

EPHEMERALITY AS AN ACTIVE AGENT IN THE WORK OF ART

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Image: Felix Helmut Wagner

People
look at melons.

Melons
don't look at people.

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The stench reached my nose before my eyes could register what was causing it. Sickly, bordering on sweet, rotting. During a particularly warm week in September 2021, at the Semmelweis Women's Clinic in Vienna, the alternative art fair Parallel was taking place. Artists and galleries occupied the rooms of the old clinic, exhibiting their works across multiple stories of the abandoned building. On the top floor, Felix Helmut Wagner, an Austrian performance artist, installed *People look at melons. Melons don't look at people*. The work consisted of a screen playing a video performance surrounded by a wooden structure and, as everyone on that floor would become increasingly aware as the week went on, 104 pieces of watermelon wrapped in clingfilm.

Throughout the course of the week, the watermelons began to rot, their pink flesh slowly changing and decaying to a sickly brown. Wagner created this piece to serve as a provocative illustration of the semiotic notion of ascribing meaning to objects. He states that "people give meaning to things, which include works of art, and not the other way around". Through Wagner's incorporation of the rotting fruit, and through its inevitable deterioration, the relation to human flesh and mortality was strongly evoked. In line with Wagner's claim, how would one come to ascribe this interpretation, this meaning, to the work if it were not for the sensory effect created as time went on and the smell of rotting fruit filled the room (and the hallway... and a bit of the stairwell)? As a result, the artwork bestowed on "time" the capability to contribute to the result of the piece, in itself no longer abstract but instead functioning as an active agent.

The use of perishable goods in *People look at melons. Melons don't look at people* is reminiscent of other installations in which the temporality of the object played a key role in the work itself. Looking back into art history, Lee Bul's *Majestic Splendor* involved a lavishly decorated raw fish to question



Felix Helmut Wagner, *People look at melons. Melons don't look at people* (2021), courtesy of the artist.

the notion of ornamented beauty, however, it also simultaneously filled the Museum of Modern Art in New York with such a terrible stench that the work had to be removed in 1997. Zoe Leonard's *Strange Fruit* is another example, as it incorporated 300 fruit skins taken apart and stitched back together after the insides of the fruit were consumed, the process of decay unfolding for all viewers to experience as time went by.

The main characteristic of these works is their underlying ephemerality, entering a new transitory state each day until, over time, the process of decay prevails. As a viewer or a curator, each day the installation has the potential to surprise and change in unexpected ways. It leaves less room for control and more space for the artwork to unfold in its own time. There are possibilities to exert some form of control over the deterioration, depending on the environment the works are displayed in. Lee Bul began to use potassium permanganate to mitigate the smell of rotting fish. Zoe Leonard experimented with drying and preserving fruit to explore the possibilities of halting the process of decay. Felix Helmut Wagner's installation is captured through photography and the non-perishable part of the installation, the video work, is still in existence. However, the end result is vastly different from how the work would have originally been displayed. No matter what precautions are taken, or curatorial strategies are imposed, the impact time has on these ephemeral works of art is inevitable.

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