

Career Opportunities, the ones that never knock

Interviews with Matt Hale of City Racing,

David Crawford of Beaconsfield, and John Russell of Bank

David Burrows

MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, the opening chapter on the history of the Avant Garde features a visit to Gustav Courbet's bungalow. Courbet was horrified that the Exposition Universelle of 1855 displayed his paintings, dispersed among other paintings, in the same light as common commodities and he removed his canvases from the Exposition to a purpose built bungalow which he then opened to the public. Maintained for five months, Courbet's bungalow was not a home for rejected art works, unloved and unwanted by the Exposition's committee. Gustav's bungalow was instead a gesture of defiance that signalled Courbet's attempt to control the exhibition of his own work. It could be objected that Courbet is not a *bona fide* member of the Avant Garde as he was not alienated from the public reception of his work. The removal of art from institutional and commercial settings to independent lodgings however, is a familiar story throughout the history of the Avant Garde. In the 20th century the attempt to occupy a space beyond the institution allowed artists to broaden the field of artistic activity. The Bureau of the Surrealists, for instance, was a place where the visitor could not only encounter surrealist objects but the Surrealists themselves. The Avant Garde's occupation of territory beyond the institution, which defines the social challenge of the Avant Garde, is often accompanied by a second process in which the institution accommodates such independent enterprises. The role as chronicler of culture furnishes the institution with its power. In this process the museum is not all-powerful of course. If institutions do not refresh themselves they become dry and crumble. The institution always requires fresh bodies.

In London for instance the boundaries between institutional, commercial and independent space are no longer so clear, presuming that is, that they ever were. Britain's art scene is often praised for the 'DIY' attitude of its artists, particularly in London and Glasgow where the mythical rise of 'nBa' is intertwined with the lesser known history of independent initiatives of the last ten years. In London, Time Out have recently dropped the term 'Alternative' under which such exhibitions were once listed. Time Out's new term, 'up-coming', was received with derision by many but perhaps it is closer to the aspirations of artists that organise their own shows. In the following interviews I discussed the relevance of the term alternative with three members of artist run spaces in London, City Racing, Beaconsfield and BANK, to see whether they thought the term had any relevance to their own practice.

Matt Hale of City Racing

City Racing is situated in an old betting shop adjacent to the Oval cricket ground in South London. A group of five artists consisting of Matt Hale, John Burgess, Keith Coventry, Peter Owen and Paul Noble, programme and organise the gallery. Since 1988 the group have exhibited their own work and, amongst others, the work of Gillian Wearing, Lucy Gunning and Sarah Lucas.

David Burrows: I want to ask, first of all, about the history of City Racing. Did City Racing show work outside the interests of mainstream and commercial spaces in the beginning?

MH: I don't think I could say that. But it was work that was not being shown and that was the reason for City Racing existing.

DB: Why wasn't the work exhibited at City Racing being shown in commercial venues.

MH: Usual reasons. People didn't know you or what you did, nerves in approaching galleries, and if you did approach commercial galleries there was a feeling that they wouldn't be welcoming. So there was a feeling of exclusion.

DB: So in 1988, when City Racing began, it was a very West End (of London) orientated art scene with only artists of a certain age group showing and City Racing plugged the gap?

MH: I think that's the feeling I definitely had and I suspect that is what others felt. Keith Coventry and Peter Owen organised the first show—they wanted to show their work. But not as an alternative gesture saying we don't like West End galleries... I have to say that in '88 there was one City Racing show and that I wasn't involved. I went and Keith and Pete basically mailed out to their friends, old tutors and a list rummaged out of Time Out and City Limits. I think the opening was just friends, artists in the main.

DB: So, in one sense, City Racing refused to be marginalised from the mainstream and had conventional career aspirations?

MH: Yes. The second show in 1998, which I was in, was in a disused bookies, City racing, which was really Keith's studio. We tried to make it as white-cube like as possible, as gallery-like as possible. There was no high principle behind it, just a desire to show... We were fed up of waiting to be offered a show, so we thought show yourself, but we didn't discuss this at length, or at least I didn't.

DB: And there was no shared idealism?

MH: No, not in that we read this and believed that or understood the history of alternative spaces... But I don't think we were totally naive and we were aware of how things had been done. I saw shows that were curated by artists and I remember that energy and it did seem different when you went to these shows.

DB: There's a claim made about this period of activity ('88-'90), and about independent shows and spaces in general, that of a 'DIY' ethic coming from Punk. Neville Wakefield suggested this in his essay for Brilliant but...

MH: Yeah. Well it was well after Punk but maybe there was that energy. I applied to Chelsea Art School because I was into Punk, I didn't give a shit about the college except it was on the Kings Road, simple as that, pathetic really, but...

DB: But I find it hard to believe that there is a direct link



SARAH LUCAS
Seven Up,
Untitled and
Upturned Bicycle:
City Racing 1992

between artists organised exhibitions in London in the late '80s and Punk.

MH: No I don't think you can say that but I think it is interesting you should mention it as maybe there was an idea that the best bands weren't from big record companies, bollocks to them, the best bands were from little companies, small labels. Maybe there is a link with independent labels.

DB: What about later on when City Racing became more established.

MH: You mean the Karsten Schubert thing... We had a benefit at Karsten Schubert's... I think his interest was to do with street cred, commercial galleries were being questioned by the press, saying that they were boring and that here was this better alternative scene happening in London.

DB: Where did this idea come from?

MH: I can't say, other than it's just a memory I have. A gradual change. An alternative art section appeared in Time Out and City Limits and my memory is that I thought at the time this is why Karsten made a link with us.

DB: It's interesting that artists' activity affected listings. Were openings important, is that how a scene developed?

MH: Yeah, I think so. The social side of City Racing for us was important at the time. Artists weren't meeting up to talk about things. After college you didn't know many people and you wouldn't get invited to commercial galleries, so yeah, the openings were important.

DB: City Racing showed Sarah Lucas, which was a successful show. There is a view that City Racing became seen as a feeder to commercial, more official galleries. Do you think that's unfair to say that?

MH: No, I don't think that's unfair. Some shows were like that and some weren't, but I remember thinking that City Racing was there to show artists' work and they might get other shows, some at galleries like

Karsten Schuberts, if it was somewhere else then fine. But it wasn't only that, we did a lot of installations which weren't commercial in an obvious way. Quite a lot of work that wouldn't have been seen as they were awkward buggers to show or sell. The shows that I like are the ones that wouldn't have happened elsewhere.

DB: I want to talk now about the way art associated with 'nBa' came out of small, localised scenes and that something of the initial impulse behind some of the work disappears when placed under the 'nBa' banner at an international level. Does City Racing recognise itself in this image of London's swinging art scene?

MH: It's interesting you should say that. We certainly recognise an international context, in other words lots of people from abroad started to come to our shows. This is how we did a show in Bremen, the guy from Bremen had heard of us as one thing happening in London.

DB: I feel that independent artists' ventures came out of specific circumstances, lack of experimental spaces, economic situations, responses to local hierarchies. A lot of recent British art has drawn on local culture. Like Bank using British tabloids, or Sarah Lucas' use of slang. That's very different from Cragg's use of found objects, Deacon's garden furniture sculpture and even Woodrow's use of a washing machine. They all had more international outlooks.

MH: My memory is that in the '80s, somehow people produced expensively made work. There was an idea that there was an international debate and an international scene. And there were people who aspired to that but I couldn't see myself in that or that it was possible to be involved in that. Therefore it felt like an exclusion took place. So the reaction was to look at your own navel a bit more, and yeah, think in more local terms but not nationalistically. I remember shows where everything was clean, expensive, lots of MDF and sharp edges, glossy surfaces. This was something related not to the artists but to some debate going on in Flash Art or Artforum and you just thought, 'why are you doing this, you're never going to be in those shows or magazines?' I did see artists change, stop doing that and do other things entirely in the late '80s and early '90s.

DB: There was a change?

MH: People made more quirky things. I tread carefully when talking about City Racing but, for instance, there was one show where Paul Noble hung toilet rolls from string and another where Keith Coventry stuffed nylon stockings with cuddly toys and biscuit tins.

DB: What did people think they were doing?

MH: We were conscious of not making museum art, that I can say. But people do things without always knowing why. At the time I was making paintings and wrapped up with the argument of what's original.

DB: After all the artist run spaces that have sprung up over the last ten years, do you think they failed to chal-

lenge existing power structures and hierarchies in London's art scene?

MH: I don't think City Racing ever thought we could. I'm not trying to be clever after the event, but I didn't think things would be different, but there has been a change, there is a different kind of work about that wasn't being seen before. Installation for instance.

DB: Where I teach I sense that *Sensation* has created a pressure on some students.

MH: They think of *Sensation* like we thought of Museum shows in the '80s. That the doors are shut and that it's an exclusive club. Yeah, some people feel excluded in London and I'm certain City Racing is seen as the establishment as we have certain contacts, but again I don't think we thought we could change that.

David Crawford of Beaconsfield

Beaconsfield are a group consisting of David Crawford, Naomi Siderfin and Angus Neill, which grew out of Nosepaint, who organised art events and performances that took place at a range of venues. Today, they have an impressive venue, formerly a school, in Vauxhall.

Beaconsfield show a broad range of work and are sympathetic to video, time-based and non-object-based work.

David Burrows: Could you first of all talk about the relationship of Nosepaint and Beaconsfield.

David Crawford: Nosepaint was something Naomi and myself started about 1991. It was an idea about having a dialogue between artists, writers, film-makers and musicians. Our interests as artists was for people to join in from outside, so I suppose it was idealistic.

DB: Were you tapping into a localised scene, friends and acquaintances?

DC: Yeah. In a sense we wanted to form a network rather than exploit a network which is more the case today in London. If you have a scene like the one we have today then people will exploit that, and that's sort of natural, but maybe in 1991 say, there wasn't such a situation in London to exploit and it was about reacting to all the negativity that was about... In 1990 or whatever there was a dissatisfaction with things, the recession, but also a feeling that galleries were dysfunctional and we wanted to take things down a peg or two, look at the work and not where the work was. I don't know if you remember what it was like to go to galleries in the '80s and feeling like a piece of shit. The whole hierarchy that was apparent. I think people thought 'Fuck that for a laugh' and combined with the recession you realised that there had to be another possible route.

DB: The difference between Beaconsfield and other artist run things that have occurred since 1993 say, is that you have remained informed by theory, conceptualism with a small c. You have remained serious about what you do.

DC: Yeah, we are serious but we don't take ourselves



BEACONSFIELD
Thatched: 1997

too seriously. What I'm trying to say is that we are quite self-critical and have never been too seduced by the very system we are operating in. Everyone probably feels that.

DB: You've resisted the dumbing down of art.

DC: We could be criticised for that... I think setting up Beaconsfield was a subversive act. It is trying to make something that isn't exploiting a fashionable scene and say 'Fuck you' at the ICA, and in a sense establish a confidence to work with the best of what's around. We originally thought we would take the best from the alternative, commercial and institutional spaces instead of being in opposition or marginal. We thought we would exist inbetween these things and create something new.

DB: It does sound like you think of yourselves as an alternative, as an alternative to a lack of debate, is that your proposition?

DC: Yeah maybe you're right, but isn't it the case that we are at a point where we have to examine what's happened and what artists can do? We like to think we give artists an opportunity to do something that might not be possible. If you do a show at BANK I would imagine that there is a tremendous pressure to keep up with them. Here there isn't that attachment... Naomi and I know what we like... a kind of critical curiosity which we feel is important.

DB: What do you think of *Sensation* and the 'nBa'?

DC: When we went to Finland we took the work of Tracy Emin and Mark Wallinger and we thought that it might be problematic. You can't just say though that Saatchi owns these artists and you have to break these hierarchies apart or you're fucked, that would be an 'us and them' situation.

DB: So do you still think you can change things?

DC: Yeah, I'd like to think that, but if the result of this period of time ('91-'98) is the *Sensation* show then we have failed.

John Russell of BANK

BANK currently operate from Galerie Poo Poo (previously

called DOG), in Shorditch. There are four members in the group, John Russell, Milly Thompson, Simon Bedwell and Bill Williamson. Their shows have included 'Fuck Off', 'God' and 'Winkle the Pot Bellied Pig' and they work with a variety of artists from the established to unknown and recent graduates. In the past, BANK shows have not been conventional group shows but often look like large installations in which individuals show work.

DB: The first BANK show was in 1991 in a disused bank. Was it quite considered or was it a case of 'Yeah, let's do it'.

JR: Yeah, just do it. At the time myself and Simon (Bedwell) sent out invites to shows that didn't happen. Then we did group shows. We fell into various traps. Painting the space white, site specificity, whatever that meant. Like Anya Gallachio put fruits in an ex-fruit warehouse and that supposedly says something about something. We did a swimming pool show at a swimming pool. But at the beginning it was fun to get people to give you a building for free to do a show.

DB: This situation came out of the recession as there was a lot of vacant buildings around. Also people didn't do stuff for Museums and collectors to buy, which was what *Freeze* and *Building One* was about.

JR: I suppose we weren't that sussed, obviously, we didn't have the contacts or the money to compete with *Building One*. We worked through different brands of idealism going from reasonably stupid and so on.

DB: Tell me what these were?

JR: Some of them are embarrassing and I can't speak as a group because it's not as if we have some party line, even now, but from my point of view there was taking art to the people, the democratisation of art.

DB: By doing shows in non gallery spaces?

JR: Yeah. Then you get into a fatalist idea where you think you'll never get any where so you think you have nothing to lose and you might as well do things.

DB: Who do you aim the shows at?

JR: I went to an art school where I accepted a lot of dumb things so it never got to the stage where I asked who should we send invites to. The initial idea was that it should all be like a party.

DB: But BANK has in a way been successful as a lot of people come to BANK openings as it's a big event like a party. People come from both in and outside the art scene. You may have had naive ideas but they worked.

JR: Yeah, well you're always going to be naive to start with and not being naive means knowing the score. But if you claim to be doing anything alternative in the present climate you are accused of being naive, dumb, hypocritical or just dull. The thing is I don't see any other tactic. If you buy into the idea of a clever manipulator you're already in a *cul de sac*. I think to be naive and to work more or less instinctively is OK.

DB: Did you think BANK at the time was alternative?

JR: Yeah, well I still think we are. It depends what you mean by alternative... If there is one thing I think

about BANK it's the social side of things. What's it like for people to be at the show. We tried to push things and make spectacles though we've never had enough money to do it properly.

DB: Because galleries and museums are places of entertainment though no one likes to admit that. And there is always pressure to be responsible, serious and educational and take a distanced position.

JR: Yeah, that's where I say naive ideas are useful. When I went to the Berlin Art Fair you see lots of art you like, like Donald Judd. You know from what you've read in his writing that he had motives beyond making commodities. Seeing his work in Berlin was a banal experience, for me it was depressing. But you have to ask the question if art isn't just a commodity what is it? The other thing is that there are no alternatives being offered at the moment. If the ICA had a position which they had to argue for and defend then that would be a good thing. But in terms of a position they don't have one. It's the same with the Arts Council. I walked around the art fair and it's incredible how stupid these gallery directors are. You have to be rich before you can run a gallery. It's simplistic to say this but these people and people like them control a large part of our culture. And not only is it unfair but it's worrying that they're so stupid and this has been replicated throughout the Arts Council and state funded arts. You have a gang of morons running arts centres. You know the case when Nicholas Serota's wife is running the Royal College of Arts curation course, and you can say, 'ah I smell a fish, nepotism', but it makes perfect sense. You can not accuse anyone in the art world of nepotism, the art world is nepotism. Similarly you can not accuse any one of corruption, the art world is bribery. You can respond by saying 'hey that's the way it is' or as far as I can see, if the Arts Council and arts centres are getting public money they should be trying to counter the effect of money on art.

DB: What about the content of BANK shows? I'll approach this by saying that... a lot of BANK shows, and the work that has been shown in various projects, draws upon popular culture and everyday culture without valorising it. Do you think that BANK treats 'high and low' culture equally?

JR: Yeah, I think it's true, it's something we have been wary of, but on one level we've been interested in a specific form of popular culture: that is film. We're interested in lighting and the way narrative works in film, like jumps from normality into horror. The way we make a show is like producing (film) sets.

DB: But there is also the BANK tabloid newspapers, the playing of classical and rock music during shows. All the stuff you appropriate or use is stuff the group actually likes.

JR: Yeah, we don't distance ourselves, we don't do that and that's partly because we don't have time. I like the idea we do so many shows that on one level, we don't think about things. We were trying to accelerate things. A couple of times we thought it would all blow up, occasionally we have dreams about making it and



BANK
Zombie Golf: 1995

villas in Italy, but basically we're fucked and we know that we are not going to make it at that level. The best stuff we've done is when we have realised we're fucked.

DB: But isn't it a case that you've made a decision to enjoy yourself as well?

JR: Yeah, well that's what it comes down to when you realised you're fucked. You don't have to do anything you don't want to. In another way, part of the attraction of working with other people is that things happen that you wouldn't have done yourself... And I don't believe you're either a moron, like people think Tracy Emin is, or clever like people think Art and Language are. Jake and Dinos Chapman do rock 'n' roll stuff but they're clever and informed. You can't do good stuff unless you are informed. We are mostly thought of as idiots by most people.

DB: All this is about the way artists have to become professionals.

JR: It's about how you represent yourself as intelligent and theoretically informed or not. I just felt like reacting against all that bullshit, that's why we did shows like *Zombie Golf*.