

I believe the solution is panic: an interview with Thomas Hirschhorn

by Fernando Oliva and Marcelo Rezende

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THOMAS HIRSCHHORN GRANTED THIS INTERVIEW to C Magazine in early October, 2006, a few hours before the opening of the 27th Sao Paulo Biennial, whose theme was How to Live Together, referencing Roland Barthes' seminars on the subject in the late 1970s. After two weeks of nonstop labour, Hirschhorn's installation, *Re, ore Now*, was ready. The work is an imposing testament to the energy Hirschhorn has dedicated to its construction; it is an environment of excess of the sort this Swiss artist living in France knows how to create in a very precise manner, without renouncing the contradictions inherent in his decision. The cruelest problem was this: how to balance the viewer's complete involvement in this seductive and spectacular space with the need to enter into a dialogue with him or her--but without muffling the work, without reasserting passivity and visual inertia. Hirschhorn's solution in *Restore Now* lies, once again, with philosophy--with the use of philosophy as a tool. This time, however, he has gone one step further than he has before, by joining

images of explicit violence (many mutilated and fragmentary bodies) with well known books enlarged to the point of sculptures or monuments. (The largest is *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) by Deleuze and Guattari, but we also see works by Spinoza, Foucault and Arendt, among others). There are also many, many tools, enough to start a small revolution. In *Restore Now* Hirschhorn once again calls for action; each time he does so he makes more tools available to the viewer.

FERNANDO OLIVA & MARCELO REZENDE: Can you tell us a little about your first solo exhibition, at the Bar Floreal in Paris? Did this work out for you?

THOMAS HIRSCHHORN: It was a failure ... But I learned a lot, I learned a very great deal. The Bar Floreal--you never saw that, did you? It was in '86, I think. The Bar Floreal was a place, it wasn't a bar, it was an alternative space, a political collective, a group of photographers who exhibited their work there.

FO&MR: Where was it exactly?

TH: It was in the 20th arrondissement, on the rue des Courronnes. It's still there and it's still a photographers' collective, where they show their work. I was invited to exhibit my collages. I did and it wasn't a good experience, not at all. But what also wasn't good was precisely--and I'm not calling the quality of my work into question, I always have--that it wasn't yet completely clear, because it wasn't in an art milieu. It was a kind of association, there was no real encounter with the viewer. It was as if I had done it at a friend's house. For example I was the one who sat there and had to guard my exhibition, and I told myself I would never do that again. There you are and some people arrive and you ... No no no! I learned a lot, that this is not how it's done. You have to really seek out where it's difficult, either in the street, where it's hard, or in an art space where it's hard also--because there is another encounter. But not alternative spaces, they're kind of feeble.

FO&MR: Now we'd like to talk about your work here at the Sao Paulo Biennial. Why Restore Now?

TH: The title is simply taken from the name of the first Gulf War, which was Restore Hope. And, well, it's a nice name, isn't it? Restore Hope. (laughter) I wanted to take that seriously, to say, yes, it's serious. I am always reminded of a phrase from Dada: "Take Dada seriously, it's worth it" But I didn't want to work on that. I wanted to take "restore": yes, we must restore, there is work to be done, and the "now" is today, it's the present moment. But at the same time, I told myself that "restore now" can also mean that we must always be restoring, we

must live in restoration, we must live "precariously," in constant restoration. This is why "restore now" also means "restore the now," but also "restore now," right now, the moment in which we live.

FO&MR: YOU mention that sometimes we have to take things seriously, but I think we can also see quite a bit of humour in your work, isn't this so?

TH: Of course, I hope so. I also hope there is irony in it. I enjoy my work, I joke around while I work, but it is not a tool for humour, because if you take pleasure in your work, if you love your work, if you take joy in your work, it gives the artist or the person doing the work pleasure too, and you can laugh about it. But I don't make humorous art. What I would like is that humour also be a tool, a tool for connecting with another person, for establishing a dialogue with them; for example in the videos, the man who dances. I mean, I didn't try to be funny, but I'm not a very good dancer, and the idea was how to dance to philosophy, right? That was the idea: how to dance to philosophy. In the end, it's not very important how you dance to philosophy, the important thing is to want to dance to it, and the result lends itself to laughter, and so I said to myself that it may be a tool for opening up to someone else, to other people.

FO&MR: How did you choose the books?

TH: I didn't really choose the books. What I wanted to do was to say that somewhere we have the tools for living together, because I share this question: how to live together. But I wanted to go further: you shouldn't even ask yourself this question, you should just live together, it's an obligation. We have

the tools, yes, but we don't use them. The tools are philosophy, art and poetry; they aren't politics, they aren't economics. That's what my work is trying to say. And so I didn't choose a particular branch of philosophy, a specific book; what I wanted to do was to show books by philosophers. This, by the way, is why they're only shown. Very rarely are they open; sometimes they are, but they are taped together so that you can't flip through them. It's a way of saying: this is a tool, it's a tool and here it is.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

FO&MR: Yet Deleuze's image is quite present.

TH: Yes, it's true he's present, because he's the person who introduced me to this idea of the tool, and also the idea of levels. With *A Thousand Plateaus*, for example, which is made up of steps of different sizes, it's also because it's an infinite book, like its title suggests. I think it's a fantastic book. As an artist, I think that everyone should find books like that, just like philosophers do. Foucault! The books he finds are incredible!

FO&MR: And why did you have to enlarge them?

TH: Yes, that's very important. Why? Because in enlarging the book you change it. And the tools too, there are also enlarged tools. The enlarging is important because the enlargement changes the meaning. This is what interests me. What attracts me is the enlargement, because I choose: I'm going to enlarge, I work on it, I make photocopies, I glue together, I work on them, I get involved with them. Like the people who do the Carnival in Rio de Janeiro--they're engaging with something, they enlarge it, they create a float. That's what interests me, the

involvement with something by enlarging it; and at the same time I empty it, I empty it of its content, because you can no longer read it, because there is just the cover. So what interests me is these two movements, enlargement and involvement, and at the same time the emptiness, a little stupid, a little ridiculous, a little empty.

FO&MR: Naturally you're aware that you're in a building with mythical status in Silo Paulo. Was creating a work in a building designed by Oscar Niemeyer difficult?

TH: No, no, it was wonderful. The park first of all is magnificent. The buildings in Ibirapuera Park were all designed by Niemeyer, and the Marquise, the idea of having a marquee in a park is magnificent. I understand, it rains a lot in Silo Paulo, I see how people would use it. It would be better to do nothing at all in these buildings, but this is the architect's problem, not mine. It's nothing to me, it doesn't intimidate me at all. Just the same, it's exciting. Yes, yes, it's exciting, I feel very privileged to be here. It's magnificent, isn't it? You can exhibit your work in a country you don't know--it's my first time here. I've come to exhibit my work and I'm in a magnificent space, a magnificent park, one with a real idea, a real project. I think this park has a real project. So I was quite encouraged by it all.

FO&MR: YOU mentioned that you prepared this work in Paris?

TH: Yes, all of it.

FO&MR: How did you do that exactly, prepare it ahead of time?

TH: It was all in my head, meaning the shape

I give ideas, the flow of ideas in my head. It's all there in my head. I don't need to make plans, I start with elements, and I numbered all these elements: the big book, the lattice work, the panels, the nails, etc.

FO&MR: And the size?

TH: Yes, the size, but everything had been done beforehand in the studio. I come along later and I need a space to put everything in. Later, of course, there are problems, something's too big, something else is too small, but I like it that way, I don't like everything to be perfect. I like it not to be affected, that it be made in a little bit of a panic, you see? Because I believe that the solution is panic, you know? I once read somewhere that "panic is not the solution," but I believe the opposite: panic is the solution.

FO&MR: Why?

TH: Because when you panic you call upon other forces than aesthetics, you see? Aesthetics is the big problem.

FO&MN: You detest aesthetics?

TH: Yes, aesthetics--not beauty, I think my work is beautiful. But the aesthetics the art world is always a prisoner of, because people always confuse aesthetics and beauty. In order not to fall into aesthetics myself, I tell myself, OK, you have to have some help in order not to fall into it, and panic is one helper, doing too much is another, always too much and you always have too much to do afterwards. It's an artistic helper, something I choose, I take on, not because I'm someone who panics but in order to struggle against this tendency for everything to be clean and smooth. I need my own helpers, that's all.

FO&MR: And aren't you afraid of being caught by the trap of creating, over time, a Thomas Hirschhorn style?

TH: I'm not afraid. Why am I not afraid? Because I have only one life, and I must work now. I'm not going to start trying to avoid working like myself. What I'm going to do is dedicate the time I have to my work, to work on my form, and too bad for what comes afterwards. I have to take responsibility for this; you can't make art without getting hurt, without taking it right in the chops. I know there are a lot of people who say, "Oh man, another Thomas Hirschhorn!" I couldn't care less. I don't work for the art world, or not only for the art world. I also work for people who have never seen my work. That's my pretension. I don't talk to that whole jet-set crowd, travelling from exhibition to exhibition. I work for them too, but not only them. I also work for people who don't travel, who are there and to whom I have never shown my work. There you have it, and they couldn't care less about this question.

FO&MR: Do you like to amaze people?

TH: No, no, no, to amaze people, why?

FO&MR: Can't a relationship with people who are looking at your work be created by amazing them?

TH: I believe that art, because it is art, can create a dialogue. The work of art is capable of creating a dialogue, not me. I don't want to amaze, if you're amazed, if something amazes you, well, too bad, but I....

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

FO&MR: Because today there is a distance

between the work and the discourse around the work, that's why I think that there are quite a few theories around your work. There is the idea of a truly political art, a committed art. And so what for you is political commitment today exactly?

TH: First of all, I'm an artist, I'm not a theorist, but neither am I a practitioner. I'm an artist with an artistic practice, with an artistic logic. For me, it's my problem to give form to my artistic logic. And theory is not my problem, nor is practice. The only thing I do is work with my artistic logic.

FO&MR: YOU have said that one shouldn't listen to theorists. Who exactly should we listen to?

TH: I didn't say that one shouldn't listen to them, I didn't say that. I said--look, I think that art is constantly being evaluated, people evaluate and evaluate: "It's no good, what do you think? Well, the other person thinks it's no good."

FO&MR: It's beautiful, it's not beautiful.

TH: There you go. It's always, "Well, he wrote that it's no good." I know my job; I'm part of the art world a little. There are evaluations everywhere, aren't there? And I think, as an artist, and this is a claim I make loud and strong, I have a mission and it's not to put myself in a position of being evaluated. My mission is to listen to myself, to make and give form to what interests me.

FO&MR: Do you talk about art a lot with people who are not part of the art world?

TH: Yes. I like doing that a lot because in my projects for public spaces, for example,

which I also still do, I encounter people who ask me questions. I like this a lot, because there are some very good questions that I hadn't been expecting at all.

FO&MR: Some of your works deal a lot with the idea of participation, like the one in Kassel and this one here in Silo Paulo. Doesn't it concern you that you won't have much contact with the public here? Doesn't it upset you to go away and leave the work here?

TH: No, but first of all I'd like to say that to do something here with people would obviously involve a lot of time because it has to be done well. You have to be serious about it, you can't just go and say anything, just because there you are and it's the evening of the opening. First of all, you have to establish a dialogue, and I didn't have the time and it's not the right moment. That wasn't what this project was about, so it's clear to me that this is a work that people can look at. I hope they won't be inactive while they're looking at it, because I always think of Mondrian and the fact that a work can make you active because you can reflect, right? If you look at a painting by Mondrian, that's also an activity. Because, in a sense, the danger is also interactivity, all that gesticulation. I'm not a big fan of interactivity, I prefer activity. Moving about for the sake of moving about, that's a bit of a placebo.

FO&MR: Can we say about this work that its method is accumulation? How do you find a method for arranging the pieces? There are a lot of them, almost too many. How does that work, or is there no method?

TH: I told you, it's panic. It's very simple, that's the method. I think that what creates chaos is form, it's not-because there is a

problem. People often don't understand that you have to create a form in order to avoid chaos. No, it's the form that creates chaos. The form is someone's willingness to say that it's there; what I mean is that everything is voluntary. Each panel has its table, each element has its place, has found its place. I have tried to give form, and at the same time that obviously creates chaos. But it's voluntary, it's not the form that creates calm, or chaos that gives form in order to create calm, it's the opposite. That's the method, if you like, it's panic. The form for creating chaos in a panic. And it works. I don't know, does it work?

Transcribed by Marinilda Bertolete with the assistance of Bruno Boulay. Translated from French by Timothy Barnard.

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