

THOMAS HIRSCHHORN

Archeology of engagement

Dates: from 18th May to 24th September, 2001

Production: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA)

The art of Thomas Hirschhorn (Bern, 1957) could be defined as the formal realization of a personal commitment that has led him to address ethical and political issues which are materialized in large-scale ephemeral installations constructed from poor materials, with a highly original and characteristic aesthetic of the precarious. The MACBA will present the installation *Archeology of engagement* which the artist has created specifically for the entrance to the Museum.

This project takes the form of an archaeological dig, showing a particular point in the progress of the excavation work. According to the artist, 'here the work of extraction and of research is being carried out on site, for the purpose of analysing, understanding, comparing and classifying elements that apparently have only one thing in common: the philosophical, political-artistic and spiritual commitment. All of these commitments are buried in the ground and brought to light by a team of archaeologists'. The idea of the artist is that the visitors, coming to the site at a moment when the archaeologists have supposedly stopped for a break, can see a number of elements that have already been brought to the surface and, at the same time perceive that there are many more still hidden in the earth.

In this project, Hirschhorn raises questions about both his own personal commitment and that of others: from the anarchists to Thomas More; from Marx to Georges Bataille; from the Palestinian military camps to the US Marines; from Greenpeace to pressure groups for the abolition of the death penalty.

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THOMAS HIRSCHHORN

SELECCIÓN DE ENTREVISTAS / ARTÍCULOS

THOMAS HIRSCHHORN, 2000
"Jumbo Spoons and Big Cake"
THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO
"World Airport" The Renaissance Society
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Interview

Interview between Okwui Enwezor, *Adjunct Curator of Contemporary Art, Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, The Art Institute of Chicago* and Thomas Hirschhorn, January 5 – 6, 2000

Okwui Enwezor (OE): *I would like to begin by asking whether you think that the year 1994, or more precisely, the exhibition of your work at the Jeu de Paume, Paris, marked a turning point in your work between the formal, sculptural syntax you developed in the early 1990s and work you are doing today.*

Thomas Hirschhorn (TH): *No exhibition has been a turning point in the development of my work. I have always envisioned my work as a series of positions taken. I realized for the first time that what I do was really being discussed after the exhibition at the Jeu de Paume. Showing my work there did not create a rupture with what I had been doing before. What mattered to me was that many, many people saw my work for the first time.*

OE: *Given that your previous work was concerned with the interaction of the work on the street, and here the work was presented in the museum context, would you say that the relationship changed in terms of the work's reception in a public context? Did you not like the ways in which the work was discussed in this prior context?*

TH: *What must be said is that I never exhibited my work exclusively in the street and then exclusively in a museum. Before the show at the Jeu de Paume (which is not really a museum but a national gallery), I exhibited my work in diverse settings: in the street, in galleries, in art centers, in alternative spaces. For me this exhibition meant an extension of the field in which I work. I think that the artwork itself is important, that context cannot change a work. I believe in the autonomy of the artwork. The interesting thing about showing in a museum is that the audience comprises both people who know about art and those who are just passing by, as in the street, except in different proportions.*

OE: *Talk about the transition from the life of the work in the street—and the ways things appeared in the street—to a regimented presentation that, in many ways, affects the formal qualities of the work itself. Where, would you say, was the critical transformation in the work's appearance?*

TH: *I want to make the same kind of work everywhere. What interests me is to make work that exists as well in one type of setting or another, in public as well as private space. I never ask myself what I can take from the street into the museum. But I do ask what I can take from the museum out to the street. I want to make work that is not hierarchical, that does not isolate, that does not intimidate. I want to make work that must fight to exist no matter where; work that has never found its place.*

OE: *Where would you say the notion of hierarchy is dissolved in your work, especially in terms of the content of your intervention in whatever space in which the work is presented? Or does the notion of not establishing hierarchy affect your interventions into those spaces in which you chose to work?*

What really changes the nature of the work in the relationship between the point of its presentation and its public reception?

TH: The attention given to my work ranges from total rejection to total absorption, and this is in the street as well as in the museum. The work does not change, whether one pays attention to it or not. This is something essential in art: reception is never its goal. What counts for me is that my work provides material to reflect upon. Reflection is an activity.

OE: But what would you say to the idea that one creates a kind of democratic space in which the work exists, an alternative, public sphere around which the notion of sculpture of this nature—and its utter fragility—can be constituted in a democratic sense?

TH: I want to make non-hierarchical work in non-hierarchical spaces. The work is not something more in the museum and something less in the street: this is essential for me. I am concerned by equality and inequality in all forms. Thus, I do not want to impose hierarchies; in exhibiting my work, I try to efface the values associated with the location of the exhibition. I am not interested in prestige. I am interested in community. Democracy is a beautiful concept, but I think democracy and direct democracy are becoming increasingly passive; they are terms that dissimulate. Democracy can conceal private interests. I want to replace the word democracy with equality.

OE: It seems to me that the spectator is really at risk inside of your installations. There is a massive amount of information they must process in order to arrive at that crucial nexus of meaning you may want to connect them to. So what sense of power do you give the spectator when the sheer amount of information you throw at them becomes overwhelming? Is there a position you take in terms of how the spectator confronts your work?

TH: I do not wish my work to exclude anyone; I try to create for people the possibility of entering into my work in different ways, introducing elements that provide access (the Chicago Bulls and Rosa Luxemburg spoons are examples). I want to be precise but open. I do not want to invite or oblige viewers to become interactive with what I do; I do not want to activate the public. I want to give of myself, to engage myself to such a degree that viewers confronted with the work can take part and become involved, but not as actors. When I present an abundance of images, documents, and informational materials, I try to demonstrate that, on their own, these things are important not because I have selected them and made them evident by enlarging them, but because their importance can be judged differently from one person to the next.

OE: In the past, you vehemently refused to classify or constitute your work as installation, choosing instead the notion of sculpture to describe the spatial practice of your work, its presence in a given space. But there is an evident paradox in the idea of sculpture being part of the condition of your work, in that sculpture's formal terms can be seen today as the very antithesis of radical, progressive thinking. How do you reconcile this paradox between the utterly conservative nature of sculptural practice, with its formal, canonical essence, and the work you make today? Why this distinction between sculpture and installation in your work?

TH: As an artist, I don't think that I have to resolve paradoxes and contradictions or to fight confusion; I myself feel confused and full of contradictions. I make affirmations without being certain of their validity. But I must work according to what interests me profoundly. What I reject in the word "installation" is that it is a term that reduces work to a form of expression. It is an insider, contemporary-art term. I do not make work that achieves within a form, within a discipline; I think that those who use the term "installation" to differentiate this genre from painting, video, photography, etc., are lazy, because they believe that the decision to work in one or another medium is a formal choice. I have never said "I want to make an installation." An artist who uses photography as a medium is not a photographer. Artists make their work in the most appropriate way to convey what they wish to say. I call my work "sculpture" because it is an open term. I achieve in three dimensions what I have thought out in two dimensions: I think in plans, points, and lines. This kind of thinking is stacked up. I have to work my ideas out in space. That transformation is a sculpture without volume, without thinking of making volume. I don't think that the term "sculpture" is anti-progressive or anti-radical. I think of the work of Joseph Beuys.

OE: It seems to me that we can go from this paradox—the distinction you make between sculpture and installation—into the very nature of another contradiction, which is sculpture's relationship to the monument. The monument has been very much a part of the way that you not only describe the public presence of the personalities you admire, but also serves to critique the very constitution of the monument as a forever-present, temporal question in the public imagination. How do you reconcile your critique of the monument, which you insist upon relative to the specificity of a given work, as conditioned by the language of sculpture, and the fact that you do not wish to produce monuments?

TH: My critique of the "monument" comes from the fact that the idea of the monument is determined, produced, and situated by decisions imposed from above, by those in power. And its forms correspond to the will to lead people to admire the monument and, along with it, the dominant ideology—whether it is the monument in Berlin to Ernst Thälmann, cofounder of the German Communist Party, or the commemoration in Washington, D.C. of those who lost their lives in Vietnam. A monument always retains something of the demagogic. I want to fight hierarchy, demagoguery, this source of power.

OE: Of course the nature of the materials you use has been central to the discussion of your work in recent years, especially your proclivity for and insistence on materials that are readily available, cheap, mass-produced; materials that both mimic "kitsch" and deride the excesses of our throw-away, consumer-driven culture. For me there is, in this choice of cheap, quotidian materials such as plastic, aluminum foil, and cardboard, a strategy to contaminate the very nature of art's relationship to high culture, and to critique the preciousness of sculptural practice. What led you to these types of materials for your work?

TH: The choice of materials is important. I want to make simple and economical work with materials that everyone knows and uses. I don't choose them for the value of their appearance. I hate art made of noble materials. I don't understand why one attaches value to a material, whether it is clean metal, marble, glass, fine wood, big screens, empty space, and enormous, heavily framed objects, etc. I don't believe these are contemporary expressions. I

am against using materials or forms that attempt to intimidate, seduce, or dominate rather than encourage reflection. For the activity of reflection, material does not matter. The materials I work with are precarious. This means that their temporal existence is clearly determined by human beings, not by nature.

OE: *Don't you risk, in terms of the materials you use, the charge of being patronizing to so-called everyday people in terms of this idea of working very close to how "people" identify, through their sense of recognition, what these materials are and what they mean? In a sense, [don't we have here] what one would call a kind of naïve utopianism and a nostalgia, a kind of social-realist attitude, about the humility of such materials versus the pretensions of high art—the highly finished, regulated, and precious sculptural object in a museum context and the banal, unprecious material of the everyday.*

TH: My choice of materials, as well as my work itself, is constituted as critical, obviously. The energy that fuels my work comes from my being a critic of the state of the world, of the human condition. However, for me these choices are based on a determination that originates beyond classification of the order of making critical art. I don't want to play the critic against the public or vice versa; but, rather, art and the art world cannot be removed from the larger world. I try to present my ideas and reflections in a clearer, more powerful manner at each exhibition. Naïveté doesn't interest me; utopianism does; nostalgia doesn't interest me; stupidity does. I want my work to be judged.

OE: *Yet there is still the risk of the work being seen as "radical chic," because it so clearly references attitudes sympathetic to a quasi-democratic context of art for the populace rather than for the elite.*

TH: To make art is very risky. But terms such as "radical chic" make me really angry. I believe that this term comes from the fashion element of the art world. It is a critical term that protects its own interests, the real chic. "Radical chic," like "politically correct," is an art-world term that, as such, is an ineffectual and uninteresting phenomenon of our time. These terms reflect fleeting values and are used to avoid rather than initiate discussion.

OE: *I understand your refusal to have your work contained in this particular register, even though writers critiquing it find that certain aspects are consumed by an overly stylized fashion, which is neither the work's fault nor intention. But I want to depart from that and go on to what has been one of your central preoccupations, the political nature of your artistic enterprise—that you do not make political art but that you make art politically. What does this mean?*

TH: Political questions are life questions. They are not art-specific or ideological. I want to affirm, as strongly as possible, that my art must appropriate the world. To make art politically means to choose materials that do not intimidate, a format that doesn't dominate, a device that does not seduce. To make art politically is not to submit to an ideology or to denounce the system, in opposition to so-called "political art." It is to work with the fullest energy against the principle of quality.

OE: *Your work has also been concerned with the hyper-capitalist, multinational rhetoric of globalization, especially as seen in your recent World Airport, shown first at the 1999 Venice Biennale and then*

at *The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago*. What is it specifically about globalization that troubles you and that warrants the extensive inquiry you submit it to in your projects?

TH: In my view, there are complicities between globalization and what I call "macro-isolation." There is a link between these two forces, which tend to go in opposite directions but which finally meet by profiting from each other. Globalization, communication everywhere and all over, economic forces, worldwide enterprises all become increasingly closer and unified. The world grows smaller. Macro-isolation, self-isolation, and particularities—ethnic, religious, social, linguistic, cultural, etc.—local divisions, regional and private wars, war lords all tend to separate one entity from another. This shrinkage and splitting is what I wished to explore in *World Airport*.

OE: Let's return to the personalities that have become a part of your personal mythology. You have created in your work a kind of encyclopedia, a cosmos, in which the works and ideas of a number of twentieth-century artists and writers have been made to resonate. Out of this, you have elaborated upon four sculptural models to investigate such issues as loss, love, piety, ideology, and so on. They are: altars, monuments, "Direct Sculptures," and kiosks. You have made these over the past three or four years. What is it about these individuals that attracts you to them?

TH: What matters most to me, in choosing these individuals, is that they have all tried to change the world. They have all led lives and produced work that inspire admiration, not in terms of success or failure, but through the pertinence of their inquiry. I can say that I love them and their work unconditionally. I love Robert Walser, Ingeborg Bachman, Gilles Deleuze, Benedict de Spinoza, Otto Freundlich, Fernand Léger, Emmanuel Bove, Ljov Popova, Piet Mondrian, Georges Bataille, Raymond Carver, Emil Nolde, Gramsci, and Meret Oppenheim.

OE: So it is their personal investment or engagement, rather than their embodiment of a higher ideological position, that moves you?

TH: Yes, the commitment is personal. The fact that I say I love these artists and writers and put them in a public place is a personal, artistic commitment on my part.

OE: And so you see the monuments as placed in the service of their political and ethical positions?

TH: Yes.

OE: Let's go back to the question of the altars, and your motives for making them.

TH: I made four altars, each for someone whose work is important to me and who is deceased: Mondrian, Bachman, Freundlich, and Carver. All of these altars commemorate their lives and work, and are situated in locations where they could have died by accident, by chance: on a sidewalk, in the street, in a corner. I exhibited all four altars in different cities; two have been shown twice in different places. These very local sites of memory become universal sites of memory, by virtue of their location. The altars evoke the memory of someone who has died and who was loved. It is important to attest to one's love, one's attachment. My

altars were inspired by the memorials that are created spontaneously for the deceased, both famous and anonymous.

OE: *But the altars are dislocated, shown out of context and in places where we least expect them.*

TH: What interests me in working in public spaces is the choice of placement, of location. The spontaneous altars to which I just referred are in unexpected locations. Most people don't die in the middle of a square or on a beautiful boulevard; their death, or the accident that precipitates their death, rarely happens in a strategic place. Even famous people do not die in the center of something. There are no hierarchies involved. Location is important not in relationship to the plan of a city but in relationship to the deceased. This is how I locate my altars.

OE: *I want to shift to the four sculptural categories that you have developed in terms of the ways in which you are seeking a kind of interaction within the context of public space, without ever emphasizing the public [aspect of the] space as one of the conditions of the work. What does "Direct Sculpture" mean to you and how does it relate to your work overall?*

TH: "Direct Sculptures" are models of monuments. They are in contrast to altars, kiosks, and monuments, located in interiors, in exhibition spaces. "Direct Sculpture" is the coming together of a will that issues from below and a will that issues from above. This congruence gives shape to a new type of sculpture, a three-dimensional form that lends itself to carrying, to supporting messages that have nothing to do with the original purpose of the actual support. The message takes possession of the sculpture. My first "Direct Sculpture" was inspired by what happened in Paris at the spot of the automobile accident that killed Princess Diana. At this location, a monument exists which represents the flame of liberty. Because of the princess' death, this monument, which had been standing unnoticed for years, took on new meaning. People started using it as a support for their messages of love to the princess. They have claimed the monument, transforming it into a just monument.

OE: *But, in this sense, "Direct Sculpture" also plays off the syntax of the ready-made.*

TH: "Direct Sculpture" has no signature. It is signed by the community, with colored spray paint, or whatever. In this sense, it is not a ready-made.

OE: *You have made what you call classical monuments for four philosophers: Spinoza, Deleuze, Gramsci, and Bataille. Why them, and why monuments for them and altars for artists and writers?*

TH: These philosophers have something to say to us today. I think that the capacity of human beings for reflection, the ability we have to make our brains work, is beautiful. Spinoza, Deleuze, Gramsci, and Bataille are examples of people who instill confidence in our reflective capacities. They force us to think. Monuments to their memory continue to question, reflect, and keep this internal beauty vital. The altars for artists and writers are conceived as personal commitments; the monuments for philosophers are conceived as communal commitments.

OE: *You have stated that artists have a responsibility in the ways their work communicates with the world. What do you see today as the ethical relationship between contemporary art and artists working today?*

TH: Spaces that contemporary art occupies are spaces for reclaiming the world, which I believe contemporary art must do. As an artist, I want to work in relationship to and in the world that I inhabit. Contemporary art is a strong force, because it can repossess the world according to the biases of individual commitments. It poses the question of ethics. It can express sadness; it can express what we reject.

OE: *Recently, you made a wonderful sculpture, or installation, for "Mirror's Edge" (Umeå, Sweden, Bildmuseet), an exhibition I curated, in which you played with an utterly melancholic sensibility. It interests me that, in certain ways, your work can be seen as melancholic and, at the same time, very aggressive. The piece in "Mirror's Edge" played with all sorts of conditions: hot and cool, changes in perception, mirroring of ideas. This produced an affective reality, a sort of fictional space, something you called a Critical Laboratory. I am interested in the interdisciplinary nature of your work, in your desire to connect things that cannot connect. What is your motivation in seeking such seemingly impossible connections?*

TH: To connect those things that have nothing in common is one aspect of my work as an artist. I can do this, give physical form to a gathering or connecting of things that is intellectually impossible. To connect what cannot be connected, this is exactly what my work as an artist is. In *Critical Laboratory*, I tried to give space, form, and even time to the very complex mechanism by which I make a critical judgment about something, in response not to a specific question but to the totality of questions about everything. That makes it strange.

OE: *Your sculptural language evokes works by other contemporary artists: Pascale Martin Tayou, Bjarne Melgaard, Georges Adeagbo, Jason Rhoades. On the surface, their works and yours seem to relate in terms of such concerns as spatial arrangement, disembodiment, accumulation, or fragmentation. This might suggest a kind of sculptural style that is prevalent in the art of the 1990s. Do you see a relationship here, and if so, are you working within this style as a way to critique it as a style?*

TH: I am not a chaotic artist. I want to work in a space with fragmentation, broken scales, multiplied angles, and to put a very strong light on what is suspect. I am against work of quality, ready-mades, finished products. I try to work with total energy. Energy, yes! Quality, no! If this relates my work to that of other artists, it's not because we share a style; rather, it's because we all reject quality. I believe only in energy.

OE: *It seems clear that your affirmation of the handmade enlarges the possibilities for the public to experience your work. There is a sense of irony in the kind of enlargement you make of quotidian objects, rendering them as soft sculptures on the verge of being constituted into finished objects or trash. Do you see a contradiction in placing an ironical presentation of everyday objects before the public?*

TH: The irony comes after the work has been made. It is self-irony. It is not cynical. I am not interested in applied arts. If I create handmade works, it's so that the process of blowing up

becomes visible. It's not about craft or technical prowess but rather about the result of intentionally taking the measure of things. I am interested in the out-of-time procedure. A worker who makes large signs or symbols in order to show them in a demonstration is not involved in a hobby. A soccer fan who holds up a big, handmade trophy cup in order to cheer on his team is not interested in hobbies. But each of them has a will, and they express it, without caring if it is anachronistic. I think as well about the carts made for street parades and carnivals. What I like is all the energy, I'd even say love, that goes into the making of such objects. I am not interested in the banality of all that, but rather in the complexity of that, of its relationship to life.

OE: *How do you see your work operating in the ideological construct we conceive of as public space?*

TH: To date I have made thirty-four interventions in public spaces, which are places for everyone. Public space is only public. Private space is not only private. Some spaces are more private than others. There are people without a private space. That is why to act in public space is a proposition that enlarges a possible audience. Also, the experience of time changes when you move from a private to a public space. There is nothing private about time. Public space means confrontation. To exhibit in public space is cruel, but public space is just.

OE: *At the same time that your work is concerned with humble, mass-produced materials, you are very interested in the city, specifically in the marginal aspects of city life. Margins, after all, indicate the existence of a center, of institutional power that denies and creates the marginal. Can you speak to this issue?*

TH: My work is tied to the city in that this is where people live, where they derive their energy, where they confront themselves, and where there is space for art to conquer. When I think "city" or "inner city," I don't think of center, for the center no longer exists. I think of the energy of the periphery or margin, between center and edge, the difference between engagement in the center and at the edge. In my work, I try to find pragmatic reasons for interventions that go beyond the concept of center/edge. The center is wherever people live. That's where I want to work.

OE: *Are you contesting the idea that there is indeed a center?*

TH: In my work, there is never a center. It is constituted of different elements. I do not think that art has a constituted center; it's an open space. Art makes things move and keeps thoughts moving; it decentralizes.

OE: *How do you choose the sites in which your work exists?*

TH: I have the liberty to choose the public spaces in which I would like to put my work. This choice is primary; rather than selecting a fine, sophisticated spot—a central location filled with historic resonance tying the space to the city, a contextual space—I look for a place that relates specifically to my project, and also that permits my work to be mobile, in another city,

in another country. These locations are places of passage. I try to work where people go for reasons other than artistic ones.

OE: *The piece you made for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Soho, VDP—Very Derivated Products, struck me in terms of its aggression toward the institutional space and the ways in which it tried to contaminate that space by inviting the outside space to infiltrate the structure. It reconceptualized the tension between the socially constituted public sphere and the institutionally constituted sphere in which culture and commerce merge. Why this particular site for this work?*

TH: For this project, I chose the museum store, which sells cultural objects, more than informative documents about artists' work and projects. I chose it because it demonstrates the problematic situations between information, admiration, and the way culture introduces "added value." In this shop, you can buy teacups and umbrellas decorated with artists' signatures. You don't have to buy books about artistic reflections and positions that make one think about art. You just buy culture! I also chose this place because, in order to go to the museum, you have no choice but to walk through the shop. I tried to place my work in the most difficult and least gratifying space, but at the same time it was the only location that was public, visible twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

OE: *Your work possesses the attributes of a work in progress, a studio, a laboratory, a storage space; all are evoked in the experience of walking through them. Can you discuss how the movement in your work between these associations becomes a kind of evasion, as if no one sphere, or context, determines the way one sees what you do?*

TH: Art is always movement, art is work. I hate forms and formalisms that wish to impose themselves on us as something fixed, stable, immutable. I want my work not to make one think first about art, but rather about something related to other work or life experiences. Laboratory, storage, studio space, yes, I want to use these forms in my work to make spaces for the movement and endlessness of thinking and to provide time for the movement of reflection.

OE: *I am intrigued by your notion of yourself—seemingly anachronistic in this age of global capitalism—as a worker. You refuse to see your work as a piece, because of the market appropriation of a piece as a product. You emphasize the notion of the work as conceived of not only through the ideas of the artist but in the very activity [involved in the] production of it.*

TH: I love the word "work." It indicates both something realized and an action. I also love that the word relates the activity of an artist to that of a secretary or a baker, and so forth, in the sense of something that must be accomplished, done. Production does not come from productivity; rather, it comes from having given form to an idea; it is in this sense that I try to work. There is a sense of resistance in the word "work" and also in the activity of work. Both noun and verb fight against "producing a piece," which is the opposite of what I want to do.

OE: *Let's discuss the interdisciplinary nature of your practice. You were trained as a graphic designer, a training that manifests itself in the orientation and arrangement of your work. Moreover, you work*

with writers who contribute commentaries about your ideas. You are a worker, an artist, a philosopher, a writer, and a researcher. How do these disparate identities converge in your work and become legible as an idea or a fully constituted process of sculptural elaboration?

TH: I am an artist, worker, soldier. I am neither a theoretician nor a philosopher. At first I wanted to be a graphic designer with a political commitment because of what I could achieve with social issues and in everyday life. Such political thinking, I understood after some time, is limited because such work only serves an ideology. I was not interested in making graphic design for an ideology. I wanted to give form to things that revolted me, that I could understand, that I did not agree with. But I wanted to give them my forms. That is how I decided to be an artist. My work with several writers, Manuel Joseph, Jean Charles Massera, Marcus Steinweg, comes from the fact that I share their concerns about the use of words to appropriate the world. Also because I want to include people who are not interested in the formal aspects of contemporary art, but are open to ideas expressed through writing or to writing in general. I want to integrate their work into mine just as they integrate mine into theirs.

OE: You often say that art has an ethical purpose. How do you reconcile this with the current critique of political correctness and multiculturalism?

TH: The motor that drives my work is the human condition and my concerns about it. I do not believe that the process of making art can exist without taking a critical position. An artist does not make a work of art so that it works or succeeds. To not agree with the system requires courage. Artists are disobedient—this is the first step toward utopia. An artist can create a utopia. The utopia is based on disagreement with predominant and preexisting consensus. I want to work freely with what is my own.

OE: I want to end this interview with your current work at The Art Institute of Chicago. There seem to be some scatological elements connected with Big Cake, especially in the etymological meaning you allude to between “cake” and “kaka.” Part of your proposal is to cut the cake into twelve equal parts. In this gesture, you seem to be speaking about the distribution of resources in global economic terms. The spoons, meanwhile, represent failed utopias. I am fascinated by the ease with which you have conflated individual movements and structures as part and parcel of what a failed utopia is. How are the Chicago Bulls and the moon failed utopias?

TH: I had to make twelve spoons, and I wanted the spoons to refer to things that don't engage me, like the Chicago Bulls spoon, Rosa Luxemburg spoon, and Friedrich Nietzsche. In selecting them, I opened possible doorways between them. Perhaps Miss Luxemburg goes to see the Chicago Bulls. She does not have only one focus, preoccupation, or love; she is perhaps aware of her contradictions, or she is confused. That is why I put the twelve spoons together. I am interested in the interaction and links between them. The links are the failures, the failures of utopias. A utopia is something to aim for, a project, a projection. It is an idea, an ideal. It is right; it is wrong. Art and making artwork are utopian. But a utopia never works. It is not supposed to. When it works, it is a utopia no longer.

Exhibitions

Thomas Hirschhorn

Born Bern, Switzerland, 1957

Studied at the Schule für Gestaltung, Zürich, 1978–83

Lives and works in Paris

Selected One-Person Exhibitions

- 1986 Paris, Bar Floréal
- 1987 Cologne, Kaos-Galerie
- 1991 Bern, Galerie Francesca Pia
- 1992 Paris, L'hôpital éphémère, "233 travaux, Jeudi 17.1.1991–Jeudi 28.2.1991"
- 1993 Dijon, Fondation art et société, "Hommage à Edouard Manet: Thomas Hirschhorn, Adrian Schiess"
Bern, Galerie Francesca Pia, "Flying Boxes"
St. Gallen (Switzerland), Galerie Susanna Kulli, "Lay-Out"
Lucerne, Raum für aktuelle Kunst, "11 vernagelte Fenster"
- 1994 Basel, Filiale Basel, "Rosa Tombola"
Brussels, APP BXL, "99 Sacs plastiques"
- 1995 Fribourg (Switzerland), Fri-Art, Centre d'art contemporain, "Très Grand Buffet"
Frankfurt am Main, Strauss & Adamopoulos, "Buffet"
Berlin, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, "Berliner Wasserfall mit Robert Walser Tränen"
Geneva, Centre Genèvois de gravure contemporaine, "Les plaintifs, les bêtes, les politiques"
- 1996 Antwerp, The Hal, "Stand"
Berlin, Galerie Arndt & Partner, "Virus-Ausstellung"
Bilbao, Institut français de Bilbao, Salle Rekalde, Area 2, "WUE–World Understanding Engine"
Lucerne, Kunstmuseum Lucerne, "Thomas Hirschhorn, Günter Förg"
St. Gallen (Switzerland), Galerie Susanna Kulli, "Aptropfmaschine, Ruheraum mit Tränen"
- 1997 Bordeaux, FRAC Aquitaine, "Lascaux III"
Bremen, Galerie im Künstlerhaus, "Diorama"
Paris, Galerie Chantal Crousel
Zürich, Kunsthof, "7/7, 24/24, Blauer, schwebender Raum"
- 1998 Bern, Kunsthalle Bern, "Swiss Army Knife"
Cologne, Museum Ludwig, "Rolex, etc., Freundlichs 'Aufstieg' und Skulptur-Sortier-Station-Dokumentation"
Frankfurt am Main, Portikus, "Ein Kunstwerk, ein Problem"
Herzliya (Israel), Herzliya Museum of Art, "Swiss Converter"
London, Chisenhale Gallery, "World Corners"

- 1999 Berlin, Galerie Arndt & Partner, "Bernsteinzimmer"
 Paris, Galerie Chantal Crousel, "Sculpture Direct"
 Luxembourg, Galerie Erna Hécey, "Sculpture Direct II, III, IV, V"
 Zürich, Universität Zürich-Irchel, "Robert Walser Kiosk" and
 "Ingeborg Bachman Kiosk"

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1989 Bobigny (France), Hôtel du conseil général, "Babylone Bobigny"
 1991 Fontenay-sous-Bois (France), Salon d'éphémère
 1992 Zürich, Shedhalle Zürich
 1993 Montreuil-sous-Bois (France), La Zonméeé, "Arrêt sur image 3"
 Paris, "Rencontres dans un couloir no. 1"
 1994 Munich, "Europa 94"
 Paris, Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, "Invitations"
 1995 Bordeaux, "Shopping"
 Johannesburg, "Africus: First Johannesburg Biennale"
 1996 Limerick (Ireland), EV + A
 Metz-Borny (France), FRAC Lorraine, "Actions urbaines"
 St. Nazaire (France), XIIèmes Ateliers du FRAC des Pays de la Loire
 1997 Biel (Switzerland), Centre PasquART, "Nonchalance"
 London, Camden Arts Centre, "Parisien(ne)s"
 Münster, "Sculpture. Projects in Münster 1997"
 Paris, ARC/Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, "Delta"
 1998 Basel, Kaskadenkondensator, "Nonlieux"
 Berlin, First Berlin Biennial, "Berlin/Berlin"
 New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (Soho), "Premises: Invested Spaces
 in Visual Arts, Architecture, and Design from France, 1958-1998"
 Minneapolis, Walker Art Center, and Chicago, Museum of Contemporary Art,
 "Unfinished History"
 Zürich, Kunsthaus Zürich, "Freie Sicht aufs Mittelmeer"
 1999 Amsterdam, St. Annenstraat Project, "Midnight Walker and City Sleepers" W139
 Maastricht (The Netherlands), Bonnefanten Museum, "Provisorium I:
 Five Potential Acquisitions"
 Paris, Galerie Yvon Lambert (Côte rue), "Ma Sorcière bien aimée"
 Venice, "'dAPERTutto' La Biennale di Venezia. 48a Esposizione
 internazionale d'arte"
 Zürich, Kunsthaus Zürich, "Weltuntergang & Prinzip Hoffnung"
 Umeå (Sweden), Bildmuseet, "Mirror's Edge"

Thomas Hirschhorn

It began with an exhibition at Jeu de Paume in Paris. Catherine David was working there at the time and had invited two young artists, relatively unknown in Paris, to mount their first solo exhibitions in a French museum. The two artists were crowded together in the same room due to a shortage of space: one of them was named Thomas Hirschhorn. His exhibition looked odd—to put it mildly. He had mounted cutouts, half picture, half sculpture, on the wall in a geometric pattern but at different heights, some of them against a background of pink fabric resembling the wallpaper in museums of classical art. In addition there was a white-topped table running the length of the wall at hip height, with similar cutouts on it, placed next to each other but somehow still jumbled. These flat fragments had a variety of surface structures, some looking highly attractive and luxurious but of cheap manufacture on closer inspection. Some had a layer of tin foil, others were wrapped in cellophane. Still others were plastic coated like kitchen furniture or chic postmodern sculptures.

Thomas Hirschhorn's exhibition at Jeu de Paume in early 1994 proved to be an astonishing encounter. On inquiring about this young artist, unknown in Paris, I was told that he was "a young artist who works in Paris." Ah, a new French artist? The idea was not that far-fetched. This interpretation could still apply to Thomas Hirschhorn's work today, apart from the mental universe that inspires it. Since the sixties

ROBERT FLECK

French art has been informed by a tradition which has tried to construct new meanings by "deconstructing" the bourgeois concepts of painting and sculpture in structural, analytical or postmodern terms. This tradition is reflected on the one hand by the "Support Surface" movement, which made an ideological impact in the sixties and seventies but ceased to mature in plastic terms and barely made a ripple outside of France. On the other hand, French artists of international renown, like Christian Boltanski or Daniel Buren, were also influenced by the "deconstructivism" of painting and sculpture, pursued at the time by philosophers like Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida in their own field of endeavor.

Have we here at long last a French artist who heartily embraces this tradition and gives it an independently creative twist? Thomas Hirschhorn's first museum show in Paris could certainly have been given such a reading. Not the style but the thinking and the formal repertory of French deconstructivism certainly do play a significant role in Hirschhorn's plastic universe. However, the exhibition demonstrated that a French artist could not be hidden behind the name of Thomas Hirschhorn. None of the younger generation in Paris had ever addressed the largely negative experience of this thirty-year tradition. Moreover, the exhibition signaled a surprising independence from the Cartesian rules of French art. Hirschhorn's exhibition at Jeu de Paume in early 1994 posed a number of questions that have only been answered in his works of the past few years.

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1995 saw the exhibition *Shopping in Bordeaux*, mounted by the CAPC-Museum, which has been trying to improve its image in the city. Guest curator Jérôme Sans invited international artists to propose installations for luxury stores, Hirschhorn chose the most obscene site imaginable, the branch office of a bank. His contribution, by far the best in the entire exhibition, consisted of a shack made of sheet plastic, which looked from a distance as if the bank were under renovation. From close up, one could see that the floor of the little transparent building was littered with cardboard and wooden signs of the kind made by the homeless or other outcasts, as if the house were a nighttime shelter and by day, a place to store the signs required for begging. Formally, the work presented a compelling sculpture that was equally viable in the urban context outside of the exhibition, where the anonymous aesthetic practice of the unemployed showed a casual, independent rapport with minimal art. Inside the transparent plastic house, viewers saw an experiment with flat fragments similar to that shown in the *Jeu de Paume* exhibition, although it was only on second sight that the painterly character of these accumulated signs could be gleaned from the seemingly unequivocal messages inscribed on the randomly cut-out signs (e.g. "I'm hungry. Please give me ten francs.").

This piece clearly establishes Thomas Hirschhorn as an artist with an exceptionally idiosyncratic approach and an equally exceptional sense of form. Subsequent projects for the "Skulptur. Projekte Münster," the Kunsthalle Portikus in Frankfurt and, most recently, for the 1999 Venice Biennale all have the same characteristics as the above-described works in Paris and Bordeaux. Hirschhorn is essentially an artist who has carved himself a niche of hybrid forms. Every piece represents a bold mixture of highly artistic forms and materials, on one hand, and anonymous, inferior means of expression, on the other. The aesthetic pressure of the various traditions of contemporary art is thereby released like an engine blowing off steam. Many of the artist's works, most recently in Venice, recall postman Cheval's lifework, although naïve is the last word one would use to describe Hirschhorn. Like Buster Keaton in his silent movies, Thomas Hirschhorn takes a radically anti-illusionist stand. An extremely calculating and deliberate artist, he exploits naïve and seemingly amateur devices as well as "impossible materials" like plastic and adhesive tape, thereby creating new forms of expression in the historical context of contemporary art. Many of his pieces are a send-up of the politically correct social art that has prevailed over the past years. With uninhibited ease, Hirschhorn manages to fulfill the brief of such weighty modernist traditions as geometrical abstraction—which appeals to him by nature—and minimal art. This art of aesthetic inbetweens might best be compared to the work of Franz West, who has in his own way converted the heavy-handed heritage of Viennese *aktionismus* into an inimitably personal interpretation of the concept of sculpture.

In his sculptures and his quasi paintings, Thomas Hirschhorn is working on a steadily evolving, precise vocabulary that is never in danger of coagulating into an ideologically defined formal canon. He pits French deconstructivism against geometrical abstraction of Swiss origins, the latter clearly being his preferred approach, although he is exceptionally well versed in French philosophical and plastic traditions, much like numerous artist-immigrant predecessors in Paris: Brancusi, Giacometti, or Hartung. Hirschhorn opposes both approaches with the art-brut attitude of a Louis Soutter, an attitude that is omnipresent in his work and obviously suits him. It is colored, however, with an elegance and a decorative verve that even informs the French art brut of a Gaston Chaissac.

This does not mean that Thomas Hirschhorn takes a special interest in tradition. The artist is acutely aware of history, but the tension in his works derives from the relationship between extra-artistic spontaneity and reflection on the social and aesthetic position of the artist today. In contrast to the neo-conceptual aesthetics of politically correct art and sociological forms of representation or interactive design, Hirschhorn intermixes the two registers, not unlike the post-Impressionists a hundred years ago, in order to inject an aesthetically exhausted and depleted situation with new expressive potential. In a certain sense, this approach takes its cue from the oeuvre of Dieter Roth. Hirschhorn has chosen to start with the 1980s postmodern concept of objects and sculpture and to give this paradigm new impetus through various anti-cultural devices.

The third aspect of Thomas Hirschhorn's work is related neither to its subcultural content (in the sense of Pasolini) nor to its stringency of form. Hardly any other young artist has given such serious attention to French thought in the above mentioned tradition, according to which all thought necessarily designates a "thinking of outside" (Maurice Blanchot). All of Thomas Hirschhorn's works inhabit the borders between art and nonart, inside and outside, normality and insanity. This is by far the most interesting aspect of his oeuvre. His installations deal with communication, while at the same time questioning the very possibility. We sense that the work does not pose formal questions but is ultimately existential in nature. Although not to be compared, in Hirschhorn's work, like that of Bruce Nauman, every utterance deals, quite independently of form, with the impossibility of saying anything at all. All of Thomas Hirschhorn's works are based on this fundamental motif, which lends them the self-assurance and self-evidence that mark not only the extra-artistic references but also the formal considerations within the framework of the recent history of painting and sculpture. Every one of Thomas Hirschhorn's exhibitions addresses the difficulty of speaking any language at all, even a pictorial one. The fact that this issue lies beyond the domain of aesthetics makes Hirschhorn's work so evident.

Just recently, for example, at the Biennale in Venice, we discovered by chance that our native language is German. But we both speak it with such a strong regional accent that we can hardly understand each other. So we prefer to communicate in French. That, too, is closely associated with Thomas Hirschhorn's work.

(Translation: Catherine Schelbert)

Thomas Hirschhorn's Transvaluation Machine

Cheap Tricks

The word cheap is an adjective that has a range of secondary meanings stemming from its basic definition: "costing relatively little; inexpensive."¹ Thomas Hirschhorn—an artist easily recognized for his persistent use of low-grade materials such as tinfoil, cardboard, plywood, plastic, and masking tape in his sculptural assemblages—perfectly illustrates cheapness in all of its senses. From the connotation of poor quality or shoddy standing to appearing easily made, despicable, or having little value, Hirschhorn has cultivated more than aesthetic consistency in his oeuvre. Underlying the objects that he fashions out of these meager materials is a sophisticated machine whose inner workings produce affects and interpretations that extend beyond mere formal statement. Cheap is no longer just an adjective; Hirschhorn makes it a procedure.

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In *VERY DERIVED PRODUCTS* (VDPs), a special installation created for "Premises," a New York exhibition of recent art and architecture from France, Hirschhorn reveals the mechanics behind his cheap tricks. Squatting in the exorbitantly priced square footage of the retail space of the Guggenheim Museum Soho bookshop on the corner of Broadway and Prince Street, a giant-scale Rolex made with a cardboard skeleton and a gold tinfoil skin occupies the central portion of the piece. Despite its lack of subtlety in referencing Hirschhorn's Swiss origins, this is not the punch line of Hirschhorn's piece—though it might be its mechanical heart. Emanating from the watch, long strands of crumpled tinfoil create a network of capillaries that spawn a host of VDPs. United by the dense web of these tinfoil tentacles, direct registers of objects can be distinguished. Collages of handwritten texts and images culled from popular magazines are glued to odd scraps of cardboard. Miniature airplanes, taxis, and police vans are crudely constructed of cardboard and colored foil. Commonplace things sold by Chinatown street vendors, from meaningless trinkets to tiny plastic gold watches, are assembled like infantry troops. Effigies of Nietzsche and Princess Diana are affixed to golden blocks of foil and positioned together to create an unexpected altar. Household fans with red flags attached flutter violently above the Rolex. Video monitors are "integrated" into the piece by duct-taping them to the vitrines. The monitors display fixed shots of absurdly deadpan scenes—a burning candle

in the shape of a dollar sign that painstakingly melts in an hour-long loop, or a girl with the words "cool loser" written on her forehead who stares blankly into the camera. The entire space is aggressively illuminated with fluorescent tube lighting.

Everything inside this space is obviously handmade—an anachronistic, if not deeply humorous gesture in regard to the vulgarity of the commodity objects that are referenced. With Hirschhorn's intervention, the usual commercial slickness of the Guggenheim bookshop is transformed into a tenuously constructed showcase for the city's wares. What machine lies beneath this strikingly cheap veneer: how does it produce its affects?

Playing off the commodity object, these proliferating and clumsy tinfoil objects might at first suggest that Hirschhorn is interested in enacting a frontal critique of the diffusion of consumerism into every imaginable crevice of the cultural sphere. While certainly *VERY DERIVED PRODUCTS* possesses a critical force, it does not derive its energy from a negation of or opposition to the objects and the political economies it might mirror. Nor is there a sense of melancholia lurking underneath this carefully choreographed mess of cardboard, tinfoil, and plastic. When speaking about the pulsions that animate his practice, Hirschhorn has often said, "J'aime bien les choses bêtes, les trucs un peu cons."² Hirschhorn's active choice in adopting a strategy of affected simplicity should not be mistaken for parody, cynicism, or irony. It should be taken at face value. The commodity object is never denied: it is multiplied. Hyperproductivity and excess, low quality and mess are nothing but cheap tricks—material strategies that work in concert to form a machine that addresses the way the worth of autonomous objects has evaporated into pure sign-exchange value.

By rendering everything into a poorer, weaker version of its commercial self, Hirschhorn attempts to inject new vitality (or even humor) into otherwise empty signs of Capital. On one level, this machine offers a low-fidelity affirmation of urban life by fashioning a paradoxical offense: resistance through weakness. From the larger-than-life tinfoil luxury goods to his aphoristic scrawlings that always accompany the cardboard collages found in his installa-

tions (*Aidez-moi, je trouve ça beau, or S.V.P. Merci, Rolex!*)³, Hirschhorn is not degrading his objects. He is in a constant process of rendering both himself and his subject matter into more humble, cheaper versions of themselves. A transvaluation occurs—not a mere inversion of oppositional terms such as rich versus poor, but a questioning that drives at locating the very impulse behind these values. By tracing a line of sight through a cheapness that is outside the rich-poor binary, qualities and forces are changed without a dialectical flip-flop or the creation of a third term. After passing through Hirschhorn's cheap trick, a Rolex—symbol of wealth and arrogance—becomes fragile to the point that it is almost emotionally touching. It is not a Rolex for the financially disadvantaged. It is reduced to a poor shell of itself—poor not in the financial sense, but in the manner that it implores pity. Visitors to the Guggenheim show might have been overheard outside the museum saying "Poor thing!" in reference to the images of the recently deceased Diana as much as for the dilapidated nature of Hirschhorn's structure that infected the facade of this otherwise pristine institution.

No matter what set of sign-values are at stake in Hirschhorn's work, the same automaton is in play. From a *mise-en-scène* of the codes of globalization in his *FLUGPLATZ WELT / WORLD AIRPORT* at the 1999 Venice Biennale to the popular reappropriation of public monuments in *SCULPTURE DIRECTE* (Direct Sculpture, 1999), a work that references the ad-hoc shrine at the Pont d'Alma in Paris where Princess Diana was killed, Hirschhorn's cheap trick machine produces not only legible critical affects but a form of endearing humor.

1) *Collins Pocket Dictionary of the English Language* (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1989).

2) "I like insipid things, things that are a little stupid." From an interview with the author and Hirschhorn, May 1998.

3) "Help me, I find this beautiful." "Please, Thank you, Rolex." These texts accompany collages that juxtapose radically different images from the news media—an image of a supermodel next to battle scenes from the Gulf War or a photo of a handicapped child. See one of Hirschhorn's early exhibition catalogues, *Les plaintifs, les bêtes, les politiques* (The plaintifs, the beasts, the politicals). Geneva: Centre de Gravure contemporaine, 1995.

Reason in Conflict

THE WAR OF DIFFÉRENCE II

MARCUS STEINWEG

The reality of our time, the factuality and the necessity of our present day, entails activating an awareness of the limit as such: pushing meaning to its limit, as it were.

Jean-Luc Nancy

What interests me most, says a friend, what I find exciting or pleasurable is related to this limit, which cuts through my dreams like a slice. But how much of this can be narrated and how much is relevant to philosophy?

With what words can we measure the field of possible decisions, the horizon of the subjective functions of intellect, judgment, or reason that supposedly hold a promise of unity? That is, the potential field of judgments made by theoretical, practical, aesthetic reason, and by reason critical of reason. Included in the reality of a general reason

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is the dangerous game with its own inadequacy, with the desire for the impossible, with the latent loss of the self in the self. With that which is capable of unleashing contagious pain if given the leeway, and thereby activates a virtual resistance originally inherent in the ecosystem of pure reason, which irreversibly unsettles and compromises the logic of free decision.

Inscribed therefore within the act of choice, of decision, is a certain trust, an almost unavoidable hope, a commitment to the most hopeless act of judgment, thereby stepping into such an exterior, which is a vague, incommensurable space of self-mediation, of communication that shows a certain compatibility, a meaningful kinship with the interior space of the self, which is supposed to be the source of meaning. This trust is not simply an example of naïve dualism, of a simple dialectics of inside and outside. It would in fact subvert any kind of dialectical faith in the irreducible madness of reason. Faith in the fact that it finds recognition in the outside—and this outside is what denotes the

space of madness, of an ultimately internal drift—and acceptance, as if by a best and eternally alien friend. Acceptance that ultimately signifies self-acceptance at the point where complex, interlocked horizons intersect, which turns the dividing line between inside and outside, between reason and madness (as it is called in cases of direct antithesis) into a place marked by the experience of nondecision.

What one can call madness and loss of meaning would be a principle axis of the resulting diagram. Each coordinate is necessarily defined in reference to the possible impossibility of meaning. The experience of nonmeaning is experience per se, acute and inescapably inherent. Nonmeaning, which obstructs calculation, strategy, laws, and rules and thus causes a certain notion of horizontality to collapse, which transcends this version and requires transhorizontal ecstasy, would be the other horizon of an altered notion of horizontality.² A notion that unites the dictate of an ultimate intention of human reason³ with a model of hope, expanded by irreducible aporia, in a good intention without end. The good thing about this intention would be precisely that it is immoderate and would frustrate any conclusion of the decision-making game in its provisionality. To accuse it of an infinitism that is ultimately quasi-religious or at best naïve in terms of realpolitik is irrelevant, to say the least.⁴ This frustration is both hesitant and decisive at once.

A horizon of impossibility ... in order not to forget, in order to make unforgotten—for more than this one moment of intersection of the experience of immediacy with this immediacy expanded into reality—is that which binds the idea of function to the nonfunctionality of ideas. In order not to forget that the concrete act at the interface of the horizontal idea, this regulated, anticipatory, promising course, of the happy line, is coupled with the factuality of drift, disorientation, and impotence. With an element of indeterminacy, to which the idea of not merely adequate self-mediation must necessarily recur but also the idea of the idea, the order of recurrence, and the logic of the concept. This directs our reflection towards the first foundations of the history of Western thought, which

must then be called an abyss or constant warfare. A horizon of impossibility ... partly a reminder as well that this general reason entails a certain incommensurable shared knowledge, a complicity, in that it knows. A self-knowing above all through that which it does not want to know anything about (does not want to know that it knows), therefore denying its existence, driving it away like a ghost, like something infinitely oppressive in its impalpability, an unhappy childhood, something ugly that is best quickly forgotten.

A belief in the ability of reason to rid itself of intimations or memories—all the more so since Descartes—by recurring to principles of clarity and distinctness: Although it often pretends to know nothing of this phantom, it is what is known or loved even to the lasting loss of its historical influence and authority. Reason, that is what a certain madness, the madness that it is itself, cannot leave alone: the target of a desire articulated in the darkest nocturnal strivings. This tendency towards the void, towards the wide expanses of immeasurable night, in which the water of origin has combined with the water of that great wave we call Future, with that which is to come or is coming, with the streams of ever singular desire, of hyperbolic hopes and self-promises, the particular horizons of bioteologies even of the blind, half-unconscious machines that we are, into a dark, dense mass without light. To speak without end of this night, from the point where the end of the day seems to merge indistinguishably into the other end of another day, would be a feature of all thinking that acknowledges that the madness of reason also has its truth.

Translation: Gino Fittucci

1) Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'oublié de la philosophie* (Paris: Ed. Galilée, 1986). The quotation here is translated from the German (*Das Vergessen der Philosophie*, transl. from the French by Horst Brühmann, Vienna: Passagen-Verlag, 1997), p. 83.

2) On the relationship of horizon and decision see: Jacques Derrida, *Force de loi. Le "Fondement mystique de l'autorité"* (Paris: Ed. Galilée, 1994).

3) Immanuel Kant, *Concepts of Pure Reason*, transl. by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), B 697ff.

4) According to Hermann Lübbe, "The theory acquires freedom precisely by not unconditionally obeying the logic of the political." In: *Theorie und Entscheidung. Studien zum Primat der praktischen Vernunft* (Freiburg: Rombach, 1973), p. 11.

interview par ALISON GINGERAS

THOMAS HIRSCHHORN

grâce à la bêtise !

Striving to Be Stupid

Cette interview a été réalisée en juillet dans l'atelier temporaire de Thomas Hirschhorn à New York, où il mettait une dernière main à une pièce destinée au Guggenheim SoHo pour l'exposition *Premises: Invested Spaces* in Visual Arts, Architecture and Design from France, 1958-98 (cf. a.p. n°238, septembre 1998). Cette conversation a pour objet d'explorer plus avant le vocabulaire et la position de Thomas Hirschhorn, et de tenter de définir ce que pourrait être aujourd'hui une pratique artistique critique.

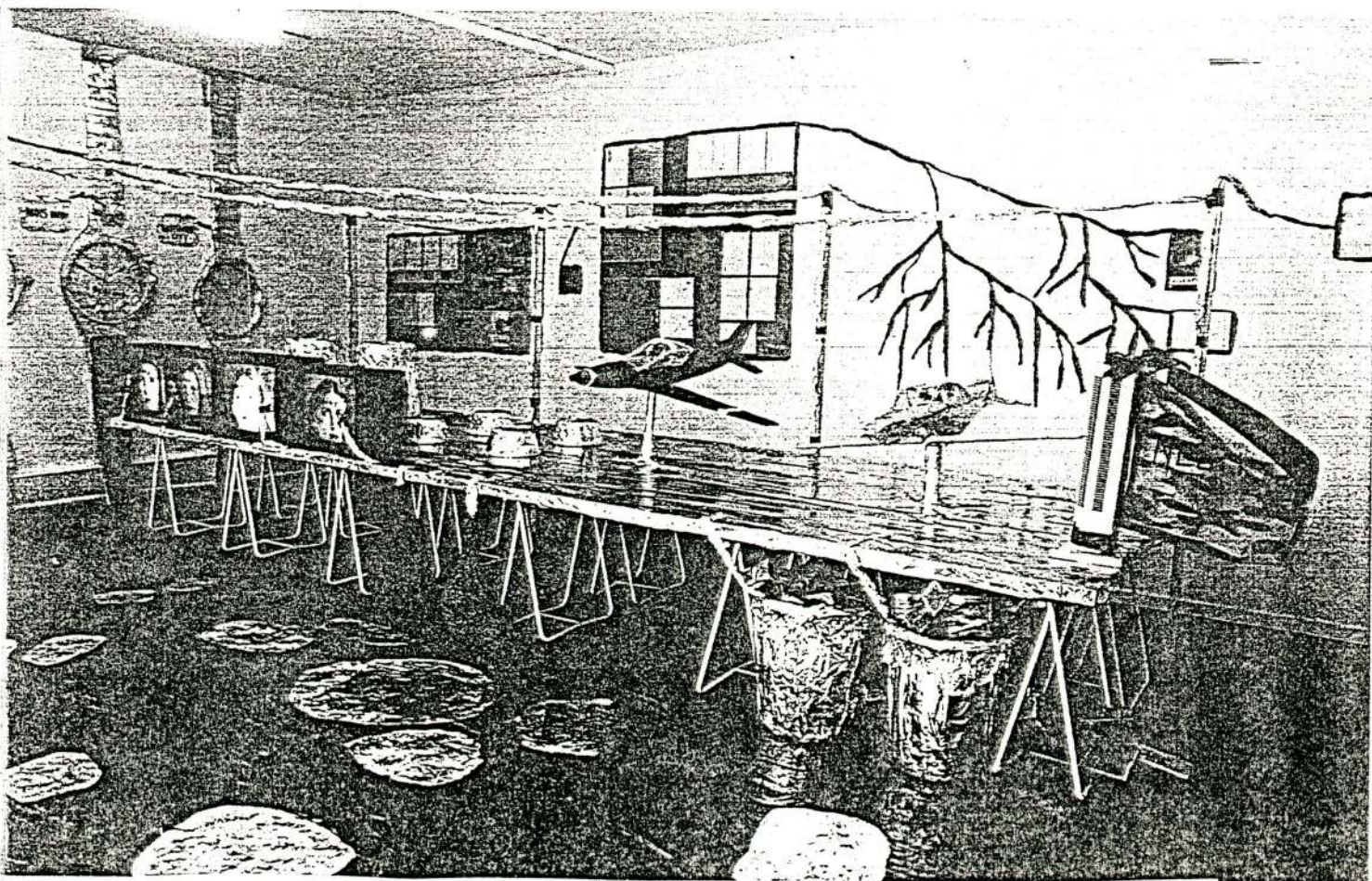
Au-delà d'une curiosité d'ordre biographique, je m'interroge sur ta décision de devenir un artiste. Pourrais-tu parler de ton renoncement au métier de designer gra-

phiste et de ta désillusion à l'égard d'une attitude politique «militante».

Cet aspect de ma pratique a souvent été mal compris. J'entends dire : «Il était gra-

This interview was conducted in Thomas Hirschhorn's temporary studio in New York during late July while he was finalizing his piece for an exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum SoHo. In the course of working with Hirschhorn over the past year, Alison Gingeras was struck by both the vitality of his plastic artistic practice and the bite of his critical ideas. This conversation tries to further probe Hirschhorn's vocabulary and frame it in a larger debate about the possible nature of a critical art practice today.

Ci-dessous : «Pilatus Transformator». 1997. Montres en aluminium, tableaux avec «Virus». Au sol : «Taches de conscience». Récipients retournés, récipients avec lingots d'or, 2 maquettes d'avion, 2 ventilateurs avec drapeaux, 4 vidéos intégrées. Vue de l'exposition, Pasqu'art, Biel-Bienne. 7 x 3,70 x 6 m. (Court. galerie C. Crousel, Paris). Below: "Pilatus Transformator." Aluminium watches, paintings with "Virus." On floor: "Spots of Conscience." Overturned containers, gold ingots, 2 model planes, 2 fans with flags, 4 integrated videos



phiste, mais il a changé pour devenir artiste.» Un des artistes que j'admire le plus, Andy Warhol, qui a lui aussi débuté comme illustrateur et designer, m'a rassuré à ce sujet. Depuis mes jeunes années, j'ai toujours voulu donner forme aux choses. Petit à petit, j'ai gravité vers des pratiques engendrant la forme : je me suis intéressé au graphisme, à la typographie, etc. Pendant mes études à Zurich, les relations avec mes amis du département de design graphique étaient difficiles. Ils voulaient devenir peintres, photographes, ou simplement «artistes», alors qu'il me semblait terriblement naïf de se proclamer artiste. J'ai toujours refusé ce titre. Je pensais que l'art n'offrait aucune possibilité d'engagement. Je n'ai commencé à mettre en doute cette notion qu'en voyant pour la première fois une exposition de Warhol. Je compris alors que l'art pouvait avoir une signification. Cet immense tableau d'avant la série des *Catastrophes*, *129 Die in Jet*, me parlait directement. En même temps, j'avais toujours ce désir de ne pas faire de l'art. Aussitôt après mes études, je suis allé à Paris travailler pour le collectif d'art graphique Grapus. J'admirais leur travail formel et leur engagement politique. A mes yeux, ces deux éléments étaient indissociables. C'est pour cela que j'accordais une telle importance aux Russes – El Lissitzky, Stepanova, Popova, Rodtchenko. Leur rhétorique révolutionnaire abolissait les frontières entre la forme artistique et la pratique politique. Toutefois, en travaillant chez Grapus, j'ai réalisé que le collectif fonctionnait comme n'importe quelle agence de publicité commerciale. Ils travaillaient pourtant pour les syndicats, pour le PC... Cette prise de conscience fut un choc. Leur travail n'avait rien de révolutionnaire !

C'est alors que tu as commencé à pointer les insuffisances et les contradictions d'un modèle politique fondé sur l'opposition et la négation. Le mythe utopique de la politique révolutionnaire se dégonflait...

Absolument ! La structure hiérarchique de Grapus était identique à celle de l'industrie privée. Pourtant, je ne les critique pas. Eux-mêmes en sont parfaitement conscients. C'est pourquoi ils se sont séparés. Néanmoins, mon passage chez eux m'a permis de connaître certains écrits qui m'ont beaucoup aidé – en particulier *le Nominalisme pictural* de Thierry de Duve.

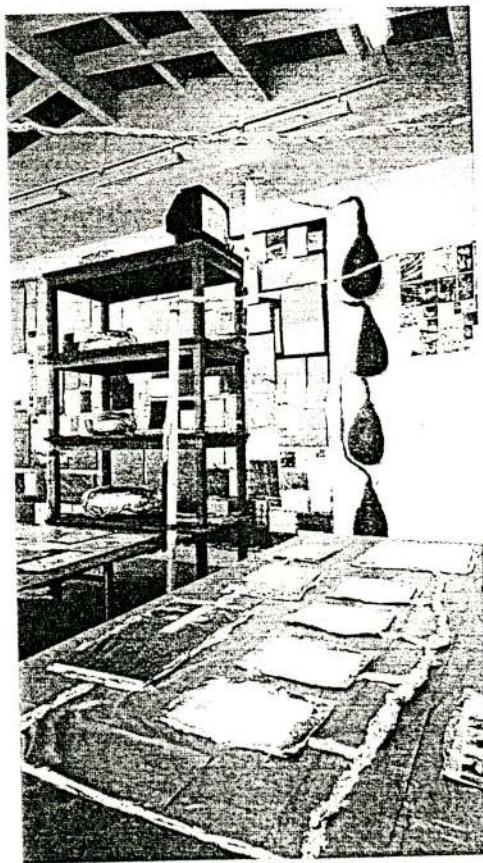
Je devrais préciser que j'ai dû surmonter une certaine tradition qui m'avait été inculquée à la Schule fur Gestaltung. Me débarrasser du poids d'une tradition d'avant-garde qui tenait aux liens de cette institution avec le Bauhaus. Il va sans dire qu'à l'époque où j'y étudiais, ces liens n'étaient plus légitimes... «Devenir un artiste» a été un choix politique. Cela ne signifie aucunement que je fasse de l'«art politique», ni

même du «graphisme politique». Mon choix, c'est de refuser de faire de l'art politique : je fais de l'art politiquement. Il n'y a pas de rupture avec ce que je faisais auparavant – lier des textes et des images –, mais cette pratique a acquis le même statut que l'œuvre d'autres artistes que j'ai toujours admirés. Pendant cette période de transition, je m'étais toutefois astreint à des règles : travailler uniquement à une certaine échelle, ou bien avec des photocopies ou des images trouvées.

Canaliser les énergies

Cette continuité formelle avec une tradition graphique est nette dans les œuvres du début. Avant de passer à des espaces plus enveloppants, tu réalisais des pièces murales planes, équilibrées à la manière du graphiste (Fifty-Fifty ou les premiers Display). Quels sont tes modèles historiques ? Je pense à Schwitters, compte tenu de ton intérêt pour le collage...

Bien sûr, Kurt Schwitters. C'est un des artistes auxquels je reviens le plus souvent, pour sa pratique plastique, mais aussi pour sa persévérance. Il a dû construire son Merzbau à trois reprises. C'est remarquable, non ? Ses collages ont une force inimaginable. Il a toujours suivi un itinéraire singulier. Il n'était



«Network Table», «Transformator», «Le grand mur». Vue de l'exposition à la galerie Ch. Crousel, Paris. 1997. View of exhibition at Gallery Crousel, Paris 1997

■ *Beyond pure biographical interest, I have always been curious about your active choice to become an artist. Could you speak a little about abandoning your original training as a graphic designer and your gradual disenchantment with an "activist" political position.*

There has often been misunderstanding about this part of my practice: people often say "he was a graphic designer who changed and became an artist." One of the artists that I admire most, Andy Warhol, who also began as an illustrator/designer, has reassured me in terms of the evolution of my work. I have always had the will to give form to things, ever since I was young. Little by little, I gravitated towards practices that engendered form: I became interested in typography, graphics, etc. During the course of my studies in Zurich, I always had a difficult time with my friends who were in the department of graphic design with me. They wanted to be painters, or photographers, or just "artists," but in fact at that time I found it incredibly naive to proclaim oneself an artist. I always refused that title. I thought art had absolutely no possibility for engagement. The first time that I questioned this sentiment was when I saw my first exhibition of Andy Warhol. That was when I realized that art could say something... This immense painting from before the *Disasters* series, *129 Die in Jet*, touched me personally. It said something to me. But at the same time, I still had this desire not to make art. I came to Paris to work for the graphic art collective Grapus right after school. I wanted to work for them because I admired their form and their political engagements. For me, these two elements are inseparable. The Russians—El Lissitzky, Stepanova, Popova, Rodchenko—were always important to me for this reason. In their revolutionary rhetoric, there were no longer frontiers between artistic form and political practice. Yet, while working for Grapus, I began to realize that they functioned like any other commercial advertising agency. They worked for the unions, for the Communist Party...but this realization was a shock to me. There was nothing revolutionary about this work!

This was when you began to perceive the shortcomings and contradictions of a political model rooted in opposition and negation? The utopian myth of revolutionary politics was deflated...

Absolutely! The hierarchical structures at Grapus were exactly the same as in private industry. Yet at the same time, I am not critical of them. They were perfectly aware of this as well. That is why they disbanded. Yet during this whole experience, I had the opportunity to meet someone who opened my eyes by introducing me to certain texts that helped me immensely—such as Thierry de Duve's *Le Nominalisme pictural*—a text that affirmed that my artistic ambitions weren't worthless. I should also add that I had to surmount a certain tradition that was imparted through my education at the Schule fur Gestaltung; I had to deal with the baggage of an avant-garde tradition that came from the institution's ties to the Bauhaus. Of course, these ties were bastardized by the time that I was there... "Becoming an artist" was a political choice.

pas seulement un iconoclaste dans le monde de l'art, mais surtout dans la sphère bourgeoise qui l'entourait et le révoltait. C'est cela, la force de Schwitters.

Quant à Warhol, il ne s'est jamais détourné de ses activités antérieures. Cela peut être considéré comme une stratégie artistique légitime. Lorsque Warhol dessinait des chaussures, il prolongeait l'esthétique commerciale dans ses sérigraphies. Il restait fidèle à lui-même. Je considère ces artistes, et j'essaie d'être comme eux ; j'aspire à la continuité. Mon œuvre reste bidimensionnelle, c'est un aspect auquel je tiens beaucoup. Certes, mon œuvre a parfois revêtu des aspects tridimensionnels ; je réalise des objets qui ont un volume, mais ils ne sont pas pensés en trois dimensions.

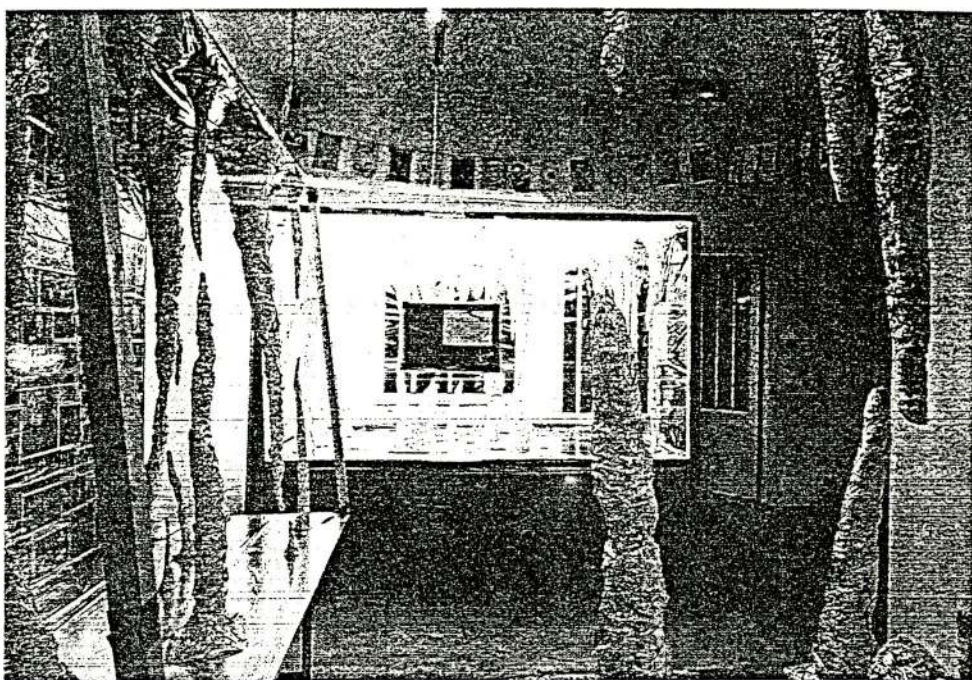
Occupations publiques/privées

Ne pas utiliser le terme « installation » constitue donc pour toi une importante distinction sémantique ?

Je déteste le mot « installation ». Pour décrire mon œuvre, j'utilise le terme « display ». J'aime le rapport avec l'acception commerciale de ce terme : étalage, vitrine. Comme Warhol et Rauschenberg réalisaient jadis des vitrines pour des magasins de New York. Cela a une résonance pragmatique. En restant fidèle aux paramètres de la pensée bidimensionnelle, j'évite les pièges associés aux dispositifs tridimensionnels. C'est pourquoi mes « formes sculpturales » tridimensionnelles sont toujours réalisées en matériaux éphémères – papier d'étain, carton... Ce ne sont pas des volumes permanents.

Que nous amène à Beuys. On dit parfois que ton œuvre est une des réactions contemporaines les plus convaincantes au modèle de Beuys, qui considérait la sculpture comme une pratique sociale totale. Sans tenir compte des points faibles que l'on peut mettre en avant pour critiquer Beuys – son projet de réconciliation historique du romantisme et du surréalisme dans le sillage du fascisme allemand –, comment considères-tu son œuvre ?

Je ne suis pas certain de la justesse de cette comparaison. Toutefois, en ce qui concerne son idéal de la sculpture en tant que pratique sociale totale, il me semble que Beuys a libéré la sculpture des volumes esthétiques. Il a su redonner tout son potentiel à la notion de sculpture, en n'en limitant pas la pratique à l'utilisation exclusive de matériaux dits nobles. Ce premier point est important en ce qui concerne ma pratique. Pour en venir à la deuxième partie de ta question, ce n'est pas une problématique à laquelle j'ai vraiment réfléchi. En premier lieu, je ne suis pas Allemand, et quand j'ai quitté la Suisse, j'ai décidé de m'installer en France. J'aurais pu choisir l'Allemagne...

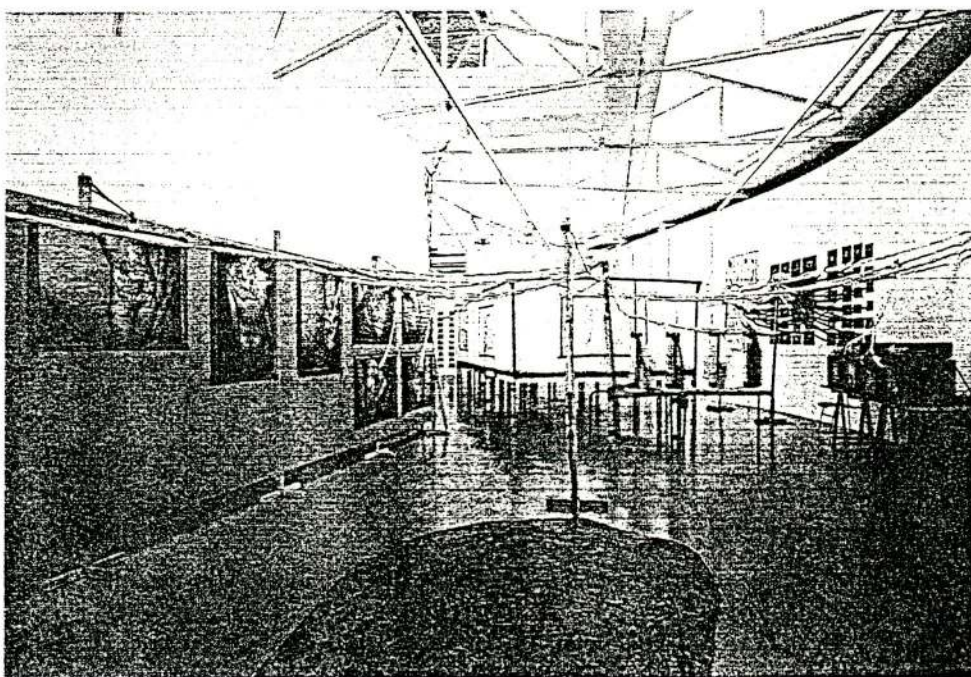


« Stalactites-Stalagmites-aquarium ». 1997. Bois, tréteaux, néons, carton, feuille d'aluminium, plastique. Travaux de la série « Virus », imprimés. 277 x 157 x 227 cm. (Court galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris ; Ph. Kleinfenn). Wood, trestles, cardboard, aluminum leaf, plastic. Works from the "Virus" series

sans oublier la complicité des Suisses avec le nazisme. J'ai inclus cela dans mon œuvre. Venir en France constitue peut-être une réponse à cette question.

Il serait certainement préférable de laisser ce débat aux historiens de l'art ! Contrairement à nombre d'artistes contemporains qui tentent d'investir la sphère publique en créant des situations fondées sur la partici-

This does not mean that I make "political art," or even "political graphic art." My choice was to refuse to make political art. I make art politically. There is a continuity with what I did before—mixing texts and images—but now this practice takes on the same status as the work of other artists that I have always admired. However during this transition, I always gave myself certain rules; I only worked on a certain scale, or with photocopies or found images.



« Time to go ». 1997. Technique mixte. 200 m². Vue de l'exposition au musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris. (Ph. Kleinfenn). Mixed media. View of exhibition at the Kleinfenn Museum

tion, tes réalisations spatiales relèvent d'un discours différent concernant les idéologies qui définissent l'espace public. Tes structures précaires «occupent» (dans le sens fort du terme) un espace public, mais ce n'est que pour exclure le public de cette «occupation». Cette stratégie, en apparence contradictoire, met en lumière l'érosion des sphères publique et privée sans recourir à une analyse dialectique, attitude actuellement rare.

Pour moi, c'est simple. Pourquoi est-ce que je présente mes œuvres dans des espaces publics ? Au début, personne ne voulait voir mon travail ; je l'ai donc mis là où les gens pouvaient y avoir accès – solution pragmatique. Un artiste réalise des œuvres et les montre au public, à tout le monde.

Par ailleurs, mes intentions, en plaçant mon œuvre dans la sphère publique, ont souvent été mal interprétées. Il ne s'agit pas d'un acte critique à l'égard de l'institution. Je ne me livre pas à une critique institutionnelle – c'est l'institution qui m'invite à montrer mon œuvre. Lorsque j'ai exposé au Jeu de Paume, des gens m'ont dit : «Thomas, tu es devenu un collaborateur de l'institution !» J'ai répondu que c'était excellent, au contraire : des milliers de personnes ont vu les œuvres – y compris des touristes japonais ! Pourquoi être exclusif ? Cette attitude provient certainement de mon milieu d'origine, où l'art était jugé sans importance et ne jouait aucun rôle social. Dans une certaine mesure, je continue à réagir à cette réalité. La seule chose qui m'intéresse, c'est d'affirmer que mon œuvre est faite pour la rue et dans la rue. Ou dans un musée, une galerie, un café... C'est cela que je veux, ce qui ne signifie pas nécessairement que cela réussira.

Avec le projet Lascaux III (Bordeaux), tu réussis à situer dans une perspective plus nuancée le débat sur la dissolution de l'espace public, menacé par les intérêts privés, commerciaux. Une partie de la manifestation se situait au Burger King, summum de l'expansionnisme néo-libéral... Que penses-tu de cette complicité ou de cette collusion ?

L'œuvre était également présentée sur une place publique, dans une galerie marchande et dans un appartement bourgeois privé. J'ai horreur du mot «contexte». Ce n'est pas le contexte ou le site qui «fait» l'œuvre, c'est l'œuvre qui crée l'espace nécessaire à son existence. Il s'agissait d'une grotte, et je voulais susciter la question : Est-ce vrai ? Est-ce une copie ? Ou bien une suite ? Je pourrais réaliser *Lascaux IV* comme un film hollywoodien, en jouant sur la logique du capital.

Pourquoi être dans la critique, alors que le marché lui-même fait tout le travail ?

Très juste ! Comment peut-on lutter aujourd-



«Otto Freundlich-Attar». 1998. Non lieux. Kaskadenkondensator, Zürich. (Ph. M. Siegwolf)

d'hui ? Grâce à la bêtise ! Nous ne serons jamais plus malins que le capital. C'est futile. Je ne veux être ni intelligent ni habile, je m'efforce d'être bête. Mais je veux néanmoins travailler. Je veux être productif. Ma position n'est pas une parodie ; ce n'est pas une réaction. Mes Rolex ne valent pas les vraies ; mes produits sont inférieurs. C'est pour moi une situation intéressante.

Ton arme critique est l'humour ?

Lorsque j'ai commencé à réaliser des montres suisses géantes, je me suis intéressé aux campagnes publicitaires relatives à ces objets, et j'ai remarqué leur insistance sur le passage du temps. Je ne suis pas certain que cela ait un rapport avec la fin du millénaire ; quoi qu'il en soit, j'ai été fasciné par la stratégie publicitaire. La récupération du temps par ces montres de luxe – «le temps Chanel», Breitling, Rolex... – signale leur opportunisme, leur manière d'être de leur temps. Je me sers de ces slogans, ou des montres elles-mêmes, pour étendre ce discours sur l'intemporel à d'autres occupations de ce temps : la guerre au Kosovo, les famines en Afrique... Cela crée une implosion, pas une explosion. C'est une façon de réagir à ce terme merdique de «globalisation». Ce n'est pas une réaction globale, mais une micro-réaction. Une réaction à la fragmentation qu'entraîne la prétendue globalisation.

Pour l'exposition Premises: Invested Spaces in Visual Arts, Architecture, and Design from France, 1958-98, tu es l'un des

Harnessing Energies

This formal continuity with a graphic tradition is particularly apparent in your earlier works. Before moving into more encompassing, or engulfing spaces, you were working to create wall pieces that occupy flat surfaces which are composed with the same sort of balance one would expect from a graphic artist (such as the Fifty-Fifty or early Display pieces). What historical models interest you? I can imagine amongst others, there is Schwitters within your interest in collage...

Of course. Kurt Schwitters is one of the artists I look at the most, not only for his plastic practice; I was also moved by his resistance in his life. He made the Merzbau three times, this is moving! His collages have an incredible power—he always had a singular path in his work. It is not so much the fact that he was an iconoclast in the world of art, but more his iconoclasm in the bourgeois sphere that surrounded him and that antagonized him. This is the power that one feels when looking at Schwitters. As for Warhol, whom I've already alluded to, he never deviated from his previous occupations. This could be considered as a valid artistic strategy. When Warhol made drawings of gold or of shoes, he extended this commercial aesthetic into his silkscreen paintings. He remained faithful to himself. I look at these artists and try to do the same thing; aspire to continuity. My work remains two-dimensional, a very important point for me. Of course my work has taken on three-dimensional aspects at times, I make objects that have volume but they are not thought in three dimensions.

So in a sense, it is an important semantic distinction for you, not to employ the term "installation." I hate the word "installation." I use the term "display" to describe my work. I like the direct connection to this word's commercial usage; window display. Just as Warhol and Rauschenberg were once creating window displays for New York department stores and boutiques. It has a pragmatic resonance. Staying within the parameters of two-dimensional thought, I can avoid the traps associated with three-dimensional dispositifs. That is why my three-dimensional "sculptural forms" are all made of disposable materials—tin foil, cardboard, etc. These volumes are not permanent.

This brings me to Beuys. Some of my colleagues have been tempted to classify your work as one of the most convincing contemporary responses to Beuys's model of sculpture as a total social practice, yet without falling into some of its weaknesses—his self-mythologizing use of materials, his project of historical reconciliation between Romanticism and Surrealism in the wake of German fascism...How do you think of his work? Is his model still relevant?

I am not sure about this comparison. But in reference to his ideal of sculpture as a totalizing social practice, for me Beuys liberates the term "sculpture" from aesthetic volumes. He is able to give back to the word "sculpture" its potential. He removes it from a practice fixed on so-called noble materials. This first point is important to my practice.

rare artistes auxquels on ait demandé de réaliser un projet spécifique. Depuis que tu travailles ici, à New York, je suis frappée par la tension entre de subtils déplacements de la portée conceptuelle et politique de cette œuvre, et ses constantes formelles, matérielles, qui sont les mêmes que celles de tes autres projets récents. Pourrais-tu expliquer la nature de cette tension ?

En premier lieu, faut parler du site, de la situation de la pièce VDP (*Very Derivated Products*) dans le musée. J'ai souhaité situer cette œuvre par rapport à la boutique du musée Guggenheim, car le visiteur est obligé de traverser cet espace commercial pour accéder aux salles d'exposition.

Le travail à New York

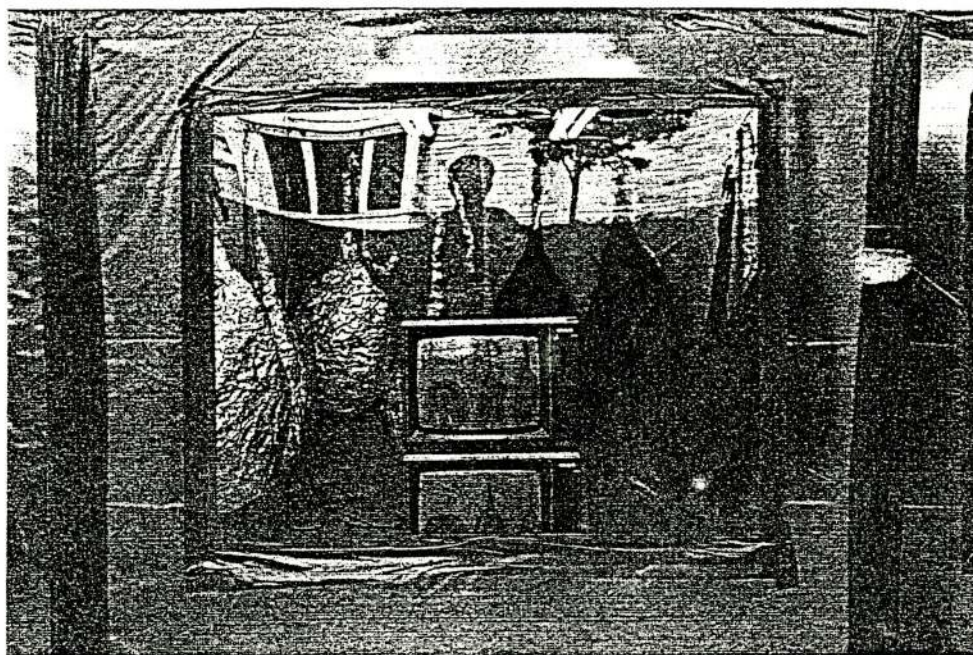
On a souvent reproché au Guggenheim SoHo d'avoir adopté cette disposition.

Il semble pourtant que cette structure soit typique de nombreux musées américains. Il est en tout cas important de ne pas considérer mon intervention comme une critique. Cette obligation en dit long, et sa signification idéologique est vivement ressentie, bien que je comprenne pourquoi cela existe au sein du système culturel américain. Le plus incroyable, c'est le mauvais goût et le statut abject des objets proposés à la librairie. De surcroît, cet espace souffre d'un réel manque d'information... Il y a des cravates Kandinsky, des parapluies Rauschenberg, des assiettes Jeff Koons, etc.

Tu ne te contentes pas d'attaquer l'aspect commercial du musée, ces produits dérivés des objets d'art exposés dans les salles...

Cet espace n'est pas une extension du contenu de l'exposition ou de la mission générale du musée. Ce qui m'intéresse, c'est la façon dont ces produits dérivés reflètent la culture dans son ensemble. C'est comme une boutique de souvenirs pour la «culture» en général. La différence entre la boutique du musée et un magasin vendant des accessoires pour fans du sport, c'est que dans le cas d'un maillot de foot ou d'une écharpe de supporter, il existe un investissement, une logique justifiée.

Lorsqu'on s'approprie un tel «objet dérivé», commercial, il est essentiel qu'il ne soit pas perçu comme une simple parodie. Sa fonction n'est pas parodique. Tu investis ces babioles touristiques d'une énergie critique afin de transformer leur valeur de signe. Cette stratégie est essentielle face à la société de consommation issue du capitalisme. Prenons un exemple concret, qui ne concerne pas simplement les produits en vente au musée. Lorsque je vois dans la rue quelqu'un qui porte une casquette de base-ball avec l'inscription «VETERAN» (ancien combattant), comme cela m'est arrivé à New York,

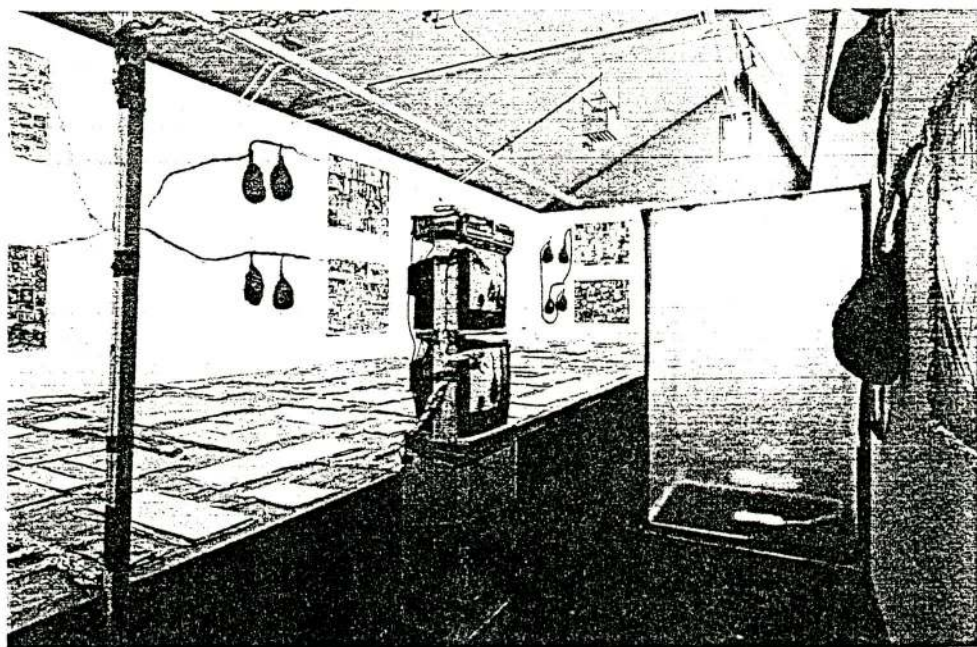


«Skulptur Sortier Station» (détail). 1997. Exposition «Skulptur Projekte in Münster». Detail of exhibit at Münster 1997

je trouve cela très étrange. Plusieurs questions me viennent à l'esprit : S'agit-il d'une proclamation véridique ? Ancien combattant de quelle guerre ? La Deuxième Guerre mondiale ? Le Vietnam ? Curieusement, porter sur soi ce mot en public constitue un acte d'affirmation. C'est un mot tellement chargé de sens (et d'ambiguïté). Pour VDP, j'ai simplement fabriqué une série de briques enduites de plastique portant le mot «VETERAN» écrit avec du ruban adhésif (un matériau que j'utilise toujours). Répéter de nombreuses fois le mot «VETERAN», c'est évidemment parler de la guerre, mais cela

As for the second part of your question, this is not a problematic I thought about actively. First of all, I am not German and I decided to come to France when I left Switzerland. I could have chosen to go to Germany—even if I am not blind to the complicity of the Swiss in Nazi activities. I have engaged with this in my work...Coming to France is perhaps a response to this question.

Perhaps this debate should be left for the art historians!... Unlike many contemporary artists who attempt to engage the public sphere by creating situations along a participatory model,



«Gitterbilder» ; «Tränentisch». Installation à la Kunsthalle, Lucerne, 1996. (Ph. S. Schröter). Installation at Luzern Kunsthalle



«Swiss-Army Knife» (détail). 1998. Exposition à la Kunsthalle, Berne. *Detail of exhibition at Bern Kunsthalle*

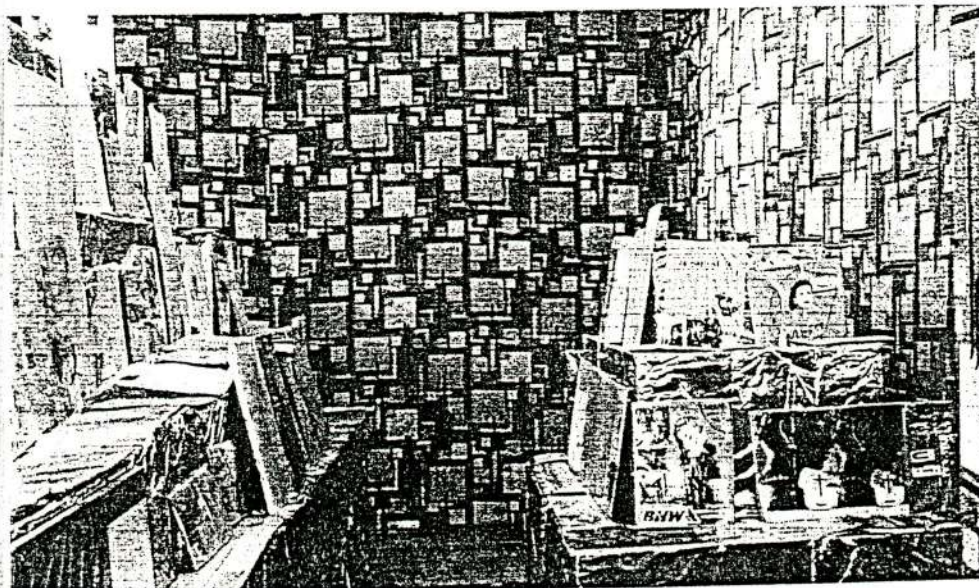
montre aussi que l'utilisation de ce terme est un acte politique. Ce type d'appropriation est un collage. Dans mes œuvres récentes, je découpe et colle des choses que j'observe en me promenant dans la ville. Tu as raison de dire que cet aspect de mon œuvre n'a rien de parodique.

Quant à ta méthode de travail actuelle, j'aimerais faire une distinction entre ce que l'on qualifie habituellement de site specific dans une bonne partie de la pratique artistique contemporaine, et la relation que tu établis avec le lieu, à la fois concret et idéologique, de ton œuvre. Tu évites le piège de la critique négative en effectuant une analyse pointue d'une réalité donnée, au lieu de te livrer à une enquête «anthropologique» sur l'histoire d'un site particulier.

Il me semble prétentieux et superficiel de la

part d'un artiste de critiquer un lieu qu'il connaît à peine. J'ai passé un mois à New York... qu'est-ce que je connais réellement de cette ville ?

Concernant le projet du Guggenheim, il est sans intérêt de jouer sur la «complicité» de Rauschenberg parce que l'on vend des parapluies décorés de reproductions de ses tableaux : il est trop facile d'attaquer cela. La seule possibilité, c'est de m'emparer de choses que j'observe, puis de les renvoyer. Mon œuvre fonctionne comme un miroir : elle renvoie ces choses qui me trappent quand je marche dans la ville, avec la même violence que quand je les ai perçues. Je n'essaie pas de juger cela – ces mots qui se sont présentés à maintes reprises pendant que je travaillais ici, et sur lesquels j'agis dans l'œuvre : VETERAN, LIBERTY, COOL LOOSER, COOL WINNER...



«Très Grand Buffet». 1995. 3 x 23,5 x 4,20 m. Exposition «Fri-Art», Fribourg. *“Very Big Buffet.”*

your spatial engagements have a completely different discourse about the ideologies that define public space. Your precarious plastic and plexiglas structures “occupy” (in the strongest nuance of the word) a public space only to shut the public out of this occupation. This seemingly contradictory strategy addresses the continual erosion of public and private spheres without resorting to a dialectical analysis: a very singular position today.

It is simple for me: Why do I show my work in public space? Where does this desire come from? In the beginning, no one wanted to see my work so I put it in the place where people could have access to it—a pragmatic solution. An artist makes work and shows it to the public, to everyone.

On the other hand, there have often been misunderstandings about my intentions in placing my work in the public sphere. This is not a critical act in regards to the institution. I am not making institutional critique—it is the institution that invites me to show my work there. When I had my show at the Jeu de Paume, people said to me, “Thomas, now you are a collaborator with the institution!” I responded, so much the better—there are thousands of people that see the work and, even better, Japanese tourists! Why be exclusive? This stance must come from my background where art was not considered to have any importance, it had no social role. Somehow, I am still responding to this reality. I am only interested in affirming that my work is made for and on the street. Or in a museum, a gallery, or a café... This is what I want, which is not to say that it necessarily succeeds.

Yet what is interesting in a project such as Lascaux III that you created for several disparate public and private sites in Bordeaux is that you are able to bring a more nuanced perspective to a debate about the dissolution of public space into private, commercial interests. One part of the event took place in a Burger King, the pinnacle of neo-liberal corporate expansionism. Can you talk about his complicity or collusion?

The work was also shown in a public square, a shopping mall, and a private bourgeois apartment. I hate the word context. This work is not about the context or site making the work, it is the work that creates its own space for existence. It was a cave—I wanted to provoke the question: Is it real? A copy? Or is it a sequel? I could make *Lascaux IV* like a Hollywood film; it is playing on the logic of Capital.

Why be in the critique business when the market does all the work itself? Just to be polemical...

Right! How can we struggle today? With stupidity! We cannot be more clever than Capital. That is futile. I don't want to be clever, I strive to be stupid [“bête”—ed.]. But I still want to work. I want to be productive. My position is not a parody; it is not a reaction. My Rolexes are not as good as the real thing; my products are inferior. This is the interesting position for me.

Humor is your critical weapon?

When I started to make giant Swiss watches, I began to notice the publicity campaigns for these objects and their fixation with the pas-

Dans ton action, il y a un transfert de valeurs, mais pas un mouvement dialectique. Ajouter «cool» avant «winner» et «looser» est emblématique de ces subtils déplacements de sens du vocabulaire courant qui surgissent dans les références – de Walser à Bataille – qui traversent ton œuvre. Ce n'est pas par hasard que le personnage de Nietzsche apparaît pour la première fois dans ce projet. Sa «présence» (sous la forme de citations et de portraits) corrobore la circulation des forces actives et réactives dans ton interprétation perspicace de la société de consommation américaine.

Il existe une volonté d'établir des liens, de relier intellectuellement, concrètement et politiquement tous les éléments de mon projet. En utilisant la figure de Nietzsche dans cette œuvre, je me suis servi du magnifique tableau indiquant les mouvements des forces actives et réactives dans les attributs de la volonté de puissance (d'après Nietzsche et la philosophie de Gilles Deleuze), parce qu'il me paraît à la fois simple et complexe. Les liens ne sont pas là ; en tant qu'artiste, il me revient de donner une forme visuelle à ces relations. Lorsque j'établis, avec du papier d'étain, des liens entre divers objets, ces liens n'existent pas réellement, ce n'est qu'une volonté. Mon travail d'artiste, en opposition à celui du scientifique ou du philosophe, consiste à établir de tels liens ou relations. C'est au plus haut point politique... ■

Traduit par Frank Straschitz

Alison Gingeras est conservatrice adjointe au Guggenheim Museum, New York. Commissaire adjoint de l'exposition Premises: Invested Spaces in Visual Arts, Architecture and Design from France 1958-98, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 13 octobre - 11 janvier 1999.

THOMAS HIRSCHHORN

Né en / born 1957 à / in Berne

Vit et travaille à / Lives in Paris

Expositions personnelles récentes :

Recent personal shows:

1996 Galerie Arndt & Partner, Berlin ; Institut français de Tokyo ; Galerie Susanna Kulli, Saint-Gall ; The Hall, Lucerne ; Kunstmuseum, Lucerne

1997 Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris ; Frac, Bordeaux ; Galerie im Künstlerhaus, Brême ; Kunsthof, Zürich

1998 Kunsthalle, Berne ; Museum Ludwig, Cologne ; Gramercy Art Fair, New York ; CNP, Paris

sage of time. I'm not sure if this is linked to the turn of the millennium, but I was taken by the strategies of the advertising agencies. The recuperation of time by these luxury watches— "Les temps Chanel"...Breitling, Rolex, etc.—is about timeliness. I use the slogans or the watches themselves to extend this discourse of timeliness to other occupations of this time: the war in Kosovo or the former Yugoslavia, the famines in Africa. This creates an implosion, not an explosion. It is a way of responding to this shitty term "globalization." It is not a totalizing response, it is a micro-response, a response to the effects of the fragmentation caused by this so-called globalization.

For Premises: Invested Spaces in Visual Arts, Architecture, and Design From France, 1958-98, you are one of the few artists asked to create a specific project. Since you began working here in New York, I have been struck by the tension between subtle shifts in this work's conceptual and political scope and its formal and material continuity with the rest of your recent projects. Perhaps you could sketch out the project's specificities in an attempt to map this tension.

First, we must begin by speaking about the siting of the piece, VDP, Very Derivated Products, in the museum itself. Since we began speaking about my involvement in the exhibition, I have always been interested in positioning my work in relationship to the Guggenheim Museum shop because the visitor is obliged to pass through this commercial space before entering the exhibition galleries.

Working in New York

The Guggenheim SoHo has often been criticized for this configuration.

Yes. Yet it also seems that this structure is particular to many museums in the U.S. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that my intervention is not a critique in itself. This obligation is telling and its ideological reach is strongly felt, but I understand why this is a reality within the American cultural system. In fact, what is more incredible is the bad taste and the abject status of the retail objects that are displayed in the bookstore itself. And even more than that, there is a real lack of information in this space; there are Kandinsky ties, Rauschenberg umbrellas, Jeff Koons plates, etc.

But you are doing more that just engaging with the profit side of deriving products from the art objects exhibited in the galleries.

There is no extension of the exhibition's content or the museum's general mission in this space. I am more interested in how these derived products are more like a mirror for the culture at large. It is like a souvenir shop for "culture" in general. The difference between the commodification in the museum shop and the shop that sells sports fan paraphernalia, is that at least in the case of the football jersey or scarf there is an investment, there is a justified logic.

When you appropriate such a commercialized, "derived object"—the football scarf or the giant luxury products—I think it is essential that these objects not be read as a simple parody. They do not function as parodic at all. You re-invest such touristic banalities with a critical energy in order to transform their sign-value. This seems to me a vital strategy in the face of late capitalist consumer society.

Let's take a concrete example that extends beyond the products found in the museum. When I see someone on the street with a baseball cap that reads "VETERAN," as I have here in New York, it strikes me as strange. Several questions come to mind immediately: Is it a true proclamation? Veteran of what war? World War II? Vietnam? Curiously, literally wearing this word on the street is an affirmative act. This word is so charged, rich with meaning (and ambiguity). For my piece VDP, I

simply created a series of plastic covered bricks with the word "VETERAN" inscribed on them with adhesive tape (a material that I always use). To repeat many times the word "VETERAN" is, of course, to speak of war, but it also manifests the word as a political engagement. This kind of appropriation is a collage; I cut and paste things that I observe while walking around the city into my later work. You are right to say that this tendency in my work is not anybody at all.

In describing your working method just now, I would like to distinguish what is commonly called "site-specificity" in much of contemporary art practice and the manner in which you relate to both the physical and ideological location of your work. I have always felt that you succeeded in sidestepping the trap of oppositional criticism by engaging in a keen analysis of a given actuality as opposed to using an "anthropological" or "investigative" approach to a given site's history.

As far as the Guggenheim project, playing upon Rauschenberg's "implication" in selling an umbrella with a reproduction of his paintings is of no interest: it is too easy to attack. The only possibility is to capture things as I observe them and then throw them back out. I function like a mirror: throwing these things that strike me while I walk around the city back out in my work, with the same violence that they have when I perceive them. I don't try to judge things—these words that have recurred over the course of working here and which I act upon in the work: "Veteran," "Liberty," "Cool," "Loser," "Cool," "Winner."

There's a transvaluation in your action; it is certainly not a dialectical movement. Adding the prefix "cool" to winner and loser is emblematic of these subtle shifts from the habitual vocabularies that reappear amongst the networks of outside references—from Robert Walser to Georges Bataille—in the course of your work. I am sure that it is not an accident that Nietzsche appears for the first time in this particular project. His "presence" (in the form of both textual citation and photographic portrait) corroborates the fluid circulation of active and reactive forces in your acute interpretation of American consumer culture. There is a will to make connections—to intellectually, physically, and politically link all of the elements of my project together. When I use the figure of Nietzsche in this work I have used this magnificent table that charts the movement of active and reactive forces in the qualities of the will to power, from Gilles Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, because I find it simple and complex. The links are not there; as an artist it is up to me to make such connections visual. When I make links between objects with tinfoil—a portrait of Nietzsche, a portrait of Princess Diana, and a giant Rolex—these links do not really exist, it is only a will. My work as an artist, as opposed to the work of a scientist or a philosopher, is to make such links or connections. It is deeply political. ■

Alison Gingeras is a keeper at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, and assistant curator of its current exhibition Premises: Invested Spaces in Visual Arts, Architecture, and Design From France, 1958-98 (through January 11, 1999).

A THOUSAND WORDS

Thomas Hirschhorn

TALKS ABOUT HIS *CRITICAL LABORATORY*

As an artist I experience the same disappointment over and over again. I claim that the end result isn't so important, but then, when I'm confronted with the failure of my work, I'm disappointed. I don't want to sound coquettish—this could easily come off the wrong way—but the constant failure of my works to express the simultaneity that I'm after is probably what makes me keep on trying. When I see the finished product I'm not satisfied, but I never feel like I know how it should have been done instead. The attempt to capture an instantaneous mental state, a "slice of consciousness," if you will—all the things that pass through the brain in a second—that's what connects my works.

In an instant, all these things pass through my brain, different sensations that relate to one another in a confusing way. The work that I presented here at "Mirror's Edge" is a "critical laboratory." I've tried to create an autonomous space, with its own atmosphere, in which a critical position can be made clear. The idea was to make a secret space on the periphery of the exhibition. It's somewhat hidden. I think that one can express simultaneity only with the help of physical space. My thoughts and sensations relate in a rhizomatic way to fashion, philosophy, fiction, and reality. They are there all at once, but how can I illustrate that? For instance, on one of these tables you'll find books by Nietzsche, Georges Bataille, and Ingeborg Bachmann, all of whom I like very much. But we also have fashion magazines, which I don't really care about, but I have to relate to them, because everybody must. Here, I tried to organize all of these connections that the brain makes so fluidly, but my attempt hasn't been successful.

People come to see the work, and for the most part they're willing to spend time. What I give them is space. You can't do that in the same way with cinema or literature. Space makes it possible to go from one thing to another and create connections. The eight tables I set up for *Critical Laboratory* are organized according to themes. Here is the Klein, Klein, Klein, Klein, Boss, Boss, Boss, Boss table. It's about fashion. The other themes are literature, suburbs, mirrors, plants, and reality. I always try to bring reality into my work. Not always my reality, but images of a reality that is out there. Here there are, for instance, images from Bosnia. I don't want to make political art. My sculptural vocabulary is chosen so as not to exclude people, but instead to implicate them in my work—or rather, implicate them in the world. That's what I try to do. That is why I work. That's my political statement.

I feel involved. This is also my world. The people who really give me stuff to think about also make me feel implicated in the world. I get this feeling primarily from writers and philosophers, not so often from other artists. Sometimes I don't quite understand what these thinkers have written, maybe because I don't have the right education. For example, I can't understand Nietzsche completely. I grasp maybe fifty percent, or perhaps only thirty percent of what he's saying. But he really gives me stuff to think about. Sometimes what's most interesting is what you can't really understand or accept. Deleuze also gives me this sensation. And Bataille's ideas about human values, how values are created, is something that makes me relate to things in a new way. And the Austrian writer Ingeborg Bachmann is somebody I love. I like her texts and I like her life—so I say

love. She was a person who lived and worked in resistance to the world.

Why am I an artist? Because I take a critical position toward how the world looks and what the human situation is like today. My non-agreement gives me energy to work. I sometimes produce very large works, like in Venice recently, but they're never monumental. I don't want to intimidate people, so everything's handmade. I want to implicate the viewer—not so much in my work as in the issues that

my work deals with. I hope that I can make people think and relate to the world as human beings. I don't want to be didactic, because I can't tell people how to act or how to change the world. But without serious thought there obviously can't be any meaningful political action, and I hope that I can make people feel involved, in the same way that certain writers—like Bachmann—make me feel involved in the world. It's not about interactivity. I give something to the viewer, but I don't expect communication. I'm a transformer. □

How much information can one receive from an artist in less than thirty minutes? Plenty, if the artist happens to be Thomas Hirschhorn. The thousand words gathered on this page are but a small fraction of the verbal barrage that was set loose with a click of my tape recorder and a few questions about *Critical Laboratory*, 1999, which the artist installed at the BildMuseum in the Swedish city of Umeå in late November. One of the more ambitious contributions to "Mirror's Edge," an international show organized by Okwui Enwezor in that small town on the northern outskirts of Europe, Hirschhorn's complicated piece struck me as deeply personal yet of global application. The simultaneity of the various sensations passing through the brain at a given moment isn't easy to capture in an artwork, especially if the brain in question is so hyperactive as to be processing on parallel channels the poetry of Austrian writer Ingeborg Bachmann, the fashion industry, the crisis in Kosovo, and the development of Parisian suburbs. Hirschhorn is in possession of precisely that remarkable organ, and no installation—not even the artist's own—will ever be able to keep up with the frenetic pace and free-associative serendipity of his thoughts.

Born in Switzerland in 1957 but based in Paris since 1984, Hirschhorn is now one of the more prominent artists of his generation. In recent years I've encountered his intriguing environments around the globe. Typically, when an artist explains his or her work, it lessens the allure. But that's hardly the case with Hirschhorn: To be exposed to his friendly bombardment is an art experience in itself.

—DANIEL BIRNBAUM

MARCH 2000 109

ARCHAEOLOGY OF ENGAGEMENT

Pré-Projet

- MAEBA 2001

THOMAS HIRSCHHORN

Paris, début novembre 2000

Cher Manuel!

Voici mon Pré-projet pour l'exposition aux
MACBA: Archéologie de l'engagement,
«Archeology of engagement».

Je veux faire un travail ou une série de
travaux sur le titre générique «Archéologie»
Le premier de ces travaux je veux le faire
pour le MACBA: «Archeology of engagement».
Ce serait un Site de Fouille de travaux
d'extraction, de recherche dans la "terre" pour
cataloguer, préserver, analyser, comprendre,
comparer, classier des éléments qui
apparemment n'ont rien à voir ensemble mais
qui ont une chose en commun: L'engagement
philosophique, politique, artistique, spirituel. Tous
ces engagements sont enfais sous terre,
et vont être découverts par une équipe d'
Archéologues. C'est l'avancement de leur recherches
que je veux montrer, le moment où, les chercheurs
sont parties pour faire une pause et que le
spectateur commun peut se rapprocher de site
de Fouilles pour regarder les travaux en cours.
Mais le spectateur commun, donc moi, l'artiste
il ne comprend pas, il ne peut que s'imaginer
les lieux, les importances, les hasards, les

hiérarchies, les valeurs de ce qui est en train
de se passer sous ses yeux dans le moment
gelé. Il aperçoit à la fois des éléments
sortis de "terre", des éléments encore dans la
"terre", des éléments à moitié sortis de la "terre".
"Il aperçoit des éléments jetés, car considérés
comme "non important" il aperçoit de la "terre",
donc du ~~de~~ "déchet". Il aperçoit aussi tous
les matériaux utilisés pour la fouille. Lampes,
instruments de mesure, outils, tentes etc. Dans
tout ce paysage de Fouille il peut se promener
sur des planches de Bois pour s'approcher des
éléments. Le paysage de ces fouilles est donc
à la fois site archéologique, une déchetterie, un lieu
d'accident, un charnier, un lieu de catastrophe naturelle
(éboulement de pierre, Avalanche) site préhistorique. Avec
des éléments encore enfouis, ou déjà sortis de "terre"
stratifiés. En strates, en couches successives, mais
aussi éparpillés. Je veux avec ce travail poser
la question de l'engagement. De l'engagement
de moi d'abord. Mais je passe à travers de cette
question de l'engagement de l'autre. A travers des
engagements du passé. Des Anarchistes à Thomas More
De Marx à Georges Bataille. Des Camps militaires palestiniens
du engagé professionnel American Marines. De Greenpeace
à la lutte contre la peine de mort. ~~De~~
etc. Concrètement je veux construire dans la
rotonde de l'entrée un espace, une colline de Feuilles

avec tous ces éléments d'engagement éparpillés.
on bois, carton, adhésif marron. Les spectateurs y
accéderont via un petit escalier d'une côté et d'une
~~autre~~ d'autre côté. Les spectateurs peuvent soit contourner,
^{remontant} soit pénétrer sur le "site de fouilles" en empruntant
les planches de bois qui y sont mises de temps en temps
il y aura une rampe pour "sécuriser" et il y aura des
présentoirs avec un texte original écrit à l'occasion
par un écrivain avec qui j'ai déjà travaillé (traduit en
espagnol de français ou anglais) ce texte serait un
texte intégré, ~~parallèle~~ mais en intégrant des éléments
de l'engagement à sa manière. Le texte serait
imprimé ou photocopié et mis gratuitement à disposition
des visiteurs. Le texte est une partie importante de
cette exposition. Il est "ce que on peut emporter".

Dans ce travail il y aura aussi 2 vidéos intégrées.
Elles montreront des prolongations de Fouilles dans la
profondeur là où il y a ~~que~~ une camera vidéo qui peut y
aller. Dans des tuyaux ou des intestins. Le travail
« Archeology of engagement », est un travail ~~que~~ où
les visiteurs doivent y aller pour la voir, c'est à dire
il sera entouré, côté passage des spectateurs par
un mur (en carton ou papiers légers) et les visiteurs
doivent y accéder par l'escalier ou le chemin incliné pour
être tout à fait dans un autre monde, de l'extérieur
par contre, vers les vitres rondes, le travail reste
complètement ouvert, visible. Je veux que ~~ce~~ travail
soit très dense, très complexe. Je veux construire
dans des échelles différents les éléments, squelettes humains,
squelettes d'animaux, trouvailles, bijoux, outils, Je veux
faire des inscriptions (anciens) mais aussi nouveaux. Je veux
creuser. Il y a des faux, des Fouilles truquées. Il
reste la question de l'engagement.

Elements dans la terre

- Livres
 - Philosophiques
 - Manifestes
- Photos
 - Politiques
 - Artistiques
 - Spirituels
- Photocopies textes
- Cartes du monde
- Images Imprimées

- Kopf abgeschlagene Statuen
- Skellette
- Mosaik
- Televiseur
- Monnay!
- Scherbenfragmente
- Art!
- Ossements
- Outils?
- Text critique

Elements de routine

- Lampes Neons
- Lampes Baladenses
- ~~...~~
- Leiter
- Outils
- Holzgerüst
- Buckets
- Metermasse
- Tafelchen
- Wasserrohre
- Elektrische Leitungen
- Bänder rot/Weiss
- evtl. Zelte oder Schutzdächer
- Pinceaux de nettoyage
- Bennes

Site archéologique

Archéologie contemporaine

Familles

Ausgrabungen