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PROPHETIC EXTREMISM. JOHN RUSSELL

INTERVIEWED BY ANDREW HUNT

Since leaving BANK in 2000, John Russell has been claiming ground for the seductively irrational and nonsensical, predicting an apocalyptic world full of redemption where a visceral enjoyment in language and horror rules. Russell's latest project *Frozen Tears*, an 800-page collection of literature, including contributions by sixteen contemporary artists and curators, was launched in April this year. Andrew Hunt met John Russell in London to talk about his recent activities.

**ANDREW HUNT:** First of all, tell me about your book *Frozen Tears*.

**JOHN RUSSELL:** I was thinking about conceptual art and initiatives involving books. All of those books usually incorporate a typographic solution on the cover to signal the braininess of the project, which is something that I was interested in not doing. I was trying to get people who would write visually, tying in with something occurring in a lot of hi-brow literature that has adopted various virtuoso stylised conventions. Certain writing that would be described as 'bestseller' writing like Philip K. Dick is looked down upon because of its narrative structure, which allows a visualisation or spatialisation in the writing. There's a crossover because I asked Martin McGeown, who was involved in the anarchist poetry and literature scene in Paris in the 70s, to curate a section. He included writing by Paul Buck. Paul Buck edited a magazine called *Curtains* in the early to mid-70s, which was one of the first places Blanchot was published in English. Strangely enough, there was another convergence with the rhetoric of horror novels or horror films, because of the excessive use of language, which touches on the hysterical at times.

**AH:** Why mimic the bestseller?

**JR:** I've got a collection of them. Firstly I like the number of pages. Eight hundred pages makes it into an object, like a block. The idea of the bestseller is important because of the logic of its existence: there's no conceptual or theoretical reason for it to exist. The product has, or the commodity has, a life of its own.

**AH:** This glossy seductive aesthetic, which is almost over abundant, seems to be at the heart of what you do?

**JR:** When you talk about the problematic of the visual within general orthodoxy in the artworld, the visual is seen of as a sign for non-intellectual, 'anti-conceptual', and language is seen as a sign for conceptual 'clever'. In fact, language fulfils a strongly managerial role, so in some ways you could almost argue that conceptual art, or the idea of art as idea, has led to a banal literalism nowadays, where language is used in a strictly dumb instrumentalist way and art becomes almost like a code that you have to decipher. The important thing about art becomes what it means – and that itself is commodified. So

all of the supposed radical positions of conceptual art are now commodifiable or commodified. I guess that this is a forlorn hope, but the product has unpredictability to it through the mechanisms of capital. It would be rather ridiculous to try and understand what a Mars Bar means, but it still manages to be very successful as a product.

**AH:** You said that there's a more intuitive or gut feeling about the people that you've included here?

**JR:** I'm very suspicious of my own working processes but I definitely go on hunches. An issue that's interesting is the idea of humour. I don't think humour is necessarily the same thing as being funny. I'm not trying to be funny. Say for instance Art and Language, it's always surprised me that their work is never talked about in terms of humour. With one of the pieces I included in the book, *Frameworks* [1966-67], there's a description of a column of air, which is a joke on Robert Barry and various American conceptual strategies. The interesting thing I think about humour is that it's unpredictable; it sort of takes things somewhere else.

**AH:** I'd like to ask you about BANK briefly. What was your particular influence in the group?

**JR:** BANK was good fun because for a long period it seemed we had nothing to lose. Along with quite a lot of other people in the London artworld I think we were unaware of any wider artworld context, which sounds ridiculously naïve. I guess it was very self-referential, but unlike other art scenes around the world, in London you could get a fair bit of attention without being successful in a conventional sense, and I think we put some very good shows on. You could do that and still be a sort of loser at the same time. However, I think we were quite sophisticated about the strategic positions we adopted. You could be the rebellious outsiders, whilst at the same time knowing that the rebellion was contained. You'd get people angry because they'd be thinking, 'who do they think they are'. At that time the position of being a hypocrite was quite interesting.

**AH:** What contributed to your leaving BANK?

**JR:** I left BANK for personal reasons, but I was also starting to get a bit bored with the position that we had. You get to the point where the endless repositioning or strategising about where and how you fit in starts to seem a bit tedious. But the time when it was most interesting seemed to be when the

excessive yBa thing happened. You had people who were interesting targets. I always assumed that the reaction to yBa would have been some sort of rock 'n' roll style expressionism. I thought there were going to be some young students who would blow everything away. But unfortunately we got the exact opposite, which was back to the usual English business of understatement and modesty.

**AH:** Tell me about your work with Fabienne Audéoud, such as the performance *John Russell Kills Fabienne Audéoud in the Style of William Burroughs*?

**JR:** I was interested in working with Fabienne because I'd seen her do a performance at the New Contemporaries where she was just screaming. I'd never done that, at least not with a capital 'P'. The William Burroughs thing is a straightforward representation of a sentence. Similarly, *20 Women Play the Drums Topless*, was like "what the fuck does that mean?" The paintings [from slides of performances] are also like that, which becomes difficult when you've got some obscure Viennese actionist photograph of someone rubbing blood on their face, with a group of people in the 1960s watching. We projected the images in the dark, painted them

really quickly and then switched the lights on and decided immediately whether they worked or not. It's quite a conventional convergence of painting and performance that is, I guess, [similar to] the way someone like Jackson Pollock is talked about. We went for an extreme kind of expressionism. Lawrence Weiner said something like "art is something that hasn't found its place in the world, and that when it does it ends up in a museum". We were trying to do something a bit like that, trying to make something that didn't make any sense.

**AH:** So there's a desire to enact something that you wanted to see happening on a wider scale?

**JR:** I suppose to some extent it seems an interesting reaction against this cosy fucking no-brainer post-conceptual art that you get, where you have some very simple idea, but with an incredible level of po-facedness. Suggesting intellectualness in line with a wholesale adoption of sociological and political rhetoric.

**AH:** You were also responsible for 'The Collagist' an exhibition at The Trade Apartment in London in 2002, where the art world was portrayed as apocalyptic horror story. How do you see these works, and more importantly, why did you give Peter Frampton a giant bird's head?

**JR:** I was interested in an over the top version of *The Society of the Spectacle*, of the gap between art and life, and the attempt to bring art into the real world. And so I used that as a horrific scenario. It was an over played version of The Artist Placement Group – which has always seemed to me a fucking good scenario for a horror movie [laughter]. So I just ran with that because the idea of artists being in charge of traffic flow in London seemed fairly amusing. Then I was wondering if there was any redemption in taking a 'Society of the Spectacle' kind of angle. Whether if through becoming connoisseurs of these spectacles, or if you were able to commodify the spectacle, you would have some sort of double negative where the commodity is re-packaged or re-commodified to be consumed by educated consumers... whether somehow you could eat the whole spectacle. I suppose the Peter Frampton head amuses me because it's like a sort of Adorno style nightmare of popular cultural meaninglessness.

**A.H:** It really seems to make sense though...

**JR:** Yeah, I tried to have different sorts of images. It was quite fun actually, because things like an ordinary street scene would suddenly look sinister. The supposed ordinariness of it would become sinister in a very camp way.

**AH:** The frames in 'The Collagist' were very confusing. How do you see that actual act of framing?

**JR:** That was one of the things that I was most interested in that show and that's why I'm quite interested in these prints at the moment. I was thinking about the frames in 'The Collagist' as being 'Parergonal', the Derridian thing – where the frame starts and where it ends – which I guess you could say is involved in the 'Frozen Tears' show. I was interested in how you'd frame the book, if it had a life of its own, what it would mean, how it would read. I was thinking of Ron Hubbard and the posters and the leaflets that he hands out and the idea of 'The Book'. I suppose I was hoping that some kind of cult mechanism would make the book into a transformational object. That in some way it could become a new anti-Bible through it's commodity status; that through the power of the commodity it could somehow be elevated or lowered depending on how you look at it.

**The exhibition 'Frozen Tears' was at Cabinet, London 26 April – 17 May 2003**

**Frozen Tears £9.99 from [www.frozentears.co.uk](http://www.frozentears.co.uk)**