

BETH CAMPBELL AND THOMAS ZUMMER

THOMAS: . . . wherever we begin, it will be in the middle of our ongoing conversation, I suppose . . .

BETH: . . . I think that's true . . .

THOMAS: . . . a moment ago, you had asked, "In preparing for a show, do you ever get antsy?" or, "Do you ever get nervous?" I think that's a question we can share. For me, the answer is usually no. At this point, I've done it enough. I have a sense of the timing that it takes to do something, and I've also learned to add on about 30 percent—a kind of buffer zone—because there are always things that happen. Something will come up, something will go wrong—we'll have an unanticipated social engagement that I hadn't factored in.

So, then I get a anxious, and I get—there's not really a word for it, we kind of made up a word—I begin to feel a bit "over-socialized." It's something like the symmetrical opposite of the word *lonely*: when you've had a little bit too much of a kind of human contact, or have had it too constantly, and you get a bit overwrought. But otherwise, when it's a question of just focusing on the work, no, not at all. How about you?

BETH: I get very antsy. Especially if it's work that I've never shown before. I used to describe my process of building, or thinking through the work, as being very dependent on the relationship to the audience. Through their participation I would know if the work was actually heading in the right direction. So I would not have been able to be very confident going into the debut of new work because of the anticipation—whether or not the relationship between the work and the viewer was going to function in a certain way.

THOMAS: Yeah, there is a strong performative axis in your work, I've noticed. Although in some cases it's hard for me to tell whether that performative dimension happens during the period of its gestation, as it's being formed, or whether it's something that happens only afterward; only after you've set into place a configuration, or parameters of sorts, and that the performative axis occurs then, once the work is up and running.

BETH: Well, but I do feel that, I think by nature, I'm a very self-conscious individual and get overly wrapped-up in the ways viewing or being viewed. I could take it even further and say consciously self-conscious.

THOMAS: I would say so.

BETH: And so I think that I'm just as self-conscious with the work. And because of that, it maybe is all the more performative, because the work itself is very conscious of how it's operating. It's not very passive.

THOMAS: No, I wouldn't picture it as being passive at all. But I'll rephrase the question, because there was something I wanted to get at. In your work in process, at what point does the interaction with a public and an audience, or even friends, happen in the work? Does the work grow by its interaction with others? Or is it something that actually comes into being as a physical configuration and then interacts and completes itself in a public space?

BETH: I guess it's kind of changed just a little perhaps. For instance, my first major installation, titled *House (A Standardized Affection for Telepresence)*, was completely formed in my head, and then built. That was a situation where people came to it. And a lot of that had to do with not having room enough to even build it, and money, and finances, and scheduling, and all that.

THOMAS: Yeah, all those things.

BETH: In origin, it was my thesis show in graduate school. So it never really came together until the moment that the show opened, or actually, just before the opening with my thesis committee. For that particular piece, I had a studio and, for the sake of having to fulfill studio visits at the time, I did set up one room kind of . . . I had a dresser and, you know, a sheet on the floor pretending to be a bed. [LAUGHS]

THOMAS: Like a dress rehearsal.

BETH: And without people having the vision, even though they were faculty at the art department, it was funny, I lost a lot of people in that in-between—where it was never fully what it was, and it was just in my head, and it was just words and not a physical thing. I actually had a faculty person walk out on a critique. And then another person said it wasn't going to be any different than two light bulbs, and that I had to reconsider my whole show. [LAUGHS]

THOMAS: But one might ask, “What’s the matter with light bulbs?”

BETH: I know.

THOMAS: But it brings up a really vexing problem, one I’m particularly interested in, which is the radical contingency of artworks. One can put together something that, let’s say, simulates an installation, like a dress rehearsal—the mark here is where this person stands, or this square cloth on the floor marks out the bed, this is the cabinet, and so on. But something about that still eludes the physical presence—one might say the “presencing”—of the artwork.

BETH: Mm-hmm.

THOMAS: At that point, even if one uses all the props that one would use in an actual installation, it’s somehow not quite yet the artwork, and only comes into being as such in a particular place that’s its radical, historical contingency—historical even of a very local nature; in that very particular place at that very particular time. And it’s very interesting to me that such a work is so both transitory and transitive.

What is the work? Where is the work to be located if it’s only secured, anchored for a moment in a physical place as an installation? (And that’s where the question about interactivity of the audience comes in and becomes important too). What happens when it’s, let’s say, disassembled, and all those elements return to just their “thingly” character—a mattress, a dress, whatever. Whereas the artwork becomes a kind of odd afterimage: something that persists in language, even of the order of rumor and innuendo, or something that persists in photographs, documentation or whatever. And it’s an interesting, perhaps even insoluble problem, and one that I’m particularly intrigued by.

BETH: Right. Well, there are a few things to say about that. That’s the kind of thing that sends my mind, rather quickly, in too many directions. But it’s hard for me not to do that and even in the way I work, it’s always bouncing between all kinds of places. In many of my installations I am using ordinary objects, but there is something more going on with these objects. In the case of the installation *House (A Standardized Affectation for Telepresence)*, in which a house contains two identical rooms separated by a hallway. The work is then in the doubling and the experience of the in between. It is similar with the three-channel video *Same as Me*, the real work of it is in between

the three videos. When I was having the DVD’s mastered, I went to a place a friend of mine sent me to. The owner was a friend of his from high school. And my friend that sent me there is a really interesting artist, Guy Richard Smith, so I had a good recommendation going in. Initially they were very friendly and kind of opened their arms to me as if I were an interesting artist in some respect.

THOMAS: You are.

BETH: But the thing is, these videos were all individually mastered, so they saw them one at a time. And over the time of this business interaction, they started to be less open and more kind of like, “Uh, here you go. Here are your videos.” Because there was nothing to see individually at all—they were so dependent on each other. And so then, finally, two months after that, I went back and had a single composite made with all three channels in it at once; then I was cool again, or interesting. So even if it is a multi-channel video or an installation using about objects like a bed or deodorant, or things like that, they all kind of share this elusive quality in some way.

THOMAS: But not only those qualities, but other conditions as well. It’s, I think, endemic to labs. And it used to be the case with film labs, although there are fewer and fewer of those around anymore. But certainly with DVD postproduction and mastering, the same thing happens. I recall going in with Leslie Thornton, a filmmaker and media artist, and my partner. Sometimes it would be my task to take film in, and go through and do a supervised transfer, let’s say from 16 mm film to beta-SP or digital beta, for example. And there’s a tendency for people to look at that and see nothing there, or to see, in fact, a kind of photographic error, or cinematographic error, for example, that “Oh, well, this isn’t color-corrected” and, on their own initiative, through some habitual sense of convention, to “correct” it.

But the point is really not to correct to the standard. Especially when you have a strategy, as one of hers was, to use a variety of different film stocks and to try to preserve the sense, the material evidentiary trace of those film stocks. One actually literally had to intervene in the process and say, “No, it should be exactly like that.” And of course technicians, who usually quite rightly observe standards, think that you’re insane.

And with DVD mastering, it’s the same thing. Leslie did an installation in Austin, Texas, called *The Ten Thousand Hills of Language*. By themselves, the three separate DVD’s that compose the work are almost senseless. In the post-production lab you master one, then you master the next,

and then the next, and you see certain repetitive elements, maybe you catch a glimmer of a structure. But for the most part it's completely opaque, and really only *does* come together when there's a live, coextensive, interaction of those three elements. Then, in fact, it's that moment, that configuration, that locus where the work actually works. Otherwise it's just three separate media/data streams.

BETH: Right. Well, I think, though, within that—what strings my three videos together are the synchronization of representation and recognition, through the daily actions of stirring your coffee and walking down the street. So, there aren't even any signs or indications of art. And it's not even a home video or anything, because there's not anything happening, or there's nothing to be recorded, because it's just breakfast, and walking down the street, and brushing one's hair. So even within that there was not a structure.

THOMAS: But it's actually what I really like about that particular work of yours. There's a great deal about cinema that's invisible, and a great deal about cinema, and indeed any subsequent media, that depends on that invisibility. It's a little bit like what Roland Barthes talks about when he speaks about photography in his book *Camera Lucida*, where he says you can't ever see a photograph. A photograph, as such, is thoroughly and completely invisible. What you see is the referent. You see what that photograph refers to. And in fact, all those things that you link and attach to a photograph—memory, desire, speculation, value, the signature, a proper name—all of those things link to that curiously wobbly anchor of reference. And it's almost impossible—Barthes would say entirely impossible—to see a photograph.

And in your work, that also becomes the case. When you can't see the overt markings of the media—it's not a shaky, handheld camera, which by now we've assimilated as the mark of cinema veritea kind of truth-claim or verisimilitude of the camera. That doesn't play out there at all. It's not Hollywood production value; the lighting isn't that way at all. The timing, the duration, the punctuation, the parsing of time in your work, doesn't do that. And neither does the reference. The content of your work, it's just about daily activities, but not underscored and grounded with the kind of tacit, enunciative apparatus that says, "here, look, this is daily activity, this is"—

BETH: Mundane activity.

THOMAS: . . . Or smoking a cigarette, this is mundane, this is *la vie quotidienne*. And it's that abeyance, that evacuation

of all of those signifiers of artifice and truth that you avoid, that, for me, makes the work so powerful. And it works very, very well, because by making its referent as invisible as possible, at least the invisibility of the medium is negatively grounded and underscored. And that's an important strategy, I think—an important move. I don't think I'd told you that before.

BETH: No. Thank you [LAUGHS NERVOUSLY]. I'm actually showing that video in Austin right now. Making it was quite an elaborate process—a very fun, kind of maniacal one. I made the first round of videos in a very casual light, and then studied them very closely—their action and tried to learn them, and then make drawings. I made drawings from most of the scenes as a way to learn how to reenact it, you know, sort of like a dance. It was actually more of a modern dance approach than acting, because I'm terrified of acting and recording my voice. So I didn't approach it as an acting thing, but more as trying to reproduce, to copy.

THOMAS: But interesting that you would use drawing as a kind of aversion strategy, or a reaction formation. And, in fact, I did have a question I wanted to ask you about drawing. Because in the last exhibition of yours that I saw, there was a strong drawing component—strong because there were a number of them, and they were very good drawings. But their relationship to the installation was more than a bit enigmatic.

BETH: Yes.

THOMAS: In other words, there was an interesting disconnect in looking at the two things in close proximity. So my question is, exactly what is it about drawing that you like, are attracted to, and practice, and what is its relationship to the installation work?

BETH: Right. Well, I guess I'll answer first with the drawings that are related to the video. Making those drawings was like a form of thinking or study, giving form to something that I needed to remember. I think maybe being visually-minded, it was just very easy to organize those scenes through drawings. And what I was going to add about this Austin show, is that it's the first time those drawings have ever been shown. I've shown the video maybe five times, but I had chosen not to show the drawings. In the beginning, I wanted the video work to stand on its own completely, and not have the show be this whole game where people can look at the drawings of how the video was made, and then look at the thing itself.

I didn't want them to go back and forth between the two, so I just really depended on the video.

But for the nature of this show, and also after allowing the video to have enough life on its own, I added another layer with the drawings. And it's curious, because those drawings and their relationship to that video—they're embedded within one another. Because it wasn't like I went out of my way to make drawings from the video. And it's funny, it is different compared to the rest of my drawings—for instance, the drawing series *My Potential Future, Based on Present Circumstances* is really writing. And I have other drawings in which I feel like I'm actually making drawings, going out of my way to make drawings, which is more of a place that I'm less comfortable with. Although in some way the drawings that are embedded with the video don't function like these other things do.

THOMAS: I think it's a good answer to the question. And it is so much the case when one considers drawing as such. I do that a lot in my own work, and I like drawing a lot, and I like it because, in an odd way you have more room in a drawing. A drawing can accommodate the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, the undesirable, in ways that other media become a bit too literal, a bit too grounded when they attempt it. A drawing somehow exceeds that. And so you as a draughts-person have always interested me, even though that's not the primary recognition factor of you as an artist. And the fact that those two things happen in the same space within the same person is very interesting. It's so much the case that when you consider drawing as a kind of supplement, a supplement to something else, and in the art world today, there's a very simple-minded idea of "supplementarity."

So much so that, often, you'll see a drawing as a prop for something else, or something else as a prop for the drawing. You know, *this* is a drawing of *that*—something that you built or something that someone else has built, or something that you do a riff upon or distort or caricature in a certain way, or approximate according to one fashionable trope or another. And in fact that logic of "supplementarity," or that disposition of the subsidiary nature of drawing to other things is much more complex and rich.

And when you use the term, a kind of "embedded" drawing, the fact that the drawing is embedded in video and vice versa, I also respond very well to that. It reminds me a bit of (and let's broaden the scope here), Louis Marin, decidedly a philosopher and a writer, not an artist, but one who wrote beautifully and well about a very interesting problem: the relationship between the visual and language. And he says that visuality and legibility are embedded in each other to an uncertain degree, and that

they're inextricable and profound in that embedding. I'm paraphrasing here, but I think he's quite right.

And I think that when you—as you do—explore that embedding of drawing and all the things that go along with it—of reference, of materiality, of style—into something else, then there's a kind of interstitial relation, an interstitial structuring process that goes on there. And I would also use that term, *interstitial*, to describe the way that you approach video and installation and performative work. I think that your performative works are interstitial in a very dynamic and active sense. And I like that very much as well. So I guess that wasn't a question after all, but . . .

BETH: Well, it's funny, because another group of drawings that you saw were shown along with a project at the Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery last January. The piece was called, *I was thinking (a living room)*, and it was a seven-channel audio piece. The drawings came out of it in a way, or actually, lead into that project. For two years leading up to that, I kept making watercolors of my surroundings—a lotion bottle, my cat, or whatever—mostly inanimate objects (though I animate that cat all the time).

THOMAS: Yeah, I often dispatch mine, in various ways—the cats—but . . . [LAUGHS]

BETH: But anyway, I was trying to give consciousness to these objects that I'm living with in some way—perhaps to understand how this landscape of things taps into my own psychology. For some viewers, perhaps because of the objects represented, it appeared to point to standards of beauty for women or some such thing, but it was really more like living debris for me. And I just kind of was acting on intuition, or following a thread, and allowing a little bit of breathing room sometimes, not overly thinking things.

But then I started to refer to them as storyboards in some way—but for something that didn't exist. But if one wanted to eventually make some sort of . . . well, I saw it first maybe as a dresser-top little play of these objects talking. But then it ended up turning into a whole living room, a conscious living room. So then, in a way, those things, drawings, really connect to that piece too, in terms of taking you through it, or to it for that matter.

THOMAS: You also do something which I think is a very fine ethical position, especially for an artist, in leaving things alone, or as you put it, in not over-thinking something. This is also an important strategy. When you use the word intuition, I am reminded that intuition is for me, also a form of thinking. I also think that today there's

much too simpleminded a notion of what one means by thinking. One can think with one's hand, or body; one can think with one's ass, one can think with intuition, feeling, and all sorts of things. And it's complex and deep, and I think that the best work actually does that. But back to drawing. One other thing I wanted to bring up is the relationship of what you're doing, in that work in particular, to something like the writing of Francis Ponge, who wrote *Le parti pris des choses*—you could translate it somewhat inelegantly as *The Voice of Things, or The Echo of Things*—as such that a thing without speaking nonetheless has a kind of echo in language, so what kind of echo is that? And that's an impulse, I thought, that you addressed and took up very gracefully and well in that particular piece. I'm very interested in just such sorts of unlikely, unexpected, relations. The interstitial play between language, things, and technologies is a really, really interesting one, especially now.

BETH: I wanted to say something, getting back to what we were talking about earlier, with the projects I do and what happens to the things afterwards. I just did an installation in San Antonio which is interesting in light of this discussion since it's something that technically doesn't exist now. It was formed for the particular location and came together in that location. Now that the show is over, the objects have either gone back to the stores or gone back to being a hairbrush or table. And I sent images to my gallery, and they're all very excited about it, very happy. But of course the Armory Show was coming up, and they were asking what I have. So even the gallery was tacitly admitting that the work doesn't work in this other location. And that's the thing—it doesn't.

THOMAS: Not everything can be a—how would you put it?—a technically reproducible commodity. In other words, an artwork may have only one commodity configuration linked and anchored to one specific site and time, and you cannot render of it a commodity in any other way. You perhaps could sell it as a souvenir, as has been done. Or a document. But that curious incidence where the disposition of the artwork as a commodity—where those two aspects coincide—in some works it disappears very readily.

BETH: Right. It's unfortunate that, with the times right now, people really want the thing they can consume in their own home.

THOMAS: Give them souvenirs.

BETH: Yeah.

THOMAS: No, I'm actually serious. Even though it may not be productive of good artwork, it's a viable economic strategy to give people souvenirs. And that's not exacting a moral judgment upon that at all—far be it from me to do that. I'm not moralizing. But it's more a matter of almost a kind of ethnography. If that's what people do, or want, if there's a certain kind of inflection of commodity interest, and that's certainly what we can see as happening now, then it is a viable linking of artifact, desire, context and transaction. And certainly to enact that as a kind of tactic does work, and in some cases can actually be rather lucrative.

But I'm also interested in processes of archiving, and in the kind of thinking that underlies them. And I do see some affinities between that kind of thinking (a kind of collective mentality about what to do with artworks), and the artworks themselves. For example, look through any glossy magazine, pick any one out of the last ten years, and look through it, and you'll see photos and reviews of an enormous amount of artwork. You know, for every work that you see represented in a photograph in a magazine in a review, that there are many more artworks by that artist. And put that all together, and you get a sense that there are an awful lot of artworks around. Where are all those artworks? What has been done with them? Where do they reside? Persist?

So then the question of just that sort of *massenweise*, that mass-like attribute of artworks—not copies of artworks, but produced artworks—stands out in stark perspective, measured and compared to the equally prodigious masses that reside within museums, galleries, and which enter into the art world's economic circuits, and it gets really interesting. One can't help but begin to wonder: where are all those works? What sorts of assignments and consignments, communications, transactions go on? Does anybody have a picture of that at all? I suspect the answer is, no, not really.

BETH: Right. A couple of years ago, I did some freelance work at Joseph Helman Gallery. I guess he's now retired. They had just moved from the 57th Street gallery to their Chelsea gallery, which was originally the art storehouse. I believe it was a combination of his private collection and the gallery's artwork. And, I guess it was the first time that I had actually witnessed what an art storehouse looked like.

THOMAS: It's astonishing isn't it?

BETH: [LAUGHS] You know, and that's just one individual. One dealer.

THOMAS: I was reading somebody who talked about the relationship to artworks (it might have been Baudelaire for that matter), that certainly, for every person for whom an artwork is an evidence of a passion, something that touches, or strikes the soul, there are any number of people who have to stand next to them all day and see that other people don't get too close, and for whom those artworks are really less neutral than even a minor annoyance—or the charwoman who has to clean around them, for example, for whom they are a minor irritant, because dusting them or whatever is . . . is unnecessarily difficult or time-consuming.

So that whole relationship is very interesting. And then, my friend Peter D'Haselaer, whom you've met, is a young architect, a brilliant one, and he, on a couple occasions, has dealt with museums from an architectural point of view. He's redesigned spaces for the Félicien Rops Museum in Belgium, and for an exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts of the works of Hans Arp.

BETH: Yes, I have seen a presentation of his.

THOMAS: And so, in that situation, his relationship as an architect dealing with the spatiality, and having a sense of the artwork that's, in one sense, one might say naïve—let's say not encumbered by a kind of history of what is the favored frontality of an artifact that doesn't have intrinsic frontality at all, but has, rather, an encumbered history of having been photographed from such and such an angle, for example.

Does one observe the kind of tacit encrustations of those habits? Or do you design something that allows those works, which have no necessary frontality at all, to simply reside there so that frontality is cut loose, drifts away from its historical/referential baggage? And that was his task in those cases, and I thought he was really quite courageous and interesting in the way that he approached that problem. He also designed successful exhibitions. So when you look at that, and then look at something like the new Museum of Modern Art—and there are all sorts of controversies—mild ones, to be sure, but controversies nonetheless—about that. And I guess I'll enter into it in my way and say that I very much like the space, maybe for a perverse reason. I have a tendency, as a curator, to like, or to respond to, spaces that are hostile to exhibition practices.

BETH: [LAUGHS]

THOMAS: Maybe it's a kind of impulse towards the auto-deconstruction of the "white box" idea that I've always tacitly had. But I do like such hostile spaces, because

they're kind of a space for the art and against it at the same time. So the fact that in the new MoMA you have a kind of actual vertigo that's, in some cases, occasioned by the fact that you have so many expanses of blank walls that are incapable of being inhabited by artworks—that I very much like. And in fact I think that the emptiness of the space is very much an appropriate kind of focusing device for what does appear within its confines.

BETH: So, while we are on the subject of dislodging the notion of a particular view of an art work, I recently did a piece called *never ending continuity error*. The piece is four splices of a bathroom in a row. The space above the sink that looks like a mirror is actually empty, cut out. There is a mirror finally behind all four segments. The piece is somewhat like a physical manifestation of an infinity mirror. I have been jokingly calling the frontal view the 'money shot,' But to try to show through photography or representation how the piece operates, it undermines the whole piece. Because it is a 2D idea that is made in three dimensions. So when you photograph it . . .

THOMAS: It disappears

BETH: Yes

THOMAS: It literally collapses in onto itself. Which, by the way, is the definition of *mise en abyme*, literally 'casting into the abyss' of signs, representations, repetitions.

So in that sense what you actually do by making something so literal, I am not saying you are literalizing it, but what I am saying is that you use the literal to activate, to enervate another sort of rhetorical stance by proposing its monocularity, that there is one privileged perspective within which the illusion composes itself as such. And it is absolutely effective. But in order to get to that, what you have done is to have problematized the entire configuration so that visibility is not constrained to that single focal point, but pluralized around and through such that visuality or visibility suffuses the entire piece. So on the one hand while you propose that monocularity as a structuring principle, it does precisely the opposite, it structures itself as through and through. And through and through is not just a pun, it is literally that.

BETH: And in many directions. In making it, I spent a great deal time with a single wall trying to figure out the size. And then I finally reached a point where I put the frame around the open space, and it was exciting. Because it really came clear what was really happening in this

piece. Well we have talked about apparatus, but this whole wall and the bathroom as a space, was an apparatus. This all was this frame for absolutely nothing. So this work is related to my other pieces as well, what is happening in the work happens in a space that contains nothing.

THOMAS: I am very interested in that nothingness, that non-place within which your piece requires a suspension of all those things you think are the case, so that you can deal with its nothingness. You can deal with its absentation of all of the attributes of the art work, because that is the only way you can get to it, that is the only way you can understand what is going on there. So I think that that work in particular is one of your more successful works, and in a way that is the most extreme one. For all its intensity, its index of labor, all those constructions, to build a bathroom over and over, to present that, in the end there is nothing there, is marvelous to me.

That is absolutely something magical in a way, but in the way of a kind of aporia in the manner of making and unmaking, which is the interplay of the artwork, and in that way there is something enchanting or engaging about that. So it moves us to consider that a crucial element in its nothingness is we ourselves, who participate in it. To be brought to the brink of that nothingness is also to cast the spectator, whether we are the ones who make the thing, or we are the ones who observe the thing or we observe each others thing in place: *mise en scene*. But it is also to put ourselves as that, which teetering on the brink of an abyss 'of reason or sense' is also cast in place, destabilized, unable to recuperate or be subsumed by the work. We are in an uncanny fix.

Anyway, when I look at the spatiality of your work, or when I deal with the spatiality, minimal as it is, in my own work, it's with that kind of sensibility as well. What are the terminal boundaries of a work like yours? What are the terminal boundaries of a work like mine? What exceeds those conventions of architecture and proximity that such works usually beg as a question? And for you, I think quite strongly (for me less so), and for other artists whom I admire, that question of exceeding those habitual terminal boundaries opens up that interstitial space wherein artworks come into being as such, and also are most active, most interesting, and most innovative. So that's also why I like the spatiality, and the whole sort of deictic structure of works. Although, that, admittedly, is a more philosophical approach, and a less critical, less connoisseur-like or appreciative approach to artworks, but for me a deep one.

BETH: Right. Well, when I first came here, before we recorded everything, I admitted to my head being caught

up in the wrong things, too much about the art world and the business. And that this is—

THOMAS: Well, it's unavoidable too.

BETH: Yeah. But these kinds of discussions, or processes of thinking, they're what excite me most. And I'm finding it's what drives my work in some capacity. I mean, I like to read a lot of philosophy and theory, science, and other related fields. But I could never really talk about it too much. It really excites me, and inspires ideas . . . But I don't think I address those origins so specifically, but I address them through lamps and pillows, you know?

THOMAS: You are quite singular and unique in your method—unlike other artists who see their process of art-making as something akin to going shopping, going to this place or that place for something that you need, so that in a way the objects they deploy have the kind of afterimage, or the aftereffect, of that whole discourse on appropriation and simulation that happened in the eighties. But that sort of shopping theory—you go get what you need, grab it, and then put it together, and maybe package it together so it's a bit more elegant, a bit less obvious and whatnot—well those works are not at all interesting. Neither are they sufficiently democratic, I suppose, to be more interesting yet.

I appreciate your abeyance—that you will have all these sources and references as a tacit background for what you do, and that you basically leave them alone, appropriate nothing from that, bring out in them the deep sensibility that's common to your interest in science and philosophy, and makes a place for a deep sensibility that's inherent in your artwork. In other words, those two interests—one active, one passive, one might say—come from the same place. It's palpable in your work, and it's something that I greatly admire.

And it also operates as a kind of gift, as a kind of invitation. Because in those sorts of things, when you present a work it's a work that opens its boundaries. It has a kind of invitational or promissory structure such that one can enter into that work, and it opens up, it exfoliates. Whereas other works, like those we've been talking about that simply have absconded with, or illustrated something from someplace else, there's no opening. They present themselves as fully accomplished and insensate, opaque to interrogation other than in the most obvious art world manner. And those are usually quite uninteresting . . . sometimes interesting by accident, but for the most part they're usually very uninteresting.

BETH: When I participated in the Art Basel Miami Beach art fair with the bathroom piece, *never ending continu-*

ity error, I had a really interesting experience with an Argentinean couple, which I'm still kind of afraid of [LAUGHS]. *I need to contact them.*

THOMAS: Afraid of?

BETH: *Well because I had such an intense, three-hour conversation with them after they witnessed my work . . .*

THOMAS: Yes, yes. But you're American, and they have a particular, Argentinian, manner of engaging in conversation that is very non-American. So don't be afraid.

BETH: *Well, yeah. But it was just that it got very close, very quickly. It was very strange. To the point where the gentleman . . . Well, I'll explain it first. He had to get up and walk away from the table because he was going to cry,* [LAUGHS] *like that kind of—*

THOMAS: Very non-American.

BETH: *Right. Earlier they had been at the booth. So then when I came back to the booth, Carolyn, who works at the gallery, was like, "do you know Borges? Because these people are going to come and ask you about him." And I felt like I was going to be quizzed or something. I've read Borges, but I just didn't know what was going to happen. So we ended up having coffee, and they were just really excited and intriguing. It was really fun, because that's not a response I get from an average American viewer or* [LAUGHS] *collector. And so we did end up having this really long conversation, and they asked me all kinds of questions. Before we met, they insisted that I couldn't have done this work without having known Borges, or something.*

THOMAS: Well, let's use a term that Foucault used at one point—I studied with him and he was a good friend. And this is very much a part of the way that he worked as well. There is an *erotics* to conversation. That is to say, there is a complex pattern of seduction and feinting, of complicity, resistance, pretense—all those sorts of things. But it's an *erotics* of conversation, meaning an *erotics* in conversation, and it doesn't necessarily have to do with other things. And it's the very nature of conversation, even the ones that we're having here, that there is an *erotics* about that we both participate in. We find ourselves taken up by the excitement of the things that we talk about. It's a marvelous process, creative and playful, with myriad surfaces and depths.

And I think that, in that sort of case, you've just mentioned, it was very much that. And social process, like *erotics*, also

harbors a certain ritual to it, like dancing a Tango—some things are quite formal, some things are quite severe, but the severity is only in order to make a place, mark a place for tenderness as well. So that kind of *erotics* goes on.

And what I'm getting at is that it also has to do with a particular both style and ethics of collecting. One thinks Peggy Guggenheim and people whose sort of stories you'd always heard, that there was a kind of *noblesse oblige* to their collecting—that collectors collected works because there was a deep appreciation, a deep knowledge, and a deep concern for artworks, and in some cases artists, and with all that came a responsibility. That to be a collector there was a responsibility to something more than the market—a responsibility to some idea of culture, or some idea of community. Let's not even say culture, let's say some idea of community within which good work, of whatever nature it might be, whatever one might advance for it, even if it's contentious, that there was a place for that kind of consideration which was not simply coextensive with the market.

And a lot of collectors, especially since the 80s, have a very different sensibility—one has made an investment, there needs to be return, and so on. One has a vast influx of people who made enormous amounts of money up to the dot-com bust, who became collectors without knowing, in any sense really, how to act. Without knowing how to be a collector, without having any sort of background, and for whom possession is enough. So there's a whole hidden side to the disposition of works. It goes back to that question of "What about all those works and where are they?"

That hidden side also has an effect in the public sphere, on the being of artworks. And in that sense it has a direct relationship on we who, even intermittently, practice as artists.

BETH: *Well, it's difficult, to do the larger projects which I enjoy most, and which most of the drawings and debris really point to, but they can be costly. And so it's very difficult. But I've been very successful with them, in terms of critical and audience attention. But it's not the sort of success that seems to be driving everything lately, which is the selling. I mean, I guess the whole thing is, is there anything to be sold? It's not why I make them, first of all.*

THOMAS: No, that's clear.

BETH: *But sometimes I'll feel, like in my darkest times, I'll feel like I'm shooting myself in the foot making this kind of work. Like maybe I should be making work that fulfills, in a smart way, the situation that we're in. Like*

if I'm dealing with context, or coming in underneath things and all that, then why not make the overly commercialized object, and the selling of that, be something to struggle with?

THOMAS: Well, it's an important question, and more so than we often even recognize, because you're asking, "What is it to be an artist?" now, today, in this moment. And in a way that's what one must ask. Some people, on either side, artists or spectators, collectors, institutions, address that in a very smart and very effective way.

Generally, People who do collect my work are actually interesting people. I like to think that it's usually because they get something about it, or they have an interesting take on it. And so I think it's at least a small pleasure, if not in some cases a necessity for an artist to have a number of good collectors, a good public, one might say. While it can provide for a minimum of means to continue your work, it also establishes a good discourse between different registers of the art world—between you and the work, and other apprehensions or appreciations, in every sense of the word, of that work. And it's important, I think, that there be good, smart, experienced and ethical collectors of artwork.

BETH: Well, I do sell a lot of drawings now, especially the *My Potential Future, Based on Present Circumstances* work. So it's very helpful. But I don't want that to take all my attention, because there's a certain anxiety in making those drawings. If I do too much, on too many fronts, I'm completely consumed and exhausted, you know.

THOMAS: Well, plus you run a risk.

BETH: Of going into production.

THOMAS: Of going into production, exactly. I did a series of works called *Portraits of Robots*. And that's exactly what they are, portraits of robots, around thirty of them, tampering with the conventional ideas of portraiture. Portraiture's a very strange thing. And when you make portraits of robots, who are already constructed as anthropomorphic but not really human, but having a index of human-like attributes or characteristics, which don't mark themselves as like us, but mark their distance from the human, marking themselves as an index of the loss, or the stripping away of the human, that's what's interesting to me. Not the fact that they end up being a series of twenty-four drawings, *Portraits of Robots*. And in fact I kind of shudder when somebody says, oh yeah, the robot guy, So you don't want to get caught up in the production aspects of it either.

BETH: There's also this tendency to want to sum up the potential future drawings. When they're referenced, they're referenced as if, "She's the one that makes these elaborate futures." And in a way, I feel like that's the vehicle, but that's not really what the work's about, exactly. It feels, for me, that it's more about an inability to locate place, or feeling, or an idea, or anything. That they're not about writing your future, it's more of a question: "How do you know who or where you are now?"

THOMAS: Right. It also goes back to that question about good collectors. But let's make it even broader, to include a good audience, and maybe we're just generally talking about an audience for artworks in the first place. But you know, for example, many times I've suffered the admonition: "There's a very important collector coming over. You have to come in to meet them, they want to meet you. But don't talk."

BETH: [LAUGHS] Right.

THOMAS: . . . "you'll frighten them." And, you know, in one sense, it does make good business sense. People who have formed a kind of idea about the work, and why they like the work, just really don't want to hear what it's about. They are profoundly disinterested. And so that's actually a very real characteristic of art-world transactions. And the second thing is also that, since we as artists do different things, it's not easy to contain the things we do into one area or another, even if you do that in broad strokes. For example, I write rather boring books and articles on philosophical or historical topics. And it's true that quite often people who know me as a writer have no idea that I make things. My students, for example—"He has shows? What does he show?" they'll often say, having assumed that I lecture, write and publish, but don't do other things. And people who know me as an artist would be appalled that I write philosophical essays or critical or even some experimental narrative works.

So that admonition, whether it's spoken clearly or tacitly assumed, to not let those two worlds converge, is a pretty strong stricture for a lot of people.

But, you know, I would suspect that it would be equally difficult for you to tell someone who likes and wants to buy your drawings (they are exquisite drawings), about the video work or installation work that you do. You may simply choose not to do that, and for good reason.

BETH: Well in conversation, it's hard, definitely. Actually I end up having really nice studio visits, [LAUGHS] because I have a person imprisoned in my studio.

THOMAS: A captive audience. . . .

BETH: Yeah. Forced captive. [LAUGHS] But actually, it ends up being good. It's a good time to bring all of these aspects together.

THOMAS: But see that's actually what's really important. Because in that kind of situation, it's a studio visit and all that, it's a site, a place where one can nurture a more generous discourse about art—and a smarter discourse also. We've participated in those sorts of things, both of us, at one time or another, where we've had somebody come into our studio and say, "Hmm, yeah okay, I'll take that, that, that, that."

BETH: Right. I haven't had that so much. But the studio visits that are really good, they're not collectors, but with friends or other artists.

Only once have I had, well, I guess twice I've had a collector in my studio, and one visit was pretty informal, and it was really to see the studio but the other was more like a collector/consultant, and that was really despicable.

THOMAS: Who wants to deal with investors?

BETH: Yeah, Maybe the studio is not the place to have somebody come in and decide whether they want to buy something or not. It's kind of the only sanctuary left. You know, I love bringing people in and showing them work. But with this consultant/curator person that came in—you're just left to feel sick in some way.

THOMAS: Right. But you do it on your own terms. It's exactly for that reason that I don't let anybody in my studio. Friends come in. You can come in. But no, if there's a transaction, my gallery director is perfectly fine for that. . . . But then, it's a contradiction, because where does that discourse happen about the work in a public sphere? And, assuming that the collecting, either for an institution, a museum, a gallery, or a public or private collector, is also a part of that discursive structure, where does that discourse happen in a way that is both generous and contributes to the richness of the field? I think that in our current transactional model, something that's really kind of been in place since the 80s, there's very little space for doing it. So, like you, I too don't let very many people into my studio. And when I do it's often because it holds for the promise of a very interesting conversation and an interaction. And indeed that's the reason to do it.

BETH: Right. This system that has been in place since the 80s, it seems to be accelerating recently in the last

few years. I'm hearing from galleries that they're even selling more. It's a very hot topic now, I guess.

THOMAS: But look at how it happens. I agree, it is indeed a hot topic. I think the art fairs are a very contemporary form of that. They are a transaction site, and a lot of work does happen like that. You know, it used to be that something like Documenta or one Biennale or another was sort of a cultural milieu, sort of like a a carnivale, or a medieval religious passion play, and now the transactional side is really something quite different.

But the tawdry side of it, and there is that too, is that when you talk to people who've gone to those situations, those sites, and participated in them, or you have yourself, what are they most well-known for? The parties—a certain excess of the parties. It's sort of as if the halftime spectacle at the football game was its primary signifying character, and that everything else were just the things that happened at the margins. The apparatus that produced this form of spectacle is interesting in and of itself, I won't gainsay that, but what does it have to do with the artwork?

BETH: Right. Well that's the point. And knowing too that collectors have a certain amount of money that they'll go and just blow in that weekend . . . So that the process of purchasing the art, and, like you mentioned before, the kind of erotics of a conversation, it's really becoming very specifically *not* about the work, but this process of . . .

THOMAS: Oh, but there's an erotics of the transaction, too. You know that very well.

BETH: But it's not about the work, it's that transaction. I've heard collectors talk about the high of buying it, and then even after the fair there's their little decline or depression.

THOMAS: But that's because the work then becomes a kind of supplement, a kind of ornament to the transaction. You know, the work is the fluff.

BETH: Well, it's the trophy.

THOMAS: Yeah. It's a trophy. And there's a kind of *post-partum* depression. There's a particular term for it that of course doesn't come to mind, something like the regret that sets in after a purchase. But the sort of post-shopping, the post-spree depression—you've gone out and sort of grabbed everything in sight, and you've done what you should've. And by the way, if you look at the scheduling of art fairs, they do happen with regard for national tax codes—

allowing for the greatest degree of recognition of surplus on liquidity, for example. So the timing is very precise. It's exactly at the point when, for tax reasons or whatever, one can get rid of surplus wealth. So, that's not unintentional. But there is also this—you know, are you buying an artwork, or is it an ornament to a performative erotics of some other sort? An erotics of the transaction? Sex and money absolutely are entwined. So, it would be an erotics of that sort. Well regardless, things are sold, and things enter into the stream of it all, and that does happen.

BETH: But just with all that in mind, it's hard, at least for me as an artist, to know what to do with all this knowledge.

THOMAS: Well, but how much should you know? I mean, one of the first things we talked about today was not being in the right sort of mental disposition or mindset to talk about art, because you've been dealing with the business of it all. And we've talked about our forms of abeyance and evasion of those transactions. I really find them distasteful. I don't want to deal with them at all, and I don't, sometimes to my detriment.

So, should an artist be a businessman?

It gets a little bit like Flaubert's brilliant book *Bouvard et Pécuchet*—in order to do X you have to learn Y, in order to learn Y you have to learn Z, and then in order to learn Z you've got to go back to A and start all over again. And you involve yourself in this infinite regress of things that you have to be: "Well, in order to be a successful artist, I have to be a successful businessman, and the commodity of my business has to be my art," and all that. And in fact, does that operate as an impediment to being an artist at all? One might think that someone like Damien Hirst or Jeff Koons or fill in the—Warhol, at least with tongue firmly in cheek, foregrounded it and called it a factory.

You have an infrastructure which produces all of that artwork, so that you can, even if in a rather arch manner, kind of sit back and say, "Oh, hmm, yeah, I like this, I don't like that. Oh yes, let's do that and let's not do that." And at least, at that point, there is a kind of ghost, or a kind of caricature of aesthetic decision made in that; there's a certain sort of minimal preserve of artistic integrity, though one which suffers from a certain kind of conceptual malnutrition. But that thing is still preserved by surrounding oneself with an infrastructure, in Koons' and Hirst's cases on a global scale, that preserves, like a zoo, some small place within which to exhibit the artistic soul.

But you know, lacking such infrastructures, and lacking recourse to such infrastructural resources, what does an artist do? Should everyone grow up wanting to be a Jeff Koons, a Matthew Barney, or a Damien Hirst—I want to be

an artist, so that involves that same American dream where I want to grow up to be the governor of the state. Go and do the math: it takes approximately ten million dollars to even mount a campaign to be a state governor, let alone talking about what it takes to be a president of the United States. So, look at how many millionaire politicians we have in the running. It gives the lie to the American dream that anybody can grow up with a shovel in one hand and the aspiration to be president of the U.S.A. in the next hand. Bullshit. So, art's a little bit like that.

BETH: Great! [LAUGHS] I didn't even know we'd end up talking about this, but—for the most part the *My Potential Future* drawings start from me, most specifically. But I just did one that started with me thinking about the art world. And now I'm actually going to go directly for the throat and do one on the art world.

And the structure is actually spinning, spinning out of control. In this conversation, I think of how I became part of all this. Before I knew that there was this thing, this art world, which I really didn't know that much about until I was in grad school. I went to undergrad for art too, and I read about artists, but it was really like a myth, because it was in books, and it was not in my immediate surroundings.

THOMAS: Right, who was the last successful artist you knew of that didn't have a trust fund, for example?

BETH: Right. And, I went through this system where you have people who don't have art careers teaching you how to be an artist. I know a lot of people like to say this about that faculty, but I can really, truly say that in my undergrad experience, I was not being taught by any people who were at all operating as artists, in any sense. I don't even think most of them were making work anymore.

THOMAS: Well, it gives some substance to that old cliché, "those who can't, teach." But there's the other side of it, which is that, you know, what can you learn from somebody who's a practicing artist? Probably nothing more. It would probably be more of an impediment to your own process to deal for any length of time with somebody who's myopically engaged in their own, successful, art production. What can you learn from that? In the end, whether one is a student at school or an artist starting out, or even an artist at any point, whatever comes to bear on your work, in terms of what you can learn or how it's read, is basically at the level of opinion anyway. And the task is your own to choose what to do with it, and where to go with it.

BETH: So I guess there's a question in there, like we're addressing the art world and all, but what about the university or the institution that promotes art degrees, only to make money? And now, through that, there's this idea that's implanted in a person's head that they can be an artist. You have people teaching you this notion . . .

THOMAS: It's a bit like Althusser's notion of ideology: people's imaginary relations to their material situation, but that's another question . . . ❗