

## Mungo & the Crickets: Art and acoustics from Mungo Thomson

Paul Weideman Feb 22, 2013 Updated Mar 21, 2013  0



Mungo Thomson: *June 25, 2001 (How the Universe Will End)* and (reflected) *March 6, 1995 (When Did the Universe Begin?)*, 2012, enamel on low-iron mirror with poplar and anodized aluminum; courtesy the artist and SITE Santa Fe

Just try to stereotype Mungo Thomson. You really can't do it, because his artistic goals and mediums are so wide-ranging. In *Mungo Thomson: Time, People, Money, Crickets*, opening at SITE Santa Fe on Friday, Feb. 22, the California artist engages his audience with six works involving video, photography, magazine-referencing mirrors, coins, film, and collapsible room dividers. The show is curated by Irene Hofmann, SITE's Phillips Director. It runs in conjunction with the group exhibition *State of Mind: New California Art Circa 1970* and with the single-artist show *Linda Mary Montano: Always Creative*.

Thomson earned a bachelor of arts degree at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and a master of fine arts at UCLA. His résumé during the past

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decade includes solo exhibitions and projects in several U.S. cities as well as in Berlin, Basel, Paris, Brussels, Vancouver, and Guangzhou, China. He has participated in biennial exhibitions in New York at the Whitney Museum of American Art, in Berlin, Istanbul, Panama City, and Cuenca, Ecuador.

**Pasatiempo:** Your video piece *Crickets* is an orchestral performance based on cricket chirps, or stridulation. It also has a solidly scientific element, since you noted the species and where the chirps were recorded.

**Mungo Thomson:** The *Crickets* music is a follow-up to a sound piece from 2008 called *b/w*, which is whale song sped up 16 times so it sounds like birds, and on the other side [is] birdsong slowed down 16 times so it sounds like whales. I'm really interested in field recordings, audio capturing of the natural world. I am interested in nature, certainly, but I'm also interested in how culture captures nature and how we frame it.

**Pasa:** Basing a human musical score on cricket chirps is an unusual and ambitious idea. Can you tell us something about the translation process and about working with composer Michael Webster?

**Thomson:** Michael worked with me on the *b/w* piece as well as my *Coat Check Chimes* that I did for the Whitney Biennial. The process was challenging, because it was about what kind of instruments could make these sounds and what kind of performers could play them in that way. It was a transcription process of an existing set of field recordings, a French album of field recordings of crickets from around the world, which I then licensed and we set about transcribing into musical notation and then auditioning performers.

I wanted it to be dynamic, so there are parts with just two percussionists and parts where 18 people are playing full blast. Crickets are a standard for silence, because when you hear them, everything else is quiet, and you tend to tune them out. Since John Cage's work with silence as music inspired decades of ambient music and elevator music and New Age music that incorporates animal calls, I wanted to go all the way back around to something sort of traditional rather than super avant-garde, to render this avant-garde idea in a more traditional way.



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**Pasa:** *Void and Observer* is a sculptural work about mis-struck coins, right?

**Thomson:** It is. These are modeled on these error coins that happen. They're rejected, and then they become high-end specialty items with collectors. You can find them, but I couldn't find a half dollar that was reasonably priced. It's JFK looking at the blank side of the coin, and he could be said to be contemplating the void. These are mistakes, and they persist and become more valuable than the functional objects, and in a way that's a void in cultural space.

**Pasa:** At SITE you're premiering *Acoustic Partition*, taking off after your *Coat Check Chimes*, which was basically hangers that rang like bells. You're camouflaging artworks in apparently functional, banal things.

**Thomson:** Yeah, well, I guess I want this to be similar as a piece of museum infrastructure that happens to play music through its use by visitors.

**Pasa:** Are visitors prompted toward it, or is there an element of surprise?

**Thomson:** I still don't know. It's not done. Once it's done and in place, the rules will follow. It will depend on what's possible, whether it needs a chaperone or whatever.



Mungo Thomson: page from *People*, 2011, 10.5 x 7.875 inches; courtesy the artist and SITE Santa Fe

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**Pasa:** Was *Coat Check Chimes* labeled?

**Thomson:** It was, but it was in a part of the museum where you're not looking for art. With the SITE piece, we'll find out how hardy it is, how much abuse it can take, and whether that's even the right thing for it.

**Pasa:** It will make accordion sounds?

**Thomson:** Yes, we're using parts of an accordion, and when you open it, it pushes air through the reeds. It's been a lot of work.

**Pasa:** Your *Time* cover project has some depth for you. In 2011 you told a Los Angeles County Museum of Art interviewer that you grew up looking at your parents' copies of *Time* magazine.

**Thomson:** Yeah, I've been fooling around with the *Time* logo as kind of a study in time. In this piece, there are 6-foot mirror versions that expand the museum space, and sometimes they're situated across from each other so you have that infinity thing happening. They're just based on issues that in some way resonate culturally or cosmologically in terms of time.

**Pasa:** In that LACMA piece, you referred to Martin Heidegger's concept of "the distance of the near" and the way we stop seeing common things. It seems you're in this realm, emphasizing the obvious, when you sort of force us to take a trip through the Margo Leavin Gallery Rolodex.

**Thomson:** The Rolodex piece [Untitled] is a film of the audience of a gallery, of the entire constituency of the gallery, from the artists and collectors to the electrician. It's a legendary Los Angeles gallery that recently closed, but I showed there for about 10 years. It showed my kind of work, but also the film is in line with that kind of work. It has this kind of administrative, conceptual, dry character, but it's done in stop motion, and that makes it whimsical and kind of silly in a way. It's slightly more comic, but I also view it cosmologically. It's a plan that's revolving; these are the people on the planet.

**Pasa:** Do you have artistic fantasies that you want to fulfill or wish you could?



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**Thomson:** There are a lot of objects that are sort of stumping me in terms of physics. I recently was trying to find out if it was possible to put a piece of film over a mirror so that it would reflect back black and white instead of color. Sometimes I have really giant ideas for things that are technically or physically impossible.

I'm really interested in objects and how they function in the world, how they sort of make sense among other objects. I think art objects are the most reified objects there are in a world of objects, and I like to use them to point to some of the absurdities and non sequiturs in the chain of meaning, if you will. A lot of my ideas come from just participating in culture and just tweaking one little thing.

**Pasa:** And you're dealing with simple objects, nothing high-tech in this age of high-tech.

**Thomson:** Yeah, I'm not really interested in being esoteric. It's not exactly populist, per se, but it's ... to use a term from comedy, it's broad. Hence the title *Time, People, Money, Crickets*. It's big and little things. ◀