

Look Again. The Work of Erwin Thomasse

Text: Nick Aikens, 2016

Erwin Thomasses' multi-disciplinary work uses the intersecting frames of politics, popular and sub-culture. His work draws on a well of cultural references, from images of the pop icon Prince or the rainbow flag to the initials of Dutch political parties, subverting their formal appearance in order that we reorient our relationship to images and signs *we think we know*. Thomasse asks us to look and think again. And again. And again.

Take the work *Kim Jong Il*, (2010) the print work and figure that served as the basis for the wonderfully titled exhibition *38 Under Par and 11 Holes in One* (Onomatopee, Eindhoven, 2010). The exhibition, whose title referenced the North Korean dictator's mythic golf score, included a series of images of Jong Il alongside other political and cultural figures such as Jimmy Carter, Jean Paul Sartre, Ghandi or Groucho Marx that had been put through an 'aura camera', a fictional apparatus used to map someone's aura. Jong Il, Carter and Sartre's faces are masked by blotches of colour, each corresponding to supposed characteristics such as intellect, stability and energy. The figures, each with their distinct political aura – as circulated via different cultural, political or media-based myths – reappear to the viewer, at once threatening and ludicrous behind a mask of fluorescent colour. *Aura Photography* is symptomatic of the manner in which Thomasse opens up a space for us to rethink how we engage and understand images. Forced to re-read the various iconic men presented in *Auto Photography* through the lens of the 'aura's interpretative con trick Thomasse seems to poking fun at the often tenuous nature of how we arrive at a reading.

Strategies of playful subversion are key to the 2010 work *Rara*. The handmade flag includes the works title in chunky rainbow font. The description of the work tells us the letters are 'two reversed and mirrored logos'. On closer inspection we realize that RaRa is VVD flipped, the D sitting on top of an inverted V forming an R. VVD are the initials of the conservative liberal party in the Netherlands, the largest party in the governments ruling minority coalition and led by Mark Rutte. If Thomasse's low fi inversion of the VVD into flag bearer of the gay community is a pointed jab at their right wing policies, RaRa's political plot thickens when it emerges RaRa was the initials of the Revolutionary Anti Racist Action group, active in the 80s and early 90s. RaRa the group carried out a series of terrorist attacks, protesting against companies with links to the apartheid regime in South Africa or against the Dutch asylum policy. Thomasse describes RaRa as the VVD's 'natural enemy', making the work *RaRa* an intriguing act of political gamesmanship. The formal choices are equally intriguing. The handmade flag and use of rainbow seems gives the work a low fi, activist aesthetic – a banner ready to be waved.

The rainbow reappears throughout Thomasse's work. In *Alternated Rainbow*, (2009) a digital image whose size depends on the environment in which it is being shown, Thomasse replaces the rainbow stripes with colour gradations. In *Triangular Rainbow* (2010) rainbow stripes appear in two triangles facing to the sky. The rainbow operates as both a signifier of queer and sub-culture, serving as what Thomasse describes as 'code' for these groups. Yet Thomasse's repetitive use of the rainbow destabilizes the possibility of ascribing it with fixed meaning. The gradations of colour in *Alternated Rainbow* for example become signifiers of digital media as much as they stand for the rainbow itself or the gay community. As such,

Thomasse's formal ruses leave us clutching at references that continually evade capture.

The interplay between sub-cultures and their representation is the focus of the multi media installation *Aromatic Compound* (2010). A silkscreen print of figures dressed in gowns and pointed hats, suggestive of the klu klux Klan, their faces blackened out, hangs above shelves of coins and scented candles. It turns out the photo is of a group of men in the US, taken by an undercover reporter who was attempting to expose their racist, misogynistic practices. The candles and coins stem from Thomasse's research into ritualistic practices whereby copper coins and candles are supposed to emit qualities such as balance and order.

To conclude, it's worth considering how Thomasse's work deploys repetition as both an aesthetic and conceptual device, continually revisiting motifs, patterns and subjects. He is a serial re-user. So much so that his sardonically titled publication *Lust, Liberty and Teleportation* (MU, 2012) appropriated images of his own work. On one page the rainbow flag of RaRa appears as a negative image in black and white – the mirroring of VVD repeated again via the work's reproduction. Such repetition appears as sinister attempts at subliminal infiltrations, borrowed from more underhand advertising techniques. As images reappear in different guises Thomasse appears acutely aware of how advertising and mass media oppress us through the sheer muscle of repetition.

So, for all of Thomasse's throw away references to pop culture or his dry wit, Thomasse's practice is in fact a complex exercise in grappling with how images and their ascribed meanings circulate in the world and come to be interpreted. Signifiers, of mainstream political parties, revolutionary groups or sub-cultures, are loaded with suppositions, presumptions and associations that, through their volume and continual reappearance, often go unchecked. By unpicking and reworking these signifiers Thomasse insists that we look and think again. And again. And again.