

Im Rahmen der Ausstellung von **Thom Merrick** ein Künstlergespräch mit Corinne Schatz und Florian Vetsch in der Galerie Susanna Kulli, 21. April 1996

SUSANNA KULLI: Vor 10 Tagen holte ich Thom Merrick am Flughafen Zürich mit dem Auto ab. Während der Fahrt nach St.Gallen sprachen wir über dies und das, und schon bald kam Thom Merrick auf den meistgesuchten Mann der letzten 10 Jahre in Amerika zu sprechen, den UNA Bomber. Weder er noch ich wussten zu dieser Zeit, dass wir in der Ausstellung eine Arbeit haben würden mit dem Titel: **Democratic UNA Bomber Party Crash Bike**, noch, dass ein Fahrrad dazugehören würde. Thom Merrick hatte lediglich Handgepäck bei sich; ein Transport mit Arbeiten von ihm aus New York war nicht unterwegs. Von der Verwendung der Autohüllen abgesehen, war alles offen. Arbeiten, die Thom Merrick ausführen wollte, mussten verworfen werden, weil das Material, im Gegensatz zu New York, wo der Künstler lebt, hier nicht zu finden war. So kam anderes Material dazu und die Arbeiten erhielten die Form, die Sie jetzt sehen können. Und was sehen Sie? Sie sehen aufgespannte und an die Decke hochgezogene Autohüllen in drei verschiedenen Grössen, in denen diverse Lichtquellen hängen, die *Lolita*, *Heart of Darkness* und *On the Road Reading Lamps*. Darunter liegen gewaschene Bücher oder, besser gesagt, das, was von ihnen übrigbleibt, wenn man sie mit 40 Grad in der Waschmaschine wäscht. Ein verbogenes Fahrrad, das in einem bunt leuchtenden Lichterfeld steht, das *Democratic UNA Bomber Party Crash Bike*, dann den Video *Road Works*, der Thom Merrick beim Versuch zeigt, mit einem Bild in der Hand Autos zu stoppen; die Bilder malte er fortlaufend am Strassenrand. Und schliesslich die Arbeit *Infinite Landscape Spin-out*: in Plastik eingeschweisste Kleider, die auf drei Autorädern liegen. Wenn Sie Zeit haben, schauen Sie sich die Arbeiten doch gegen Abend einmal an. Sie sehen dann eine Ausstellung voller Licht und Poesie, die zum Reisen einlädt.

**THOM MERRICK:** First, for myself, I am not used to speaking in public, because it's kind of a private affair to make work. There is a funny quote by Wittgenstein, that I have often thought about. He happens to be very popular with artists right now. Famous artists use him. I thought, since he wrote this before other artists quoted him, then I could use him now too. I can relate to it because the way I try to make my work is: you don't really know what you're going to do and you take on certain ideas, but you're not sure where they are going to end up. So I have this quote from Wittgenstein, but since I am very nervous I'm going to make Florian read it.

FLORIAN VETSCH: Good.

THOM MERRICK: It starts right here. It's very nice.

FLORIAN VETSCH: "In teaching you philosophy I'm like a guide showing you how to find your way round London. I have to take you through the city from north to south, from east to west, from Euston to the Embankment and from Piccadilly to the Marble Arch. After I have taken you on many journeys through the city, in all sorts of directions, we shall have passed through any given street a number of times - each

traversing the street as part of a different journey. At the end of this you will know London; you will be able to find your way about like a born Londoner. Of course, a good guide will take you through the more important streets more often than he takes you down side-streets; a bad guide will do the opposite. In philosophy I'm a rather bad guide."

THOM MERRICK: So, why is this significant to me? It's because I think the situation in art right now, at the end of the millennium, the end of the Nineties or the mid-Nineties, is that there isn't a clear-cut situation any more. I mean painting isn't so clear, even sculpture - people aren't even making sculptures - performance is part of sculpture now, economic situations, political situations, everything, it's all in a kind of flux. About Wittgenstein and his quote, I think it is pertinent at this time because it may be that the way to get at things isn't the most direct route any more. The way to get into the future, let's say, if you can use that phrase, is to go down the wrong street or the backway of the popular ones. That is kind of a metaphor for Post-modernism. It's the popularised phrasings or streets that are being reused or recycled to the point where we can't get anywhere. So it's interesting maybe to go the wrong way, or some other direction, where you don't necessarily know the final destination. But it's a way to get, hopefully, into the future.

FLORIAN VETSCH: Thom, in what circumstances did you come to art?

THOM MERRICK: That's a hard one, actually. It's slow. I mean it's like an attraction. Probably because you don't have to do any one thing in particular, and that's an attractive place to maintain thinking. You go through the motions, you go to school, you come out and then you're kind of stuck with yourself. You have to find your own way. When I left art school, it was in the Eighties, artists had a very elegant stance. Artists were all of a sudden famous. When I began art school I thought it was a very private activity to be an artist, maybe you would get to have an exhibition. Suddenly I got to New York, I went to New York because there was no way to show in California, unless you had been working for thirty years. I really liked New York, everybody was a superstar. It was funny, it was paradise. I was not attracted there by the fashion magazine kind of activity, more by a process of getting to a place where it was possible to maintain a way of thinking without having to work at a terrible job.

FLORIAN VETSCH: You just said that you were born in California. Even here in St.Gall, California is a kind of legend, California is a dream. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze said that California is on the West Coast of the USA, but actually it is the East, the Orient. Did this origin have an effect on you?

THOM MERRICK: I think maybe it's a kind of cliché, but spatially it does. Because there's a lot of wide-open space. You actually spend a lot of your time driving in a car. It's like a think-tank. When I first came to New York I suffered because I didn't have time to spend in an automobile, thinking. Yeah, maybe it is a car culture, perhaps Deleuze foresaw the situation where American cars are full of parts from Japan, who knows, I don't think it has anything to do with geography but translocation. Perhaps that is one way of framing this exhibition: travelling and thinking in the car.

CORINNE SCHATZ: Well, you've just said a few things about moving towards the future, and you were talking about travelling by car and thinking, moving on the streets. I feel that many of your works have to do with mobility and immobility, or movement and the impossibility of moving. It's like, for example, a bicycle that cannot be ridden any more or hitch-hiking but nobody picks you up. Or you also deconstructed a motorcycle, for example. So there are devices for movement, but it is not possible, physically, to move. My question is: Is this tension between motion and stillness like moving from physical to mental movement? Is that part of your intention?

THOM MERRICK: I think part of it is. Because I haven't used a studio since 1992. I don't make sculptures or paintings in a studio. I don't work that way. So I am either travelling somewhere or walking around in the city. I don't have a studio any more in New York, because it is very boring to sit around in it and do all that thinking. I would rather walk or travel thinking about art. It is more of a street-level mentality, rather than the ivory tower. It's street-level. There you see things that are very normal, everyday situations. From there, you attempt to make normality transcend itself. I don't know if that answers the question.

CORINNE SCHATZ: Part of it does. But I would like to ask you about the meaning or the role of not moving. What role does this play in the work?

THOM MERRICK: Inertia. I guess because I hate sculptural devices, if you will, things that move. I contradict myself, but I don't think sculpture is a theatre. It's a situation. I don't think sculpture is theatrical. Maybe it can be theatre to actually make it, but that is a private process. Maybe it's like the Beatles - it's a funny thing to say that - but when they were stuck and they hated each other, and could not work any more, they made an alter ego band, the Sergeant Pepper's Band. They didn't have to be themselves. The theatrical part is maybe in your head. You can become somebody else, and then you become an object, if you like, you can make a way to get to that sculptural point. Thinking may be active, but a sculpture is generally static, it is the reverse of what it seems to be. Even if movement is implied, or acted out, or recorded, to be seen later, in what you might call a content or the intent of the sculpture, sculpture generally doesn't move, the dynamics and manoeuvre are in the thinking that made it.

FLORIAN VETSCH: If I regard your work *Infinite Landscape Spin-out* as a sculpture, do the tyres have the function of a pedestal?

THOM MERRICK: No. I mean the top and the bottom are functioning the same way. A lot of my works, even the car-covers or the work I did at the Documenta IX, have a kind of flimsy aesthetic, a kind of lightness. Again: I try to get away from the usual kind of sculpture, which is rooted to the ground, or that relates to the ground, in a fundamental way, like gravity. Whereas, flimsiness and things which are physically light can change, and I can partly control them, balance them to fit the situation. It is more interesting. They fit awkwardly, in this wrong way again they are clumsy or graceless. In this piece it's more that the tyres give you a falling-over effect. The potential of it falling is the interesting part. In short, pedestals don't fall down, so it is not like a pedestal.

FLORIAN VETSCH: The title of this work is *Infinite landscape spin-out*. Do you regard the plastic packages with the worn-out clothes as a landscape?

THOM MERRICK: Yes, I mean visually, but also practically. If you travel a long way you end up with a lot of dirty laundry. So in this piece, the compression, let's say, of travel, or space, or thinking is a matter of work. But, yeah, if you can measure time by how much dirty laundry you accumulate, then you have a big space, like forty kilos. So this piece has an expanse. The space is really big.

FLORIAN VETSCH: Is this the way you came to this title *Infinite landscape spin-out*? Or does it refer to the industrial material?

THOM MERRICK: Well, no. It's just maybe the configuration that if the piece was moving it would spin, or if you take your clothes to a laundromat they would spin.

CORINNE SCHATZ: In this work with the car-covers you use three books that also have the theme of travelling. On the other hand, as they have been washed they are unreadable. It crossed my mind that books are something that enable us to make mental journeys. By washing out the words it's again like a motion that has been stopped. The potentiality of moving is here, and the moving happens in your head by thinking about what you see. Is this also some part of your interpretation of this work?

THOM MERRICK: I think in a way it's a little bit like that flippant use of Wittgenstein's quote. These are also three books that I like very much. Sometimes one sets about a kind of thinking, like, "I would like to do something with this, but I don't know how." And it sits there percolating in your mind for a long time. Because it is literature, it is timeless or something. You have to be able to shape that timelessness into the here and now. The use of a book, and that was my method - maybe it's not a good one - and to put it in a washing-machine makes it 'right now'. So the printed matter congeals into matter. Those things, you can probably roll them out with a rolling pin, make them into pasta and eat them! That's another possibility. Yeah, it's taking something that's part of your thinking, but you don't know what to do with it. As far as the car-covers are concerned, they're really inspired by Isamo Noguchi, the Japanese-American artist, the designer. He makes these rice-paper lamps. They're very light-weight. There is this very beautiful paper, and they are very Zen, Asian lamps. Mine are not delicate or Zen, they are more on a street level. These are reading-lamps, but it's really, it seems, from these very delicate, beautiful Noguchis. They're lamps - okay, it's a car-cover, some people see a car perhaps. So, I had to put something that would indicate that it was a reading-lamp. That's the way I found to use my books, or that idea of a certain use of books.

FLORIAN VETSCH: You use these three different books, three different titles: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. How did you come upon these titles? And what do these titles have in common?

THOM MERRICK: It's the travelling theme. *Heart of Darkness*, of course, is the trip up the river to kill Kurtz, a military man who went insane. It's a famous book. It's the

meditation on what one fears to face before getting to the destination. Instead of facing the man that he's supposed to kill he's facing himself. If you could make these books into three different parts of the same story about travelling your brain drifts within the self: sex, death, insanity, or all three. Anyway, there is that kind of coming to terms with who you are. *On the Road*, of course, is Kerouac's travels around the United States making alcoholic travels as well, while he's in motion. But it's also very descriptive about these landscapes and the expansion of the land, an account of how that affects him internally. And then there is *Lolita* which is a kind of sexual perversion. But there are also very lucid descriptions of these people and places that he meets in his kind of perverted travels, a brushing-up against normal people. It's a kind of a comparison. Anyway, it's a very loose interpretation of these books, not a good usage, and certainly not literary, but you use them however you can.

FLORIAN VETSCH: I think the usage of these books is a wonderful illustration of a sentence by Michel Foucault who said, "A book is a tool-box." To me it seems that you use these books as tool-boxes. You deconstruct them into their ideal part and their real part. The ideal part of the book goes into the title of your work. And the real, the material part of the book, the book itself, was washed up. But I don't mean this in a dialectical sense, because there is no overwhelming unity. What we have is a new composition, and its parts point in different directions. And I feel that the viewer is free to make up his own story, when looking at these works.

THOM MERRICK: Oh yeah. There is not only one way to see it. If I can put it this way. Someone once told me before I made pieces like this, "Californian artists usually deal with light". And in my head I always thought I was a failure as a Californian artist. Even though I would rather be a Californian artist than a New York artist. Maybe because I am not. At the same time it has nothing to do with books. It's another subtext to my own thinking. But I'm just a Californian artist, and I ought to make light.

FLORIAN VETSCH: Only Kerouac's book belongs to American literature, and a very special part of it. It's a cult book of the Beat Generation. And Allen Ginsberg was right when he called the prose of *On the Road* "a spontaneous bop prosody", because Kerouac wrote it down in one sitting on a 100-foot roll of teletype paper. The Beat Culture was a big thing. The bands, the gangs, the subculture. They tried to free things, tried to free people by working against the establishment and its traditional culture. In Europe the Beat Culture was recognized with a certain delay and is still not fully accepted, which, of course, means its art and ideas are not yet dead; but its appreciation is increasingly growing. Now, was the Beat Culture already a part of your education and milieu? Was it something real when you were young?

THOM MERRICK: In a way that's a good question. In California the whole Beat Culture is very accessible and it's still alive. The people still live like that. It's not like Vienna and its cafe culture, it's really Californian. Everyone is a poet, everyone is writing, everyone is travelling and they are all talking about it. So anyway you come up against that mentality when you're growing up there. But the problem is that you see how these people get trapped in eternal capucchino lives. They never do anything. I read a lot of Kerouac's work when I was young. It permeates, maybe, that kind of freedom and all this kind of romantic, ideological, mental travelling. Yeah, it's

attractive, seductive. So, yeah, it's there, part of it.

FLORIAN VETSCH: When did you start with the car-covers? These are not the first.

THOM MERRICK: No. I did one at John Gibson's gallery in New York. But mainly not knowing what I was going to do with it. The title was *A Proposal for the New York Public Library Reading Room*. Because it's a great space to go to, the reading-room in that library. But it's also a very cavernous space. This has to do with public sculpture, not that they would let me do it. I was just thinking about it. It would be like a parking-garage on the ceiling of the New York Public Library. Underneath the library there is a parking-garage. Inverting what is beneath you, that was in the thinking. So on the ceiling there could be reading-lamps. This was also part of another idea. I wanted to use car-bodies in the Redwood Forest in California. There are these trees which are 2000 years old, they are huge. They are protected because they are so old. They are fantastic things. They are so enormous. I was thinking if they were Christmas trees, what kind of ornament could you put on them? If I hung cars all over them then they would be like Christmas trees. But of course again, it is something you can never do. So you have to take these ideas that you can't do anything with, but which are attractive to you. Then you have to try to figure out how to put them into a situation where other people can, maybe, enjoy what entertains you, what makes it worthwhile to continue this kind of thinking.

CORINNE SCHATZ: I would like to ask you something concerning this piece about the UNA Bomber. The other night we started talking about the UNA Bomber, and we didn't really get to the point of talking about the strategies. I remember you said that it interested you because of the strategies. How do you see your own strategies and how do they relate to politics or social themes?

THOM MERRICK: It's similar to walking around the street if you read the popular Press or the Press that is given to you. It's kind of traversing what other people think. The collective point of view about the correct mode of thinking about political or social or economic paradigms. This is the only position that you can think about in certain situations. Okay, it's the Press. It's not new to recognize that in itself, as a mode of thinking. But my fascination with the UNA Bomber is that he thinks outside of this status quo and used it to get across his ideas. Okay, he killed people. At the same time he didn't do it out of malice, or for power, or money. He did it ideologically. In his mind he thought he was helping humanity. I think in a way, as a human being, that is kind of admirable. There is without doubt a really bad thing that comes with it. But it's the same thing with Jean Genet or the Marquis de Sade. These people, they had their own visions. Were they good or bad? I mean in a way it's admirable and it's courageous. So this UNA Bomber guy managed to elude the powers that be with no finances, he was very resourceful. He did it with his intellect. I thought that was kind of interesting. I don't condone what he did. And my work has nothing to do with his ideology, and nothing to do with terrorism. I just thought that as a human being he has kind of an interesting story. I thought to make the piece evident of this time. Until the last two or three years, you didn't have terrorism in the United States, not internal terrorism. I just wanted to make this piece as a citation of a situation which is right now. Again, I don't think anyone knows where it is going. I certainly don't. I don't

pretend to know.

CORINNE SCHATZ: How do you see the role of art in general and of your own art in relation to politics and the role of art in the social context?

THOM MERRICK: That's a hard one. I think that the artist's roles are private roles. However, a lot of people don't work in this way. It annoys me when people use art to illustrate political beliefs. Or to preach or lecture about a part of society. Massive ideological features like in the Sixties, the Marxist kind of movement, that was very interesting because it was open-ended and it was a youth movement as well as intellectual. But now everything is so sectioned. It's people with agendas. It's a take-over situation. And it relates in a way to the economic situation, where you have take-over bids. And it is very hostile. It's not supportive. I just think it's annoying.

FLORIAN VETSCH: If one looks at the list of your works it's obvious that you like to give your work titles, especially long titles. Is language a kind of medium that you use just beside the other media, which were mentioned by Susanna at the beginning of this conversation, media like photography, video, sculpture and so on?

THOM MERRICK: I think the title is just a kind of bracket. Hopefully it's abstract and it's open-ended. But if you can steer something - you don't really want to steer people in what they think. Everyone should really bring his own ideas. But perhaps they work more as a bracket or maybe as the opening bracket, and hopefully the viewers will fill in the rest. If they don't, it's just a completely negative response, which is another kind of bracketing, a very short one. Hopefully there will be a larger response, and their way of thinking will make the other end, I only give the first side.

PUBLIC: Where did you find Wittgenstein's quote?

THOM MERRICK: I think probably at the university. I studied philosophy - this is interesting, actually, concerning the UNA Bomber situation - I studied philosophy with Angela Davis, the black Sixties radical. I fell into the class by accident because there was nothing else available to take. But when I got there she was a very brilliant, magnetic woman. She studied at the Frankfurt school with Herbert Marcuse and these people in the Sixties. I was terribly impressed by her, she was really well educated and a great teacher. In a way she, by accident, led the way for me into philosophy for which I had a slight aptitude, but not in an academic way, not in a really philosophical way. I was kind of a dilettante. But at the same time, I was very interested in it.

PUBLIC: Susanna, where did you meet Thom Merrick for the first time?

SUSANNA KULLI: The first time he came to St. Gallen was when John Armleder curated the Écart show in 1993. A piece by Thom was part of the show: there were tyres standing up in different directions and a shop window, 2 x 3 meters, was lying on top of the tyres. Quite a dangerous, impressive work. And because of its great size a very important one for that show. So it was John Armleder who brought Thom Merrick to St. Gallen. Thom came here for the opening. He already knew John from New York and also Olivier Mosset, who was part of the Écart show as well. But they don't belong

to the same group of artists. They belong to different generations.

FLORIAN VETSCH: Already then you worked with tyres. If I look around I can see a lot of tyres: the three small tyres of *Infinite landscape spin-out*, the wheels of the cars which are driving past you on your video, the buckled tyred wheels of the UNA bomber bicycle and the tyres that one might associate with the car-covers. So how did you come upon the idea of using tyres in your work?

THOM MERRICK: The tyre thing started in 1989. Because I always loved the tyre piece of Allan Kaprow, the man who invented the happening and hence performance art. He went from Jackson Pollock standing on top of the canvas, this kind of all-over field treatment, he took off the canvas, out of the studio. He did an all-over thing with tyres. That was really interesting. With this all-over thing, he also covered a Volkswagen with jelly. In a more Nineteen-nineties way, everywhere I walked in Brooklyn there were these damned tyres. They were just everywhere. I was thinking, "This is the material for me, because it's free and nobody knows what to do with it. You can work your ideas out with this stuff that no one else wants." And I always admired Kaprow. So I thought, "Why not quote someone that you really like?" I mean in a material sense.

CORINNE SCHATZ: You just mentioned Allan Kaprow. The first ready-made ever presented was Duchamp's bicycle wheel from 1913. You often used bicycles for your works, too. Is this also a conscious reference to Duchamp, who started a method in art which has been of great importance ever since and especially in the last thirty years? And in general what role does the use of ready-mades play in your work?

THOM MERRICK: Duchamp also said, "Paint and canvas are ready-mades"; once those constraints are gone, it allows you to just move anywhere you would like to go. At this point I think artists should do everything they want. Walter De Maria said in the Sixties, "I don't need a studio, I need a construction company". I would like to use his construction company for, say, a few weeks, then go onto something else, rather than have all that heavy machinery and attitude to live with. No, at this point I don't relate to Marcel Duchamp any more than any other artist working in the past thirty years.

CORINNE SCHATZ: You make sculptures. But in your video *Road Works* you paint. Many painters would probably be at least irritated by your negligent way of handling this medium. Is irony part of this work? I can see yet another element of irony. The sign 'roadworks' usually indicates an obstruction for the traffic. But obviously art has no influence whatsoever, because nobody stopped or slowed down for it. Or was it more important to make the process of making art absolutely transparent? Because whoever buys a painting can watch you making it in the video.

THOM MERRICK: The idea to make this piece came from seeing all those kids hitch-hiking around Europe with signs. Their signs relate to the codes used on licence plates, like 'D' for Germany then 'D-H' for Hamburg, 'D-M' for Munich and so on. It is abstract, but can be understood at a glance. So I thought I would try some colours, some paintings. Making the paintings in the small duration of time I have between cars, and showing them to the cars as they pass. Their process is just extracted from



a subculture, and because it is painting it can allude to other kinds of showing, like the gallery system or whatever. It sounds obvious, but often things seemingly unrelated to art seem as good a way to get there as any. Instead of, what did you say, irony or neglect it is more like 'whatever', it is a way to make and show paintings. Anyway, I am in a landscape making those paintings, maybe it is not so typical, that can also be a reference.

PUBLIC: Is it normal that you create your artworks with the materials that you find in the place where you make your shows?

THOM MERRICK: Yes, I've been doing that. Mainly because it's more challenging not to know what's available. You try not to, let's say, repeat yourself. At the same time you have ideas that reoccur. Sometimes it takes quite a few years before you can actualize them. Like the hitch-hiking theme. I started that in 1992 or 1993. But I never had an opportunity to realize it. I started the situation with an art magazine in Europe, but I didn't like the situation, so I stopped. So, again, that's a nice thing about Susanna's gallery, that it's a good situation. And she let me actualize the things that I was thinking about for a while. With some people it's just not a good situation to work. It just becomes annoying. It doesn't make you want to open up and "do it!". Certain situations make you want to close down, then you have something more like the usual gallery show, something more commonplace for the art market. Okay, this is a gallery show, but in a certain situation that is good for you to run with your ideas.

Thom Merrick, geboren 1963 in Sacramento, California, studierte am San Francisco Art Institute, lebt in New York. Einzel- und Gruppenausstellungen in New York, Genf, Documenta IX Kassel, Köln, Antwerpen, Frankfurt u.a.

Corinne Schatz, geboren 1958, studierte Kunstgeschichte, englische und deutsche Literatur an der Universität Zürich, lebt in St.Gallen als freischaffende Kunstkritikerin und Kuratorin, u.a. Fotoforum St.Gallen. Publikationen zu Roman Signer, Silvie & Chérif Defraoui, Josef Felix Müller u.a., Dozentin an der Schule für Gestaltung, St.Gallen.

Florian Vetsch, geboren 1960, studierte Germanistik, Philosophie und Literaturkritik an der Universität Zürich, Dr. phil., lebt als Kulturjournalist sowie als Deutsch- und Philosophielehrer in St.Gallen. Texte zu Roland Luethi, Verena Merz, Silvie & Chérif Defraoui, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Gertrude Stein, Mohamed Choukri, Paul Bowles u.a.

## Impressum

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