us? When tangible forms disappear, will the physical world be transposed into one flat whole, deadened to conform to the architecture of a two-dimensional flat screen?

Barba is attempting to explore a paradigm shift here, and she achieves this through the form of a social community. For instance, her protagonists are constantly found attempting to assign and archive objects from the past—it is, as the artist asserts, “a transitional realm where the past exists only as a reference to itself and the details of the present are not fully legible.”

In Cornerhouse’s second gallery, Barba presents Coro Spezzato: The Future lasts one day (2009), an installation consisting of five 16mm projectors that seek to form a chorus, projecting lyrics in effervescing color onto separate walls. The inspiration behind the installation is the Venetian polychoral style of singing of the late Renaissance and early Baroque. This was a kind of music that involved spatially separate choirs singing at the same time. As the wall panel describes, it occurred at a time when the world was being “replaced by a humanistic idea of reality and choirs were allowed to sing about ideas as well.”

As the lyrics pulse and disappear on screen, they produce an incandescent light. At the same time, the projectors can also be heard humming as they gradually speed up and slow down—all at different times. The poetic mix of lyrics projected on screen, coupled with this mechanical noise, creates an unresolved chamber of irresolute sound and images. Here, it becomes apparent that Barba isn’t merely a fetishist of mechanical form, but rather, is interested in how the material nature of the apparatus can be transposed across music, literature, and lived experience, illuminating new structural possibilities for how we produce and construct narrative. Barba’s homage to the history of material film serves as a fervent paean to the dissolution of our cinematic history.

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NOTE 1. Interview between the artist and Henriette Hülshoff, exhibition curator at Cornerhouse, Manchester, January 23, 2013.