

ARTFORUM

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Peter Roehr

ORTUZAR PROJECTS

A fascinating—and, at least as far as the conventional canon goes, mostly missing—link between Pop art and Minimalism, Peter Roehr's work identified a vein of astringent poetry in the image world of an emergent global consumer culture. An exhibition at Ortuzar Projects provided a bracing overview of the five-year career of the German Conceptualist, who died of cancer in 1968, only weeks before his twenty-fourth birthday. Focused on his rigorously ordered photomontages, and featuring a revelatory suite of film montages, the show presented a practice very much in dialogue with the dominant conceptual streams of the time. But while Donald Judd and Andy Warhol would seem to be inevitable figures against which to measure Roehr's enterprise, the work's anti-iconic attitude toward its subject matter and its rich visual dynamism mark it as an epigone of neither.

Selections dating from 1963 to 1966—including a range of ephemera as well as several typewritten texts that suggest a species of Concretism—provided a useful context for the artist's life and work. Born in 1944 in the town of Lauenberg, Germany, Roehr attended art school in Wiesbaden and settled in Frankfurt, where he lived for the rest of his life. He was enormously prolific during the half decade he was active (he abandoned artmaking in the last year of his life and opened a head shop with his partner, Paul Maenz), producing some six hundred

View of "Peter Roehr,"
2018. From left:
Film-Montagen I-III,
1965; *Untitled*
(FO-52), 1965.
Photo: Jeremy Lawson.



works, including 127 photomontages, nine of which formed the heart of this show. All built from found images arrayed in tightly gridded rectangles, seven of these drew on photos from a 1964 Maxwell House coffee print ad campaign, the page proofs for which he received from Maenz, who was working in advertising at the time. “Each work is an organized area of identical elements,” Roehr said of his program, “neither successive nor additive; there is no result or sum.” It’s true that his accumulations do little to summarize the nature of their repeating subjects. But the six-by-six grid depicting a cup of dark brew near a woman’s expectant lips (*Untitled [FO-15]*, 1964), for example, and another featuring a couple enjoying a special bit of *kaffee* time with coquettish bonhomie (*Untitled [FO-21]*, 1965) produce a kind of affectual detournement that transforms images designed to convey product-derived satisfaction into stuttering emblems of pleasure indefinitely forestalled. Roehr dissolved highly specific commercial meaning into a generalized plenitude where, curiously, the more a given image is seen, the less stable its signification becomes.

Roehr’s interest in putting ready-made images through calculatedly machinic operations soon led him to experiment with film. He cut commercial footage, again supplied by Maenz, into tiny segments, then edited them into looping shorts. Three suites of these, two with sound and one silent, were collected in a single, twenty-two-part work called *Film-Montagen I–III*, 1965. The individual titles—*Tunnel 11x*, *Haare 14x* (Hair 14x), *Neon 12x*—plainly classify what is seen and how many times: In *Explosion 6x*, for instance, a car soundlessly plunges off a cliff over and over again, *Groundhog Day* style, bursting into flames on impact, while in *Lichter 10x* (Lights 10x), a two- or three-second clip featuring a dark roadway punctuated by headlights and streetlamps is accompanied by a jazzy little earworm. Warhol once wrote that repetition was for him a means of leaching meaning from images, a way to feel “better and emptier.” Roehr similarly effaces the intended significance of his chosen material. Instead of providing an easy vacancy, however, his alterations produce a fretful saturation, an anxious fullness that keeps real satiety tantalizingly out of reach.

—Jeffrey Kastner