





Drawing Mindmaps

A Conversation with

ANTE TIMMERMANS

Make a Molehill out of a Mountain (of work), 2012. Shelves, desk, chair, stacks of paper, folders, side table, time clock, time card holder, time cards, and 10 neon lamps, detail of installation at Manifesta 9.

BY OLGA STEFAN

Ante Timmermans, a Belgian artist based in Zurich, is best known for his contemporary approach to drawing in which the two-dimensional transforms into a three-dimensional universe. The spare, simple techniques that define his drawings also characterize his sculptures and installations, which frequently employ obsolete technologies. An avid (and skeptical) observer of today's world, Timmermans takes up issues such as labor and leisure, the city (and its plight) as a metaphor for the creative process, and the function of language. His recent exhibition at the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, "ANTE POST ANTE," which featured drawing, sculpture, installation, and video, followed up on the well-received *Make a Molehill out of a Mountain (of work)*, a performative installation for Manifesta 9 in the administrative offices of the Waterschei, a former coalmine in Genk, Belgium. This work perfectly encapsulates the absurd humor that Timmermans can tease out of sometimes grim situations. As the press release for his solo show "WERK STATT WERK," another iteration of the dynamics between "workplace/studio work" and "work instead of work," explains, "The idea that for 65 years, during which the mine was in operation, thousands of miners were fighting a daily battle against a mountain, resulting (visually) in a molehill of coal-waste, recalls the work of Sisyphus and forms the basis of the installation."

Olga Stefan: *Your work originates with drawing and then takes different forms. For instance, your project at Manifesta included drawings, an installation of paper-stacked metal shelves surrounding a desk (where you worked as a petty bureaucrat stamping and filing), and assemblage sculptures made of various 19th-century office equipment. What led you to the medium of drawing?*

Ante Timmermans: I started to draw because, for me, it's the most direct link between thinking and visualizing your thoughts.

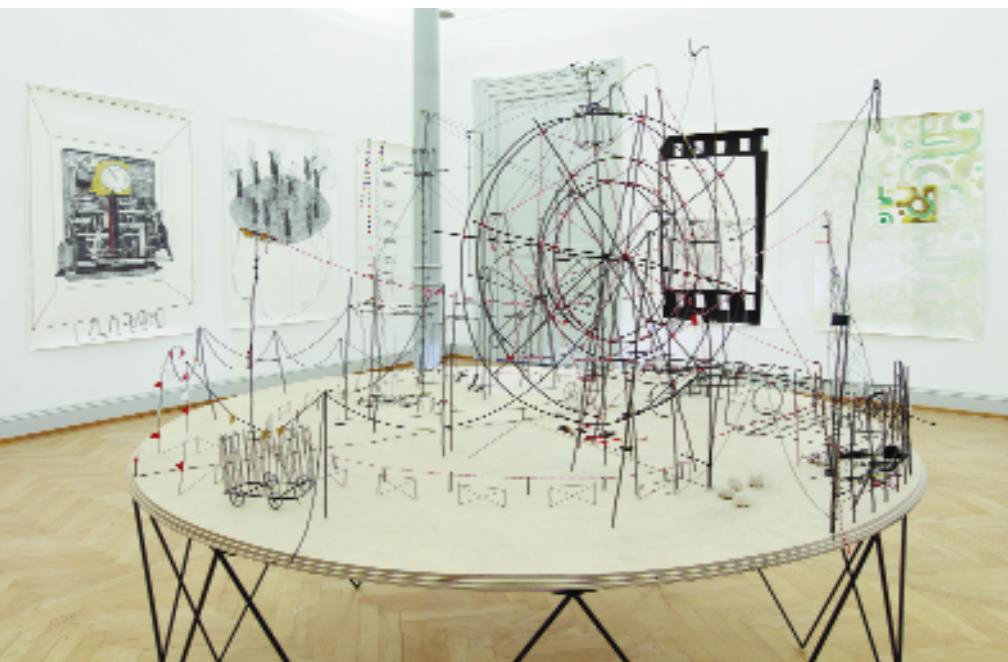
OS: *Is it like writing for you?*

AT: Before you try to translate your thoughts, you have images in your head. I try to use symbols or signs or images or drawings and put them on paper. At the beginning, I tried to make individual drawings, small drawings. The more I did, the more I made them one

symbol or one image; then these lines became like mindmaps, like associations, connections in my head, and they came out on paper. With drawing, there are no technical requirements, all you need is paper and a pencil. It's the most primal communication—a kid can draw, it's the first way to communicate.

OS: *Your sculptures, videos, and installations also make use of your drawing vocabulary and allude directly to the lines of a drawing. How do you feel about space and the integration of space into the two-dimensional plane? How would you like viewers to experience space in your work?*

AT: I never wanted to limit myself to one plane, so, for me, everything is more like a mindmap. I use video and sculpture like I use drawing. There is a direct link between my mindmap and an architectural map. From the beginning, my drawings were very spatial. People would ask me, "When will you make this drawing into a sculpture?" But my drawings are not sketches, they are autonomous works of art. So, I started to think that I should make new, three-dimensional works, not drawings on paper. Another aspect of my work is that the sculptures are like spaces from my mind; you can walk through them, experi-



Installation view of "ANTE POST ANTE," 2012–13, at the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen.

STEFAN ROHNER



fict | fact | fiction | factory | FICTIORY | factitious | fictitious, 2011. Mixed media, 300 x 500 x 300 cm.

ence them—they are like walking through my mindmap. I also like the idea of zooming in and zooming out.

OS: *What is the relationship between your use of space and the issues that you treat in your work—repetition, bureaucracy, monotony of labor, alienation through meaningless tasks, and the dullness of the everyday?*

AT: In the beginning, my work was about absurdity and everyday boredom. I was in a pattern of making these drawings on my way to and from work, and it's quite logical that I felt as though the space I was creating reflected how people moved in this routine way. I was also interested in examining how we influence space and how space influences us—not only physically, but also mentally. Another thing that interests me is how the work can influence your experience of it, for instance, how the installation influences how you feel in the exhibition. One thing is about my observation of how space functions, and the other thing is about how you can influence other people. I was really trying to create a way for people to slow down. At a time when people just go in and out of exhibitions, and everything is quick, efficient, and rushed, I tried to bring them to a stop, arrest them a bit, and not give everything away too quickly. People have to look slowly, step-by-step, and not think that they understand everything immediately.

OS: *Many of the drawings have a claustrophobic feel to them: the space is very constricted and limited. Do you want viewers to feel this claustrophobia? Are you communicating something through your rendering of space?*

AT: There is a lot of stuff in my work, and people should not feel too comfortable. They should be a bit confused. I don't want to offer a single, overview solution. It's about losing yourself. It's not about me trying to understand this boring life and trying to create this world. It's not about offering answers, but revealing the questions.

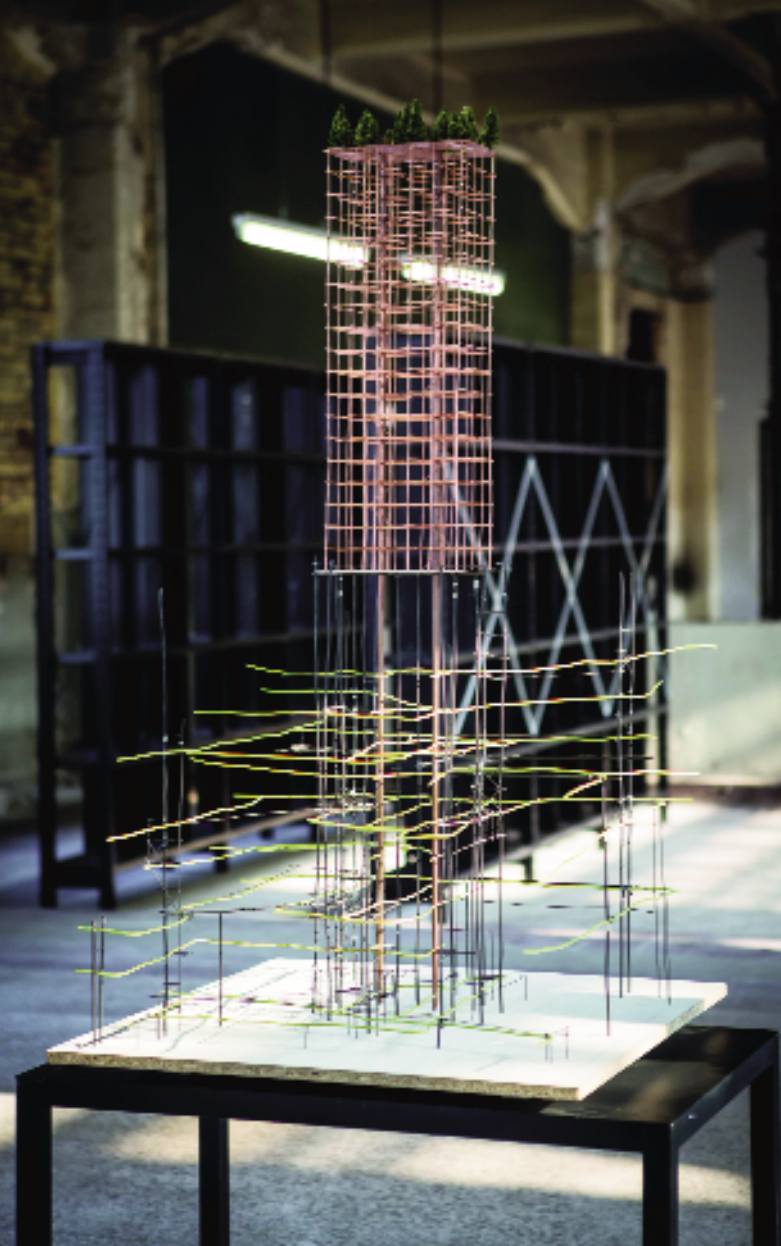
OS: *Many symbols repeat throughout your work and are re-contextualized to create new associations and maybe new meanings. Your work is also very humorous—it's not only about seriousness. I find it very funny when you include images of mules or people transforming into these animals of burden. You also take recognizable signs, like official stamps and the infinity symbol, and integrate them into different contexts to create new compositions. What are you getting at with this repetition and transformation of signs?*

AT: I'm not the first one who has used the mule as a symbol for carrying the burden of the world on your shoulders. Now, I'm using fireworks as a symbol of absurdity—shooting money into the air for nothing, just for entertainment.

OS: *Among other elements, Making a Molehill out of a Mountain (of work) featured your performance as a bureaucrat whose task is to perforate paper, file it neatly, and then use the paper holes to build a small mound. Some visitors saw you at work and thought that it was an interactive performance. What happened, and how did you feel about it?*

AT: I'm not such a fan of interactive work. I have a strange feeling about the fact that nowadays everything must be interactive and participatory. In a way, I really hate it. I want to offer ways to make people aware. The strange thing is that in this entertainment society, this "Coca-Cola-ization" society, people really need to participate; everything should be fun, and art should be something like looking at fireworks. But this is not something I want. I think of Johan Huizinga and his book *Homo Ludens*. People don't like to work anymore, and the time will come when they won't have to, but we have all this leisure time and very few people know what to do with it because so many have lost their creativity. Here's a utopian idea: create a parallel city where there's enough time to make social contact, to talk, to play. Now, it's like creativity is just entertainment.

OS: *Creativity is just another form of consuming. It is indeed entertainment. You mention that it wasn't your intent to enter-*



Claustrophobia (physical | mental | social), 2012. Wire, metal plates, wood plate, and model trees, dimensions variable.

tain at Manifesta, that you were really there to work. How do you account for the lack of understanding, and why do you think that people wanted to interact?

AT: My performance was work. I was clearly not there to entertain, and it was really not my intent to be interactive. I wasn't walking around with a donkey head. I was just sitting there, activating the installation. People didn't know that I was the artist. I would turn around to archive the paper, and people would start playing around with my tools. And the absurd thing was that Tomaz Furlan, whose work was clearly interactive, was right next to me.

OS: So, viewers are not receiving the message about what is interactive and what isn't, what they're allowed to touch, and where they can participate and where not. They don't know what to do anymore. They no longer understand their role vis-à-vis the artwork.

AT: Yes, absolutely, but I also think that, in this particular example, it's about anxiety and fear. They were like little kids with my installation; it was like entertainment, meaningless entertain-

ment: "Haha, let me try stamping this paper, let me take this with me."

OS: They were just repeating an action without thinking about its significance—they thought that they should repeat something to have an experience, but didn't stop to think what this action could actually imply.

AT: Yes, but not everyone. There were other people who looked at me, recognized the gestures that I was making from their own everyday lives, and were amused. I had an interesting talk with a civil servant who recognized the bureaucratic absurdity. But 70 percent of visitors go to an exhibition like they would go to Disneyland, and I don't know how to feel about this. I should be happy that they're there. The Belgian Minister of Culture stated that his goal was to make art more accessible. I don't believe in that.

OS: This brings us to an interesting point, because many writers, including Claire Bishop, have criticized how art has been instrumentalized to justify public funding and how it increasingly has to prove that it has a social application and can play a transformative role. How do you feel about the transformative powers of art?

AT: I make these small manifestos, but I would never stand on a soapbox and yell my message to everyone through a megaphone. Again, I believe in a more subtle treatment. I don't want to make offensive statements, but slowly try to make people realize what I'm speaking about.

OS: Have you had personal experience of the alienating and dehumanizing labor that you reference? Your work reminds me of Gogol's writings. Have you been in those types of situations?

AT: For me, labor is inspiration. When I finished my studies, I had to work. I also worked in a factory as a student. It can be dehumanizing, but I also see that it sometimes brings people together. I couldn't do it anymore, though I should be careful what I say because I might have to one day. It's mad—boredom, routine. I taught for a while, which took all my energy. I would prefer to work in a factory than to teach art students and give all my creativity to other people and not have any left for myself. Labor is also a way to control people, so labor inspires me to think in different ways.

OS: Do you see a difference between the manual labor associated with blue-collar jobs and artistic labor?

AT: For myself, yes, but I don't want to imply that I feel there is a difference in quality of life, or quality of work, like a hierarchy. Everyone has to find their way of living and working on something that they think they're good at. I have the same respect for a good artist or a good electrician and the same disrespect for a bad artist or a bad electrician. The work itself is similar in scope. I really like good mechanical work, or the technical drawings of a good technician, or a good building. There are a lot of similarities between a good builder and a good artist. I don't see major differences between these categories.

OS: Do you believe in technological progress?

AT: We believe that we are more and more important, but we are here just like animals to reproduce ourselves. We turn into animals of burden ourselves. We believe that we are heroes, we



Above: *WERK STATT WERK #1*, 2012. Mixed media, approx. 190 x 90 x 700 cm. Left: *funfactory*, 2012. Mixed media, detail of installation.

are changing the world, we are making progress, but I don't believe it.

OS: *Malraux wrote about art replacing religion in society. How do you feel about that?*

AT: I'm still working that out. I feel that art combats the absurdity of life. At least that's what I'm doing through my work.

OS: *You have been on a path of success recently, with higher visibility shows in more prestigious spaces. How does that impact your working conditions, labor practices, and work/life balance?*

AT: I don't see this as success, and it's not changing my work/life situation today, tomorrow, or in three weeks. Even if I had to work in a factory, I would continue to make my artwork like I did in the beginning, drawing on the train. Of course, as an artist, it's great when you can make for yourself and for a public. To have more communication with a larger and more interesting public makes my artistic development richer: it gives me more content to work with, offers access to more interesting curators. Also, I have a studio now, and I don't have to use my kitchen table.

OS: *That affects your labor practices, doesn't it?*

AT: Yes, that's true. It's a confirmation that my work is interesting and that I should continue, that it's not relevant only to me anymore.

Olga Stefan is a writer and curator based in Zürich.