Introduction

ALFRED AND THE ART WORLD

In the early 1960s, Robert Whitman created a series of eight Cinema Pieces or, “film sculptures,” a subgenre of that protean designation “expanded cinema.” With titles such as Window (1963), Bathroom Sink (1964), and Shower (1964), each addressed issues of realism and illusion, conventions of representation, and the practices of viewing associated with different media, namely, sculpture, cinema, and painting. Each did so by fusing tangible material objects with filmic images, by pairing ordinary domestic items with footage of routine actions associated with them. For Window, Whitman projected 16mm film of someone gardening within the contours of a window frame mounted on the gallery wall. In Shower, he installed an actual shower stall complete with running water and projected an image of a woman bathing. Apparently, the illusion was so convincing that several visitors thought they had witnessed a live performance. However, as the film progresses, close-ups of skin, the drain, and showerhead shatter the believability of the rear-projected image. So, too, do moments when the water turns to paint.

For Lynne Cooke, these gestures establish Shower as a work that recalls traditions of nude bathers in Western painting and, more pointedly, Yves Klein’s use of models as the “living brushes” with which he applied his signature International Klein Blue during an infamous 1960 performance. Cooke suggests that these allusions are far more pertinent to an understanding of Whitman’s work than what is perhaps, for many of us, the more obvious one: Alfred Hitchcock’s Psycho (1960). And yet, it is hardly surprising that a filmed image of a woman taking a shower, at points under a stream of red paint, whose image is intercut with close-ups of skin and a drain, should also encourage speculation of a Hitchcockian influence. In fact, Shower’s connection to Psycho has become a common refrain in reviews of the work’s various restagings. What is more, it is a connection that happens to be extremely productive. When approached with Psycho in mind, Shower
Hitchcock and Contemporary Art opens up a series of specific trajectories into questions of voyeurism, fetishism, realism, suspense, narrative, offscreen space, materiality, phenomenology, modes of exhibition, and the extradiegetic life of films and their iconic sequences.

This capacity for an artwork to initiate meaningful explorations of cinematic concepts will be a key concern in the pages that follow. In particular, I want to show how contemporary artistic practices invested in Hitchcockian cinema activate sophisticated engagements with memory and history, time and space, as well as broader issues to do with the cinema itself. I also want to consider cinephilia and epistemophilia as two interrelated forces motivating the production of these artworks and examine how these forces inflect the nature of the art objects created in response to Hitchcock’s oeuvre. In short, I hope to introduce the reader to the world of art about Hitchcock and to see what we might learn from it—about Hitchcock in particular and the cinema in general.

With Shower, Whitman inaugurated a rich, multifaceted, and multimedia set of artistic practices invested in the aesthetics, legacy, and significance of Alfred Hitchcock’s films. Not just broad in scope, but also plentiful in number, these works have populated several exhibitions dedicated exclusively to this subject that were first staged in 1999 to mark Hitchcock’s centenary. For example, the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford organized Notorious: Alfred Hitchcock and Contemporary Art, collecting works from the late 1970s to the late 1990s by artists situated in diverse traditions. Cindy Sherman’s Untitled Film Stills (1977–80), Judith Barry’s video projection, Casual Shopper (1980–81), Douglas Gordon’s mail art project, A Souvenir for Non-Existence (1993), and Victor Burgin’s photographic installation The Bridge (1984) that brings John Everett Millais’s Ophelia (1851–52) into contact with Madeleine and Marnie, speak to the range of practices devoted to Hitchcock’s filmic worlds. That same year Oh! Hitchcock appeared at the Kunsthalle Tirol in Hall, Austria, featuring the work of 19 international artists including Ruth Schnell, Claudia Hart, Sam Samore, and David Falconer. The curators of this show sought to offer visitors a cinematic experience by transforming the space of the gallery itself with Peter Kogler’s tunnel installation through which visitors had to pass and Stefan Demary’s attachment of bird silhouettes to all of the gallery’s windows. Moral Hallucinations: Channelling Hitchcock at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney also opened in 1999 and featured work by 11 contemporary Australian artists tasked with responding to themes prevalent in Hitchcock’s oeuvre.