



seen
by curious and keen

Markus Raetz
Kopflöse Mühle

So often our vision plays tricks on us: you think you see someone you know from the corner of your eye. You turn and blink, and the person is gone. Was what you saw real or just a play of the light, or even a whim of your imagination? There is no way of knowing for sure.

This September SEEN welcomes the installation *Kopflöse Mühle* (1993-2002) by Swiss artist Markus Raetz. It is remarkable that, despite being arguably one of the most important contemporary artists in Switzerland, his works have rarely ever been seen in Belgium. This 'headless mill', which took him nine years to finish, is one of his largest mobile sculptures, yet only seldomly has it been on public display. The installation takes up most of the room and, in a way, epitomizes his explorations of the impact of light and shadow on human perception. It consists of two motor-driven wheels and a large number of aluminum slices spinning around a light. All these elements work together to create the illusion of a human head in the center of the installation.

Although he works in a variety of disciplines, including sculpture and photography, the artist's primary medium is drawing. It is said he has created over 30,000 pieces over the past decades. In fact, even his sculptures can be viewed as drawings in three-dimensional space. In this sense they are drawings of the imagination, with shapes suggested through the use of contrast, light and shadow, and a minimum of lines.

Probably the most important part of Raetz's work is the viewer. The success of any visual representation is, after all, contingent on the presence, location and physicality of the perceiver. Indeed, one's perception of *Kopflöse Mühle* changes depending on one's position; not only does the installation move by itself, it also changes according to the viewer's movement. This reciprocal aspect of the work lends it a powerful intimacy. Furthermore, it is most unlikely that two people standing in the room will experience the same image. In these ways, the relation of each viewer to the work can be said to be unique.

Almost irrelevant to the perception of the work, yet crucial for its interpretation, is the fact that Raetz's human figure appearing in the light was inspired by a portrait of Italian renaissance artist Piero della Francesca (1416-1492). He is known as one of the first artists to work with mathematical perspective, using it to create the illusion of depth in the architectural backgrounds of his paintings. The emergence of mathematical perspective in art was a crucial turning point for the relationship between reality and representation – a recurring theme in Raetz's artistic research.

The movement of Raetz's mill is reminiscent of motion photography and the early days of cinematic motion. In the 1880s, English-American photographer Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904) captured moving people and animals in hundreds of consecutive images, thereby dissecting what it is we truly see when perceiving movement. The basis of cinematic motion lies in the creation of a sequence of hundreds of still images, which are then projected fast enough to be perceived as if they were moving. Raetz inverts



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this principle: the image is created by movement. The title *Kopflose Mühle* emphasizes that the installation is, in fact, 'headless' – the head isn't a real object, present in space, but an illusion.

With its elegant yet intricate construction, the work also bears an inherent reference to early industry and the first motorized machines. The electric-motorized turning of both wheels is perfectly synchronized and the aluminum slices meticulously cut and perfectly aligned for one purpose: to suggest the exact image Raetz wishes for us to see. In fact, one could say the work hinges on the blind spot of our brain: an image appears where the object and the light leave a gap. And what image is more natural for us to see than a human head?

SEEN – a small yet flexible space – offers a multitude of possible perspectives from which to view this work. Most obviously, the visitor can move around the piece inside the space. Another perspective is offered from the outside, where you can see the work from different angles, as well as the play of light and shadow projected onto the white walls. As dictated by the concept of the art space, the installation will be running day and night. A nighttime viewing offers yet another experience, since at this time the installation itself becomes the primary source of light.

Tamara Beheydt

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Practical information

Opening: 27 September 2019, from 6 pm at SEEN
Exhibition: 27 September until 23 November 2019

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