


Thomas Hirschhorn

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On a rainy day in May, the Miami-based artist Christy Gast and I decided to distract ourselves from working on the exhibition project that had brought us to Paris by going to check out Thomas Hirschhorn's latest installation Flamme Éternelle at the Palais de Tokyo. It was a welcome surprise, upon entry, to discover that Hirschhorn had chosen to make his exhibition free of charge and had built a structure and a communication/signage system that bypassed the admissions desk and descend directly into the massive sub-floors of the art palace. Steered, as we were, by Hirschhorn's usual language of cardboard, packing tape, and philosophical slogans, we soon found ourselves in what felt like a jerry-built city constructed almost entirely of tires and where the reigning feeling was "anything goes."

CAMILA MARAMBIO (RAIL): This is going to be an informal interview because my desire to engage in a conversation with you arose just a minute ago—unexpectedly—when I saw you were present. Then I read the guidelines you wrote up on the wall in the front of the gallery space, and I felt encouraged to approach you, because there you state that this space is a space for “un-programmed production.”

THOMAS HIRSCHHORN: That is what this is: a place for presence and production. The production, I thought at first, is the production of thinking. I think the activity of thinking, the production of ideas, of this discussion, or of encounters through ideas, is the production of art. And then, I also see there is a lot of production of, what I call nonsense...which makes me happy, actually, because this is very much what all this is about, actually. So I am very

happy that now there is a lot of nonsense produced here. This is not something that you can provoke or you can think of in the beginning; I am surprised and overwhelmed by all of this production of nonsense.

RAIL: Don't you think it is symptomatic of a contemporary need to go beyond sense-making?

HIRSCHHORN: I think today there is the kind of pressure for everybody to make everything so quickly satisfying, to make everything so quickly communicative, to make everything just so quickly. The result is just a pressure to make everything so quickly functional.

For example, everybody comes in and asks me, "Does it function? Does your work work?" Since that is what they want, I say "yes, it functions," but actually, this is a place for non-satisfaction. So that there exists a space and a time, I hope, where non-satisfaction is possible. Perhaps art is the last refuge of non-satisfaction, also perhaps the last refuge of nonsense, but I didn't know this when I started. I discovered it here. I see how people are joyfully doing nonsense here. I am surprised, but of course I don't understand nonsense against sense—I only understand sense against nonsense. I think I understand sense as the base of everything actually, where pieces of sense are glued on, like onto a big sheet, the big glob of nonsense.

RAIL: When I look around where we are now, I see overproduction. Overproduction of tires, overproduction of images, overproduction of text, overproduction of both physical and abstract material, and I can't pick out what makes sense, or what is nonsense. The overproduction is disabling.

HIRSCHHORN: It's very important not to distinguish between the two. That's why I say the base is nonsense. I mean, everything is based on nonsense, no? Think about existence, our existence, in this galaxy, at this moment, knowing millions of years are behind us, and how small we are on this world, on this earth. This, HERE, is only very few image of it. So, I think it's important to understand that this is all nonsense, but also that there are moments of sense, and it's up to us to declare that which can make sense. Each one of us decides. It is not up to the artist, to the cultural system, to politics, to the economical system, or to the social system to say what makes sense. It's up to each one to decide what can make sense for us, and I think philosophy, poetry, and writing can help.

RAIL: Right now, we are sitting in a library of sorts, books here and there. Do you see each of these books as a sense-making path?



Photo courtesy of Felicia Chizuko Carlisle.

HIRSCHHORN: First of all, it's an unfinished library. I mean it's incomplete; it's a very empty library, because of course even though there are more books in the world, there are also not more. What I mean is that there is so much more to get still. This is why the unfinished library is important. It is also why the unfinished banners, the unfinished pallets, and the unfinished style reports are important. They are all here to make a statement for what can come, what can still be achieved, or what can still be invented. Each book in the unfinished library has attempted sense, but there is still much more that can be done.

RAIL: This feels like an invitation, but I read somewhere a statement you made that this place you have created is not an invitation, not an event.

HIRSCHHORN: It's an invitation to think, I hope, but it's also a statement: a statement about a need to create other places, instead of events. These places can be places in our brain, places where one is also reachable.

For example, when there is non-programmation, such as an unfinished library (or like the unfinished banners) what I want to say with this is, "Okay, there's no more announcement now at six o'clock it is Jacques speaking" or "At eight o'clock it is this or that person doing this." No, you just come whenever, and perhaps you arrive into a lecture, which you didn't get the beginning of, and perhaps because you have to go somewhere else, you cannot be there when it ends. So, you are in the middle of something and perhaps this middle can be

something important. It's up to you to decide that and to be open to it, to create a new kind of way to get it, to touch it, because I do not believe that extra information will help you to get it. Instead, it's up to each one to produce new ways to make sense.

In this world of Twitter, of Instagram, of Facebook, of the Internet, we have to create other spaces. That's why this wants to be not only an invitation but also a statement. The production here is complete imminence, a kind of souvenir of this moment, of all these moments—somebody was here, or did produce something here ... even when it's nonsense.



Photo courtesy of Felicia Chizuko Carlisle.

RAIL: It sounds to me like you are making a case for the presence of production.

HIRSCHHORN: Yeah, of course. I think it is necessary to understand that presence is something very important. I mean, as an artist I am not the only one saying this—we can learn it from the Occupy movement, for example. That was not necessarily a successful experience, not even a satisfactory one, but I am interested in it too, because what they understood is that the human body is the only power to resist representation. For, by example, resisting the democratic representation system. So yes, this is about inventing new forms of presence and seeing how these operate, without getting immediately concrete and making politics again with it, or making business with it, or making these forms something efficient. Instead, it's about understanding how these forms can be, as such, an important statement, an important contribution to today's complexity and political causes.

RAIL: You are here everyday sharing with anybody who chooses to come and be with you, and you bring up friendship as a mode of presence in the guidelines. I am curious about what you have understood about the sort of presence that friendship requires.

HIRSCHHORN: I am here all the time because I want the presence of the others, and then, of course, I hope it will produce something. What can this be? Friendship? Discussion? An encounter? A thought?

But I am also celebrating the friendship among art, poetry, literature, and philosophy because they are my real friends. I invited friends to give lectures, to give a forum to this friendship. So there are lectures, there are readings, there are discussions, and there are philosophical developments in the name of friendship.

RAIL: And how do tape tires and benches of wood help friendship?

HIRSCHHORN: They help a lot.

RAIL: How?

HIRSCHHORN: They help a lot because, you know, this is not a culture of manifestation—this is an artwork. So it means not only just putting some chairs there and saying “Come on, this is for you to sit on” ... and then expecting you to do it. No, no, it is not how you to solve the problem. This is very important—each thing here is very important—because I think in order to ask the others to be involved you have to do the work first. As an artist, wanting to speak about presence and production, I had to create this container here, with a lot of work. This is how I have a chance to implicate the other, and not to say, “Just do it or you do it.” Have you seen a sign here saying, “Do it or just do it”? No, no, there’s no sign stating that you can do this or that. People understand when they can do something because somebody has already done it. This is because somebody else was ridiculous enough to do this, and so as an artist I am the ridiculous one that stacks the tires, the empty pallets, the one that covers everything with tape. I am proud of being the ridiculous one and happy because I really do think I do my work as an artist. I am not saying, “You do it.”



Photo courtesy of Felicia Chizuko Carlisle.

RAIL: It feels like you are overgiving in way.

HIRSCHHORN: It's overgiving in a potlatch way—not in a generous way, but in an offensive and even aggressive way. You know what I'm saying is "Come on ... I did it so now see if you can put yourself on this level." It's an economy. You know human beings are economic. What I mean is that it is not a new system.

I think today we are completely in a cul-de-sac, not only economically, but socially, politically, and culturally. I think the only thing that can help us is art, philosophy, poetry, and literature. There are very few moments where one can understand this—very few, very hidden moments, and I am for creating these kinds of moments. Perhaps when reading a poetry book, you can find something inside, you can learn something. So, I'm not pessimistic about this cul-de-sac. I believe in adding to it. Here, I am adding something. For example, yesterday Andrés Claro came and gave a lecture about the difficulties of translating poetry. He added 1,000 pages to this complex cul-de-sac. Do you know his work?

RAIL: Yes, I do, actually. In fact I am also from Chile, like him, and in some ways I consider myself a translator.

HIRSCHHORN: That's fantastic *[laughs]*. He gave a fantastic lecture. I am privileged because I am here every day, and there are also a lot of things coming up—unprogrammed things. People are performing and saying things that I think make a lot of sense, but also

non-sense. But this is not a performance. I am not here as a performer; no one is here as a performer. I am somebody who takes authorship 100 percent. That's why I am here: to speak with you. It's normal.

RAIL: Thank you, honestly. I say this because I am certain that your resistance to program a series of events and performances required a lot of institutional negotiation.

HIRSCHHORN: Yeah, of course it did, but that is why I like your question about the tires and the tape and everything. Not a lot of people get that point, I know. The aesthetic of it is really making possible the understanding that there are ideas, decisions, behind it all. For example, this half-empty library is a visual suggestion that it is ok for it to be this way.

RAIL: Do you register people's perceptions and all the other things that are going on here? How do you keep time?

HIRSCHHORN: I think documentation for this is not necessary and it's not possible. It's more about the moment. Perhaps somebody fell in love here, I don't know. Perhaps somebody got a book that he would never have read otherwise? That would be great! We do take some pictures everyday and put them on a website. Eventually, we will pull the website down. So, the only documentation is on our website...I have to go now because there is a lecture.

RAIL: Yes, perfect timing! Thanks.