



Johan Thom

Diary of New York

Johan Thom is an artist whose work continually pushes conceptual boundaries. Thom stages unsettling performances which physically challenge his body and the comfort zones of his audience. Whether he is inserting foreign objects into his skin or creating paintings on a wall with his own blood, his work brings together theories and energy into dynamic, almost shamanistic performances.

In summer 2005 Thom came to New York City through the Ampersand residency program. During this period he set aside time each day to observe people, places and the rhythm of life in Manhattan (often from the rooftop of the Ampersand apartment in Tribeca). Thom's findings became source material for an energetic series of surreal cartographies. The following conversation negotiates a path into Johan Thom's recent works on paper.

LAF: This body of drawings represents a significant departure from your work in performance. What prompted you to create this series?

JT: Long before my departure for New York I felt that I wanted to write my own manifesto, so to speak. So, for me there are two basic levels of experience at stake in writing this Diary: One, that of the reality of my experiences in NY – my body and mind in that space for that time; Two,

my thoughts and experiences as an artist who had been forging an aesthetic and a modus operandi over the course of a decade and now felt ready to 'write' it down. In this way, writing the Diary was a cathartic experience for me.

I was a drawing artist long before performance became my primary field of artistic expression. When I was an undergraduate art student I admired the work of Diane Victor and William Kentridge immensely. I just felt like they had done everything I wanted to do with drawing already. Thus, in an attempt to (re) shape my own identity as an artist I abandoned this medium and decided to only return to it once my own concepts were more mature. This process took nine years in total (during which time I researched sculpture, abstract expressionism, conceptualism and performance art, amongst other things). Today I consider myself a conceptual artist and will use any medium for its strategic or logistic value to clearly communicate my concepts (even if other artists have successfully explored the same medium countless times before).

That said, many of my performances bear witness to an ongoing fascination with the relationship between the act of mark-making and the concept of catharsis. So in hindsight, I never really stopped drawing.

LAF: You dedicated a great deal of time to studying people and places in New York. Can you explain some of the concepts behind this body of work? How does it relate to your Village Idiot series?

JT: I wanted to capture all my experiences of, and in, New York without becoming embedded in the struggle to be objective about it. That's why a free flow of ideas, words and images, sometimes taken from the street, the subway or even a book that I was reading at the time (such as 'The Plague' by Albert Camus) pops up everywhere. Everyday I would wake up at six and go up to the roof of the Ampersand flat to write a new diary entry. Some mornings I just watched New York wake up - joggers, cyclists, parents with their children and lonely stragglers on their way to work, all going through their familiar morning rituals. Other days I would deliberately get 'lost' on the subway for hours on end, experiencing and observing the ebb and flow of the trains` bumpy journey through New York. All the time I would have my sketchbook with me, mapping each experience in a kind of shorthand vocabulary of symbols and signs that I could later re-think and rework as a new Diary entry, one that made no distinction between the objective facts of my journey and my subjective responses thereto.

At the time I was still in the process of conceptualizing the Village Idiot series. Therefore similar ideas may appear in both the Diary and the VI series (a series of performances, videos and drawings currently in progress). For example, my passport containing my US Visa and Schengen Visa for a trip to Italy, both of which already took a serious amount of time and money to obtain in South Africa, was stolen at JFK International airport. A nightmare, yes, but also excellent field research for the VI series: much of it is based on exploring the objectifying power of bureaucracy, how it strips our individuality and makes of us statistic abstractions only. The savage brutality of the Berlin wall pales in comparison to that of the new, capitalist, bureaucratic order that controls our every movement. The VI series is an attempt to talk back to the 'grey people', the customs and immigration officers, for example, that animate and enforce this system. The brutal reality of bureaucracy really struck me after I visited Ellis Island and the Jewish Museum in NY in a single day: the 'new world' with its promise of a new future unfettered by the weight of our tainted history, brushed aside in one fell swoop by the initial refusal of the US Immigration services to allow Jewish refugees fleeing the horrors of WW2 onto its shores.



Image: Helicopters over the Hudson
Medium: Pastel on paper
2005

LAF: The style and energy in this body of work resonate with the work of artists such as Paul Klee and Piet Mondrian. Were you inspired by these artists?

JT: I wasn't trying to emulate any single artist's or philosopher's work in the making of these drawings. To be honest, formally they were a complete surprise to me: I knew I wanted to use language; symbols and emotive marks but I had no idea what this would amount to. That said, my artistic influences range from Paul Klee, Francesco Canquillo, Filippo Tomasso Marinetti, Vasily Kandinsky, Joan Miró, Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Bruce Nauman and Thomas Hirschorn internationally, and Willem Boshoff, Kendell Geers and Kay Hassan in South Africa. Philosophical interests include Karl Marx, Georges Bataille, Michelle Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Noam Chomsky, Pan Africanism and Negritude, amongst others. As you can see, it is a self-contradictory, messy affair.



Image: The Holocaust Museum
Medium: Pastel on paper
2005

LAF: You created a significant series of drawings in a short period of time. Did the completion of such a substantial body of work inspire projects that you are currently exploring?

JT: If I hadn't made these drawings I would not have continued with the Village Idiot Series, the seeds of which were planted long ago but never allowed to develop because I thought it too obscure and didn't want to marginalize my artistic practice even more. Now I feel that the series is not only feasible, but also a necessary addition to my work: I must respond to the growing bureaucratization of space that swallows all, from individuals, politics, economics and culture. The cacophony of sounds that once emanated from the tower of Babel is silenced by the dull thud of a stamp on paper that accepts only one currency: its own (which language you speak is now entirely besides the point).

Images: (left) Birdy and (right) Hanmanpreachmanbangman
Medium: Pastel on paper
2005



LAF: Your imagery in this series marries the specific (through the use of location or iconography) to the metaphysical (or otherworldly). What is the conceptual thread between these points?

JT: There is no difference between theory and life and accordingly no need to reconcile the two. Too often theory, religion or philosophy are viewed as occupying some ideal Platonic space above or beyond the scope of our everyday activities. Capitalism and Christianity, war and Deconstruction, ice-skating and God, there is no gap between them – to differentiate between them is to perpetuate the illusion that protects Western capitalism as the new global order. I wish more people in the world would realise this. The separation between church and state, that marks the rise of 'modern' society in the West, is a good example of an attempt to maintain a difference between theory/philosophy or religion and life. And then the West shakes its head and wonders why the Muslim world holds it in such contempt today. For example, Nike, Shell, Coke, Ford, Microsoft and Apple aren't just companies or products, they are complex philosophies or 'brands' that implicitly argue for a specific way of living, relating to and understanding the world. Plato on a skateboard, why not?

Laurie Ann Farrell - Curator, Museum for African Art, New York, USA



Overleaf images: (diptych) Federal plaza
Medium: Pastel on paper
2005

Image: (detail) Heavens gate
Medium: Pastel on paper
2005



- ⊕ - Graskop
- ⊕ - Dullstroom
- ⊕ - Pretoria - Tshwane
- ⊕ - Irene - Tshwane
- ⊕ - Richmond
- ⊕ - Cape Town