Sculptural assemblages and gestural works on paper are not what one often associates with the work of Paul Sharits, an artist best known for his systems-driven films characterized as prime examples of so-called “structural” cinema. Yet a recent presentation at the Emily Harvey Foundation in New York City (curated by Agustin Schang, Alice Centamore and Christian Xatrec) reveals a side to Sharits’ later works that feels more akin to the practices of artists such as Jack Smith, Paul Thek, or Mike Kelly. Created between 1981 and 1992, towards the end of Sharits’ life and during a period in which the artist struggled to find institutional support, the one-day show at EHF marked the first time this work had ever been publicly exhibited. With the absence of any of Sharits’ filmic pieces on view, the presentation was a quick glimpse into an unusual selection of work, thematizing a kind of reading that might suggest that these later works are a blip—or flicker—in the art historical narrative of an artist’s otherwise staunchly structural filmic output. How does one read this work in the context of the prevailing characterization of Sharits as a “structural” filmmaker? If one of the genre’s tenets was the emptying of cinema’s narrative content for an interrogation of its material properties, this later work suggests an irreverence to medium specificity, and invites readings of contamination, psychological fracture, and systematic breakdown. Indeed, the work is not structural—rather structureless.

The raw, post-punk sensibility in Sharits’ later work may appear disjunctive from his early algorithmic process. Flux Prefrog Hopper, for instance, a 1983 neo-expressionist crayon drawing wrapped in plastic, depicts a prehistoric frog with teeth enraptured in ecstasy or pain as a giant mosquito performs fellatio. While scenes of (human) copulation were not uncommon in Sharits’ output, absent is the cool remove of systematic logic and non-representational grids of color. Instead, these works exhibit a faux naïf quality, made with a liberal use of both cheap physical material and referent. In an untitled and undated work, a menagerie of plastic creatures—tarantulas, a lizard, and a rat—are haphazardly glued to a wall-hanging mirror. The grotesque infestation is a mesh through which one encounters, or hides from their own reflection, inviting any number of psychoanalytic readings. A similarly free association is at play in R.I.P (c. 1991), a vanitas still life in which a pink Easter-themed bowl (adorned with flowers, eggs, a cartoon rabbit and duck) holds a witch’s finger, an eyeball, a headstone and other Halloween-themed trinkets. Perfectly packaged in saccharine cuteness, the mass-produced arrangement frames the way in which American consumerist rituals of autumn and spring are suggestive of death. If many of the works are almost unrecognizable as early Sharits pieces, one thing they share in common with his early work is a persistent preoccupation with color. Looking across the range of work, it’s difficult not to recall Shutter Interface (1975), a “locational” piece comprised of a series of film projectors arranged...
to emit saturated hues in overlapping frames upon a gallery wall. This chromatic system might be located and reimagined in Dancing Hula Skirt Combo (Kinetic Wall Piece with Sound) (1981), a gestural drawing for a proposed wall sculpture involving painted hula skirts, each attached to an individual motor so that the colorful skirts sway “totally out of sync.” Though the kineticism of this sculpture was never realized, it extends to a work like Circles of Confusion (1991), which presents two moving plastic toys consisting of spiraling, multicolored serpents and a robot that spins endlessly upon a drum skin and a metal serving tray. When animated, the work produces an aggressive cacophony of plastic harmonics on a loop that leads to nowhere.

Indeed, though the later works are distinctive, perhaps Sharits’ earliest works always had a proto-punk sensibility. The perceptual aggression of an early “flicker” work like TOUCHING (1968), for instance, is underscored by the repetition of a single word throughout the film: “destroy.” This angst is matched by ephemera from the live performance The Existential Anguish Symphony (1991) displayed at EHF, including a proposal to edition the work as a kit à la George Maciunas containing VHS documentation of the original performance, audio of “fluxmusic” and color instructions for its conduction. This video documentation of The Existential Anguish Symphony is the sole moving image in the exhibition. In the video we see Sharits performing the premiere of the work in 1992 at the Big Orbit Gallery, in Buffalo, NY. The performance consists of a triangular arrangement of musical toys set on the floor, which Sharits activates at different intervals as a “conductor” gestured towards them with an elongated baton. In an associated score, the work’s title is scrawled in capital letters in pink, green, and orange craft puff paint across a vomitus ground of stains, paint splatters, and musical notation. Made on designer’s grid paper, this explosive chaos becomes even more compelling. Notes for the performance indicate the intended length to be 12 minutes (though its enactment lasted just over 5 minutes) – in either case, this brief, effective tantrum infatilizes modernism’s heroized forms of such philosophical nihilism. Existential anguish takes the form of Sharits frantically moving back and forth attempting to keep up with conductor’s tempo. Amidst the shrill discord he can be heard saying, “Oh, this is tragic!”

Perhaps most intriguing about the Emily Harvey exhibition is that it highlighted a sort of paradox within the legacy of Paul Sharits’ work. In a sense, the exhibition positioned his later and largely under-examined output as at odds within the larger historical narrative surrounding his practice. One way to think through this “Two Sharits Problem,” which positions either a “good,” conceptually orthodox Sharits or the scatological, “bad” Sharits on view at Emily Harvey, might be through the psychoanalytic work of Melanie Klein. Following this either/or position for Klein is the depressive position, a more integrative period of development in which ambivalence, and an embrace of the good and bad—or what might be thought of as grey thinking—emerges. If Sharits’ early films broke with the illusion of cinema, his later output presents a refreshing rupture to institutionalized understandings of his practice, perhaps opening up the historical discourse around this artist’s work, and towards a more integrated depressive-position. Sometimes restrictive systems have their generative limits, often their breakdown might be more interesting.

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