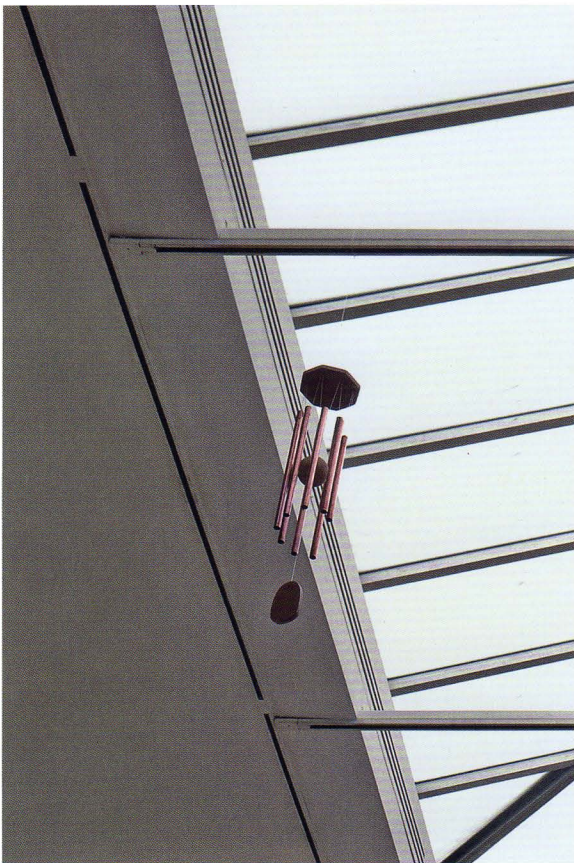


2008 BIENNIAL EXHIBITION

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK



top: *Wind Chime*, 1999 (installation view, Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles, 2000). Medium density overlay plywood, copper, and monofilament, 26 x 7 x 7 in. (66 x 17.8 x 17.8 cm). Collection of the artist

bottom: *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths (12-Step)*, 1999 (installation view, Auckland Art Gallery, New Zealand, 2007). Vinyl lettering on holographic vinyl, 3 x 36 in. (7.6 x 91.4 cm). Collection of the artist



Still from *Silent Film of a Tree Falling in the Forest*, 2005–06. 16mm film, color, silent; 7:10 min. Collection of the artist

Born 1969 in Woodland, California; lives in Los Angeles, California, and Berlin, Germany

In the words of artist Margaret Morgan, Mungo Thomson is a “polymorphous, bastard conceptualist”—a designation hard to improve on, given the artist’s promiscuously wide-ranging art. By turns deadpan and caustically sly—he has manufactured Styrofoam antenna balls emblazoned with John Baldessari’s bearded visage and bumper stickers bearing Bruce Nauman’s doxa “The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths”—Thomson’s inherently conversational practice both gamely Pop-ifies its often antiaesthetic historical precedents and resituates that generation’s thought experiments in the social realm.

Across the many media Thomson exploits, a common denominator might be his interest in backgrounds, whether material (canvas or gallery wall) or historical, and his suggestion that they are not as empty as they may seem, particularly when amplified by his intercessions. In the DVD projection *The American Desert (for Chuck Jones)* (2002), for instance, Thomson compiled a chronological archive of backdrops from the Looney Tunes Road Runner cartoons that Jones created. Protagonists and narratives excised, the desert scenes mimic landscape painting; yet, the work has also become a de facto tribute to Jones, who died shortly after Thomson completed it, as well as a meditation on experiential mediation when screened outdoors at Andrea Zittel’s A–Z West in Joshua Tree, California, that year.

In the white cube, Thomson’s interventions pressure their containers by rendering them visible in the absence of other work. *Wind Chime* (1999), a handmade chorus of wood and copper that responds to movement, fills the space with only the possibility of sound when the air is still. Building on this for the 2008 Whitney Biennial, *Coat Check Chimes* (2008) involves replacing the Museum’s coat-check hangers with custom-fabricated “tuned” metal hangers that—although peripheral to the galleries—bracket the viewer’s experience of the show.

Like aural renderings of Robert Smithson’s Site and non-Site pieces, *The Bootleg Series* (2003–04) are ambient recordings Thomson made of gallery exhibition openings and then installed in other galleries, filling the spaces with persistent, intangible chatter dislocated in place and time. The premise of *not* seeing the event structures *Silent Film of a Tree Falling in the Forest* (2005–06), a 16-millimeter film of trees falling, punctuated by blank intervals of white. Here and elsewhere, Thomson neither wholly directs nor abdicates responsibility. As he notes to Adam Carr in *Uovo*, describing *John Connelly Presents 2002–2005* (2005), a giant inflatable bounce house based on the New York gallery’s architecture and erected at London’s 2005 Frieze Art Fair: “There’s stuff there to chew on—to do with the work being empty until it was filled by the viewer . . . 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.” **S.H.**