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### **Craig Martin, Thomas Hirschhorn and Rainer Ganahl, Summer 2001**

Conversation for Perche? - done in London during the presentation of our books for BOOKWORKS. this interview is about to appear in Perche - an Italian art magazine but has run financially a bit too dry to appear.. so lets see and hope.. as of today, there still is some hope. 4/1/04 (sounds like a joke of the day)

Conversation for Perche?

The following conversation between Rainer Ganahl, Thomas Hirschhorn and Craig Martin occurred at the launch of Warm Seas, a series of four books edited by Craig Martin for Book Works. The four titles by Ganahl, Hirschhorn, Christian Nold and Daniel Jewesbury were published in July 2001.

CM: One of the things that was of influence to Warm Seas was derived from Michel Tournier's book Friday: the idea of the individual in relation to the Other person. I feel that your project Thomas, with the bridge which linked the Freedom Press Anarchist bookshop to the Whitechapel Gallery café as part of Protest & Survive and your project Rainer, with the construction of reading seminars on Marx, was of interest to me with regard to this idea of the Other. Perhaps we could discuss this first of all?

TH: I believe that a book is a real tool for prolonging an experience. It provides the possibility of collecting the experience or the time spent together. It also gives the opportunity to bring to other geographical spaces an experience that was initially on a very local level.

CM: So you obviously consider that the book can achieve this more so than the nature of the fixed artwork?

TH: I believe that even today when we are living in the age of the internet a book is a primary tool for allowing time to slow down: inertia. Which is perhaps quite anachronistic and paradoxical, but I believe this is the power that books will always have.

CM: Do you think that's partially about the nature of study in its own right – the act of taking one's time? A coming to terms with the material in the book?

TH: No, it's about the people or the audience who have the book and make the decision to open the book, so it's about extracting the information.

CM: Rainer, do you think this process of extracting information from books relates to the act of discussion in your own work – particularly with Reading Karl Marx?

RG: Actually, first of all I'm still completely outraged at the way the Italian Police killed this demonstrator yesterday (July 20, 2001), the way they helplessly shot this guy down. There is the image of the body lying on the floor and the Land Rover drives over the body. They crushed TV cameras and beat-up 60 year-old people.

CM: How people act together is of the utmost importance. So, for example, are the police aware of the other person, the protestor as another individual, or do they just see them as the enemy? One of the other books in the series by Christian Nold is about this idea of whether the confrontational nature of recent protest culture, between the state police and the protestors, is in fact just a game. So the book concerns itself with the idea of the protestors constructing their own riposte to the police violence.

What we discussed in your book Rainer was the idea of reading as a form of activism in its own right, i.e., learning, taking on board the knowledge and moving with it.

RG: I would also like to say that what's interesting here is the context within which people read. For example when you read in the context of the university, it has a legitimate function - that is, when you read for your profession. But when you read without a context you have the possibility of 'becoming suspicious', simply through the process of reading and reading....

CM: Which do you think is the most powerful of the two; the ability to choose; or that of being forced to learn, which is what would appear to be a failure of university education, the need to learn facts. On the flipside, one's own activity of reading allows one to move and think in a much more heuristic way.

RG: I think there are millions of readings, but reading itself is a certain kind of culture. I don't mean it in a bourgeois sense, but something that needs some kind of time on its own. It creates an attention span, a certain kind of time capsule if you want. Fundamentally it affects, influences and changes people and their way of seeing things and understanding events.

CM: Do you think what Thomas mentioned about slowing down is pertinent?

RG: Sure, but some people have a very fast handling of books. Most books are just bought and placed somewhere.

TH: That's ok.

RG: Everybody has to come to terms with these questions by themselves. I don't want to tell them what to read or how to read.

TH: For me, a book is an object as well, but an object which has an energy contained within it. Even when you don't read it you have the opportunity to take part in the energy contained in the book. So, I'm in favour of this: the idea that the object is not one of appearance but one of potentiality.

CM: So, the ability to read in the future?

TH: Yes.

RG: Or even just the identity they give.

TH: But not in a way where the book is exposed to other people, but simply me with this object.

CM: Was that the idea behind your work in the exhibition *Protest & Survive* at The Whitechapel Gallery, particularly your initial plan to link the Freedom Press anarchist bookshop and the Whitechapel Library together. Did you see it as a form of pure energy or intensity?

TH: That was true with the project in the beginning, the idea to bring 'books' together, not the content of the books, only the books themselves. This is another way in which I like to work with philosophical books, but with mainstream magazines as well, basically with printed material in the most expansive way.

RG: I have a little bit of a different take on this. For the Reading Karl Marx project, it's not a matter of quantity or a matter of the book as object. We mostly work with photocopies of some chosen text fragments. So long as it generates some kind of thought, some kind of discussion, some kind of community: This is what is important for me because a lot of times, as you said, it is a concentrated experience that needs its time, its interpretations, and talking through. For that experience – or reflection - the physical artefact of a bound book is not essential. For practical reasons we worked with loose papers of a text everybody can take home. The act of reading, reflecting, discussing and speaking is for me the 'cultural' aspect. I think when reading together we experience not just the concatenation of words that are there, but the layers of texts behind the text, the multitude of books on top of books.

TH: I think that what is interesting in Rainer's book is that it's not a documentation of what happened, but rather a reinterpretation or an adaptation that gives me the spectator - because I am not just the reader in this instance but the spectator of the photographs - an opening or portal into the project via the book. The book generates these possibilities.

CM: One of things that I'm interested in relation to the group or the discussion, the desire to open out a text to other people, is whether the discursive aspect is another form of reading? The person or the collaborator in the reading is a text in their own right – where 'I read you'. Rainer, when you read Marx, for example, you obtain something from a paragraph but you get more from what the other protagonists in the discussion group have to say, so I wonder whether the Other person is almost a form of reading in itself?

RG: It's dialogical, it's polyphonic, there are many voices going through a text, whether it is at the stage of writing and producing it or at the stage of reading and transmitting it. We almost could say – in reference to the Greek philosopher Thales ("We can't step into the same river twice") - that we cannot read the same text twice. It's not about establishing a particular kind of authoritarian reading, or looking for some kind of final truth, it's about offering a set of conflicting readings that people can try to adapt, to use, to fertilize. When I read with people I'm really interested in how people respond to certain kinds of texts. We shouldn't be intimidated by the often liberating, but also repressive history of reception of these kinds of texts, particularly when it comes to Marx.

CM: Do you see the books then, not just artists' books, but texts per se as an interface then for something else?

RG: Definitely, it's an interface, it's a screen for a different way to see the world and to act and interact in the world. It's a tool and not a marker for some kind of shelved flirtation with a hard cover life style ...

I also try to take the texts quite literally. I take a sentence and ask 'Is this still true today?' What does that phrase or statement mean in today's context of globalisation, of total communication, total commodification?' I think we can still learn a lot even on these contemporary issues from Marx. Another reason why I chose Marx was because the text is so difficult to approach due this history it has: A history of prejudices, of violence associated with it, of state terrorism, but also a history of hopes, of social justice as well.

For me, Marx offers a very interesting account and understanding of how politics, economics and history making are interrelated. With an unprecedented vocabulary he tries to think about social processes, technological innovations, power, resistance, (class) struggle and revolution in response to oppression, exploitation and institutionalised injustice in the world. It is definitely worth revisiting.

CM: Thomas, in relation to this with your own work, your use of text, for example the piece at MACBA in Barcelona you worked with a writer, where the text was available to the audience. How do you consider the encounter the reader has with the text – particularly for example, where you employ certain paradigmatic texts by Deleuze or Spinoza?

TH: There are two things; firstly, there is my frustration with 'art' texts, where I found that 99% of these texts are just so boring and only written to give value to an artists work. I'm not interested to read why somebody finds a piece of work good. There are some writers whom I find interesting, not just their writing, but also their will to be confronted with the world, with the times we live in. Also I feel they have a similar concept of the Real as I do. They try to express it with their writing and I try to express it with my visual work. So I thought that it would be an idea to ask them to collaborate with me and to expose them within my work, or in parallel to it. It gives the audience the possibility to take a text which is not actually about my work but which is related to the experience of the world. So ultimately it is an attempt to make an experience with Friendship, Information and Knowledge, Confrontation and Dialogue.

The second point is that I feel when you are in an exhibition and you leave it, there is often a will in having a text which can be taken away – a banal catalogue or a free paper, this can be legitimate, and it gives you the chance to suggest possibilities.

I like this because it allows another possibility of slowing down, which at same time provides the link back to the exhibition. Basically, something driven by content.

CM: The idea of 'friendship' is something I felt strongly about when I asked you both to take part in the project – the nature of production as an act of friendship.

RG: I can subscribe to that. It's not just friendship, it's more like getting to know someone a little better.

CM: Which is somewhat akin to the act of passing a stranger in the street and the act of contact.

TH: You must remember that 'friend' is quite a big word. What I like about working together is that you can only do it when you are friends.

RG: If I may speak of books as friends. I have a history of working with books and their authors in my function as an artist.: More than a decade ago I started it by quoting books and authors, footnotes and indexes, painting them directly on the wall. Around 1993 I continued reading books with interested people whilst I photographing and video taping. In 1995 I initiated a series entitled Seminars/Lectures which consists of photographs of people whose books I read. I then moved on to the process of actually interviewing directly some of the people who wrote books. I came to a point where I actually also started making and writing books myself. This is not a chronological account in which one's involvement replaces the next. This movement parallels my interest in psychoanalysis in which I see also a tendency running from the abstract, general, non-personal to the particular, specific, biographical investment. Or to bring it back to our subject: one discovers a comprehensive friend in oneself, as one finds a friend in books in order to make friends, understand friends and maintain friendships.

CM: Thomas, where you talk about giving someone something to take away with them, reminds me of a statement you said: "I super-inform in order not to inform at all." Do you see the work itself as blank, which is quite interesting in relation to the immense visuality of your work at the same time? In that sense, given your collaboration with the writer, is one the carrier for the other?

TH: For me, to collaborate with writers - who aren't art critics – is like adding another dimension to the work, because I have only three dimensions and this gives the fourth dimension. Above all, this is a way to give another entrance to the work. Even when people don't like my work they can at least read something they're interested in – about fishing or about war, whatever. That is for me always the idea – to include people, so this is why I think books or printed matter are inclusive. This is an important point about my work: that I want to include people, not to exclude anybody. I want to work for a non-exclusive audience.

CM: There is the World Airport piece at Venice in 1999 where you talk about the nature of the micro and the macro. You state that there is almost nothing in between, and thinking about your practice as well Rainer, you move to these local spaces and work within them. I wondered what your feelings were about the idea of the momentary encounter and what is the zone within which you can act these days? With your work Thomas the materials are not localised in that sense, you bring these materials to the place....

TH: I'm not about globalism or localism.

CM: There seems to be this dialectic at work in your practice. When you produced World Corners at Chisenhale Gallery in 1998, you used images of the global media, with images from magazines, but then there's something interesting about using the local material such as cardboard boxes picked up in the local area.

RG: Boxes are not always local. They end up in an area as local trash, but they most likely come from Spain, South America, Korea, China or some banana plantations overseas.

TH: The 'local': that's why I always believe in producing exhibitions. The 'local' is that space where people are within a place. At this moment, this is the local. Here and now. So as an artist I try to put the density and the charge into the moment, so that when these people are in this local situation they feel they are there, really there. That's important to me.

RG: Many of the texts we discuss in the reading groups address the aspect of nation building, of religious and cultural identity formations and of construction. I am especially interested in the history, formation and transformation of the public sphere. And I think today, it is crucial for our proper physical and political survival to revisit many types of completely anachronistic, false and exclusive, even racist and biased concepts of national identities. By revisiting, analysing and criticising the origins (an not just the origins but also its present mutations) of European nation building and its aggressive colonialism we have to look into the various types of practices and ideologies. We need to revisit our books too, our curricula, our education systems, that not just inform our prejudices but also our politics. Books, their contents and ideologies have – unfortunately – had a big share in this. We shouldn't fetishize books as such. We need to really question them.

CM: What do you see as the best vehicle for doing that? There's something enriching about using the much more dilettante methods, this misreading: is there a potential in that?

RG: We have to distinguish what we are talking about. When it comes to large scale political and ideological interventions they are best addressed through political means. For example, ministries of education in every country could come together and investigate their history books and their political representations of themselves. When we are talking about racism, religious and cultural discriminations, as an example, as they surface all over Europe, it is not just a question of policing. It's a question of understanding how and why these biased notions came into place, how they are created, on what false assumptions they are built, what policies they inform, what negative consequences they will have and how to change them. I'm really interested in interacting with people who are in educational programmes.

CM: How does that elicit itself within art production in its own right? Do you see that as having any capacity to carry out those things you're talking about?

RG: Well, it's a rather fragile, vain and symbolic (im)position that can be treated with respect, attention, ignorance or rejection. It might create troubles and embarrassment and hopefully raise questions. If we compare my type of cultural practice with those during the more authoritarian periods of the 20thC we may speak of tolerance and see it as an

indicator. One of the first interventions by Hitler was against the cultural apparatus of the Weimar Republic.

CM: Do you see that as operative at the moment?

RG: It depends: certain kinds of cultural productions, critical ways of thinking, writing, publishing and speaking out publicly could easily be curbed, curtailed, denounced and even criminalized.

CM: You rightly brought up before the death of the man in Genoa, which is exactly where we are at, where we have to be. Can cultural production act along with that as a form which allows these questions to be made manifest? There seems to be a shift in certain modes of production at the moment towards this idea of being active through necessity.

RG: There is a lot of activity. We've had Demonstrations of power and global corporate capitalism for a long time, but now they are accompanied by large / broad public criticism and activism. I think that is a very positive sign, even if I'm outraged about how monopolised police power is handling it. But these demonstrations as we have seen in various places lately are a new kind of old politics, the politics of the streets, the politics of mobilized masses. For this kind of direct politics I don't want to privilege art as such, it's just one kind of process which speaks for a specific interest group, a class, an educational and cultural strata that is still based on knowledge productions dependent on books and the temporality and privilege of reading.

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