

THOMAS HIRSCHHORN

radical unchic



Thomas Hirschhorn's approach to sculptural installation uses two principal strategies to avoid the exclusivity that accompanies high culture. Firstly, he employs extremely inexpensive materials and, secondly, he often places his work in public spaces. He is best known for his 'anti-heroic' 'anti-monuments' to artists such as Otto Freundlich, Ingeborg Bachmann, Raymond Carver, and Georges Bataille. All the instances just cited can be broadly classified as 'high culture' and consequently might be considered out of place on the street. On this point Hirschhorn comments:

the altar form that I have chosen is familiar from the deaths of celebrities (Lady Di, Versace, Olaf Palme, Mitterand) of the unknown, such as young people who have committed suicide, car-accident fatalities, or victims of crime; we pay homage in this form. Candles, stuffed animals, photocopies, photographs, images from illustrated magazines, and other materials close at hand will be assembled to proclaim a personal commitment or statement. {Hirschhorn, 2000}

It is possible that Hirschhorn intends to overcome the barrier surrounding high culture and that his use of humble materials together with placement on the street is an attempt to





widen the potential audience for avant-gardist art. Certainly, Hirschhorn's concern with non-precious materials is a recent manifestation of the longstanding avant-gardist project not only to enter everyday life but question its priorities. His use of the popular alter form can be understood as subterfuge designed to introduce the public to literature and philosophy that challenges conventional social norms.

Constructed out of polythene sheeting, duct tape, packing tape and aluminium foil these 'altars' last only a matter of weeks. Hirschhorn claims that 'the disappearance of the altar is as important as its presence'. One can note that this can be understood both poetically in terms of the relationship of the alter with passing away and as a gesture against the commodification of the work of art. In February 2000 he also noted:

An altar is a personal, artistic statement. I want to fix my heroes. The altars attempt to memorialize a person who is dead and who was loved by someone else. It is important to testify to one's love, one's attachment. Heroes can't change, but the altar's location can change. The altars could have been made in other cities, countries. They could be in different locations—on a street, a side passage, in a corner. These local sites of memory become universal sites, by virtue of their location. That is what interests me. {Hirschhorn, 2000}

So the very transience of Hirschhorn's arte povera-like monuments actually flags the possibility of them recurring in different times and places. Hirschhorn certainly repeats his altars but it is also the case that his use of simple mate-



Thomas Hirschhorn, *World Airport*, 1999



rials might suggest that anyone of us could follow his lead and construct 'alters' to our own 'heros' or heroines, if we so wished. But we could hardly place them on the street without the intervention of a institution such as a public art gallery. In the final analysis it is the matrix of such institutions that define what is and what is not art. But it is also the case that this institutional matrix has proved itself remarkably flexible to the demands placed on it by artists, to the extent that it currently plays a crucial role in the realization of out-of-gallery experiments.

Hirschhorn also constructs installations that take over the entire internal space of a gallery. One instance of such is his *World Airport* initially installed at the 1999 Venice Biennale and then again at the Renaissance Society, Chicago in 2000. *World Airport* functions as a metaphor for globalization. But the web of umbilical chords is a mess and the planes are all grounded. Moreover this is a pre-9/11 airport which gives it a certain macabre prescience. Whereas the airport used to signify relatively free flows between the nations of the earth it is now a zone of fear.

The tendrils connecting the planes to the flimsy control tower seem more akin now to a Foucauldian panopticon in which everyone who enters through its gates is biometrically inscribed, cross-referenced and essentially submitted to the processes once confined to criminals. Since the man with the plastic explosive Nikes everyone is a potential terrorist {Kayyem, 2003}. But to return to less fraught times and the Renaissance Society's (Chicago) exhibition of *World Airport* Hamza Walker Director of Education reports that Hirschhorn's instructed the gallery to use 'much tape, badly':



These instructions, delivered as an imperative from Hirschhorn to a gallery assistant, were diligently followed to the degree that the tape is somewhat repulsive, taking on a creeping, organic quality, a bureaucratic mildew of sorts. It transforms the gallery into a cocoon where certain components (televisions, chairs, the base of the partitions), having been literally collaged into or onto the space, lose their edges ... at the point they connect to the floor. {Renaissance Society 2000}

The notion that Hirschhorn's installations reduce the world to a single substance is intriguing. If we had to designate the essence of Hirschhorn's aesthetic substance then surely it would be paper. Virtually all Hirschhorn's materials are paper-thin: parcel tape, aluminium foil, cardboard, cellophane. And Walker's interpretation of Hirschhorn's ramshackle airport is especially interesting when he notes that it possesses a melancholy aspect:

Despite its humor, Hirschhorn's work is sad, mourning the loss of intellectual and spiritual ideals that have nourished modern utopian thought, and commemorative, celebrating the triumph of the commodity. Since Marxism had become the most comprehensive language of social transformation, one resting on a critique of the current social order, 'the death of socialism' became synonymous with the proscription of utopian thought. {Renaissance Society, 2000}

The fundamental source of melancholia in the postmodern world lies in the realization that the complexity of con-



temporary culture cannot be reduced to any single theory. Indeed Michel Foucault's thinking suggests that modern society be conceived as a complex arrangement of nested, interacting systems, which one could compare with the self-organizing systems found in nature. This gives added weight to the Frankfurt School Marxists concept of culture as 'second nature': a second layer of nature.² The Frankfurt theorists traced the origin of science and technology to the desire to acquire mastery over nature (Held, 1980). The melancholic aspect of second nature lies in the fact that science and technology have only served to create yet another layer of nature-like complexity that stands outside our control. In other words we appear to be confronted with a universe of infinite complexity that will defy all attempts to formulate a 'theory of everything'.

Bourgeois technological mastery over life-praxis turns out to be paper-thin. And Hirschhorn's child-like, paper-thin constructions seem to point this out. The materials for church and courtly patronage were gold, marble and lapis lazuli, the materials for late capitalist art are often poverty-stricken. Metaphorically, they point to the poverty of 'advanced' capitalism wherein the First World finds it impossible to help out its poorer neighbours and prefers instead to spend most of its copious funds on a witches' brew of consumer goods and sophisticated weaponry. In Hirschhorn's work the selfishness of the West and its mirror in Third World poverty is conveyed through his use of poverty-stricken materials for what are considered as high cultural artifacts. Whether this strategy degrades into radical chicness within the hyper-bourgeois world of art is a moot point.

In addition to his deployment of junk materials Hirschhorn's installations are invariably accompanied by texts. Often these are instances of high theory: Marx, Habermas, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari. Hirschhorn's use of text is significant because of its superfluity. Is one actually expected to *read* the texts in the context of his installations? And how can these high ideals and ideas challenge the immense power of the society of consumption? By making a cardboard replica of Deleuze and Guattari's *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (*What is philosophy*) Hirschhorn seems to underscore the simulacral stature of philosophy in contemporary culture. One might buy a copy of this book because it would look impressive on one's bookshelf (especially in French) but would one actually read it? Probably not, because one would be too busy earning one's living. Turning the book into a hollow icon indicates a new twist to popism. Pop art recodes low into high culture and thereby defies the inherent elitism of the European aesthetic tradition. Hirschhorn, in contrast, recodes philosophy into the useless fabric of ephemeral sculpture. Martin Herbert makes the following perception observation:

Thomas Hirschhorn's sprawling, gallery-filling bricolages immerse viewers in structures that seem halfway rooted in reality and halfway analogous to mental constructs; they encourage the creation of links between multifarious tranches of visual information; and, while invariably offering pointers towards political and philosophical concepts, they generally seem both to revel and to despair in the primacy of subjectivity. {Herbert, 2004}

'Subjectivity' seems to allude to the cult of the individual that arose in modern bourgeois culture with the waning of God and monarchy. But how real is the individual within an increasingly administered world? Certainly the image of Hirschhorn holding a hollow cardboard replica of a book entitled *What is Philosophy?* seems to pose the question: what is the value of intellectual culture in a world dominated by shopping?

If the human race is to evolve as a global species then people must resist homogenization. One of the best features of contemporary philosophy lies in the encouragement of a the spirit of questioning.