



SAUSAGE FACTORY

Weronika Stepien
& Stephen Wichuk



Sausage Machine (detail)
Stephen Wichuk
Two channel digital video
2016

Unit Operations (detail) - cover
Weronika Stepień
Four channel digital video
2016

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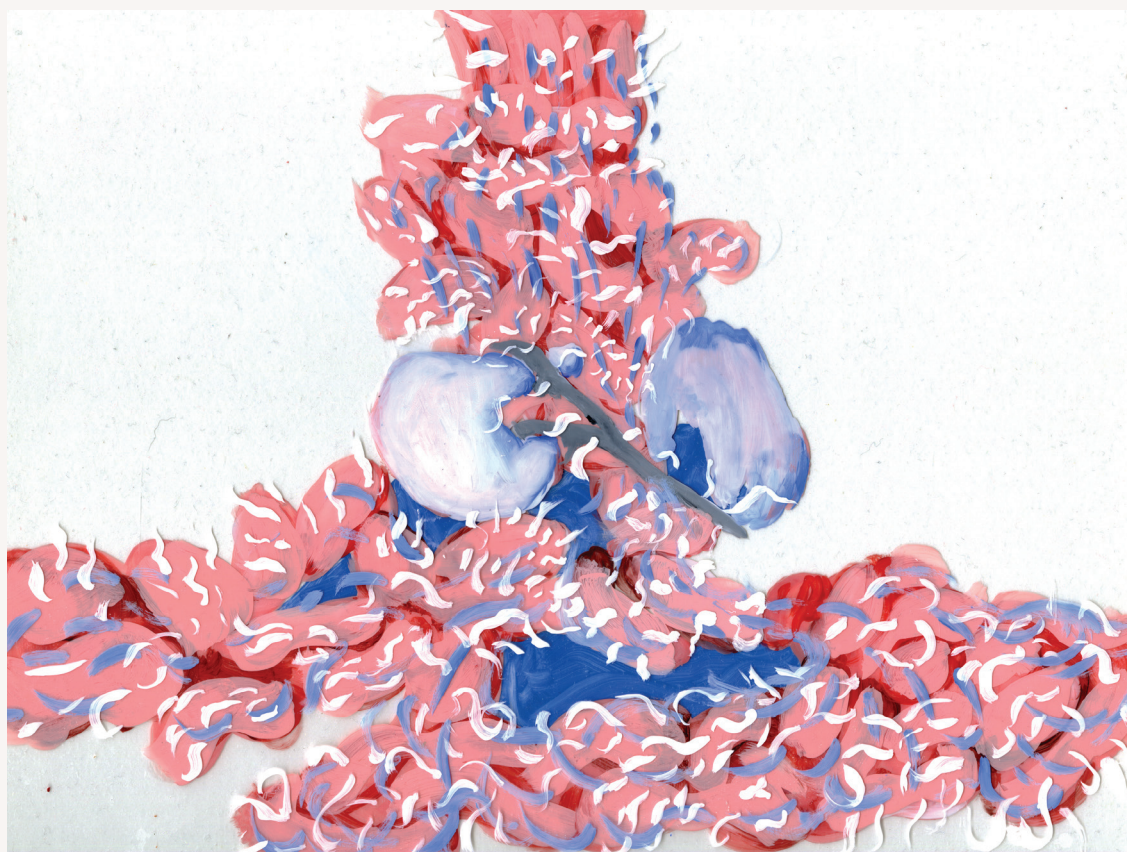
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HOW
THE
SAUSAGE
GETS
MADE

Unit Operations (detail)
Weronika Stepien
Four channel digital video
2016

Alla Gadassik

To “see how the sausage gets made” is to venture behind the curtain of sanitized respectability and discover the unsavoury details of a process most consumers would prefer stayed hidden. The source of this idiom is the modern sausage factory, a place where prior methods of manually mincing, stuffing, and preserving meat are transformed into industrial machinery for cranking out the signature food of the working class. As a product made from cheap leftover ingredients ground into a consistent, indistinguishable texture, the mass-produced sausage is the ultimate mystery meat. Whether dressed as a classic wiener or the alternative veggie dog, the sausage is quite at home nestled in a bun under layers of condiments and a “don’t ask” attitude about its provenance. To ask, to deliberately or unintentionally see how a sausage gets made, is to risk disappointment and court despair.

Near the end of the nineteenth century, rumours occasionally surfaced in European and North American cities that unscrupulous entrepreneurs used stray canines as a sausage ingredient (one disputed origin of the name “hot dog”). These rumours paled in comparison to ones that would circulate in Eastern and Central Europe after the Second World War: that missing people were turned into sausage meat in a secret campaign to combat postwar starvation. Such rumours, from the repugnant to the unthinkable, lacked

merit, but they functioned as a symptom of social anxieties about the hidden costs of industrialization and the impact of modernity on animal and human flesh. As an unsettling metaphor, the sausage factory reminds us that industrial production, particularly in the context of low-wage labour and unsafe working conditions, does consume people, often in physically palpable ways. In the contemporary context, the “sausage factory” is still invoked to describe and demystify a wide range of institutions that prefer to hide the unpalatable mechanics of production, from the operations of television networks to the inner workings of educational institutions.

In their work on display in this exhibition, Weronika Stepień and Stephen Wichuk treat the sausage factory as a challenge to investigate the hidden provenance of moving images and as a dare to locate the artist within (not outside) the messy, repetitive, and precarious daily grind of production. Stepień’s *Unit Operations* (2016) breaks down the sausage assembly line into distinct stages; at each stage flesh is unmade and remade into new forms, while human bodies are carved into limbs and plugged into continuously running machines. Each quadrant in the composition is further segmented into distinct painted frames that are destined to tirelessly cycle through the same gestures. Wichuk’s *Sausage Machine* (2016) also deconstructs and reanimates a cyclical gesture, sourced from an early Popeye

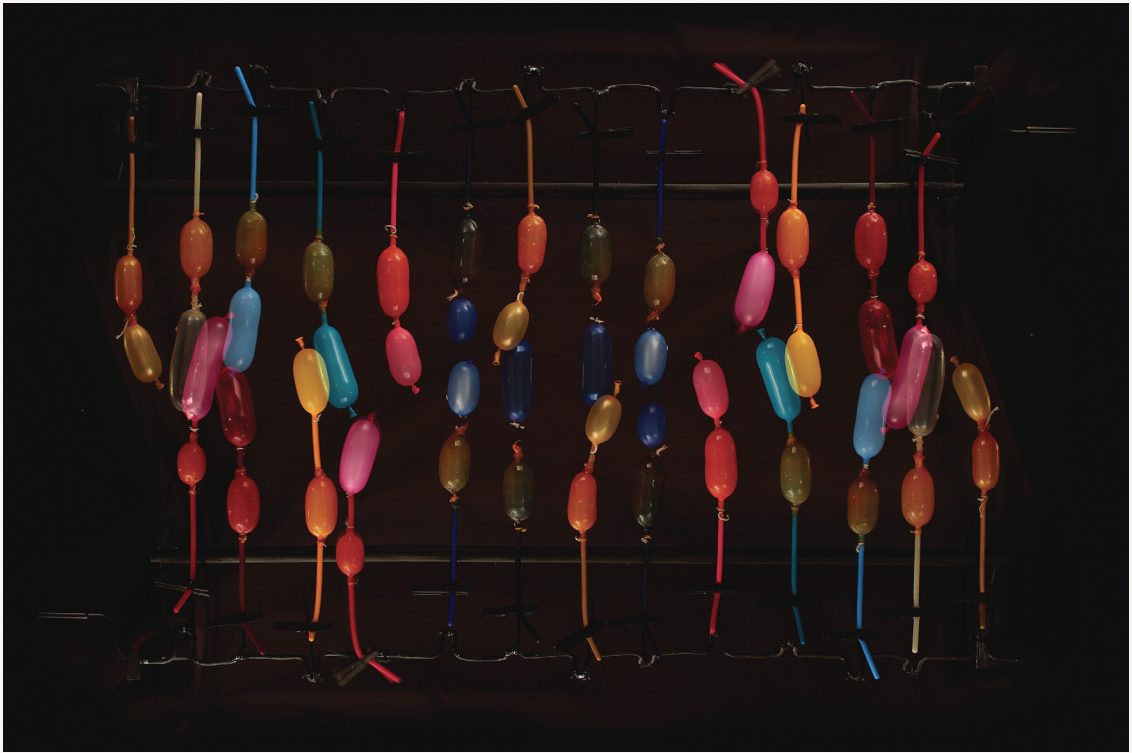


Popeye the Sailor: Seasin's Greetinks! (stills - low-resolution digital scan)
dir. Dave Fleischer
1933

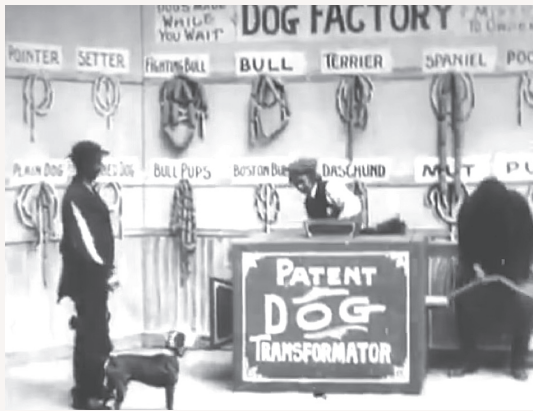
cartoon titled *Seasin's Greetinks!* (1933, dir. Dave Fleischer). In the initial episode Popeye's burly nemesis Bluto pursues the sailor on ice skates that are pulled by a small dog, whom Bluto mercilessly whips until the whimpering animal momentarily becomes a floating sausage link. More than fifty years after its original release, this episode was colourized and repackaged as *Season's Greetings*, but the sausage gag must have been deemed unsuitable for television syndication, because all traces of it are gone in the later version. Bluto still whips the dog, but the dark humour of the flying meat never appears. With the *Sausage Machine*, Wichuk resurrects the gag through what appears to be a perpetual motion machine of balloon-animal fun, but which may be hopelessly compromised by the fragility of its dubious ingredients.

Both Stepien's and Wichuk's video works remind us that the history of the moving image is inextricably tied to the history of manufacturing and mass-production. Cinematography was invented in part by scientists and business entrepreneurs, and early film technology was made possible by a series of industrial patents. The cinema belongs as much to the modern factory as to the artist's studio, and early commercial studios were often called film factories and cartoon factories. Numerous studios were organized as assembly lines for producing serial products, preferably





Sausage Machine (detail) - top & left page
Stephen Wichuk
Two channel digital video
2016



The Dog Factory (still - low-resolution digital scan)
dir. Thomas A. Edison
1904

new variations on older ingredients, for audiences consisting primarily of working classes. However, the products of those film factories – the films themselves – were sold to the cinemagoer as ephemeral works of wonder and satisfying entertainment. Rarely did the films betray the full extent of the tedious labour, technical troubleshooting, and myriad of instruments and chemicals that went into their production.

This discrepancy between the magic of the movies and the grinding mechanism of their production is likely responsible for the recurring motif of the sausage factory in early films. Thomas A. Edison's silent film *Dog Factory* (1904) is not the earliest example, but it offers a curious variation on the theme. The film takes place at the titular factory run by the owner of a Patent Dog Transformator. The Transformator is a bulky crate with three openings, through which dogs of various breeds are transformed into different types of sausage links (Bull, Terrier, Dachshund...), and the sausage links are transformed back into dogs upon customer demand. The scenario is an obvious riff on the "dachshund sausage" (a nickname for the wiener introduced to Americans by German immigrants), but the scene is multilayered in meaning. The Transformator relies on the rumour of dogs used for meat, but its fantastical power to reverse the process expands the premise into an additional portrait of bourgeois consumption and bred-to-order accessory pets.

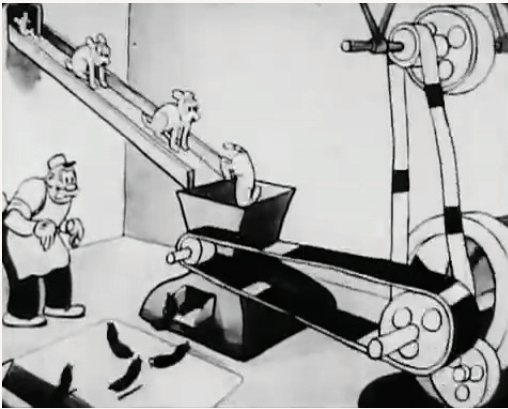
The Dog Transformator also evokes the apparatus of the cinematograph. A trapezoid hood spitting out dogs on one side and a cylindrical pipe pushing out sausages on the other side are shaped like viewing peepholes, and the name of the device on the front of the box is painted with rectangular ornamentation in the manner of silent film intertitles. A factory employee cranks an invisible handle to turn dogs (real life) into inert strips of meat (strips of film), and those strips can also be brought back to life for a paying audience.

Metaphors aside, filmstrips and sausages share a very literal, material connection. Both rely in part on cellulose, a plant-sourced derivative used as a major ingredient in paper products. Cellulose was necessary for the development of film celluloid, as well as transparent sheets used in classical animation (called "cels"). Cellulose is also a popular ingredient in the production of skinless sausages, because it is a cheaper than animal casing and can be used for vegetarian products. In addition to this mutual ingredient, the history of the moving image also benefited from animal-sourced gelatin, which was instrumental in binding light-sensitive particles to make photographic emulsion. Wichuk's *Sausage Machine* embraces this material history by tinkering and experimenting with the versatility of quotidian ingredients. Some of its glistening, bouncing sausages





Unit Operations (detail) - top & left page
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Mutt and Jeff: Dog Gone (still - low-resolution digital scan)
dir. Bud Fisher
1926

are cased in dyed gelatin – a twisted take on “organic” artisanal balloon animals made with real animal products. The industrial alchemy of substituting one substance for another is also integral to Stepien’s *Unit Operations*, in which photographed footage of workers at a sausage factory is distilled into evocative movements, coated with the artist’s painted gestures and transferred onto animation cels.

Unit Operations points to a deeper relationship between animation and factory labour. Animators are usually trained as artists or illustrators, but the production of an animated film requires painting tens of thousands of nearly identical, anonymous, and disposable images. Moreover, even the structure of a classic cartoon relies on assembling and frequently repackaging joke-components, or “gags” (a term implying choking with laughter). As such, cartoon gags involving sausages are also an inside joke about the relentless labour demands of the animation process.¹ For example, in the silent *Mutt and Jeff* episode *Dog Gone* (1926, dir. Bud Fisher) the two protagonists decide to capitalize on a dog competition, with Jeff dressed in a dog costume and Mutt volunteering as a judge. The con goes south when a dogcatcher rounds up Jeff together with a horde of fancy dogs and sells them to a sausage factory. As Jeff (still in costume) desperately fights the cruel conveyor belt, dog after dog falls into the sausage machine in a drawn-out sequence

that was itself made by a team of nameless employees and filmed on a loop.

The ubiquitous and odd sausage-factory trope walks on a razor's edge between repulsion and amusement, between exhausting repetition and creative play. *Unit Operations* and *Sausage Machine* – part artworks, part contraptions, part mystery ingredients – also live on that edge. They challenge us to venture beyond passive observation and engage the tactile and gustatory dimensions of vision. They invite us to ask further questions: How does the process of recycling a gesture from the real into the photographed, the photographed into the painted, the painted into the animated, and the animated into the sculptural shape our encounter with the moving image? How does the addition of digital and plastic materials alter its substance? Whose hands are cranking the visible and invisible handles of all these devices? The details are put blatantly on display and yet somehow always deferred, because in closely following one ingredient we conveniently forget another.

¹ The historical and cultural relationship between animation and industrial production is detailed in Donald Crafton's seminal book *Before Mickey: The Animated Film, 1898-1928* (University of Chicago Press) and in Nicholas Sammond's recently published *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* (Duke University Press). The balance between humour and tedium in classical cartoon gags is also explored by Scott Curtis in his essay on Tex Avery, which can be found in the edited collection *Funny Pictures: Animation and Comedy in Studio-Era Hollywood* (University of California Press).

