

DAN CAMERON AND ALESSANDRO RABOTTINI IN CONVERSATION WITH MUNGO THOMSON ON THE OCCASION OF “NEGATIVE SPACE VARIATIONS” AT GALLERIA D’ARTE MODERNA E CONTEMPORANEA (GAMeC), BERGAMO, ITALY

Alessandro Rabottini: You primarily live and work in Los Angeles, a place with a distinctive character, which seems suspended between amusement and analysis, between pleasure and the deconstruction of mass myths. It’s Arnold Schwarzenegger and John Baldessari at the same time, radical counterculture and gym culture, technology and emancipation. How does it affect – if it does – your artistic practice? I ask this because I see yours as a very layered and shaded attitude towards mass culture, while at the same time you have a very personal way of dealing with issues related to art as a specific field.

Mungo Thomson: Well, my work is mostly about carving out spaces for thinking, and what makes LA so workable for artists is it’s like a blank slate to be written on each day, a neutral, non-interfering backdrop for working. The weather is always more or less the same, the stores repeat themselves, and it has a real sense of expansiveness geographically. So I find it quite perfect spatially. At the same time, culturally, it is this huge center of global image production, and you can look at the barrage of information in a Walter Benjamin kind of way, where every transmission contains a secret message. Decoding them becomes kind of irresistible.

So yes I would say I work right on the line you describe, between immersion in the mythology and the deconstruction of it. I only really separate art and mass culture insofar as one is a good way to remark upon the other. The distinction I make is more between cultural production and consumption; when I say I want to carve out spaces for thinking I mean I want to activate reception. Resist the passive entertainment model a little bit.

Dan Cameron: One intriguing thing I’ve noticed about Mungo’s work is that something is often removed to make room for an expanded sense of space, or else something which is supposed to be activated is not, leaving us to consider the ghost in the machine. This is very antithetical to the Los Angeles mode of existence, which is always about making more, making it new, and moving on. Mungo seems to prefer to linger a bit longer at the scene of the crime, and piece things together in a way that others wouldn’t bother to.

Alessandro Rabottini: It seems to me that you often deal with the issue of authorship or, better, with the possibility of being original within a given set of options. And this counts both in the field of art and, possibly, in life itself as a pattern of beliefs, behaviours, and aspirations.

Mungo Thomson: I like the common grammar that people use. I want the work to be legible, and I want the work’s relationship to its audience to be mostly generous. Art is a social practice and I’m not interested in being asocial – though occasionally I need to become a hermit to accomplish anything. I usually try to start somewhere recognizable. Of course the danger then is to make things that are overly familiar, because the familiar, the comfortable, is itself part of the problem, especially in the US. But I try to tweak the familiar, alter or remake it slightly, enough to produce an experience of gestalt maybe? Or in any case a strangeness that can cause a delay.

In a way this goes back to the first question; what are our choices as citizens, as consumers, and so on? We seem to be offered a false set of options, irresolvable tautologies – “with us or against us” – and my work is more about the third way, the lateral route. It’s sort of about refusing the terms of the argument as presented. So yes the work is in some way about cultural choice, and deliberation. I’m interested in “the authentic”–whatever that means–and in the conversation that’s always taking place between global mass culture and local “folk” cultures or movements, the way they influence and resist and absorb each other.

Dan Cameron: I would add here that I think Mungo is actually trying to address the feelings of total powerlessness that go along with being a passive consumer in a high-technology, media-driven society. Because most people are unaware that they are actually semi-voluntary participants in their own loss of power, sometimes it takes something as slight as changing the backdrop of a video, or shifting the context a bit, just enough to make people understand that if a single, self-motivated artist can instigate change, then maybe they aren’t as powerless as they had imagined.

Alessandro Rabottini: I’m interested in discussing your relation to “reality” and the world of mass media, because we’re facing new practices in this respect today. And what interests me most – especially in the context of the art produced by recent generations – is the fact that relating to mass media is a matter very far removed from the “appropriation” discourse which dominated the 1980s. I find it very interesting that there is a sense of urgency about the idea of “truth” today, when we are so intensely confronted with media-based, constructed realities.

Mungo Thomson: Again, I think my work rides the line. I am very interested in “reality” and “the truth” precisely because *what those are* seems not only to be always shifting of its own accord and in terms of one’s own changing subject position, but is also only occasionally glimpsed at all through the fog of social discourse, the media, etc. This fog, or white noise, is a kind of social phenomenology, and in a lot of ways this is the subject of the work; the thing and its context and its delivery system and its larger relationship to time and space, all interdependent and folded together.

Like, what is the truth of Bob Dylan? Dylan is, I suppose, his music, his lyrics, etc., but those are all highly subjective artefacts subject to ongoing re-examination. The historical truth is that he was put where he was by people, by audiences, who asked for certain things from him, some of which they got. My sound piece (of all the applause from all of Dylan’s live albums) is about those people, and about what they’re asking. It is also, in negative, about Dylan. It frames him, but he is missing. So anyway this work too is subject to ongoing re-examination I guess, but it seems to me the only way for a work to have parity with such a subject is for it to be able to shift also, to be open and also opaque, saving some of itself for later.

I work with a lot of appropriated material, there’s a great deal of “the found” in my work. But I tend to appropriate what is off to the side, the framework or apparatus holding up the subject, and concentrate on that, more than on the subject itself. So in this way yes, certain cultural artefacts are revisited – Roadrunner cartoons, say – but so are their frames, and hopefully, so are the issues or questions that accompanied the original. *The American Desert (for Chuck Jones)* (2002), the video of cartoon desert backgrounds from those cartoons, ended up for me being very much about being an American artist, looking back at Earthworks and so on, the importance of landscape in personal and cultural identity, but also the post-War moment of

American cultural ascendance as manifested in Hollywood animation studios, and an idea of collapsing the avant-garde and the popular, and all these things that can be brought forward once the central characters and their conflict are removed, once there's some stillness. But the characters themselves I didn't appropriate, and wouldn't be interested in—and ironically this also allowed the work to pass muster with the Warner Brothers legal department.

Actually maybe *The Swordsman* is the best way for me to talk about appropriation, mass media, and “reality.” I made a 35mm film in 2004 of a Hollywood sword master named Bob Anderson throwing a sword off-camera. It was intended to be an inverted answer to all the films he'd made, from *Robin Hood* to *Barry Lyndon* to *Star Wars* to *Pirates of the Caribbean*, in which he was the guy standing out of the frame throwing stunt swords to actors in the frame. All those films from 1939 to 2004 are not pictured, but they are present. Bob was 82 when we filmed, in retirement in Florida, and that history is on his face. So it was a portrait of him, but also one of action cinema, and of the somewhat unspectacular truth of a certain kind of authentic skill or “mastery” that supports the fiction, and also of the decline in appreciation of those skills as they are made obsolete by developments in CGI and the popularity of martial arts. So it was about a number of kinds of truth and a number of kinds of fiction... and it's another case of appropriation in negative. Or in ellipses.

Dan Cameron: It seems, too, like there was a moment in recent cultural history when everybody became exhausted from the sheer effort of accusing each other of essentialism. My truth, your truth, and everybody else's truth seemed to have been turned into categories that, while quite simple to demonstrate objectively, never seemed to address the listener/viewer's aspirations to partake in some of that truth. Today I think we're more comfortable with acknowledging that truth belongs as much to its recipient as to its purveyor, and therefore my efforts, or Mungo's efforts, to be truthful do not detract in any way from somebody else's very different standards for truth.

As self-evident as the above might sound, don't overlook that it's coming from a society in which the highest elected politicians have engaged for six years in an endless series of lies and distortions in order to drag us into an illegal war in Iraq, declare anyone they want an 'enemy combatant' to be detained indefinitely without charges, or else simply kidnap them in Europe to be sent somewhere else to be tortured. In this light, I think that reasonable people have come to the conclusion that the dangers implicit in asserting the truth, or of insisting that there is a truth, cannot compare to the much graver dangers of lying knowingly, and then lying even more to cover up the first lies.

Mungo Thomson: The work tries to privilege the viewers' “truth,” such as it is, in all its mutability. This is sort of central to it, that what I'm advancing is not coming from a place of authority. That I'm not really making claims so much as suggestions. Of course this has a relation to cultural and political dynamics of domination and powerlessness and so on, but it is also to do with absurdity, countering logic with illogic. Trying to work against the idea that everything must be organized and productive, and optimized as a resource.

It's interesting how conversations about my work often end up in political territory; this makes sense of course, especially as some of the work is expressly political. But it's also funny because I think of the work's compartment as primarily phenomenological and atmospheric. Politics and media and society and so on are of course very present as a layer or strata within that atmosphere, as one strain of the cacophony. But

so is its physical behavior and its emotional temperature, humor and pathos or whatever. And so is its specific relationship to its context, and to the art institution.

I'm interested in whether you can make art that functions at the edge of representation. Can you make something that is almost just a haze lingering in the room, but is still socialized, still legible? At what point does something disappear? I'm trying to make work that recedes into the walls but is still present. That gloms onto the skin of the institution. And becomes an object—or again, a space—in the mind of the viewer, as much or more than in the room.

Alessandro Rabottini: What you say about the phenomenological and atmospheric nature of your work, and its very subtle relation to the exhibition space, brings us straight forward into the main work on view here at GAMeC, the 3 murals installation with negative views of sky fields taken from the Hubble Space Telescope. I'm interested in knowing more about how they function both in relation to the exhibition space and to the viewer's perception. I'm also so intrigued by this work, also because of a very interesting and incidental coincidence: your show will run concurrently together with a big retrospective of Kinetic artist Jesus Raphael Soto, which is all about perception and the intimate relation between the viewer's own sphere of stimulations, the work in all their shifty visual appeal and the exhibition space itself.

Mungo Thomson: I'm looking forward to seeing more of his work. It's an interesting case of optical art that is not primarily geometric or mechanical; it's organic and quirky but still has a destabilizing quality. I don't have a skill for optics exactly, the way a lot of phenomenological work does—my project is more organized around leaving things alone. I go more for the stuff that simply points to the corner of the room, or brings the background forward somehow. My work has always tried to evoke 'THE ROOM': the space where art is shown (and made) as a distinct carrier of meaning unto itself, a framing device that can't go unmentioned, and also as the final theatre of a set of conventions and expectations—architectural, promotional, economic—that the artist confronts over and over again. Beckett said, "All art is the same: an attempt to fill empty space." A lot of my work highlights the attempt, and the arena, as much as the result.

The Negative Space works came out of a consideration of voids—and also an attempt to picture voids, precisely when they are missing, or are vacuums—when they absorb vision. The void of art space, studio and exhibition space, is always white. The void of outer space is of course black. So by inverting images of outer space I can align these voids. The hope is to doubly open up the space, rather than fill it. Make it more empty by putting something in it. So there's numerous inversions happening.

And hopefully this happens with the wall murals on the large, institutional scale—where a couple of the image are 12 meters wide, and you can stand before these massive images looking out, but in a sense you will be just staring at a wall—and also in the book in a more intimate way, flipping through lots of these images in the reading room. And hopefully the soundtrack in there, my playing the wineglasses, makes for an atmosphere of attention.

Dan Cameron: Mungo, before we abandon the subject of truth altogether, can you say a little bit more about the idea of space in your work, and how it relates to living in southern California, where I think that one's inner map of the world develops quite differently than in the rest of the country? Specifically, I'm thinking

about the special illusion of freedom that comes with riding aimlessly along a freeway (provided you're not trying to get anywhere), and knowing that this endless ribbon of highway floats along on top of the world, while down below a very different sense of space prevails. When you refer to negative space it somehow makes me think about Mike Davis' book *City of Quartz*, in which he speaks of the fact that what California is really selling to the world is the illusion of endless space in which to romp around and project your individualism onto identity. Do you think that there might be a residual trace of that illusion of freedom in the way you define space in your work?

Mungo Thomson: Well, today I was driving on an *Italian* highway between Milan and Bergamo with a GAMeC intern named Beatrice, and we were discussing our respective empires, and she was amused to be reminded that, as opposed to say, Rome, Los Angeles is only about 100 years old. Relative to Rome LA looks like it was made out of cardboard, but of course in cultural terms it looms very large. I think California is in a way the end of the road, the place where dreams are supposed to come true, and as civilization, such as it is, headed West it developed more and more specific ideas about what it wanted to find there. And yes, I think those ideas are expressed as Unrestricted Horizontality. So I can see the connection you're making. But for me the work is also totally culturally inflected—spaces for contemplation are not available without a cultural frame or language to describe them, and all my work acknowledges the complexities of the contexts of the production of meaning in the lived world. The frame, the mediation, is always present. As I saw in one of the Soto wall texts this week, “We (artists) are no longer observers, but an integral part of what is real.”

I actually grew up in Northern California and have only lived in LA for about 8 years, and the culture of *that* part of the world, not the hippie culture but the sort of burnout aftermath, has had a big impact on my thinking too. Where LA has had a spatial or formal influence NoCal informs my work more in terms of language and culture. It produced a fascination with the consequences of idealism and the beauty and folly of belief, and you could say California in general is a study in those things. And of course it makes itself a study by constantly exporting its self-image.

My work is concerned with choice; it deals in the options that have been laid out, as Alessandro was saying before. And so it is in a way about “freedom” and how it comes in packages—and you're right, it gestures toward empty space as some sort of antidote to that I suppose... but as I keep saying the spaces it describes (or parenthesizes) are spaces for thought, not necessarily physical sites. And when I say spaces for thinking, I don't mean you have to be thinking about much at all. I am positing *nothingness* as an option. I'm not sure whether this is individualistic or not—hopefully the void offers something more than the self. Hopefully it can be expansive space rather than just ‘leave me alone’ space—though admittedly for me it is both. Of course perverse Zen relationships to mass culture are a staple in California too.

Maybe the new project could be read as a confluence of my two Californias. I think the inverted astronomical photographs could resonate within the Bay Area/Santa Cruz countercultures that I know, but they are also clean and clear in a Southern California way. A little bit Michael Asher and a little bit stoned Berkeley teenager. So maybe this project finally resolves some sort of personal tension.