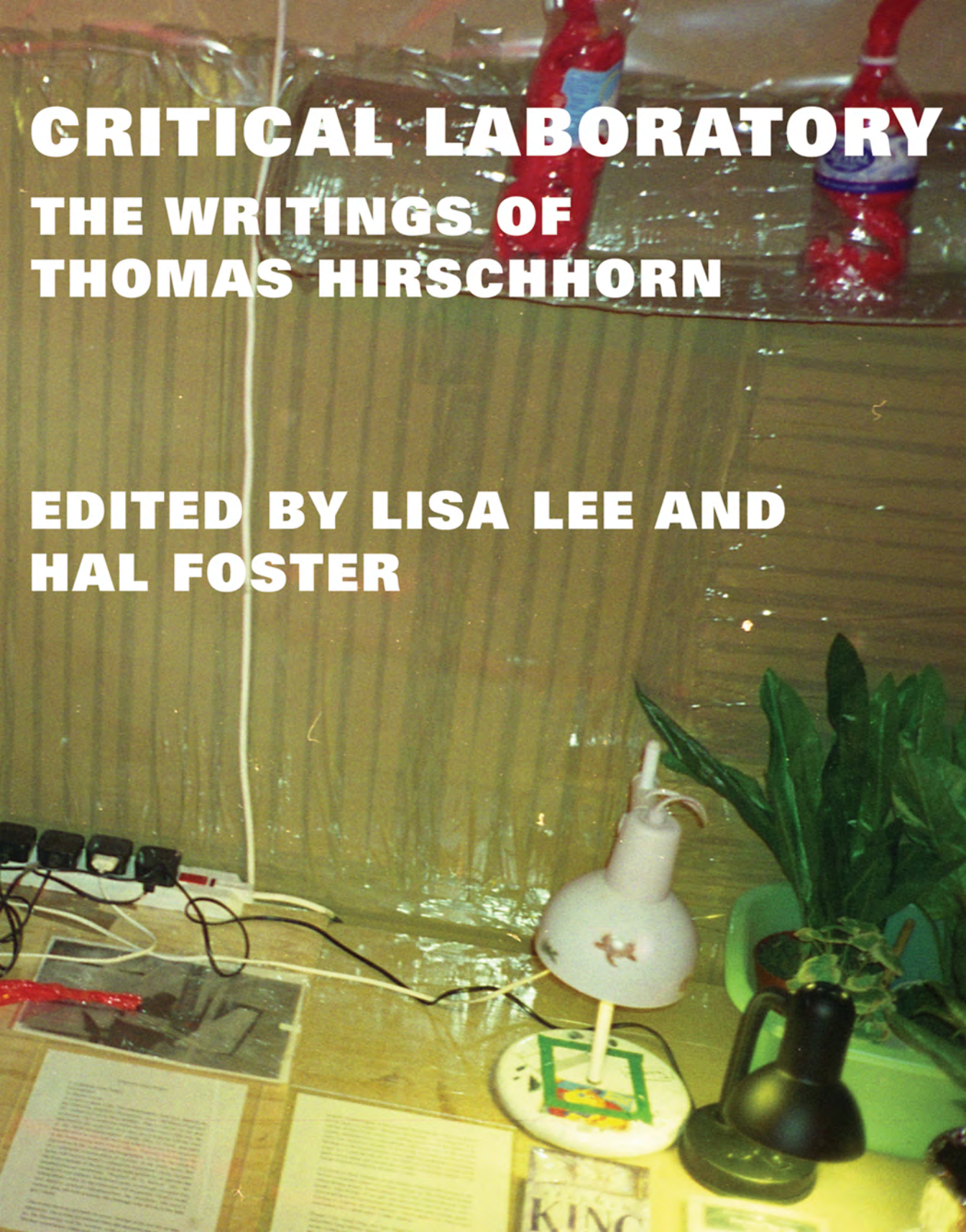


CRITICAL LABORATORY
THE WRITINGS OF
THOMAS HIRSCHHORN

EDITED BY LISA LEE AND
HAL FOSTER



CRITICAL LABORATORY

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CRITICAL LABORATORY

The Writings of Thomas Hirschhorn

THOMAS HIRSCHHORN

EDITED BY LISA LEE AND HAL FOSTER

AN OCTOBER BOOK

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Thomas Hirschhorn
Aubervilliers, May 2012

PREFACE

This laboratory is utopian and realistic at the same time.

—Thomas Hirschhorn

The paraphernalia of a makeshift laboratory fill a room awash in dim red light. Clandestine analytical work is underway, involving the intense scrutiny of texts and images. Like specimens or pieces of evidence, books, magazines, documents, and photographs are pressed under glass, reflected in mirrors, or subjected to the one-eyed gaze of desk lamps. Throughout the room, thick strands of red plastic extend downward from the ceiling. When terminating on the surface of a book or photograph, these plastic cords act as physical manifestations of theoretical and conceptual connections; when coursing into the open mouths of bottles and canisters, they evoke some elemental force (perhaps that of thought itself) to be collected and conserved. Thematics of authenticity and simulacra, encoding and decoding, deconstruction and analytical reconstruction play out across the room's many elements, which together constitute the artwork *Critical Laboratory* (1999).¹ Its creator, Thomas Hirschhorn, describes this compact yet expansive work as a "space aside" in which research is undertaken. The subject of that research? Criticality itself.

In this collection of Hirschhorn's statements, letters, project proposals, and interviews—the first to date—the realm of the word constitutes for this artist a critical “space aside,” apart from the work but intimately bound up with it. Writing is a crucial tool at various stages in the life and afterlife of Hirschhorn's works. As the initial articulation of the governing ideas and constituent forms for a given project, a proposal or statement commits to paper the will that drives a work that has yet to come into being. To borrow Hirschhorn's own metaphor, it is the stone thrown ahead, whose trajectory is to be followed in the realization of the work.² In the case of the “Presence and Production” projects in public space, Hirschhorn's writings, in the form of private correspondence or open letters, are the means by which he appeals to potential collaborators and host communities.³ This same correspondence, along with the other documents and photographs generated over the course of the temporary projects, contributes to the apparatus of memory through which the works endure after disassembly. The writings thus bear conceptual import, just as they serve logistical functions. Indeed, the logistical (as regards issues of placement, materials, installation, security, etc.) overlaps with the conceptual; and neither, for Hirschhorn, is ever far from the political.

The written page is a site in which Hirschhorn exercises his criticality and self-criticality. Writing enables him to gain distance from his work: he judges his own motives, assesses his works' successes or failures, and derives lessons for future action. He may also turn a critical lens upon the institutions of art and the conventions governing the global art market. In this way, Hirschhorn pushes back against the forces with which he is necessarily involved and in relation to which he must negotiate his place. Most expansively, his writing attests to Hirschhorn's persistent desire to conceive his work and his artistic stance in response to—and specifically as a form of resistance against—contemporary social, political, and economic contexts.

Although Hirschhorn insists that writing is “an exercise outside [his] work,” his texts nevertheless exert tremendous influence on the reception of the work. Hirschhorn's determination to “invent [his] own terms,”⁴ an intent to wrest interpretive power from critics and art historians, has been successful

to the extent that his terms and formulations demand to be reckoned with, even by skeptics. The interest generated by Hirschhorn's writings is due less to some general aura surrounding the authorial voice, than to the specific nature and force of his articulations. Hirschhorn is notably unafraid to make a grand claim, to adopt an unfashionable term or stance, or to put forward a provocative, perhaps even preposterous, proposition. In an age of cautious relativism and of the codification of an academic language of art, Hirschhorn's bluntness and refusal of distancing mechanisms have the capacity to jar the reader from merely polite engagement. His tendency to express himself in short, grammatically unembellished constructions, his coining of pithy sayings, his use of anaphora, and his penchant for reiteration produce urgent and emphatic rhythms.

Critical Laboratory: The Writings of Thomas Hirschhorn brings together a large and representative selection of Hirschhorn's scattered texts, returning many to circulation and presenting many in English for the first time.⁵ Hirschhorn has long distributed his texts in the form of pamphlets or press releases accompanying his exhibitions. Individual texts have been published in catalogs and journals, where they have been more permanently archived, perhaps, but nevertheless dispersed. The writings gathered in this collection span two decades, from 1992, around the time of Hirschhorn's earliest exhibitions, to 2012. The full range of his output is discussed: single-channel videos, works on paper, large- and small-scale public projects, and museum and gallery exhibitions. In tone, the texts vary from the introspective to the plainly descriptive, from the solicitous to the assertive, and from the polemical to the strident. The textures of the writings differ depending on the language and date of composition, the type and purpose of the document, the private or public mode of address.⁶ As editors, we have aimed to unify the texts without rendering them uniform.

The first section, "Statements and Letters," is devoted to those writings that address broad themes and problematics. Included are programmatic statements about typologies and works in specific media as well as declarations of

aesthetic philosophy, political positions, and art historical commitments. The second section, “Projects,” gathers occasional texts relating to specific artworks or exhibitions, chronologically arranged. In some cases a single project is represented by more than one document, each of which brings to light a different dimension of the artwork’s relationship with institutions and publics.⁷ The third section, “Interviews,” introduces other strong voices that challenge the artist to elaborate upon his positions. The interviews have been selected because they home in on particular concepts, develop themes in greater depth (such as Hirschhorn’s attitude toward the museum and his engagement with art historical precedents of the avant-garde), or tackle controversies that have surrounded his work.

The reader of *Critical Laboratory* is in a position to trace the development of Hirschhorn’s ideas and artistic strategies—their coming into being, their transformation and refinement, their falling away. For example, in “Regarding the End of the *Deleuze Monument*,” Hirschhorn reflects upon the premature disassembly of the *Monument* due to fallout from inadequate measures for protecting the work. Having decided that his weekly visits to the site of the *Deleuze Monument* were too infrequent, Hirschhorn concludes that in the future he would have to be present for the duration of such projects. The germ of the “Presence and Production” guideline, which has generated some of the artist’s best-known projects in public space, can thus be located. Shifts in concerns can be noted as well. One observes in the early projects, for instance, Hirschhorn’s preoccupation with accentuating the horizontal and vertical through lateral spreads and perpendicular stacking or leaning—a formal concern that recedes, or is perhaps subsumed, in the later works.

Ultimately, the continuities are most remarkable. From the earliest writings forward can be traced Hirschhorn’s commitment to quotidian materials, to deskilling, to the centrality of political and economic thinking within (and as means of generating) form. Certain distinctive artistic strategies surface repeatedly. Hirschhorn often creates new forms through what might be termed the “materialization of metaphor.” A “stain on the conscience” is rendered as an amorphous, physical mass; the assertion “art is a tool” is literalized in a room

full of construction implements; and psycho-emotional “hardening” is manifested by bulbous accretions of paper and packing tape.⁸ What I propose to call the “spatialization of abstractions” constitutes a related strategy, in which democracy, utopia, and the depletion of history are conveyed in the space and structure of a hotel, a lounge, and a chalet, respectively. Particular themes recur in the documents gathered here and in the works described: the ideals and the institutions of democracy,⁹ philosophy’s ongoing relevance to art and life,¹⁰ the ravages of human violence and injustice,¹¹ the proliferation of urban non-places,¹² and vernacular modes of making,¹³ just to name some prominent examples. To draw out these themes is to map the constellation of concerns that animates Hirschhorn’s practice as a whole, aesthetically and ethically.

Principal among these concerns is the place of art in the public sphere, which can be traced not only through the writings collected here, but also in *33 Ausstellungen im öffentlichen Raum 1998–1989*, a catalog of Hirschhorn’s earliest works in public space.¹⁴ We reproduce in full this extremely rare, out-of-print publication. Its material lexicon of raw-edged corrugated cardboard, casual photographs, transparent tape, and ballpoint pen will be familiar to those who know Hirschhorn’s collage work; so will the visual lexicon of Hirschhorn’s ungainly script, his errant and aggressive scribbles.¹⁵ In the works pictured, Hirschhorn claims any passerby as his audience and any locale as his gallery, from the stairwell of an *habitation à loyer modéré* to a nondescript urban sidewalk. Yet, the publicness of his work cannot be limited to its presence in any particular instance of public space. Hirschhorn’s desire to address a “nonexclusive audience” determines the materials, means, and forms through which his work takes shape. His head-on engagement with fraught political and economic matters of imperialism, warfare, globalization, urbanization, economic marginalization, and deterritorialization asserts the place of art in a public sphere that is understood as a site of critique, argumentation, and dissent.

So too one might understand Hirschhorn’s prolific writing and his readiness to be interviewed as manifestations of that same impulse to effect “moments of publicness.” In his writings Hirschhorn stakes his political and artistic positions, explains his motives, and lays bare the mechanisms of his

thought even when they are contradictory or insufficient. He writes in ways that explicitly invite judgment, ask to be held accountable, and call to be challenged. Writing might constitute for Hirschhorn a “space aside,” but unlike the artwork after which this collection is named, writing is not conceived as a clandestine site. The reader is invited to enter the space of this “critical laboratory,” at once utopian and realistic.

Lisa Lee



1.1 *Less Is Less, More Is More*, 1995. First Johannesburg Biennale, Johannesburg, South Africa, 1995.

STATEMENTS AND LETTERS

LESS IS LESS, MORE IS MORE

What I want to do here is get down on paper why I almost always show many, very many, in fact, too many, works in my exhibitions. This is a criticism that is often leveled at me, but I don't have any difficulty living with it; I'm not trying to explain anything or defend myself. What I'm trying to do is write down—positively, assertively—what I had in mind, for example, in the case of *Less Is Less, More Is More* (1995). There's the old Bauhaus idea of leaving things out, of simplifying, eliminating. This leads to products, and to artworks, that may be elegant and chic, even pretty, but they aren't beautiful. Beautiful form is a fraud, and in art—and above all, in art's presentation in galleries, exhibition venues, and museums—this is pushed to the limit.

White walls, gray floors, large spaces, that's all fine, but then comes the problem: people put very little in these spaces, ideally as little as possible, presenting what's most important, most valuable. What I have difficulty with here is that this approach is totally systematic. You see it done over and over again, even today—in fact, especially today.

This insistence on value, this exclusiveness, this luxury is what scandalizes me. And the result is often exactly what people want: art exhibitions that

look just like art exhibitions, but only because of their form. Less is more: it's a designer's precept. I know a gallery isn't a worker's home, and a museum isn't a canteen; a gallery isn't a place where people really work. But galleries, museums, exhibition spaces are often more like upper-middle-class homes or white-collar residences than any of the above. It's all about "less is more" as an appropriate language of form, borrowed initially from art and then applied to other fields, such as design. Who buys art? What are they buying? I think more is always more. And less is always less. More money is more money. Less success is less success. More unemployed are more unemployed. Fewer factories are fewer factories. I think entirely in terms of economics. That's why I'm interested in this concept: more is more, as an arithmetical fact, and as a political fact. More is a majority. Power is power. Violence is violence. I want to express that idea in my work as well. I don't accept the dictatorship of the isolated, the exclusive, the fine, the superior, the elite.

And that's why when I show many, far too many, works, I'm making a political statement. That's why it's never right to call it "swamping," "flooding," etc. Ideas like that don't interest me, because they're passive: you (the artist) can't stop the tide of the work yourself; you're flooded, you have no choice, etc. No; what it's about is showing this excess actively, assertively; it's not about all-over composition, it's about economy, power, and a political position. I don't want to swamp anyone, flood them, overwhelm them; I want the show to be about individual works—not as a formal *diktat*, but to make the individual important in a conscious effort, using quantity to help the individual assert its own importance, but in relation to the others, not without them. That's how I see it, and though I admit that I've done it myself—shown a single work in a single space at an exhibition—I didn't see that as a distinction or added value. In this case, the individual work was a representative, a witness, no more and no less; a representative or witness that's very present, and reports on behalf of the others. That's important to me. Even though I know it's an approach that's very difficult to keep up, from the point of view of the whole of art history, it's still what I want to do. In my exhibitions I always try to find ways of making that possible for viewers. I work through presentation and

form—for example, on fabrics, on tables, as a cascade—by trying to work with limitations, to stress change; but I still let the presentation form remain what it is: the form, the mold, the vessel in which the work is contained. And for that reason alone, because there is a vessel there, my vessel, it can't overflow unless I want it to.

I like the Barnes collection, but not for the individual masterpieces that make it up. No; it's more the way the pictures are presented and put together: they're arranged by size, not by period or subject or artist. What this apparently silly, simple, strange decision—to arrange the pictures by size, all hung to the middle line—does is create an overall impression that's overwhelming, simply because there are so many pictures. It lets viewers completely isolate one picture from all the others—they pretty well have to if they want to focus on it. They have to forget the others around it for a moment, but then the overall impression returns again, like focusing your eye on a detail and then shifting back to the whole. In my recent exhibitions it wouldn't have been possible to take a single work away without being aware that something was missing. It would have left a hole, although the hole wouldn't have actually told you what was missing; it would just have given a few clues as to its size and its external form.

1995

[Translated from German by Michael Robinson]



1.2 *Fifty-Fifty*. Belleville, Paris, 1993.

FIFTY-FIFTY

What I call *Fifty-Fifty* are all the works in which only half of the surface (paper, cardboard, wood) is covered. It seemed sufficient to me to occupy only 50 percent of the supports and to leave the other half empty, at the disposal of the person looking to fill himself. Not literally. But with his eyes, he can complete the work himself. It's not finished, it's half-made. I like the term "fifty-fifty" because it speaks of sharing. Of course we know very well that economically and politically "fifty-fifty" does not exist. In a democracy we can only enact a decision with 51 percent; in a corporation it's the same principle. It's only in shady matters that you settle on "fifty-fifty." Someone's going to be taken for a ride. And yet, in this idea of equitable sharing, there resides a utopian, idealist idea. It's also the search for a balance, even if derisory—the balance of energies and forces that have to lead to equality.

I'm equal to the other. I'm in some shit, you are too. I'm weak, you are too. I'm lost, you are too.

January 1993

[Translated from French by Molly Stevens]

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