

## Claire Butcher

Sameness, differentials and the quantum physics of everyday

Erwin Thomasse

There's a group standing in the rain outside. Their huddled umbrellas seem to increase the intensity of the gathering – in turn surrounded by pieces of random household furniture, couches soaking up the downpour, and a strange assembly of triangular, domed and raised handmade structures. This combination of human/built constructions has occupied the strangely shaped, semi-public oval arena at the heart of the Van Abbemuseum – het Oog, or “the Eye” (2008). The formerly pristine glass walls are covered over with plastic tarps, broken only by circular portholes through which I regard the group still standing in the rain. One of the figures, the artist, Erwin Thomasse, is speaking to the museum director, refusing to explain the motivation behind this outlandish invasion of the museum space with the very local.

The pieced-together or assembled nature of Thomasse's work – whether it be two-dimensional graphics, graffiti style wall scrawls or small bungalow huts – make spatial invaders of each of his installations. Via a strong physical presence, the use of heterogenous media and a complex system of references, Thomasse is able to reflect both on where his craft sits, at that very moment, as well as where it has come from and where it is going.

Erwin Thomasse's background in graphic and textile design, as well as his interest in philosophy and art history, refract his current art forms in a diverse prism of regional and international references. As Kaatje Lomme cites in her text around Thomasse's artistic position, his move into the hip-hop scene caused him to see ‘similarities between this subculture and the art world, which both have, like any (sub) culture, their own vocabulary, rules of conduct and knowledge...Erwin found his own form in playing with elements from the art world. "It does not interest me if people like my art work, I think it's not art. I do not make things, but more variations on existing but new things, regardless of any expectations.”<sup>1</sup>

These contrasting or rather co-relational elements of banality and the utopian provide the crux of madness in Thomasse's creations. Whether a seemingly simple wooden shed for rent (Saekkers 01, 2007) or an intricate Heaven Bank Note to the value of 10 000 (5 Minuten Museum, 2009), Thomasse overloads his work with everyday signs and symbols to show the off-kilter possibilities resulting from blowing the smallest details out of proportion. He defines his method as establishing “the balance between madness and genius as a passage towards a kind of paradise which is no longer taken seriously” in the context of a local art/design sphere.

The paradise Thomasse leads us into is always implicated in the world as it is – poetically entangled in global flows of individualism vs. community, industry vs. craft and consumerism vs. creation. However, these dualities themselves become generative, exposing the structures themselves and, like Fuller, de Stijl or even the graff tagging of Phase2, Thomasse shows the extraordinariness of what can happen upon and around those same structures of contemporary life and cultural production.

In his most recent exhibition, 38 Under Par and 11 holes-in-one (2010) at Onomatopée project space, Thomasse takes on this same extraordinariness in a more evidently political sense. The title refers to the legendary golf record set by Kim Jong-Il, leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea). His performance of this amazing feat played out in a surprisingly banal context is frequently used as a means of defending the leader's status as demi-god. And using a number of up-scaled prints from low-res internet images of Jong-Il, as well as an assembly of satellite dishes Thomasse provides a stark reflection on the rainbow-hued propaganda around fairly banal events spouted by media and global visual culture.

In a text written about the necessity of art in the escape from banality or what could be called, “the commonplace”: meaning the already existing, written in the 1920s in response to the unfamiliar aesthetic beginnings of abstract painting, A. Clutton Brock wrote, This does not mean that we should aim at mere differentiation and try to be unlike everyone else, for that is aiming at a symptom; and those who do it are themselves an undifferentiated herd, alike in their emphasized difference. But it is sillier to aim at sameness than at differentiation for its own sake. To aim at sameness is to aim at what you are to start with, as if you said: “I will go where I am.” Sameness is behind us all...<sup>2</sup>

I would argue that what Mr Brock failed to see was perhaps the necessity of the commonplace, the everyday, in art itself. When transposed to the supposed sanctity of the gallery, the exposition, the rain-drenched museum courtyard,

Thomasse’s “commonplace” forms become differentials, spinning off quantum physics of utopian possibilities using the bare essentials of the local, the same, the here and now. The continued showing of Thomasse’s work in his local Eindhoven setting is note worthy in terms of the potency of his reflections. Standing outside of the usual professional jetstreams to Amsterdam, Berlin and Beyond, Erwin Thomasse is for all intents and purposes in agreement with Mr Brock; but what Thomasse would perhaps add is: “I will go where I am...but where I am is so much more than meets the eye.”

Clare Butcher 2010

<sup>1</sup> Kaatje Lomme, 2010. “Erwin Thomasse: On the Border of Exclusion”, unpublished.

<sup>2</sup> A Clutton Brock, 1924. “Art and the Escape from Banality” in *The Necessity of Art*, pg.4.