

DETROIT: TELEGRAPH

Questions for Matthew Higgs

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Hartmut Austen: What thoughts, ideas, considerations went into organizing "Words Fail Me" (which just opened) at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit?

Matthew Higgs: I've always been interested in art's relationship with language – not only from the perspective of someone who writes about art, but also as someone who is interested in the many different formal – physical – manifestations of language (text, words, etc.) in art. The thinking behind 'Words Fail Me' began with a consideration of art works that displayed or provoked something of a sense of uncertainty – where language is perhaps less didactic, and more 'porous', where words/texts are open to more subjective, and possibly even emotional, responses/interpretation.

2. What significance has Detroit as a place had in the context of selecting work for this exhibition?

Certainly the physical reality and larger context (social, economic, etc.) of MoCAD's space/location informed my approach. The space – a former car dealership – still bears traces of its former function. The space is highly theatrical, the visitor is constantly aware of the building's scale: which will be a significant factor in the installation. The space also displays certain melancholic aspects: certainly in relation to its own history, but also to the larger social, cultural and economic histories of Detroit. Rather like other transformations of former industrial sites into cultural venues - one might think of Tate Modern in London, or Dia Beacon in upstate New York – MoCAD's present tense (and its future) is inextricably connected to its past. I'm interested in this 'conversation' across space and time.

3. You wrote an "On The Ground - New York" article for *Artforum* a few months ago in which you described the "Milwaukee International" as one of your personal highlights if not personal epiphany in the past year. What's your perception of regional differences within the U.S. which shape artistic attitudes and artwork?

I'm not from the U.S.A. – I'm British – but have lived here (in California and now New York) for the past six years. A lot of my ideas and assumptions about American cities were shaped by my engagement – as a teenager and as a young adult – with American movies, TV shows, books, and – most significantly –

music. I was always interested in how – because of America’s scale – certain cities or locales had very specific ‘sounds’ (and cultural identities): that were distinct or discrete to those of other cities. (e.g. With regards to Detroit we might think of, say, early Techno – which is clearly different from Chicago House music of roughly the same period.) These ‘differences’, and the legacies of such distinctions interest me greatly. I’m no expert on American culture, but it is always interesting to try and develop a relationship – however unformed - with a new place. I grew up in working class communities in the North of England in the late 1970s, and I can identify aspects of that reality within present-day Detroit (e.g. the ‘ruins’ of industrialization, etc.)

4. I’m interested to learn more about your background. Originally from Northern England, you became the director of the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art in San Francisco and are currently director and chief curator of White Columns in New York. How did you first become involved in curating exhibitions?

I’ve always enjoyed working with other people, and I’ve always enjoyed organizing things. As a teenager in the late 1970s I started to write a music fanzine. Eventually I started a small label releasing music on cassette, and then started organizing shows in my home town. (I organized the first advertised New Order show in the U.K. in January 1981, when I was sixteen.) I have never enjoyed my own company, so I was always interested in the social dynamics at play in these activities. I started organizing exhibitions about 15 years ago in London, initially working with a generation of artists that I was close to (including artists such as Jeremy Deller and Martin Creed.) I’ve organized maybe 200 projects with artists since then.

5. What were the important issues back then?

I don’t think the idea of ‘important’ – or for that matter ‘issues’ - ever occurred to me. I was always interested in other people’s ideas, and in finding appropriate ways to support other people’s ideas. For me it was simply a way to engage – hopefully in a productive way – with things that interested or intrigued me.

6. In what ways has working in America influenced you?

I like the distances between different places in the U.S. The scale is genuinely shocking – compared to, say, the relative ease with which one can move through dozens of neighboring places in Europe. These distances are not only physical, but obviously they are also emotional and psychological. It is interesting trying to figure out what this might actually mean – on a personal and professional level, especially when one has the opportunity to make projects in cities that one is

somewhat unfamiliar with (e.g. Milwaukee, Detroit, etc.) I certainly feel very different now that I live in the U.S. full-time – but I'm not sure I can articulate how.

7. What do you like most about living and working in the US? What can you find here that you can't find in England, or Europe; but also: what do you miss?

I miss my family and close friends. I collect records – mostly disco 12" – which is a lot more enjoyable, and cheaper to do in the U.S. I can't drive – so a lot of my time in many American cities is spent in cars, in the company of other people (being driven around) – which is an unusual experience for me.

8. You're perhaps best known for your contributions to *Artforum*. Can you talk about your critical platform and writing process?

I'm not sure I have a critical platform. I'm interested in what other artists do. Consequently all my own thoughts are informed by other artist's approaches to the world around them. As a curator I think my responsibility is present an artist's work in a sympathetic context that allows the work to function on its own terms, and – for the duration of an exhibition – in relation to other works. I like the 'durational' aspect of exhibitions: that they unfold over time, and consequently have a performative dimension – which the viewer is obviously also implicated in. I write infrequently, I don't enjoy the actual process of writing – it makes me incredibly anxious. I prefer to have conversations with artists, or work on texts that have a more collaborative dimension.

9. Besides your writing you're also an exhibiting artist represented in both London and New York. What are the advantages or disadvantages of being an artist who also is heavily involved in the mediation of art and artists?

I would imagine that as someone who makes art, that my relationship with it might be different to, say, an art historian's: but I'm not sure how relevant or even interesting such a distinction might be. Certainly as someone who makes art, writes about art, organizes exhibitions, etc. – I'm very interested in the spaces between these ideas/disciplines and also in the points at which they overlap.

10. Public funding for art organizations is severely stressed (particularly in Michigan). In your experience, what role does money play in the creation of meaningful exhibitions?

None. Interesting ideas don't cost anything, and there are always ways to make interesting projects on limited budgets. My feeling is that the challenge is always

trying to find an appropriate response to specific, local situations or circumstances. (It is certainly possible to spend too much on exhibitions.)

11. What are your priorities in a project you organize or curate on a (tight) budget?

Regardless of the budget the priorities are always the same: trying to create in as interesting a context as possible for the artists involved – from which, it hopefully follows that an interesting situation is established for the audience. As someone who runs a not-for-profit space in New York I'm always aware of the economic realities of a given project ... but hopefully that should never interfere with a project's ambition.

12. I am interested in the ways artists communicate (or, to stay within the theme of this publication: transmit) current social and cultural issues in their works and if you see any common themes, which are new or have changed with the new Millennium, September 11, or with the various wars engineered by the current US administration?

I think it is significant that many artists have embraced an engaged and reflective position in relation to history. We increasingly see a lot of work that wrestles, in different ways, with the past – e.g. the social histories, cultural histories, and political legacies of earlier generations. I don't think this is an exercise in nostalgia, rather it seems to be a collective attempt to reevaluate (recent) history, so that a new space can be opened up: for new thoughts, new ideas, and new approaches. Certainly things are currently in flux – economically, technologically, geographically, politically, etc. – to an extent that they never were before, which I feel makes it an especially interesting time to either be making or thinking about art. No one seems to have a clear idea about what is going on – which can only be a good thing.

13. What's next for you?

Continue programming White Columns (in my first two years as Director and Chief Curator I organized more than 60 shows and projects, working with more than 250 artists of all ages, and from all over.) Involve as many people as possible in this process, to hopefully create a conversation among artists that didn't exist before. I will organize a large show at Bard College in October 2007, and I am also co-curating an exhibition with the artist Peter Doig for London's Hayward Gallery that will open in Fall 2008.