

***IN THE FOREGROUND:
CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING***

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

**“A SET OF WAYS OF ENGAGING”:
LISA LEE ON THOMAS HIRSCHHORN & MATERIALITY**

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Transcript

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Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. I am Caro Fowler, your host and Director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In this series of conversations, I talk with art historians and artists about what it means to write history and make art, and the ways in which making informs how we create not only our world, but also ourselves.

In this episode of *In the Foreground*, I talk with Lisa Lee, Associate Professor of Art History at Emory University, and Florence Gould Foundation Fellow at the Clark in spring of 2020. Lisa and I were also colleagues together at Princeton while doing her graduate coursework, and it has been a pleasure to learn more about her research after graduate school. While a fellow at the Clark, Lisa worked on a project tentatively entitled "Thomas Hirschhorn's Real Abstraction, 1984-94." And in this episode, we explore Lisa's interest in the tension of what she describes as work that is critical, but isn't merely cynical--work that highlights the possibility of art and its everyday political power.

Lisa Lee

The work is the physical object, and it's a whole set of ways of engaging with the world that constitute a practice.

Caro Fowler

One of the questions I thought we could start out with was thinking about the term "real" and the title "Real Abstraction." And I know when I originally broached this question to you, I framed it around some later influences that came out in terms of Hirschhorn's own work and reading. But I also realized upon reflection that it also refers to a fairly canonical text for our own graduate education, which is of course Hal Foster's *The Return of the Real*. And I was thinking about how in that text the real is so closely connected to trauma--trauma as a not even necessary but assumed condition for not only contemporary art, but contemporary experience in the world--and also a really strong focus on the abject body, and a consideration that there's no way to think about being in the world now without trauma and repetition as the only means

to access or touch something that could be in some way defined as real. But it seems to me that in your title, and in Hirschhorn's work and in your own work, there's such a strong through line of--I don't want to say utopian, but there's something that's much more--I appreciate your book on [Iza] Genzken, and I imagine that these same qualities will come out in your work on Hirschhorn, is there's a way [in] which as much as you attend to and are very acutely aware of these artists' extremely critical engagement with our contemporary world, and late capitalism and neoliberalism, that you still maintain a place for possibility. And I also think about the ways in which "love" also seems to be a key term for Hirschhorn in some ways. And so I wonder if for you if this term "real abstraction" is articulating a different real for not only of course, Hirschhorn's work in the 80s and early 90s, but also perhaps a different real for this moment now in art history.

Lisa Lee

Well the way in which I'm thinking about real is really derived from Thomas' own writings, which are, as you know, extensive. And in those texts, and in his articulations, the real functions, I think, in two different ways. Of course it does evoke, it does address the traumatic, the disjunctive, conflict, [and] trauma (various kinds), especially in the work that engages war, violence, [and] traumatized bodies in particular. And that's all there, but there's also the real in a much more everyday sense of lived reality--the kinds of encounters one might have, the kinds of small but meaningful interactions one might encounter in a given day. And I think it has to function multiply in order for the work to gain resonance. So it is the traumatic. It's also the quotidian with all of its comings and goings. And then there is the opening onto what you're talking about as the utopian. Love is important, but I would say that probably grace is the opposite to the traumatic. So they're held in tension for him. In the real, there's always the possibility that in difficulty [and] in conflict, there will be the possibility for moments of resourcefulness, grace, insight, inventiveness, strength, creativity. And I think he really works at the intersection of that positive and negative--the affirmative and the deeply troubled.

Caro Fowler

It seems to me as an outsider to his work that this question of grace is possibly entering into it as something that comes in a little later. Do you see it present in this earlier moment?

Lisa Lee

No, they're there, but they're not as powerfully manifest or quite so foregrounded. From the very beginning, he's inserting his works into the space of everyday life, and instigating possibilities for the public's engagement with it. And that engagement is open to various types of response, some of which invite neglect, invite rejection, and some of which are open to precisely those moments of unexpected.

Caro Fowler

Right. And when does he start using the term "presence and production"?

Lisa Lee

So that comes in the 2000s. So he decides that he's going to produce four monuments. These are some of the works for which he's best known. And he produces the first two. There's the Spinoza monument, and then the Deleuze monument. And the Deleuze monument is a real turning point where, at that moment, the work is still in public space. It's open 24 hours a day, but he himself is not on site, except for the installation and the planned deinstallation. And that work was subject to vandalism. There were community concerns or concerns on the part of visitors, and he had to dismantle that work prematurely. And it is the occasion for this insight that the artist presence must be the basis for any kind of intervention of this level. And so shortly after, he begins to formalize the concept of presence and production.

Caro Fowler

I know that you're framing the first part of the project around the term "page," but also thinking more concretely about paper and industrial-made paper, and the ways in which Hirschhorn's project engages with paper as a material. And

one thing that I really appreciated in your book on Genzken is [that] you argue that material had meaning for her as a site of allegorization. But you point out that it doesn't have meaning for all artists in her period, which I think is important. There's a sense in my field often that any material could have meaning for any artist. Perhaps working in early modern art, there's a sense that all materials of necessity had meaning. But I appreciate that you're attuned to the fact that materials don't necessarily have meaning for every artist just because they happen to pick up a certain material. But it seems that at least for Hirschhorn, materials were a form of thinking, and thinking through practice, and thinking through meaning. And I'm just curious to hear more about some of the specific paper works you're looking at in this section, and paper in particular (probably industrial premade A4 paper)--specifically how he engaged with that as a site to then also move away from graphic design.

Lisa Lee

Yeah, gosh I have a lot to say about that. I am interested in materiality and materials, and the ways for certain artists it becomes a way of thinking. And that's especially true for Genzken. I think it's very much true of Hirschhorn as he approaches the much more heterogeneous kinds of works that he produces. In the early moment, which is the subject of this book-length study I'm undertaking, the page--actually I've ultimately decided on the "sheet" as the more apt term. It's not actually the materiality of the paper that he's interested in. It's the A4 sheet as a standard, as a format. So it's actually not material at all. It's a possibility for reproduction, rather than any kind of particular investment in the thing that you hold in your hand. So when you look at these drawings that he's producing in these mid 1980s--I've actually never seen any of these reproduced, and I found them in the archive--they're very fragmented. They've been cut up and stuck together with scotch tape. And we think of that as sort of Hirschhornian in its aesthetic, but it doesn't have the same valence as the later collages that he produces using similar means. They're actually a very practical way of approaching image combination for reproduction. So A4 is important because it promises dissemination, ease of reproduction, cost effectiveness--all of the things that might have been a concern for a graphic designer. And so for

me, this particular period of working with the sheet of paper, and thinking through it is important because it shows a transition between thinking about the sheet of paper as a basis for reproduction. It begins there, but he very quickly abandons that, but not without some degree of internal unease. He ultimately begins to take the sheet as a kind of abstract limit, as an object. He treats it less as a basis for reproduction, and more as an object. And so its materiality, eventually, would force its extension into space. Literally, he would begin to build upon its surface, and then ultimately replace the blank sheet with substrates that have more significance, like cardboard. And by more significance, I mean cultural and material history: salvaged pieces of cardboard, particle board--things that he's finding from the street. And so at a crucial moment, he abandons that pristine page in favor of materials that do actually suggest a kind of material history.

Caro Fowler

Second question: I'm curious about the ways in which you find his early engagement and training in graphic design--which I imagine you think of as as a through line throughout his career, even if it's not directly engaged explicitly at every moment--playing out in some of the more current work, which is in many ways engaged with not the graphic design of printed ephemera, but the graphic design of social media and social networking. And not to argue that social media doesn't have a materiality, because obviously it does--[I'm curious] if you see a resurgent interest in graphic design, and the possibilities or failures of mass communication through these premade forms that are [inaudible].

Lisa Lee

I think he's always been interested in graphic forms of representation and expression. And the more ubiquitous the better. So something like the heart as an emblem is present in the very early works, and appears now in the very particular cellphone interface that you're describing--the chat interface that appears in more recent work--but it's always been there. It was there in his alters. And these are for him, I think in ways that you've captured, simultaneously replete and completely empty. And he's always been interested

in that fullness and absence of meaning, and the ways in which these emblems are a resource for people for communicating with one another. I think it's entirely consistent. The technological dimension of it seems to be quite different--that the interface would be on a cellphone screen. That's obviously not the point of reference in his early work. But I think it's really of a piece. And it's important that his quotation of the cellphone, for instance, is always remade in cardboard and felt tip marker. He's not actually reproducing them. So there's a way in which even when he's engaging with these sorts of technologies and the virtual, they're often materialized as objects, as printouts--as things that are remade by hand. And so even the digital is most often present in his work as substances, as object, as thing.

Caro Fowler

Yeah. As much as one could easily on the surface read this as a critique of the mode of communication within emoticons for example, there's also this generosity there within [inaudible]. One thing that I love about the recent chat posters and this idea of having a conversation with Simone Weil via a chat on cellphone, is it's such a long trope within humanism that goes back to Petrarch writing letters to Cicero--so the way in which it on the one hand could seem very surface, but it also takes part in a long tradition of people thinking about how we engage.

Lisa Lee

I think he has a way of suspending judgment. And it takes a moment when you encounter these works. I think well, is he making fun? Is he in jest? Is he in earnest? And I think for the most part, he has the capacity to--I think his term would be choose to agree with them. They are the existing modes through which we communicate, and he wants to validate that. At the same time, he's obviously aware of the vapidness that is also lingering behind these emoticons, right?

Caro Fowler

The question of publicness, which I know is something that you talked about in your book on Genzken, and something that you've thought about quite a bit--I know it's something that's central to this project (it can't not be considering the public nature of so much of his work, ultimately). First, if you could discuss a little bit further the ways in which you see publicness as different for Genzken versus Hirschhorn, and even I think more broadly then what theorists or readings of publicness have been most formative for you and your theorizing of these artists.

Lisa Lee

I think any sort of historically conscious discussion of publicness would have to begin with Habermas and his really foundational texts on the structural transformation of the public sphere published in the 60s. And there he really lays out the ideal bourgeois public sphere as holding emancipatory potential. He acknowledges it's rendered impossible, that it was always failed perhaps, but he wants to hold on to the idea of disinterested rational debate. And that's a foundational text that is productive precisely because it gives rise to critique. Very important for me was Negt and Kluge's formulation of a counterpublic sphere. So they're taking from Habermas, but deeply skeptical of the ideational core of the bourgeois public sphere. They want to project instead the possibility for a counterpublic sphere based upon the experience of the proletariat. And it's written from an explicitly Marxist perspective in the 1970s. The two dimensions of Negt and Kluge's texts that have been most useful for me, and that's formed the background of my thinking, would be their discussion of media as a kind of pseudo public sphere that infiltrates life such that there is no domain that is free from this exertion of power and capitalism. So that's one aspect. And the other would be the ways in which they were able to acknowledge a fragmented, heterogeneous, overlapping group of publics if you will, diverse publics. And they were obviously still ultimately invested in a proletariat that would be the public that would ultimately precipitate a revolutionary change. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that there were competing publics, and that's also very useful in my writing. So this forms the background, but really isn't the driving force of my work on Hirschhorn, though as we know, publicness is critical. I do think that his

background in Marxist graphic design, or communist graphic design, which was his initial intention (his professional ambition was to produce graphic design with a political charge), I think that's ultimately very significant actually to the perhaps idiosyncratic way in which he's approached art in the public sphere. And it also explains his resistance to certain more common terms of contemporary art such as social practice. The terms that our discipline have generated to describe these sorts of works grate upon him in part because the genesis for his approach to the public sphere is so different. And that's part of the story that I hope to tell in this book.

Caro Fowler

Well, it also seems that one of the terms that I hear all the time in the Research and Academic Program is the term "precarity," but it is an important term, and it's not to undermine that it's an important term right now. I think that generally in the projects that people talk about it, they talk about it as the exploitation of both environment and modes of labor and modes of distribution, etc. [that] have created a state of precarity for most of the world. What I appreciate in Hirschhorn's work and I think in your own thinking of this term, is that precarity also is a place in which for example, it is the only condition by which perhaps we can experience grace, or by which we can come together and actually change perhaps the ways in which we are living. So I'm curious for you then how you think precarity is at work now. Or I guess I'm asking you to perhaps extrapolate a more engaged sense of precarity than one I often hear [inaudible].

Lisa Lee

[Both laugh] I hardly want to be responsible for that, but I should say that Hal Foster has written about this with regard to Thomas's work in particular. And it is a word that has been operative for Thomas for a long time. It's gained currency, and perhaps it's within certain discourses always had currency, but it precedes, in other words, the fashion for the precarious (not to sound cynical about it). For Thomas, [it's] the site of possibility, right? And if his invocation of it can seem sometimes romantic, which he certainly has been accused of, I think that he's sufficiently attentive to the very real difficulties, struggles, and systemic

problems that give rise to precariousness that he isn't merely romanticizing it as the site of some sort of more authentic lived reality. But you're right that it is in the projects in public space in particular [that] he's in pursuit of interactions that surface precisely these moments of friction that give rise to the possibility of grace or the unexpected, the unplanned, the unstructured, and power. I think the power of the precarious is very provocative for him, and very interesting.

Caro Fowler

And "practice" is a word that I know is really important for you and your project, and thinking about Hirschhorn. Could you expand on it a little bit? Also, I'm thinking about practice versus production and the term presence and production. I feel like production is a term that evokes both laborers and the factory, and being alienated from the object of one's labor, versus practice and the ways in which you see practice and production playing out as terms perhaps not even for Hirschhorn, but for you and your writing.

Lisa Lee

I mean that's interesting because I think you've pointed to a kind of habituated language that has crept in. We talk about practice maybe a little unconsciously. I think Thomas himself would much prefer the term production, in so far as he's always insisted on being an artist, but being a worker also, and practice perhaps is slightly too rarefied for his tastes. Why would I resort to such language rather than production if it isn't merely a kind of convenience? I would say that there is a way in which for an artist like Thomas in particular the work is the physical object. It's a whole set of ways of engaging with the world that constitute a practice--the world (the art world in particular), the various populations that he involves in his work, the kinds of publicness that he puts forth as an artist available always to answer for his work. I think if it isn't merely a convenience, and a sort of art world jargon to aggrandize the things that we're talking about, I do think that there is a way in which he carries on the work of being an artist that is not just about the solutions to a certain set of formal questions. I imagine a kind of way of being in the world, and a very principled and political way of encountering and dealing with all conversations--with scholars, with critics, with

curators, with collectors, with dealers--that really constitute for me a practice that ultimately informs the individual works, but also everything else.

Caro Fowler

So one thing I'm curious about is, in terms of your work more broadly--so both of these projects are essentially monographic projects, the Genzken and the Hirschhorn, and I know that comes from the fact that--I don't mean to mention the dissertation because obviously these books are much beyond the dissertation, but I know that originally the crux of your dissertation was these two artists. But I'm curious, do you ever have insecurities about working monographically? I feel like the monograph is something in art history--one might be told as a graduate student to not write a monograph--that people really trouble. We've had some very senior scholars recently come in who were working on monographs, and they were a little sheepish about it or they're like, "oh I've always written these big histories, and I'm writing a monograph." So I'm curious if you've ever had any insecurity around it, or if you've really embraced it.

Lisa Lee

It has always struck me that different projects require different parameters. I respect deeply, and read and assign, and think about texts that take the measure of a moment, or really lay out a productive theory of something. And I have non-monographic projects that I've considered. But when it came time to think about the actual public life of my research, there were reasons both intellectual and practical that drove me toward monographs for the Genzken book, and the Hirschhorn book now underway. The intellectual had to do with a strong sense that there was a way to write about these artists and account for them that could only be done by taking the oeuvre as the object of study--the studio, the kind of "logic," if you will, and it's definitely in quotes, the logic of an artist working in the studio--which would give rise to insights that I couldn't otherwise develop more thematically. Once the project seemed to call for it, then it was no longer an issue of "what will other people think?" I will say that the practical dimension had to do with talking to publishers actually, who are thinking in a

very different way about the dissemination of scholarly work. So in conversations with Susan Bielstein of University of Chicago Press in the development stages of the book, it became very clear that she saw in a way that I also knew but didn't have the confidence to assert at that particular juncture, which was immediately after I had finished my dissertation, that there was a need for a monographic study of Genzken in particular. So at the moment that I had proposed the dissertation, Genzken was known as an entity, but very few people in the States had actually seen work by her. And so there was a degree of insecurity on my part about whether or not I could produce a work of scholarship that would have been would be accorded the kind of significance a dissertation ought to have or ought to be accorded, or rather ought to earn. And so once it became clear that the monograph was desired and needed, then the intellectual and the practical went together very well.

Caro Fowler

I think there are ways in which these two artists Genzken and Hirschhorn (while their practices are obviously very different, they also have overlapping questions) not only question, but I would also say they still maintain the possibility for art to interact and to create possibility in the public sphere. And they also maintain the possibility of the criticality of not only art, but also art practice or art making. What do you think it is about your own intellectual history or background that has drawn you to these two specific artists or writing this specific history of our contemporary moment, in which I think there's still possibility for reflection and engagement and critique?

Lisa Lee

I mean it's almost a given, but the interwar moment of Dada and Constructivism, these of course now heroic moments of utopian thinking within art making, was deeply important to me in my formation. Especially within Dada, unsentimental critique of society that nevertheless bore the kernel of some aspiration to change it--that still moves me in a deep way. And it's really not very difficult to see why I would choose Genzken and Hirschhorn as artists to focus upon, in so far as both of them explicitly profess indebtedness and affinity with those

particular moments of art's history. But that kind of affinity manifests itself in ways that are not simple. They are critical. They are very much aware of what has been discussed as its failure. And I think it's their persistence in trying to work through that very complicated space--a clear-eyed assessment of society and also a rose-tinted view of its possibility that I find very generative. And so it has to do with a larger sense of wanting to have it both ways--to have work that is both critical, but that isn't merely cynical, [and] that isn't resigned. And it's why I've turned to these artists, and why I still think their work bears importance for us.

Caro Fowler

And what do you then see as the role of art history or the role of you as an art historian writing about these artists? How do you see the possibility of that discourse or that writing--obviously it shapes the way that they're received--then also creates its own work? How do you see that interaction?

Lisa Lee

I try not to think too much about it--

Lisa Lee

--in that sort of very grand sense. I think I proceed best when I feel like I am doing what is possible for me in terms of the greatest degree of consciousness and rigor and creativity that I can bring to bear to the task. But I really do not, and cannot proceed by thinking about how I'm going to make a mark or intervention in the discipline. I know other people do, and are empowered. I would just find it utterly debilitating. And this is maybe a little bit hard-earned in the past couple of years really figuring out how can I go about doing this work in a way that feels significant to me, but will also produce something that is compelling to others. It has to be both, but it always has to begin with the first part. If I find myself approaching it from the other end first, I think I would be crippled with doubt [laughs].

Caro Fowler

[Laughs]

Caro Fowler

Do you think that holds closely to description as a grounding for your method?

Lisa Lee

I think Michael Fried gave an interview recently where he talks about generating argument through description. And I think that is for me the only way of proceeding.

Caro Fowler

I agree. I also find it it's the hardest thing to teach students. I find that they don't somehow have the faith that the argument comes from description, and I often feel like description and theory coexist beside each other in their papers. But it's so difficult to teach or to think about the ways in which description is the argument--

Lisa Lee

Precisely.

Caro Fowler

—and I find that one of the most difficult things to convey to students.

Lisa Lee

I think for them it's just too self-evident. I think that description is somehow a one-to-one relationship to the object, and to introduce the idea that it's a lens already is, I think, quite new, and I think difficult for them to grapple with.

Caro Fowler

Your field modern and contemporary is the field in which most graduate students want to work. I think many programs experience that. How have you seen the field change since you were a first-year PhD student at Princeton to now being an assistant professor at Emory? It seems that many fields have had

really watershed changes since the early part of the century, but how do you see modern and contemporary more broadly? How has it really changed for you since you were a graduate student to teaching in it now?

Lisa Lee

I think in ways that you've already indicated, the applications to the programs suggest that the area of focus has really shifted. It's rare that I receive an application that is focused on European art, and even American art that isn't informed by critical race studies, or a sense of the global, and it is perhaps the way it should be. But it does put me in an interesting position of fielding applications that no longer speak to my area of expertise. And trying to figure out how to navigate that has been [and] will continue to be something I struggle with, and have to figure my way around. And as I say, it's something that is necessary, and is a corrective. But what's coming and what has passed are I think meeting in a way that is going to produce some unrest. This is the field in which I've invested my energies, and I believe in it, and I love it. But I also feel a great deal of remorse for not being more knowledgeable about what has happened before. I think it leads to some of the most egregious overstatements of the newness of the new. And maybe it's just one of a series of these kinds of turnings over of the discipline. But things that were given, that for instance one would be interested in European contemporary art, is no longer to be taken as such.

Caro Fowler

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