

art

## Lost and Found

Stefan Themerson

Ubu  
16 East 78th Street  
Through April 27

**T**races of traces: Polish artist Stefan Themerson's photographs, frame enlargements, sketches, and collaged contact strips are the ghostly fragments of an avant-garde so fugitive it might have been imagined by the Brothers Quay. In the Warsaw of the 1930s, Themerson and his wife Franciszka were an entire movement—working in (or theorizing about) photography, radio, painting, opera, typography, theater design, and movies.

While the Polish film avant-garde tended toward social documentary, the Themersons stoked the embers of a tradition already cold in Paris—championing painters' movies like *Ballet Mecanique* and *Entr'acte*, looking for ways to synthesize visual forms. Ubu's exhibit includes Themerson's sketch for the homemade contraption on which he produced the skeletal hands, silhouette seltzer bottles, and other animated photographs of his first film, *Pharmacy* (1930). Other relics include shards of the Themersons' *Europa* (1931-32), a poetic montage film on the end of civilization:

the village  
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multiple exposures of a fat man eating, juxtaposed close-ups of bread and a beseeching face. Included, too, are collages and frame enlargements from the couple's two "commercial" films, *Moment Musical* (1933), an ad for fashion accessories, and the sci-fi-inflected *Short Circuit* (1935), commissioned by the Institute of Social Problems to educate the public on the perils of electricity, with a lightning bolt scratched on the film emulsion.

Although the Themersons managed to escape Poland before the Nazi invasion, their films vanished. Legends of prints circulating in South America notwithstanding, the one movie that turned up helped jump-start Poland's new film-school avant-garde. The movie, titled *The Adventures of a Good Citizen*, concerned a man who insists on marching backward—a retroactive image for Themerson's lost vanguard.

—J. HOBERMAN