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BETWEEN PROJECTS: AN INTERVIEW WITH MUNGO THOMSON

by Adam Carr



Bohemia! Bohemia! Bohemia! 2006

ADAM CARR: Perhaps we could start this interview by discussing your time at UCLA under the tutorship of John Baldessari. What effect did this shape have on your understanding of art and development as an artist?

MUNGO THOMSON: John Baldessari had a big effect on me before we ever met or worked together. He was the first artist I looked at, as a very young and struggling art student, and thought that making art could actually be fun, not just gut-wrenching. It was a huge relief. And his work still hits me like that.

To me, John has been able to somehow balance intellectual inquiry with a desire to be entertained. His work is serious, but first it is usually “taking the piss”, as your people like to say. And these are things I take from him. Balancing contradiction, making odd connections, going after “bad ideas”, engaging in exercises as the work, and doing it all with good humor and generosity, above all for himself, was very influential, and very permissive. The other day, we had just finished installing my show at the GAMeC, Bergamo, and I stood back and thought this could either read as totally pretentious or like it’s making fun of everything. And I suppose I could trace that taste for bemusement, and the perversity of enjoying the possibility of that misreading, to him.

AC: The importance of Baldessari as a tutor, or guide, was exemplified in the work *Antenna Baldessari*, in which you had foam antenna balls resembling Baldessari manufactured that could subsequently be found adorning car arials around LA. Could you speak about this particular piece?

MT: He has also been very important to an in-between generation of artists and teachers who were important to me, like Jim Welling and Lari Pittman, who were his students at CalArts. And there are also LA artists that I didn't study with but who studied with John and whose work had an impact on me, like Stephen Prina and Christopher Williams. And there were all my fellow students, legions of us. Basically John has an army, like Jack-in-the-Box and The LA Dodgers (though smaller of course), and those institutions have their \$5 foam antenna ball heads driving all over LA. So Antenna Baldessari came out of that.

AC: Your work clearly stems from a closer look at what most take for granted: an investigation principally aimed at uncovering un-questioned truths ingrained in popular culture. In particular, the context of LA – or what this city has become mostly renowned for – seems to provide a basis for your works. You have recently spent some time in Berlin – a city distinctly different, and at odds with LA – so I'm interested in how this impacted on your work.

MT: To me, they are more similar than different, in a way. LA is horizontal and my work is too. And so is Berlin. It just has a historical axis underpinning everything that LA doesn't have as much of. And it's harder to confuse the bohemian and the bourgeois here. So it hasn't been a dramatic change, just more intensive – and primarily internal. It's been sort of back to basics with minimal distractions, and this has been really nice. LA is a great place to work, but in some ways a harder place to work because there's always a little voice saying, "what's the point?" because it's sunny and you're not pitching a screenplay. Over here, you can more readily see the cultural value of your own production. As far as being more at a removed from the flow of American popular culture, well, I would describe the subject of the work as mass culture and reception, and the conversations that global culture mandates – and Berlin is an excellent study in that at the moment. It's all about the local and the global here, resistance and absorption. Punk's not dead in Berlin. But it's also true that the work has, during this time, detached itself a bit from certain pop cultural cues and gotten more expansive, more phenomenological and cosmological, and more and more concerned with the space of the viewer.

AC: Tell me about the work *Bohemia! Bohemia! Bohemia!*, which you recently produced in collaboration with a glass manufacturer in the Czech Republic. This particular piece seems to embody some of the aforementioned issues you described in relation to some of the changes that your work has endured.

MT: I went there to work with the Ajeto glass company on a project, a suite of hand-blown "Bohemian crystal" beer bottles. The project had to do with the myth of Bohemia and what, on a practical level, sustains it. Earlier this year, I read about how the Pilsener Urquell brewery might have to abandon its traditional triple-fermentation process because it doesn't meet the energy consumption standards that the Czechs have to adopt as they are consolidated into the EU. Likewise, the Bohemian glass-blowers are no longer using crystal; the difference between glass and crystal is essentially lead, and lead is toxic, so they have to give it up. They now use soda-potassium glass, which they call "Bohemian crystal".

Anyways, to me, it was pretty amazing that this place, at the very seat of a certain kind of radical myth, almost as much an idea as a location, was undergoing a painful reckoning with reality – a local adjustment to the global, affecting both large-scale industry and

artisanal craft. And I found myself, nearby in Berlin, within this period of adjustment. I've been sort of obsessed with how notions of oppositional and "authentic" culture are in decline, or at least in constant contestation, and the idea of a kind of mass cultural imposition on all things "Bohemian" seemed really emblematic to me. So the idea was to produce something commemorative of a lost moment, something just passed. And at the same time redemptive of skills that are being faded out or forced to adapt. And to mix up industrial production with hand-made production. The bottles we made were designed so that every sixth bottle has a flat side so it can lie down without rolling. So what you get are these little six-pack still-lives, five up and one down, residue of a drunken binge, or a party that already happened.

AC: When considering this particular idea of the overlooked or amplifying lost and ancillary elements, I recall you mentioning the reception for your last solo outing at John Connelly in which a large majority of people seemed to have dismissed the content of the work *New York, New York, New York, New York* – mistaking it for a mere filming of various parts of New York, when in fact the piece was entirely shot in LA using studio recreations of New York City. After we spoke about this situation, I began to be more cognizant of a feeling of distrust for everything around me. Although, having said that, I've always had ambivalence toward the authenticity of culture in general. Following a text I read some years ago, I'm always amused when seeing punks generally loitering around Camden Town, here in London, as the author's concept was founded on an idea that punks are simply fake and being paid to be part of the fabric of "London" for touristic spectacle. Could you tell me more about the work, *New York, New York, New York, New York* and its reception? Perhaps the piece was intent with its disillusionment, or rather, geared towards a fuller understanding in the long term rather than the short term; disseminated by rumor rather than a direct encounter? The piece also seems to speak with regards to authenticity and the decline of cultural heritage in general.

MT: This is the four-channel video installation of New York street scenes, one projection on each of the four walls of a room, and each was actually shot on the "New York" stages at Paramount, Fox, Universal, and Culver studios in LA. The scenes are mostly empty and mostly quiet; there are occasional "tells" when someone zips by in a go-cart, or cables are coiled up on the sidewalk, or you can see a palm tree in the distance, or a subway entrance is just wrong somehow. And I was worried that New Yorkers know their city too well and that, showing it there, the work would end up a one-liner: you'd walk in, be confused for a moment, it would click, and you'd walk out. But it turned out that that moment of confusion went on and on. People at the opening were saying I must have gotten up pretty early to film such deserted streets. Even a reviewer from Artforum missed it. The thing is, those sets were built to lie to the camera, and in a way, all I had to do was put a camera in front of them. Ultimately, I think that work sustained a delay that I really like, and that I think you're talking about; it can feel like things sort of fall flat in their moment but then they build, the work holds some of itself back for later, and it's disseminated in other ways. I'm not sure this is something you can exactly engineer, and in fact it was a little disappointing when no one was getting *NY, NY, NY, NY*. But we left the fact that it was shot on studio lots out of the press release because I didn't want people to walk in armed with that knowledge; the work would have had no gestalt. So in that sense I guess I set it up for a long-term "reveal". I remember the first show of Fischli/Weiss' cast-polyurethane objects; it looked like the show was still being installed and I left. It comes down to how long can that moment, that gap before reception, be extended. Can it be indefinite? And how long can you, the artist, tolerate that

echo chamber? Or maybe it's just where you live all the time.

As far as "trust" and "reality", I would say the thing that's maybe the most "real" is that feeling of distrust you're describing; without sounding paranoid, it is a way of being awake in the world – tuning into how reality trades places with its own representation, how a physical place blurs with its own mythic status, its place in the imagination or memory or whatever – and I do try to engender that, or I feel it myself and try to pass it along. But it's also wheels within wheels – apropos of your London observation, there was once a great Onion headline that read, "90's punk decries punks of today".

AC: The idea of outwardly assuming something's opposite, which on closer inspection and examination reveals meaning otherwise latent, seems to be a recurrent issue throughout your work. What interests me, as you previously described in relation to *NY, NY, NY, NY*, is how you mislead an audience by tampering with the mediation of your work, or, moreover, by not giving them all of the answers usually provided by these forms of communication – have you done this before? I feel also that people are spending less and less time actually experiencing work, perhaps partly due to the proliferation of mediation such as art journals, etc. I guess this is something you are aware of... Perhaps that echo chamber you described earlier is getting larger?

MT: I think of the work as essentially democratic, so accessibility, that is, common grammar, is important. But delay, or not letting the work become stupid, is also important, and this requires a degree of opacity, even diffidence to reception. I think about these issues a lot – the work takes reception as a subject a lot. And I'm interested in all the meandering trajectories a work can take, all the venues it might operate in. I think it's possible for art to occupy a different realm than entertainment but to do that it has to insist on a kind of sustained attention.

You're right, in many ways the spaces of production and exhibition are the least privileged spaces in art right now; in terms of price per square inch, an ad in Artforum or a booth at Frieze is much more precious. Experience, in general, is highly mediated, and art is less seen in person than spoken of and photographed and written about. So it also becomes necessary to deal also with this mediation, and intervene in that stream as well. The projects I've done with you – posters on the shutters of closed galleries, for example, so "The Show Is Open When The Show Will Be Closed" – have been interesting in this way. At the same time I do see the "proper" exhibition space as a pure model for thinking, a "clean room" to layout a test or a proposition.

As I was answering your last question I began thinking about *NY, NY, NY, NY*, which I hadn't in a while, and I was thinking how it might have been another attempt to make an empty room. That is, the thing and its opposite cancel each other out and become nothing. And what you get then is four walls of nothing, an empty white cube. Speaking of echo chambers. And the empty, or emptied, white cube has been a pursuit of the work for a long time: what can you put in a space that will empty it out (*Negative Space*), or how little can you do to occupy a space (*Wind Chimes*)? So the space itself is amplified as a frame. And the viewer is the only thing in the space, and what's going on in their heads is the work.

This was the objective, or the experiment, with the inflatable bounce-houses based on John Connelly's former gallery spaces in Regent's Park in London during the Frieze

Fair. And this was an interesting work in terms of these issues of accessibility and opacity; you didn't need to have all the information to just enjoy it. And as far as people not spending time with actual work, we had to chase people out of this piece. But at the same time, it's obviously not modeled on a castle, or a jungle, or a circus, it's actually quite neutral and unspectacular relative to that, so something is going on. There's stuff there to chew on – to do with the work being empty until it was filled by the viewer, and also to do with fairs and the way galleries pack up their spaces and take them on the road, and the gallery and the fair and all the business being a kind of romper room, and also how it looks and how it functions – but you can also take or leave that stuff and just bounce.

AC: I'm interested in knowing about a recent work of yours titled *Silent Film of a Tree Falling in the Forest*. Is the piece as straightforward as the title suggests?

MT: Um... yes! In an elliptical way. Actually, maybe this gets back to the last question again. This work sort of goes the farthest in how it refers to or relies on certain kinds of reception contexts, and the inevitability of works being ignored or only partially grasped, or that sometimes things just languish in your head or in your studio and never enter the world. It definitely plays with withholding at the same time that it is laid out pretty plain. So this is a 16mm film that I made in the Canadian wilderness with professional tree-fellers in a logging area, a cut-block in a forest in Northern Alberta. We shot 10 ten trees and the film has six one-minute shots of a single different tree falling, separated by expanses of white, because I wanted to reference this great Nam June Paik work, *Zen for Film*, which is just clear film leader on a loop, collecting dust and dirt. So a tree falls slowly and silently, then white, then another tree, and on and on. It plays very straight. This piece is actually about missing it, about not seeing it. And about how meaning is only produced through encounter. This is a project where not seeing it, completes it. But of course, for me, it's also about all the projects that I'll never get around to making, and all the work by other artists that I'll never see.