

From Threshold to Threshold

Thom Vink in conversation with John Gayer

Thom Vink's art elicits mystery from the most common sources. Inspired by walls, dust particles, and storage cabinets, he transforms obviously mundane features into complex visual statements that perplex and fascinate. His work weaves together features ranging from abstract art, modern design, and architecture to science and technology. It also affects both the emotions and intellect, proving that there is much to be felt and seen. Vink's work has primarily been exhibited in Europe and Asia. Born and educated in the Netherlands, he has spent extended periods of time in Finland and Japan in recent years.

John Gayer: When I first encountered your work in *Math for the Masses* at Helsinki's Forum Box in 2009, I became intrigued by the narrative aspects of the installation. The arrangement of drawings and photographs and the video pointed to multiple relationships inside and outside the presentation, but the story it harbored lacked a clearly defined plot and definite conclusion. How do you develop your installations and what is the importance of narrative in your work?

Thom Vink: A couple of years ago, I started to work on a series of drawings inspired by the illustrations of 1970s and 1980s encyclopedias. The often mysterious images and cryptic infographics depicting nature and the achievements of technology and science fascinated me with their stories from the pre-Google era. Simulta-

neously representing indisputable and outdated truths, these compact bits of data informed us of the wonders of the world and pretended to bring us vital clues about our lives. I chose to carefully select, rearrange, and combine these images to alter their aesthetics and give them new meanings. These arrangements engender more questions than answers, but also allow viewers to interpret the images in personal ways and to create their own narrative from the work.

The exhibition space also becomes an important part of the work. I consider the installation stage to be a creative process equal to making the drawings or videos. It involves the same approach. Ordering is important and, as it changes, so does the story that it tells. Though the story has no strict beginning or ending, it can always be read.

JG: This ongoing rearrangement of elements reminds me of science, which is subject to constant revision, and archeology, which involves interpreting material culture. It is interesting that you frequently provide no titles or dates for your work. Why do you do this?

TV: I prefer to title the exhibition, which keeps the work closely related. I also feel that dates are not so important; it doesn't matter if a work has been made yesterday or ten years ago. Sometimes it takes years for a work to find its place. The meaning of a work changes according to the context and the way it is presented. So titles and dates have little relevance and can

even be disturbing. The works take on a chameleon-like character. They interrelate in an organic way.

JG: Given your subject matter, what does the word nostalgia suggest to you?

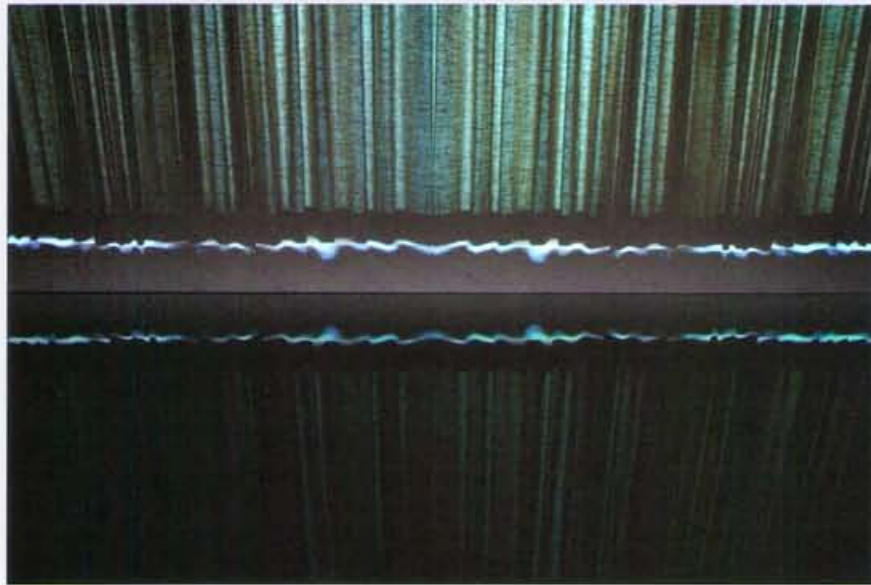
TV: When I hear the word nostalgia, I think about my videos made of images of old TVs being turned on and off. Despite drifting off into the past, they carry a futuristic message. The analog strips on the cathode ray tubes and the chaotic, yet repetitive, noise of time and space captured from old radios and TVs are becoming a part of history. The fading dot of light from an old TV screen will be but a dream of our generation, a piece of "futuristic nostalgia."

JG: This brings up the numerous contrasting notions evident in your work. Ornate patterns develop out of swirling particles and otherwise static projections gently pulse. Order arises out of chaos and certain images integrate stasis and movement. Is the expression of such dichotomies an intentional part of your strategy or do they develop intuitively?

TV: The starting point is always intuition. Various images trigger the process, and then begin to have a life of their own. I start to analyze and make choices to claim control over the intuitive image. Still, this knowledge without reason exists as the source for all of my plans and ideas. It seems counter-productive, even impossible, to explain why a work is being made.



PAGE 1: **Thom Vink**, detail of site-specific video installation, 2009, featured in *Moth House* at Stroom, The Hague, Netherlands: two-channel video projection of digital stop-frame animation transferred to DVD, water pool, dripping water, 240 x 600 x 200 cm / OPPOSITE, TOP: installation view of *Moth House*, Stroom, The Hague, Netherlands; OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: detail of wall installation, 2009, featured in *Moth House*, Stroom, The Hague, Netherlands, various isolation and insulation materials in combination with veneer, wood, styrox, metal, acrylic (all images courtesy of the artist)



An intellectual-emotional yearning that cannot easily be put into words resides deep beneath this mysterious level, which seems to be a universal characteristic.

But to get back to this idea of opposites in my work, I am interested in the constantly changing field of tension that exists between contrasting states as well as the patterns and images that it sometimes generates. This can be seen in the pulsating projection of a light circle, which creates a dark afterimage that overlaps the projected light. The video *Dust*, 2008, made in collaboration with Saara Ekström, not only visualizes shifts between chaos and order, but also equates degenerating materials with decoration.

JG: You express contrasts in many ways. Some of the work presented in your retrospective at Stroom in The Hague earlier this year evoked the grid, but gaps in the rational structure and shifts in scale consistently complicated its reading. I found the wall installation to be particularly interesting, since no modern building's skin could ever be this thick. This outrageously exaggerated cross-section presents a view of a wall's interior structure. What inspired you in the creation of this piece? Included in the exhibition is a small architectural model. What purpose does it serve?

TV: Actually the whole exhibition at Stroom refers to the interior layers of a house. It includes the wall and wallpaper, a curtain, dust, and slide projections showing pipes and wires. The model house represents its external shell. *Moth House*, the exhibition's title, references a Japanese architectural project focusing on the preservation of an old house in the middle of a dense forest. To preserve it, a white translucent structure was constructed around it. Lit from inside, its glowing walls attracted all sorts of insects. The name of the project also refers to the house itself. Isolated by the new structure, it resides within a protective cocoon.

The wall installation forms the central piece of the show. Made of various insulation materials, I see it as a way to question the idea of boundary as it relates to the mythical undisturbed privacy of the home. In reality the wall is a thin, almost illusionary, barrier between us and the outside world. The immense thickness of my wall not only symbolizes the boundary, but also represents it scientifically. It exists as a geographical display that reveals all of the accumulated sediments and layers.

One of the biggest challenges I face is infiltrating the "grid" of the exhibition space. I see this grid as a net that I can respect or corrupt, in which I can establish a sense of balance or imbalance. A vital part of this process involves using negative space to create tension between certain objects and materials. In Asian culture,



ABOVE, TOP TO BOTTOM: detail of site-specific video installation, 2009, featured in *Moth House* at Stroom, The Hague, Netherlands, two-channel video projection of digital stop-frame animation transferred to DVD, water pool, dripping water, 240 x 600 x 200 cm; installation view at AMA Gallery, Turku, Finland; left to right: untitled drawings, 2007, graphite on paper; *Moth House*, 2008, video projection



empty space holds more importance than filled space and objects are defined by the space surrounding them. I find this interesting.

JG: You have, in essence, inverted and deconstructed the house, recontextualized it and changed the character of the exhibition space in the process. Many elements have been transposed into planar constituents—a series of screens—that urge the viewer to reconsider the house in physical and conceptual terms. Psychological implications are also evident.

TV: All the dichotomies defining my work are also indications of an individual's psyche. The work visualizes our constitutive contradictions, the complex nature of the mind, and the way extremes can simultaneously be present.

JG: What other influences did your time in Japan have on your work and artistic outlook?

TV: I have been obsessed with maps since I was a child. I especially loved the city and subway maps of Tokyo. When I finally visited the city, I was completely taken by this mega-labyrinth and saw its maps as portraits of the city and icons of urban navigation. This inspired me to begin a series of pattern drawings which can also be interpreted as maps.

While in Japan I also learned much about the ancient Japanese traditions of *suseki* and *bonseki*—types of miniature landscape art where imaginary environments are created with sand, stones, and moss. I was really struck by the Japanese's ability to replicate the complexity of nature at such small scales. This inspired me to make a video installation that was first shown at Youkobo Art Space in Tokyo. The installation shows a twenty-four-hour stop-frame video of a curtained Tokyo apartment window. As evening falls, the curtain gradually darkens.

Simultaneously, the folds and patterns in the green fabric suggest an imaginary forest. A water basin on the floor reflects the projected image. Every thirty seconds, a water droplet falls from the ceiling to break the stillness of the surface.

JG: Your artistic strategy asserts that nothing is fixed, interdependencies abound, and there are many ways to see things. Your focus is not strictly on subverting our assumptions. You also invite us to recalibrate our cognitive abilities to witness the complexity around us.

TV: Yes, we move from threshold to threshold. The world keeps changing. Every boundary we cross brings us to another's edge.

Based in Ireland, John Gayer is a frequent contributor to ART PAPERS.

ABOVE: graphite drawing, 2008, graphite on paper, 40 x 50 cm [collection of Turku Art Museum, Finland]