

## **Semiosis is a word that emerged from the Greek verb semeio.**

Text: Francesca Gavin, 2020

Semiosis is a word that emerged from the Greek verb semeio, to mark. The activity of producing and interpreting meaning through signs, introduced by Charles Sanders Peirce and expanded on by others like Jacques Lacan, is arguably the definition of art itself. Symbols, signs and codes and their role in politics, aesthetics and life are at the centre of Dutch artist Erwin Thomasse's practice.

Thomasse began making work in a street context, beginning with graffiti in the 1980s and developing into the Eindhoven-based street art collective Betamaxx. Thomasse describes this period of production as "Taoist Chinese philosophy inspired installations and interventions in public space." Now focused on solo work, Thomasse reinvented his approach but the directness and anti-authoritarian nature of his history still impacts on his approach. In particular he is drawn to logos and branded text. "I think it's something to do with them being just omnipresent," the artist considers from his studio in The Netherlands. He is not afraid from looking at the weirder and more disturbing spectrum of graphics, for example when he became aware of the visual overlaps between the Dutch political party VVD's logo and terrorist groups in the country. There is often an inbuilt dose of irony in his visual observations and realizations.

The most central example of this is the 45 project. The project's inception was a decade ago. He had made a drawing for a friend's 45th birthday and when looking at it on the wall realized its similarities to a swastika. When Trump got elected, he discovered his combined image of the number 45 as the Nazi emblem. "I knew he was the 45th president with all right wing connections. I put it on Instagram," he recalls. A couple months later, he saw the artist Tauba Auerbach post an image of a woman with a sign depicting the image on social media. It went viral in weeks and Thomasse began to collect its use and representation in the media. He created an accidental meme.

The American Mike Mitchell claims to have invented the same image, though did not reply when Thomasse reached out. Erwin's archive of the use and representation of the image instead became the work itself. "It's out of my hands. It's not locked," the artist points out, and is not annoyed about not getting credit. His only frustration is about at the (notably American) commercialization of the image onto products including mugs, towels, underwear and fitness gear. He screenshot everything and created a document that tracks the image's path from viral dissent to product and back again, which he developed into a booklet with a graphic designer and curator. It had a life of its own. The project questioned authorship as much as the dissemination of an image. It destabilizes what an artwork is.

The political aspect of the project is something that comes up repeatedly in his work. "I think it has something to do with injustice. It affects all of us multi-level, on multiple levels," the artist considers. "I tend to do is look at cultures and try to pick out the patterns and analyze what's going on and try to express this in shape," he notes. He is currently working on a big project about the rise of the far right. "There's something burning right under the surface that has been modified by Covid." He researches and unpicks the visual cues in imagery, for example the use of colour, shape or fonts which he uses, reuses and misuses. He unpicks a code and then uses it to work against its source. The results are subversive but undoubtedly use humor.

His Flash Face project was about perception and belief in the media, in particular the assumptions and aesthetics of criminality. He observed that in the news any human face can be depicted in a way to resemble a “Serbian war criminal” or ‘extremist’ Iranian. “You already criminalize somebody to some degree,” he points out. In contrast he noticed that the medieval depiction of people looked saintly even when they were not. In both cases aesthetics are politicized.

The concepts that underlie Thomasse's approach form often by accidental discovery. A notable project like this is the pair of newspapers that he found and represented as a take on self portrait. His father had received a facsimile of the front page of newspaper of the day of his birth, when he subscribed to De Telegraaf newspaper. “He was born in the middle of the Second World War. We were occupied by the Germans. They collaborated with the Germans gave him a piece of Nazi propaganda as a welcoming gift! I thought like how silly can a marketing machine of a big company be to just forget about this?” Erwin muses. He began to look for an equivalent newspaper to represent his mother. “They were born just a week after each other. They are in relationship which is really poisonous in a way. I thought him being the oppressor. I tried to find a way for her to be the oppressed. I started looking at resistance newspapers,” he explains. Working with Vivian Zihlerl from the Imaginary Frontiers, he searched without luck to find a resistance newspaper from the same date. Instead he discovered a Catholic newspaper, whose cover reprinted the biblical verse, Romans 13. It aimed to explain to its readers that they had to comply with the occupying forces. “In the Bible, it says you have to not only obey to God but you also have to obey a mayor, a teacher or the head of a household. This tended to be a way my mother was in the relationship, as well,” Erwin observes.

He framed originals of the two newspapers, noticing that the other news stories interconnecting due to the short time frame of their birthdates. “It is a portrait of their relationship. I named it after a medicine they both have, because it's also shows that whatever happened between them also gave affected them.” The piece captured a moment in public history, his personal biography and the wider legacy of World War II that continues today.

Religion is another white elephant that Thomasse is not afraid about talking about. In fact the concept of belief is strong across all his projects somehow, questions what we believe in from political parties to God. “Religion is one of those things I just have to fight,” he observes. “There's always also a thing with clairvoyants and psychics. I love the coding. They have all these rituals.” His latest work unpicks the ubiquitous, banal use of buddha statues. “In Holland, people put them in front of the window and everywhere. It's sort of instant serenity and a way of telling something, which they don't live by. They are almost like garden gnomes.” Conscious of this disrespectful hypocrisy he made of few banal objects. One was a Buddha fountain filled with vodka. The objects also touched on colonial history and the theft of artefacts that fill museums. Another was an edition of erasers all depicting Buddha. As the object is used, Buddha himself erases. In a way the freedom and disappearance of Buddha is more in line with Buddhist teachings than a faux altarpiece.

Thomasse highlights the subcultural element of the more ‘underground’ political groups, almost noting how they echo the methods of subcultures. “Hooligans wear these shirts where you have Nazi logo and it says “Fuck ISIS” and left-wing groups have the same logo and it says “Fuck PVV” or whatever political touch point. They both use the same aesthetics, only they tell a completely different story. It's insane!”

Erwin points out. "I think that's the internet for you in a nutshell, because it gives everybody instant visual gratification." Thomasse in contrast shows how the immediacy of assumptions and visual understanding are paths that are more prickly and unstable than we think. He makes us rethink symbols we can take for granted.