

**John Timberlake**  
**'Interview with BANK'**  
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**e:** How many shows have you got so far this year?

**Milly Thompson:** Nine.

**e:** Where?

**MT:** We did our last show at Gallerie Poo Poo in January (*Press Release*). Then we did a show at the Mayor Gallery in April, and a group show at Milch. Now we're doing a series of Lowry paintings for East, and we're doing a version of our *Dead Life* show, incorporating a future still life and a sculpture we made some time ago called *Spaceship Cleaner*, for a Magazin 4 show in Bregenz, Austria. Then we're doing a *FaxBak* 'We Hate America' show in New York; a collaboration with Art & Language in the Kunsthalle Vienna, a show at the Courtauld Institute and our own Millennium show.

**e:** A woman who worked in a canteen in a non art job I had a couple of years ago had heard of you but not Julian Opie. Why do you think you don't shift as many objects as him?

**John Russell:** Because we don't make stylistically recognisable commodities (unfortunately), although we are hoping that at some time in the future we will be able to commodify our uncommodifiability. Julian Opie, on the other hand, is a commercial artist who produces slick commodities, he's represented by the Lisson Gallery and his work always looks the same.

**Simon Bedwell:** It's the difference between the artist and the career-artist, which is some kind of fate and/or life choice; the convenient and eminently understandable logic of art-is-a-professional-career-like-banking, etc and it's naive to act otherwise' is looking a bit dull if you ask me (mostly it's a career like bog-cleaning anyway - it's only the successful careerists that you hear about). There's a strict division of labour in the art world - dealers/gallerists sell, 'critics' interpret, artists (the bottom of the food chain, usually) produce - which everyone generally agrees on and which makes the whole enterprise look a bit depressing and tawdry, at least to some artists, who then get dismissed as naives or romantics for thinking that art could or should be about anything other than some kind of 'visual commodification' of 'emotion', 'personal histories', 'sociality' etc.

**MT;** What's so important about the 'canteen' part of your question? Are you bringing up some dubious issue about class here?

**e:** Ahem... not at all, comrade - I was merely highlighting the point that she worked in another department to me..

**MT:** In any case, I think the answer to your second sentence is obvious.

**e: Most artists have a clippings file of reviews. You've now got a lever arch folder crammed with them. I remember John saying back in 1993 that he wasn't at all interested in commercial success, yet on the other hand being extremely disappointed in the (then) lack of critical interest in *Natural History* (1993). Has that changed?**

**JR:** Yes and no. We believe in History. Not for any political or theoretical reason but purely and cynically from the point of view of our careers. We know that if we can become part of history then at some point this historical-ness will be commodifiable. So in this sense, critical interest is money in the BANK. In a way critical interest is the art equivalent of an ISA. And so it is vitally important to us that some fat arsehole, like Michael Archer for instance, validates or endorses us.

**MT:** More yes than no. We are interested in commercial success because we're all nearly 40. That doesn't mean that we need to change our attitudes to how and why we make art, it just means we have to approach things from a slightly altered position. For instance, BANK is now stabilised. There are three of us. This means that we can be more focused on how we do things. At the moment we're interested in how we make things - in the past we made things knowing that we were going to throw them away. This became boring. It seems more interesting at the moment to make things that last.

**e: In the absence of a political/theoretical reason for seeing History as important, why is it important to you that art is difficult to consume?**

**JR:** Yes, well I'm glad you came back on that one. Obviously, I do think History is vitally important, it's just all this business of History with a capital H. Why is History capital H and art with a small a?

**SB:** It's maybe more that if it's easy to consume, for all the realpolitik chic of such a de rigueur 'cool' attitude (it's been like this here for a decade now), if it's easy, then you're just doing what everyone else is doing. Deliberate naivete and/or attention seeking can seem preferable.

**MT:** Of course we are aware of political/theoretical reasons for seeing History (H or h) as important and armed with that knowledge we have reasons aplenty for preferring art that is difficult. I've got a problem with big H history not just because it's pretentious, but also because you're basically talking about male history here, there's other histories and mine is different to yours because I'm a woman and I've had to try and fit into yours.

**e: In the original press release for the recent show at The Mayor Gallery you described the *Dead Life* paintings in terms that recalled your zombie sculptures of 1995. In a subsequent series of lino prints you say you want to retract much of what you said. Why is that?**

**SB:** We've done a lot of rants in the past. The hyperbolic, rhetorical tone, and their form, comes about because they're always 'art' not 'fine writing' like what you do. So we say a lot of things we mean, but it's difficult to say them straight, because it's art, so, in a sense, what's the point?

**JR:** And, regardless of 'what's the point?' it is important that art is difficult to consume and so we retracted some of the press release because we'd made it too jokey, which was irritating, because it was meant to be serious.

**MT:** But then the retraction was jokey too. We could have done another retraction to retract that jokeyness but it's possible that that would have been jokey too. Being serious is hard. There's always going to be someone who can construct themselves a laugh out of something that's trying to be serious.

**e:** **A recurrent and engaging feature of your practice has been the manipulation of embarrassment, both your own and other's. Your *Dead Life* paintings are sort of embarrassing. Your rants are never slick enough to be merely ironic or posturing. The *FaxBak* project was partly about embarrassing others. Your final press release for Gallerie Poo Poo signalled a kind of embarrassment. This all seems to arise out of genuine anger. Are you still angry? If so what at?**

**JR:** Embarrassing art is good because it means you might be doing something interesting. It is also true that you might be doing something embarrassing and uninteresting, and also that embarrassingism has its own aesthetic and style etc. But things like embarrassment and anger are useful because they are not theory which is good because in my experience theory means career. Obviously embarrassment can also be career. At the moment most things have become a career; so for instance you have career socialists, career feminists, career artists etc. It is therefore difficult to get angry about anything without it being a career or theory. So it's important to be a hypocrite, otherwise you end up being Hans Haacke or Mary Kelly.

**MT:** I never was angry. I don't think BANK ever has been either. But I have been embarrassing and so has BANK, and I hope that doesn't change because it's what keeps me interested.

**e:** **I suppose most people are hypocrites in terms of areas they don't care about. Does that apply to you in this instance?**

**JR:** I think it's important to be a hypocrite in terms of areas that you do care about.

**MT:** No. People are more likely to be hypocritical about areas that they do care about. For instance people are very hypocritical about wealth.

**SB:** Hypocrisy is important if and when it helps you never having to toe some, your own hopefully-moved-on-from, party-line.

**e:** **Why do you think people bothered getting upset by the tabloid or the *FaxBak* service?**

**JR:** Because they don't like being criticised and also because in the art world there is a saying: 'Don't complain. Don't explain,' which is a throwback to the idea of the stiff upper lip. Basically it means: 'Be a good commodity'.

**SB:** Which means: 'Show the work; shut up about it; so others higher up the interpretational pecking order (ie anybody but the artist) can get on with their careers explaining the work, in a way that fits their agenda, to an imaginary audience of dead hares (an old story of mutual back-scratching, but a continuing one). Both the tabloid and the FaxBak project attack the vanity of people in the art world, usually those with some kind of power. Most such powerful people exist in a milieu where everybody is always nice to them, but can't afford to reflect upon the simple fact that it's their power that causes this, above anything else. If people get upset, it's because we've pointed to this, through satire.

**MT:** Because the artworld is made up of hypocrites and arse-lickers. No-one says anything about anything so when you do you get noticed. People can't help but get upset when their polite world gets attacked by a bunch of losers like us.

**e: Painting has been another consistently re-emerging feature of your practice. How would you describe your engagement with painting now?**

**JR:** It is Traditional, Dead and Old Fashioned which makes it immediately attractive. At the moment there seem to be a variety of categories of art going on:

- there is the non-conceptual art of the well-made object/dandyish gesture/nostalgic-70's-as-style/idealism-is-dead variety;
- there is the retro 80s/still doing the PC thing/'the subversive sound of women's laughter' variety;
- there is the out-of-focus, blurry colour photographs of people standing outside nightclubs, or in the bath, or on the toilet, or taking drugs/look good on your wall variety;
- or there is the socio-anthropological organising a reunion/ tribute band/cross-cultural event/questionnaire/techno-music 'Do you remember the Clangers?' life-is-more-interesting-than-art variety;
- recently there is also the 'Boy Painters' variety, which is a sort of distanced, post-Richter, abstracted cartoonish highbrow nod-to-popular-culture stance to painting, but with a bit more earnestness, but not too much.

Each of these stances involves breaking down reality into immediately commodifiable, interchangeable segments, much in the same way as popular music involves the repetition of interchangeable parts as a way of reproducing the sound of mechanical machinery; so that when people listen to pop music they are listening to the sound of their own oppression and commodification. We see painting, through it's links to an elitist, aristocratic tradition, as a point of resistance.

**e: There're echoes of Benjamin's analysis of the development of information as a commodity in *The Storyteller* in that reply. Benjamin had a relevance to previous projects - *Natural History*, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. What kind of relevance does Benjamin still have for you, if any?**

**JR:** As far as I can remember *The Storyteller* is a criticism of written language and the novel as opposed to spoken language and the oral tradition, and thus at some point a longing for a simpler, better world and all the concomitant pastoral overtones, which was not what I was getting at. Actually I was joking - although it wasn't very funny - and I was thinking of Adorno.

**e: Err - yeah, I meant him as well...**

**MT:** I don't think that Benjamin has ever had any relevance to BANK. The others may have been talking about Walter Benjamin when they did *Natural History*, but I wasn't really involved then. For me BANK started with *Zombie Golf*. And when we were sitting around talking about *The Charge of the Light Brigade* we were avoiding thinking about theory, let alone talking about it.

**SB:** There might be an analogy with storytelling in our choice of a 'straightforward' descriptive language for the *Dead Life* paintings, rather than using an 'innovative' way of painting the objects; the paintings aren't even innovative-in-their-lack-of-innovation. I always like Benjamin's ideas around using the just-out-of-fashion, rather than being in thrall to the consumerish throbbing anxiety about being right up to date all the time; the world of objects as a boot-sale rather than a department store.

**e: What is your relationship to Expressionism?**

**JR:** We like it because to some extent the idea has been unacceptable except for in a historical context. Kirchner is under-rated.

**SB:** PoMo Neo-Expressionism was cleverly quoting it pretty much, a cool (if pseudo-hot) stance which isn't very interesting. We tried to reheat it, via a kind of four-way mind-meld, for the *Recovering Ourselves* series last year.

**MT:** I disagree with John [Russell] - Kirchner is over-rated. But Expressionism is interesting because it's loads of grown men crying and doing bear-hugging in the woods. I found it interesting entering this male territory.

**e: Do you see an analogy between the paradox of Expressionism's contemporary exclusion/historical relevance and your own position? What I'm saying is your engagement with expressivity seems to have a different character to your other references. There seemed to be a particular period when you were engaged in executing a series of light-footed strategic turns and positioning; *Fuck Off* (April 1996) seemed to me a particularly good example of that, a deliberately cool polished show just at a point when frenetic down-graded shows seemed more or less de rigeur in a Chelsea punk sort of way. *God* (April 1996) was another example of a sharp turn. That period of rapid manoeuvring seemed to change with the press release for *Stop Short-Changing Us...* (June 1998) which read as an honest - earnest even - manifesto of intent. The following *White Cubed* series seemed to me to wistfully acknowledge your exclusion, having made that commitment. In white cube terms, you are 'underrated'. There's a material hardship but also a genuine, hard-won romanticism about that.**

**SB:** There seems no reason why an 'honest - earnest even - manifesto of intent' couldn't be a further example of 'manoeuvring'. Maybe it was both things at once. As to wistfulness, it's to be hoped that it's a knowing, 'used' wistfulness as well as being sincere. Being romantic - for which read the belief that making or showing art is more interesting in itself than accepting that doing such things depends for validation upon its making money — always has its

accepted risk of melancholia etc. Another risk is that you're making art that's never seen; which is why we organised all the shows in the first place. We couldn't do it the Thatcherite way - we didn't have the social/money contacts of the Britpack lot - so we tried to find another route. For us the shows became the work pretty quickly, as opposed to being displays of gallery wannabees – in retrospect, much of it was appropriation disguised as curation, through over-contextualising the art work. As to being 'underrated in white cube terms', that assumes that the *White Cubed* series was simply an attempted variant on the commercial gallery, a kind of novel and failed attempt to join in with the commercial operators, which it certainly wasn't; it was an attempt to do with the form what they have to pretend to do but can never manage as they exist mainly to make money from art (ie have an actually neutral timeless space beyond interests, commerce etc). So I reckon 'unrated' would be nearer the real point.

**JR:** Wistful ...hmm! I suppose it could be if you want but it's not something that interests me. I thought the *White Cubed* shows were an attempt at transcendence, through the juxtaposition of a rhetorical white cube - a device which, since Michael Asher etc, is consumed only as style and so does not fulfil its intention of distancing the viewer and/or revealing the structures of its own construction - against the cliché of *The Society of the Spectacle*. Through this juxtaposition of two tired clichés we hoped we might create a truly neutral white cube space, or a space with idealistic aspirations similar to somewhere like Wide White Space in Amsterdam in the 1970s. That could be seen as wistful and the other things you say, but I guess that depends on how you look at things. Hard-won romanticism... I like that but ... material hardship? What material hardship?

**MT:** Everything we've done has been manoeuvring and earnest at the same time. This is a strange position that we've got ourselves into by using our gallery and our 'outsider' stance at the same time. Now that we don't have a gallery things have started to change. We have become more engaged with the 'inside' of the system that we have spent the better part of this decade criticising.

**e:** Does the closure of Gallerie Poo Poo mark the end of your engagement with curation?

**JR:** No. We are doing a Millennium show.