

MICHAEL HAMPTON
JCHP CRITICAL BOUT

JCHP invited individuals to publicly critique their practice, the ideologies of the exhibition and CRITICAL DECOR : WHAT WORKS! The poet and critic, MICHAEL HAMPTON led the first Critical Bout session.

CRITICAL DÉCOR was a determined bid to reformulate the conventions of the exhibition apparatus and disengage the relations of production with the relations of distribution, which are immobilised in their bind to one another in the art system.

SK: Thanks everyone for coming, I'm Sadie, the researcher for Lanchester Gallery Projects. This afternoon is the first of the critical bout sessions for the occasion of JCHP's exhibition Critical Decor: What Works! We've invited three individuals and labeled them crudely – the art critic, gallerist and art historian - to publicly critique Critical Décor, JCHP's practice and the wider ideologies of the exhibition.

The combative language I'm using for the title of the sessions, bouts, perhaps in quite a heavily labored and artificial way, is to set them apart from the usual polite complicit guff that tends to exist between actors in the artworld, in the case this afternoon - the artist and the art critic.

So to introduce Michael after setting him up in this way. Michael Hampton is an art critic and poet who has written extensively for art publications and journals and has a keen interest in conceptual writing and artists books. And is ideal to blow the starting horn. The use of writing, and its quite particular contrived dense and laden with wit tone is a distinct instrument of JCHP's practice and Michael's writing is aside from just being about art, it plays with its heritage in art. I'm sure it'll come up in their conversation. So Michael will start off, bringing in JCHP as he sees fit and there will be a chance for Q&A's from the floor at the end. Just leaves me to say thank you to Michael for doing it and for all of his useful correspondence running up to today.

MH: Thank you for bearing with us and putting up with the delay. Anyway, what is it a bout? Yes what is it a bout? A bout is a fight, an antagonism. A fever, some other illness, so the judgment on that will be for you to make as we go along...or at the end. But, to begin with a quotation from JCHP, "we're not saying it's going to be easy" and with that in mind I'd just like to start off by considering Décor, in fact if possible to structure this discussion in three parts and to begin with looking at décor, and then hone into precisely the way in which JCHP use décor as part of the theory of exhibitionism. And then we'll see whether we arrive at it in part three... and see whether we can unpick this event because it is a difficult complex structure that they have built and it's conceptually quite perverse and it's also chock full of art historical references, art historical décor. So I'd like to begin by asking JCHP to address the issue of décor and what did décor have in a way of an advantage over other potential terms, such as furnishing, furniture or design – the dreadful d word: design. So. What is it about décor – does it have a particular set of associations that maybe aggravated you?

JCHP: I think the first association was with theatrical décor, the backdrop to the play, the more we thought about the content, the more it seemed like a backdrop to something else. They're not the main event, they're something that's building up towards something...

MH: Yes well it is a French word, and in French it means film set and so that's probably lost in translation to a certain extent. There is a filmic point to this exhibition and you also talk about props – you use the term props to describe your work and I was wondering if that's the whole kind of package you put together?

JCHP: We were conscious of how we actually recorded this. Of how it was to be photographed, as much as it would be walked around... the documentation would add a certain balance to the viewing and the viewer.

MH: Which balance is that?

JCHP: As much towards knowing that it's going to be a photograph or an image that's going to be reproduced rather than being just conscious of the viewer walking around...

MH: Ok.

JCHP: Also, the initial use of décor in the context of critical décor was slightly more accidental and the title came from an art practice in the 90s, which was 2 artists working under the name Critical Décor...

Who were part of YBAs... but purely there as the token theoretical group to support all the other stuff going on.

MH: You say they were token artists but you've taken over the name and occupied a similar territory?

JCHP: Well no... because we don't exhibit. They were token in terms of the other artists they were showing with. They were there as some kind of prop to the kind of cheapness of the other productions going on.

We're only going by the way that they have been written about.

We've never seen their work.

Basically, there's a review in Frieze of a group show that's probably our main point of access to their practice. As people they're talked about as someone who you would not want to have a drink with at a private view, that they're like Steven Willets, who corners you and talks only about theory. They're the kind of people you don't want to be with at the party. The review itself is evidence of the level of critique that was going on...parties...personalities...

MH: Are you trying to compensate through your practice for conceptual shortcomings of the YBAs? Or the landscape of the post YBA?

JCHP: No.

Possibly.

Right...no.

MH: So where are your post-war reference points?

JCHP: (awkward) ahahahahahahaaaa

MH: Well the reason I ask is because, maybe it's coincidental but currently at the ICA there's a reconstruction of Richard Hamilton's installation from 1957, *An Exhibit*, and I bothered yesterday to write down a quote from the ICA website about Richard Hamilton's, *An Exhibit*, conceived in collaboration with Lawrence Alloway and Victor Pasmore, the rarest of beasts of an English constructivism. Anyway the ICA website says that *An Exhibit* "is organised around a modular hanging system, a kit of suspended Perspex hangers was devised to be freely configured while installing, the intention to give visitors the opportunity to "generate their own compositions as they walked through it". Now I don't for a minute propose that you want your audience to generate their own compositions but is it an uncanny coincidence that you should be using similar kind of means i.e. hanging Perspex?

JCHP: Yeh, I think it is a coincidence. Our intention is that all of the content of the exhibition pretty much is intended to function as this thing we called décor. I think the clearest way that we have come to think about it is with the choice of doing the Brecht Messingkauf Dialogues, which is the film that's being shown for the duration of the exhibition on the screen over there. The idea of that is the title Messingkauf meaning Buy Brass, implies that there is an object, a work in the form of a performance or something played by a trumpet, as the title refers to the purchasing of a trumpet for its raw material of brass rather than for any aesthetic product that might come about through playing the trumpet in the future. So that idea of there being a kind of implied work or artwork is an analogy we've used in putting this exhibition together, in that our implied artwork is a potential version, in pencil, of Courbet's *Stonebreakers*, which we've rendered in a photocopy and framed in 15 frames on the back wall over there. The intention is that all this work somehow functions as a secondary type of object and falls short somehow of being a work of art... as the implied finished *Stonebreakers* on the trestles would be.

Or at least being in a position where things could be measured against other things.

MH: Doesn't that automatically mean that it's hocus pocus, that you're actually using a kind of stage magic and using the work to misdirect the intentions of the audience?

JCHP: It can fall into that, yeh quite easily. We worry that that could happen.

MH: Well what are you offering instead?

JCHP: Nothing, just props and the potential of the work that we might be able to make. With regard to what we're offering, we're not offering a lot. I suppose the driving force behind this exhibition is to make something that doesn't in anyway try to deliberately maintain exhibiting. To maintain a practice through an exhibition tends to be the way exhibitions are formulated by artists as a way in which to maintain their practice, to crystallise the practice to a certain point and you exhibit that and the exhibition crystallises everything that comes beforehand for a certain period in the practice. The idea with this though, is to try to somehow develop or progress our practice through doing this... so with regard to what we're offering the audience, probably not a lot other than this implication of work which hopefully we'll be able to produce at some point. Under the right conditions.

MH: But there never are perfect conditions, there is no ideal conditions so this is all contingent.

JCHP: But the idea of the exhibition is that it would have an effect to bring about the right conditions, completely unrealistically, but that was the intention.

MH: But you're not producing in isolation, nothing does exist in isolation so if you're concerned about not controlling the means of distribution, which I sense is your main problem here, it's a main obstacle and what has stopped you not having control of the means of distribution, do you think it's fair just to produce work without considering the wider economic field? And surely that is crucial, it's something that is a pre-requisite in today's age, to consider the economic field that you're working inside of.

JCHP: We do consider that... but don't just want to exhibit the outcome of that. What might come about in the studio... it just seems unproductive to go ahead and just exhibit that for the reasons mentioned before – it would just be a way of maintaining that practice.

MH: So, I'm playing the devils advocate to try and understand your position better. You've been through a long period of abstinence where you chose not to show any work, do you think that has worked out for you? Are you glad you've come out of the closet now?

JCHP: It's too early to gauge that but it seemed productive, the non-exhibiting in terms of production.

MH: But that's why at the beginning I said I thought that it's conceptually perverse, I still think that and the very idea of using an exhibition to critique exhibitionism per se is a kind of trap, a Chinese knot.

JCHP: But where else would it be done then, where would you do that – in an academic book or a treaty?

MH: You might, you might but you've chosen this particular place – Lanchester Gallery Projects – don't you think that in a way is a bit of a cop-out and it's a soft target because it's part of a university, it's not a...

JCHP: So doing it in a commercial gallery would be more pointed?

MH: It might be more difficult to negotiate...

JCHP: The only reason we've exhibited here is because this was the only offer and only option. We've never been asked to do anything in a commercial context and if we had, that is what we'd try to deal with but...

MH: Yes, using exhibitionism to critique exhibitionism. Do you think exhibitionism, as an ism, is something that's got legs and going to take off at some point as a negative concept in the contemporary art scene?

JCHP: I think it would be really unlikely to. In my limited experience of the contemporary art scene, it's to be wholly celebrated, the idea of exhibiting.

MH: Critiquing the exhibition from within?

JCHP: No no no, accelerating the exhibitionism.

MH: So exhibitionism as dis-inhibition, as in alcoholic disinhibition perhaps. Is that what you mean?

JCHP: No

MH: i.e. as in losing your inhibitions?

JCHP: No, we just mean exhibiting is something that is celebrated.

MH: Ok, not by you?

JCHP: No, because to us it seems very unproductive from the point of view of the practice, and it's not to be celebrated at all.

MH: But the silence of Marcel Duchamp is overrated by Joseph Beuys and now you've broken this period of abstinence, do you think that what you're doing here by creating this environment, which is a political lobbyist term, in the way that you're creating an environment to attract interest from politicians to get contracts for your client. And you've created a colloquial environment and I think you're putting your finger on something about a lot of contemporary art practice being a type of lobbying and you're lobbying whether you like it or not. Lobbying is the main metaphor for this.

JCHP: Is that why you're here then, are you part of the lobbying as well?

MH: To put my finger on this unacknowledged motivation. No, I'm definitely not part of the lobbying...

JCHP: For us...

MH: No, not really no aha

JCHP: Also, when you started talking there about having stopped this prolonged abstinence of exhibiting, the idea is that we're trying to engage with doing an exhibition whilst protecting the work from doing what it would do if we just did a straight forward exhibition...

MH: What do you mean by a straightforward exhibition?

JCHP: Say for instance just putting up the work... because we haven't done that. We do make work... which we pretty much consider to be artwork but that's not in the exhibition. Here the idea is to withhold showing artwork. Everything here is supposed to be understood on the level of the secondary peripheral objects...like décor.

MH: Secondary periphery objects...so, in other words you're denying consumption of a commodity, or any finished product?

JCHP: That's the plan, yeh
Or rather that's what's hidden in the planchest?

MH: What would it take, what kind of bid would it take for you to open the planchest?

JCHP: Just the key, which we think we've lost...
We're aware that the whole operation is done within a big contradiction.

MH: You have exposed a lot of your working methods through classic conceptual art poster text formats. That's something that A&L developed and you are slotting into a tradition, a dirty word maybe but you are slotting into a tradition of critiquing institutions.

JCHP: Oh yeh yeh yeh, definitely...
It's not a very long tradition is it?

MH: No, since the first wave of conceptual art. But anyway, let's think more about the actual furniture, furnishings, fittings, I gather you've made these tables?

JCHP: Table? I think that's a little generous...

MH: The furniture itself is sort of indicative of other intellectual lineages that go back to Bauhaus and I'm thinking of Naum Gabo and in particular the post-war Middle European emigres living in Hampstead... designing very modernistic looking furniture, and your furniture is a cross between that international modernist style and state primary. I had a lie down on that hard couch before and I'm not quite sure how those pieces fit into the artworld complex.

JCHP: Décor. And there is text near to it...so a seat might be useful.

MH: I see, it's as simple as that?

Well we won't flog that one to death.

JCHP: When we were setting up the show at least more than one person was asking why we chose the yellow screens and it just goes back to that thing we were trying to describe earlier... of trying to instill a kind of hierarchy between the objects in the exhibition and a potential finished piece of work at some point in the future. And the implication we suppose, of people asking us, because they had access to the authors of that choice, is somehow that it looks like there is going to be an artistic reason behind that...

MH: (laughing) you're sadists then... when setting things up for the audience. You're giving the audience a hard time.

JCHP: We're not making it easy.

But the idea of getting in touch with an artist and saying 'why are you using yellow Perspex', as if the idea that that decision reveals meaning... is to us about mystification in art and the reason we chose that is the same reason we chose the yellow cover for the publication... because it's seen as designed and that choice is pretty much identical, there's no clear distinction.

MH: That's almost like going back to the Middle Ages, to art produced for the Catholic church which was meant to bring on a devotional state, or rapture, and to suspend critical faculties and all of that changed with the Reformation and Luther and the remodeling of the Church, representations behind the altar for instance, The Last Supper... It seems to me that you're actually annoyed by that simplicity in response to your work, which is provoking a kind of religious state of mind or sensibility. Can you say a bit more about that, the way you've got the cubicles, this almost pseudo-domestic space. What work is that you're doing there?

JCHP: That came about when we first saw the space. We just had to deal with a big space like this. It made sense.

MH: You've cut it up into cubicles and it's very noticeable that you've got these busts distributed around the place and that brings a sort of aristocratic tone to bear on the contents. And I was wondering about that because it almost suggests that 'I brought these busts back from the grand tour of nowhere', looted art. How do the busts fit in with, for instance, the bank of sixteen desks over there, which seem to imply or suggest a Fordist site of performance manufacture. And on the other hand you've got the bust of Blake and so that is just another contradiction, amongst many.

JCHP: They're mass produced Wedgewood busts, they're borderline art – William Blake is a life mask. It was used by phrenologists as a tool itself... to feel the bumps on his head to see where his genius lies.

MH: So this is a copy then?

JCHP: They're all copies.

MH: Blake was a par excellence figure of Romantic subjectivity.

JCHP: Correct

MH: And you're throwing that into the mix as part of the overview you're trying to achieve with art history or are you trying to escape from art history? There's the question.

JCHP: (silence)

No. With regard to going back to your mention of the Fordist layout of tables... That's intended to imply, in a literal way, production. Just to help make it as clear as possible, this distinction between the potential of a finished piece of work and all the stuff that we've put inbetween that potential piece of work and the audience, so all this being traffic between the two. And as far as I'm concerned, that's the way the busts work, in the same way as the chairs. There's not a huge amount to say about the content...

MH: Going back to Sadie Kerr's notes in the invite, I was amused to see that LGP is displeased by the presence of JCHP here and would you like to comment on that and also she uses the expression, an awkward jig – so how's that worked out?

JCHP: We didn't take it as an insult and read it as the fact that the gallery was about to end.

MH: Let's just address that because this is your advert in the current Art Monthly for this show which looks like a Victorian mourning card, just a black oblong. And so I was wondering, that basically you're responsible for the last show here under the current regime and your show is the death notice on LGP and I was curious to find out from you, because of your extreme pedagogic approach and way of operating, that you've got other places on your hit list, or if it's a side effect, collateral damage or whether or not your intellectual thrust is going to leave other spaces and sites, rendering them defunct...

JCHP: A death knell, harbingers of doom...

MH: Like reciting the lord's prayer backwards, that you're bringing a sort of curse. Are you trying to curse the artworld?

JCHP: We don't think...errr...Well, as we said from our limited experience of the artworld there doesn't seem to be much productive work going on, you know commercial galleries & c. other than stuff that seems to just perpetuate the idea of keeping, sustaining and maintaining art practices. Obviously they've got their own agendas with regards to making money.

MH: Art practice that metamorphoses into career?

JCHP: Yes, we mean those types of galleries definitely encourage...

MH: It's careerism you're attacking then isn't it... when you put all the emphasis on the means of production; it's all about your phobia with regard to distribution and not having control of distribution. And entering into this network of relationships...

JCHP: It's just difficult from our own point of view to figure out a way of doing anything productive in that context but it's not necessarily an attack.

MH: But you've got to carve out your own space, your own niche if you want to continue to perform. You can't just wait for it to come to you. So we're all careerists to a point. But let's face it, there are other levels, other ways to interpret art, the activity of making of art. For instance, you could see it as part of evolutionary psychology, the art and the manufacture of art, the production of art as a type of sexual display. So it's wrong to just see the artworld as being entirely beholden of the art market and global capitalism because there are other motivations. It's nuanced.

JCHP: Definitely, and we're generalising massively, but there's a huge amount of art objects that get circulated within the artworld and art market which have innumerable references piled on them by artists themselves or critics and that doesn't change the fact that what it comes down to

is the same set of objects circulating around the artworld. But it's not really framed in the context of an attack...it's just that it is not productive for our own practice.

MH: You know I went to Saatchi New Contemporaries recently and I was just horrified to see the number of Chapman Brother derivatives of silicone dummies, it was really depressing.

JCHP: We'll make a note of that.

MH: You use the word circulation there, and I know in the past you've employed other strategies and in particular the strategy of giving away drawings, launching yourselves via these framed drawings and gift exchange was the most primitive, earliest economy that preceded capitalism and so bearing that in mind, have you decided to give gift exchange a rest or is it something you've decided to put in brackets for now?

JCHP: Because of doing this and being given an opportunity to do this exhibition, we haven't decided not to do it. It was up until getting this opportunity that it seemed like the only way of dealing with distribution that we could control and encourage a wider distribution than we'd hitherto been able to achieve.

Even that was starting to fail... People would leave them and we'd find the pictures left in pubs.

MH: People are suspicious of anything free, there's no such thing as a free lunch.

JCHP: On the whole most people took them away. But actually, we did it three times, where we just drew for the year and made the work and in January set up an event where we could give them away in the course of one evening. We realised by the third one that it was the same people and it just wasn't reaching. That was the problem, it worked in terms of limiting a general broad distribution i.e. galleries or whatever it might be, because if you're giving it away there's no other means for us to access that means of distribution so it worked in that sense but we still wanted to distribute the work.

MH: Perhaps we can say something more about the notion of trajectory... because you refer to this event Critical Décor as a mid point, or way station in your practice – so it's giving us a bulletin isn't it.

JCHP: Well, that's part of the intention of this exhibition. The only way we could figure out about arranging for ourselves to do an exhibition, that still doesn't exhibit our art output, was to conceive of the exhibition as just a part of, to try to force as much as we possibly could, force it into being a part of the relations of production. How useful *this* will be, we'll find out later... but it's exactly the same as what we're doing for the exhibition. Trying to produce work, making it relevant in the relations of production rather than trying to find out ways to distribute the work. The only way to do that is try to make this exhibition an ongoing process... so for instance with the posters, we started producing those nine months before the exhibition started, and the plan is to continue doing them after; the drawing we're producing throughout the duration of the exhibition, as fragments of what would have been the finished drawings on the top of those tables, I think that's what we meant by making the exhibition meaningful?

MH: Having spoke to you before the exhibition, I got the impression that you were going to subtract the work. You've overloaded the space so are you going to subtract the space and what would be the criteria for doing that?

JCHP: The idea originally was to not necessarily just to subtract, but to change the exhibition throughout the duration of the exhibition. Which goes back to what we were saying about your

description about it being part of a process which was our intention with it. Going back to the drawing, the drawing has continued to a certain extent throughout the exhibition, so that's sort of being added to.

MH: What else?

JCHP: We can't imagine, if through these discussions, somehow somebody came up with some idea of removing these yellow Perspex screens and came up with a valid reason for how it would be productive and useful, then we would do that but we're slightly cynical, whether they're there or not... it's not that important other than they divide up the space and...

MH: One thing I did notice about the show, because of the suspended works and use of boards, there is an opportunity to crawl around and we're left with this crawl space which would be an assertive way to engage... sometimes I think the notion of crawling is quite important, going back to George Bataille and notions of the abject and the animal of which the Marxist critic Rosalind Krauss developed, that whenever we stand affronted by a picture, a two dimensional work on a wall... that this is always a moment when you're actually getting a reminder of some point in a dim and distant past that we actually stood up as creatures and at that point in time we were standing and looking at wall art, we were actually repressing the animal and repressing ourselves as 4 legged creatures and I was curious about that... the opportunity to actually go commando and crawl around would be an interesting way to engage with what you're doing.

JCHP: Going commando? Is that the right phrase? We've got our underpants on...

JCHP: I mean, yeh if you crawled under the chairs they'd still, as far as we're concerned, serve the same function.

MH: Maybe you could stack them up later.

JCHP: Hmmmm

MH: Thanks very much anyway.

BIOGRAPHIES

MICHAEL HAMPTON:

Michael Hampton is a poet, book artist and critic whose work has appeared in Art Monthly, Frieze and The White Review. He is especially interested in urban topography, destruction in art since the Second World War, and new forms of conceptual writing. He is currently working on a revisionist history of the artists' book with the publisher Colin Sackett.

JEFFREY CHARLES HENRY PEACOCK:

Jeffrey Charles Henry Peacock is the sole collective practice of Dave Smith (Derby, Derbyshire, UK, 1972) and Thom Winterburn (Leeds, West Yorkshire, UK, 1970).

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Lanchester Gallery Projects (LGP) is a curatorial research project that ran a contemporary art programme from January 2012 to March 2014. LGP examined the conditions, task and terminology of the art institution through a multifaceted programme of exhibitions, publications, residencies, education and events.

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