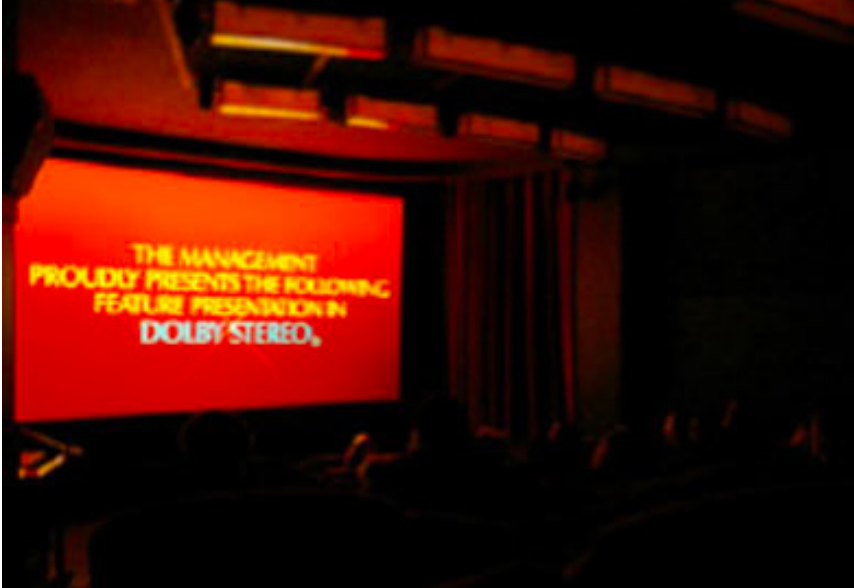


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MUNGO THOMSON AT CSU LONG BEACH

by Suvan Greer



Mungo Thomson, *Cinema Concepts*, 2000, installation view, at the University Art Museum, California State University, Long Beach.

Background is an attention-gap territory. It's what we don't usually notice, yet is part of what we see. In film, the background is the atmospheric terrain that frames the main action; in painting it's the negative space surrounding the subject; and in sound it's the aural noise we take for silence behind and between what we are really listening to. Background is the nearly invisible ground that supports what we see. But in Mungo Thomson's recent work at CSU Long Beach's University Art Museum, background—in all sorts of permutations—is the main focus, and the material it brings with it proves to be loaded with incisive meaning about art and culture.

For this exhibition Thomson presents a portion of his ongoing projects, *The Bootleg Series*, which consists of ambient sound recordings he gathers at art exhibitions, opening receptions and other socializing art functions. This version, *Volumes 5-7: Beyond a Singular Future*, consists of audio recordings he made of the aural chatter at the openings of LA's simultaneous 2004 minimalist art surveys: the Guggenheim's *A Minimal Future* seen at MOCA, and LACMA's *Beyond Geometry*.

Thomson's presentation here is no more than a short stack of white Bose CD players that fill an empty gallery with the chattering hubbub of nearly indecipherable conversations. In part, the piece is amusing because the installation's physical emptiness is a wonderful parody of minimalist reductive methodologies in the pursuit of art's intangible "aura." But, further, his use of conversations recorded at the openings to reference the show's visual art content entirely shifts the focus of those surveys to the peripheral flurry of words that have become, for many, their main construction and source of meaning.

That kind of two-pronged irony is thick in Thomson's work. He looks at art as part of a larger culture of contaminated and manipulated cross-communications that constantly affect each other. Whether it's putting stained glass windows modeled after a "Simpsons" cartoon set into walls of an LA gallery to give the noble aspirations of art's commercial enterprise an atmosphere of self-deprecating benediction, or having beer bottles copied right out of fine Dutch crystal to create high-end collectibles that look like recyclables holding melting candles or wilting flowers, Thomson seems fundamentally aware that viewing art or cultural paraphernalia is seldom a pure or simple act.

This complexity is strongly felt in his DVD projection titled *Cinema Concepts*, an enthusiastic romp through the attention grabbing programming that usually precedes our movie going experience. Thomson spliced together thirty movie house lead-ins: the boisterous animation graphics selling trips to the snack bar, "silence is golden" reminders, razzle-dazzle coming attraction shorts and the kind of "for your viewing pleasure" flourishes that we often only vaguely remember from our time in a theater waiting for a movie to start.

Watching these massed announcement trailers on their own is oddly disconcerting because our bodies and minds quickly settle into long conditioned patterns of anticipatory pleasure. But, as one announcement follows the next, the stimulation and promise heralded pointedly never achieve climax. We are left with a strangely hollow emotional roller coaster of blatantly exposed prods and their unfulfilled desires mired in a chain of cheerfully banal entertainment. We may still find the commercials nostalgically endearing, but the cumulative effect of their ever-spiraling anticipation becomes a somewhat painful rumination on the wiles and disappointments of all commercial enticements—including art—which promise so much they can never deliver.

If a deluge of theater announcements can expose the conundrums within a culture of marketed desire, Thomson finds the Hollywood back lot a perfect setting for examining the layers of cinematic background we have grown to accept for reality. *New York, New York, New York, New York* is a room that looks like a city. Four facing walls of the gallery are filled with projections of footage the artist shot, not in the Big Apple, but on the empty street sets of four LA-based film studios. The installation presents us a tightly compressed cinematic version of New York's streets, complete with window curtains waving in the breeze, trash, graffiti, store signs and towering tenement architecture. But despite the image's verisimilitude, it's still a visual sham. A nesting box of movie magic simulations—on top of the gallery's own physical reality is the virtual urban sire that is really four other trompe l'oeil sites, that are also pretending to be the one and only original. What a spin!

Thomson's works are clever and always enjoyable examinations of a visual culture that repeatedly marries entertainment and marketing to almost everything and then wonders at its inability to find authenticity or truth. While most of the work has fun with the confusion, one piece suggests that the artist knows focusing on visual truth in this culture is seldom spectacular. *The Swordsman* is a short looping film clip of a "master" sword handler expertly throwing a prop sword to an actor in a scene. Our view of the throw is devoid of movie magic; no set, no costumes, no music, just a very ordinary older man in shirt sleeves, on a lawn, making a prop pass on cure. The clip is a bit of arcane film information visually interesting more for the way it stands outside the illusion of a movie than for the reality it pictures. It is a view from

the edge, outside the fictional space of the film and the action it captures. For that reason it is also an example of the limited authenticity possible in the cinematic realm. And, like all the background information Thomson presents as part in this exhibit, its meaning too is forever peripheral, forever bound to a larger, more dominant subject of enterprise that subsumes everything around it.