
PRESS RELEASE

Philippe Thomas: AB (1978-1980)

A Philippe Thomas exhibition curated by Émeline Jaret

Opening on Saturday April 26, 2014, from 6 to 9 pm
The curator, Émeline Jaret, will be present

Roundtable on Thursday May 15, from 6 to 8 pm
"The reception context of Philippe Thomas' works: letting the artists be heard"

Exhibition from Tuesday April 29 to Saturday May 31, 2014

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Letters A and B in their original packaging used by Philippe Thomas for certain works of *AB* (1978-1980), black letreset letters on adhesive vinyl, Helvetica Medium, 50 mm.
Courtesy claire burrus

Introduction

Knowing the kind of issues Philippe Thomas' early work deals with, it seemed only natural to present Philippe Thomas' work at mfc-michèle didier gallery. *AB* is a multifaceted body of work and two of its productions will be presented during the exhibition *Philippe Thomas: AB (1978-1980)*.

1. A reconstitution of the very first production displayed in 1978 during the Mixage International in Caen, a device made up of various elements: a couple of letters A and B materialised in black vinyl letraset identical to the letters inscribed on the invitation which is also part of the exhibition.
2. The tapuscrit *AB*, consisting of 41 sheets of A4 sized paper will line the walls of the gallery.

To complete the *AB* artwork, a selection of unreleased documents from the Fonds Philippe Thomas conserved at the Kandinsky Library (Pompidou Centre, Paris) will also be presented: photographs, drawings, invitations, as well as two of the artist's sketchbooks.

The exhibition *Philippe Thomas: AB (1978-1980)* is curated by Émeline Jaret and aims to cast a new light on the more mysterious period of the artist's life. A PhD student in Art History, Émeline Jaret began to write a monographic thesis on Philippe Thomas' work in 2011 supervised by Arnauld Pierre of Paris-Sorbonne University (Paris IV). She has worked as an assistant to Claire Burrus for the inheritance proceedings of Philippe Thomas and undertook the necessary steps for the Fonds Philippe Thomas to enter the Kandinsky Library. She has written for an issue of the magazine *Retour d'y voir* dedicated to the artist in 2012. In 2013, Émeline Jaret was nominated for the "Art History" scholarship at the Centre Pompidou, Paris.

mfc-michèle didier would like to thank especially Claire Burrus, Philippe Thomas' testamentary executor, for her support in organizing the exhibition *Philippe Thomas: AB (1978-1980)*. The gallery is also grateful to the Kandinsky Library of Centre Pompidou for taking part in the project and making it happen. Lastly, mfc-michèle didier would like to thank Ghislain Mollet-Viéville for generously lending us two rare documents from his personal collection.

Jan Mot, Bruxelles, represents the works of Philippe Thomas since October 2012.

AB: a first glance

Excerpt from an article to be published: Émeline Jaret, “Les dispositifs à l’œuvre chez Philippe Thomas = l’exemple de *AB* (1978-1980)”, in *Marges*, n°20, Presses universitaires de Vincennes (Vincennes University Press), Spring 2015

The years from 1977 to 1980 were of the experimental kind for Philippe Thomas who, coming from a literary background, experiments with various artistic practices, all edging towards the same issue. In the first years of his career, his work can be roughly divided into two groups. Working with paper and typewriting, Philippe Thomas focused on the material aspect of signs from which he experiments with the relationship between the surface (of the page) and its inherent constraints. The works also take part in redefining the act of reading, since the absence of punctuation and syntactical chaos helps generate new meaning through differently combined letters. These early works include the use of objects somewhere in between sculpture and painting, made using large strips of surgical tape. These pieces also tackle the notion of spacing (no longer between letters but between the strips of surgical tape), opening a new and fundamental dimension for the works that follow, a dimension which reunites the object with the space it is presented in. These two types of work thus question (among other things) their connection to the surface in which they are inscribed and tend to break away from such a link. Evolving amidst many artists’ groups from 1977 to 1980, Philippe Thomas decides, in March 1985, to go his own way and leaves the IFP group he had founded with Dominique Pasqualini and Jean François Brun. He then elaborates his body of work, in line with his early researches and examining issues which are fundamental to twentieth-century art, to be crystallised as he creates the agency **readymades belong to everyone®** in 1987, in New York.

CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF *AB* EXHIBITIONS

- From December 12 to 18, 1978, Mixage International, Caen (solo exhibition)
- March 1979, at Ghislain Mollet-Viéville’s, 26 rue Beaubourg, Paris (solo exhibition)
- From May 24 to June 1, 1979, bookshop-gallery Artalect, Paris (solo exhibition)
- From December 9 to 16, 1979, Onze rue Clavel, Paris (group exhibition)
- From January 26 to February 16, 1980, 12 Waffelaerts Straat, Brussels (group exhibition)
- June 1980, at Ghislain Mollet-Viéville’s, 26, rue Beaubourg, Paris (solo exhibition)

Some of these themes already underly the *AB* display. Placed on the threshold between being seen and being read, it is a display that stems from the early works by Philippe Thomas, a multifaceted and evolving artwork which claims as many different appearances as the number of surfaces on which it is inscribed. Six exhibitions between December 1978 and June 1980 give consistency to the project: Mixage International (Caen) in December 1978, at Ghislain Mollet-Viéville’s (Paris) in March 1979 and in June 1980, at the bookshop-gallery Artalect (Paris) in May 1979, at Onze rue Clavel (Paris) in December 1979 and at 12, Waffelaerts Straat (Bruxelles) in January and February 1980. Each one of them adds a new element to help *AB* evolve. During the first exhibition, *AB* is presented as a set of letraset (letters in adhesive vinyl) and corresponds to a geometrical convention which, on dropping the strips of surgical tape linking the letters A and B, takes on a linguistic dimension. The display is deconstructed as layers of paint illustrate the interactions between different appearances of *AB* (letraset and invitation card) during the second exhibition which takes place outdoors three months later. From as soon as the third *AB* exhibition on, the letter B is given the possibility to move around, breaking from the former

geometrical convention of a straight line between A and B. *AB* is no longer limited to a specific spot but is seen all over the place, embracing the entire exhibition space including its “accidents” (interacting with the viewer). Henceforth, *AB* is indifferent to its allotted place and to the nature of the space around it, for what matters is its sole presence. This new direction is confirmed by the other exhibitions that follow, especially at Onze rue Clavel, where *AB* appears also on paper.

AB defines itself as a display composed of heterogenous elements, multiplying both the surfaces from which it tends to overflow and its various appearances: letraset, painting, photography, typewritten texts, etc. In allowing the play of interaction between the letters to show, it also incorporates various spatiotemporal data. Such elements serve the purpose of questioning the space surrounding a piece of art, a place for and by which the artwork is created. In the same way *AB* is not simply an installation on the wall but interacts with the surrounding space, each component of *AB* and the ties between them have to be taken into consideration as a whole. Then, Philippe Thomas’ creative context emerges in these questionings and *AB* is a witness to the artist’s maturing habit of identifying himself with “models” in order to find his place in a certain art scene. Philippe Thomas is as influenced, at that time, by sources such as the writings of Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot, Russell or Goodman, as by the works of fellow artists (the likes of Niele Toroni, Peter Downsbrough, Claude Rutault, as well as Daniel Buren and Joseph Kosuth) and discussions he has with them.

AB is a pivotal work through which Philippe Thomas breaks free of his previous work, and through which he casts a new light upon the transitional value that the questions he deals with have in the development of his body of work. The *Texte Théorique* (1980-1981) which comes before the *manuscrit trouvé* (1981), was originally an attempt to write a introductory text for *AB*. *AB* finds thus its lineage in the *manuscrit trouvé*, typescript of seven pages, which establish, through their content and manner of presentation, the theoretical foundation of the artist’s project. For this, *AB* is the missing link for understanding the chronological coherence of Philippe Thomas’ work.

Émeline Jaret

¹ Mixage International is a centre for alternative art founded and run by Joël Hubaut in Caen, between 1978 and 1985.

² Claude Rutault, who lives at the time at 11 rue Clavel (Paris, 19th arrondissement), provides a studio that the artists in his entourage can use for various exhibitions and events.

Biographical and bibliographical references

- 1978** Editing of *spenserm*, Gallery Katia Pissarro, Paris (February 1978)
Participated in *Travaux d'artistes*, Garage Escoffier, 11, rue Forest, Paris (27 April–1 June 1978)
Participated in *Trois Travaux*, 36, rue du Temple, Paris (27 Septembre–04 Octobre 1978)
AB, Mixage International, Caen (12–18 December 1978)
- 1979** Editing of *sans titre philippe thomas*, bookshop-gallery Artalect, Paris (March 1979)
Du 26 rue beaubourg au 26 rue beaubourg, at Ghislain Mollet-Viéville's, Paris (March 1979)
Publication of *pour la nausée philippe thomas*, in *Obliques* n°18–19, Sartre special (April 1979)
AB, bookshop-gallery Artalect, Paris (24 May–1 June 1979)
AB, Onze rue Clavel, Paris (9–16 December 1979)
- 1980** Group exhibition at Onze rue Clavel at 12 Waffelaerts Straat, Bruxelles (26 January–16 February 1980)
Philippe Thomas AB, at Ghislain Mollet-Viéville's, 26, rue Beaubourg, Paris (June 1980)
Philippe Thomas présente un exposé de Philippe Thomas (Philippe Thomas presents a presentation of Philippe Thomas), Onze rue Clavel, Paris (11 June 1980)
Participated in *Sur rendez-vous* (J.F. Brun, D. Pasqualini, J.-C. Lefèvre, C. Rutault, P. Thomas), at Ghislain Mollet-Viéville's, Paris (September 1980)
- 1981** Presented a *manuscrit trouvé*, at Ghislain Mollet-Viéville's, 26 rue Beaubourg, Paris (July 1981)
- 1983** Founded IFP (Information Fiction Publicité), with Dominique Pasqualini and Jean François Brun (November 1983)
Participated in *Présence discrète*, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon, organized by Le Coin du miroir (10 January–23 February 1983)
- 1985** Participated in *Immatériaux*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (26 March–15 July 1985)
Publication of *Philippe Thomas: sujet à discrétion?* by Michel Tournereau, in the magazine *Public*, n°3
Philippe Thomas leaves the IFP group (March 1985)
Fictionnalisme: une pièce à conviction, at Galerie Claire Burrus, Paris (25 November 1985–16 January 1986)
- 1987** Conference at Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, under the title: *Pour un art de société. Conférence de Philippe Thomas* (23 March 1987); Daniel Bosser edition, *Philippe Thomas décline son identité (une pièce à conviction en 1 acte et 3 tableaux)*, Paris, Galerie Claire Burrus / Yellow Now editions
Sujet à discrétion (John Dogg, Barbara Gladstone, Joseph Kosuth, Allan McCollum, Philippe Thomas), American Fine Arts Co., New York (15 October–8 November 1987)

Opened the agency *readymades belong to everyone®*, Cable Gallery, New York (1st–20 December 1987)

- 1988** Publication of *Publicité, publicité by the agency les ready-made appartiennent à tout le monde®*, in the newspaper *Libération* (11 August 1988)
- Created the French affiliate of the agency *les ready-made appartiennent à tout le monde®* on the occasion of the exhibition *Épreuves d'artistes*, Galerie Claire Burrus, Paris (19 September–5 November 1988)
- Presentation of the project *® (codes-barres)* by the agency *les ready-made appartiennent à tout le monde®* at the FIAC 1988, Paris, Galerie Claire Burrus
- Publication of Georges Verney-Carron, *Publicité, publicité. De quelques cas de figure*, in *Art Press*, n°129 (October 1988)
- Exhibition *Sur un lieu commun* with the help of the agency *les ready-made appartiennent à tout le monde®*, Maison de la Culture et de la Communication, Saint-Etienne (17 November 1988–15 January 1989)
- 1989** Exhibition *Ready made gehören allen: Ernst Ulrich Hertel*, Sabine Schütte with the help of the agency *les ready-made appartiennent à tout le monde®*, Galerie Esther Schipper, Cologne (17 November–9 December 1989)
- Exhibition *Insights* with the help of *les ready-made appartiennent à tout le monde®*, Curt Marcus Gallery, New York (29 November–23 December 1989)
- 1990** The agency *les ready-made appartiennent à tout le monde®* organized an international competition in the context of the exhibition *Art et Publicité*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (31 October 1990–25 February 1991)
- Exhibition *Feux pâles* with the help of the agency *les ready-made appartiennent à tout le monde®*, capcMusée d'art contemporain, Bordeaux (7 December 1990–3 March 1991)
- 1991** Participated in *Lieux communs, figures singulières*, ARC, Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris (24 October 1991–12 January 1992)
- 1992** Exhibition *Scusate, ma non abbiamo potuto aspettarvi* with the help of the agency *readymades belong to everyone®*, Galerie Massimo Minini, Brescia (8 May–9 June 1992)
- Participated in the *Documenta IX*, Kassel (13 June–20 September 1992)
- Exhibition *Übergänge* with the help of the agency *readymades belong to everyone®*, Kunstraum, Munich (16 September–14 November 1992)
- 1993** Participated in *Tyne International*, Newcastle upon Tyne (18 June–5 September 1993)
- The agency *readymades belong to everyone®* closes at Donatella Brun and Jay Chiat's, New York (5–24 November 1993)
- Participated in *Backstage*, Kunstverein, Hambourg (10 September–24 October 1993); Kunstmuseum, Lucerne (4 February–4 April 1994)
- 1994** Closing of the agency *les ready-made appartiennent à tout le monde®* during the exhibition *Mobilier national*, Galerie Claire Burrus, Paris (19 March–14 May 1994)

- 1995** Publication of *Philippe Thomas, Le cinéma, quelle histoire!*, in *Libération* (18 May 1995)
An Ilmari Kalkkinen exhibition with the help of the agency *readymades belong to everyone®*, Galerie Claire Burrus, Paris (7 October–30 November 1995)

We have referred to Émeline Jaret's article in the magazine *Retour d'y voir* n°5 (further references below), pages 340 to 352, for the exhibitions of Philippe Thomas after 1995

RECENT EVENTS: 2012 - 2014

- Ever since 2012 Philippe Thomas is represented by **Jan Mot**, Bruxelles.
- Publication of a special issue *Retraits de l'artiste en Philippe Thomas* of the magazine *Retour d'y voir*, n°5, Geneva, Mamco / Dijon, Les Presses du réel, June 2012
- Reproduction of the exhibition *Fictionnalisme: une pièce à conviction*, Jan Mot, Bruxelles (09 March–20 April 2013)
- Retrospective *Hommage à Philippe Thomas et autres œuvres*; augmentée de *L'Ombre du jaseur (d'après Feux Pâles)*, **Mamco**, Geneva (12 February–18 May 2014)

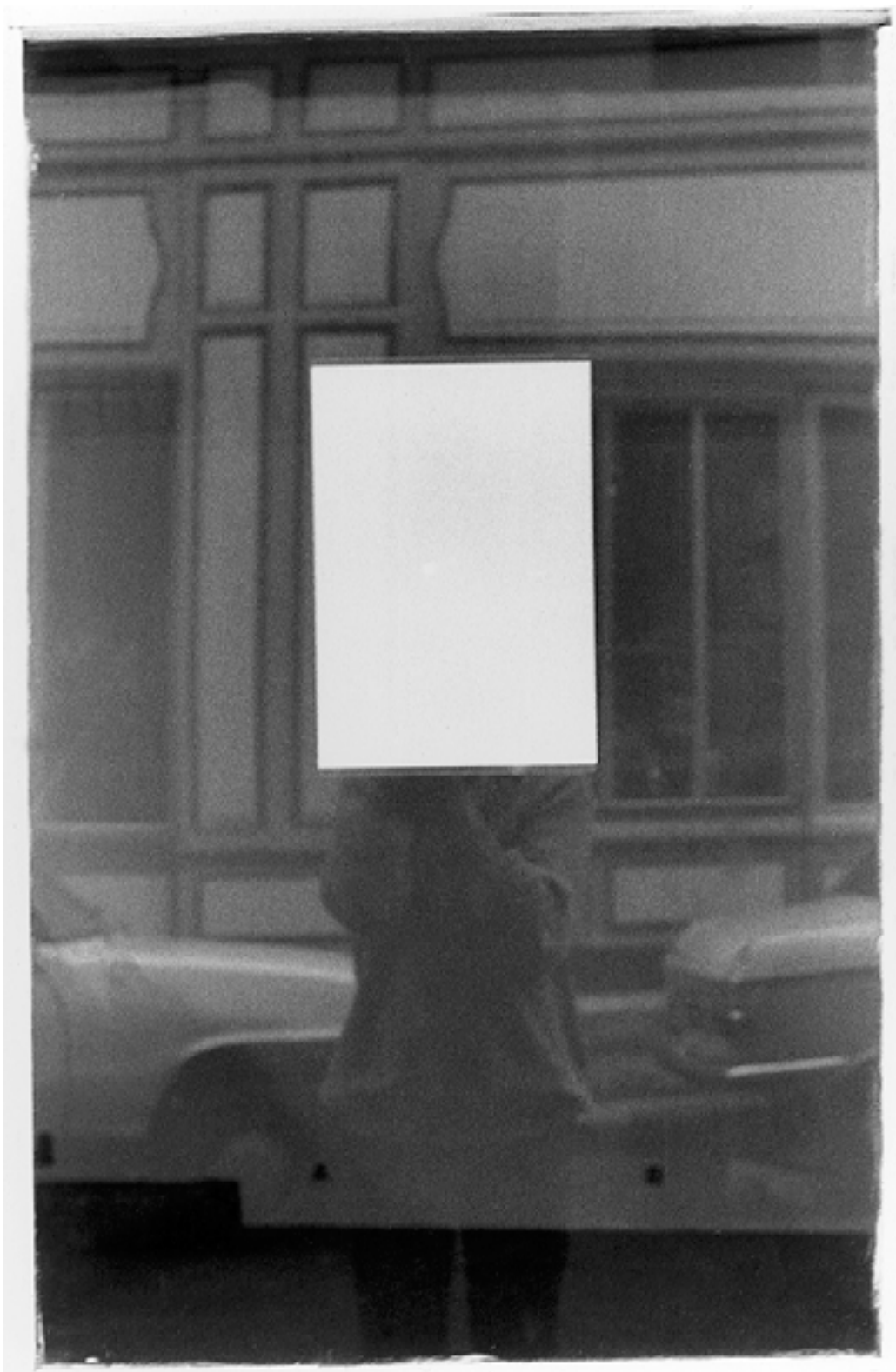
Press images



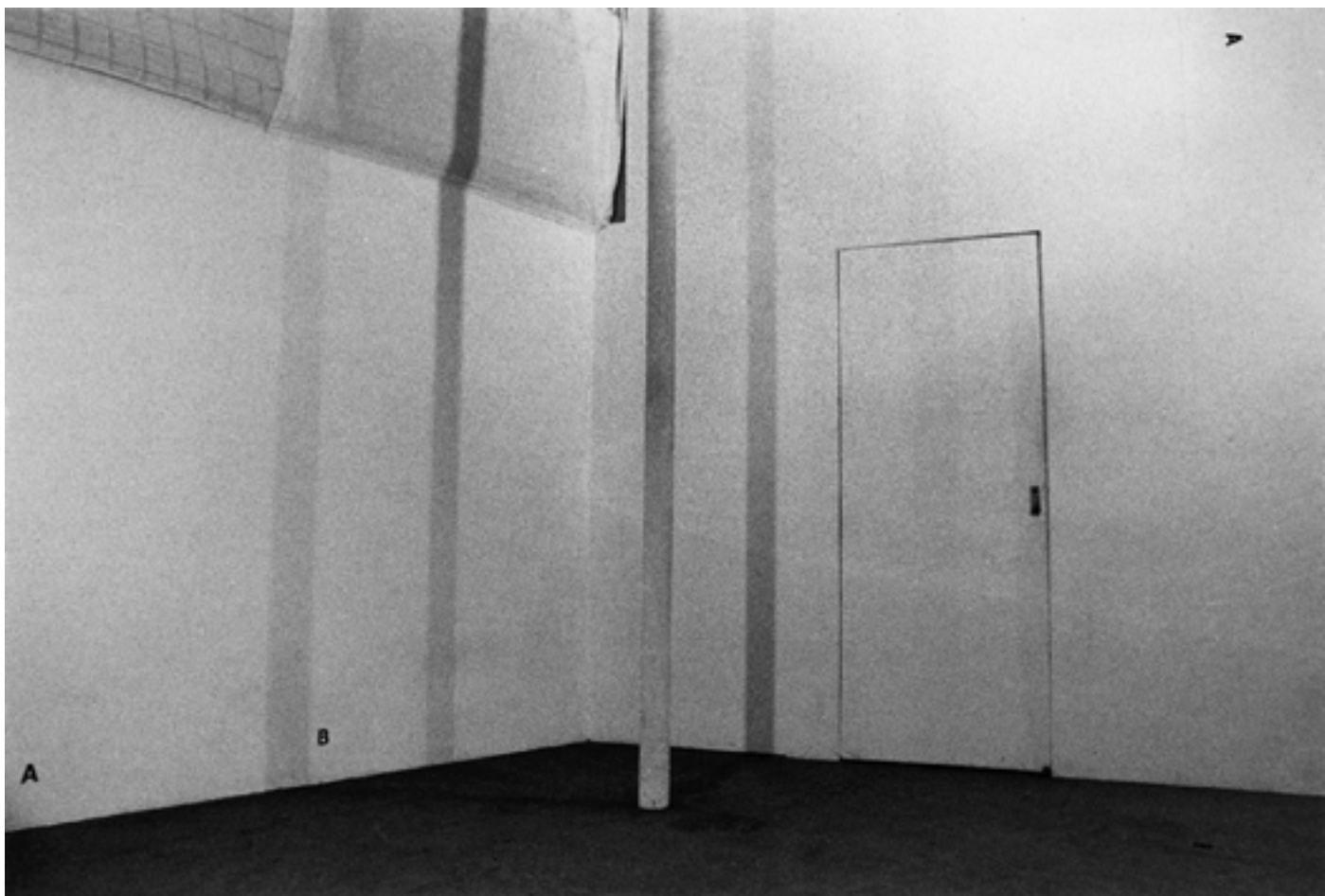
Philippe Thomas during an *AB* exhibition at Onze rue Clavel, Paris, from 9 to 16 December 1979.
Courtesy claire burrus



Exhibition *AB* at Mixage International, Caen, from 12 to 18 December 1978.
Courtesy claire burrus



Exhibition *AB* at Mixage International, Caen, from 12 to 18 December 1978.
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