

## Hold Your Breath: Turn Panic Into Magic

Text: Manus Groenen, 2023

In January 2020, the world encountered COVID-19. What followed was a period of great uncertainty, vulnerability and fear. At the pinnacle of the pandemic Erwin Thomasse produced *Turn Panic Into Magic*, commissioned by the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven. The project consists of five light boxes, a large light installation and a social component. The phrase *Turn Panic Into Magic* is pivotal: for some it stands for a sliver of hope, for others it's a call to action.

During the course of a conversation, Thomasse misunderstood what was being said, and the saying *Turn Panic Into Magic* came to be. This accidental discovery resonated with Thomasse, who is intrigued by the power of slogans and symbols. He regards them critically, as an element of American consumer culture. This sort of punchy phrasing is effective in concisely conveying a message, and engages the consumer immediately. *Turn Panic into Magic* is a close cousin to the semi-poetic or pseudo-spiritual vocabulary of wellness culture and scores high on the 'Live, Love, Laugh' scale. For some, these three words neatly express the warmth of the good life, while for others they stand for superficial bad taste. Social media has fuelled the hunger for similar statements. We want slow, reflective and meaningful – but as quickly as possible. And so, Thomasse pokes at religion, superstition and spirituality of this kind.

The slogan is partly a parody of the wellness culture from the lens of a salt-of-the-earth Brabant local, but at the same time Thomasse wants to consider the words with less cynicism. "I somehow really believe in it." *Turn Panic Into Magic* appeals to the imagination. The goal is to compel the reader to alchemise panic into magic; a transformation from something painful to something so extraordinary you couldn't even make it up. The slogan has no past, and as an empty carrier its words can be overlaid with meaning in different contexts during the project. Thomasse compares the process with bearing a football fan's flag, a phenomenon that he researches in relation to hooligan culture. "An object such as this is a symbol. It must be experienced, and that's how it acquires meaning. Objects collect their significance through how they are handled, and gradually they bear weight and carry a history."

The effect of the regulations around COVID was mostly felt in the evenings. The brightly lit Brabant streets that Guus Meeuwis famously warbled on about – because they constantly burnt bright – were dark and still, thanks to lockdowns and curfews. The only lights on in Eindhoven were in the houses: cultural institutions and the entire hospitality industry were regularly shut down for safety reasons. In the Spring of 2022, *Turn Panic into Magic* shone out in clear bright lettering on the roof of the Van Abbemuseum, like a beacon for optimism in these complex times. But, according to Thomasse, it was also an ode to a city that continues to achieve the impossible. Like a hopeful beacon, the letters shine over the centre of Eindhoven: the light pulsates to the rhythm of a breathing technique designed to treat panic attacks. Two and a half seconds in, five seconds out, two seconds pause and repeat ... Thomasse helps Eindhoven breathe through a global panic attack, but the work touches more than just COVID.

The pandemic was a forced catching of the collective breath, for an out-of-breath society. Misery aside, the pandemic provided short-term peace, togetherness and

space for reflection. We suddenly found ourselves all in the same situation, world-wide. And the pandemic looked like a chance for change: a potential global tipping point.

The relentless tide of capitalism slowed down, threatening to take a sudden left or right. The empty streets were the perfect blank canvas for protest: the death of George Floyd in America caused a wave of Black Lives Matter demonstrations to swell across the Western world; climate activists saw an opportunity when interrupted production chains turned out to be a positive for the environment; the housing shortage became more pressing than ever when everyone was forced to stay in, and combined with disenfranchisement with established politics it all culminated in the anti-COVID regulation movement.

Social unrest in some cases was pure rowdiness – certainly in Eindhoven where demonstrations turned quickly into riots. But in most cases it was based on a shared and genuine frustration with the status quo. As soon as the current system began to struggle, there was a chance to turn the friction into a(n) – until recently unimaginable – (r)evolution. In this light, *Turn Panic Into Magic* takes on the political rallying cry calling for change.

Thomasse has always been interested in the civil disobedience aesthetic. His artistic career started in the graffiti scene in Eindhoven, but he has long since freed himself from its typical visual language and underlying subcultural values. He hasn't, however, lost the foundational mentality of illegal (artistic) action. He has a lot to say about the in-between status of his work, which he describes as "too street for the museum and too museum for the street." There are deep roots in identifying with those who use public space as a mouthpiece. Resistance, protest and riots are therefore recurring themes in his *oeuvre*.

For Thomasse, the aesthetic of the engagement of recent years can be found in the flight of thrown stones, cracked windows, shards of glass and shop windows boarded up with wooden panels. He sees this visual language as the translation of the *zeitgeist*, expressed in the form of five light boxes. The wooden housing refers to protective subframes, while the front is made of reinforced, sandblasted safety glass with the text *Turn Panic Into Magic* cut out. The font is original, developed by Thomasse (in collaboration with Baschz Vandewater and Michiel Schuurman) so as to minimise the significance of the typography. The light on the inside of the light boxes also breathes with the calming, anti-panic attack rhythm that Thomasse took from a Youtube video. The sleek object exudes calm, but the front has been violently battered, and the smashed glass is riddled with stars and cracks.

In the Van Abbemuseum the light boxes are stacked on top of each other in a stark white gallery space. They find resonance in the walls of this institution for modern and contemporary art, in the formal visual language and minimal art, amongst the conceptual art of Lawrence Wiener or the worlds of commerce and media as found in the text-based works of Jenny Holzer. Thomasse has been invited by the Van Abbemuseum to reflect on the museum's collection from the perspective of his artistic practice. "I've appropriated the language of that art and told my own story with it." The battered glass of the boxes leads one to think that someone has attacked a collection item. Is it a resistance to this specific piece? A call for the overthrow of the fine arts and the institution that gives it its right to exist? Or pure vandalism? Once again, the work is loaded with new connotations.

For Thomasse the work has to live outside the museum, which during the lockdowns experienced regular forced closures. During the exhibition visitors could register to adopt one of the light boxes temporarily: for a one-month period it was placed in a space of their choosing. In the motivations that were submitted, 'panic' was summarized as a personal, or mental or emotional battle; or, it was connected to social unrest. One mother describes her son who sees spiderwebs in the cracked windows after the riots in Eindhoven; another, the collective handling of the clean-up of glass shards from the streets in the aftermath. In 'magic,' people read comfort, healing or creation. A communications agency wants to motivate staff; a school wants to calm down students facing their final exams; a design course wishes to inspire students and a psychologist longs to soothe patients. The light boxes have been placed in 15 different locations so far: in private living rooms and public places like the Gemeentehuis (town hall), a bookshop, a café, a bakery and a care home. Thomasse still dreams of putting the work in a police station, the interreligious prayer space of the Eindhoven airport, the PSV football stadium and a shop whose windows were broken during the riots.

The travelling artworks build bridges between individuals and institutions that had previously been disconnected. Thomasse thereby emphasises the existence of endless invisible networks and connections that we must cherish: the social component of the project is intended as an expression of this very fact. It also refers to the role the internet played in maintaining relationships or finding common voices in protest movements of conspiracy theories. Existing social bonds were under pressure, but at the same time solidarity seemed to blossom from unexpected places. Meanwhile, the World Health Organization declared in September 2022 that the end of the pandemic is in sight. On the surface it seems to be BAU (business as usual), but many problems that surfaced as a result of recent protests remain unsolved; the world still squeaks and creaks. Let's not lose the sense of solidarity and confidence that 'anything is possible'. Thomasse confirms that collectively, we can make the unimaginable a reality. Until then, we wait with bated breath.