

ART IN AMERICA

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MUNGO THOMSON AT MARGO LEAVIN

by Sarah Valdez

Mungo Thomson plastered bus benches in Los Angeles with promotional advertisements for *The Collected Live Recordings of Bob Dylan 1963-1995* (1999). "Available Now at Margo Leavin Gallery," they read in the lower right-hand corner. *The Collected Live Recordings of Bob Dylan 1963-1995* (1999) was a rather low-key installation occupying a side room at the gallery. It would have been disappointing if it hadn't been so funny. Promotional posters like those on the benches covered one wall. Speakers on the opposite wall emitted applause that grew to a crescendo and diminished. The twang of a guitar string resounded periodically, but never a song. It was difficult to walk out of the room since it seemed as if something marvelous was continually on the verge of happening. The awaited Dionysiac eruption never came, and the experience on the whole was wonderfully maddening.

The walls of the main gallery held small, humble graphite drawings in wooden frames that might be stylistically likened to the work of Raymond Pettibon for their scrappy, slightly punk esthetic. One of these shows a crowd of people crowding an incomplete bridge and falling off like lemmings at its clifflike end. Another shows a winged being and a man standing together on unearthly terrain, gazing across the atmosphere at what looks like a blank drive-in movie screen about to reveal something of cosmic importance. The drawings were collected in a small booklet, *Everything Has Been Recorded* (2000), which Thomson distributed in public places like airports, in the spirit of disseminating the delight of found art. With text, the little comic books melodramatize the artist's archetypal struggle to find self expression: "I know what to do--I just don't know if I'm doing it. Everything is a hypothetical question never answered...Cleaning my house, paying my bills, regaining my neglected cat's love...Thomson also copped Bruce Nauman's adage *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* (12-Step), 1999, to make bumper stickers, and he gave them away, too.

Wind Chimes (1999) hung from the ceiling and plumbing pipes in the main gallery. The works initially seemed at odds with the rest of the exhibition; I wondered for a time if they were part of the show at all. The nice-looking copper-and-wood objects, esthetically incongruous sculptures, seemed built to make noise. But since there was no wind, and one would have had to actually strike one of the chimes--risking not only drawing attention to oneself but maybe even breaking the thing--to find out, they were pleasurably annoying in much the same way as the rock-concert applause. Such is Thomson's wit: He elicits his viewers' anticipation, renders it palpable and leaves it unfulfilled. The very special tension between an artist and his work, and between art and its viewer, here becomes the point that transcends the object and cannot itself be recorded.