

**NIGEL PRINCE:** The first works of yours I saw were a series of drawings of graph paper in an altered scale, the *Royal Leerdam Crystal Beer Bottle Candle Holders* and *The American Desert (for Chuck Jones)*. Each in their own way demonstrates the idea of taking something familiar but challenging our perception and understanding of things. Such a practice clearly has precedents in conceptual strategies present in the local scene in Los Angeles throughout the late 1960s and 1970s. What was the background, the conditions of this context, that prompted such a compelling take on the world?

**MUNGO THOMSON:** The graph paper drawings are an interesting place to start, because I made those in school, and when I went back to school, I really wanted to start over. I moved to Los Angeles from New York, where I had been in the Whitney Program and had begun showing a little, and I was already unsatisfied with objects sitting in galleries, or at least my objects. To show in New York was to be declarative, and I wanted to be more propositional. I wanted to be exploring the ontological conditions of becoming an artist. And school was a place I might be able to do that.

That was the context for those drawings, for *Room Tone* and some other things. I began thinking about fundamentals. I was interested in the atmospherics around production and reception: the substrate, the ambient—the thing behind the thing. So I made graph paper by hand. They were very optical drawings and very hard to photograph because they were made with non-photo-blue ink, as real graph paper is. And then I gave them away to other artists, to use as grounds for their own drawings.

**NP** This sense of ‘letting go’ or of setting an idea in motion, allowing it to take form and live in the world, seems crucial.

**MT** I would usually program some kind of secondary application into an object. That way, even if it failed as art, you could still *use* it, and it would still have a life. Conceptual art can be like graphic design—you establish your grid and you execute, and you get what you planned. But there has to be something that escapes. I was trying to make things I would lose control of.

Keying off familiar things has to do with the way things that are ‘obvious’ are also sort of invisible. It’s partly a Heideggerian idea, that the world is hidden in the commonplace, and ‘disclosing the world’ is the task of the artist. And even if an art object reiterates a commonplace object, they remain very different through their systems of contextual value, and through that displacement you can summon those vernaculars and examine them, or amend them somehow.

The *Royal Leerdam Crystal Beer Bottle Candle Holders* were made at a factory in Holland where they make fine artisanal crystal for the Dutch royal family and beer bottles for Heineken, all from the same sand. So this building already contained some of the distinctions and contradictions I’m describing. When I asked the artisans to hand-blow an edition of crystal Heineken bottles, I was confusing those classifications. I really had to convince them to do it, they thought it was pointless. But with these projects one of the things I wanted to talk about is the way the art object is of no use to anybody, and this gives it a kind of excessive freedom. There is this societal imperative to be productive and contribute, but the artist is the one who gets to be un-productive, to be absurd, to digress.

**NP** And anything specifically Californian?

**MT** I grew up in Northern California in the 1970s and 80s and my family went to a Unitarian church, so this meant I was

exposed to a certain cultural vocabulary—wind chimes, whale-song records, Bob Dylan, *Cosmos* on PBS—and those things became really embedded and surface in my work all the time.

The West Coast conceptual practices you mentioned are very important to me of course, but I learned to see them as part of a continuum. I think pop and conceptual art were more blurred in California than elsewhere, and that conceptual and perceptual art were more blurred. I always found a lot of critical art to be phenomenologically disengaged, and a lot of perceptual art to be culturally disengaged, and I think there is sort of a middle path that integrates common grammar and everyday life. And seeking the middle path is very Californian.

Discovering John Baldessari’s work was really critical for me. It was enormously permissive, this way of making work that was worldly and sociable and reflexive but where the artist was clearly the first audience. I took a lot away from that. And later John was my teacher at UCLA.

**NP** While a student at UCLA, you made a film production-quality audio recording of the sound of your studio, *Room Tone* (1998). Such recordings are standard practice in film production—the ‘soundtrack’ of a room while notionally ‘silent.’ Consistently this thematic of absence and presence recur through individual works made ever since. What led you to begin this interrogation?

**MT** Like I said, I was trying to start over, and I was thinking about the conditions one takes for granted—contextually, structurally, and perceptually—and one of those is the assumption that the room where the art gets made is just a neutral backdrop. To me it felt much more constructed, like a stage or a set, and it was a much more high-pressure situation—haunted by past occupants, weighted with expectations: a drama.

At the same time, being in LA, the tools and techniques of the film industry suddenly materialized as a resource. And I became interested in room tone recording for films because it was like an official acknowledgment of the invisible. That something so structured exists around something so ephemeral interested me, and the idea that I could capture the atmosphere of my studio as sound, and that sound—‘signature’—could stand in for my art practice. I was reading Daniel Buren, how every succeeding space a work occupies after the studio compromises the work, because it was made in a specific space that it can never return to or recapture. So here was that space, captured and played in subsequent spaces, and superimposing itself onto them.

*Room Tone* isolates the sound of a room from the rest of the ways a room is experienced, and it isolates that aspect of film production from the other aspects. There were no actors and no dialogue, and no cameras rolled. This is just selection and magnification. Like Al Held said about conceptual art, it’s just pointing at things. But it’s impure: it drags things like romantic comedies along with it. And I want those cultural elements to get wadded up with the phenomenological ones.

**NP** As a means to suggest such ideas, you use the physical device of removal as an ongoing vehicle to examine or underline our participation or engagement. This is perhaps first seen in *The Collected Live Recordings of Bob Dylan 1963-1995* (1999), where you left behind just the applause of the performances, and in *The American Desert (for Chuck Jones)* (2002), where you digitally removed the iconic characters of the Coyote and Roadrunner from all the Warner Brothers Roadrunner cartoons, leaving behind only desert landscapes and minimal ambient sound. Both works recall popular imagination and evoke the

importance of site to your work, rooted in your immediate context of working in Los Angeles with everything that conjures. Most recently the images which make up *People* (2011)—a series of photographs of visitors to art exhibitions with the art on view removed in Photoshop, leaving only people in white rooms—raises the issues again. What caused the shift from the ‘exterior,’ from things of mass culture to the more specific situation of art, or is it part of the same series of considerations?

**MT** I think it is. They are on a spectrum with each other. Those works are all archives of the negative space around some cultural phenomenon. Removing the ‘hero’ component was a way to shift emphasis onto the collateral, ambient material. I remember catching a Roadrunner cartoon and wanting to move the characters out of the way so I could look at the drawn landscape, and that turned into *The American Desert*. It became about collecting those moments where nothing was happening. And it became about having that original source be present, but suspended—put in tension.

*The Collected Live Recordings* is still about Bob Dylan, but in negative—it removes him to talk about his reception, and about a historical arc more generally, and to achieve certain aural results, like sounding like rainfall, which in itself summons a certain genre of New Age recordings. With *The American Desert*, the title alone collapses Monument Valley and Joshua Tree and the Grand Canyon into a Platonic, imaginary place. This is how the desert exists in the mind, and I was trying to picture that. We think of the desert as this pure and unmediated site that exists beyond civilization, outside of culture, but that is still a cultural notion, and using a cartoon desert was a way to talk about that. It should ideally be read as both an anthropological work and a phenomenological work.

**NP** And this co-existence or mutual reliance is always part of the construct in your work, its internal logic or dialogue.

**MT** It's important that each thing contain its opposite. That it be both the void and the frame. For me the cartoon and the commercial are inextricable. They always arrive together. From a certain neurological perspective, the world appears as an undifferentiated phantasmagoria, and how we break it up and integrate it, name it, and structure it—and the mistakes that happen and the spaces that open up in the process—is the subject of my work. I'm very interested in how the terms we use to understand reality often obscure it.

The void of the desert in *The American Desert* is also a stand-in for the empty gallery. The white cube as a space to be contemplated, and a problem to be negotiated, is something I return to over and over. In *People*, this contemplation is just pictured for the first time. It's true the images are sourced from the art context, but they are framed through the mass cultural format of a tabloid magazine.

In each of these works you mentioned there is sort of an ultimate consideration of time: the historical moment of an artist and the uses society puts his work to in *The Collected Live Recordings*, and opposing spectacular time and geologic time in *The American Desert*. With *People*, I wanted to talk about artworks and magazines as artifacts, and to talk about which artifacts are preserved and which are discarded. Art is ostensibly disposed towards eternity, made to be around forever, but if you remove the artworks from these images, you're left with the people looking at them and the spaces they are in—the interiors and the fashion, and even the photographic resolution, of *this* moment. And those things are suitable for a tabloid. Removing the art actually makes that delivery mechanism appropriate. So

I was interested in these differing conceptions of time in culture that are largely class-based.

**NP** Is this deliberation on hierarchies or ideas of protocol important to you in other ways?

**MT** Art exhibitions were once thought to offer a therapeutic benefit to society, because the classes mixed there, and the underclass could model its behavior on the upper class. What separates an art exhibition from other cultural forms—from theater, music, cinema—is that audiences experience the work together, but not simultaneously. In those other forms the work arrives at the same moment for everyone in the audience, but in an art exhibition you watch as someone approaches the work, has an encounter with it, and moves on, and then it's your turn, and you perform that ritual for someone else. Other people are in the field of view.

**NP** Around 2006, with the beginning of the *Negative Space* project, the work becomes a little more expansive, while retaining ongoing key cultural and historical reference points, it opens out much more. The ongoing propositions in your work concerning time, place, and dislocation manifest through an extended set of strategies. Humor too appears to play a role. I'd like you to discuss your thoughts in relation to these and why such ideas remain at the forefront of your practice.

**MT** I was living in Berlin for several years, and that cut me off somewhat from the pipeline of American cultural material that had fed my work previously. It encouraged a more itinerant, post-studio point of view and put me more often in the space of the experience of the viewer. I was going to a lot of museums. It inverted the practice slightly. It made me think more about what I wanted to

see as opposed to just what I wanted to make. *Negative Space* came from that position, from being abroad with just a laptop.

**NP** So pragmatically the change was both theoretical and practical?

**MT** It was such a literalization of my concerns, and it allowed me to generalize those concerns across diverse spaces. My work has always been context sensitive—*Negative Space* is too, but in a more open way. It takes advantage of exhibition conditions that are pretty standard. It really solved the problem of what to do with an empty gallery. It's exactly what you *should* do, following a certain logic, and I liked the absurdity of that. At the same time it's enormously efficient and expansive and adaptable, in the manner of Sol Lewitt's wall drawings, or like software. The plans sit in a folder on a computer and wait to be sited. It manages to be both consolidated and dispersed.

**NP** And was the specific imagery for this body of work a departure, or rather an extension?

**MT** With that project, cosmology, nature, and science began to be more explicitly visible in the work. But insofar as any of it is actually about outer space, it's really about how we mediate the idea of the cosmic, and the void, culturally. It functions in the work like the desert had earlier. Space puts culture in scale.

Carl Sagan said the best way to engage the 'religious sensibility' is to look up on a clear night. He was describing a moment away from culture. But we carry culture around with us. Heidegger's concept of 'the distance of the near' describes how we don't see the lenses through which we see, how we adapt to mediation and it becomes embedded and invisible. With *Negative Space* I'm talking about the Hubble Space Telescope and the art

gallery as lenses. I'm trying to ground the mythology of one in the material facts of the other. The *National Geographic*-style look of the book is suggestive of that—of subscription, of delivery, of lenses and frames.

I've also come to think of the *Negative Space* murals as a series of self-portraits. That is, they combine the aesthetics of Northern and Southern California—the psychedelic and the evacuated.

**NP** And there are other ways in which we create identity, a sense of self. Music in a variety of forms plays out in your work—those early drawings of drum kits, the vinyl record *b/w* from 2008, through to the recent performances and associated presentations of *Crickets* (2012). As cultural forms how do you see its connection to what you do as a visual artist, and where does such an interest stem from?

**MT** Music has been an incidental result of my interest in sound, and my interest in sound has been a part of my broader interest in background information, like the sound of a room, or the sound of crickets. But I'm also trying to suggest that things like *TIME* magazine are a type of white noise—things that through their ubiquity simply become ambience, even as they continue to influence us. Sound is part of that to me—the first thing we perceive and the first thing we tune out. John Cage used to paraphrase Thoreau: "Music is constant, listening is intermittent."

I've always been interested in field recordings, because they are a kind of formalized listening. It's just putting brackets around the found. Again, pointing at things. And I think of *4'33"* as a field recording of its own context, conducted by each member of the audience. I'm interested in how field recordings find use in the biological sciences on one hand, for example for species differentiation in birds, and on the other hand, in the

spiritual marketplace—the song of the humpback whale as meditation aid or whatever. They have application in both of these opposing fields. The *b/w* piece came out of that.

**NP** And there is something about locating sound in or through time and place, in history, that recurs.

**MT** Right. For *Crickets*, I worked with a Los Angeles composer named Michael Webster to transcribe an album of field recordings of crickets for an orchestra to try to play. I licensed the album from Frémeaux & Associés, a French record label that is sort of an audio corollary to *National Geographic*, who boast “a library of sound.” Their sound archive contains everything from philosophy lectures to nature recordings. They’re trying to catalog all of nature and civilization. One of their releases is a compilation of recordings of singing insects that were made around the world between the late 1960s and the late 1990s, *Cigales et Grillons*. The first side of the record is 25 crickets tracks, and this is what we transcribed into music. The track order and cross-fades between tracks are preserved in our score, so while the composition is a transcription of crickets, it’s also a transcription of the compilation album itself, of the time and distance between the recordings. The original field notes become the program that accompanies the live performance and the subtitles in the video. I wanted to preserve the source as an artifact. I wanted something encyclopedic, and I wanted a collection of sounds that was dynamic and would move around a company of musicians and provide solos for different instruments—to really approach classical music, as opposed to just reproducing ambient sound.

**NP** Therefore music is used to connect, as a soundtrack to our lives or to reveal our ‘participation’ at a concert, would you say?

**MT** Most people think of *4’33”* as a ‘silent’ work, but of course there’s no such thing. That work exists to disprove the existence of silence. To me *4’33”*, and before that Satie’s *Furniture Music*, opened the door to a whole world of ambient music, elevator music, Muzak—background compositions of all kinds, even the type of New Age music that incorporates animal song and accompanies a massage. This was part of what I wanted to do with *Crickets*, to go all the way back around from an avant-garde gesture of silence-as-music, through all of the antecedents it spawned, good and bad, to a classical performance of music-as-silence. The sound of crickets is a constant background presence and a cultural stand-in for silence. In the context of performance, the sound of crickets means you’re bombing. That is as close to silence as we get in culture: a brief pause when no one is transmitting and no one is receiving. And *that* was the sound I wanted to perform.

**NP** The use of seriality, while present early on in use of modular or implied mass produced works—the beer bottle, the cartoon book—has become more evident, in particular in works that are multi-format and exist across a variety of modes, for example beginning with *Negative Space* in 2006 through to the *TIME* series. This raises questions dealing with distribution, dissemination—broadly, *reception*. Can you discuss this development and hence its impact in examining such a subject?

**MT** I try to make serial objects that can disperse and still remain auratic. For example, I make a lot of publications, and I really try to treat the book as an object, to deal with its *book-ness*. When you hold a book, it is yours, even if there are thousands of copies. It’s important that a work belong to the viewer during the encounter, that there be a

place of remove where they form a loop together. But I also want the works to be able to live outside the exhibition system, to implicate other production and distribution and reception models. *People* arrives in the mail or in boxes from the printer. *Everything Has Been Recorded* was left at airports. *Dylan* played on the radio. The *TIME* mirrors often have mailing labels printed on them, or show some analog record of waiting rooms, or of having been on eBay. For me it’s important to incorporate these other contexts into any ‘pure’ phenomenological inquiry in order to talk about perception more broadly as reception—to expand the term to integrate the transmission of values and ideology. To underline the degree to which we participate consciously and unconsciously. This is the *ganzfeld* to me—the whole field. Phenomenology salted with mass culture, and with more degraded forms like AA bumper stickers, evangelical comics and commercial supergraphics.

**NP** Touching then on this idea of a broader cultural impulse... while certain works can be seen to specifically reveal the machinations of the art world, for example the Super-16mm film *Untitled (Margo Leavin Gallery, 1970–)* (2009), or the magazine *People* (2011), they are about so much more, underlining what it is we see and how we do this, as well as being portraits of technologies or systems becoming redundant or superseded in some way. They form part of the subtext which surrounds us, the background to our daily lives. How do you intend us to contemplate such a provocation? Is there a possible politicized reading to such works?

**MT** I guess I see art as one point on the continuum of cultural activity. One of my interests is how it abuts its neighbors—music, cinema, mass media, history,

politics—and in testing the fences. My work is not about art so much as it is about various cultural and perceptual contexts, and art is one of those. And the architectural and historical and economic spaces of art are where the work plays out, so it’s natural that those spaces become the subject from time to time. Of course the art world can be very inward-gazing, so those works can sometimes trigger a stronger response than works that deal with other things. *People* sort of embraces that problem. It’s a gossip magazine. People see people they know in it. It plays to those dynamics. But the subtext you mention seeps in.

I want there to be some confusion when encountering these works, some degree of mix-up with other, real things, and for that moment of delay to get extended and not resolved. I guess I see them as engaged in a kind of oblique institutional critique, in that they are concerned with drawing attention to the obscure infrastructure of the exhibition system. I think the work attempts to sensitize the viewer to deeper, unseen atmospherics and that this is a kind of training or ammunition for other contexts. At the same time that implies an instrumentalization for my art that I don’t mean. I also want it to be ambivalent, diffident and confounding. Pointless, as the glass-blowers said.

**NP** *Coat Check Chimes* (2008), your contribution to the *Whitney Biennial* of that year, replaced the 1,200 coat hangers in the museum’s coat check with custom-made, musically tuned coat hangers that were modeled on orchestral triangles. It transformed the existing museum infrastructure into an enormous musical instrument that was ‘played’ by the public, the guards, the weather, and chance. In many ways this embeds the ideas contained in an earlier work *Wind Chimes* (1999), which are mobile sculptures that respond to the presence of visitors in the gallery: the opening and

closing of the gallery door, the proximity of visitors to the actual piece. This connection to context and place—the art world, the museum, the overall place of reception—seems key to your practice.

**MT** Sometimes my work is in the gallery proper, sometimes it is out in public, and sometimes it occupies the in-between, ‘non-art’ areas of an institution: the exterior spaces, the storage room, the parking garage, the coat check. With *Coat Check Chimes*, I had one day banged some metal hangers together in the closet and thought it sounded almost musical, and had the idea of modifying a museum coat check to play music. There is a lot of scaffolding, a lot of technical support, holding up those white galleries. And tuning that scaffolding was one way to draw attention to it.

The coat check at the Whitney sits in an area of the museum that is free and open to the public, near the bookstore but before you pay admission, and, critically, before you begin to expect to encounter any art. For this reason there was the possibility of surprise with *Coat Check Chimes*. And, for a moment, the possibility that *Coat Check Chimes* was not art. And as a result, many people missed it, whether because they didn’t check a coat or didn’t notice it when they did. And it doesn’t sound very democratic, but I think when people don’t notice a work like that it sharpens the perceptions of those who do. It allows them to take greater possession of the work.

**NP** Intervention and the notion of invisibility are drawn out in these pieces too, perhaps seen uncannily in other pieces such as *Royal Leerdam Crystal Beer Bottle Candle Holders* (2001), or most recently in *Acoustic Partition* (2013). Is the ultimate place of apprehension—or the final ‘home’ of your work when purchased—of specific focus to you?

**MT** Yes, or of *misapprehension*. The possibility of something never being fully understood is a compelling prospect. For it to never find a home or to always be uncomfortable there. The *Wind Chimes* were initially a hostile gesture toward collectors—I’d been in a home that had my work up for the first time, and it was very depressing. It felt like my work had been killed and mounted, and reduced to domestic terms, and I thought that making wind chimes would be the solution to this problem: they would still offer décor for the home, as artworks do, but none of the status. They would be a non-sequitur in terms of taste. Later I became interested in other properties they had, but that was the first impulse.

So, yes, I do think about the life a thing will have, and where it will end up, how it will tuck into the world of objects and make you look twice at other objects. I try to program problems into many of my works, some element that will continue to have to be negotiated over and over. I like the *TIME* mirrors to end up with people living with them in a long-term way, because time happens in the mirror, looking into it every day, seeing time happen in your face. They are vanities, in the double-edged sense of the term: “I’m on the cover of *TIME*” and “I’m going to die.”

As far as invisibility, an essential aspect of *Acoustic Partition* is that it pass for background. People walk right past it. It’s so familiar that it goes unrecognized. So it plays with that notion of the ambient, as something that exists right at the threshold of perception. And when it is discovered it responds with sound that is almost the opposite of ambient—specific, regional, moody, absurd. It flips over from one extreme to the other at the moment of encounter.

**NP** How do you understand the viewer in relation to your exhibitions? You mentioned earlier the idea that *Crickets* could be likened to the sound of an

impartial or disengaged audience. But more often there is the necessity of direct involvement—such as an active requirement or request to view or experience something, as is the case with *Void and Observer* (2013), or we are implicated in the actual experience of viewing, such as the large mirror works within the *TIME* series. Such works demand a more active response or participation. What do you feel is the role of the audience in response to works like these?

**MT** I think there are many degrees of engagement possible, and the work tries to provide different access points. But it also operates at the level of blunt facticity. Like it was here before you anyway, and doesn’t care.

With the newer works I’ve been entertaining this idea of the viewer as an astronomer. That is, a person of some seriousness peering into empty space and watching for an event. This is operating in *People* and in *Void and Observer*, and is part of why a number of the *TIME* works reference magazine covers that featured cosmologists.

There is an idea in physics that I’ve become interested in as it relates to the *TIME* works specifically. ‘The hypersurface of the present’ refers to the position of an observer relative to an event in time and space and how light traveling from the past reflects off the observer and travels into the future. In a mirror this is made into a cycle—light reflects off you into the mirror, and back to you, and back into the mirror, and so on, so fast that it makes the absolute present extremely dynamic—both highly concentrated and difficult to define. And of course this is happening in a mirror with the word ‘TIME’ written on it. The subject announces itself. The mirrors offer infinity spaces and kinesthetic entertainment, but they are fixed to the lived world—to moments in politics and world events and graphic design.

**NP** And does that encompass the notion of a stargazer as a day-dreamer, as a person who imagines another time or place or in some ways holds on to an ideal regardless of practicality?

**MT** Again, the ideal and the practical arrive together: the ‘pure’ experience and the cultural noise around the edges of the experience. ‘The hypersurface of the present’ also happens to be a good term for the phantasmagoria I was describing before—the way the world arrives as an intense agglomeration of images and sensations, all at once. And it echoes certain recent ideas in neuroscience, where things like conduction times of nerve signals along limbs, and the way different parts of the brain integrate different signal speeds into a temporally coherent picture of reality, imply that we live slightly in the past—that is, that there is a delay between our experiences and the representation that we assemble to understand them. I’m interested in this delay.

**NP** The space between things, the subtext or background that consistently draws your attention ...

**MT** On one hand it’s like looking at the stars, whose light is old by the time it gets here. Even the light of the sun takes 8 minutes to arrive; we are bathed in the light of the past. But it’s also a way to think about the ‘contemporary’—that what constitutes our present is a set of signals. And then there is a consensus about this data that produces culture. And there is a gap in between—billions of gaps. My work is about those signals, and the formation of that consensus, and those gaps.