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# Philippe Thomas with interventions by Bernadette Corporation | DIS | Emily Segal

G.C.A.

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Extract from BDDP/Paris, *This advert could change your life, readymades belong to everyone*<sup>®</sup>

*Who can deny the pleasure of reading a room, and that it only improves with similar dinners? You learn to see irrelevance as it starts to yellow a painter's complexion like the early stages of a cancer. You can hear the money laughing in his ripped jeans, all the way across the room. You can almost taste an artist emerging in a dealer's mouth. Eventually you are even able to spot the missing people and predict the newcomers.*

John Kelsey, *Rich Texts, Selected Writings for Art*, Sternberg Press, 2010

The strange adventure of the institutional reception of Philippe Thomas's œuvre is disquieting. Not so much because, in the wake of Broodthaers but in a far more troubling manner, Philippe Thomas has turned exhibition and conservation devices, and market conventions into what is to be shown, conserved, and sold ; but because, in our view, a certain truth emerges clearly from his story: that there is a very close connection between institutional reception and a certain kind of solitude that is proper to the *individual*.<sup>[1]</sup> One must be able to extract and isolate from the rest one object, one approach, one author, in order for it to be included in the official art history. We might go so far as to say that the solitude of the work and that of the artist who produces it are the fundamental conditions for being exhibited. The same goes for groups and collectives: in so far as they remain recognisable, and their members do not change, they function exactly like an individual, like a holding or a limited liability company within the economy of the archive and the collection. For there is indeed a recognition that is prior to public recognition, one that consists in a cold, quasi-clinical scrutiny—something that accumulates heavily in a blank silence, like money. Museal consecration is built on the capacity to discreetly stockpile constants, forms, and attitudes in the memory of the experts until they cohere, in order that one day these experts may grant full citizenship of art history to the physical and intellectual gestures attributed to a person. Thus they decide,

they cut, they mutilate sequences of work so as to isolate the masterpieces; they choose one being from a social pool and separate it out from all those who made its life meaningful, for him or her alone is worth something, and the others are worth nothing.[2]

But Philippe Thomas was by no means alone.

Even apart from his explicit association with Jean-François Brun and Dominique Pasqualini, with whom he formed first *Ligne Générale*, and subsequently *Information Fiction Publicité*, throughout his life he was part of a sort of community in which he permanently dissolved himself. One might think that he multiplied pseudonyms, created an advertising agency to relinquish rights of authorship, and built a mirror of the digestive system of institutional memory, all in order to protect his oeuvre and to control its reception.

But one would be wrong.

Meta-fiction, the multitude of real and imaginary identities, and the accumulation of visual and conceptual devices were developed and refined into a gigantic mechanism of contamination and inclusion, in opposition to the myth of the unicity of the artist's genius. To the extent that, when one comes to Philippe Thomas from a younger generation, for example to curate a section of an exhibition[3], as is our case, and when one has known him only through his texts, a few of his works, and (rare) photographic reproductions of them, one feels oneself to be in the presence of a very tight circle of collusion and complicity, almost a magnetic field. For Philippe Thomas developed ways in which not only to share his works but to

distribute—and dilute—his glory (even posthumously); he short-circuited critical distance by leaving behind, in his place, collaborators of uncertain status and a host of open questions.

First of all, that of the oeuvre as enigma: the writings, the images, the sculptures, the exhibitions and performances are designed like a puzzle where, provided one manages to join together enough pieces, one begins to hear a faint laughter like that of Odradek, like a rustling of leaves; a laughter that has no lungs behind it and which sends shivers down your spine. Philippe Thomas used the void left behind by the author-function to capture the set-ups of subjectivation at work, the desires of collectors to change their life without changing anything, to live vicariously through the artwork. He made the most complex and embarrassing relation—that between the artist and the buyer of his work, which the mediation of the gallery usually obfuscates—into a collaboration, a paradoxical convergence of interests which put the laws of capital into reverse. As he wrote: '[The readymades belong to everyone<sup>®</sup> agency] endows these pieces, which ultimately were only made possible by the collaboration of at least two people (say, Philippe Thomas and a collector), with a corporate name, an amplification of these 'micro-companies' of which each of them provides the proof of social effectiveness'[4]—the proof of a paradoxical possibility, a decisive evidence perhaps? And if so, on whose behalf? Deleuze is certainly the philosopher who best grasped what is at stake here, in particular in his *Dialogues* co-authored with Claire Parnet, but from which Parnet's voice is absent because she only engendered the space *between* the two of them and then disappeared: 'when it comes down to it', Deleuze writes, 'you are all alone, and yet you

are like a conspiracy of criminals. You are no longer an author, you are a production studio, you have never been more populated'. And it is a matter of making a rich usage of this solitude between two or more beings, without trying to deny it; 'using it as a means of encounter, making a line or bloc shoot between two people, producing all the phenomena of a double capture, showing what the conjunction AND is, neither a union, nor a juxtaposition, but the birth of a stammering, the outline of a broken line which always sets off at right angles, a sort of active and creative line of flight? AND ... AND ... AND ...'.[5]

Our hypothesis is that, by scrambling the boundaries between collectors and artists, by integrating modes and devices of presentation into works and titles, Philippe Thomas wanted to show that the ultimate consequences of the readymade were to be sought in the bodies of artists, become readymades in their turn, subjects without qualities promoted to the rank of exceptional people simply by the context in which they were placed. That not only had the author-function left a void, but what still remains of it, namely the role of the artist, needed to be unmasked and redistributed. Philippe Thomas discovered a detached tone in which to show, without cynicism, with a cold anger, the effects of capitalism on our ideas and our bodies, to illustrate calmly the collusions in which we are all immersed, and to undo stereotypes. He did so without any fuss, laboriously, elegantly, across dreadful years, surrounded by silent complicities and embarrassed glances.

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*In each of us there is, as it were, an asceticism, in part turned against ourselves. We are deserts, but populated by tribes, flora and fauna. We pass our time in ordering these tribes, arranging them in other ways, getting rid of some and encouraging others to prosper. And all these clans, all these crowds, do not undermine the desert, which is our very asceticism; on the contrary they inhabit it, they pass through it, over it.*

Deleuze, C. Parnet, *Dialogues*

Philippe Thomas created a territory and populated it, he offered ownership of it and shared it with those who wished to accompany him in this adventure; but now that the author is physically dead, the expansion of this space draws to a close and the inhabitants of this place, despite themselves, have become keepers, messengers, protagonists of a story that is now complete.

Even beyond the pseudonyms that Thomas used, one is faced with a body of work that has a multitude of signatories, and it matters little whether or not one can call them authors, for Philippe Thomas did not hide himself in this crowd, he merged with it, even when this seemed ill-advised, shaking off all moralism so as to go further. It has been said that his oeuvre was an operation of ventriloquism, but in reality what is most compelling about the 'Philippe Thomas constellation' is that sometimes his characters are *real*. Even when they are subject to the knowing supervision of the artist, certain voices bring with

them their true identity, wearing it like a mask and mixing with the chorus of other fictions. In this regard the dialogue between George Verney-Carron and Eric Duyckaerts, which gives its title to the 1999 Mamco publication *Sur un lieu commun* [*On a common place*], is exemplary. In it Verney-Carron plays the role of himself to a dizzying degree. The entrepreneur incarnates at once the old bourgeoisie and the new spirit of advertising. The son of an arms dealer but a collector and organiser of artistic events, he gives us a terribly pragmatic vision of art on whose basis the disquieting substitution is carried out. The exhibition mounted by Yves Aupetitallot at the Saint Etienne Maison de la Culture in 1988 bore the title *Agencement 88: Georges Verney-Carron*, and in particular it contained the magnificent sculpture *Agencement 88*, consisting of a Decaux billboard with Verney-Carron's name on one side, and on the other a phrase taken from his conversation with Duyckaerts, overprinted on a photograph of an empty conference table: 'It is enough to say yes in order to change the face of things.' When asked about his transformation into an artist and author, Verney-Carron admitted that this had had 'a strange effect' on him: whereas normally he bought advertising space for his clients, this time he had bought it for himself, even though he was not 'the creator of the campaign'. But this made sense for him because he was quite sure that the museum where the work was to be found was, in its turn, an 'advertising spot'. A builder of bridges between what he called the economic world and the cultural world, Verney-Carron tells us an everyday story of the bringing together of art and business: 'For example, last year when the Monin group presented a work to Bernard Ceysson, in Saint Etienne, Gilbert Monin organised a

seminar for his executives in a hotel in Saint Etienne and, after lunch, all the executives went to visit the museum, with a guided tour, and so on.... People who had never set foot in a museum before were led inside. As for the head of the company, he must fulfil his cultural responsibilities: he can talk about the role of the company in a different way, and the executives will take pride in the fact that their firm is playing a part in the heritage of France. This has an effect on both internal and external communication, and the loop is closed.’[6]With these company meals, guided visits, and this internal and external communication, it is corporatist affects that assert their citizenship of the museum. Artworks, caught in this closed loop, certainly cannot have much meaning for the lives of the executives forcibly trailed around the museum while they digest their working lunch—but there is nothing unusual in this, for not only has art become compatible with the market economy, it has become the equivalent of other commodities, like second houses or cars. Its place, in the world of contemporary art, can be bought for oneself and, as *La Pétition de principe* shows us very clearly, this is how one becomes an *actor* in this fiction. ‘Personally,’ says Verney-Carron, ‘I believe that I have been an actor from the moment I began to buy art. It’s clear for me: to be an actor in art, in cultural life, means to buy—it means that, rather than buying myself a car or a weekend break, I set aside some money for the purchase of paintings, of artworks. It’s at that point that I begin to be an actor.’[7]

The activist nature of Philippe Thomas’s device is clear: collectors have been represented enough, now the time has come to let them play a part. As Verney-Carron writes in



'Publicité publicité' [Advertising advertising] (where he does not speak in his own voice): 'When art history makes of the very people who supposedly tore it down the radical heroes of a gesture which it seeks to repeat, it invites us to recognise in representation a force of destabilisation which the New York agency, following Warhol and Johns, will of course make the most of.'[8]

Philippe Thomas questioned the position of the artist in the same world in which Marcel Broodthaers had posed in 1971 as a model for Van Laack shirts, manufactured by a company belonging to the collector couple Rolf and Erika Hoffmann. The advertisement appeared in the German magazine *Die Spiegel*, and on his own copy Broodthaers wrote: 'What shall one think of the links between art, advertising, and business? MB (the director)'[9]. Readymades belong to everyone<sup>®</sup> tried to respond to this question.

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*Pour avoir des souliers, elle a vendu son âme;  
Mais le bon Dieu rirait si près de cette infâme,  
Je tranchais du Tartufe et singeais la hauteur,  
Moi qui vends ma pensée et qui veux être auteur.*  
*[In order to have shoes, she has sold her soul;  
But the Good Lord would laugh if, in the presence of that  
vile woman,  
I played the hypocrite and acted lofty—*

*I who sell my thought and would be an author.]*

Baudelaire, *Je n'ai pas pour maîtresse une lionne illustre*, cited by Walter Benjamin in *Bohemia*, 1938.[10]

Three years after the founding of the New York agency, collectors lent their image *and* their name to a work. The faces we see in the 1985 *Hommage à Philippe Thomas, autoportrait en groupe* are the reflection of themselves ('yes, we act like a mirror,' says Georges Verney-Carron of the effects of the readymades belong to everyone<sup>®</sup>agency);[11] and even if we fail to notice that the plaque beneath Thomas's photograph/conceptual portrait is inverted, surely the mirrored cover of the *Frage des Präsensation* cannot escape us. One can allow oneself to be swept up in the vertigo of the multiple levels on which this work can be read (the image of the sea which 'represents' Philippe Thomas, probably an echo of the sea into which Blanchot's Thomas the Obscure plunges, the composition which explicitly cites Fantin-Latour's *Homage to Delacroix...*) but the context in which the work is presented leads us elsewhere. The group self-portrait, supposedly an homage to the artist by seven collectors, is shown for the first time in 1985 at the Claire Burrus gallery in what is described as a group show, entitled *Fictionnalisme. Une pièce à conviction* [*Fictionalism. A decisive evidence*]. The police investigation evoked explicitly in the title must be of a very peculiar kind to admit of such a 'proof', as indeed it is. For the strange assembly of collectors around a portrait/simulacrum of the artist reveals a complicity with his enterprise of scrambling of the author function, to the point where

they pay homage to him, as the title emphasises, but the homage that they pay to the artist is also something of which they are the inalienable owners. Looking at them, one cannot help but see them as having been taken hostage by the story of which they are the protagonists. The (paying) presence of a sponsor in a portrait is not unusual in the history of art, but the role that someone's image plays in the composition is as complex an affair as the plot of a crime novel.

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*I asked myself a number of questions: I said to myself that, even so, there are authors in philosophy and in literature [...] Well then, I was completely reassured because I had the impression of a sort of extremely brilliant conjuring trick: what Michel Foucault took away from the author, that is to say his work, he gave back with interest with the appellation 'founder of discursivity', since in doing so not only does he give back his work, but also those of others.*

Jean d'Ormesson, discussion following Michel Foucault's presentation *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?*, in M. Foucault, *Dits et Écrits*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 2001)

The importance of Foucault's memorable Collège de France lecture entitled 'What Is An Author?' for Philippe Thomas's practice is perhaps too obvious for us to examine it at length; we will insist only on the fact that, in this text, Foucault emphasised the consequences of laws passed between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in that same bourgeois society that sought

the best measures for the recognition and punishment of delinquents and the colonised.

‘Texts, books, and discourses’, says Foucault, ‘really began to have authors [...] to the extent that authors became subject to punishment, that is, to the extent that discourses could be transgressive.’[12] It is at this moment, according to Foucault, that transgression becomes a sort of duty in literature (and in art), in order to bring back some danger to a writing (or other creation) that has been guaranteed all the benefits of property.

Thus there is a monetary economy that accompanies the risk economy, like its counterpart or balancing factor. Philippe Thomas was not at all unaware of this problem: he had even broached the question via Jean-Joseph Goux, part of the same luminous constellation as Alfred Sohn-Rethel—they both brought together the history of metaphysics and that of monetary abstraction in economics.[13] The museum qua gold standard for the value of works itself participates in commerce, when Duchamp makes his *boîtes en valise* and when Broodthaers establishes his *musée des aigles*. These operations, Jean-Marc Avrilla/Philippe Thomas assures us, are part of the same economy, of the same remunerated and self-conscious transgression in which every author finds himself trapped, because ‘doubtless the same performative contradiction is at work in the Cretan who says that all Cretans are liars and to the artist who claims to abhor the very museum that puts him on a pedestal’.[14]

In the 1991 photograph attributed to Marc Blondeau and entitled *Lisbon*, on a deserted café table dappled with light, in a

perfectly artificial composition worthy of an advertising spot, we see the face of Fernando Pessoa reproduced on a 100-escudo note. Faced with this, it falls to us to feel the affects of the general abstract equivalent, the metaphysical consequences of the fact that the face of the writer whose body hosted so many different voices, and whose hands transcribed styles and writings that could not be more varied, is reproduced in millions of copies, on paper money.

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*Do not be deceived!*

*Life is not much.*

Brecht, *Against Temptation*

As this text draws toward its close, we are aware that there are many things we have had to leave out, including the immense sadness we felt when we were in close contact with the work of Philippe Thomas. Pessoa's face printed on banknotes is a metaphor for what Thomas continually foretold—namely that in our society, success, for an artist, can be the worst of poisons and a shame that will pursue him even after his death, a zero-sum game where the artist loses when he wins and loses when he loses. Indeed, if he wins, it is only in the same way a racehorse wins: in fact it is others who win instead of him. And yet life continues relentlessly, even in the sad flesh of he who has read and understood all books; and yet the desire to make work

persists.

How can we speak sincerely of this desire? How can we extract ourselves from the value economy? One thinks of workers' strikes in the private sector, where the names of brands reappear in marches, but metamorphosed, finally reconnected with the bodies that make the products they adorn, as they decry their distress and their exploitation. This is how, thanks to documentaries which immortalised their striking workers, Lip, Peugeot, Rhodia Acétate, and the Wonder factory<sup>[15]</sup> have become names for masses of workers, proper names of power relations in need of transformation. This is the miracle of the strike, and Philippe Thomas became the vehicle of such a strike, as he took on the names of patrons and regularly effaced his own. This must have been very difficult some days. Someone said to us that at the end of his life he saw himself disappear, but he knew that he had already disappeared in the eyes of art history, into whose ranks he had continually recruited strangers. A strange gesture, to make the owner into the author (and one which also reveals the extent to which the author is always also an owner). But once we understand that there is no cynicism whatsoever in this, we can see it as an attempt to re-enchant the everyday prostitution of commerce, a way of feigning love or friendship where money makes a scorched earth of feelings.

The reason why readymades belong to everyone is certainly not because everyone can become a collector, but because everyone can make themselves sensitive to the potential, to the possibility harboured by every vulgar mass-manufactured object to be or not to be a work of art. Everything can become a

readymade, anyone can be an artist; it is enough just to develop the sensibility that allows one to unmask, behind social classes, the almost physiological universality of the 'whatever-singularity', which in our societies only appears in debased form in total institutions, in the form of naked life. Philippe Thomas's oeuvre, which sometimes lacks lightness of touch, at moments seems over-controlled and even scholarly, while at other times it is luminous and powerful, elegant and uncompromising. But we understand what it is that weighs down the literary élan or compels him to stick to a pre-written script. There is no spontaneity in fiction, everything must be calculated in order to be credible: we pardon mediocrity and inefficiency only in real life, the life that appears like a watermark behind the work of Thomas (and others), poignant in its absence, generous, a stranger to the market economy, unheeding of the laws of value, anonymous.

If the story of this artist troubles us, it is because it addresses us.

This text must necessarily end with the words of someone else, but they are words that have continually reminded us of Philippe Thomas over the last few years: in her *Notes Scattered and Lost* the Italian poet Amelia Rosselli wrote:

*For you I have the most surprised love  
the most surprised one could imagine  
and is your own the life that I have lost.*

## Claire Fontaine, 2011

[1] On this subject see particularly Bernard Edelman, *De la propriété littéraire et artistique. Propos recueillis par Jacques Salomon*: 'The very idea of rights of authorship was a part of an immense movement of legal individualism [...] The "death of the author", as far as the law is concerned, means nothing. It is in total contradiction with our culture, whose defining moment we may consider to be the birth of the individual'. In Jean-Marc Avrilla, Marc Blondeau, Daniel Bosser, Carine Campo, Laura Carpenter, Simone de Cosi, Sylvie Couderc, Lidevij Edelkoort, Bernard Edelman, Jean-Louis Froment, Michel Gransard, Stéphane Mallarmé, Christoph Sattler, Estelle Schwarkz, Philippe Thomas, Michel Tournereau, Georges Verney-Carron, *Sur un lieu commun et autres textes* (Geneva and Saint-Etienne: Mamco/ Presses Université de Rennes, 1999), 258, 259. 'The law' here, of course, concerns the legal right to participate in the history of art.

[2] Philippe Thomas was particularly sensitive to the theme of institutional 'dismemberment', and one might even venture the hypothesis that his deliberate dissemination of himself and his oeuvre may have been a way of preventing it. On this subject he notably quotes Duchamp, who, in 1955, declared in his conversation with James Johnson Sweeney: 'I always felt that showing one painting in one place and another in another place is just like amputating one finger each time, or a leg.' (Jean-Marc Avrilla, 'Le Musée réfléchi', in *Sur un lieu commun*, 247 ['Marcel Duchamp', in *Wisdom: Conversations with the Elder Wise Men of*



*Our Day*, ed. James Nelson (New York: Norton, 1958), 91]).

[3] In 2010 Claire Fontaine curated one section of the exhibition entitled *Rip It Up and Start Again* at Artist Space in New York where she chose to present works by Philippe Thomas.

[4] Georges Verney-Carron, *Publicité, publicité. De quelques cas de figures*, in *Sur un lieu commun*, 121.

[5] Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 9–10.

[6] Georges Verney-Carron, ‘Sur un lieu commun, Propos recueillis par Eric Duyckaerts’, in *Sur un lieu commun*, 174.

[7] *Ibid.*, 173.

[8] Georges Verney-Carron, ‘Publicité publicité. De quelques cas de figures’, in *Sur un lieu commun*, 122.

[9] Reproduced in the catalogue of the retrospective exhibition at Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris, 1991, p. 188.

[10] Walter Benjamin, ‘The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire’, *The Writer of Modern Life*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, trans. Howard Eiland, Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingston, and Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 66.

[11] Verney-Carron, ‘Sur un lieu commun’, 173.

[12] Michel Foucault, ‘What is an Author?’, in *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, vol

//., ed. James D. Faubion, trans. R. Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1998).

[13] Philippe Thomas cites *Les Monnayeurs du langage* in Avrilla, 'Le Musée réfléchi', 250. Alfred Sohn-Rethel developed the same problematic of philosophical abstraction as profoundly linked to monetary economy in *La pensée marchandise* (Boissieux: Éditions du croquant, 2010).

[14] Avrilla, 'Le Musée réfléchi', 247.

[15] *Les LIP, l'imagination au pouvoir*, 2007, dir. Christian Rouaud; *Avec le sang des autres*, 1974, dir. Bruno Muel; *Rhodia 4/8*, 1969, Les Groupes Medvedkine; *Reprise du travail aux usines Wonder*, 1968, dir. Jacques Willemont.