

MATTHEW HIGGS AND PAUL O'NEILL

PAUL: How did you become a curator? Or is this is even a term that you're comfortable with?

MATTHEW: The term's fine. I became a curator directly—or indirectly—out of my teenage experiences of organizing things. There was always an impulse to organize things. As a teenager in the late 1970s I published a music fanzine and promoted concerts in my hometown Chorley, in the North West of England. And I'd say that my subsequent interest in organizing exhibitions—or working with artists on projects—emerged from a similar set of concerns, which were designed primarily to alleviate boredom, make something happen, and to somehow get closer to or become more involved with the thing that you're interested in. When I eventually went to art school in the mid 1980s I found the idea of being an artist somewhat disappointing, I guess the perceived singularity of being an artist just didn't appeal. Somehow trying to make one's own practice more collaborative appealed. And one of the ways to do that was to simply start working on projects with other people. So I think all of those things combined contributed to how—or why—I became a curator.

PAUL: What would you define as your first curatorial project?

MATTHEW: If I was to separate my teenage life from my more adult life, then the first project would be around 1992 when I was invited—by the artist, writer and curator Gareth Jones—to take part in a group exhibition called "Making People Disappear" at Cubitt, an artist-run space in London. I was invited to participate as an artist, but one of my contributions to the show was to produce a publication with all of the other artists in the exhibition. It functioned not so much as a catalogue, but as a coda to the exhibition. It was produced in an edition of a hundred copies and distributed informally. For me that was, I guess, an attempt to unravel my identity as an artist, and it provided an opportunity to think about other ways that one might productively implicate oneself in the "structure" of an exhibition. That idea was repeated the following year in New York, for a group show at 303 Gallery called "OK Behavior" (1993)—

jointly organized by Jones and Gavin Brown, who was then still active as an artist. Again I was invited to take part as an artist, and again I made a publication with the other artists involved in the show: which included Elizabeth Peyton, Gillian Wearing, and Doug Aitken amongst others. And in 1993 that would have been amongst the earliest published material by those artists. For me it was interesting to work on these publication projects within the context of exhibitions. Certainly it reminded me of my teenage years publishing a fanzine. When I eventually started my own publishing project—*Imprint 93*—it seemed like a natural development. The motivation behind *Imprint 93* was modest: to publish and distribute—as cheaply as possible—new projects with artists whose work I found interesting. *Imprint 93* was self consciously influenced by many earlier strategies such as Fluxus, mail art, fanzines, and so on. However in the early 1990s in London very few people—at least of my generation—were producing and circulating work in this way. *Imprint 93* was connected to and inspired by the then important—and emerging—artist-led initiatives such as London's City Racing gallery, or Glasgow's Transmission Gallery, or artists' collectives such as BANK. I was involved—initially somewhat peripherally, and then later more formally—with the artist run studios and gallery Cubitt. It was there that I co-curated my first exhibition with Peter Doig. It was a show of Billy Childish's paintings. At that time Billy Childish wasn't particularly well known in the art world. He was a cult figure, but better known for his music and writing. Peter had studied with him briefly at St. Martin's College in the early 1980s. We both shared an interest in this mercurial figure, whose work was—and remains—something of an anachronism. Billy—obviously—became much better known as his former partner, and longtime muse, Tracey Emin, became more widely known from the mid 1990s on, but around the time of our show Billy was a resolutely independent figure who had somehow retained an extraordinary sense of self-determination and independence: by the early 1990s he had released in the region of fifty or sixty albums and published twenty odd volumes of his poetry, but his prodigious output as artist—some several hundred paintings, and at least as many drawings—was largely unknown. I think, Peter and I saw the show as an opportunity to say something about our mutual interest in Billy Childish, whilst hopefully introducing Billy's art to a broader audience.

PAUL: Your practice has often shifted between being an artist and being a curator. Do you make a distinction between those activities, or do you see them as merging activities?

MATTHEW: I probably have less investment in myself as an artist than I do in other roles. In a way my art practice has become a somewhat reclusive activity—I don't show too often—which now largely emerges from my interest in both collecting books and spending time in bookshops. I'm not entirely sure what I think of "hyphenated" terms such as "artist-curator," or "artist-writer." On the one hand I think the use of prefix of "artist" in such terms does allow one to do consider certain actions or approaches from a particular perspective. Again it is probably a somewhat romantic, and no doubt convoluted notion, but the idea of "artistic license" does seem to infer that—as an artist—one can operate outside of convention or orthodoxy. And I guess—in some respects—being an "artist-curator" allows one to interpret those categories from a particular perspective. Certainly I would consider some of the projects I've worked on with other artists as collaborations. Perhaps people who work within more traditionally institutional frameworks don't necessarily see publishing or organizing exhibitions explicitly as "collaborations," but then again maybe they do. For me the interest remains in trying to find appropriate—and hopefully interesting—responses to whatever circumstances one finds oneself in.

PAUL: What past curatorial models or exhibitions, historical precedents or precursors have been an influence on your practice as a curator/artist?

MATTHEW: All kinds of things—obviously the whole independent publishing movement that emerged in the aftermath of punk. The notion of a DIY culture that was tangible. There was something utopian about the years 1978, 1979, and 1980. There was a sense of liberation and a collective sense of "permission." Certain individuals and groups within that culture were, and remain important: Mark Perry of *Alternative TV*, Mayo Thompson, Scritti Politti, Mark E. Smith, Joy Division (and New Order), *Throbbing Gristle*... I knew almost nothing about art until the age of 14 or 15, around 1980, when I started to come across independent art magazines like *ZG*, *Performance*, or *Artscribe*. In terms of curatorial models, I don't know if he has influenced me directly as such but Kasper König has always struck me as an exemplary figure: you get such a palpable sense—from his exhibitions and publications—of his belief, and pleasure, in art and artists. Certainly *Portikus*—the exhibition space he founded in Frankfurt—remains one of the most compelling models for exhibition making: create a modestly scaled, ideal space for artists to work in, and provide them with the support they need to create often extraordinary things. I have never been that interested—on an emotional level—by exhibition models

that seek, somehow, to subvert or unravel institutional frameworks. This is probably for any number of reasons. Perhaps such projects are simply too self-referential, too self-reflexive, too tautological, too academic, and perhaps are ultimately somewhat alienating: a kind of endgame, with increasingly diminishing returns.

PAUL: Are you talking specifically in relation to early or later forms of "Institutional Critique" that used the exhibition space as the means through which museum history, gallery practice or institutional policies were critiqued in some way?

MATTHEW: I think I'm increasingly interested in quite conventional approaches to exhibition making. Most of my favorite exhibitions have taken fairly conventional form i.e. they consist of interesting art displayed in a fairly traditional, or at least straight-forward manner. Ultimately my interest is in the art, not in the structure or framework of the exhibition as such—which I accept can be of significant interest in-and-of-itself. However curators rarely create new approaches or methodologies for exhibition making, they simply adopt or adapt strategies developed by artists. Art changes exhibition making. I don't think the reverse is true... or at least I can't think of a compelling example. Over the past decade I think there's been an overt imposition of curatorial frameworks onto art—which doesn't seem to have produced that many interesting results. I think as a curator your responsibility is to support the artist's intentions—to the best of your understanding—and not to create some torturous or convoluted framework in which the art is ultimately co-opted.

PAUL: You're not necessarily talking about particular shows, like Hans Haacke's "Viewing Matters" (1996) or "Play on The Unmentionable" (1992) by Joseph Kosuth?

MATTHEW: Not at all. Both of the exhibitions you cite were exhibitions determined entirely by artists. Each can be thought of as an extension—or an amplification—of those artist's respective approaches. They are both great examples of artists interrogating the exhibition as a model or form. I have no issues with artists seeking to unravel the logistics and legacies of institutions. (However such invitations to artists—from institutions—have become so commonplace that the impact of such projects seems if not exactly compromised, then at least somewhat diminished.) I think when artists are creating the "rules" or parameters for such projects then we stand to gain a great deal. However when curators take on such roles, then I think we should, at least, be skeptical.

PAUL: When the curatorial structure, or the system of the display overrides the work?

MATTHEW: Exactly.

PAUL: Are you referring to certain structural or systemic approaches to exhibitions, for example projects by curators such as Hans Ulrich Obrist or Jens Hoffmann?

MATTHEW: Not specifically. On the one hand you could say that the emergence of these overt curatorial tendencies in the early nineties was born out a necessity: to test—or challenge—things. And this may have been the case, but I think the reality was that the exhibitions themselves invariably tended to be very disappointing, so that the only thing you were left to think about was the structure or the mechanics of the exhibition: i.e. not the art it contained. In such circumstances you could argue that the work is at the service of the exhibition, not the other way round. My question would be: who is interested in such ideas? Other curators? However maybe it was specifically a condition of the mid-to-late 1990s. Certainly you see far less exhibitions these days which privilege curatorial structures over and above the art.

PAUL: The generation of so called “independent” curators associated with the mid-to-late 1990s—such as Maria Lind, Jens Hoffmann, Vasif Kortun, Nicolas Bourriaud or Hans Ulrich Obrist, and yourself—have moved towards institutional curating positions. How has such a move impacted upon or changed the way in which you deal with exhibition making, now you are the Director and Chief Curator at White Columns?

MATTHEW: Well I think I would have to establish that my institutional experience has been quite different from people like Maria Lind or Hans Ulrich Obrist, who from an early stage in their careers worked within very large public institutions. Between 1992 and 2000 I supported myself, and my curatorial projects, by either working full-time in an advertising agency, or later through teaching part-time. I’ve only had a regular salary—as a curator—since 2001, when I moved from the UK to the USA. So our experiences are, and remain very different. (However it is interesting that both Hans Ulrich and Maria have both recently moved from much larger institutions to smaller ones.) I purposely have avoided working full-time within larger institutions. Virtually everyone I know who works in such places seems to spend half of their time in meetings. The scale of such institutions invariably requires a separation between the curatorial staff and a day-to-day engagement with one’s

audience or public. (At White Columns my office, which has no door, is next to the gallery’s reception desk. Half the pleasure of the job is talking to people who come by the gallery.) Becoming the Director of White Columns—which was founded in 1970 by Jeffrey Lew and Gordon Matta-Clark and is New York’s oldest alternative, artist-led art space—was, in many respects, a natural development, that relates back to my time in ten or fifteen years ago working at places like Cubitt in London. White Columns is an artist-centric organization. Its primary audience was, and remains, other artists. The whole field of artist-led, or artist-run organization seems like incredibly fertile territory to be thinking about again, especially in art world currently dominated by economics. I think we have an amazing opportunity to think about how to do things differently, and also to think about why you might want to do things differently, and to think about the kind of activities and ideas that both the commercial market and the larger institutions either have no interest in, or are unable to contextualize. White Columns’ mandate—which hasn’t changed since it was founded—is to support the work of both emerging and under acknowledged artists. Those two ideas have always interested me. I’ve always been interested in working with artists at an early stage in their career, just as I have always been interested in trying to establish cross-generational dialogs between those artists and artists of earlier generations. Also for me it was interesting to step outside of the British art scene, which—on a personal level—felt extremely claustrophobic. I moved to California three and a half years ago and on a very basic level it was refreshing to have to re-calibrate one’s ideas, and see how they might work in another context.

PAUL: Your practice in London was very localized, it moved from the specific to the general. How was the transition between working closely with artists associated with the art scene in London to working in firstly in San Francisco and then New York?

MATTHEW: Well I think you know my primary interest in London was to specifically work locally. There was a kind of intensity to working locally, especially in the early-to-mid 1990s. In moving to Northern California, another locality with a much smaller art community, it was interesting simply because you had to re-set your radar. I had to learn a new “dialect,” I had to research and think about another “art history.” It took me more than a year and a half in the Bay Area before I felt confident enough to make what I would characterize as a “local exhibition,” i.e. an exhibition that comprised works made in the Bay Area. For me it was important that I did an intensive, eighteen months

worth of research—around a quite narrow subject, which was Bay Area photography—in order to have the appropriate, or hopefully informed, conversations with the artists involved. Obviously I could never be an expert in the area’s many art histories, but I felt that the discrepancy between my experience, and interests, in London and a new opportunity to consider a mostly—to me at least—unknown situation would provide for an interesting conversation. And now that I am working in New York I would hope a similar dialogue might take place: I’m the first Director of White Columns not historically associated with the city, I’m the first non-American director of the space... and these distinctions alone seem to present an interesting platform from which to re-think what White Columns might be.

PAUL: Commercial gallerists in New York often talk about their exhibition programs—a term usurped or appropriated from public institutional practice. Do you think this term is representative? Is it used in a coherent or relevant manner?

MATTHEW: No, not in all cases. I mean if you look at a gallery, say for example, like Marian Goodman Gallery: then there’s clearly an interesting and important programme. And now that a lot of the larger institutions have semi-abandoned contemporary art we are even more reliant on the intellectual, and economic, philanthropy of many commercial galleries to provide audiences with access to the most interesting contemporary art. I still find it astonishing that you can go, every six weeks or so, to several hundred commercial galleries in New York—free-of-charge—and potentially see something amazing. It is a strange kind of public philanthropy, and fairly unique—at least in the United States—where the doors are always open for anyone to walk in off the street and encounter often complicated ideas. It’s kind of an anomaly in our society, where we are increasingly expected to pay for everything. Certainly if you think about the progressive and innovative commercial galleries of the late sixties and early seventies, spaces like Wide White Space in Antwerp, or Konrad Fischer’s gallery in Düsseldorf then they were clearly establishing the territory for Minimalism, post-Minimalist, and Conceptual art practices that few, if any, institutions would have been interested in working with—without the pioneering support those artists received from what were fundamentally commercial galleries.

PAUL: Many of these galleries such as Konrad Fischer’s or Wide White Space, or even Seth Siegelau’s, were never very successful commercially during their time in the 1960s–70s. There was an opportunity for experi-

mentation during a period when such curators mainly focused on working with a small group of artists within a relatively small scene and their main ambition was keeping things going, maintaining what they had and continuing operations.

MATTHEW: Maybe, but the work was still presented under the auspices of a commercial enterprise. And because of their fiscal autonomy—regardless of whether they made a profit—they retained a degree of independence that a publicly-funded institution would probably never have had. Certainly few public institutions would have taken such risks, at that time, on such progressive, and untested art. Also some of the people involved with the galleries we just mentioned were active at different times as artists, so their galleries were bound to have a different ambition, dynamic, or intention. This is one of the reasons why the idea of the artist-led space (whether it be a commercial gallery, or an institution like White Columns) remains such an interesting and compelling model to me. Those spaces seemed to emerge directly out of—and respond to—contemporary art practices, they were informed by—and helped shape—those practices. This is the dynamic that we are currently trying to sustain—and develop—at White Columns.

PAUL: Do you think there’s certain “amnesia” towards recent exhibitionary display practices of the past? For example, you curated “City Racing 1988–98: A Partial Account” (2001) at the ICA, London, which could be read as an attempt at re-positioning, historicizing or making-visible such DIY artist-led initiatives in London from the early nineties. It could also be seen as a response to “Life/Live” at ARC Paris in 1996.

MATTHEW: With “City Racing 1988–98: A Partial Account” at the ICA—which looked at certain activities presented at City Racing between ‘88 and ‘98—I think I wanted to, in a straight forward way, simply acknowledge that the story of British art in the nineties wasn’t only determined or conditioned by the activities of the yBa—i.e. Damien Hirst and other artist’s associated with Goldsmiths College, and later with the Saatchi collection. I read or understood City Racing as a kind of parallel history to the “yBa.” There were obviously moments where these tendencies were intertwined, or overlapped, but I think for the most part they were quite distinct. I certainly gravitated more towards—and empathized with—City Racing.

PAUL: Do you think “Life/Live” was a successful show in terms of how it dealt with such DIY practices? It did give

City Racing and other UK artist-led initiatives their first big institutional outing? In her essay “Harnessing the Means of Production,” Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt was suspicious of institutions that use the labour and attitude of artist-led initiatives as they themselves become assimilated into the establishment whilst bringing a certain level of visibility for both at the same time?

MATTHEW: I was involved with “Life/Live.” My project *Imprint 93* was invited to participate. I thought it was an extremely ambitious—and ultimately very intelligent—attempt to juxtapose several distinct tendencies in British art. I certainly thought Hans Ulrich’s positioning of John Latham, Gustav Metzger, and David Medalla as artists who were important or influential on the then recent developments in British art was intriguing: because most younger British artists in the 1990s had never mentioned those artist’s names in any context whatsoever. It was an interesting example of historical revisionism. But at the same time such a gesture functioned as a kind of historical “correction,” i.e. it signaled that the intellectual roots of British art were more complex than the standard art histories might have it, which I thought was interesting. City Racing was invited to participate too. They did two things: they installed the old City Racing illuminated shop sign at the entrance to the exhibition, in a sly way co-opting the whole show as “theirs,” whilst simultaneously “infiltrating” their identity into that of the museum. They also organized—in their allocated space—a group-show of artists who they were interested in. So instead of overtly celebrating themselves, they instead did what they had always done at the gallery in South London—which was to create opportunities for other artists. “Life/Live,” of all of those shows of British art that took place in the nineties, of which there were many, remains the most ambitious and inclusive. What would be interesting now would be to make an exhibition in the UK—in a major institution, such as Tate Britain—that reflected on that period, and to really privilege and articulate those artists and initiatives that were actually important—and remain compelling.

PAUL: Do you think there are any interesting recent self-organized DIY artist/curator initiatives that have emerged since then, either in London or in the States?

MATTHEW: I appreciate that times change, but I certainly think in London one of the most disappointing things that happened was the way that the artist-led, and artist-run culture—for the most part—capitulated to the market. Where you might have had a number of independently-minded organizations or idiosyncratic initiatives, you

have instead a plethora of new spaces employing exactly the same mannerisms and methodologies of commercial galleries—where the only tangible ambition appears to be a desire to be accepted into the fold of certain international art fairs. I appreciate that this is a generalization, but I feel it is for the most part true. London lost a lot of energy towards the end of the 1990s, and given the cost of living in London, that energy was replaced by the more prosaic imperatives of the market... one consequence of which was a tidal wave of third-rate, and possibly reactionary figurative art.

PAUL: During the last 15 years you have been practicing primarily within the contemporary art world, do you think there’s been any kind of dominant forms of curating that have developed during that time, or models that have emerged?

MATTHEW: Probably just the extent to which “curating” is discussed, or at least was discussed—as I’m not convinced too many people give much thought to it any more (apart from other curators.) Curating wasn’t widely, or publicly discussed when I was in my early twenties... exhibition’s just seemed to “happen.” Of course art was discussed, and that discussion led to art changing—sometimes for the better. One could argue that the fact that exhibition-making is being discussed is, fundamentally, a good thing. But the real question would be: are exhibitions any better for more than a decade’s worth of curatorial hand-wringing? I don’t, of course, know the answer. But what does seem to be true is that there is still only so much interesting art being made. (Probably no more, or no less, than there ever was.) If you read the art press you can see that there are increasingly more adverts for programs dedicated to Curatorial Studies... and one wonders what they talk about all day. Because is there really that much to talk about? Maybe there is, I don’t know. Certainly curating as a “discipline” is still a relatively new area for discussion, so it is probably only right that someone, somewhere is thinking about the mechanics of exhibition-making and the culture of exhibitions.

PAUL: You’ve had a lot of involvement with these postgraduate curating training courses—do you think it’s something that can be learnt or something that can be taught?

MATTHEW: I think you can only encourage people to think for themselves. Certainly if you look at the careers of people who’ve been successful in this field—by that I mean people who have experienced some degree of visibility, acknowledgment, or I guess influence—then there

tends to be evidence of an idiosyncratic viewpoint. This is why we are interested in people like König: i.e. they have a position, about which you can have your own opinions. But you can't teach someone who to have an opinion or create a "position" for themselves. Similarly you can't teach someone to be interested, or for that matter interesting.

PAUL: Are there particular curatorial projects that have played a major part in thinking about your own individual practice?

MATTHEW: Well *Portikus* obviously remains such a compelling and simple idea: create a great, modestly-scaled space; invite great artists; provide them with the support they need to realize the project; and then publish a catalogue, a substantial record for every project, so that other people—who couldn't see the shows—have access to the efforts and work involved. I'm sure it was always a struggle to find the funds to support such activities—which were hardy media-friendly spectacles—but as an "idea" *Portikus* remains hard to beat, for both its simplicity and its cumulative complexity. You might also think of another König project like the "Sculpture.Projects" in Münster, again a profoundly simple idea—take a German town; invite some interesting artists to make interesting public work; and to do it once every ten years. Such a brilliant investment in an idea over a long period of time: which is counter to the short-termist attitudes that prevail in our current culture. You always get the sense that he is both very close to the artists and very close to the art: and that is the thing that ultimately matters. There is never a sense of self-aggrandizement in these projects, the curatorial "structure" is always straightforward... what is allowed to shine is the art...

PAUL: What makes a great art exhibition?

MATTHEW: Interesting work, intelligently and straightforwardly presented.

PAUL: Do you think we need any more international Biennials?

MATTHEW: I'm all for the democratization of art. The more people that have access to contemporary visual culture the better. Outside of the complicated civic and economic rationales for most biennials I think only a curmudgeon—or a snob—would argue that they are a bad thing. It doesn't mean—or even matter—that they are necessarily good exhibitions, what they do is provide a broader audience with access to contemporary visual culture/

ideas. I would say the same about the rise in the number of international art fairs, which I'm also a big fan of. The juxtaposition of the carnivalesque and economic realities of the art world at such events seems very honest, and useful for all artists to deal with, and develop a relationship with... and they provide a great opportunity for people who can't afford to travel internationally to see, first-hand, a lot of contemporary art in their own community... which, again, is obviously a good thing. Are as many biennials as there used to be?

PAUL: There are probably more. There were 80 listed in a recent special issue of *Contemporary* magazine dedicated to curating.

MATTHEW: Maybe you just don't hear about them as much, maybe through their proliferation they have less cumulative—or even specific—impact internationally. For example I always remember reading about the Sydney Biennial in the '80s and early '90s—it seemed to be a really big deal. (I certainly could never have afforded to travel to Australia to see one at the time, in fact I probably still couldn't afford to travel there to see one now.) But several installments of that exhibition have passed without the same level of coverage, or impact. The degree of attention that's given to these things—internationally—has clearly diminished... which in many respects is as it should be, because by their very nature biennials are in fact "local" events, and I'm sure their true legacy is their impact on the communities in which they take place. The biggest problem I can see with biennials is that a rotating cast of the same two dozen or so people seem to have organized them all... consequently they tend to feel the same, and often engage with a tightly defined narrative.... It is not difficult to see why the 2006 Berlin Biennial, which stepped outside of the "usual suspects" for its curators, has already received such positive word-of-mouth.... ■■

