

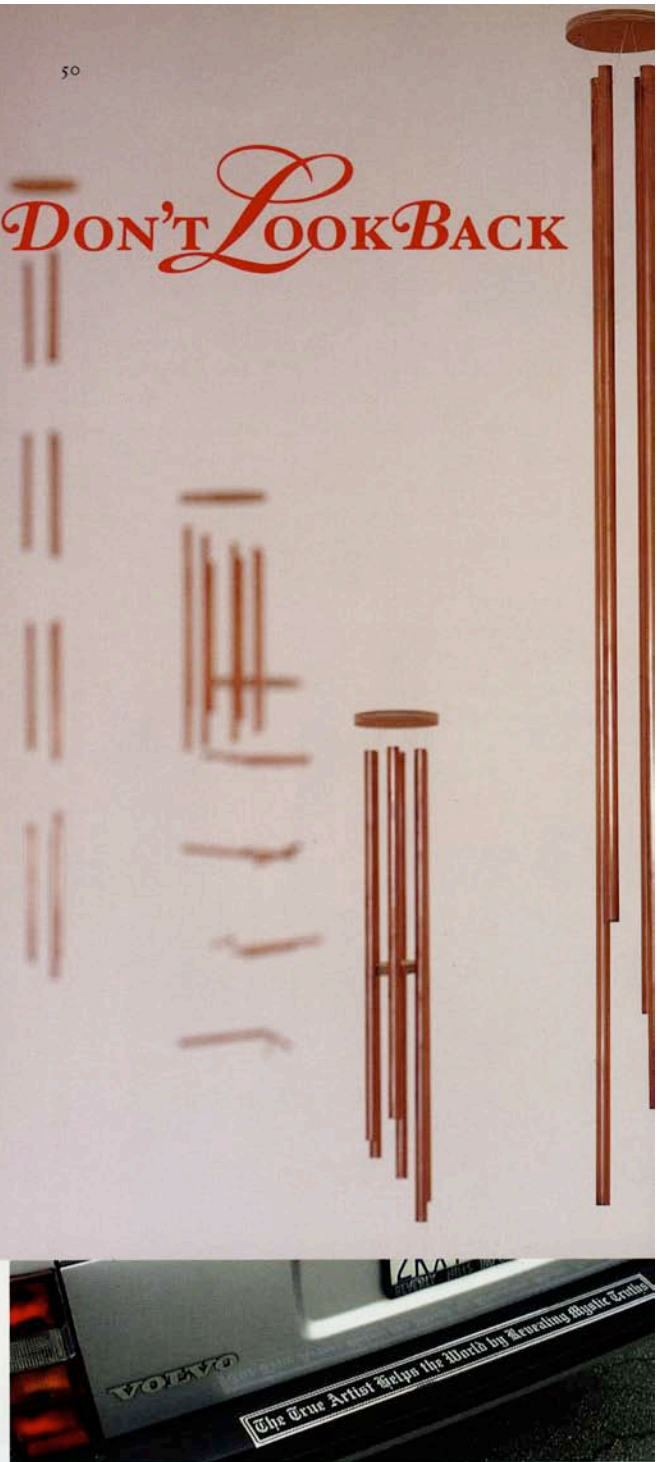
MARGARET MORGAN

## MUNGO THOMSON *DON'T LOOK BACK*

Mungo Thomson is a polymorphous, bastard conceptualist, like many L.A. artists including Sam Durant, Charles LaBelle and Andrea Bowers. If the work of their forebears is famously dry, that of these second-wave conceptualists is distinctly wet. If their predecessors simulated the controlled methodology of scientific experimentation, these younger artists argue that there is no control to begin with, no hope of predictable outcomes. The first wave sought to approach the purely phenomenological, but the second accepts the futility of trying to isolate sensate experience from the social, and embraces the white noise of everyday interference. Where conceptualism proper tended toward formal austerity, bastard conceptualism relies upon once-shunned pop and pictorial traditions. And if the former honored a lack of compromise as rigor, the latter finds art and life nothing if not a series of concessions. Thomson references the heyday of conceptual art—from Bruce Nauman to Bob Dylan—and, like Sam Durant, riffs upon Rosalind Krauss's expanded sculptural field to take in media culture, commerce, and lived experience. Yet the particular past he evokes winds up receding like the hairlines of its chief players. Thomson's tropes of the past say much more to the current state of things.

Consider first Nauman's 1967 neon spiral, *The True Artist Helps the World By Revealing Mystic Truths*. Here, neon—that tawdry, ordinary stuff of beer signage—speaks to the impossibility of revelation, its lurid glow parodying the whole notion of an "aura" of art. The Nauman functions critically from a materialist base of relative certainty. Thomson's reincarnation of the same phrase marks a significant generational shift: it appears as a bumper sticker intoning, "The True Artist Helps the World By Revealing Mystic Truths." To reiterate the Nauman as a mantra on a sticker written in a bold Gothic font is to situate it squarely in the company of self-help jargon, political one-liners, and platitudes—the kind in cheap frames on low-ceilinged office walls and rented kitchens, on Internet greeting cards and of course, on the bumpers of cars. The sticker is aimed at contemporary artists who might wish to find in Nauman's strategies a cure to their malaise, a way to regain their lost critical certitude, or more simply, a way to be useful. This, in a world in which art is just another commodity, one tiny message in a sea of jammed freeways and crowded parking lots. Thomson's bumper sticker is a scatter piece indeed.

In a sculptural work from 2000, Thomson created a series of stacking steps, units of IKEA-style furniture, which he pointedly names in Swedish *Stapla*. Naturally, the steps are held together not with carpenter's joins, but with glue—speedily built and arranged to fit any space, destined for easy application and certain disrepair. Thomson's *stapla* wittily materialize the 12-step mantra. Do-it-yourself decor and do-it-yourself therapy: both are manifestations of a larger cultural fantasy of self-actualization; such is the new mystic truth revealed by the artist.



In his first solo exhibition at Margo Leavin Gallery in October 2000, Thomson filled the main gallery with sixteen wind chimes, a veritable paeon to New Age imperatives. Much more refined than their Pier One precursors, these are sculptures made of copper pipe and wood hung with nylon string in delicate, artful configurations. They form partial spirals, cylinders and discontinuous lines, like so many letters from an unknown language. They beg to be touched, to have their sound set in motion, despite the interdiction against making physical contact with art in a gallery. And here is where the wind chimes draw you into what Žižek has called the postmodern superego, the imperative that, "You must! You must enjoy—because you can" ("You May!", *London Review of Books*, March 18, 1999). That is, in the New Age, pleasure—and wind chimes—are somehow obligatory. Which of course is about as calming as that irritating music some ex-hippie insists on playing while you pay him to give you a massage.

As I write I am listening to Thomson's CD, *The Collected Live Recordings of Bob Dylan 1963-1995*. It is not what your typical megastore consumer might expect. It excerpts only the applause. The clapping breaks over this listener like waves, or

sparks, the audience's response building into a fire. It is actually soothing. And in the emptiness of the side gallery of Margo Leavin, *The Collected Live Recordings* also have a kind of congratulatory function: Cheers to you, the viewer, from your own invisible audience! You could purchase a copy as an act of self-affirmation and sit on your *stapla*, tinkling your chime, feeling quite pleased with yourself. Yet the recording is punctuated by the stray strummings of guitar (acoustic and electric), remarks, asides, partial introductions, calls and responses from the crowd which inhibit the easy listening required for such idylls. Like Andrea Bowers's images of crowds at sporting events, Thomson's isolation of audience bespeaks the privileging of fan and spectator over author and expert. In a further gesture toward contemporary mass marketing, the CD is advertised in posters, some of which fill a wall of the gallery, and on bus benches in various locations around the city, à la Daniel Buren. Of course they have none of the formal austerity of a Buren: these posters bear the inscription, incongruous but not untrue, "Available Now at Margo Leavin Gallery."

Thomson identifies turn-of-the-century coping regimes as opportunities for art. Copies of *Everything Has Been Recorded* (2000), a small, two-color booklet produced in an unlimited edition, sit in messy stacks on a ledge in the gallery. You can take one—they are free—and in so doing, you experience an uncanny revelation: you've done this before, you've found found booklets just like this—by public phones, in airport lounges and waiting rooms, booklets produced by born-again Christians, proselytizing, promoting, preaching, trying to reach none other than You, You and You. The booklet consists of drawings like those you might see in bibles written in a contemporary vernacular: comic-book hands of God, wandering crowds of folks wearing simple clothes, people falling down or rising up—familiar pictures, but the speech bubbles take a different turn. The text offers a rumination on the machinations of that Other Creator, the artist—and an anxious artist in need of counsel this one is. The source drawings for the booklet were also displayed in the gallery. In the absence of the printed word, these delicate cartoons return to the realm of metaphysics. In the title drawing, for example, we see a vast heavenly landscape, with a generic Archangel and sinner to one side, who seem to be looking in awe upon an enormous, empty, cinematic screen, a place for the unspeakable. We know from the final printed booklets that upon the surface of the tabula rasa will be these words, the *bête noire* of the contemporary artist: "Everything Has Been Recorded."

And this is where the ambiguity of Thomson's project lies: these attempts to insinuate art into the cracks of faith's distribution system smack of sincerity, and longing, for surely the biggest question for any artist in the brand-new (so to speak) twenty-first century is the question of audience. Be it booklet or bumper sticker, cheap modular furniture, an ad for a CD, or the CD itself, Thomson's work seeps into the social, trying to locate and engage with unknown, fragmentary audiences whose primary commonalities are their mobility, their dispersal, and their deep desire to believe. The work is at once everywhere and nowhere in this fractured public sphere, messages in bottles, their own faith in the possibility of connection figured as utter necessity.

MARGARET MORGAN is an artist and writer based in Los Angeles.

MUNGO THOMSON, (ABOVE) *Wind Chimes*, 2000, installation detail, copper, MDO, wood, monofilament. Photo Brian Forrest. (BELOW LEFT) *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths (12 Step)*, 1999-2000, ink on holographic vinyl, 3 x 36 in. (BELOW RIGHT) *The Collected Live Recordings of Bob Dylan 1963-1995 (Promotional Bus Bench)*, 2000, 24 x 84 in. Courtesy Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.

