Andrew Goldstein, "5 Rising Stars to Discover at the Liste Art Fair 2017", *ArtNet News*, June 15, 2017.

artnet news

Liste is known for its discrete, idiosyncratic, and relatively portable works, but John Russell's cinema-screen-sized painting at Bridget Donahue galumphs as a shock—and, for the artist, it's actually a small piece. An artist whose 54 years of age—not to mention collect-them-all schooling at St. Martins, Goldsmith's, and the Slade—make him a veteran at the young art fair, Russell has brought a sweeping vista of a robotic dragonfly coursing over an ocean dotted with floating crucifixes towards a towering agglomeration of toads, faces, and other densely packed imagery. "A congealing mass of something" is how he describes it, explaining that the congealing factor has to do with Marx's quote that "as exchange-values, all commodities are merely definite quantities of congealed labour time"; the blazing oranges, meanwhile, are a nod to Turner's fiery seascapes.

In other words, there's a lot going on in this crazy picture, which Russell made through a multiphase process of digital collage, 3D rendering, and retouching, printing them out on massive sheets of vinyl (like a high-end billboard) and then backlighting them with fluorescent bulbs for a glowing effect that amps up the colors. The artist likes his intensely visual paintings—sci-fi epics, really—to become immersive environments that "smash you in the face," he says, and his largest to date has been 15 feet by 60 feet long. Russell, who is currently working on a debut film, will have a show at the Kunsthalle Zürich this August.

Saim Demircan, "Mo-Leeza Roberts: Head", *Art Monthly,* April 2016.

# Mo-Leeza Roberts: Head

Head gallery originally appeared (and continues to remain) online as a rudimentary emulation of a commercial gallery website. Its homepage crudely mimics that of Maureen Paley's. An address locates it at 165 East Broadway in New York, which is actually Reena Spaulings, as is the listed phone number. These casual distractions are, however, just the beginning of what proves to be a more psychedelic form of parasitical art practice. Fragments of press releases for imaginary exhibitions start out routinely - "thrilled to present" - albeit suspiciously, but then hyperlink what are often endlessly scrolling, GIF-filled text-image collaged web pages that read as a mash-up of sci-fi-horror-erotic fiction in the vein of literary transgression. In a sense, while the website applies punk aesthetic to web design, Head gallery's anonymity opens the floodgates for the unadulterated, exhilarating, form of online self-publishing that has now become transposed into a novel.

Published by Bookworks as part of 'GSOH The Rest is Dark, The Rest is Dark', guest-editor Clunie Reid's series of artist publications, the simply titled *Head* is headgallery.org distilled into book form, within which the Head gallery universe is expanded upon or, perhaps more appropriate to the style of writing, fleshed out. The New York, or Nu-York, in the novel exists a desolate epoch during the years 2096-97 with the gallery standing as the last bastion of the art world in a post-apocalyptic future society. Head is apparently authored by Mo-Leeza Roberts, one of several fictitious artists - others include Carlstone Dempsey, Druuva Deville, Hassam Nassim and Rainbow Nbeme - collectors, critics and art magazines with titles like *Offworld Quarterly*, *Death Fukk* and *Art Thrust*. They zip across a wasteland - the Expanse - to the Metropolis (as 'emptied out fuck-zone') where Head gallery is 'the only place that matters anymore'. These characters populate the novel alongside real art-world figures, or what's left of them - present day personalities sometimes appear as clones, eg Jan Verwoert VI. Rather than construct a controversial narrative, though, the textual pseudo-fiction of the website is adapted into a series of vignettes prefaced with with press releases for demented exhibitions. Characters are often on their way to opening receptions that customarily descend into debauched sadomasochistic orgies, or end with massacres or other catastrophes: 'dropping a giant swamp whale' into the gallery space, for example. These performance rituals are described in incessant detail, in language that is heavily sexually explicit and violent. Lengthy, brutal descriptions read like passages from Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*.

Yet what takes place at the gallery occurs with a sense that it does so in a vacuum of accepted inevitability, perhaps to fulfill the demands of the spectacle. It is as if exhibition-making in the future has become a form of visceral, undone pageantry, like an art version of *The Hunger Games* where everything is laced with an acute sense of fatality and is celebrated as such. As far-

fetched as *Head* is, though, stereotypical routines of art world procedurals and social behaviour can still be acknowledged. By hijacking the format of the press release, one could fantasize that the language is *Head* is the outcome of what would have happened if BANK's 1999 *Press Release* project - that, after all, was a service; its slogan 'The BANK FAX-BAK SERVICE: Helping You to Help Yourselves!' - had actually worked, liberating PR from its redundant, traditional, de-authored language and instead producing mutated, bastardized texts. Yet, I would also suggest that by being anonymous, those actually behind Head gallery use it as a weapon with which to fire its latest critique: breeding suspicion rather than full disclosure, the knowledge of which could then be too easily accepted or dismissed. Georges Bataille famously wrote *Story of the Eye* under the pseudonym Lord Auch, after all, and while Head gallery might circulate as a cult fiction within the hyper-distribution of the exhibition-as-image nowadays, its masquerade is what makes it perennial.

In a sense, *Head* reverse-engineers the Reena Spaulings novel-cum-gallery model. Reena Spaulings started as a book based on the fictitious titular character, which then morphed into what is now a (fully functioning) commercial gallery. In *Head*, the gallery is also recognized as being both a 'space of dramatization' and transitional, yet it proves that it can roam virtual and literary space as much as a gallery traditionally occupies the physical. Aside from debasing artistic luminaries, though, there is commentary to be gleaned from the use of transgressive fiction to exaggerate an oversaturated art world. *Head* reconfigures the gallery-as-institution as a site of perversion through a use of language that sites critique within the prose of obscenity. Philosophically disengaging with past schools of criticism, the future-now of Head gallery opens up a space where it is made flesh, heralding a form of abject criticality.

Mo-Leeza Roberts, *Head*, 2015, Bookworks, 160pp.

Domenick Ammirati, "A Taxonomy of Non-Sense", *Mousse* Magazine, February 17, 2016, 226 - 229.

MOUSSE

# [A TAXONOMY OF NON-SENSE]

BY DOMENICK AMMIRATI

**Domenick Ammirati** is a writer whose art criticism has appeared in *Artforum*, *Mousse*, *Frieze*, *Dis*, the *Artforum* and *Afterall* websites. His writing on music and books has appeared in a variety of publications including *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Dot Dot Dot*, *Bookforum*, and *Index*.

Greer Lankton, *Peggy (Moffit)*, 1986. Courtesy: Greer Lankton Archives Museum (G.L.A.M.)

A lateral move from neosurrealism is to animism, linking up via Freud, who describes the uncanny as a self-projection onto the environment of the unconscious: "An uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced." The uncanny confuses the boundary between the human and the nonhuman; it infuses the object with life.

*di Domenick Ammirati*

**Un movimento trasversale al neo-surrealismo è quello verso l'animismo, al quale si collega attraverso Freud, che descrive il perturbante come un'autoproiezione dell'inconscio sull'ambiente: "ci troviamo esposti a un effetto perturbante quando il confine tra fantasia e realtà si fa labile". Il perturbante confonde il confine tra l'umano e il non umano; infonde vita all'oggetto.**

In origine, le pratiche concettuali sono state radicali. In molti casi il loro carattere antiretinico irrita tuttora l'osservatore occasionale. Ma in un certo senso l'arte concettuale è stata sin dal principio fortemente tradizionale, nel senso che in essa è inscritta l'idea del tema illuministico razionale. Se la pratica concettuale infastidisce i tradizionalisti, questo avviene solo perché la tradizione ha assegnato l'irrazionale, il romantico e l'individuale all'ambito dell'arte, lasciando al resto del mondo la razionalità, lo scientismo e l'oggettività. Vedono l'arrivo dell'intelletto in quell'ambito come un'intrusione, come l'ingresso di un cacciatore di frodo in una riserva di specie in via di estinzione.
In arte il desiderio di detronizzare o di annullare il soggetto cartesiano, e la conseguente dicotomia soggetto/oggetto, esiste in tensione con il paesaggio creato dalla svolta concettuale. Le tendenze più in voga degli ultimi anni, contrastanti e forse a volte sposate capricciosamente, hanno in ogni caso questa dinamica manifesta. Condividono un'ostilità nei confronti dell'assetto ontologico dell'illuminismo e dei suoi mali; e non è un caso che, in meglio o in peggio, esse mostrino una varietà di pratiche anti-concettuali o non concettuali.

Di recente a New York sono comparse due opere, entrambe video (la maggior parte di ciò che esce è spazzatura, naturalmente, ma la pompa e gli encomi tendono a fissare lo sguardo e a riempire gli occhi a lungo). *Everything and More* (2015) di Rachel Rose è stato proiettato a tutta parete al Whitney Museum. Il video, della durata di undici minuti, è costruito attorno alla descrizione da parte di un ex astronauta del periodo trascorso a bordo della stazione spaziale Mir, del suo successivo ritorno a terra e del conseguente spiazzamento. Se avessi ascoltato il suo racconto in un podcast, questa storia mi avrebbe avvinto. Ma qui il narratore è una voce fuori campo, sovrapposta a diversi tipi di immagini. A tratti, come espediente drammatico/simbolico, Rose allestisce degli effetti visivi, frequenze e velature di colore liquido in stile psichedelico ad altissima definizione. Il video ci porta anche in visita in una struttura di addestramento per astronauti, con la telecamera che guida il nostro punto di vista dentro e fuori dall'acqua, mentre l'immagine a volte si disgrega per gli effetti visivi vetrosi/planari. Questa sezione è inoffensiva finché non arriva un punto di non ritorno, in cui la telecamera comincia a scrutare nella parte posteriore di una tuta spaziale vuota per mostrarci le cose attraverso la visiera. Un momento, perché sta per fare il suo ingresso un po' di follia: possiamo vedere *quel cazzo di spazio*. Procediamo attraverso la maschera nell'insulso brancolare dell'artista dietro ai trascendentali, dove ad esempio un minuscolo astronauta delle dimensioni di una formica fluttua nello spazio, di fronte a una macchia psichedelica galattica. L'universo è così grande, e noi così piccoli.
La masturbazione cosmica diviene incongrua quando la scena cambia per mostrare il pubblico di immensi spettacoli di musica dance elettronica, spazzato da imponenti velature di colore, rosse o verdi, ragazzi in apparenza non tanto fatti da far andare su tutte le furie la direzione del Whitney, ma comunque un po' storditi. Tutti si muovono all'unisono al suono di una musica immaginaria; forze invisibili si uniscono a noi, sembra essere il messaggio, persino agli stupidi. E in qualche modo viene tutto dal cielo. Il colpo di grazia è la comparsa nella colonna sonora di una lagna gospel priva di testo che ricorda un po' *The Great Gig in the Sky*, il brano più imbarazzante del forse sesto miglior album dei Pink Floyd, *The Dark Side of the Moon*. Nel 1973 come nel 2015, una voce "piena di sentimento" esprime prelinguisticamente immaterialità che noi bianchi non possiamo udire. Per chi se lo stesse chiedendo, la voce senza parole nel video di Rose è quella di Aretha Franklin.
Ugualmente immatura è *Nummer zestien: the present moment* (2016), videoinstallazione a

Greer Lankton, *Grandma and Suzanne, Palm Beach*, 1985. Courtesy: Greer Lankton Archives Museum (G.L.A.M.). Photo: Greer Lankton

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## [A TAXONOMY OF NON-SENSE]
## D. AMMIRATI

At their origin, conceptual art practices were radical. Their anti-retinalism still often rankles the casual observer. But in one sense conceptual art has been from the outset highly traditional, in that it inscribes the idea of the rational Enlightenment subject. If conceptual practice irritates traditionalists, it is only because tradition has apportioned the irrational, the romantic, and the subjective to the realm of art, leaving to the rest of the world rationality, scientism, and objectivity. Traditionalists view the intellect's appearance in the realm of art as interloping—poaching on an endangered-species reserve.

In art the desire to overthrow or overwrite the Cartesian subject, and the resultant subject-object dichotomy, exists in tension with the landscape created by the conceptual turn. The hot trends of the past few years, divergent and perhaps at times waywardly embraced, have in any case manifest this dynamic. They share an opposition to the Enlightenment ontological setup and its ills; and, not coincidentally, in ways better and worse, they demonstrate a variety of anti- or non-conceptual practices.

Two unfortunate artworks appeared in New York recently, both videos. (Most everything is shit, of course, but pomp and praise tend to fix the gaze for a good long eyeful.) Rachel Rose's *Everything and More* (2015) appeared at the Whitney Museum of American Art as a wall-size projection. The eleven-minute piece is structured around an ex-astronaut's description of his time aboard the Mir space station, his eventual return to Earth, and his ensuing sense of dislocation. If I'd heard him on a podcast, I'd have been gripped by his story. But here his account comes in a voice-over, over a few different types of image. As an occasional dramatic-symbolic device, Rose sets up hyper-high-res psychedelia-style visual effects with loops and washes of liquid color. We also get a tour of an astronaut training facility, the camera dragging our POV into the water and out of it, with the image disrupted at times by visual effects. This section is innocuous until Rose jumps the shark, when the camera peers around the backside of an empty spacesuit to show us the view through the face shield. Hold on, because things are about to get crazy: you can see *outer fucking space!* We proceed through the mask into the artist's facile groping after transcendentals, wherein for example a tiny astronaut floats in the void, the size of an ant opposite a galactic psychedelic blotch. Ah, the universe is so big, and we are so small.

The cosmic wow vibe turns bathetic when the scene shifts to grand sweeps over audiences at enormous EDM shows, tinted in red or green, looking not so drugged up as to freak out any Whitney board members, but with the guys still a little date-rapey. Everyone moves in unison to unheard music; we are all joined by unseen forces, the message seems to be, even the chodes. And it's all coming from the heavens, somehow. The coup de grâce is the appearance on the soundtrack of wordless gospel wailing that recalls nothing so much as *The Great Gig in the Sky*, the cringey-est track from Pink Floyd's maybe sixth-best album, *The Dark Side of the Moon*. In 1973 as in 2015, a "soulful" voice pre-linguistically expresses etherealities we white people can't hear. FWIW Rose's clip of is of Aretha Franklin.

Equally sophomoric was Guido van der Werve's showing at Luhring Augustine of his three-channel installation *Nummer zestien, the present moment* (2016). On opposing walls a bunch of naked old people and a bunch of naked young people sit around and do stuff in abstract black space. The old people look mostly pathetic. The young people get to fuck and some of their bods are worth a second look. There's also a middle screen where people in loose-fitting black sweats and tees do yoga, laugh for no reason, and stare into each other's eyes; the press release actually uses the self-help, businessman-Buddhist buzzword "mindfulness." But come on, you're not looking at *them*, you're looking back and forth at the naked people. None of them have much individuality, about which we are supposed to feel sad. If you weren't sure what to think, don't worry: melodramatic "classical" music emerges from a player piano lurking dimly in the center of the room, a mysterious source giving off a whiff of magic. The hour-long video is divided into sequences titled after the signs of the zodiac.

With both van der Werve and Rose, drippy humanism is given a vague, safe cast of spirituality. There's something out there connecting us somehow, though we're not quite sure what. And we can appreciate our intangible universality and the quasi-sacred nature of our personal journeys nevertheless. Tepid as they are, these works are part of a tide of what I'd call irrationalism that's welled up against your conceptualists, your Whitney ISP types, your slaves of logic. And it doesn't have to be all bad. It subsumes a broad variety of phenomena, including the mentality displayed by Rose and van der Werve. Of it, some dare less dodgy and more complex versions, like Lucy Dodd, who places in the gallery space not only her deceptively crafted paintings, tinged with both pigment and yerba mate, but also herself, citing and collapsing the everyday and the ritual, and displaying a sense of humor in her odd wielding of old-school artist-shaman equivalencies. Irrationalism includes both the current uptick in interest in "outsider art" (no, really guys, trust us, tre canali di Guido van der Werve proiettata da Luhring Augustine. Su pareti opposte un gruppo di anziani nudi e un gruppo di giovani nudi vagano e fanno qualcosa in uno spazio astratto nero. I vecchi appaiono fondamentalmente patetici. I giovani si mettono a scopare; alcuni dei loro corpi valgono una seconda occhiata. C'è anche uno schermo centrale in cui persone vestite con pantaloni da tuta e t-shirt neri praticano yoga, ridono senza motivo, si fissano negli occhi; il comunicato stampa utilizza curiosamente una parola in voga tratta dal gergo del self help e degli imprenditori buddisti, "mindfulness." Ma insomma, uno non guarda loro, bensì occhieggia a destra e sinistra la gente nuda. Nessuno di essi ha una individualità pronunciata, cosa che si suppone dovrebbe rattristarci, ma non preoccupiamoci se così non fosse: celata nell'ombra al centro della stanza, una pianola esala musica "classica" melodrammatica, fonte misteriosa dalla quale si sprigiona una folata di magia. Il video, della durata di un'ora, è diviso in sequenze che prendono il titolo dai segni dello zodiaco.

Nel caso di van der Werve quanto in quello di Rose, a uno sdolcinato umanesimo si assegna una vaga, prudente impronta di spiritualità. Là fuori c'è qualcosa che ci unisce in qualche modo, per quanto non abbiamo certezze sulla sua natura. E nondimeno possiamo apprezzare la nostra intangibile universalità e la natura quasi sacra dei nostri percorsi individuali. Scialbe per quanto siano, queste opere sono parte di una tendenza di ciò che chiamerei irrazionalismo che è montata contro i vostri concettualisti, i vostri tipi da Independent Study Program del Whitney, i vostri schiavi della logica. E il tutto non dev'essere poi così negativo. Racchiude un'ampia varietà di fenomeni, compresa la mentalità esibita da Rose e van der Werve. Al suo interno si trovano alcune versioni meno instabili e più complesse, come nel caso di Lucy Dodd, che nello spazio della galleria non colloca solo i propri illusori dipinti, venati allo stesso modo di pigmenti e di yerba mate, ma anche sé stessa, citando e smontando il quotidiano e il rituale, e sfoderando il suo sense of humor nel propugnare l'equivalenza "artista della vecchia scuola-sciamana". L'irrazionalismo comprende sia l'attuale crescita nell'interesse per l'"Outsider Art" (davvero ragazzi, fidatevi di noi, questa volta è per sempre) sia la moda per comunicati stampa grottescamente sovrascritti che pompano la loro soggettività fino alla tronfiaggine. Poco spazio per scrivere e moltissimi esempi, che spaziano comunque da "Ecco le mie note" ("Il paradosso culturale della mostra è messo in scena nella sfera del gusto. Ermetiche culture dell'immagine recitano la fantasia dell'autonomia dalla storia") fino ai Burroughs mancati ("Magnete coreoplastico, ho guardato anche più da vicino e ho visto che non eri tu; baci zooidi che incollano la carne alla cassa toracica, e galleggiano nel nulla! Ma tu sei stato sempre più di te stesso: una lacrima che fu una rosa che fu una lama, un corpo, una città ... la tua realtà era tua, minerale, smeraldo, 'diamante-rosa-miniera'").

Quest'ultima prosa punta verso un altro importante passaggio dell'irrazionalismo, che è stato definito neo-surrealismo. Di fatto tra i suoi antenati verosimili c'è più il dadaismo, poiché Dada era più antitetico alle concezioni convenzionali del sé rispetto al surrealismo, che fu promosso per portare alla luce il significato di una parte invisibile del sé, l'inconscio. Qualche parte del neo-surreale concentra l'attenzione sulla tecnologia dell'informazione, adatta a turbare i tipici processi semiotici. Tende a essere fredda e piatta, con una giustapposizione radicale simile a quella di un motore di ricerca. Raccapriccianti occhi di ragno insufflati in un cutout di alluminio autoportante stampato in digitale, termitai ottenuti allo stesso modo, e l'icona di una sinuosa freccia che secondo il titolo rappresenta il "potenziale di crescita": Katja Noviskova al "New Photography 2015" del MoMA. Quello degli AIDS-3D è un esempio interessante, nel senso che le loro rivendicazioni eccessivamente furbesche per i loro accumuli di significante sono ciò che manda in corto circuito non solo la nostra intenzione ma la nostra capacità di analizzarli: la semiosi distrutta dal sarcasmo. C'è un altro tipo di surreale che si concentra sull'angoscia del corpo, normalmente inquietante, poiché quando si tratta della destabilizzazione del nostro senso di un sé integro e razionale, un buon sussulto fa la sua parte.

this time it's forever) and the vogue for grotesquely overwritten press releases that puff up their subjectivity to a bloat. Little room to write and so many examples, but they range from "Here's my notes" ("The exhibition Cultural paradox staged in the sphere of taste. hermetic image cultures play out fantasy of autonomy from history") to William S. Burroughs manqué ("Coreoplastic magnet, I looked even closer and noticed you weren't you: zooidic kisses sticking flesh to ribcages, and floating in nothing! But you were always more than you: a teardrop that was a rose that was a blade, a body, a city… your reality was ours, mineral, emerald, 'diamond-rose-mine.'")

The latter prose style points toward another major swath of irrationalism, which has been dubbed neosurrealism. In fact it relies more on Dada as forebear, since Dada was more antithetical to conventional conceptions of the self than Surrealism, which was pitched to unearth meaning from within an invisible part of the self, the unconscious. Some of the neosurreal is focused on info tech, attuned to disrupting typical semiotic processes. It tends to be cold and flat, with a search-engine kind of radical juxtaposition. A spider's grisly eyes blown up into a digitally printed freestanding aluminum cutout, termite mounds similarly treated, and an icon of a wiggly arrow representing "growth potential," according to the title: Katja Novitskova at the Museum of Modern Art's "New Photography 2015." AIDS-3D makes an interesting example, in that their excessively arch claims for their signifier pileups are what short-circuits not just our willingness to parse them but our ability to: semiosis disrupted by sarcasm. There's another type of the surreal focused on body angst, usually creepy, since, in terms of destabilizing our sense of an integral, rational self, a good shudder works. Alisa Beremboym; Ian Cheng; even Sarah Lucas repping the UK in Venice in 2015 nods in this direction. The exceptional survey of the work of Greer Lankton at New York's Participant Inc. in late 2014 drew a charge from the neosurreal context as well. Lankton, who died in 1996, made doll sculptures of friends and celebs (Jackie O., Diana Vreeland) that display a caricaturist's brio. Up to life size, they treat the human body with love and as grotesque. Lankton's identity as a trans woman—not to mention her depiction of surgeries both in watercolors and with dolls—hint at how the received notion of self might be taken apart and reassembled.

A lateral move from neosurrealism is to animism, linking up via Freud, who describes the uncanny as a self-projection onto the environment of the unconscious: "An uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced." The uncanny confuses the boundary between the human and the nonhuman; it infuses the object with life. (Lankton's show found a tidy fit here as well. Dolls are animated by those who care for them and take them up for play, in this case someone who is definitively absent via premature death. In turn the artist's death becomes a stand-in for the deaths of so many in a New York milieu ravaged by AIDS and drugs.) Discussions of animism in the art world became overt in 2010, with two very different takes—the first iteration of Anselm Franke's show "Animism" and the publication in *Artforum* of Mark Leckey's annotated portfolio "The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things." Leckey eventually produced an exhibition of that title that began traveling in 2013, and has continued to explore the subject in the rest of his work. Franke's show appeared at four venue (2010-2012) and generated multiple publications. Leckey is a techno-optimist-mystic, credulous that technology is the gateway to wonderment, endowing the world with magic (a word Leckey likes to use). This must be a nice way to go through life. Franke, meanwhile, takes a rich, sophisticated, anthropological look at animism as a boundary-defining practice—and one that, at its root, was a tool of colonialism. Animism exists on the line dividing human from object; it was ascribed to divide the modern from the primitive, the colonizer from the colonized. Which is to say that it was a way of proclaiming and enforcing the idea of the reason-driven Western individual subject, its imposition being a key aspect of colonization.

Franke's animism study was wide-ranging and largely historical, but the plain notion of animism remains a subject of fascination in art. This resonates with the rise of philosophies that have been gathered under the rubric of neomaterialism. The neomaterialist project is to establish a non-anthropocentric view of subjecthood, with objects, humans, even immaterialities such as ideas all existing on the same plane of being—thus overthrowing the prime mover behind animism itself, the subject-object split. Two leading examples of these theories are object-oriented ontology and speculative realism, with affines including actor-network theory. These efforts are intriguing in that they represent an attempt to rationalize what on its face appears blatantly absurd. What does my chair think? How does my thought about my chair feel? The neomaterialists employ the tools of Western philosophy for what would seem antithetical to those very tools. And if the effort were to succeed, they would seem to be extending the Western subject-object model outward rather than revising it, given what would seem to be the

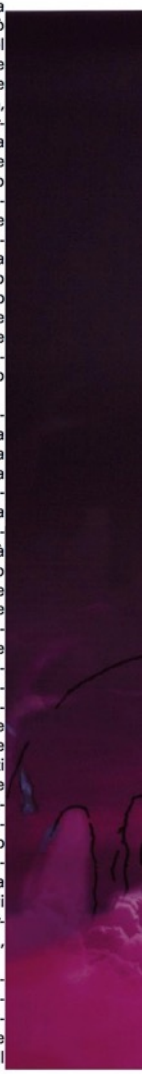


Alyssa Berenboym; Ian Cheng; anche Sarah Lucas, che rappresenta la Gran Bretagna a Venezia nel 2015, indicano questa direzione. Anche l'eccezionale indagine dell'opera di Greer Lankton al Participant, Inc. di New York nell'ultima parte del 2014 si è nutrita del contesto neosurreale. Lankton, morta nel 1996, realizzò una serie di bambole-scultura di amici e personaggi famosi (Jackie O., Diana Vreeland) che mostrano una verve da caricaturista. Di varie dimensioni fino alla grandezza naturale, trattano il corpo umano con amore e come cosa grottesca. L'identità di Lankton come transessuale donna – per non parlare della sua rappresentazione degli interventi chirurgici, sia negli acquarelli sia nelle bambole – allude alle modalità secondo le quali la nozione condivisa del sé può essere scomposta e ricostituita.

Un movimento trasversale al neo-surrealismo è quello verso l'animismo, al quale si collega attraverso Freud, che descrive il perturbante come un'autoproiezione dell'inconscio sull'ambiente: "[...] ci troviamo esposti a un effetto perturbante quando il confine tra fantasia e realtà si fa labile" (Sigmund Freud, *Il perturbante*, in OSF, vol. IX, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1969, p. 86). Il perturbante confonde il confine tra l'umano e il non umano; infonde vita all'oggetto (qui la mostra di Lankton trova un abito che le calza a pennello. Le bambole sono animate da chi se ne prende cura e le prende per giocare, in questo caso qualcuno che è definitivamente assente per morte prematura. A sua volta la morte dell'artista diventa un sostituto per le morti di molti, in un ambiente newyorkese devastato dall'AIDS e dalle droghe). Il dibattito sull'animismo nell'arte si farà manifesto nel 2010, con due modi di interpretarlo diversissimi: la prima replica di "Animism", mostra di Anselm Franke, e la pubblicazione su *Artforum* di "The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things", portfolio commentato di Mark Leckey. Leckey realizzò poi una mostra itinerante con lo stesso titolo che cominciò a girare nel 2013, e continuò a indagare il tema nel resto della sua opera; la mostra di Franke si tenne in quattro sedi, tra il 2010 e il 2012, e generò molte pubblicazioni. Leckey è un tecno-ottimista-mistico, un ingenuo convinto che la tecnologia apra le porte alla meraviglia, irraggiando il mondo di magia (un termine che Leckey usa volentieri). Dev'essere un modo piacevole di attraversare la vita. Intanto Franke posa uno sguardo ricco, sofisticato, antropologico sull'animismo come pratica che definisce il confine – e che, alle sue radici, è stata uno strumento del colonialismo. L'animismo esiste sulla linea divisoria tra umano e oggetto; gli è stato inoltre assegnato il compito di dividere il moderno dal primitivo, il colonizzatore dal colonizzato. Vale a dire che è un modo di proclamare e applicare l'idea di un soggetto individuale occidentale guidato dalla ragione, la cui imposizione è un aspetto fondamentale della colonizzazione.

Lo studio di Franke sull'animismo è stato ad ampio raggio e principalmente storico, ma la mera nozione di animismo rimane nell'arte un tema che cattura e che entra in risonanza con l'ascesa di filosofie raggruppate sotto la categoria del neomaterialismo. Il progetto neomaterialista mira a fondare una visione del soggettivo non antropocentrica, con oggetti, esseri umani, persino entità immateriali quali le idee, tutti sullo stesso piano dell'essere, rovesciando così il motore primo che sta dietro allo stesso animismo, la separazione soggetto/oggetto. Due importanti esempi di queste teorie sono l'ontologia orientata all'oggetto e il realismo speculativo, che si affina con l'inclusione della teoria attore-rete. Questi sforzi sono interessanti per il fatto che rappresentano un tentativo di razionalizzare ciò che appare palesemente assurdo. Cosa pensa la mia sedia? Come si sente il mio pensiero sulla mia sedia? I neomaterialisti utilizzano gli strumenti della filosofia occidentale per ciò che sembrerebbe antitetico proprio rispetto a quegli strumenti. E se lo sforzo dovesse avere successo, sembrerebbero estendere il modello occidentale soggetto/oggetto verso l'esterno invece di sottoporlo a revisione, considerata quella che sembra la letterale impossibilità degli esseri umani di concepire l'esistenza al di fuori dei termini umani – il significato dell'essere non umani, persino inerti o immateriali.

In queste ultime frasi avrete notato parecchi "sembra". Ammetto di non essere molto ferrato in materia di Kant, Heidegger e tutto ciò che serve per esaminare nel profondo questi temi. Fortunatamente questo mi unisce al 95% di ciò che costituisce il



literal impossibility of humans to conceive of existence outside human terms—what it is like to be not-human, even inert or immaterial.

You will notice a lot of *seems* in those last sentences. I admit I lack the chops in Kant, Heidegger, et al. needed to truly evaluate these arguments. Fortunately this puts me in common with 95 percent of what constitutes the art world. (When *Artforum* published a critique of neomaterialism in summer 2015, it seemed notable that they relied not on someone with a background in art but rather a professor of English.) Within my understanding, I feel comfortable saying that OOO and speculative realism clear open a space for a lot of interesting thought experiments. It is safe to say also that they open a space for art that eschews language and discourse, which makes Jimmie Durham ("Language isn't all—it only says it is") apt for reinvestigation, and brings ripe attention after three decades of work to Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys, whose videos of actors in abstracted scenarios are terrifyingly, comically static. It is also safe to say that by and large, the results of neomaterialism in art—namely cybernetics of criticism and production—usually look like an Arte Povera *pauvre* and rarely escape anthropomorphosis in one way or another. Juxtapositions of the organic and the contemporary man-made are common: sweatpants and oysters, "skull chips" and Mac laptops with holes in them (Michael E. Smith, *Bubbles* and *LBS*, both 2013); stills from *Transformers* and plant leaves (Timur Si-Qin, *Mainstream*, Société, Berlin, 2011). Just so we get the point.

The joyless year of 2015 came to an end in New York with a presentation of John Russell's animated video *SQRRL* at Bridget Donahue gallery. It tells the tale of CarlEee, who lives in a resource-depleted future in which humans have realized that we can survive only if we "body allocate" into engineered hybrid animals (or if most of us do: President Paul "BoBo" Davies is recognizable as human). CarlEee is, in this, her 195th year of life, a squirrel with lizard legs; her significant other is a plant-mackerel splice. The story unfolds over thirty-odd minutes via a whispering voice, neither sad nor sinister, exactly, who offers fragments of CarlEee's terribly human experiences, for instance drinking coffee in the morning, looking back on the death of a parent:

For an hour,
Miraculously,
He was his old self.
He spoke freely,
Even rang a few friends,
But then reverted back.
Mute. Silent.
He died 3 months later
But Happy
They said.

Crude images representative of what's said aloud fade in and out; they are drawn neither completely by hand nor entirely with software and often possess simple animated details. They look sort of outmoded, but not quite. Meanwhile rows of text occasionally run down screen, layering in or over a garble of Luce Irigaray and Bruce Willis movies in a radical and absurd critique of pop masculinity that is freakishly apropos. A tortoise in fuchsia and indigo swims across an interplanetary vista at a dreamy pace, meshing with the voice-over, which interlaces with the rhythm of the fading in and out of the imagery, which goes in and out of sync with the occasional scrolling of crude type. Everything glows, implausibly, in a gross and heady world—a gross and heady work—that comes into being at a point when the retrenchment of the human subject is a ludicrous proposition.

John Russell, *Mirror Mapping the Stars*, 2015. © John Russell. Courtesy: Bridget Donahue, New York. Photo: Marc Brems Tatti

mondo dell'arte (quando, nell'estate del 2015, *Artforum* ha pubblicato una analisi del neomaterialismo, è sembrato degno di nota che si appoggiassero non a qualcuno con un background nel campo dell'arte ma piuttosto a un professore di inglese). Nella mia interpretazione, mi sento a mio agio nel dire che l'ontologia orientata all'oggetto e il realismo speculativo creano uno spazio aperto per molti interessanti esperimenti sul pensiero. Possiamo anche ritenere che essi aprano uno spazio per un'arte che respinge il linguaggio e la discussione, che rende plausibile una riapertura dell'indagine su Jimmie Durham ("Il linguaggio non è tutto, dice solo di esserlo") e porta un'attenzione matura, dopo tre decenni di lavoro, a Jos de Gruyter e Harald Thys, i cui video con gli attori al centro di scenari astratti sono comicamente, spaventosamente statici. Possiamo anche dire che in linea di massima i risultati del neomaterialismo in arte, cibernetica della critica e produzione normalmente appaiono come un'arte povera *povera* e raramente sfuggono all'antropomorfismo, in un modo o nell'altro. Gli accostamenti di organico e artificiale contemporaneo sono comuni – pantaloni da tuta e ostriche, "patatine a forma di teschio" e portatili Macintosh bucati (Michael E. Smith, *Bubbles* e *LBS*, entrambi 2013); still da *Transformers* e foglie (Timur Si-Qin, *Mainstream*, Société, Berlino, 2011). Giusto per capire quale sia il punto.

Il cupo 2015 è finito a New York con *SQRRL*, un video animato di John Russell presentato da Bridget Donahue Gallery. È la storia di CarlEee, che vive in un futuro in cui le risorse sono esaurite e gli essere umani si sono resi conto che potremo sopravvivere solo se ci "suddividiamo nel corpo" di animali ibridi progettati (o se lo fa la maggior parte di noi: il presidente Paul "BoBo" Davies è riconoscibile come umano). Nel suo centonovantacinquesimo anno di vita CarlEee è uno scoiattolo con zampe di lucertola; il suo compagno è la combinazione di una pianta e di uno sgombro. La storia si dipana per una trentina di minuti attraverso una voce sussurrata, non proprio triste né sinistra, che offre frammenti delle esperienze terribilmente umane di CarlEee – bere caffè al mattino, ripensare alla morte di un genitore:

Per un'ora,
Miracolosamente,
Fu il suo vecchio sé.
Parlava liberamente,
Telefonò persino a qualche amico,
Ma poi tornò allo stato precedente.
Muto. Silente.
Morì tre mesi dopo
Ma felice,
Così dissero.

Immagini esplicite, rappresentative di quello che viene detto a voce alta, si dissolvono in entrata e in uscita; non sono completamente disegnate a mano né interamente con un software e sono spesso contrassegnate da semplici dettagli animati.
Paiono in qualche modo antiquate, ma non del tutto. Nel frattempo, di tanto in tanto, lungo lo schermo scivolano righe di testo che si stratificano all'interno o sopra un intreccio di film di Luce Irigaray e Bruce Willis la cui critica radicale e assurda di una mascolinità pop è bizzarramente appropriata. L'andatura sognante di una tartaruga fucsia e indaco che nuota in un panorama interplanetario è in armonia con quella della voce fuori campo, che si intreccia con il ritmo dell'esausta dissolvenza delle immagini, in sincrono e fuori sincrono con l'occasionale scorrere di scritte criptiche. Il tutto immerso in un implausibile bagliore, in un mondo rozzo e ubriacante – un'opera rozza e ubriacante – che prende vita in un punto in cui l'assenza del soggetto umano è un'ipotesi assurda.

Dana Kopel, "John Russell", *Modern Painters*, March 2016.

MODERN PAINTERS

NEW YORK

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# JOHN RUSSELL

*Bridget Donahue // November 14, 2015 - January 10, 2015*


THIS EXHIBITION, RUSSELL'S first with Bridget Donahue, begins in a pink-tinted dystopia. A sculpture of a turtle impaled on a tree branch, titled *Transformational Joy*, 2014, is coated in tar-like black enamel and resin, and appears to emerge from environmental catastrophe, swimming onward to something better. To its right, a massive canvas structure stretches diagonally across much of the gallery's length. Only its blank back side is visible, backlit by several pink fluorescent tubes. On its front, a digitally rendered scene unfolds like a post-human history painting: Various figures - a flamingo, a seahorse, and women, some with the head of a cat or with big ears and tails - dance in a circle in a mass of pinkish clouds, while, at the far end, a human skeleton looks on.

The turtle reappears in the video *Relaxation Video: SQRRL/ BRUCE WILLIS*, 2015, where it swims languidly across the opening credits, returning intermittently throughout. It's one of the few familiar creatures among a menagerie of humans transformed, via technological augmentation, into rodent-reptile admixtures - better suited, as the narration explains, to space travel in the late 21st century. Like the characters it features, the video is itself a composite creature, compromising two previous works by Russell, *SQRRL*, 2015, and *Aquarium Proletarium*, 2014, layered atop each other. The video features two texts: a new work, "SQRRL," which also inhabits the gallery's homepage, and "Bruce Willis, Irigaray, and the Aesthetics of Space Travel," From 2014. Overlapping in subtitle-like phrases and blocks of scrolling blue text, respectively Russell's writing emphasizes the work's theoretical rigor and sci-fi impulse.

Online, "SQRRL" manifests as a heavy footnoted poem, interspersed with GIF illustrations of glittering pink angels, urinating flowers, and images of its protagonist, CarLEee the squirrel - or post-squirrel - as she prepares for space travel or navigates the Web from her office inside a tree. The footnotes serve as a glossary of key terms, embedded with varied and sometimes contradictory references spanning de Sade, Donna Haraway, and the Accelerationist Manifesto. These resonate within Russell's installation, cohering in a vision of a post-human near future where nature and technology are collapsed into each other, permeated by forces of capital and desire. **- Dana Kopel**

Anne Doran, "John Russell", *TimeOut New York,* January 6, 2016, 51.

Time Out New York

# Art

## JOHN RUSSELL


Formerly a member of the subversive London art collective BANK, John Russell maintains the group's critical stance on contemporary culture, expressed in his latest work through science fiction.

The exhibition's centerpiece, *SQRRL*, is an animated video evocation of a near future in which life is extended by downloading an individual's consciousness to the body of an animal. the main protagonist, CarLEee, is a 195-year-old incarnated as a squirrel-lizard combination. In her world, Christianity and capitalism are ascendant, while hybridity is the accepted model of existence.

The film is laid over an earlier one by Russell that combines a meditation on actor Bruce Willis with the writings of Belgian feminist Luce Irigaray. An illustrated and extensively footnoted version of *SQRRL*'s narrative on the gallery's website seems essential to the piece, while the accompanying sculptures and paintings do not.

In *SQRRL*, technology has effected a "transformation of philosophy, science and politics." But CarLEee's time bears an uncanny resemblance to our own, creating a most chilling allegory for the present.

— *Anne Doran*

Alan Gilbert, "John Russell's SQRRL", *Art Agenda*, January 5, 2016, www.art-agenda.com/reviews/john-russell's-"sqrrl"/.

art agenda

by ALAN GILBERT January 5, 2016

# *John Russell's "SQRRL"*

BRIDGET DONAHUE, New York

November 14, 2015–January 10, 2016

If after finishing this review you visit Bridget Donahue's website to learn more about John Russell's current exhibition, "SQRRL," you'll find a brightly hued digital collage of image and text in the place of a static gallery homepage with its neatly tabbed categories linking to exhibitions, artists, about, and contact information. Hybrid imagery featuring animals, humans, and robots is illustrated by short, cryptic texts, such as "CarlEee sits sipping coffee. / 195 years old. / Forty-five body allocations / Since the Starvation Wars of 87." These, in turn, are explicated by 33 footnotes and a bibliography in the right-hand margin that unfolds a sci-fi-esque allegory of the present in which a predatory digital realm becomes the new organic as the human—and its various modes of social and epistemological organization—collapses in its wake. Along with slyly serving as an online artwork in the exhibition, it also functions as the show's press release.


John Russell, Relaxation Video: SQRRL/BRUCE WILLIS, 2015. (Right) John Russell, Mirror Mapping the Stars, 2015

If you visit Bridget Donahue proper, you'll find a 45-minute digitally animated projected video version of the web page entitled *Relaxation Video: SQRRL/BRUCE WILLIS* (2015) with ambient soundtrack and Russell whispering parts of the

script. Beginning relatively bucolically, and with short poetic descriptions, the work vividly depicts the cyborgization of all living things (from butterflies to humans) with their "tech implants," and its first snippet from the critical theory canon—Luce Irigaray's 1980 work Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche—scrolls vertically in blue. Russell creates an immersive world that's part aquarium, part outer space, while operating as atmospheric backdrop for his primary concern: collapsing sharp distinctions and binaries between natural and artificial, human and animal, female and male, virtual and real.

There's a story of sorts in *Relaxation Video: SQRRL/BRUCE WILLIS*, but like everything else in the work, it's a hybrid blending narrative, poetry, theory, and image—specifically, gifs. The main character, CarlEee, is a mutant squirrel who watches a parent die, falls in love, and works for ARCWEB, a kind of *Terminator*-ish Skynet in which the machines slowly take over and whose slogan is "NATURE LOST, NATURE WON"—again, the digital world as increasingly our "natural" one. Interspersed within all of this are hovering gifs, soothing sonic effects, musings on Willis's evolving symbolic masculine role in action films, and references to the cyborg and posthumanism. This description makes the video sound headier than it actually is, as it's haunted by a dystopian beauty, however glitchily rendered.

In the 1990s, Russell was a member of the artist group BANK, which critiqued—sometimes scathingly—the art world and commercial culture alike. Even after going solo, his work remains strongly collaborative and interdisciplinary. Projects slide from one medium to another; Christian iconography promiscuously intermixes with urinating flowers; CarlEee might be both male and female. In keeping with the art world's current infatuation with poetry, Russell seems to be indicating that the latter has a role to play in this. Yet the point is less about indeterminacy for its own sake; rather, the aim is to multiply relations, networks, and subject positions to the point that reality itself shifts. At some level, resistance is built into a submission to this evolutionary, or at least inevitable, process.

In keeping with a sense of proliferation, the show at Bridget Donahue includes a painting, a print, sculptural objects, and one of Russell's massive, backlit, diaphanous mural billboards that stretches along the length of the gallery space for 60 feet. Digitally printed on vinyl in apocalyptic—or maybe it's Martian—red, with a row of pink fluorescent lights behind it, *Mirror Mapping the Stars* (2015) might also serve as a scrim for the casting of real or imagined fantasies. A male body with a fox head, a female body with a cat head, a skeleton, and more amorphous creatures scamper across a landscape of clouds floating against a night sky. With a scale hinting at nineteenth-century panoramic paintings intended to teach the history of famous places and events, *Mirror Mapping the Stars* illustrates a future in which everything solid has melted into air.

At the same time, Russell hasn't entirely abandoned more traditional material (art) objects, although they're mostly clustered in the gallery's back room: a painting in which organic form and content are rendered synonymous at the dawn of a new era (*Untitled [Abstraction of Labour Time/External Recurrence/Monad] II*, 2015); three similarly sized boxes, one for cat food, on which he has painted fluid abstractions (all *Untitled [Box]*, 2015); and a mobile (made in collaboration with artist Dan Mitchell) that floats a small swarm of plastic flies and miniature easyJet planes (*easyJet/Flies*, 2015). At one point, the phrase "A fictional space of desire" appears in *Relaxation Video: SQRRL/BRUCE WILLIS*. At Bridget Donahue, Russell arrays canvases both virtual and real for the projection of desire, though one not always our own, and one not entirely human.

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Alan Gilbert is the author of two books of poetry, *The Treatment of Monuments and Late in the Antenna Fields,* as well as a collection of essays, articles, and reviews entitled *Another Future: Poetry and Art in a Postmodern Twilight*. He lives in New York.

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Peter Plagens, "3-D Printing, Mixed Media, and Mysterious Creatures", *The Wall Street Journal*, January 3, 2016, A17.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

John Russell's immersive gallery exhibition, 'SQRRL.' *PHOTO: MARC BREMS TATTI/BRIDGET DONAHUE, NW YORK*

# Mysterious Creatures, 3D Printing and Mixed Media

John Russell, Paul Kaptein & Eric van Straaten, and Matthew Kirk in this week's Fine Art

By PETER PLAGENS
Jan. 1, 2016 6:38 p.m. ET

## John Russell: SQRRL

Bridget Donahue
99 Bowery, (646) 896-1368
Through Jan. 10

When an academic talks about something on the outlandish side at a cocktail party—say, that futuristic medical breakthroughs such as "wasp-parasite technology" could lead to human beings

living longer by inhabiting the bodies of other animals—a common rejoinder is, "Have you thought of publishing that?" British artist John Russell (b. 1963) has done just that, with such subject subheadings as Baptism, Meat, Reality, Death, Consciousness, Nature and Poetry, including citations from, among others, Arthur Schopenhauer, Georges Bataille and Gilles Deleuze. Mr. Russell's publication arrives, however, not in the form of a peer-reviewed essay in a scholarly journal, but in a vision expressed as an immersive gallery exhibition.

Once one traverses a long, pink-lighted corridor featuring a sculpture of a turtle impaled on a pole, and then does a U-turn past a lengthy sheet of vinyl festooned with images of mysterious creatures, the reward is a 45-minute-long video documenting—if that's the word—Mr. Russell's speculations about being "posthuman."

An uncharitable interpretation of this Gesamtkunstwerk would be that it's a teenage boy's science-fiction fantasy grounded in excessive footnoting in order to pass as important art. But if we get past the encyclopedic seriousness of the enterprise, "SQRRL" is more like another episode of "Star Wars"—good clean fun.

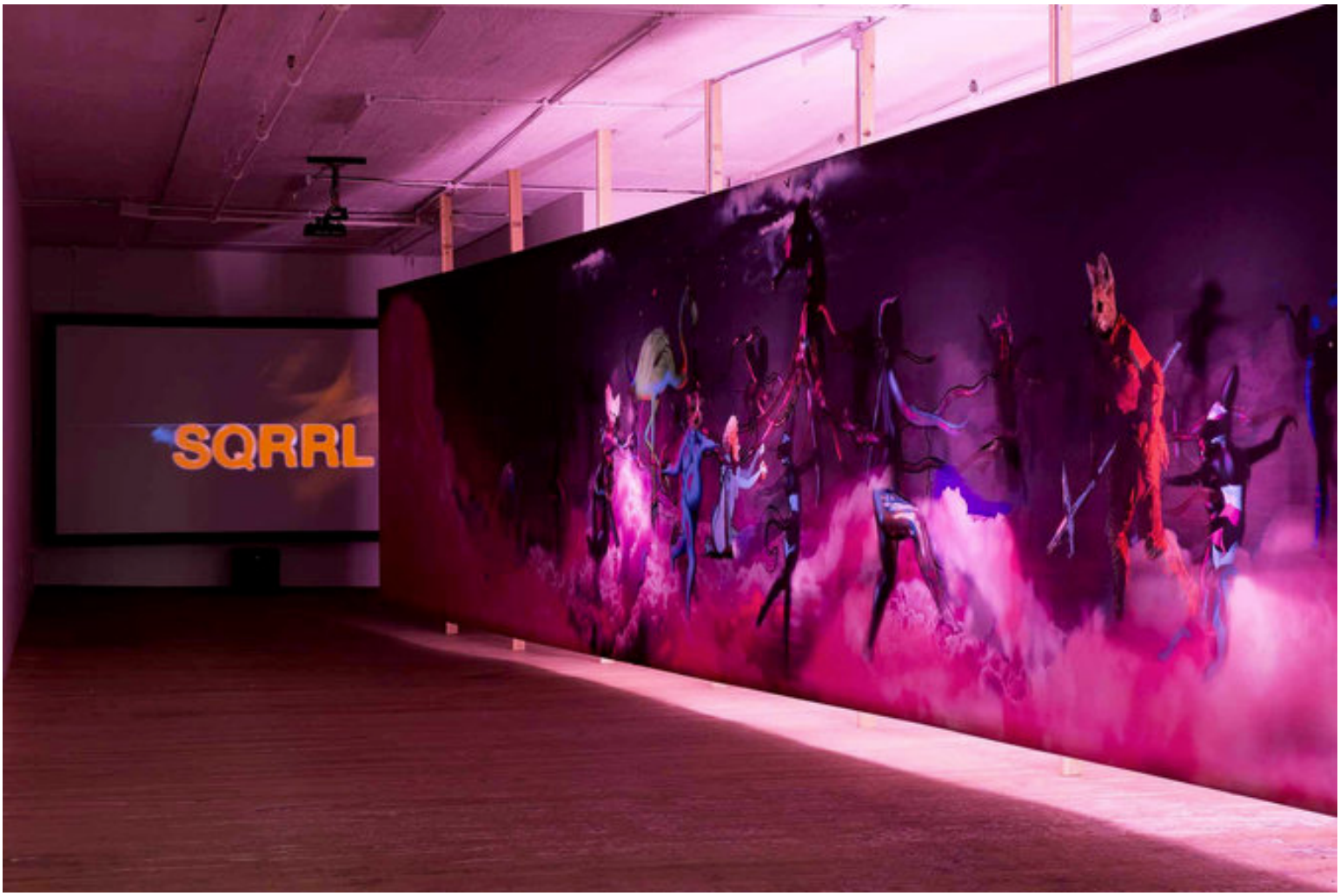
Martha Schwendener, "John Russell's 'Sqrrl" Embodies a Science Fiction Journey", *The New York Times*, December 24, 2015.

The New York Times

**ART & DESIGN** | ART REVIEW

# John Russell's 'Sqrrl' Embodies a Science Fiction Journey

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER DEC. 24, 2015




John Russell's show "Sqrrl" at the Bridget Donahue gallery uses the story of a 195-year-old posthuman to comment on the environment and other issues. Credit Marc Brems Tatti

Good fiction, Ernest Hemingway once wrote, is like an iceberg: Only a small portion is visible, but it's the submerged mass that creates momentum. John Russell's current show, "Sqrrl," functions this way, too, sitting on a colossus of ideas that inform the work. The metaphor is also apt because icebergs are a bellwether of climate change, and Mr. Russell's show touches on everything from ecological crises to the uncertain future of humanity.

The first thing visitors see in the pink glow of the gallery is a shiny black sea turtle sculpture suspended — or perhaps impaled — by a pole stretching from floor to ceiling. A long sheet of vinyl printed on one side with futuristic figures divides the gallery lengthwise. A 45-minute video — sort of a cross between William Kentridge's animations and the politically minded Paul Chan's early videos — tells the story of CarLEee, a 195-year-old posthuman who has undergone 45 "body allocations" involving the bio-fusion of various species. The video's whispered soundtrack appears in a modified form as an essay-artwork on the gallery's website, and the gallery's office includes a mini-library of texts, some edited or written by Mr. Russell, that both supplement the show and function as part of his art practice.

The video and essay include references to feminist and techno-feminist thinkers, including Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz and Donna Haraway, as well as to recent theories like accelerationism and speculative realism. While these later philosophies have been challenged by mainstream thinkers, Mr. Russell uses art to his advantage. Following in the tradition of artists like Robert Smithson and Juan Downey, he has created work here that is open-ended and visionary. It functions more as science fiction-philosophy than as an argument for airtight specific conclusions or outcomes.

Correction: December 29, 2015
The byline was omitted for an art review on Friday about a show of work by John Russell at the Bridget Donahue gallery in Manhattan. The review was by Martha Schwendener.

John Russell

'Sqrrl'

Bridget Donahue

99 Bowery, near Hester Street Lower East Side

Through Jan. 10

Nick Irvin, "John Russell", *Frieze*, December 14, 2015, http://frieze.com/shows/review/john-russell.

frieze

Current Shows

# John Russell

BRIDGET DONAHUE, NEW YORK, USA


John Russell, 'SQRRL', installation view, Bridget Donahue, New York, 2015

*14 November, 2015 – 10 January, 2016*

John Russell has made a video that is both singular and plural. *SQRRL/BRUCE WILLIS* (2015) grafts a new video on top of an older one: *SQRRL …* (2015) plays an illustrated story about 22nd century interspecies brain transplants over Russell's *Aquarium Proletarium* (2014), an animation of his essay 'Bruce Willis, Irigaray, and the Aesthetics of Space Travel' from the same year. Animated GIFs stutter over a scrolling text by the artist that riffs on poststructuralist philosopher Luce Irigaray's call for a non-binarized model of sexuality and, consequently,

multiplicitous writing. The result is messy frottage: dense walls of excursus slide beneath crude animations of viscera, hybridized animals, and Willis's shiny pate, set to an ambient score of wind chimes and whispered narration. All is low-res and choppy. Periodically, a ghostly turtle glides through this ocean of signs, suturing visual information as it goes, anchoring our dive into hallucinatory fiction and bleeding-edge philosophy.

John Russell, *Transformational Joy*, 2014, wood, metal, mixed media sculpture, 2.3 × 1.1 × 1 m.
Installation view 'SQRRL', Bridget Donahue, New York, 2015

Before viewers meet this turtle they first come across its corpse. It is impaled on a tall, knotted branch, at the mouth of the exhibition, caked in crude oil-evoking black enamel and resin. This lonely turtle appears in silhouette, awash in pink fluorescent light. Like a crucifixion scene, it brusquely unites violence, desire, and symbolic transcendence – a trinity scrambled by Russell's delirious erudition, perhaps against what Irigaray calls 'the one of form, of the individual, of the (male) sexual organ, of the proper name, of the proper meaning.'

A long and angular wooden structure, supporting a screen wall, bisects the gallery lengthways like a spine, its back covered with pink fluorescent light bulbs. If the turtle sculpture floats by the exhibition's mouth, then its video counterpart drifts by the anus. Russell's exhibition hinges on the interdependence of brains and bowels, eliding conceptual headiness with scatalogical headlessness. This climaxes on the reverse of the dividing wall, which supports a sprawling, backlit mural printed on vinyl (*Mirror Mapping the Stars*, 2015), a recurring format for Russell. It depicts a lurid, animistic scene: a coven of nude beast-people dance around a totemic seahorse whose tendrils tether their bodies like a symbiotic Maypole. A flamingo, a skeletal centaur, and a canine warrior interlope. Though the scene is rendered through computer-generated modelling, Russell interrupts that medium's claims to crisp hyperreality with inky outlines and other painterly intrusions. Here, the digital is anything but a zone of frictionless exchange.

John Russell, *Mirror Mapping the Stars* (detail), 2015, back-lit digital print on vinyl, wood, hardware and fluorescent lights, 2.5 × 18.3 × 0.6 m, installation view 'SQRRL', 2015, Bridget Donahue, New York

The mural's stark iconography, scale, and narrative choreography perversely recall the stately populism of Enlightenment history painting. But unlike the mythologies of classic history paintings, familiar to their viewers, Russell's allegories are hermetic and inscrutable. Take the mural's seahorse, at first glance a sinister puppeteer sporting phallic probe-like tendrils. However, it is the male seahorse that carries eggs and gives birth, aligning the tendrils with umbilical nourishment. Such slippery conflations abound, recalling Irigaray's demonstration that bodies are more complicated than our schematizations of them.

As with classical allegory, text provides context for Russell's imagery. The artist's writings, present throughout *SQRRL …*, as well as a parasitic takeover of the gallery's website, traverse the murky rift between his roles as reader and imagist. Online, *SQRRL*'s thorough footnotes elaborate his bibliography (Irigaray, Georges Bataille, Ray Brassier, George Grosz, Die Hard) and lexicon ('SQUIRREL,' 'TURTLE,' 'MEAT'). Rather than parroting theoretical jargon, Russell's texts are lucid; even when their legibility is obscured in the video, one gets the sense they are meant to be read. Yet accompanied by bizarro illustrations, the texts' moments of straight-talk are self-effacing, even comically so. They stage the anxiety of trying to speak Reason in the awareness that what speaks is a messy sack of viscera – a knowledge inevitably conditioned by sexuality, health, and environment.

This coupling of anxiety and voracious intellectual appetite lies at the heart of Russell's exhibition. The digestion of information yields nourishment as well as its byproducts, and Russell revels in its excesses. Unlike most contemporary art practices labelled 'cerebral,' Russell's orgiastic mode rejects visual sterility without trimming any conceptual meat.

**Nick Irvin**

Celine Katzman, "John Russell's SQRRL", *Rhizome Blog*, December 7, 2015, https://rhizome.org/editorial/2015/dec/07/john-russells-sqrrl/.

RHIZOME

DEC 07, 2015 –

# JOHN ▫ RUSSELL'S ▫ SQRRL ▫

BY CELINE KATZMAN

*SQRRL by John Russell is on view through Thursday on the front page of rhizome.org*

"Since 2085
Rodent and reptilian
Body structure,
Musculature and skeleton

Have been identified
As the ideal anatomical-model
For extra-terrestial operations.
The sophistication
Of contemporary
Brain miniturisation
And transplant surgery

Means that
Human relocation
Into smaller species
Is now routine."

SQRRL is a dynamic hypertext fiction speculating on a future in which medical advances such as "wasp-parasite technology" allow humans to inhabit the bodies of one or more animals as a way to save or prolong their lives.

SQRRL begins with a sparkling array of softly glowing pastel fauna and flora. Animated .gifs and text frame a squirrel in cyborg headdress. This is the protagonist, CarLEe.

Scrolling downward, the user encounters collaged illustrations of nature, the city, and a gently smiling man with pink antennae. It is revealed that CarLEe the squirrel was once human-bodied, living in the city with Mom and Poppo (who died shortly after an electric kettle water Baptism, despite early success with wasp-parasite technology to keep him alive).

Russell's description of this post-human future grows yet darker as the user learns CarLEe has lived through starvation wars and extreme capitalist extraction, and currently resides in a controlled habitat that includes "non-combo species" (woodchucks and birds) fitted with "passification-tech." Playful, lo-fi images illustrate the text, giving the grim vision of the future an air of absurdity.

Russell structures SQRRL along two trajectories, allowing the user to toggle between a narrative poem and a series of footnotes which include meditations on specific terms, along with links to a diverse selection of citations ranging from introductory Christian FAQs to the Cyborg Manifesto, and banal reporting on grocery store masturbation, as well as an in-depth discussion of the theoretical work of Luce Irigiray and its legacy. Moving fluidly between contemporary theory and futuristic narrative, the reader of Russell's text finds that this cynical and beautiful vision of a future society, in which a person's consciousness may be distributed among seven lizards, has strong echoes of the present.

John Russell's solo show, "SQRRL," is on view at Bridget Donahue Gallery, 99 Bowery, New York, November 14, 2015 - January 11, 2016.

Cameron Soren, "Custom-Produced for Imbeciles of Some Sort: An Interview with John Russell", *Rhizome*, April 10, 2015, http://rhizome.org/editorial/2015/apr/15/custom-produced-imbeciles-some-sort-interview-john/.

RHIZOME

# Custom-Produced for Imbeciles of Some Sort: An Interview with John Russell

CAMERON SOREN | Fri Apr 10th, 12:00 p.m.

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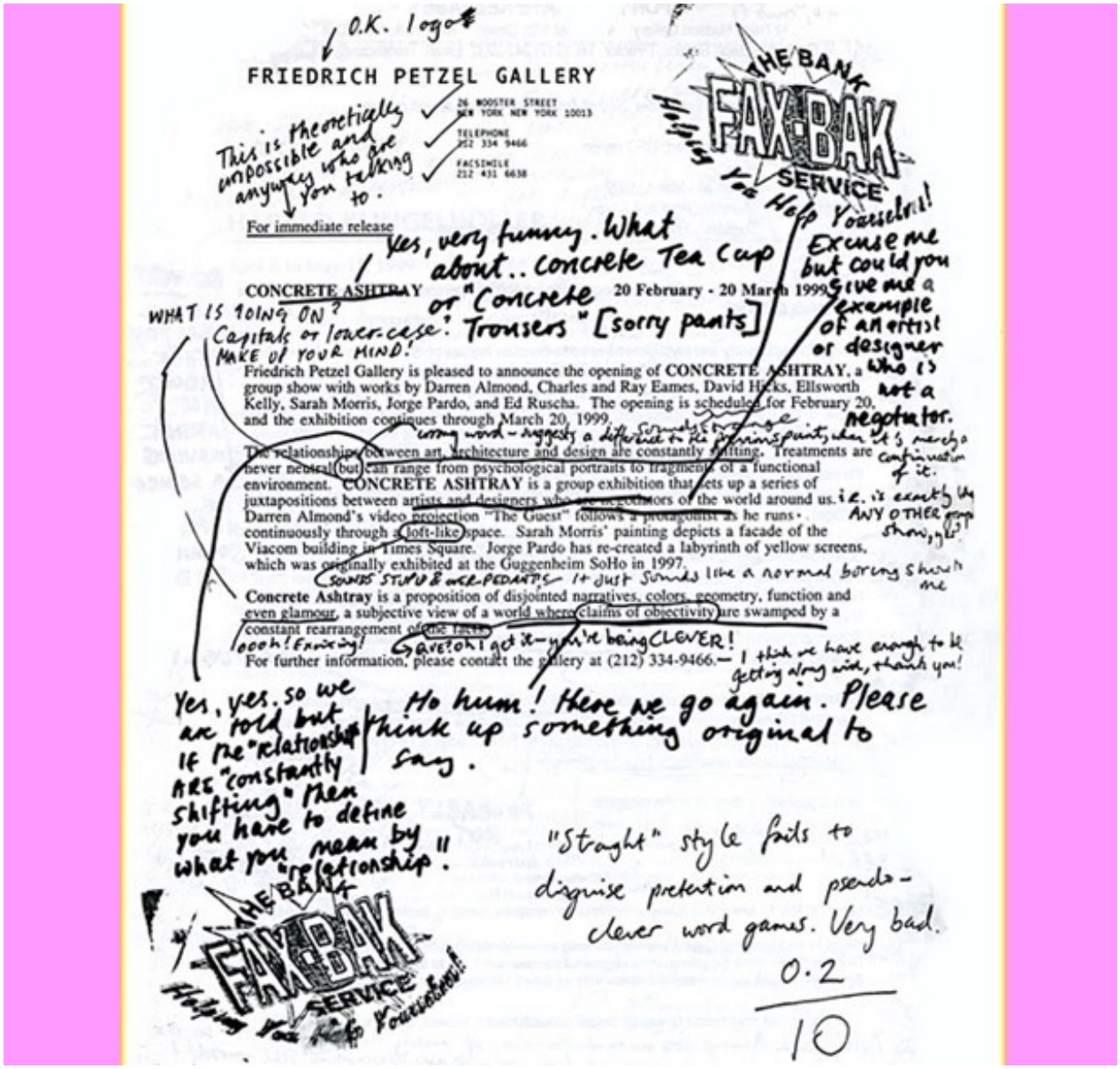
***John Russell on active forgetting, bad theory, squirrel pink, and speculative medievalism, in conversation with Cameron Soren.***
***Layout, font and images by John Russell. —Ed.***

**John Russell, *Ocean Pose*, Installation, backlit digital prints on vinyl, Matts Gallery London, 2007**

John Russell was a founder-member of the London-based artist group BANK, from 1990 to 2000. BANK would require their own article (or book), but for the sake of brevity here, BANK practiced their own unique form of a kind of anarchic "institutional critique". This involved, among other activities, staging aggressive, immersive and polemical group shows with titles like "Zombie Golf" and "Cocaine Orgasm" in temporary warehouse spaces around London (re-named BANKSPACE, DOG and then Galerie Poo-Poo). These sprawling installations often lampooned the contemporary art scene and satirized the popular culture of the '90s. In Zombie Golf, for example, the work was placed within a miniature golf course installation populated with wax figures of the undead. Their most well-known project "Faxbacks" involved taking other galleries press releases, correcting them and sending them back.

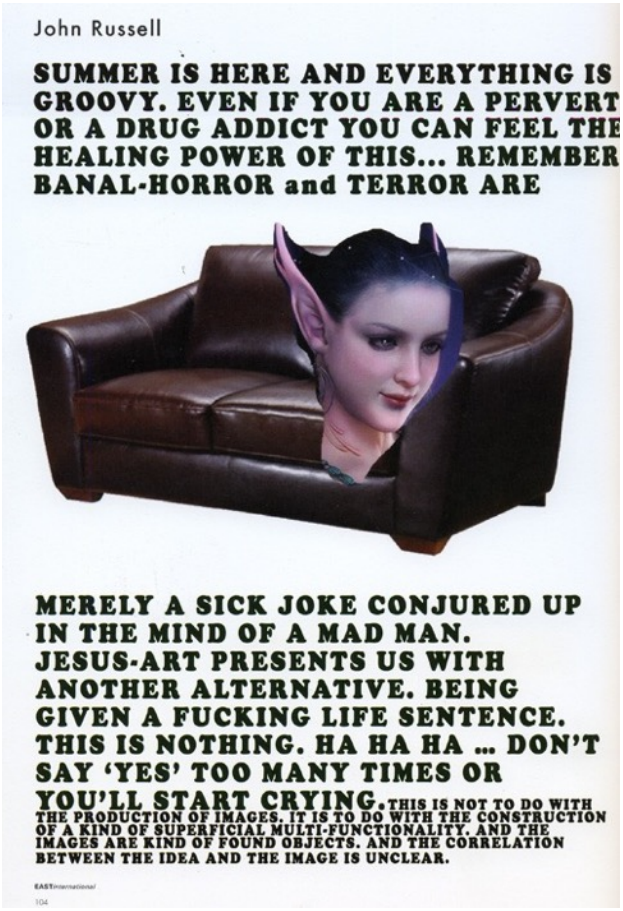

BANK, *Zombie Golf*, 1995




BANK, *Faxback New York*, 1999

Russell parted ways with BANK in 2000 to take up his own multifaceted practice. Often collaborative, this included staging performances with Fabienne Audeoud, (most recently in one of Bjarne Melgaard's curated group shows entitled "After Shelley Duvall '72" at Maccarone), working (in collaboration with Mark Beasley) with the underground cult film director Damon Packard (Lost in The Thinking, an on-site commission for MoMA PS1 that culminated in the museum locking them in a room), producing three 800-page anthology books (Frozen Tears) featuring writings from prominent underground authors including Dennis Cooper, Kathy Acker and their historical antecedents (Baudelaire, Bataille) while also finding time to produce paintings, posters, public sculptures, animations, gifs, fonts and gigantic backlit digital prints that are somewhere between magical-fantasy ad billboard and body-horror expressionist painting. Recently, he gave a talk at Artists Space, a psychedelic-theory lecture that linked the writings of Belgian feminist Luce Irigiray to space travel and Bruce Willis.

*Faerie Poem*, 2009, Backlit digital print on vinyl, 475 x 1064cm




Catalogue text: EAST, Norwich Gallery: 2009


John Russell, *Frozen Tears III*, gif, 2007

*Explain Death to Very Young Children*, installation, 2010

## Interview: Rhizome: John Russell/Cameron Soren

**I wanted to ask you about press releases, or maybe the way you use language in general. There seems to be a pretty strong connection between some of the work BANK did and some of the work Head Gallery does (obviously BANK's Faxbaks vs. the long delirious fictive narratives as press release that Head Gallery puts out). In some ways, Head Gallery's press releases almost feel like an adaptation of the Faxbaks to the current digital climate. Faxbaks on steroids. That's about an almost 20 year divide though, so would you say things haven't changed much since when you started working in the 90s? Is history repeating itself, or worse, regressing?**

Hey yeah, lolz, press releases - in fact, I'm not part of Head Gallery, though they did send me a draft of their forthcoming novel to read which I was very happy about because I'm a big fan of their work and love their website and evites and everything (headgallery.org) I think they're from Mexico or Guatamala or somewhere. And yes. Press releases … evites or whatever … love them lolz. In fact, Head Gallery write about this in their novel, how it carries on after the nuclear apocalypse, (Head Gallery, London: Bookworks, 2015).

"The management of the gallery has been especially good at the details that maintain the façade of retro-normality from evaporating. For instance, they maintain the arbitrary structure of one exhibition a month. This is completely absurd to all but those who participate in—feed on—what the gallery offers. After all, what could a month possibly mean anymore? These temporal demarcations are useless. The sun, deadly and unpredictable, rents a gash in the thick cloud-scapes and comes out whenever it wants, and when it does everyone has to hide from its brutal nucleo-rays. When it's day, it feels more like night: everyone scurries away and locks themselves in what is left of buildings, monuments, museums, sewage lines. And when it is night, when the blackouts come, when the firmament reveals its absolute indifference to all that has transpired here, it also feels like night. Time is nothing but a long stretch of darkness, as endless as the Expanse itself. To pretend to keep a schedule in the middle of this is supremely cynical. It disregards all that has happened. It's a mockery, a farce, a travesty, a joke. It's disgusting. And it's brilliant. It's brilliant in the way that it structures the zombie-existence of the sub-prolebians and elito-displaced who would otherwise simply drift about in semi-affluence until the sunlight would kiss their flesh away.

*Judgement. The kangaroo is not happy. It's not clear who or what it represents but its not in good place* (2014). 3.5m x 6.8m. Backlit double-strike digital print on vinyl.

**Shortly after BANK ended, you began making digital prints. These eventually evolved into the giant digital backlit "billboard" prints in 2006/2007? I know in the earlier one's like Ocean Pose, you talked about 19th century French painting, Peter Paul Rubens and Jackson Pollock and accompanied them with a part poem/part theory text. There's also this last one with the kangaroo entitled "The kangaroo is not happy. It's not clear who or what it represents but it's not in good place (2014)." All of your billboard prints seem to be resisting a literal interpretation but this last one explicitly so. Can you talk about that and the series in general a little bit?**

O lolz did I talk about 'Rubens and Jackson Pollock' - o fuck although I do like them lmao. Or maybe mainly History painting and Jackson Pollock. Coz generally I think my art is custom-produced for imbeciles of some sort. Ha ha. Or the meaning of my works is only accessible to people willing to render themselves imbecilic. Ha ha, coz no OK I'm not saying I'm 'against meaning' because that would be anyway impossible. But as I'm quite often parasiting pre-existing imagery and empty forms, I'm interested in how these might might be reconfigured … how they might have a different force, like a kind of expressionism. Y'know like we can ALL FEEL it maaaan … but feel it differently. Because anyway it doesn't matter if you are interested in 'meaning' or not, cos things will 'mean' anyway. And there isn't any particular type of imbecility that can swerve this. I mean, if 'meaning' is about force – i.e. not about what you 'mean' but who can 'mean' and how they are allowed to mean; or who can speak and how can they speak'; or who can be seen and how can they be seen. Or laced through with metaphors and fictions that we've forgotten are metaphors and think are the truth (Irigaray), but which structure what we say and think and 'mean'. All that sort of thing, then 'Interpretation' or literal meaning is usually something weak – concerned with coherence and legibility but you know obv only in delimited contexts that allow them to be legible.

And verily like Žižek doth say, ideology operates on the register of the sublime, where ideological objects have NO meaning. And lo … our inability to grasp their "meaning," to understand something greater than us (sic) like in Kant, provides testimony to their Transcendent nature – of Nation, God, Freedom, Market, and whatever – residing resplendent far above the ordinary or profane things of the world, including our own trivial existences. And so, Truth and force reside in lack of meaning. And God forbid that we say there's no 'agency' or 'subject' or that we are now just all code or something. Or that meanings can't be contested and transformed. Or that we cant speak but rather language speaks us. In this respect, Irigaray talks about mimicry, as a kind of parasiting which is also what aesthetics always is anyway – the parasiting of already existing forms - i.e. the relations of our bodies as they exist now (positioned by class, race and sexual/sexuated relation) to the contexts of the outside world and its objects. And also how these relations might change. In contrast to an aesthetics of 'harmony' as a kind of regulating system where beauty must always be the same thing and our experience of it be organized in the same way, prioritising the immaterial over the material, as the Divine/ Truth/ beauty/God. So that salvation/beauty are always located 'somewhere else'. As cure for the sickness of life. No fuck that. What we need now is poetry. As the young Nietzsche writes:

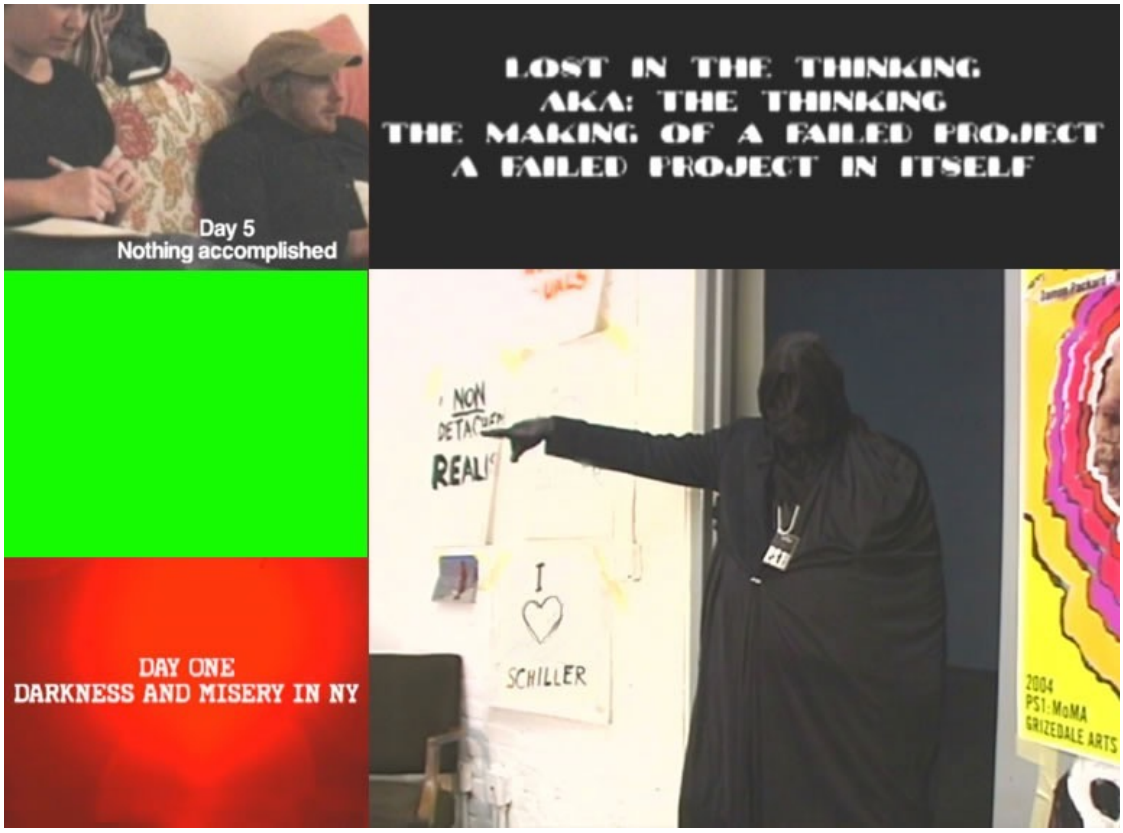
"The sphere of poetry does not lie outside the world, like some fantastic impossibility of a poet's imagination: it seeks to be the very opposite, the unvarnished expression of truth, and must for this very reason cast aside the false finery of that supposed reality of the cultured man."

**In an interview with Gean Moreno in 2007 you point out your exhaustion with the two seemingly never-ending tropes in contemporary art which is the aesthetic/transcendent vs.the conceptual/critical. You end up saying: "My idea at the moment is that we should start forgetting things." (" all of this stuff should get forgotten NOW"). Especially the critical art which you see as this perpetually re-staged event of "critical not-belonging." (http://thefanzine.com/john-russell-q-a-2/) I find this interesting on one level because a lot of your work seems overtly critical, or at the very least is looking for a reconciliation between these binary threads.....I'm also just interested in the idea of "giving**

**up"....but, to take you at your word ,albeit from over 5 years ago, how does one go about forgetting? What would that work look like? Would you say this has somewhat been your goal post-BANK (from your early "meaningless" performances with Fabienne Audeoud to the more recent kangaroo piece)? Or am I reading into it too literally?**

'Bruce Willis. Irigaray and the Aesthetics of Space Travel'. *Metamute*, December 2014

Forsooth, the 'forgetting' idea comes from Nietzsche (maybe primarily via Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche). If 'meaning' roughly is about force then this is not a contestation on the level of literal meaning, it is contestation on the level of active and reactive forces. And 'active forgetting' would somehow be the forgetting of existing values and the `value' of those values, rather than including these in a 'critical' dialectic.Forgetting as a kind of difference-in-itself, as opposed to difference-from the Same. Which is linked up to Deleuze/Nietzsche's idea of eternal return as the untimely active forgetting as the return of same as Difference. Cos only Difference can return my friend. And this links up to the idea of mimicry and aesthetics discussed earlier. You can see it in the circulation of Benjamin's idea of a (recurring) dialogical image which forgets its previous context. An 'interruptive' philosophy of history, where history is constructed in a politically explosive 'constellation of past and present'. As a 'dialectical image' which occurs in the Now of its recognisability - a 'lightning flash' of truth: a suddenness which precludes its re-assimilation into the structures of continuity – an active forgetting, animated as the potential for immediate action (in this suddenness). In contrast to historicism, continuity and progress.




*Lost in the Thinking*, collaboration with Damon Packard and Mark Beasley, PS1, New York, 2004

**I'm somewhat wary of artists who deal with theory head-on. I think it's because usually the result is annoyingly dull or annoyingly "clever". Your work uses theory in a much more anarchic way and the results are far messier and to me, refreshing. There's a question here somewhere... Are a lot of people using theory wrong? (ha).**

*Ocean Pose [Pink]* (2008). Backlit digital print on vinyl, 3 x 7.9M

Yes well dude, that's bad theory - dead ideas. Talking like old peoples. (Like above) it's the same old bad theory/bad philosophy/bad art. And dullness. It predicts what it wants. What is going to be

expressed. What is already expressed. Organises what it expects. OK OK OK sometimes preset political ideas fire things up. But it is usually boring. It kind of 'means' what it expects (as above). Same old conservative/capitalist trick – the production of its own continuation. All the richness and intensity of culture (as something with potential for change) that is not part of this structure although it has to happen in it and is often implicated and fucked and co-opted by it. In this respect philosophy is often more interesting when it is only half understood. Or when it is written to enable this. Whe
n it has force rather than meaning. That is the key thing - when it has force or affect rather than (as well as) meaning. This might be the thing.

**I'm interested in your attitude towards technology and art. In my head, I contrast your work with someone like Mark Leckeys. To me, Leckey seems sort of optimistic or sentimental in his relation to technology and digital culture, whereas your take is much more morbid, negative, abject (or possibly just ambivalent)? You also both seem to share an interest in (or anxiety with) the boundaries of "non art" (specifically you mention aesthetic art's potential "risk" of "losing itself within the infinity of extra-institutional social relations ". Leckey says something similar to art being at the risk of "dissipating" into LOLcats ). These concerns are felt, I'm sure, by other artists, but the connection was only re-enforced when I saw Leckey curated you into one of the Universal Addressability of Dumb Things shows. Anyway...I guess I'm just asking about your attitude towards digital technology and its relation to art …**

Limits don't worry me dude. In that article I was describing the way 'art/artists' continually claim to move beyond limits. I connected this up to a monologue, a suicide note, narrated by a dead person hanging from the ceiling of his studio flat - tracking his sliding recession from human subject to inanimate object. And then prompted by the narrator's necrotic musings, including the banal details of his life and description of the interior of his flat, described the way 'limits' operate as a kind of institutional version of the sublime where the artworld is presented (in a variety of different ways) with an experience of the terror of the infinity of the outside or unlocated. A kind of 'critical' fetishisation of

limits as the promise of transcendence. Descending into a kind of Romantic aporetics, or bad (boring) joke, endlessly repeated, of impossible transcendence. A prophecy of overcoming, that ends up as the discourse of the parergon: neither/nor, either/or. The non-dialectic of life/death from the perspective of life (human). Where the '/' becomes the sliding registration of the unregisterable. A procession/ recession of limits, from art/non-art, to finite/infinite, to the fiction of the ultimate limit of life/death - the 'master-limit' which validates and codes all other limits.

And as far as digital technology goes its just what is close to me. I'm sitting in front of a computer all day, partly for my job. Its what I read stuff on and look at things on, and I fucking luv it. Digital imaging helps me imagine things. And I like the way it uses conventional imagery/models and conventionalised perspectives. It's a familiar standardised realism and that's cool coz im looking for something that is figurative and realistic. I don't know why but I'm not interested in abstraction or formal properties in themselves. It is something to do with recognisable imagery. The images I use are pre-existing and stereotypical - emptied out. Dead figures. I mean I mess about with them a lot, paint over them, re-draw them, re-wrap them, clone them, c&p stuff and so on. But I hate them in a lot of ways. And for instance digital printing is an inferior medium in a lot of ways, say in comparison to painting. In terms of colour and texture its very limited (CMYK is a very limited colour range in comparison to oil paint and a lot less vivid). That's why I use back lighting. But when I see the finished back-lit prints installed, they make my heart sink. They look as ugly as fuck. Horrible objects in some ways. Not that the imagery is upsetting just the whole thing as an object. I like them though.

Still from *Vermillion Vortex*, 2010

**To continue the Gothic thread: you employ a lot of heavy Abrahamic monotheistic (not sure whether Christian or Catholic) imagery. There's the crucifixations in JEXUS (as well as pizza menus and Internet porn...what was that about?) And Thomas Aquinas quotes in your yuppie horror animation "Vermillion Vortex." Not to mention gorey crucifixations way back in early BANK installations. It seems like the use of this imagery or subject matter could be parodic/kitschy or be functioning in some 'art-historical' sense or maybe there's a third option that I'm not aware of...Somewhat related, I know you're affiliated with Punctum Books and they have a large amount of staff/contributing writers involved in "medieval literature" studies. Some of it "speculative medievalism". So....are we still living in the Dark Ages?**

Similar to above. Religious imagery is dead in one respect but the violence remains. And keys into the psychological/mythic/philosophical/political structures that surround us. Clichés and emptied out but operating like TRUTH and the figures and flesh remain in their positions. My family are religious (catholic) although I'm not. But I did go to a school where one of my earliest memories was colouring in photostatted illustrations of religious images, crucifixies and people killing lambs. As well as that this religious imagery is all around us and you don't even have to go to church to see a human nailed up on a cross. Or a man killing a lamb. So we all 'own' this shit.

John Russell, *Elf Flux*, 2013, HD video on monitor and stand, 11 min on loop

**A more general question about the present/future….. What are you working on now? What sorts of things (artists, writers or otherwise) are you interested in lately? Where do you see things going? Are you optimistic?**

Hey dude optimistic? Yes I'm optimisitic. What I'm mainly working on the moment is some animated fonts. One is an animated font which is top secret and then this one – which is a semi-animated squirrel font. SQUIRREL PINK.

This email was conducted over email, late 2014 into 2015.

Zoë Marden, "John Russell: AQUARIUM PROLETARIUM", *This is Tomorrow*, January 20, 2015, http://thisistomorrow.info/articles/john-russell-aquarium-proletarium.

this is tomorrow

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MOT International, 72 New Bond Street 1st Fl., London, W1S 1RR

## John Russell: AQUARIUM PROLETARIUM

**Title : John Russell, 'Aquarium Proletarium' (2014), installation view at MOT International, London**
**Website : http://www.motinternational.com/**
**Credit : Courtesy of the artist and MOT International, London & Brussels**

**John Russell: AQUARIUM PROLETARIUM**
**MOT International, London**
**12 December 2014 – 31 January 2015**
**Review by Zoë Marden**

**John Russell's second solo show, 'AQUARIUM PROLETARIUM' with MOT International continues to disrupt the boundaries between language and image through an immersive and multi-sensory installation, punctuated with darkly humorous images and philosophical references. As in his 2012 solo show with MOT in Brussels, the exhibition was developed in conjunction with an illustrated text for MUTE magazine. The video piece, which gives the show its title, takes centre stage and is framed by a back lit digital print, a sculptural sea turtle, a textured acrylic painting and a soundtrack that veers from wind chimes to distorted whales sounds.**

Eerie sounds greet me on the walk up to MOT International's Bond Street gallery, piquing my curiosity and setting the tone before I enter the space. Along the right wall, there is a long rectangular painting that looks like a peculiar cross between a Jackson Pollock and a manga comic. Caricatures peek through the thickly applied blood-red paint, prompting the viewer to step closer. The digital print on the seven-meter long canvas glows like a computer screen, depicting a surreal alien landscape, empty apart from three skeletons holding a leash attached to a small, life-like rendition of a pug dog. The whole image is washed in pastel pink tones that create a rosy light reminiscent of church stained glass windows. It is clear that the digital image is still at the forefront of Russell's practice as he explores its various outputs moving back and forth from the virtual to the actual.

In front of the projection is a large sculpture of a sea turtle covered in a thick, black tar-like substance, evoking images of the aftermaths of oil spills. The ever-increasing encroachment of mankind into animals' natural habitats is made painfully obvious. The sea turtle becomes an animated figure and the video's main protagonist. The relationship between man, animal and technology is explored in a soupy, underwater aquarium. There are reams of texts that move upward like the workings of a teleprompter; philosophical quotes flashing in neon pink are interspersed with animated bubbles. The film demands to be read as much as to be watched. The colour of the text changes from blue to pink, from large to small, the speed at which it moves dictating what can be read and understood.

The video is dense with visual and textual references as well as mutant GIF creatures that morph from one form to another. These absurd images appear and disappear, poking fun at the philosophical framework of the exhibition. The text seems to go on forever oscillating between shapes and words. There is, however, a hilarious repetition of the words penis and vagina alongside images of Bruce Willis and Labrador puppies, which only heightens the sense of absurdity. The accompanying essay's title, 'Bruce Willis, Irigaray, And The Aesthetics Of Space Travel', underlines the American movie star's importance in the show as the ultimate male hero through his phallic potential. As a counter balance to Willis, Russell refers heavily to the writings of radical French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, who has been critiqued for taking an essentialist view of gender politics. She argues that the phallic economy places women alongside currency, since all forms of exchange are conducted exclusively between men. The battle between masculine and feminine in this underwater world seems to lead only to death and destruction, with bloody decapitations and surgical procedures the inevitable outcome.

The title of the video and of the show, 'Aquarium Proletarium', points to Russell's preoccupation with an expendable labour force and Marx's theory of capital and commodities. The image of the ant 'death spiral' appears as a flashing metaphor for capitalism's endless downward force, sucking up all available labour power towards violence and ultimate destruction. Before the violence threatens to overwhelm the exhibition, the soft blues of the tranquil seascape and the soothing undulations of bubbles and wind chimes undercuts the ferocity in radical feminist Valeria Solanis' quote calling for "murderous radical pussy envy".

Published on 20 January 2015

JJ Charlesworth, "BANK: The Banquet Years", *Art Review*, April 2013.

ArtReview

# BANK: The Banquet Years

MOT International, 10 January – 16 February
By JJ Charlesworth

The art group BANK (principally comprising John Russell, Simon Bedwell, Milly Thompson and Andrew Williamson, with Dave Burrows and Dinos Demosthenous early on) was one of the best things in the London art scene of the 1990s. This spiky, sociable, politically sharp and extremely funny band of artists flared brightly throughout the middle of that decade, until divisions and departures reduced the group to a duo (Bedwell and Thompson), who finally called it a day in 2003. A decade later, MOT International's revisiting of BANK's work is timely, given the group's significant intervention in the strange concatenation of zero-budget adversity and YBA commercial hubris that was 1990s London. BANK's mix of punk humour, leftist political critique, art theory pisstaking, populist vulgarity and avant-gardist bloody-mindedness reminds the current, supersleek, professionalised artworld of a moment when artists invented their own cultural context and had the guts to mock the conditions of an official system they saw as driven by liberal, careerist hypocrites.

Most of BANK's work, cheaply made and hard to store, ended up in the skip. What is left are a few works and an archive of the publications and print ephemera, here presented in a long row of display cases, alongside a framed selection of their notorious Fax-Baks, some paintings and a sculpture from their 1998 show Stop shortchanging us. Popular culture is for idiots. We believe in ART, and a few other works. The vitrines lay out the chronology of BANK's critical reworking of the DIY ethos of the time, as the group invented ever more parodic, histrionic and utopian versions of the artworld's usual functioning: BANK made artworks, ran their own gallery and curated their own shows – but significantly the group saw these activities as interchangeable, opposed to the professional division of labour that handed power to curators and gallerists. BANK-curated shows were artworks as well as containing the artworks of others (such as the seminal Zombie Golf!, where visitors rubbed shoulders with mannequin zombies, staring blankly at the artworks); BANK's gallery (BANKspace, renamed DOG, then Gallerie Poo Poo) messed with the institutional form of the gallery space, eventually staging a gallery-within-a-gallery programme, punningly titled White3. Everything the 'proper' artworld shied away from – vulgarity, sensuality, bad taste, idealism, embarrassing sincerity and talking openly about power – BANK threw back in its face.

Most vivid here are the samples of their own tabloid-style newspaper – The BANK – and the Fax-Baks, press releases sent to them from prestigious galleries to which the group added critical annotations, mostly disparaging, which would then be 'faxed back' (with marks out of ten) to bewildered and usually incensed gallerists. And The BANK, with its lurid 'shock' headlines about artworld personalities and politics ('Galleries "all owned by rich people" shock!', 'Ad Man you're a bad man! – Saatchi slammed by young girl', 'ICA complete pile of bollocks shocker!') turned the artworld's insiderish gossip into satirical backchat. This was relational aesthetics and institutional critique without the intellectual cuteness and politically correct selfregard. Everybody hated it. Today, power has arguably drained even further away from artists, in an artworld now run on a global scale by cultural bureaucrats, monster gallerists and auteur curators. And while it's good that groups like BANK are feted, bought into museum collections and given their due, it's time artists took inspiration from their example: because in the end, there's art, and artists, and the rest are just parasites.

This article was first published in the April 2013 issue.

Mark Sheerin, "John Russell brings animated madness and praying mantises to Grey Art in Brighton," June 23, 2011, http://www.culture24.org.uk/art/art358962.

# John Russell brings animated madness and praying mantises to Grey Area in Brighton

By Mark Sheerin | 23 June 2011
Tags: Brighton & Hove | Moving Images | contemporary | Art | All tags

Photo of a silhouetted woman infront of a projected film with an image of a praying mantis
A visitor looks on as the world ends: Preying Mantiss, installation view
© Photo: Daniel Yáñez González-Irún

*Exhibition: John Russell – Preying Mantiss, Grey Area, Brighton, until July 3 2011*

In a group show given over to the occult, The Dark Monarch at Towner Art Gallery in Eastbourne last year, it was John Russell's epic hallucination which stood out as being most touched, if not by magic, then at least madness.

The seven and a half metre backlit print drew comparisons with a prog rock album sleeve. Now some of its apocalyptic splendour, along with the work's unwholesome preoccupation with insects, can be found in a solo exhibition at Grey Area.

Central to the new show is a 23-minute animated film called Vermillion Vortex. It might be described as a family saga, but one which begins with a breakdown and builds to a vision of the relatives' home surrounded by crucifixions.

The characters do have some lucky breaks. One lands a modelling job; another has a hit record. But there is alarming urgency in the hasty sketches used to tell the stories. The news is scrawled, not heralded, in bubblewritten captions.

Captions are perhaps the highlight of the film. The tone of crude celebration is at good as capturing the horror of a funeral as at enumerating the financial rewards of success. Repetition is used to good effect and this is frequently laugh-out-loud funny.

Vermillion Vortex was commissioned for the Art Review website in November last year. While it had undoubted power online, its projection on a wall of a basement space gives the viewer more chance to revel in these torrid lives and be swept up in the nihilistic rush of a shuddering noise track over the looped ending.

John Russell has also now been commissioned to produce a set of glossy comics for the story, which began life as a piece of text, and these are for sale at Grey Area at a giveaway price.

The preying mantiss (sic) of the show's title has a presence throughout the gallery, as both a fly-posted image and a graffitied reference to insects found at the foot of the cross and supposedly soaked in Christ's blood. It's a horrendous image, but one feels the meek won't inherit the earth here. In the world of John Russell, it may be anything that crawls.

"Mark Beasley on John Russell", Mark Beasley in conversation with Michael Bilsborough, *Artist of the Month Club*, Invisible Exports, March 1, 2010, http://artistofthemonthclub.blogspot.co.uk/2010/03/john-russell.html.

# ARTIST OF THE MONTHCLUB

MONDAY, MARCH 1, 2010

## Mark Beasley on John Russell

British Invasion! John Russell is the Artist of the Month for February 2010, fingered by curator/selektah Mark Beasley. Russell was most recently praised for his digital collage murals, which The Guardian described as "stupendous cinema-scale, Pollock-wide Photoshopped phantasmagoria...the digital marriage of Peter Paul Rubens and Jeff Koons in the mind of a mad sea god."

Russell calls his AMC print by the featherweight name Untitled (Abstraction of Labour Time/ External Recurrence/ Monad).
The archival ink shimmers on metallic polyester film, and reminds me of some of the "collector's edition" superhero comics marketed with irresistible "chromium covers."

John Russell has exhibited work in solo and group shows for over 20 years, and has teamed up with Mark for several projects. Let's hear from Mark about their knockin' about...

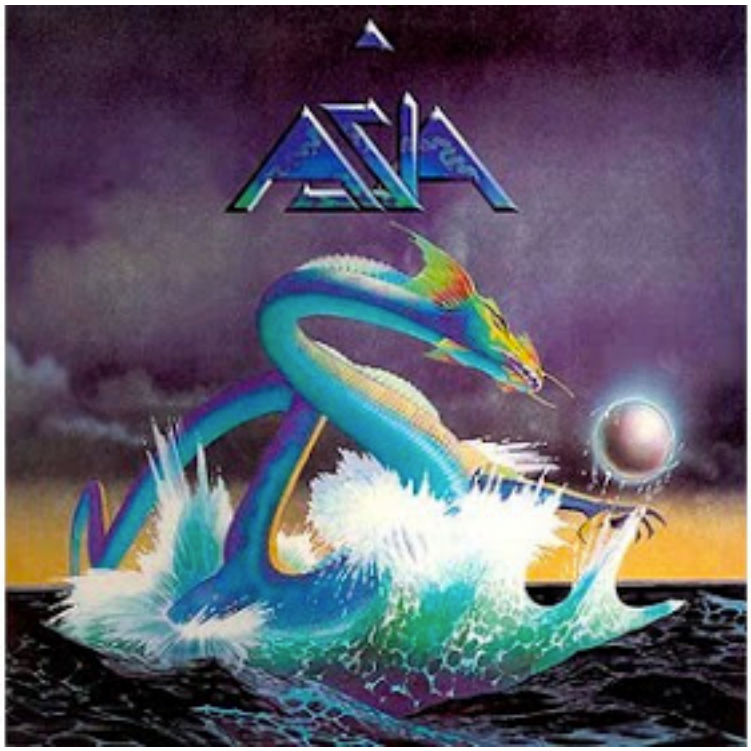
Michael: In 2004, you worked with John at PS1 on a film and painting project titled 'The Thinking.' Was that the first time you worked formally with John Russell?

Mark: That was the first time that we produced a jointly authored work, with the help of cult LA film-maker Damon Packard: the resultant film 'Lost in the Thinking,' won mocumentary of the year at the Berkeley Film and Video Festival! I was firstly aware of John through his work with BANK, a cult of another kind. They produced a series of exhibits in London throughout the nineties that were both artwork and group show, with heady titles such as 'Zombie Golf,' Cocaine Orgasm' and 'Charge of the Light Brigade.' BANK was a key group for many fledgling curators and artists in Britain at the time, whose story as such hasn't been fully explored. I was drawn to the work of BANK, and particularly, John, for his irreverent, witty and theoretically savvy, but unleaden approach to art making. It appeared lively and didn't follow any prescriptive approach, the fact that it was hard to pin down appealed to me; it seemed wonderfully at odds with the one-liner work being produced at the time. Prior to 'The Thinking,' John and I worked on a series of co-curated shows, such as 'Angloponce,' at the Trade Apartment, London and 'AXXXPRESHUNIZM' at Vilma Gold, also in London.

Michael: And you've worked with John a few more times since then: 'Barefoot in the Head' (2009) and 'The Prop Makers' (2005), for example. This AMC print, along with the mural-scale vinyl prints he has unveiled throughout the last three years or so, adhere to lofty production values. I mean "lofty" when compared to his earlier work with BANK, which coughed up cheaply printed tabloids and posters, handdrawn cartoons, and various figures made of paper, wire, and sometimes wax. The BANK projects often looked decidedly provisional and lo-fi. How do you account for this stylistic transformation? Does it seem to you to be a departure?

JOHN RUSSELL *CRUCIFIXION LIGHT BOX* (2004). Lenticular Prints [3D] and light boxes.

Mark: On the face of it, yes, I guess it feels different. But fundamentally, it's in tune with John's continued interrogation of the vernacular of the day, whether it's the Xeroxed zine of the BANK Tabloid or his 800-page anthology 'Frozen Tears,' which mimics a Stephen King bestseller. The AMC print allies itself with the explosion of rendered digital imaging. It also riffs on 70s psych poster art and the seventies pomp and prog rock connections with science fantasy - specifically, Tolkein, it seems. It's an aesthetic that strikes fear into many - Roger Dean meets Dalí by way of Peter Paul Rubens - strictly for the strong of heart. It's certainly not the Peter Saville studio of clean cut, well-behaved lines.




Michael: Yes, while looking through his digital images, I had to switch on Emerson, Lake, and Palmer's Fanfare for the Common Man, which still gets unfairly shunned from most libraries. The BANK stuff felt more like Pavement or even SST records, though that wouldn't be a parallel timeline. Anyway, the timing of John Russell's digital, sci-fi pastiche is perfect, given the sensational spectacle of Avatar, the coming Tron remake, and the other epic, digital IMAX features that are imminent. Personally, the print, the vinyl murals, and Avatar all make me wince at their excesses, which more recent art and music have shaven away; but eventually that guarded skepticism can give way to the undeniable sentiment that "this stuff is really cool." I guess by understanding that Russell's newer imagery is profligate and over-the-top, we can then permit ourselves to really have fun with it. Of course, the images aren't thoroughly kitsch; the crucified hands, permeable bodies, and flowing internal organs make things makes things a bit morbid - yet no worse than the maggots and armed Nazi corpses of Jake and Dinos Chapman.

Mark: 'Fanfare for the Common Man' is perfect; it is more a knowing banal excess than kitsch. Fantasy is key, not as a function of intuition or in opposition to reality, but rather as something suggested through knowledge, something that grows through montage, citation and digital reproduction. A fantasy let loose from closed and dusty volumes, a liberation of impossible worlds. A form of baroque, digital triumphalism, a becoming aesthetic that as yet isn't fully understood. The potential appeals to me, rather than simply quoting the past so as to be clearly understood, it presents something of a curveball. What is good or bad taste and who decides?

POSTED BY MICHAEL BILSBOROUGH, AMC'S HEAD BLOGGER, IE ARTIST AND ALL AROUND CULTURAL PUNDIT. AT 7:37 PM

Paul Gravett, "John Russell: Vermillion Vortex", *Art Review*, November 2010.

ArtReview

# John Russell: Vermillion Vortex

*Untitled (Abstraction of Labour Time/ Eternal Recurrence/Monad), 2010*

John Russell was a cofounder and proactive member of BANK between 1991 and 2000 throughout its assorted incarnations, group shows and publishing of a tabloid-style satirical magazine. Much of what

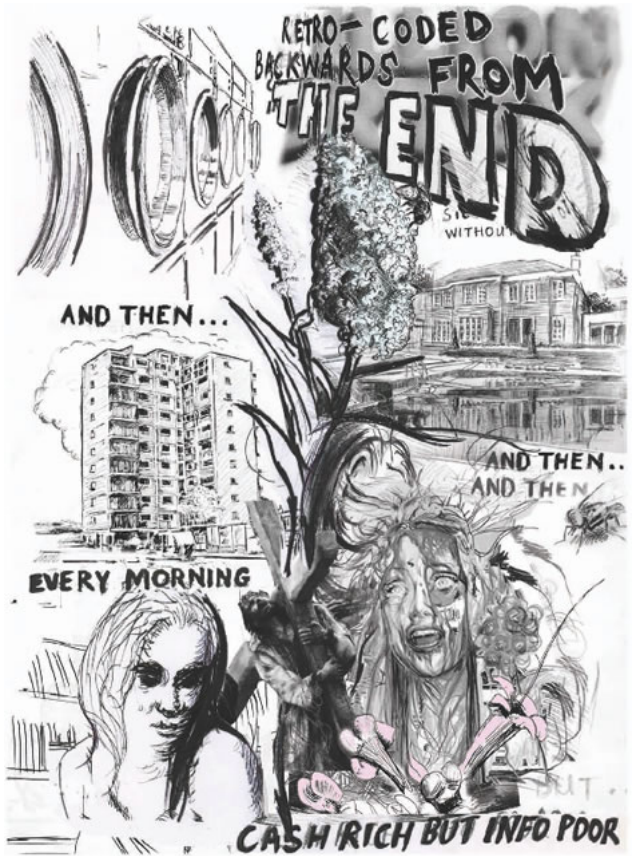
Matthew Collings described in Art Crazy Nation (2001) as BANK's "surly, self-destructive, self-conscious, introspective attitude - combined… with critical intelligence and a flair for spotting weaknesses in the art system", persists in Russell's wide-ranging post-BANK solo works, from his intellectually intense writings to grand hallucinogenic vistas in backlit digital prints on vinyl.

In now addressing the visual-verbal interplays of comics, Russell has developed them into an arresting short 'drawn film' for Art Review magazine entitled Vermillion Vortex (2010), viewable above. He largely shuns animation effects, aside from a few pans, zooms or sequences such as water in motion, in favour of a flow of dissolving, sometimes overlapping drawings, mainly kept raw and vivid, some laced with sinister Psycho-style subliminal flashes. He intersperses this image stream with bursts of narrative texts in bold capitals, some balloonish, graffiti-style or aggressively hand-drawn in marker-pen.

"I was interested in the potential of drawing and the phrasing of comics," says Russell. "More specifically, in a kind of cinematic phrasing and the way that a still image can stand in for a scene. Most of the scenes are in fact a kind of minimally animated still. Anime plays on this, as do comics, in the gap between frames." Neither a comic nor an animation in their conventional senses, and perhaps closer to the halfway hybrid of 'motion comics', Russell's film demands to be read as much as to be watched - as well as listened to, with the soundtrack similarly dissolving music and voiceovers. The result can be experienced as a time-based audiovisual piece like most animated films, but equally the pause and mute buttons let the viewer/reader/listener control it as in a comic.

Russell suggests that his Strip for the November 2010 issue of Art Review magazine serves as "a kind of trailer for the film", but unravelling in reverse, starting with the ending. As the title implies, Vermillion Vortex 'climaxes' in a blood-red maelstrom, contrasting the antiseptic soullessness of the main setting nearby with expanses of multiple, rotting Golgothas.

"The ending is a kind of ecstatic, holocaust-event and has nothing to do with the narrative as such. It ends the narrative and therefore renders the flow of events up to this point as establishing scenes, only more or less interesting in as much as they set up the situation where they can be ended", says the artist. "And therefore, in the end is the beginning, as the narrative is retro-coded backwards by the end, from the end, to allow for the end… in the end… Amen. So 'the end' is the monster in this story."





*In preparing this article for Art Review magazine,*
*John Russell kindly answered some further questions by email.*

**Paul Gravett:**
**Coming from other practices, for example writing text or making large, rich, complex single images, how did you feel about tackling the media of comics?**

John Russell:
I have read a lot of comics, in particular I was a fan of 2000AD, not very rarified taste perhaps. I was interested in using drawing as a way of standardising a series of images. I tried to storyboard a film using googleimage (what a wonderful thing that is) to find images and sites like Getty Images. I also used images/ drawings I had produced over the last few years. The story was something I wrote a few years ago but in its earlier incarnation it was a reverse-werewolf story - the idea that a dog turns into a man and kills people. But when I started working on the animation I liked the less dramatic parts of the story. Having the "end of the world" as the conclusion was useful because it helped me keep the story down-beat. In fact I'd like to carry it on further at that pace at some point.

*Vermillion Vortex*

It's a powerful, unsettlng piece, its title suggesting a blood-red maelstrom?

Yes, an event of some kind, some kind of transformation (for better or worse) that requires dramatic change.

**In some ways your film is closer to a 'motion comic', a way of fairly minimally animating a comic, through pans, zooms, small moments of 'flash' animation, and added sound of course. Are you aware of these?**

No, but I am aware of motion graphics and I am very interested in animated gifs and how they work on the web. The original idea was to make a story by linking a series of animated gifs.

*Vermillion Vortex*

**I liked the urgency of your bubbly lettering - it's a reading as well as viewing experience, so really more a hybrid of comics and animation?**

Yes, I thought that. That's why I varied the writing/typography and the time allowed to read the text, sometimes too long, sometimes too little time to read.

**I can imagine Vermillon Vortex working as a book, allowing reader/viewer to take the time they choose on each image. Would that appeal to you or do you want the largely imposed duration of film?**

I did like the imposed duration. I like the way it disrupted the way you viewed things, and the way you could play with attention spans and expectations. I spent so much time on the film, I found it difficult to translate it to the printed strip in fact. That's why I went for the trailer format in fact.

*Vermillion Vortex*

**How planned, or how spontaneous, was Vermillion Vortex's creation?**

I spent a long time drawing and editing. As the work developed, it changed format from a series of linked webpages/animated gifs to a film and the story changed to exclude the most story-like aspects. I became interested in The End both as both a structural device and an idea. I was partly thinking of those short strips you would get in Marvel comics and Future Shocks in 2000AD, where cataclysmic events were described with reference to a single character not usually featured in the comic - you know the ones I mean. There was something abrupt about the stories that was carried through by the drawings. The drawings somehow surfed over the various implausible aspects of the storyline. I like that effect.

This article was published in the November 2010 issue of Art Review magazine.

Jonathan Jones, "John Russell restores my faith in new art", *The Guardian*, January 6, 2009.

theguardian

# John Russell restores my faith in new art

## Get yourself to the Royal Academy: you have until 19 January to see a stupendous work by John Russell, one of the most important artists of early 21st-century Britain

Ocean Pose (Pink) (2008) by John Russell (detail). Photograph: Brunswick PR /Brunswick PR

I didn't expect to see a work that would knock my socks off at Collision Course, part two of the GSK Contemporary season at the Royal Academy. I didn't expect to enjoy much at all. I thought the first part of this exhibition that wants to feel like a happening was the most vapid, pretentious and boring art event of the previous 12 months. I've been getting a lot more tolerant of this contemporary art lark recently, but the turgid emptiness of this affair really brought out my deepest suspicions that it's all

a load of cobblers.

And yet ... part two turns out to be much better. It's far more of an exhibition, with some, y'know, works of art in it. The William Burroughs retrospective (as I moaned yesterday) left me cold but the rest is all quite interesting. And one part of the show – a mini-exhibition called Sudden White (After London) curated by Mark Beasley – is more than that. It's a wintry apocalyptic glimpse of some unexpected and powerful art. Above all, it includes a stupendous cinema-scale, Pollock-wide Photoshopped phantasmagoria by John Russell.

Ocean Pose (Pink) is the digital marriage of Peter Paul Rubens and Jeff Koons in the mind of a mad sea god. Floating over a purple sea, a white unicorn stands enfurled in an expanding cosmic cloud of giant octopus tentacles. Bloody viscera, action-painting smears of goo and the baroque curves and shadows of the coiling gastropod limbs create one of the most exciting and perversely joyous, yet at the same time mad and disconcerting, new works of British art I've seen in ages.

Russell has a sensibility that consumes and expels the stuff of contemporary life with orgiastic abandon. His art is painterly without being painting and pictorial without being a picture. It is more exciting than street art. It does definitely invite comparison with Koons's food paintings as a hyperbolic overactive pop monstrosity. But it has its own high-art, 17th-century quality that makes it hugely original and hugely striking. I urge you to visit part two of this mélange of an event, if only to see this stupendous work by one of the most important artists of early 21st-century Britain.

Maria Fusco, "Frozen Tears III", *Art Monthly*, February 2008.

# ARTISTS' BOOKS

## Frozen Tears III

Maria Fusco

*Frozen Tears III,* ed. John Russell. ARTicle Press, Birmingham, 2007, 928pp, pb, 6.99, 1 873352 59 X.

"Yes, it's a wonderful saying. Dermatologists should inscribe it on their doors. Philosophy as a general dermatology or art of surfaces…" (Gilles Deleuze in conversation with Robert Maggiori).

If, as Deleuze suggests, good philosophy is best enacted as a dermatological principle, then the conjectural framework that is inscribed on the surface of *Frozen Tears III* is as raging, as sweet and as prescient as chronic teenage acne. All it requires is a good hard squeeze.

The third installment of John Russell's *Frozen Tears* cycle announces itself as "THE PLACE WHERE, THE PROPHESY-AS-COMMODITY, AS CURSE OR SALVATION, IS STAGED AS FICTION". This phrase is a cheeky synthesis of style and content, asserting, as it does, an aggregate of what might possible happen in the future ("prophesy"), as a regularly available product ("commodity"), articulated in the oft traditional form of storytelling ("fiction"). Already the volume's strapline firmly places the reader outside of average causality, that is to say, quotidian cause and effect, in which experiential relationship to time is central to making sense of text. Here I am considering "time" as the chronological space that looking takes place within, in terms of both the personal time spent in the act of actually reading and the specific historic timeline or literary lineage within which a work is placed, through looking as an activity in itself.

The materiality of *Frozen Tears III* as bricky-book-object self-reflexively points to its own construction as part of a series, which further suggests temporal compression and sites potential readers outside of an average reading experience. "III" is rendered in hyper-real mercury numerals emerging from or perhaps submerging into the glossy pink "FT" branding mark, while the cover image itself could be a stylised photograph of pea and ham soup, or something more sinister that has been expelled at high speed from Linda Blair's mouth.

Patricia McCormack's polemical contribution to the book, "Becomings-Cunt: Flesh, Fold and Infinity", is a call for a putsch in patriarchal understanding. It begins: "This article positions female genitalia as a model through which a project of becoming may be launched. Female genitalia should not be understood as metaphor or as reflection applied to a becoming after the project. Becoming-cunt engages with the materiality of both becoming and the cunt as fleshy, risky and challenging to the basic paradigms of thought and subjectivity." McCormack's piece is a broad application of the concept of

"cunt" to traditional approaches to comprehension, and their attendant social appearances in classical and popular culture. Utilising examples that range from *Hellraiser* to the Bible, she redetermines both how cunt is seen and how it may be used to see.

Something of a fictional accomplice to McCormack's text is Andrea Mason's "Does She Squirt?" in which the story's main character Kelvin - sometime doctor, sometime porn star - is sucked into an anonymous churning vagina that he had previously been in control of. This sly little story displays the bright nastiness of Alasdair Gray's *1982, Janine* - itself an ambivalent examination of the politics of pornography - in its use of a cyclical narrative structure. The story's title is also its last line, signaling to the reader that any revelations that may have taken place within the space of the journey (and hence the story) will be deleted, or possibly repeated with another protagonist, returning us to the beginning again. This structural gesture, together with the general unsavoury oddness of the main character's actions - "Nurse," says Kelvin. "The banana please." - has the effect of making readers' efforts to adhere to the plot pointless, opening up a much more specific (and interesting) discourse on the nature of reading.

The title of Mike Paré's "The Canyon is Possessed" places the work in a very specific geographical location. This is not the UK, this is not familiar, this is rural America, and yet the tropes of storytelling that he employs to deliver his quasi-memoir afford the reader lots of points of entry (and exit). Essentially this is a list of observations attached to the canyon, through which Paré carefully constructs an eerie sequence of hearsay, and a creepy geography: one character, Gary Hanu's friend, meets a group of men in black robes and his heart explodes; a serial killer in nearby village lynches teddy bears as ciphers for the children he has murdered; Big Daddy's diner feeds burgers to desperate teenagers before they embark on drinking copious amounts of beer and blood in dark crevices of the canyon. This is no average spook story, for while Paré's tale is familiar in terms of delivery, death surrounds it, with no redemption.

*Frozen Tears III* is, however, a challenge to readability. For while many of the contributions are redolent of (or actually are) legible fiction texts, Russell's selection of so many - over one hundred of the blighters colliding together - combined with their separation from author details, means that the reader is made to feel disoriented.

This formal displacement is not very helpful in terms of locating or fixing the meaning of what we are reading, for we have little to plot ourselves against. That said, at best, the book does embody characteristics of Ramon Llull's "thinking machine", which advocates the extraction of meaning through the mannered collision of hundreds of lists, in that the sheer denseness of text suggests that it needs to be used, but that it cannot really be read, placing its dazed readers back in control by encouraging them to be always in the present rather than wondering what will happen at the end.

**Maria Fusco** is director of art writing at Goldsmiths, and editor of the journal *The Happy Hypocrite.*

Gean Moreno, "John Russell Q & A", *Fanzine*, September 2007, http://thefanzine.com/john-russell-q-a-2/.

Fanzine

# JOHN RUSSELL Q & A

GEAN MORENO 27.09.07


Caught in one of those unforgiving Chicago winters that not only chap the skin but ruin things deep inside, I find sanctuary and solace in the only place we natives of tropical latitudes usually do in such inclement conditions—a seedy, out-of-the-way bar. I intend to review, over a beer or two, some notes for a Q and A I just conducted, but things quickly go south.

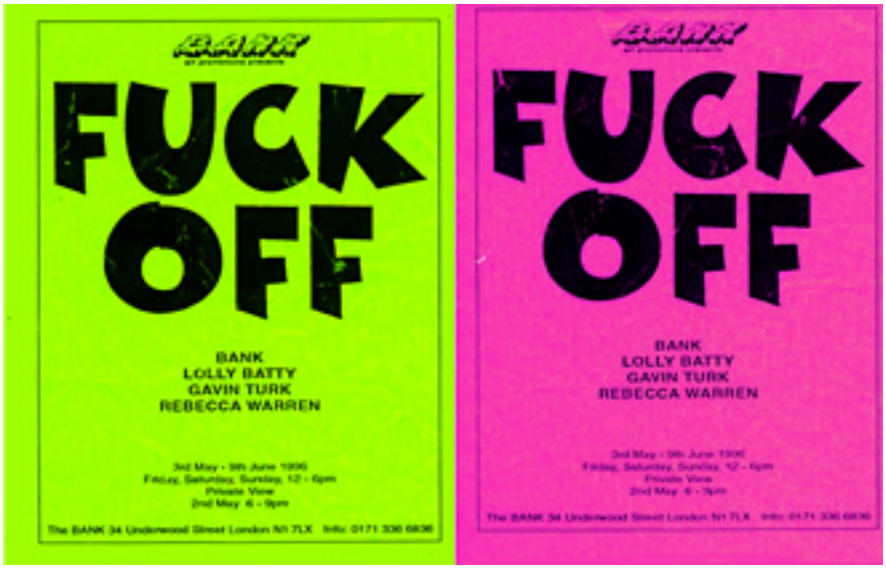
The entertainment tonight comes courtesy of two loud burly union guys, working on their tenth or eleventh Blue Ribbon and future strategies for the labor movement. One, the traditionalist, calls for a re-fattening of the ranks, mobilizing a new generation, returning to the pre-Hoffa halcyon days. The other, the visionary, uninterested in old solutions, talks of the need for new flexible models for the union to match the flexibility of multinationals. Spewing some of the best blue-collar theorizing I'd ever heard (or, at least, that's how it seemed to me, also working on my tenth or eleventh Blue Ribbon), there is a mixture of eagerness and exasperation in his tone. He's willing to wipe the slate clean and try to start from scratch, because really what's the point of working with broken equipment.

John Russell, the subject of my Q and A, is kind of like that second burly union guy, beer-breath and all. He's sick of doing things the same way. He wants to know what else art can do. We know that it can serve as a critical tool to probe some of the unseemly aspects that have accompanied the entrenchment of capitalist structures; that it's a great tool of rhetorical opposition, even if it has never really been all that good at furthering real, practical changes. But art has served this function for so long that these days it seems as if it is merely putting on a show that it can perform, Wayne Newton-like, more out of habit than out of desire or disgust.

Without putting on the clown suit of willful ignorance, Russell wants to know what is it that paintings, artists' books, exhibitions and things of the sort can be, if we forget all the uses that they have been put to and the standardized narratives that accompany them. For instance, what happens when 19th century French historical painting is recast as a back-lit digital billboard with sexy automata and shinny sports cars? Or, when a Pollock is rethought as an ornamental meatscape? Or, when Clement Greenberg with his unrealizable idea of pure flatness is recast as the first conceptual artist? What happens, in short, when we return the art object (or anything, for that matter) to some ideal virtual state and apply the pressures that will shape it from unexpected sides and skewed angles?

In the last few years, Russell has been compiling the strange Frozen Tears anthologies, which have been brought into the world in the guise of 800-page horror paperbacks with foil and embossed covers. Although perhaps at home in the same bookshop aisle as pulp slasher novels, they may ultimately earn their place at the margins of the mainstream less for the blood-and-guts fests in them than for the weird collision of views that they manage to capture. Heavyweight conceptualists Art & Language are mixed with the sticky formalism of Dennis Cooper with the weirdness of Jeffrey Vallance and Kevin Killian and Benjamin Weissman and Trinie Dalton with inimitable dispatches from the Gulf courtesy of the tweaked worldview of Reza Negarestani with the pop darkness of any number of neo-goth young artists. And all this woven with Marx and Artaud and the all-verb torrential textual currents of Pierre Guyotat. It's less a mosaic and than a dirty coleslaw wrestling match of hefty worldviews, a jumble of active forces that somehow explains the world in its mind-tweaking multiplicity better than any prim-and-proper dissertation could.

*- Gean Moreno*




Q: Let's start at the beginning. How did BANK come together?

A: There were a few of us who went to St. Martin's art school together, and when we left we couldn't think of what to do. The Frieze exhibition happened in 1987, and that looked glamorous and exciting, unlike all previous British art. The social dimension also seemed interesting. Putting on your own exhibitions seemed like a good idea. After Simon Bedwell and I designed and sent out a load of invites for imaginary exhibitions, we decided to do a real one. We put on a show in a disused bank (hence the name) in Deptford. At that time there was lots of empty property in London and people were squatting buildings to put on raves and art shows quite regularly. The show was organized as a party primarily. We thought we were doing what Damien Hirst and his friends were doing–but we weren't.

Q: It seems to have taken on a different vibe, however. A kind of politically incorrect politics and an artist-as-cultural-jammer ethos took over.

A: Well, yes, the impetus or trajectory of things did change. I don't know about 'cultural-jammer' though – things were not so clear or planned as that sounds. BANK's performance was based around a kind of positionality or situationality but with the direction flipped around. So, we kind of adopted a series of stances, as 'angry', 'stupid', 'clever', 'political', 'working class' and so on. And it was a lot of fun. We could also play around with a kind of knowing-

hypocrisy whereby although much of the work was seemingly overtly critical of art world structures, sometimes a cartoon version of criticality, it was also engaged self-consciously in an attempt to ingratiate itself within the art world it criticized, e.g., BANK Fax-Bak and the BANK Tabloid newspaper. It also seemed that as long as you were not concerned with immediate commercial success within the conventional commercial structures of the artworld, the performances of 'bitter hypocrite' or 'twisted loser' were at least as productive and interesting as those of 'successful artist' or 'international gallery.' And this gave you a strange kind of power – the power of visibility. We were also popular and possibly even fashionable as well for a while – as well as being losers.


By the end, I had begun to find the idea of "politically incorrect politics," as you put it, as a limiting option. It has been played out so many times, from Kippenberger to Lucy Mckenzie – the idea that an artist maintains a 'critically' located position whereby the critical or political content (or performance) of the work is staged within the structures of which it is critical but which it relies upon for its visibility…blah blah blah…existing as a kind of critical 'not-belonging' or antagonism or disaffirmation. Unfortunately, it is difficult to see what these stagings 'do,' except to signal their presence as antagonistic or disaffirmative to a receptive but fairly limited audience for this type of art product.

Q: Although Relational Aesthetics seems to have become a sought-after target as of late, I guess I want to link it here to this idea of a political posturing that doesn't really 'do' anything to the object it is critical of. The idea of participation was at times treated as somehow ipso facto progressive or correct. It didn't matter to what end the structure for participation was serving, only that 'social relations' had replaced objects.

A: Yes, I think Relational Aesthetics is just one of the latest attempts to find a way to suggest that art might 'do' something – as art, or as art-as-politics or as anything else. Bourriaud tries to suggest the political significance of relational aesthetics is tied to a DIY microtopian ethos based around using the institution (configured as a kind of shelter/oasis from the spectacularised conditions of the world outside) as a place where we can conduct social experiments and find new ways of 'living together,' new ideas of 'non-scripted interaction,' as he puts it. I didn't really find his ideas that useful, but I suppose I prefer them to the 'critical' backlash. For instance, Claire Bishop's dumb-arse response in October, where she refers to the clapped out ideas of radical democracy and the idea of antagonism, i.e., in democracy, conflicts are good, involving the negotiation of difference blah blah blah. Then, she goes on to use the

example of [Santiago] Sierra only to reinstate the artwork within the conventionalized contexts of critical art practice/ theory, as disaffirmative/ antagonistic/ critical etc.

I have been thinking recently that in a contemporary context artworks are continually confined (to use Robert Smithsons phrase) by their staging in relation to a binaric conception of artistic practice, split between either a critical model premised on ideas of negation, deferral and lack, or an aesthetic model based on ideas of transcendence. This configuration coordinates roughly with the distinctions drawn in the 1960s, in the reaction against formalist aesthetics. This is the (supposed) distinction between the aesthetic (for instance the formalist aesthetics championed by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried) as visual (retinal), sensual, anti-intellectual and aristocratic (criticized as a mystified affirmation of the structures of capitalism); and the conceptual (for instance Minimalism and Conceptual art) as a form of radical criticality, intellectual and politically engaged (championed as critical of the structures of capitalism). These distinctions are replayed again and again and again. It's not a useful structure. It doesn't go anywhere. A continual restaging of 'the critical' doesn't do anything.

My idea at the moment is that we should start forgetting things. In the same sense that Deleuze asks for a philosophy that has "forgotten dialectics" (in his book on Nietzsche) as a way of escaping dialectical thought without that escape being dialectically reincorporated as dialectics. In his case, he is concerned with a way of thinking or doing that would allow difference and contradiction to remain in tension in thought and in doing. If artworks are 'confined' politically, theoretically and materially by their prefigured relationship to the structures of the institution, and if doing (as art) is prefigured and contained in the same way, is it possible we could start forgetting some things, for example forgetting politics, forgetting political art, forgetting critical art?

Q: With Deleuze, it's always a need to go from a tired actualization of a category back to the virtual in order to reactualize it in a fresh "format." There is a kind of 'forgetting' back to the virtual, if you like. Now, it sounds like you got to this end point with BANK and had to start forgetting how things were done. Where or how did this process of rethinking things begin?

A: Re-thinking? I'm not sure certain things can be re-thought. Like this whole discourse surrounding critical/political/function. I don't think it's a question of rethinking it. It's fucked. It's become kind of hysterical comedy/tragedy. Like that thing Andrea Fraser wrote in Artforum. She says there's no longer any position for critique of the institution, that what we should do now is create critical institutions. And we can't get

outside the institution because its inside our heads, whilst at the same time the institution is not separate form the wider socio-economic world (that is …err, outside our heads). What the hell was that all about? She might even be right. It's like a trauma of limits. Like I was saying earlier, an anxiety regarding boundaries and the dialectic between located and unlocated-ness–what is contained, what is excluded, what is allowed and what is censored. If an artist maintains a critically located position, the critical or political content or performance of the work is inevitably staged within the structures of which it is critical but which it relies upon for its visibility. This is a kind of critical not-belonging. However, if this type of art is pitched at a wider (mainly non-art) audience then it risks losing its art status and visibility as art and its differentiation from the (supposedly) chaos of other non-art messages. In this context, it risks losing itself within the infinity of extra-institutional social relations. In this respect, the move towards the possibility of an infinitely expanded institution leaves open problems of indeterminacy both in relation to status as art and to how this indeterminacy might operate. I think all of this stuff should get forgotten NOW.


After I left BANK the first things I did, which were a kind of reaction to this, were some performances with the artist Fabienne Audeoud. One was called 'John Russell Kills Fabienne Audeoud in the style of William Burroughs' (2001) and the other '20 Women Play the Drums Topless'. The idea with these was that they didn't mean anything. The '20 Women…' performance was based on a conversational idea for a performance (the idea was described to me ten years earlier by the artist Wayne Winner as an example of a performance that could never happen). We staged it so that the performers (the first 20 to answer an advert in a magazine) were seated on a four-tier stage and each provided with a complete drum kit (bass, snare, cymbals etc). The only instructions we provided were that the performers should move in and out of rhythm erratically for 40 minutes: apart from this they should play the drums any way they wanted. It was very loud. I thought it was interesting because it was difficult to make sense and the title did not seem to describe the performance. It was a kind of event.

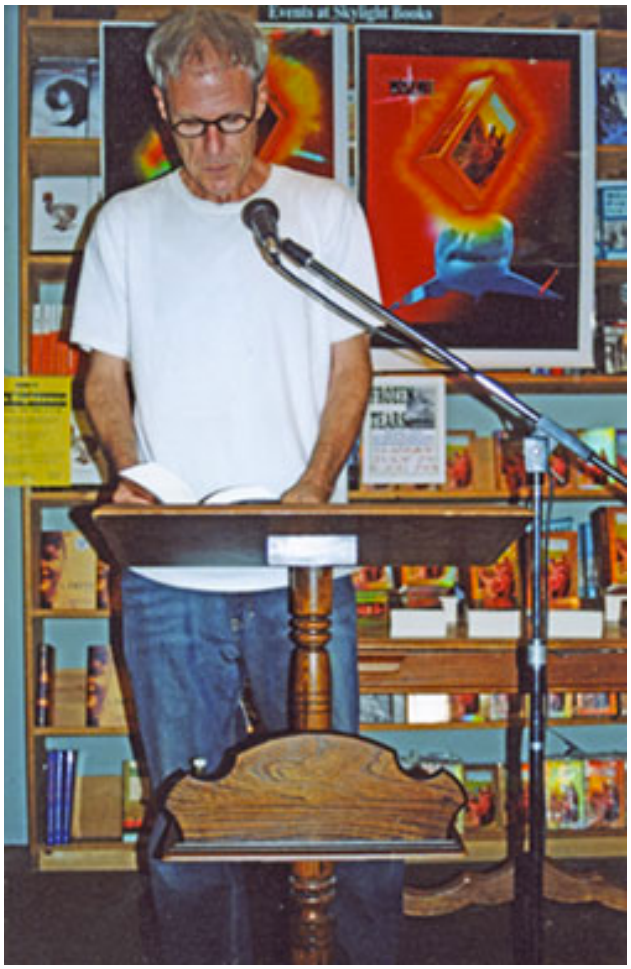
This all kind of relates to something I read recently where Jerry Saltz put it very well where he wrote that theory was problematic because it always 'knew where it was coming from'. That's almost like a phrase from Deleuze. And another quotation that has remained stuck in my head was Lawrence Weiner saying that 'once his work becomes part of art history it stops being art'. This relates to the idea of meaning and what you said earlier about the virtual. Things seem most interesting when they are virtual rather than actualized. But obviously that doesn't mean they are not real. This is the case with theory. Theory is most interesting (and creative) when it's half-understood. In fact, the

problem is often that when you read theory or philosophy and finally get what the writer was trying to say, you realize how banal it was all along. Theory is much more useful at the point where it holds out a variety of half-understood possibilities – it's a kind of trippy sensation – exciting and dislocating. Smithson described the experience of watching sci-fi and horror films in similar terms as 'low budget mysticism.'

Q: Maybe this is a good place to speak of the Frozen Tears anthologies?

A: Yes, the previous Frozen Tears books adopted the format of an 800-page horror/sci-fi bestseller, including cover illustration, foil blocking, embossing, and spot varnish. That was because I liked best seller books as objects – and I like the fact that they were viscerally/violently visual. But also the format wasn't random. It pointed toward the idea of a visually excessive use of text (or 'figurality'). In the first book I asked people to write a "visual text". I felt there was a connection between the expressionistic/cinematic/violent use of language and fiction of writers such as Stephen King, Phillip Dick, Stanislav Lem and writers from the French transgressive tradition such as Artaud, Bataille, Guyotat, etc and, in extension, the cross-over with the American beat writers (and beyond), for instance William Burroughs, Kathy Acker, and then more contemporarily Dennis Cooper and so on.

So, the idea was to stage the conflation of the visual and the textual both in relation to these ideas of figurality and with respect to the distinction between book-as-text (text art, collection of texts) and book-as-object (art object, sculpture, commodity, found object or pretend found object). For instance, I showed the books as a pile at the Cabinet gallery like Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes. This is the idea that the object (or book), though superficially (or perhaps profoundly) visual, could only be approached, interestingly-as-a-text, by reading; which would seem to temporarily negate the point of its visual-ness as an object or art object, in line with the idea that "reading isn't the same as looking, unless it is" which was something Smithson wrote about. Put simply visitors to the gallery would be able to look at the books OR read one. In the first edition, for instance, I included two texts by Art & Language. Art & Language and Pierre Guyotat —that seems like an interesting collision.



Q: But then, the books were used as a pretext to organize exhibitions in which they weren't shown. And these were really more like events–with metal bands, hired prostitutes, live web feeds, etc.

A: Yes. I also liked the idea of Frozen Tears as a kind of brand, or virus; as a kind of speech act. The idea of performing something as a statement or speech act (or as a sort of naming) to see what reality effects it could produce. We did that a bit in BANK. Not as something that has a pretext or a plan but speculatively. I think Frozen Tears is the prophesy or curse of the infinite social as predicted in Marx.

Q. Maybe you can draw some concrete distinctions here between the Frozen Tears branding or viral model and the critical/political stagings that are no longer effective? Let's finish off by talking about the digital paintings that you are working on these days?

A: I like big paintings. In particular, French 19th century figurative painting – 'Raft of the Medusa', 'Oath of the Horatii' etc—or Jackson Pollock. I like the violence and the narrative/dramatic dimension. Pictures of people killing each other and interacting – the illocutionary force of this type of presentation. And the way this

plays off against some of those old-style formal issues like surface. At the moment, I'm interested in the way Greenberg talks about the move towards the 'purity' of flatness as painting. It's pure but it's also impossible because flatness is an abstraction – and so his idea of the purely visual is conceptual – which is exactly what he doesn't want it to be (Thierry de Duve talks about this in Kant after Duchamp). There is a drama and violence in these ideas as well. I was watching a brilliant film of Greenberg talking in the 1980s about Pollock the other day. He is drunk and ends the interview by saying "Ah, he was full of shit like all the rest of us.' I've recently been producing large digital prints on canvas and vinyl of virtual Jackson Pollock-influenced paintings made out of blood and meat, and including Jesus' hands. And at the moment I'm producing 4 large (30 x 10ft) paintings on back-lit vinyl depicting a range of people standing ankle deep in an infinite ocean.

Images are:

Pg 1: Photo of John Russell

Pg 2: BANK, Invitation to 'Fuck Off' 1997. Exhibition organised by BANK. Including works by BANK, Lolly Batty, Gavin Turk, Rebecca Warren. DOG, London. 1996.

Page 3: BANK, 'Adman You're a Bad Man.' Cover, BANK Tabloid' 1997.

Page 4: John Russell, Fabienne Audéoud and Wayne Lloyd. Performance shot – Twenty women play the drums topless. South London Gallery. September 2002.

Page 5: Installation shot from 'Zombie Golf' organised by BANK.

Page 6: BANK, 'GOD' 1997.

Page 7: Frozen Tears II cover.

Page 8: Genesis P-Orridge reading at Frozen Tears III launch, NYC 2007.

Page 9: Dennis Cooper reading at Frozen Tears launch at Skylight Books, Los Angeles, CA.

Page 10: Frozen Tears II installation, Death Valley, CA.

More about Russell & Frozen Tears is at http://www.frozentears.co.uk/

Andy Hunt, "John Russell," *Art Monthly*, no. 307, June 2007, 31-32.



## Simon Bedwell

**MOT** London March 23 to April 28

## John Russell

**Matt's Gallery** London April 18 to June 6

Separated by a short walk along the Grand Union Canal, Matt's Gallery and MOT are manifestations of how different generations have approached running an independent space. Matt's, which was initiated in the 70s, has continued to develop contemporary projects largely free from any commercial motives, while MOT, which started in 2002 as an artist-run space, has veered towards a more hybrid model of public and private funding. Each provides a reminder of the dilemmas galleries face in maintaining a programme under current economic pressures. Underlying both organisations' series of projects is an increasing shift in their strategies for funding and survival, and, while Matt's very existence is being seriously threatened, MOT has started to build a separate commercial identity, MOT International, though the gallery is to remain protected within it. Despite the implications attached to these shifts in perspective, what has been consistent for these two galleries is the pace and boldness of their responses to this situation. Each gallery appears to have turned up the power of its activities to an increasingly spectacular level.

John Russell
*Ocean Pose*
2007

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the current shows at Matt's and MOT – by John Russell and Simon Bedwell respectively – both dealt with the situation in a more formal and enigmatic way, each facing away from any direct reflection on current local issues. You might have expected Bedwell and Russell – both former members of 90s art group BANK, which reached new levels of hyper-reflective critique with its humorous ruminations on the London art world – to have continued on the same trajectory since the group ceased to work together. However, it is obvious that after a good decade spent pontificating about positions and counter-positions the novelty had worn a bit thin and, since the early part of this decade, different strategies have been required.

Through a mixture of *détourned* objects, posters, paintings and ceramics Bedwell created a grotto-like environment in MOT's intimate space. It was soon noticeable that his imagery had developed in a very particular way for this project, whose ambition was to recreate the 'decadence of an early Roxy Music album cover'. It is true that on this showing the work, collectively titled *The Receivers*, was more glamourous than before, yet his collaged constructions are still far from any early-70s chic that one might associate with, say, Marc Camille Chaimowicz, an artist who uses Roxy Music's soundtracks to great effect in his remade and remodelled 70s installations.

Bedwell's direct, deliberately obtuse set of collaged female figures are taken from soft-porn imagery and achieve an effect that's ever-so-slightly subdued compared with his previous work. Yet his new series is still injected with a very forceful and direct form of critique, which is where the humour drives the artist's critical point home. And paradoxically, this is where strong parallels with Roxy Music's artwork start to emerge. If we look at the band's *For Your Pleasure* and *Country Life* LP covers from 1973 and 1974 – the latter was banned in the US for its suggestive depiction of female figures – they confuse pop and sexual politics, and critique the idea of 'rock as art' by accentuating and

embracing the album as product together with its productness. In a similar way, Bedwell's art references Brian Ferry's privileging of costume and artifice, and by turns, the singer's adherence to Richard Hamilton's practice and Pop Art. Although it seems a coincidence, Bedwell's recent work is perhaps doubly interesting given Ferry's recent verbal 'gaffe' about the attributes of Nazi film and propaganda ('Leni Riefenstahl's movies and Albert Speer's buildings and the mass parades and the flags – just amazing. Really beautiful'). It's as if Bedwell is trying to position his work in a similar manner, to cause confusion or ambiguity about his forms of representation. Either way, through this mixture of critique and empathy, Bedwell's constructions – such as the powerful *Untitled*, 2007, an anaemic bleached-out image of a thin naked woman projected onto a canvas, while the rest of its surface halos the image with roughly dripped acrylic paint – not only serve as a powerful comment on issues of class, race and sexual politics, but through their visceral overloaded anti-aesthetic, provide a deeply uncomfortable commentary on the artist's own work's productness, which in this case is particularly incisive given their context within a gallery now extending itself commercially, even if not in entirely orthodox ways.

Over at Matt's, Russell's series of works, collectively titled 'Ocean Pose', were much larger in scale and, by contrast, informed less by critique than by an affirmative position. Russell's four 35ft by 10ft backlit digitally-printed vinyl screens were each held against one of the four walls, and together they provided a complete environment for a variety of figures in ecstatic poses, pictured on the surface of an infinite sea. Russell's work now appears to have taken the mixed language of figuration and abstraction to a different level of virtual representation entirely, in both scale and subject-matter. In his own words, each piece – such as the highly animated and frighteningly vivid multiple red octopuses that surround a blissed-out unicorn on one backlit wall – is now presented as an 'artwork-as-event-as-prophesy-and/or curse of the unleashing of the power of the false'.

The positioning of Russell's images in the gallery – each claimed to act as a 'presentation of a presentation', or combined as 'self-articulations' that enact events that 'emerge from a multitude of phenomena' with aesthetic power – worked together with great effect. In a clever turn, it is through the artist's focus on his vinyl work's own two-dimensional 'incorporeal realm' – where the 'forms, passions, shapes and rhythms of this flatness' threaten to 'slip and explode as ideas, shapes, states of affairs, bodies and forces' – that creates an affirmative appropriation of theoretical discourse. Here we have a post-Deleuzian vision of the future in the present, where Clement Greenberg has reappeared as a conceptual artist to re-enact the aforementioned power of the false. What complicates this theoretical fantasy further is that Russell seems to have already second-guessed the flaws in this strategy, and attacks the work's position though a more literary and theoretical element in his accompanying booklet's similarly self-conscious text. Seen together with Russell's writing, the work combines to present a project of intense complexity.

Russell claims that the fictions in his pictures are contingent on the appearance of random cultural phenomena. Yet because these fictions also begin to take place outside of each image in Russell's text, a fantastic logic starts to operate between both the text and the work in the gallery. The elaborate theoretical rant that references philosophers such as Kant and groups like Art & Language, via an equally elongated rumination on the multiple staging of judgement and criticism as an additional 'dynamic universe of multiplicity', eventually starts to exist as an artwork in its own right, and becomes yet another focus for the project.

If Bedwell successfully mines the critical properties and potential of collage with a biting sense of humour, Russell's attempt to complete the rapture of his visual material through a form of 'theory as artwork' – so as to render philosophy's critical revenge on art's immediacy ineffective – perhaps provides new possibilities for visual practice. As Russell notes in his exhibition booklet 'fiction expresses the FORCE OF LANGUAGE. gives [sic] us other worlds and other becomings' and 'it does so, not by being a simple copy of the actual world, but by extending the virtual tendencies of the given world'. With this in mind, hopefully both artists will persist in pushing the boundaries of their practice with even more energy in the future, along with those galleries that currently have the imagination to support them. ▮

**ANDREW HUNT** is curator of International Project Space, Birmingham and reviews editor of *Untitled*.

Robert Garnett, "John Russell", *Frieze*, Issue 96, January - February 2006.

frieze

# John Russell

TRANSMISSION GALLERY, GLASGOW, UK

In a self-penned press release John Russell describes his 'factory aesthetic' as a 'display of retinal/conceptual cross-over entertainment and pleasure', replete with 'an AMAZING ZERO-CRITICAL CONTENT and NO ADDED AESTHETICS'. Not content with this, he provides us with 'an added amazing ZERO AUTONOMOUS-ARTWORK-FUTURE-WORLD-PROMISE-DIMENSION and a FABULOUS 0% RELATIONAL-POSSIBLE-UTOPIA'.

We can be pretty sure that he's not being quite straight, but at the same time the show doesn't come across as being completely ironic either. Rather, Russell's mode of address, the 'attitude' of the work, is too acutely pitched, and there is far too much going on for it to amount to a one-dimensional instance of pastiche. Here is an invitation to take seriously his refusal to be serious.

The centrepiece of the show is *The Philosophy is in the Meat* (all works 2005), a gigantic, epic-Cinemascope, high-resolution digital print that looks at first sight as if it might be some kind of parody of a classic, drip-period Jackson Pollock. Looking closer, we see that it is a computerized collage, with one layer of dripped skeins of paint made from images of entrails and offal, and the busiest passage of which depicts a blood-drenched stigmata image of a nailed hand, engulfed by a feeding frenzy of flies. However, all this mock-heroic Romanticism is played off against superimposed, candy-coloured layers of images depicting cake decoration and various other food

substances, forming a kind of confectionery spectacle of would-be abjection. What really makes the work take off, is Russell's 'gravity-defying' formal feat of making the surface of the work appear to disembody itself from its support in such a way that it becomes a kind of virtual, but vividly palpable, hovering presence that effectively energizes the whole space.

It's difficult to pin down exactly what's happening because Russell doesn't seem to be playing the games we've come to expect with work such as this. While it cites Pollock, it doesn't come across as a detached paying of lip-service. Though he may appear to be deploying typical Mike Kelley-ish or Paul McCarthy-esque strategies of desublimation, the work 'works' too well to be an instance of one-dimensional anti-aesthetics. Rather, he uses Pollock as a cipher of Modernist abstraction to see what it might mean to 'do a Pollock', to go 'elsewhere' today. There's a particular kind of intelligence to Russell's manoeuvrings that does not consist in working from a critical pretext, but moves with an intuitive sense of humour to arrive at a conclusion before theory does. When something becomes too 'serious' maybe it ceases to be interesting or problematic and it's time to go elsewhere, to create new problems. In this way the 'philosophy' may indeed inhere in the 'meat'.

Similarly, other works in the exhibition make art 'out of' fashion and the spectacle. Fraudulently Valorised as Exceeding Rational Thought, lifts from a 1970s' fashion shoot, while Limited Options, enters a cartoon kitsch territory reminiscent of recent Jeff Koons. As with *The Philosophy is in the Meat*, the work operates in different registers, but what sets Russell apart is that he does not resolve these registers into any neat dialectic. He is not content to float on the surface of the spectacle, but neither does he go for the option of abjectly rupturing it. Rather, he goes beyond the opposition between art and fashion neither by collapsing the two into each other nor through critique, but by upping the aesthetic stakes. While 'options' themselves may indeed be 'limited', what we do and where we go with them is not. Rather than mourning lost options, Russell opts for Gilles Deleuze's affirmative 'art of combinations', which is the process of synthesizing disparate elements: open-ended assemblages that resonate and vibrate together to create not an organic unity or a tasteful 'rightness' but something possessed of the 'right' kind of 'wrongness'; a confounding logic but accessible if the viewer has the sense of humour to go with the work. This aesthetics is not an added supplement in the sense in which we used to refer to something as being 'aestheticized' but is in itself active, affirmative and potentially political.

The half-mocking Deleuzianism of Russell's press release displays a welcome ironic scepticism towards the increasingly over-serious readings of that philosopher currently being applied to art, as well as casting a sceptical eye towards the current art-world moratorium on irony. At the same time his redeeming humour still betrays a paradoxically sincere, but far from Romantic, belief in the ways in which art is capable of discovering new possibilities and, proving that artists often make very good archaeologists, shows us a new Pollock, a virtual-reality one for our so-called digital age.

**Robert Garnett**