

G L A D S T O N E

Zachary Cahill, "Art is a Tool to Confront Reality," *Portable Gray*, Fall 2024

# Portable Gray

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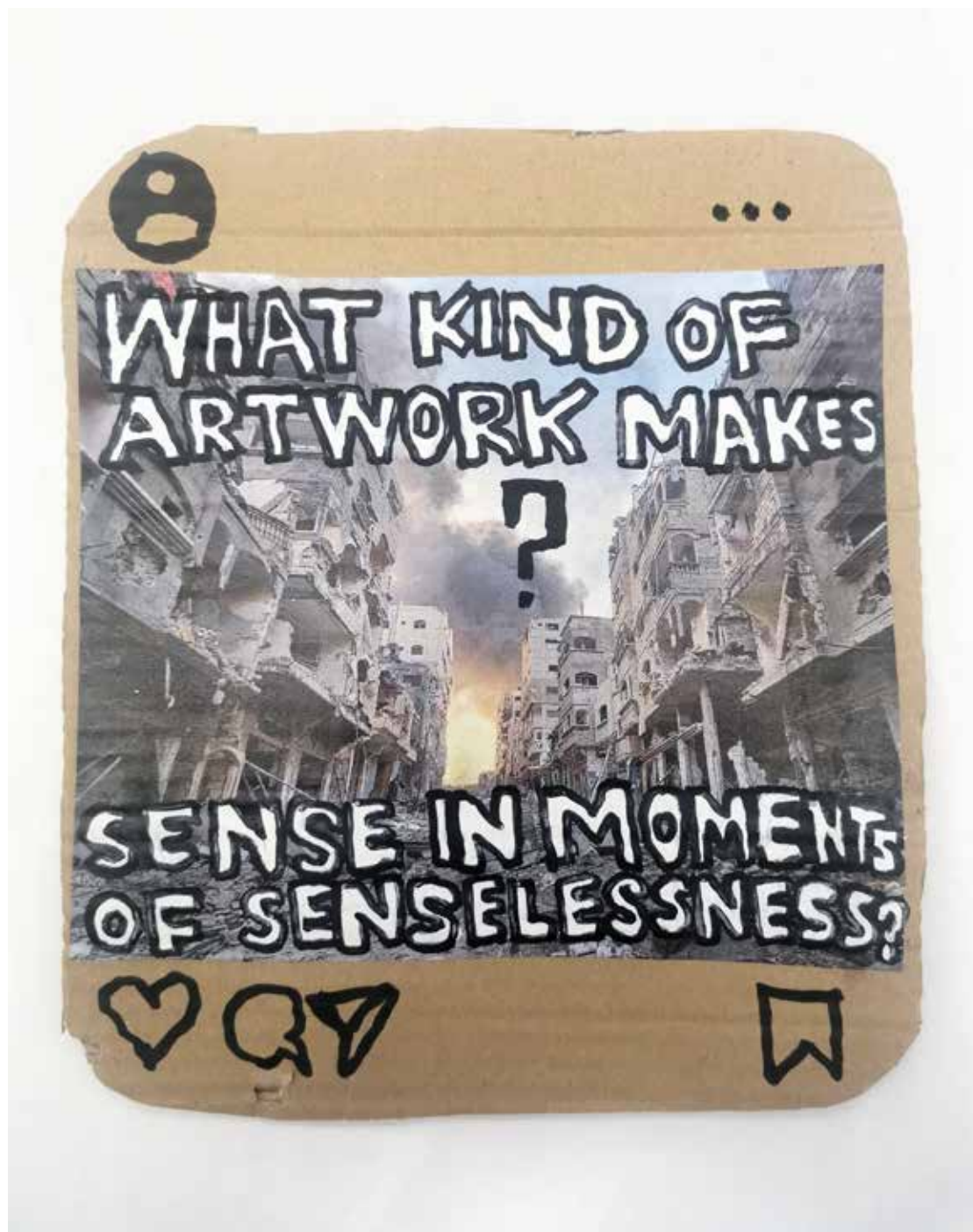
# ART IS A TOOL TO CONFRONT REALITY

*9 Questions for* THOMAS HIRSCHHORN  
*on Art and Criticism*



ZACHARY CAHILL





1.

Criticism. What is the first thing that comes to mind? Is there an image or phrase that comes immediately to mind?

THOMAS HIRSCHHORN — The first thing that comes to my mind is how important it is for us, artists, to have our work critiqued. Without critical reception, it is impossible for a work of Art to be absorbed into art history. Furthermore, I think that originally all works of Art are grounded in critique, a critique of what already exists. I cannot imagine an artwork that doesn't emerge from critique—at least partially—because if the artist wants to create a new form, the existing form must be examined.

2.

Has there been a consistent image or phrase relating to criticism in your career? Has it changed from when you first started out as an artist?

TH — After one of my first exhibitions in Switzerland in the early '90s—a group show with three other artists—each of them received lengthy critiques in a Swiss newspaper, but my work was only described in one sentence: "Thomas Hirschhorn's work turns around in a small circle." Besides the indecency of these journalistic words, I understood that it would never be easy for my work in the future, and I also learned that I must insist on my own particular understanding of Art.



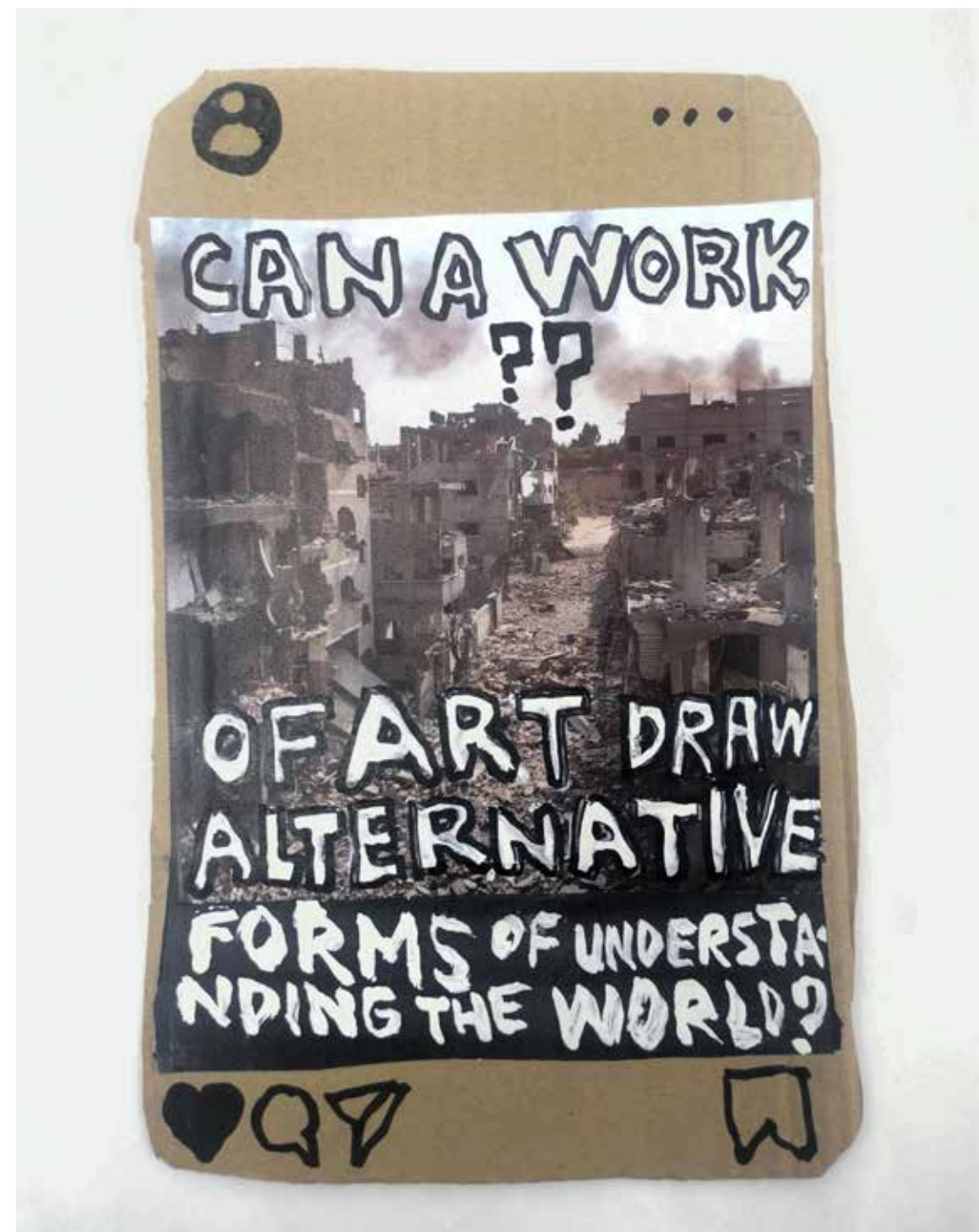




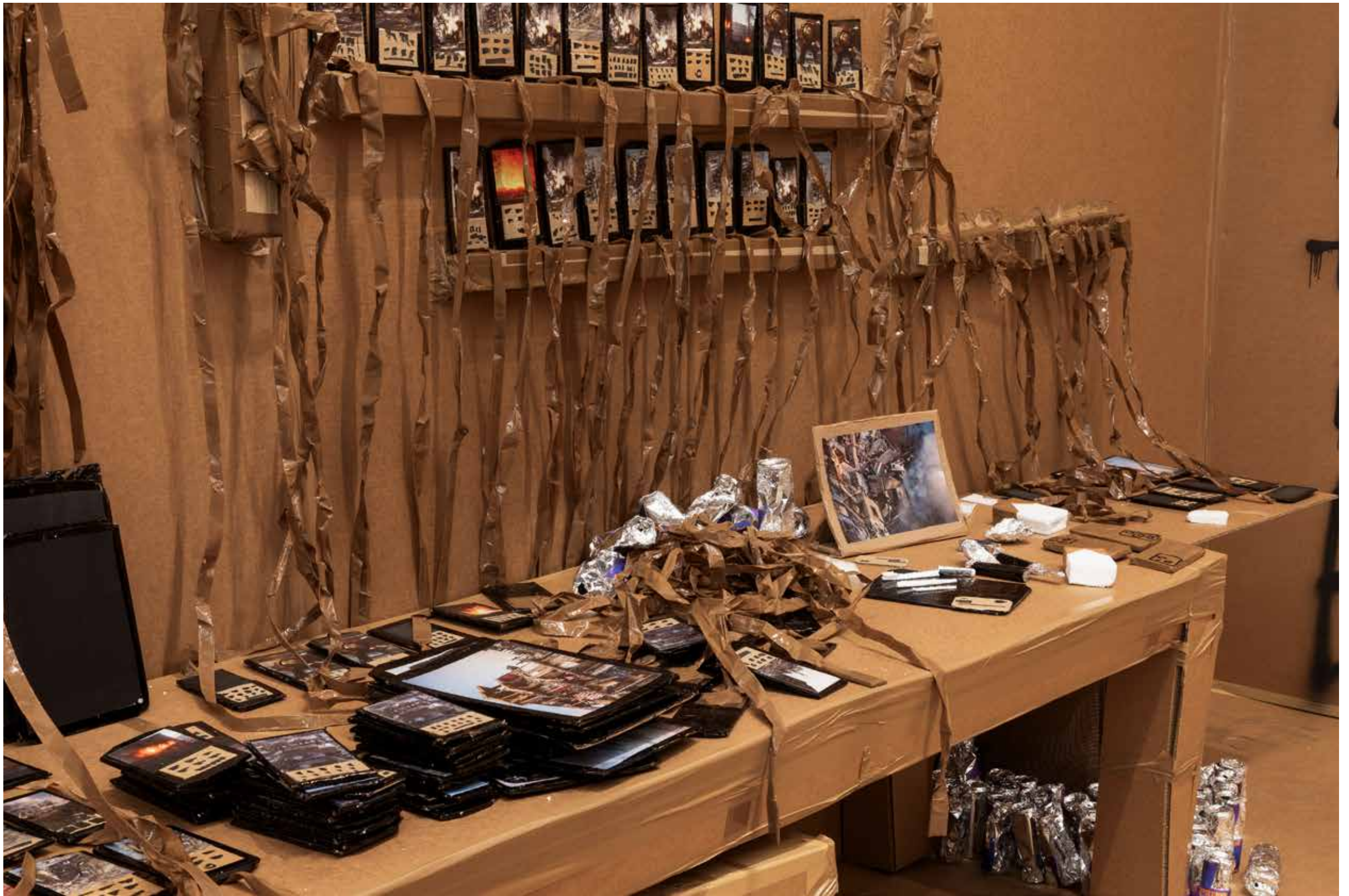
3. The critic and curator Boris Groys posited in his book *Art Power* that contemporary artworks judge their audiences; and philosopher Jürgen Habermas proposed that art criticism helps form the public sphere by performing a mediating function between art (and its purveyors) and its audiences . . . an oversimplification of their positions, but I wonder where you see your practice along that spectrum, in the wish for your art practice to connect with what you call a non-exclusive audience? How do you hold the critical function of your work simultaneously with a wish to connect with the audience?
4. Plans and sketches: what is it that draws you to them as a mode of working?

TH — I believe that everyone on earth is connected to Art, has ideas about Art, for— or even against—Art. Most important: everyone has a place for Art in his or her soul. Because Art concerns everyone, it is my job as an artist to be critical of my own approach and when I am creating something new. When discussing with people who have other interests or passions than Art, I am always astonished by their comprehension of this critical view on Art. Art history nourishes this problematic. Therefore, keeping in mind the “Non-Exclusive Audience” is crucial to me because, if there is a place for Art, there is the possibility to discuss its differences. And it’s precisely these differences and complexities that give Art its critical dimension.

TH — Doing Maps and Schemas is evidence. It helps me take positions, make decisions, clarify, and work out the dynamic of my production. What I love in doing a map, a plan, or a schema is that everything I draw on it has significance. Nothing is unimportant. Everything unmentioned on the map, the plan, or the schema is also important. Generally, when working in the field of Art— what you are *not* doing counts as well— even the invisible or unmentioned!











**5.** Along those lines, what happens, in your way of thinking, when something is translated from two dimensions to three? i.e. what does the transformation of a sign into a thing mean for you artistically? And vice versa. Here, I am thinking about how you have, in a way, reverse-engineered your social media presence by making tactile works for Instagram posts.

TH — I like the term “reverse engineering” that you introduce. It is indeed what I somehow try to do. I use a “tactile approach” to switch from what is thought of as a two-dimensional work into the third dimension, as I did in my recent work “Fake it, Fake it - till you Fake it.” that is based on the technique of collage, which by definition is two-dimensional. Reverse engineering also makes sense with my vision of challenging the analog with the digital, and the real with the virtual. I want to confront by giving form to what I don’t understand or what I misunderstand in this world. Therefore, the term “reverse” is justified. To me, as an artist, this is the only way to stay in contact with the specific moment I am living in; and it is inevitable.

**6.** Militancy is something you talk about frequently in your writings . . . references to being a soldier of art or for art . . . is that way of thinking still part of your position? Is militancy (or being a soldier for art) a method of criticism?

TH — I don’t use the term “militancy,” but one can say that I’m an activist. I’m definitely an activist of Art. I’m an activist of my works of Art, and I’m an activist of my own understanding of Art. To me, doing an Artwork is a mission. As an artist-soldier I have a mission, never mind if I will succeed or fail in my mission. The beauty is to understand that the artist is entirely and definitely committed to his or her mission: To give form. This is why doing Art is a big adventure—it makes sense and is fun.



**7.** Militancy and being open to the world . . . can one be militantly open to the world?

TH — Opening to the world comes from total engagement in Art. Because engagement, as such, means taking part in the world, our unique world. This engagement in Art is my competence, my skill, and something I can and must share. Competence is what builds the bridge toward the world. Therefore, it is important to act with my commitment, my position, my work of Art. Everyone can then relate to it because it becomes about sharing our competencies for different passions.

**8.** How does art speak?

TH — Art is a tool to confront reality; Art is a tool to encounter the world; and Art is a tool for existing in the time I am living in. If I am able to use this tool—my work—my Art will speak for itself.





9.

Can you talk a little bit about the 20th-anniversary Celebration of Le Musée Précaire Albinet and why it was important for you to have critical reflections for the backbone of the anniversary celebration?

TH — The "20-year Musée Précaire Albinet Celebration" will be a "Critical Celebration." To celebrate the precarious artwork we did together 20 years ago with the residents of the Cité Albinet is important. It is important to interrogate those who experienced this artwork in 2004 (residents, participants, and invited speakers) and ask: How did this experience change our lives—or did it not? How did this artwork create another approach to our destiny—or did it not? And did the "Musée Précaire Albinet" become a vital collective memory for us? It is crucial that a precarious artwork in public space be critically questioned, even after 20 years—which is, I think, already an achievement in itself.