

BACKGROUND RADIATIONS by Martin Herbert

A COUPLE OF YEARS ago, a slim publication swished unexpectedly through my letterbox. It had the dimensions and print quality of an American tabloid, but displayed no logo, straplines, front-page celebrities, barcode or price tag. On the cover instead was a photograph of a man standing in an empty gallery space, intently contemplating a blank white wall. Inside were myriad variations on that theme: well-lit acreages of denuded gallery and art-fair architecture, all receiving comically close looks. Striding figures keenly rubberneck empty booths at the Frieze Art Fair; two young women press ears to a white wall as if to invisible loudspeakers; a woman laughs while Tate Modern Director Chris Dercon peers enthusiastically at *nada*. 132 pages of art world background, the cognoscenti and the gawkers gazing into nothingness, in repurposed photographs digitally tweaked to erase the artworks—this, it turned out (via a credits note disguised as a subscription card), was *People* (2011), a Mungo Thomson public art project arriving in characteristic camouflage, delivering a subtraction that adds.

Let's consider, as one is frequently invited to by Thomson's blindsiding proposals, the value of what remains when a main attraction is deleted, consensual priorities are reversed, the unseen is seen. What function, here, do these preoccupied strangers serve? First of all they're frictional, usefully so, and temporal markers. Airbrush them out of these images as well and you'd have a representation of something fairly traditional in modernist art and in West Coast art in particular—that is, an embodied phenomenology of emptiness and light, aimed at recalibrating attention and with covertly idealist overtones, a dreamy drive towards purification. Given this retroactively questionable lineage and Thomson being based in LA, it's far from incidental that the people remain: like prickling static at the edges of a clean FM station, like sand in the Vaseline.

But also these people—*People*, the unwieldy subject that the artwork cheekily purports to encompass—turn out to be substantial:

eloquent in themselves, sociologically indexing gestures and unconscious attitudes that usually go unseen. They'll get more interesting too, as the magazine ages and the everyday styles of dress we don't notice today become outmoded and visible, just like weird unexamined notions in art do, a few years on. (How strange we look, also, when we look at art!) So just as a category peripheral to the gallery-going experience has here assumed center stage, what was peripheral about the category itself will become more pronounced too, in time. Remember that *People* is owned by TIME Inc., just as people are owned by time. And that *People*, the magazine, is for many people background noise too. There, bright and vapid, in the doctor's waiting room or on the newsstand, the self-selecting summarizer of its title's grand abstraction. Always around, but for many just part of the background: like time, like *TIME*.

In the body of work *TIME* (2009–), Thomson performs a dumb-smart move exemplary of the resolutely high-low span of his art. How can we visualize time, that intangible fundamental? How about—comes the savant-ish response—through *TIME*, the journal that through its very name has set itself up as the implicit arbiter of temporality, and how about by considering the ways in which *TIME* itself has changed over time? In the time-lapse video *Untitled (TIME)* (2010), all the magazine's covers to date scroll past at a strobing 30-frames-per-second clip. The artist's book *Font Study (TIME)* (2011), meanwhile, modeled on the bound volumes of periodicals held by libraries, isolates, page by page, the changing fonts and changing colors of the *TIME* logo, which morphs a dozen times from the 1920s onwards, suiting the times: Deco in the 20s, angular and sharp in the 80s, modest and sober today, etc.

It's tempting to use it as a flip-book, to clasp time in your hands and move it at your own pace—the fantasy of time-stopping conceits like Nicholson Baker's novel *The Fermata* (1994)—or to speed up time in order to watch it go. *Untitled (Margo Leavin Gallery 1970–)* (2009) does that with one specific marker of time, the eponymous gallerist's Rolodex, which Thomson shot frame-by-frame on Super-16mm—to match the aspect ratio of Rolodex cards—and then ran together as a stop-motion animation until the whole, yellowing pages scrolling by, verges on abstraction. Rolodexes are graveyards after a while, if you leave the names of the dead in there; the technology itself is a virtually dead one too. Analogue film isn't too healthy either, and Super-16mm is particularly close to extinction; and since the work was made the Los Angeles dealer whose index this is has shuttered her gallery, claiming that the art world has changed. You can take your time or not, but time will certainly take you—and everything else. Even *TIME*, a victim of the drift to digital like every other print magazine, has been laying off staff lately.



A SAMPLING OF LOGOS from different eras of *TIME* magazine. From top to bottom: 1923, 1973, 1980 and 2012.

UNTITLED (Margo Leavin Gallery 1970–) is a blur made up of *people*—this is where we came in—probably mostly unknown to us, some still with us and some not, but all contributory here. And people, the *demos* in the Greek *demos-kratia*, underwrite Thomson’s essentially democratic and generous art, an art that can’t work without them. Early on, for example, he made *The Collected Live Recordings of Bob Dylan 1963-1995* (1999), in which he took all the live recordings Dylan had made for Columbia Records over thirty-two years and edited out the music. On the CD that comprised the artwork, that left only a 25-minute flow of crowd noise. This, to ears attuned to New Age (or anyone who accepts, *pace* Edgard Varèse, that music is organized sound) turned out to be somewhat musical in itself. The applause and approval rises and falls in waves, like waves, and it’s subjective. Some listeners, Thomson notes, have listened to it while enjoying the fantasy that the audience was applauding *them*. Note that the crowd noise was there all along; we just weren’t paying attention to it, until now.

The record, like so much of Thomson’s art, made its way out into the world. There was an advertisement, featuring hand-drawn images of an audience, on bus benches—thinking laterally, Thomson figured that if you make a record, you advertise it, though in doing so he was also asking what place an artwork has in the world—and *The Collected Live Recordings* was played in full on free-form stations in LA, going out to meet people who, in turn, would absorb it their own way. Who’d discover that, as Thomson’s quietly anti-spectacle art insists, when you remove a distracting focus of attention—a rock star, say, or the cartoon characters Thomson erased from Roadrunner cartoons in *The American Desert (For Chuck Jones)* (2002), putting the idealized American West backdrops front and center—what’s left can be polyvalent enough, and fascinating enough, for anyone to find their own place within. ‘When there’s too much of nothing, no one has control,’ Dylan sang in 1967. Precisely. And that’s not what he meant, but creative misprision is in any case the point.

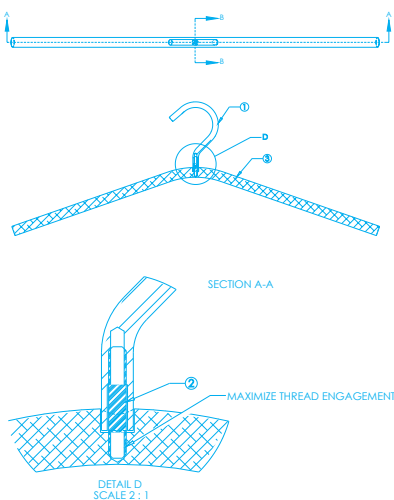
Thomson took from Felix Gonzalez-Torres, he says, the notion that you have to trust your audience to be intelligent. His art does that, but it also gives them plenty to work with—while appearing, at first, not to put itself forward at all, while appearing to retract and/or withdraw. Thomson, on one level, might be seen as pursuing and presenting a panoply of counterintuitive strategies for being heard within the art world’s noise—from disguising something as something else, to self-deprecation (often via humor) to withdrawal from the primary venues of exhibition, to a refusal of captivating spectacle, to near-invisibility. Again, though, he’s a West Coast artist and the meditative undertow of California culture as inflected by Zen and, later, New Age isn’t wholly extricable from this. A short series of works involving chimes, beginning with *Wind Chimes* (1999),

peaked with *Coat Check Chimes* (2008), installed in the cloakroom of the *Whitney Biennial Exhibition* and featuring 1,200 ‘tuned’ coat hangers, allowing the chancy checking of coats to create a peeling sound, like myriad orchestra triangles—and to be performed, of course, by amateurs, i.e. the coat checkers. (Also significant, for Thomson’s purposes, in terms of the people it will reach and their potential attitudes to it, is that this work catches one unawares, appearing as it does *before* one has crossed the threshold into the art space; before one’s guards are up, if you like.)

With its aleatory structure, *Coat Check Chimes* opens onto the historical dimensions of Thomson’s work, which is partly rooted in the Cagean notion of background becoming foreground: as see, of course, *4’ 33”* (1952). Silence, in Cage, is never actual silence but the ever-present unnoticed noise of the world. (Indeed, silence doesn’t really exist on earth. Even in an anechoic chamber, Cage noted, one can hear two sounds, one high and one low: one’s nervous system and one’s pulsing blood.) In Thomson’s work, which has repeatedly literalized the non-visual by turning to music and music manqué, this overlooked context—background ‘noise’—has untapped value, philosophic and emotional resonances. *Acoustic Partition* (2013), a sequel of sorts to *Coat Check Chimes*, features a fully operable accordion built into sliding doors and installed as a partition between exhibitions at SITE Santa Fe: that viewers can play this room-divider, or may walk past it, speaks to the decorum of exhibition-going and, of course, to Thomson’s thematic. It’s the unnoticed with the capacity to become big and diversely used, a set of doors that, if activated, fly wide open.

For *Crickets* (2012), meanwhile, Thomson and Los Angeles composer Michael Webster produced a score based on worldwide recordings of cricket chirps, to be performed by a 17-piece orchestra, the specific sources carefully labeled in the video version. This was another sequel of sorts: to *b/w* (2008), a vinyl LP in which the artist sped up whalesong 16 times so it sounded like birds and slowed down birdsong 16 times so that it sounded like whales—perhaps the most explicit pointer Thomson has made to the fact that he’s interested in going high and low at the same time, or, if you like, pointing up the fulsomeness of the natural/cultural spectrum. *Crickets*, whose formally dressed musicians bend with great seriousness over their instruments to produce a precise simulacrum of aleatory insect noise, reflects that. It’s funny, of course. It also frames a persistent, much-ignored natural phenomenon so that it resonates diversely, open-endedly.

First, in comedy, crickets are stand-ins for real silence: in a pop-cultural version of Cage, they’re the sound supposedly heard when a comedian bombs, when the crowd sits stonily. (Bill Hicks, getting his defense in first, used to do an impression of them onstage;



A SHOP DRAWING of a coathanger for *Coat Check Chimes* (2008). The metal coathangers are modeled on orchestral triangles. The shop drawing shows a threaded nylon rod joining the hook armature to the hanger bar, which insulates the bar so that it resonates tonally when struck.

Brian Regan talks of doing a show in a rustic hotel with a window open, and actually hearing crickets as his jokes tanked.) Here, then, sound becomes musical yet anticipatorily fringed with failure, and an artistic tradition finds a contemporary, real-world equivalent that allows an entrée for all kinds of audiences—no small thing. There’s also a satisfying conceptual neatness in the fact that *Crickets* instrumentalizes the sound of no hands clapping. If an earlier work made music from applause, this makes it from implicit disapproval. (Which, with warm irony, gets applauded at the end when it’s performed.) Thus are the two bases of audience response covered. Yet perhaps more centrally in terms of Thomson’s iconography, in referencing the rich emptiness opened up by an unappreciated joke, *Crickets* also suggests a modern and perhaps degraded conception of something for which old vocabularies seem suspect, or a way of approaching it: namely the void.

ONE THING that Conceptual and Minimal art had in common—and that Thomson’s art, when it redeploys their aesthetics in order to crack them open, bucks against—is that their practitioners seemingly liked to pretend that people didn’t exist. Or, rather, that subjectivities didn’t: that there might be a direct transmission of a pure thought from artist to subject, who wouldn’t spoil the deal according to the quirks of their own brainpan. From the off, Thomson’s art has argued against this apodictic, purist and sometimes forbidding approach. See, for example, his *Skyspace Bouncehouse* (2007), which takes the classic form of James Turrell’s sky-contemplating apertures and uses it as the basis for a shoes-off, jump-on inflatable, earthy pleasure—and emphatically physical bodies—invading a cynosure of purism. It suggests that including the vagaries of self-hood makes for an art that’s not only unblinker vis-à-vis the chaotic nature of reception, but is also richer for it. Nor, relatedly, does Thomson pretend that pop culture doesn’t exist. Rather, leveraging the outside world in a way analogous to Cage’s processes, he takes these two givens that high art has sometimes wanted to forget, our wayward brains and ‘low’ culture, and asks what shape—and to what ends—an art that accepted them might take.

The most explicit of those ends, Thomson’s production so far might suggest, is that we’re allowed an entrée to subjects whose scale might otherwise overmaster us, and which might seem the highfalutin purview of artistic approaches that *did* seek to exclude the viewer and pop culture. Chief among these, seemingly, is the void: nothingness, the inverse of everything that is. A profound awareness of *Śūnyatā*, the emptiness of everything, is a goal of Buddhist meditation: a realization that the world is empty which accompanies an emptying, or clearing, of the mind—freedom from attachment.

The void might also be construed as the ‘other side,’ the negative of being. But an actual experience of it, at least for non-meditators, feels fairly impossible. What shape might a contemporary void—a nothing that’s useful to contemplate—assume?

Again exemplifying, if knowingly, the West Coast tradition of adapting Eastern thought, what Thomson’s art posits is that ‘nothing,’ today, is that which inhabits the various borderlands of our attention: the mainstream culture that’s so omnipresent as to be ambient. That is, the negative space around people, events, locales and architecture, attention to which might be, in its own way, meditative and enlightening. Even within the bright blare of popular culture, Thomson suggests, there’s space for thoughtful remove, potential for wonder, out at the unremarked edges. If art has historically put its unruly audience on the margins, that might not be a bad place to be—provided your eyes are open. In *The Swordsman* (2004), for example, Thomson offers a minute-long loop of Hollywood stuntman Bob Anderson throwing a prop sword out of shot, as if to an actor in a swashbuckler. One sinks into a light trance watching this work, which is again deliberately situated at a distance from spectacle; at some point, though, one might realize that *The Swordsman* is a film about time, because Anderson—though a master of his craft—was about to be made redundant by CGI. As with *TIME*, as with Margo Leavin’s Rolodex, extinction ghosts it: the small and local is made to appear surprisingly large, philosophical. And this is nothing if not the territory of art history, of the *memento mori*, albeit articulated in a demotic that feels like now.

The already large can also be enlarged, provided it’s familiar enough to be de-familiarized. In *Negative Space* (2006)—an artist’s book and a series of murals that also serve as gallery décor—Thomson color-reverses outer space photographs from NASA’s public-domain archive. Deep emptiness comes to look like marble (or tie-dye psychedelic art, another West Coast ref)—at least to this viewer, who finds them beautiful but claustrophobic. Yet Thomson finds the images airy, he’s said: in his pop-toned void there’s room for you, me, him and all of our subjective takes. So when, in *Void and Observer* (2013), Thomson stows inside the pocket of an invigilator a mis-stamped half-dollar coin, reflective of a mishap that sometimes occurs at the US Mint—in which John F. Kennedy, the coin’s star this last half-century, appears to contemplate a blank crescent of unstamped metal—it’s partly a work that plays out mystery and cosmic pondering in a very worldly currency (Kennedy, of course, remains an unanswered question in himself). Partly, too, it’s a reflection of the ‘error coin’ phenomenon, wherein a badly stamped coin will sometimes go out into circulation: a mistake that persists, which for Thomson, he says, is something like the void. But it’s also one situated in the void-like peripheral realm of the exhibition,



A RENDERING of a model for *Void and Observer* (2013), a sculpture of a mis-struck half-dollar. The model was made by making 3D scans of a blank half-dollar planchet and an actual half-dollar, and creating an ‘error coin’ in computer space.

deep in a pocket and you have to ask for it. And what is the coin-jangling act itself but tuning out, letting the mind drift, communing momentarily with nothingness?

NOW THE ABOVE would suggest that Thomson's art has a *subject*, a near-metaphysical one. But let's reverse terms. Let's entertain the possibility that the modern void is not the endpoint but an enabler, and that Thomson, in talking about foreground and background, center and edge, is getting at something else, something contextual that leads back to looking: outmoded hierarchies and their discontents, and how they shape (or limit) what we can see, feel, receive. That by pointing to margins he's talking about the existent breadth of a spectrum: of experience, of culture—in short, *The Varieties of Experience* (to quote the title Thomson adopted from William James and Carl Sagan for a 2008 film, which used Nam Jun Paik's white *Zen for Film* (1962-4) as a dust-attracting negative). The historical reference points of his art are, on the one hand, a couple of practices that were exclusive (Minimalism, Conceptualism), and one that was wildly, programmatically inclusive (Cage and the aleatory continuum). Thomson fuses the two, implicitly calling the former finally limited and unrealistic while defending close looking and close thinking; furthermore, he fuses that fusion with *everything else*, including that quality often excluded from Minimal and Conceptual practices: humor, also a device for accessing an audience and catching them off-guard.

And so, while his art is far from visually maximalist—it consists of tight, conceptually satisfying, often minimal-looking projects—it deliberately contains multitudes. It says, you can get the same thing up here and down there, and in fact there *is* no up here or down there, or in here and out there. In so doing, it not only avers that the deepest questions and registers of feeling are available all across the spectrum but emphatically invokes the spectrum itself, the simultaneity and equalized value of its bands. Here is a non-hierarchical cultural field in which cartoons and comedy, viewed from the right angle, are no less harborers of profundity than what is traditionally considered great art, and in this egalitarian wondering at the commonplace, every net is widened. A tabloid gets itself upgraded and so do you, since the artist is explicitly no more an arbiter of meaning than the viewer is. Remember that in the subtraction that underwrote *The Collected Live Recordings of Bob Dylan*, Thomson not only reminded audiences of the potential-filled, questioning overflow that surrounds the thing we're told we should be focusing on, but he also made the audience—both on the record and off it—into the stars of the show, the motive force. Those ambits flow together still. First he takes it away; then it's our turn.



A SECTION OF FILM STRIP from *The Varieties of Experience* (2008) shows how the dust and particles clinging to a copy of Nam Jun Paik's *Zen for Film* (1962-64) were printed as reversed imagery when *Zen for Film* was used as a negative.