



## STEVEN CLAYDON

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INTERVIEW

He works with Hotel, one of the trendiest galleries in London (you've already heard of it around here). His résumé boasts, among the other things, a solo show at White Columns in New York. But clearly, he was not satisfied. So Steven Claydon experimented with the role of curator, and he put together a group exhibition currently on display at the Camden Arts Centre in London (until February 10) that counts no less than some forty artists. A oddly-titled catalogue of styles and works that ranges from the turn of the century to these days, from certain obscure heroes of British Modernism to Carol Bove. We had the suspect that this little pantheon was worshipped not only by Claydon but by a whole generation of artists, especially British ones. And we wanted to know something more about it.

*Let's start from the exhibition you curated at the Camden Art Center in London, "Strange Events Permit Themselves The Luxury Of Occurring". To begin, tell me something about its title.*

The title comes from an aphorism quoted from a fictional character. As well as empathizing with the fugitive sentiment of this maxim, I was curious as to whether a quotation from a fictional character is any more or less relevant owing to its spurious nature.

*The first thing that one notices when glancing through the list of the participating artists is that it involves several generations back to the first decades of the twentieth century, and it includes also not-well-known and almost-forgotten artists. How did the selection process work?*

The intention was to create a climate of practice orbiting an errant core. The worry is always that the event will appear prescriptive/ didactic or conversely, that it is rendered nebulas or flippant. As I was invited to include my own work I felt uncomfortable creating a "top ten" show and including myself within an exclusive lineage. Instead, I

sought to create a show that was sympathetic to my own practice. An a-historical, a-paralell, lateral incursion into some neglected territory that provides an alternative reading of the peregrinations of the modern.

*Is there any artist or work you wanted to include in the exhibition, but for some reason you didn't succeed?*

The show could have taken multiple directions and I think I may have included a very different group of artists for every day that I worked on it. For instance, I would like to have done an alternative neo geo show or a text related show. Instead I chose to dwell on the nature of the thingyness. Looking back I think I would like to have included a Hiem Stienbach but I was lucky enough to be able to include every thing I requested except for a Paul Theck piece that was too fragile to travel and a Picabia that has disappeared off the face of the planet.

*The backbone of the exhibition is "the relationship between the art objects and the institutions which display them. " You talked about "taxonomies of display. " Can you explain this idea more in depth?*

History and critical literature relies on a lineal compartmentalization of events in order to rationalize causal events. Institutions evolve modes of display that accommodate these conceits. Likewise, the commercial sector apes the architectural language of the venerable or authoritative. The resulting fallout can loosely be termed "the taxonomies of display" in ironic reference to the flawed attempts of the institution to provide a non-invasive backdrop in which to house the artifact or thing.

*This subject reminds me of Inside The White Cube, the renowned collection of writings by Brian O'Doherty based on the question of how artists must construe their work in relation to the gallery space and system. Did you read it? Did it have any influence on your approach?*

I did read it years ago and again towards the end of the curation process and was tempted to include several passages in the accompanying text I produced. However I considered the eccentric way that the show evolved to be independent if not parallel so I decided to omit any reference O'Doherty's book.

*The exhibition at the Camden includes a new installation of yours. I wonder how the creative process of this work has been influenced by its being conceived for an exhibition curated by yourself.*

Most of my work is conceived with consideration of the kinds of environments the artifact can be situated, be it an art fair stand or a domestic environment. One can never entirely provide for such eventualities, nor can one impose patronizing comments on the work or viewer. The furniture of display, public and private, are important devices and influence how I construct my pieces.

*It has been talked about a lot in the last times the difference between the approaches of the curator and of the artist when conceiving exhibitions. After such an experience, what is your opinion about this matter? What shows curated by artists did you appreciate the most?*

There is an element of risk taking and automatic decision making that the artist can afford themselves, idiosyncrasies that are not often evident in professionally curated shows. Warhol's Raiding the Ice Box and Robert Gober's The Meat Wagon were influential to some degree as well as Mike Kelley's The Uncanny.

*Something that has always had a great importance in your work is history and its crystallizing power. What can you tell me about this?*

History is a curious and fascinating realm, partially evidential and partially fictitious. The lateral mesh of causal events and absorbed protocol that informs our nature and forms our cultural conditioning should perhaps have a more suitable and complex title but as it is we call it history.

*Closely linked with your strong reference to history is the reflection upon the idea of "monumentality. " It seems like you're interested in the process via which things, events, and people get a kind of immortality through the*

*action of history that turns them into monuments, and at the same time they keep on being dead relics and can't escape becoming "obsolete" in time. What do you think?*

I think the encounter between cultural obsolescence and material longevity is the thing that fascinates me about monumental sculpture. For me it engenders a certain vulnerability despite its intransigent nature.

*And how do you relate with the idea of monumentality in your work? You frequently use elements that emphasize this aspect, such as pedestals and shrines, but at the same time you seem to subvert it in a way (for example, several times you substituted bronze for copper in your sculptures, and at times you urinated on them in order to obtain an aged effect).*

I have an ambivalent relationship with monumentality. It has both a prurient and a benign nature. Active and inactive. sometimes it can engender a sense of pity or outrage but more often than not these things go unnoticed. public sculpture in general serves us best as a symbol of mass amnesia. I employ a meshing and degradation of inappropriate and appropriate materials and imagery to further complicate this relationship.

*On an aesthetic level, what's very evident in your work is an inclination towards everything that's outdated and old-fashioned. What's the origin of this predilection?*

I think I am interested in utilizing the subversion of materials in order to catalyze a sense of dislocation from received ideas of venerability and engender a critical appraisal of the way we encounter things. I am very critical of artists who employ nostalgic imagery with an intact aesthetic; it is lazy and gratuitously retrospective. I am as indebted to science fiction and wildlife illustration as I am to mythology and early modernism. For me I see my engagement and reordering of semirecognizable historical reference points as a kind of detournment. I also work hard to employ contemporary materials and techniques, providing a forum via necessary means that destabilizes any rose-tinted reading of the work and generates a suspicion of inherited notions of tradition and accepted modes of thought.

*I understand that *The Author Of Mishap (Them)*, a work of 2005, is inspired by Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, a classic of anthropology on the subject of the sacred and magic. Would you like to tell me something more about this connection?*

I am interested in Frazer's associative methods—methods that span time and cultural divides, methods that saw him lampooned by the newly—formed science of anthropology within years of the book's completion, and strangely methods that are now becoming resurgent in that field.

*Your work is extremely rich in references and quotations (more or less explicit ones), from the Kibbo Kift Movement through the British sculptor Charles Sargeant Jagger to the Italian Futurist Renato Bertelli. Especially showy are also those regarding artistic movements from the past, such as Modernism, Bauhaus, Vorticism, and so on. What can you tell me about this "network"?*

Each phase of my production spawns a new cycle of research, often born from subtle connections inherited from previous projects. This climate of signs and associative connections bares some resemblance to Frazer's nebulous, but direct research and owes something to the early modernist literature of Rousell or Joyce. Whatever its genesis, it is an accumulative and selfperpetuating line of a-lineal inquiry.

*What is your relationship with the exhibition space, and in particular with the so-called "white cube"? It seems to me that many of your exhibitions reveal an essential rejection of the nowprevailing idea of display. I mean, for some of your shows the space was semi-darkened; for others, walls were covered with wallpaper . . . What can you tell me about this?*

Any environment is contrite and theatrisized. I sometimes choose to amplify that theatricality in order to highlight its shortcomings or leave it to stew in its own self-importance. Good art should overcome its environment and

paint its own world pink, Panther pink.

*Your native country, England, is very much present and celebrated in your work through many references to artists, movements, and historic events. Would you like to tell me about your personal relationship with it? How do you think your being English has affected your work as an artist? Do you feel like being part of a sort of "English art scene"?*

I suppose it is inevitable that my immediate environment affects my practice to some degree. However, I do not consider myself an "English" artist. I am currently working on two shows, one is a loose attempt to reconcile pre-Socratic Greek philosophy with the Idea of the thingly and the other is concerned with the post-war German economic miracle, Smurfs, and Hiedegger's preoccupation with the bucolic verses technicity.

*Something stupid. I read somewhere that you were an extra in a film from the saga of Harry Potter. How did it happen?*

I believe I was a wizard in a past life and that Harry Potter was my father, other than that I can tell you nothing.

*Tell me about your experience with the band Add N to (X).*

In many ways I see add n to x as a parallel project. Many of the concerns relating to anachronism and futurism are shared to greater and lesser degrees. There is a definite attempt in the audio as well as my artistic practice to recuperate technologies and stylistics as well as imposing spurious narrative and allegory.

*What are you currently working on?*

I am preparing an installation for the LA art fair as well as a joint presentation with Carol Bove at the Armory. In April I am showing at Dennis Kimmerich gallery in Dusseldorf and at Hotel gallery in October.

*Let's step back to the exhibition at the Camden. There is something you told when talking about the show that was really striking to me, and I think it could be an interesting key to your exhibition and to your work in general. You told that the "acceptance of the manifold nature of histories and cultural contexts could lead us to better understand 'the thingliness of things'." Can you explain it more in depth?*

I think this goes back to analyzing approach and association. Encompassing the magnitude of the way ideas and actions accrete around notions. Joseph Conrad talks about the way a story evolves as satellite fragments around a fugitive kernel that is never directly illustrated, only alluded to. I think this approach can help us to understand the broader significance of things and objects and to understand some artifacts and things as active and some as benign.