

RAPTURE

In the debate about high and low, issues concerning the status of comics and other visual languages remain common. Most of the time, they are either declared as participants within the system of "high art" or "exploited" as the "trash"-marked source material of artistic productions.

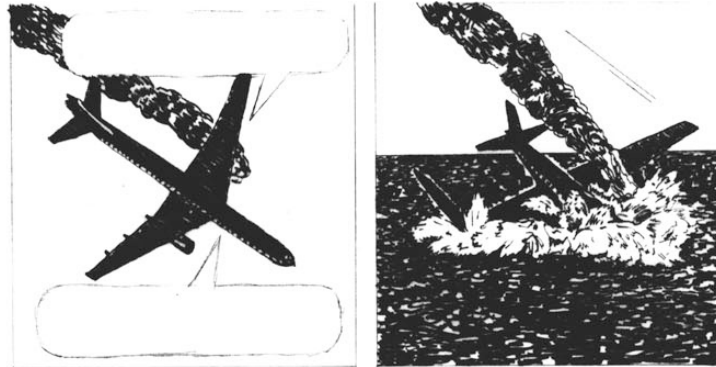
Supported by various historical attempts at appropriation by means of Dada, Pop Art, or Situationism, and with solid hipster knowledge in his pocket, artist Mungo Thomson has now stepped forward with an exhibition at the Margo Leavin Gallery. Here, he tried to approach the image-text relationships in religious tract comics from a conceptual point of view while also considering their channels of distribution.

Comic book drawings with empty speech bubbles: A car accident, a plane crash, a war scene, a group of attentive listeners, people in extreme emotional circumstances. Between apocalyptic scenarios and mundane situations are motifs that emanate a hazy religious aura:

There is a ghostly apparition in the dark, for example, startling a woman out of her sleep with an illegible letter - the fact that the haunted woman presumably reads the text in the following panel aloud (glad tidings? her catalog of sins?) is of no use to the spectator, as the speech bubble remains blank, floating in the image as a cloud.

If one wants to "discuss" Mungo Thomson's exhibition at the Margo Leavin Gallery in Los Angeles, then these drawings seem like a comment on one's own situation. "Please fill in with discourse!", asks the silent instruction. Subject: Art and Religion, Art as Religion, Religion as Pop Culture, Pop Culture as Religion. Here, one text that comes to my mind concerns my grandiose coming-out as an "atheist" at the age of fifteen - and the anxiety that was creeping up inside me as I uttered the words, fearing that "God" was also listening. Thomson's drawings reflect, among other things, the sense of ambivalence that persists when one breaks

Mungo Thomson,
 „Everything Has Been Recorded“,
 Source drawings, 2000
 1 „screen w/angel“
 2 „plane crash“
 3 „devil unmasked“
 4 „Everything Has Been Recorded“,
 Comic-Heft, Seite 12

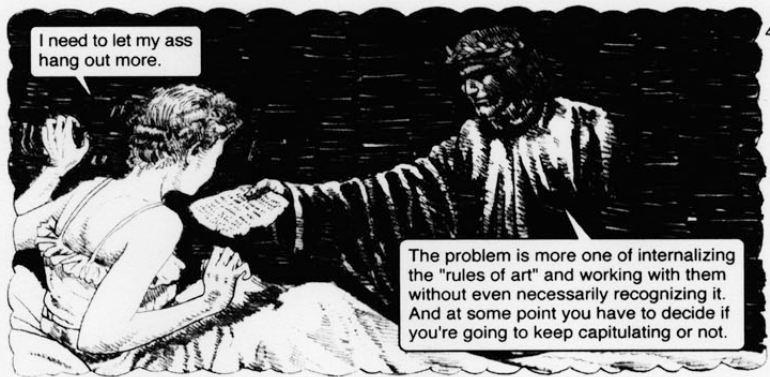
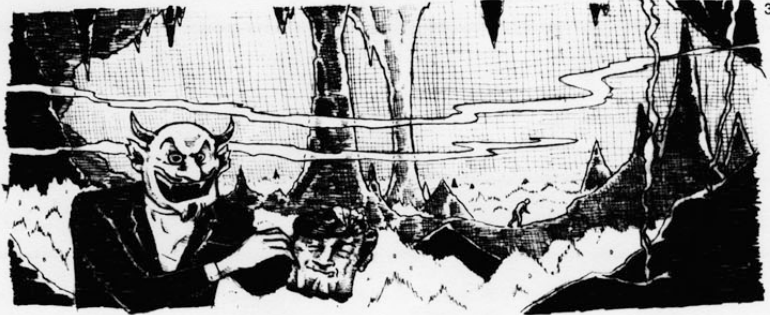


with religious patterns of sense-making, because the desire for simple answers is likewise tied to a repertoire of images and ideas now “left” in transcendental homelessness. And apart from fantasies of punishment, which continue to haunt the unconscious as eerie inscriptions - for they are efficient in a sustainable way and intellectually controllable only to a limited extent - we are also dealing with fantasies of - well, let’s just say it: redemption.

The simple stories that are being told in the comic strips within those Bible tracts, from which Thomson copied scenes in pencil, are co-producing and borrowing such notions. The drawings are based on the cheaply manufactured booklets that Jack T. Chick, in particular, has been mass-distributing worldwide¹; like the ones that are occasionally handed out to you on the *Domplatte* in Cologne. These booklets exhibit conversion scenarios, for instance, in which ideologically astray men and women are sent through existential crises until they finally find their way to religion and redemption, as if or indeed by miracle. Often, individual scenes are supplemented with passages from the Bible in order to anchor the wisdom of the Holy Scripture within the ordinary life of the “human being per

se” (since, as we all know, crises, diseases, and disasters are a reminder of our equality before the Lord). Yet this is not solely a matter of amusement, since the paranoid constructions that Chick’s obsessively anti-Catholic tracts teach - the Vatican is Satan’s earthly power headquarters - also like to invoke Sodom and Gomorrah, when, for example in light of the AIDS crisis, homosexuality is supposed to be represented as the surest way to hell.

This frame of reference will likely be immediately recognizable to anyone familiar with the propaganda in the U.S., where, in comparison to Germany, similar techniques of persuasion are considerably more common and prevalent via a myriad of confessional organizations, sects and televangelists. It was that small takeaway booklet from the exhibition - which is designed to resemble Chick’s Bible tracts both in format and quality - that first made me realize. This time, Thomson has filled in the blanks himself: with excerpts from his journal. The dialogues found in the conversion comics have now been replaced by the artist’s monologue about his own sense of mission, but also about self-doubts, production conditions (“Other people diminish their confusion by minimizing the stimuli they expose



themselves to - perhaps I should use that as a model. It's as if my TV, my cat, my bills, my car, and the weather are all conspired against me."), the question of meaning and the consideration if conforming to the Californian body cult could put an end to the misery ("eat properly and get more exercise").² The booklet is titled "Everything Has Been Recorded" - probably an allusion to the list of sins, which determines one's entrance into Heaven or Hell, namely one's success or failure within the art scene.

In the gallery, the pencil sketches are labeled as "source drawings", that is, the template for this booklet. The form of presentation, which has a stronger connotation of "art" (as well as the selling prices: after all we are dealing with "origi-

nals", more specifically with "original citations") suggests that one is not obliged to accept this implicit hierarchization. Precisely because of this artfulness, it is no guarantee that spectators socialized in the U.S. will recognize the Bible tracts in these drawings right away.

That is because the lack of words, but also the aestheticization marked by the label of "low"-coded reproductions "by hand", the contextual change, framing as well as the selection of individual images and their arrangement, has, as expected, an alienating effect. This enhances the images in the best sense because they become eye-catching only as such in the first place.³ Consequently, it is striking, particularly in the case of religious motifs, that the visual tactics of popular-

ization employed in the tracts are able to rely upon instant recognition due to a centuries-long tradition of Bible scenes in art history. The nocturnal messenger mentioned earlier, for instance, is firmly anchored within representations of the religious imaginary by means of an endless series of representations of the Annunciation - not least in corresponding monumental films - as well as the affiliated drastic nature of the lighting effects, which move light-dark contrasts into the dichotomy of enlightenment vs. gloom. This holds also true for the so-called popular aesthetics of little devotional pictures, where the connection to Pop Art is already established, and from which Thomson adopts not only the ideal of belongingness, but also the occasional halo. What is more, because the meaningful dialogues or scriptural passages are omitted, the comic book nature of the images boldly comes through. So when the alleged devil, stylized as a silhouette on the globe's horizon, looks like a cross between Superman and Batman, or - in another image - triumphantly holds a torn off human mask in his hand, he cuts a rather ridiculous figure.

Thanks to this reduction, which at the same time is underlined by the sketchy nature of the drawings as well as their pop appeal, the archaic idiosyncrasies are being softened and rendered palatable. Nevertheless, although the scenes depicted seem peculiarly "enraptured", they are not necessarily being trivialized. The hooded Ku Klux Klan members at a fire ceremony appear quite disturbing especially because of the lack of any accompanying commentary, and, in their parabolic nature, the mass ascension of faded bodies (souls?) towards Heaven suggests the somewhat overused term "Kafkaesque". In contrast, subjects like plane crashes can rely on the visual idiom established by Pop Art, for example by Warhol's disaster paintings - no wonder, perhaps, that these sold the fastest.

Fill-in-the-blank texts of this nature, and gaps highlighted as such, frequently seek to expose the recipients'

productivity and confront them with their conventionalized modes of perception. They are requested to fill in the gaps with recourse to their own cultural knowledge. My attempts to formulate at least some possible references is not supposed to conceal the fact that this is different in Thomson's drawings: Even if one is familiar with the source material, the comic sketches open up a space of association and projection, "space for one's own thoughts", which organizes itself neither conceptually nor discursively. For when the empty speech bubbles look like clouds, one is not only close to Heaven, but also to that imaginary figure that traditionally embodies the ambiguity that threatens immediate "enlightenment" and thwarts moments of epiphany. And promptly there appear a couple of small clouds in the image that Thomson cites. The image depicts two hands being penetrated by what seems like Divine light - "close enough to touch and yet unfathomable" (not least suggesting that the light is just the sun, which can be relished even without a superstructure of spirituality).

In the pencil sketches, Thomson manages to disregard the redemption offers articulated in the actual biblical tracts while taking the longings expressed in them seriously. It is not about the ennoblement of trash as trash or kitsch as kitsch, but indeed about a moment of internal truth. The works employ a genre of institutionalized - and commercialized - religiosity in order to accommodate the need articulated therein for a much more unspecific spirituality (which naturally is also co-produced by the former; but insight into its constructedness rarely causes the disappearance of phenomena, as we all know). This approach reminded me of Peter Handke's early texts, which likewise operate by reducing an overdetermined pop-cultural genre (such as the Western or the crime novel) down to the skeleton of a few constitutive mythologems and aesthetic-formal elements, thus making it reusable as a space for projection and "capable of transcendence". The

openness of Thomson's comic drawings is likewise created by the images' removal from their original narrative context and their simple display in a very loose thematic and motivic arrangement. The blank space principle is thus reproduced at the level of narrative structure: Just like an associatively edited film, the linear arrangement implies a story (in one room, for example, the work's genesis) that the spectators must - or can - make up for themselves.

If suspicion arises that this opening up is abandoned in the booklet "Everything Has Been Recorded" by vehemently occupying the free space produced by the elimination of religion with art, then this grand gesture is relativized by a clearly ironic detour. Although not coincidental, what distinguishes the relationship between texts and images here is that, in order to establish an appropriate relation to commentary, each element is "too large" to allow them to appear interlocked; they usually only stick to one aspect. At times, the inserts are too contemplative to be covered by the banality of the images; conversely, the depicted situations are sometimes too existential for them not to collide with the trivialities of the artist's life. This, in turn, suggests that the big questions regarding banality and authenticity are closely adjacent to those of everyday life: "Work for what, after all?" That is the question which is posed in a situation in which many a person has rediscovered their true faith: during a plane crash. Nevertheless, this play on the age-old idea of art as religion is only ironic insofar as irony is not regarded as a detached gesture of superiority over the distastefulness of its subject. Thomson's comics do not derive their charm and humor from the strategic placement of artifacts from low culture in that popular trash perspective, which allows one to simultaneously participate in and disdain mass culture. If irony is at work here, it is frequently as a result of a fascination that is aware of its subject's precarious status and does not conceal it, but rather presents it openly to the viewer and, if anything, loyally makes fun of it.

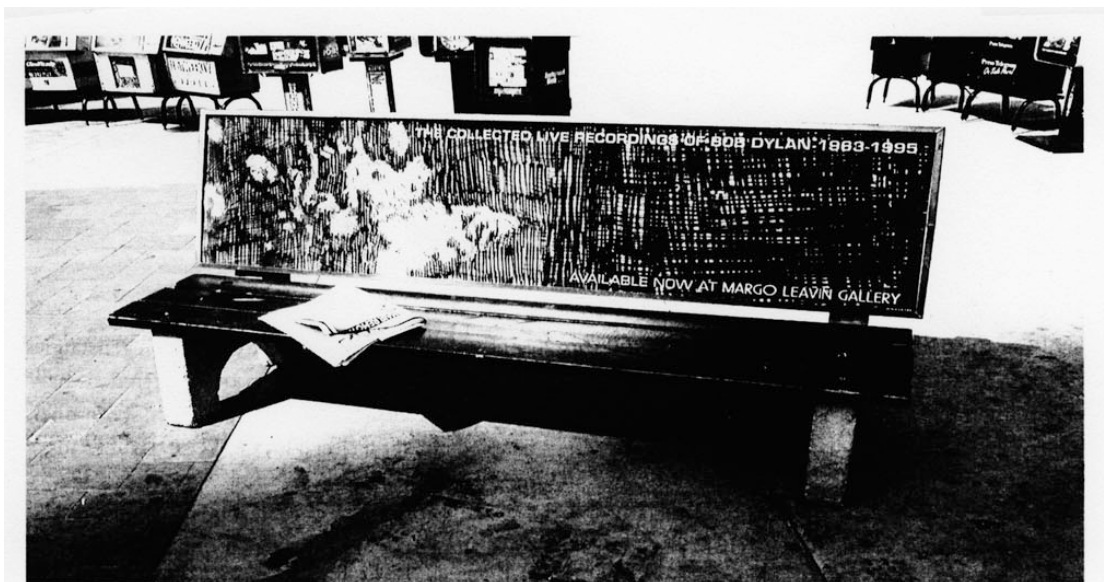
The principle of repurposing a prefabricated pop cultural form of expression for one's own concerns is also the basis for the work which visitors of the exhibition had already been

confronted with in the parking lot, namely the sticker on the artist's car:

"The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truth (12 Steps)". Those are big words. And the fact that they are printed in silver on black with gothic type does not make them any less weighty. However, what does diminish their importance is the genre's persistent context, that is, autosuggestive motivating slogans like the ones exhorted by Alcoholics Anonymous as a way to portion their path to withdrawal into feasible stations: "step by step".

Thomson attaches great importance to the level of "application" (in "real life", one is tempted to add), through which his work would ultimately become complete. Given his keen understanding of art, this can hardly mean that his works are to be taken out of the context of art. Rather, they would have to be expanded beyond its ancestral institutions. Now this is not really a brand new idea, and to me that claim, which is convincingly implemented with the open display of "Everything Has Been Recorded" in phone booths or in the waiting rooms of the LA airport, seems also at times overstretched in order to become a method.

The impression of 'too much' was triggered in me, for instance, by the exhibition installation "The Collective Live Recordings of Bob Dylan 1963-1995", which expanded into the public space. It consists of promotional posters drawn by Thomson and covers an entire gallery wall, showing not Dylan, but a detail of the audience emerging from the darkness thanks to a spotlight. The opposite wall, the "stage", remains empty; in front of it are placed two boxes from which a compilation can be heard that consists only of the audience applause on said live sampler. This is very "uplifting" for the visitor because one is put into the role of the star and can get carried away by the waves of applause for a while (helped by the fact that one does not necessarily have to like Bob Dylan for this).⁴ Another "application" is the distribution of a CD that might produce the ego-stabilizing effect of "help for self-help" tapes. The so-called artwork includes the titles of the songs that were deleted from the applause CD in favor of background noise - a series that reads like a poetic chronicle



not just of Dylan's evolution, but also of the "attitude to life" associated with his songs. Similar to the comic drawings, emphasis is put here on a purifying reduction effect created by the splitting into different media components. When the promotional posters then move into the "public space" onto bus benches, and Thomson adopts the marketing strategies of pop, however, not much of this idea is left. Through this expansive access, motivated by the claim to "application", the respective uses evaporate just like the pleasant impression of seriousness in the little and delicate individual elements.

Speaking of marketing: This programmatic escalation into a body of work is certainly one of the reasons why Thomson is listed as a highly promising talent at the moment, at least in LA. That is because the "application" principle also makes it possible to play with different registers - and cater to the demand for gallery-compatible works with an "art-art" appeal as well as the demand for pop-cultural contextualization and youthfulness.

There were also wind chimes made of copper pipes on display - appearing "sketch-like" themselves due to their functional simplicity - imbuing

the room in which they are hanging, in turn, with an air of sacredness. Here, too, different modes of reception are being offered - one may recognize echoes of Calder's mobiles or simply experience "some spiritual vibes". It is quite possible that Thomson's work is so well received because of its mixture of innocence on the one hand and its conceptual sophistication or reflection on the relevant "state of the art" on the other. But arguments about rank in the art business aside: The fascinating aspect about the comic drawings in particular is not least that they come across as both clever and naive, for despite the numerous borrowings and allusions, a level of accessibility beyond these references is ensured. Handled so delicately, the Heavy Signs that stand in for the idea of art as religion don't overwhelm but, again, render these questionable in the best sense.

BRIGITTE WEINGART

"Mungo Thomson," Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles, October 14 to November 11, 2000.

Notes

1 E.g. via the Internet, where German-language copies are also offered. Cf. <http://www.chick.com>. - For more information, cf. the incredible work by Robert B. Fowler with the telling title "The HISTORY of the WORLD ACCORDING to Jack T Chick," San Leandro 1997 (4th ed. 2000), a meticulous examination of all Chick tracts and comics from a fan perspective that is equally amused as critical. The book contains information on the history and distribution of the tracts, a catalog of the contents of all the tracts, and a comprehensive index of topics that systematizes the - both biblical and secular - myths, beliefs, and historical falsification conveyed in the tracts: Chick philology, culminating in an apparatus of concordances. The list of references and parodies also shows that Chick's work has not gone unnoticed within the comic book scene and has also been appreciated by its heroes such as Robert Crumb or Daniel Clowes

Cf. also: Daniel Raeburn (Ed.), *The Holy Book of Chick. With the Apocrypha and Dictionary-Concordance*. Introduction, Annotations, Cross-References, Special Articles, Map, and Indexes (= *The Imp*, Nr. 2, 1998), Chicago 1998.

2 As an artist's comic, the work suggests a comparison with Roy Lichtenstein's "Brad '61." In it, Lichtenstein retrospectively connects a series of his individual works that reference comic aesthetics into a continuous story about Brad the painter's years of apprenticeship and destiny.

3 The effectiveness of this is highlighted in the comparison with the booklets that are labeled with the self-disclosures, where the texts trigger attention and dominate the text-image relationship, while the images fade into the background as mere illustrations.

4 At the same time, the choice of Bob Dylan is hardly accidental, not only because Dylan, for his part, symbolizes a kind of art religion. Thomson's work also takes up the juxtaposition of a supposed "naturalness" and immediacy of live performances with the "alienation" caused by technical mediation/recording (according to which "live recording" would be a paradox displaced by the "live appearance" of the exhibition visitor who makes the "recordings" possible). After all, Dylan was earning boos at the very moment he switched from acoustic ("natural") to electric guitar.