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Appropriations and cosmic coincidences

Erwin Thomasse's request for me to write something about his work, and more specifically about the work 'no. 45' (a clever cross between the number 45 and the swastika - one of those typically ambiguous and streetwise visual trouvailles that Thomasse so naturally produces) reminded me of a remarkable occurrence some time ago. Or to put it more precisely, I was reminded of it because of the conversation I had with Erwin about 'no. 45' and the changing meaning of things like authorship, appropriation and plagiarism in the era of the extremely fast dispersion of images.

Around 2011 an e-mail appeared in my inbox, containing an invitation from an English artist, who after his time at De Ateliers had stuck around in Amsterdam for some years, asking me to come and visit him in his studio in his new city of residence, Brussels. I hadn't heard of him nor of his work for a long while, but in the past we had had interesting conversations about art and the secrets of illusion, and the question of whether art should immediately (activistically! Politically!) interfere in reality, in times that demand engagement, or whether it should influence our critical capacities through imagination and fiction. We never really resolved that question.

The encounter took place in a spacious, deserted cafe in the centre. The artist arrived and even before he sat down, he pulled a pile of files out of his bag. 'I've got a story', he said, 'that nobody believes. Including you, presumably. I don't fully understand it myself, yet, either'. He shoved the pile of files towards me and ordered a beer (even though it was only 1 pm, as indicated by the prominent art deco clock above the bar). I started leafing through the neatly organised folders. 'Film Clock' was written in capitals with a red marker on the cover. Inside there were printed pages in a ring binder, with endless rows and columns of both famous and obscure film titles, time codes ('37:03:00') and short descriptions: 'medium shot - empire clock in cabinet' or 'zoom in on dress watch'. Notes and scribbles in the margins. A forest of Post-its with film titles. And more film titles. A preliminary budget (some tens of thousands of euros, many assistant-hours for 'film spotting', a stay in Los Angeles). In short: a hefty research dossier.

The artist explained to me that in 2007 he had started a new work that would take him years to complete: a 24 hour video work, consisting of film fragments of indications of time in existing films, in which the film time should be synchronous with the real time. 'So actually... you mean... like...' I said. 'Correct', he interrupted me, with a hint of conspiracy in his voice, 'like 'The Clock' by Christian Marclay. And not just a bit 'like' it, but exactly and completely like it. So much exactly the same, in terms of idea, design and execution, that ever since Marclay's work came into existence - now a year ago - I've been feeling unreal about it, and I wake up in disbelief in the middle of the night sometimes'. He looked at me piercingly. 'A glitch in the Matrix. Something like that'. During the course of our conversation the artist entertained the possibility of plagiarism on Marclay's part, who could have learned about his concept 'indirectly, and after a while started thinking he'd come up with it himself'. More dominant, however, was the artist's notion that 'apparently, we had the EXACT same idea in the same moment. Cosmic coincidence'. I ordered myself a beer. A good idea, that seemed to linger in the air, let's say.

The embrace of Erwin Thomasse's 'no. 45' by activists and the internet is perhaps less surprising than this true story about appropriation and coincidence. Thomasse created this work in 2010, the year that Marclay's 'The Clock' came out. He wrote me:

'The work from 2010 is in essence a swastika that is reshaped to become the number 45. I saw the striking resemblance once and grasped its 'contradiction in terms'. Your brain sees one image, but actually something else is stated. The context moves from the one extreme (swastika/war) to the other (45/peace). This transition refers to the original meaning of the swastika as a symbol for transformation'.

Late 2016, shortly after the surprising election of Trump as the 45th president of the United States, Thomasse decided to post the image in his Instagram with the hashtag #Trump. The image in this context produced a perfect, intuitive link between the 45th president and fascism: a sublime, ambiguous graphic commentary of the absurd political situation of the moment. In the summer of 2017, Thomasse discovers to his astonishment that anti-Trump protesters on social media have embraced his 45 logo (with the addition of a stop sign) as one of the logos they use in their response to Charlottesville. From that moment on, the image starts to appear everywhere, from the Instagram page of singer Michael Stipe to the art pages of the New York Times. On TV, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest. Pieces came out about the logo on CNN, in USA Today, The Guardian, and big art and design blogs like Artnet and Dezeen. The ambiguity of the logo is striking: it is at once a convenient commentary on the successful propaganda aesthetics of fascism, and in itself activist propaganda. As well a 'unification of two extremes' as a reference to polarisation in society. The fanatic responses to the image from both camps only reinforce these ambiguous meanings.

Can an idea float around and somewhere meet its doppelganger? Hang in thin air for a while, and then be detected by the feelers of a receptive mind, that gives it shape (again)? Where does the creativity of an individual hinge with the collective inspiration of the 'Zeitgeist'? It must have been questions like these that occupied Thomasse when he set out online to find the origin of the activist's logo. Eventually he found someone in Texas, who said to have been the designer, but who showed little interest in Thomasse's questions about authorship, let alone credit him as the one who conceived the image, and - crucially - linked it to Trump. I imagine that the artist quite quickly traded in his immediate reflexes (plagiarism! Injustice!) for what he - himself a master-appropriator and logo-magician in his art practice - knew all along: that the internet has uprooted our assumptions about intellectual property and established radically new relations between maker and audience. That the border between the so-called original artworks and the freely circulating image, that Benjamin already said to be porous, has now almost completely vanished. That the satisfaction about the public success of his image has taken the place of any mixed feelings about the overly easy, unsolicited appropriation. That the unforeseen fate/success of 'no. 45' is an indication of probably Erwin Thomasse's greatest quality as an artist: creating attractive, immediately readable images that provide the zeitgeist with sharp-witted commentary in unexpected ways.