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# RHIZOME

## Custom-Produced for Imbeciles of Some Sort: An Interview with John Russell

CAMERON SOREN | Fri Apr 10th, 12:00 p.m.

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*John Russell on active forgetting, bad theory, squirrel pink, and speculative medievalism, in conversation with Cameron Soren.*

*Layout, font and images by John Russell. —Ed.*

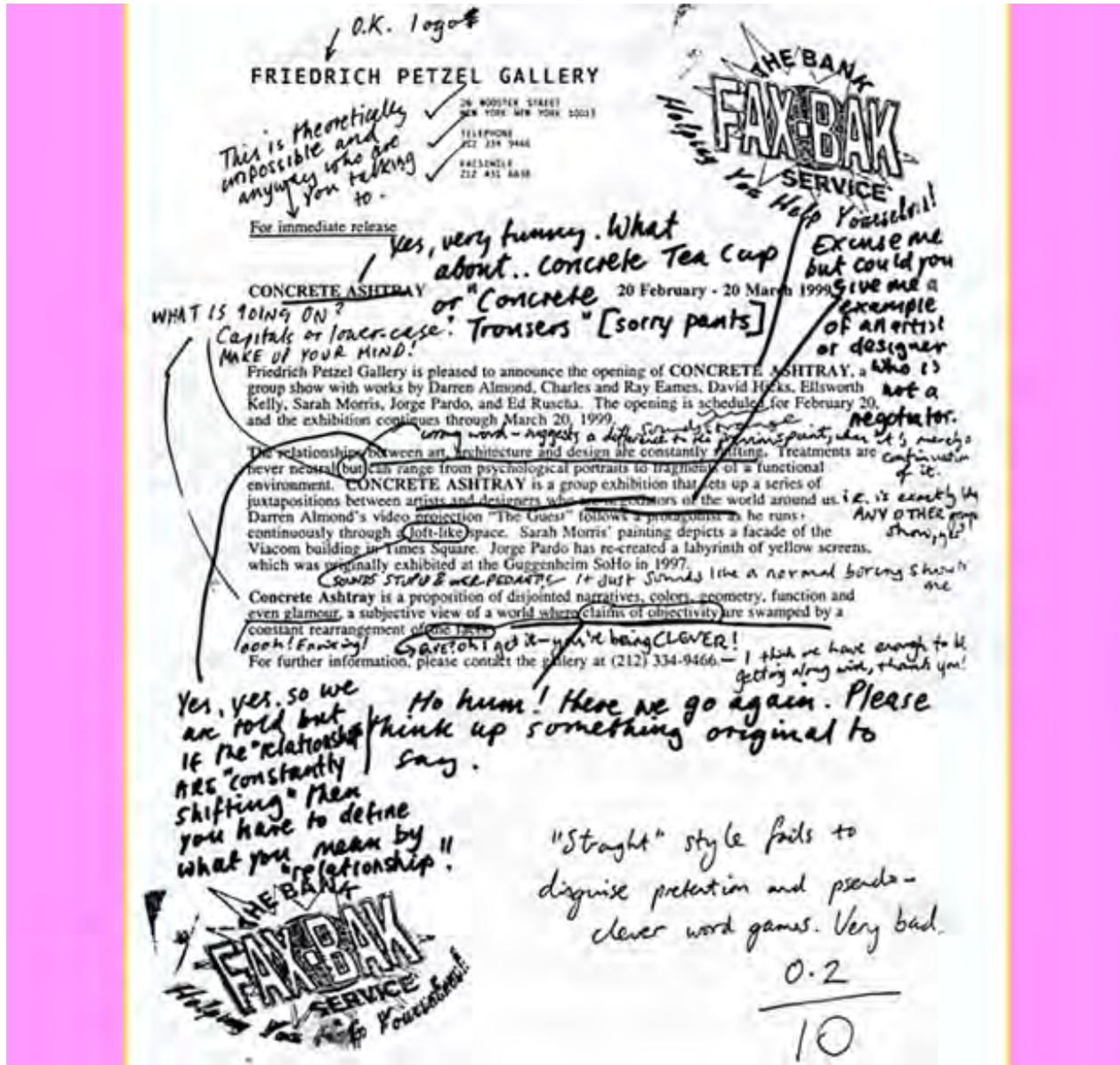


John Russell, *Ocean Pose*, Installation, backlit digital prints on vinyl, Matts Gallery London, 2007

John Russell was a founder-member of the London-based artist group BANK, from 1990 to 2000. BANK would require their own article (or book), but for the sake of brevity here, BANK practiced their own unique form of a kind of anarchic "institutional critique". This involved, among other activities, staging aggressive, immersive and polemical group shows with titles like "Zombie Golf" and "Cocaine Orgasm" in temporary warehouse spaces around London (re-named BANKSPACE, DOG and then Galerie Poo-Poo). These sprawling installations often lampooned the contemporary art scene and satirized the popular culture of the '90s. In *Zombie Golf*, for example, the work was placed within a miniature golf course installation populated with wax figures of the undead. Their most well-known project "Faxbacks" involved taking other galleries press releases, correcting them and sending them back.



BANK, *Zombie Golf*, 1995



BANK, Faxback New York, 1999

Russell parted ways with BANK in 2000 to take up his own multifaceted practice. Often collaborative, this included staging performances with Fabienne Audeoud, (most recently in one of Bjarne Melgaard's curated group shows entitled "After Shelley Duvall '72" at Maccarone), working (in collaboration with Mark Beasley) with the underground cult film director Damon Packard (Lost in The Thinking, an on-site commission for MoMA PS1 that culminated in the museum locking them in a room), producing three 800-page anthology books (Frozen Tears) featuring writings from prominent underground authors including Dennis Cooper, Kathy Acker and their historical antecedents (Baudelaire, Bataille) while also finding time to produce paintings, posters, public sculptures, animations, gifs, fonts and gigantic backlit digital prints that are somewhere between magical-fantasy ad billboard and body-horror expressionist painting. Recently, he gave a talk at Artists Space, a psychedelic-theory lecture that linked the writings of Belgian feminist Luce Irigaray to space travel and Bruce Willis.



*Faerie Poem*, 2009, Backlit digital print on vinyl, 475 x 1064cm



Catalogue text: EAST, Norwich Gallery: 2009



John Russell, *Frozen Tears III*, gif, 2007



*Explain Death to Very Young Children*, installation, 2010

Interview: Rhizome: John Russell/Cameron Soren

**I wanted to ask you about press releases, or maybe the way you use language in general. There seems to be a pretty strong connection between some of the work BANK did and some of the work Head Gallery does (obviously BANK's Faxbaks vs. the long delirious fictive narratives as press release that Head Gallery puts out). In some ways, Head Gallery's press releases almost feel like an adaptation of the Faxbaks to the current digital climate. Faxbaks on steroids. That's about an almost 20 year divide though, so would you say things haven't changed much since when you started working in the 90s? Is history repeating itself, or worse, regressing?**

Hey yeah, lolz, press releases - in fact, I'm not part of Head Gallery, though they did send me a draft of their forthcoming novel to read which I was very happy about because I'm a big fan of their work and love their website and evites and everything (headgallery.org) I think they're from Mexico or Guatamala or somewhere. And yes. Press releases ... evites or whatever ... love them lolz. In fact, Head Gallery write about this in their novel, how it carries on after the nuclear apocalypse, (Head Gallery, London: Bookworks, 2015).

"The management of the gallery has been especially good at the details that maintain the façade of retro-normality from evaporating. For instance, they maintain the arbitrary structure of one exhibition a month. This is completely absurd to all but those who participate in—feed on—what the gallery offers. After all, what could a month possibly mean anymore? These temporal demarcations are useless. The sun, deadly and unpredictable, rents a gash in the thick cloud-scapes and comes out whenever it wants, and when it does everyone has to hide from its brutal nucleo-rays. When it's day, it feels more like night: everyone scurries away and locks themselves in what is left of buildings, monuments, museums, sewage lines. And when it is night, when the blackouts come, when the firmament reveals its absolute indifference to all that has transpired here, it also feels like night. Time is nothing but a long stretch of darkness, as endless as the Expanse itself. To pretend to keep a schedule in the middle of this is supremely cynical. It disregards all that has happened. It's a mockery, a farce, a travesty, a joke. It's disgusting. And it's brilliant. It's brilliant in the way that it structures the zombie-existence of the sub-prolebian and elito-displaced who would otherwise simply drift about in semi-affluence until the sunlight would kiss their flesh away.



*Judgement. The kangaroo is not happy. It's not clear who or what it represents but its not in good place (2014). 3.5m x 6.8m. Backlit double-strike digital print on vinyl.*

**Shortly after BANK ended, you began making digital prints. These eventually evolved into the giant digital backlit "billboard" prints in 2006/2007? I know in the earlier one's like Ocean Pose, you talked about 19th century French painting, Peter Paul Rubens and Jackson Pollock and accompanied them with a part poem/part theory text. There's also this last one with the kangaroo entitled "The kangaroo is not happy. It's not clear who or what it represents but it's not in good place (2014)." All of your billboard prints seem to be resisting a literal interpretation but this last one explicitly so. Can you talk about that and the series in general a little bit?**

O lolz did I talk about 'Rubens and Jackson Pollock' - o fuck although I do like them lmao. Or maybe mainly History painting and Jackson Pollock. Coz generally I think my art is custom-produced for imbeciles of some sort. Ha ha. Or the meaning of my works is only accessible to people willing to render themselves imbecilic. Ha ha, coz no OK I'm not saying I'm 'against meaning' because that would be anyway impossible. But as I'm quite often parasiting pre-existing imagery and empty forms, I'm interested in how these might be reconfigured ... how they might have a different force, like a kind of expressionism. Y'know like we can ALL FEEL it maaaaan ... but feel it differently. Because anyway it doesn't matter if you are interested in 'meaning' or not, cos things will 'mean' anyway. And there isn't any particular type of imbecility that can swerve this. I mean, if 'meaning' is about force - i.e. not about what you 'mean' but who can 'mean' and how they are allowed to mean; or who can speak and how can they speak'; or who can be seen and how can they be seen. Or laced through with metaphors and fictions that we've forgotten are metaphors and think are the truth (Irigaray), but which structure what we say and think and 'mean'. All that sort of thing, then 'Interpretation' or literal meaning is usually something weak - concerned with coherence and legibility but you know obv only in delimited contexts that allow them to be legible.

And verily like Žižek doth say, ideology operates on the register of the sublime, where ideological objects have NO meaning. And lo ... our inability to grasp their "meaning," to understand something greater than us (sic) like in Kant, provides testimony to their Transcendent nature - of Nation, God, Freedom, Market, and whatever - residing resplendent far above the ordinary or profane things of the world, including our own trivial existences. And so, Truth and force reside in lack of meaning. And God forbid that we say there's no 'agency' or 'subject' or that we are now just all code or something. Or that meanings can't be contested and transformed. Or that we can't speak but rather language speaks us. In this respect, Irigaray talks about mimicry, as a kind of parasiting which is also what aesthetics always is anyway - the parasiting of already existing forms - i.e. the relations of our bodies as they exist now (positioned by class, race and sexual/sexuated relation) to the contexts of the outside world and its objects. And also how these relations might change. In contrast to an aesthetics of 'harmony' as a kind of regulating system where beauty must always be the same thing and our experience of it be organized in the same way, prioritising the immaterial over the material, as the Divine/ Truth/ beauty/God. So that salvation/beauty are always located 'somewhere else'. As cure for the sickness of life. No fuck that. What we need now is poetry. As the young Nietzsche writes:

"The sphere of poetry does not lie outside the world, like some fantastic impossibility of a poet's imagination: it seeks to be the very opposite, the unvarnished expression of truth, and must for this very reason cast aside the false finery of that supposed reality of the cultured man."

**In an interview with Gean Moreno in 2007 you point out your exhaustion with the two seemingly never-ending tropes in contemporary art which is the aesthetic/transcendent vs.the conceptual/critical. You end up saying: "My idea at the moment is that we should start forgetting things." (" all of this stuff should get forgotten NOW"). Especially the critical art which you see as this perpetually re-staged event of "critical not-belonging." (<http://thefanzine.com/john-russell-q-a-2/>) I find this interesting on one level because a lot of your work seems overtly critical, or at the very least is looking for a reconciliation between these binary threads.....I'm also just interested in the idea of "giving**

up"....but, to take you at your word ,albeit from over 5 years ago, how does one go about forgetting? What would that work look like? Would you say this has somewhat been your goal post-BANK (from your early "meaningless" performances with Fabienne Audeoud to the more recent kangaroo piece)? Or am I reading into it too literally?



'Bruce Willis. Irigaray and the Aesthetics of Space Travel'. *Metamute*, December 2014

Forsooth, the 'forgetting' idea comes from Nietzsche (maybe primarily via Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche). If 'meaning' roughly is about force then this is not a contestation on the level of literal meaning, it is contestation on the level of active and reactive forces. And 'active forgetting' would somehow be the forgetting of existing values and the 'value' of those values, rather than including these in a 'critical' dialectic. Forgetting as a kind of difference-in-itself, as opposed to difference-from the Same. Which is linked up to Deleuze/Nietzsche's idea of eternal return as the untimely active forgetting as the return of same as Difference. Cos only Difference can return my friend. And this links up to the idea of mimicry and aesthetics discussed earlier. You can see it in the circulation of Benjamin's idea of a (recurring) dialogical image which forgets its previous context. An 'interruptive' philosophy of history, where history is constructed in a politically explosive 'constellation of past and present'. As a 'dialectical image' which occurs in the Now of its recognisability - a 'lightning flash' of truth: a suddenness which precludes its re-assimilation into the structures of continuity - an active forgetting, animated as the potential for immediate action (in this suddenness). In contrast to historicism, continuity and progress.



*Lost in the Thinking*, collaboration with Damon Packard and Mark Beasley, PS1, New York, 2004

I'm somewhat wary of artists who deal with theory head-on. I think it's because usually the result is annoyingly dull or annoyingly "clever". Your work uses theory in a much more anarchic way and the results are far messier and to me, refreshing. There's a question here somewhere... Are a lot of people using theory wrong? (ha).



*Ocean Pose [Pink]* (2008). Backlit digital print on vinyl, 3 x 7.9M

Yes well dude, that's bad theory - dead ideas. Talking like old peoples. (Like above) it's the same old bad theory/bad philosophy/bad art. And dullness. It predicts what it wants. What is going to be

expressed. What is already expressed. Organises what it expects. OK OK OK sometimes preset political ideas fire things up. But it is usually boring. It kind of 'means' what it expects (as above). Same old conservative/capitalist trick – the production of its own continuation. All the richness and intensity of culture (as something with potential for change) that is not part of this structure although it has to happen in it and is often implicated and fucked and co-opted by it. In this respect philosophy is often more interesting when it is only half understood. Or when it is written to enable this. When it has force rather than meaning. That is the key thing - when it has force or affect rather than (as well as) meaning. This might be the thing.

**I'm interested in your attitude towards technology and art. In my head, I contrast your work with someone like Mark Leckey. To me, Leckey seems sort of optimistic or sentimental in his relation to technology and digital culture, whereas your take is much more morbid, negative, abject (or possibly just ambivalent)? You also both seem to share an interest in (or anxiety with) the boundaries of "non art" (specifically you mention aesthetic art's potential "risk" of "losing itself within the infinity of extra-institutional social relations ". Leckey says something similar to art being at the risk of "dissipating" into LOLcats ). These concerns are felt, I'm sure, by other artists, but the connection was only re-enforced when I saw Leckey curated you into one of the Universal Addressability of Dumb Things shows. Anyway...I guess I'm just asking about your attitude towards digital technology and its relation to art ...**



Limits don't worry me dude. In that article I was describing the way 'art/artists' continually claim to move beyond limits. I connected this up to a monologue, a suicide note, narrated by a dead person hanging from the ceiling of his studio flat - tracking his sliding recession from human subject to inanimate object. And then prompted by the narrator's necrotic musings, including the banal details of his life and description of the interior of his flat, described the way 'limits' operate as a kind of institutional version of the sublime where the artworld is presented (in a variety of different ways) with an experience of the terror of the infinity of the outside or unlocated. A kind of 'critical' fetishisation of

limits as the promise of transcendence. Descending into a kind of Romantic aporetic, or bad (boring) joke, endlessly repeated, of impossible transcendence. A prophecy of overcoming, that ends up as the discourse of the parergon: neither/nor, either/or. The non-dialectic of life/death from the perspective of life (human). Where the '/' becomes the sliding registration of the unregistrable. A procession/recession of limits, from art/non-art, to finite/infinite, to the fiction of the ultimate limit of life/death - the 'master-limit' which validates and codes all other limits.

And as far as digital technology goes its just what is close to me. I'm sitting in front of a computer all day, partly for my job. Its what I read stuff on and look at things on, and I fucking luv it. Digital imaging helps me imagine things. And I like the way it uses conventional imagery/models and conventionalised perspectives. It's a familiar standardised realism and that's cool coz im looking for something that is figurative and realistic. I don't know why but I'm not interested in abstraction or formal properties in themselves. It is something to do with recognisable imagery. The images I use are pre-existing and stereotypical - emptied out. Dead figures. I mean I mess about with them a lot, paint over them, re-draw them, re-wrap them, clone them, c&p stuff and so on. But I hate them in a lot of ways. And for instance digital printing is an inferior medium in a lot of ways, say in comparison to painting. In terms of colour and texture its very limited (CMYK is a very limited colour range in comparison to oil paint and a lot less vivid). That's why I use back lighting. But when I see the finished back-lit prints installed, they make my heart sink. They look as ugly as fuck. Horrible objects in some ways. Not that the imagery is upsetting just the whole thing as an object. I like them though.



Still from *Vermillion Vortex*, 2010



**To continue the Gothic thread: you employ a lot of heavy Abrahamic monotheistic (not sure whether Christian or Catholic) imagery. There's the crucifixions in JEXUS (as well as pizza menus and Internet porn...what was that about?) And Thomas Aquinas quotes in your yuppie horror animation "Vermillion Vortex." Not to mention gorey crucifixions way back in early BANK installations. It seems like the use of this imagery or subject matter could be parodic/kitschy or be functioning in some 'art-historical' sense or maybe there's a third option that I'm not aware of...Somewhat related, I know you're affiliated with Punctum Books and they have a large amount of staff/contributing writers involved in "medieval literature" studies. Some of it "speculative medievalism". So....are we still living in the Dark Ages?**

Similar to above. Religious imagery is dead in one respect but the violence remains. And keys into the psychological/mythic/philosophical/political structures that surround us. Clichés and emptied out but operating like TRUTH and the figures and flesh remain in their positions. My family are religious (catholic) although I'm not. But I did go to a school where one of my earliest memories was colouring in photostatted illustrations of religious images, crucifixies and people killing lambs. As well as that this religious imagery is all around us and you don't even have to go to church to see a human nailed up on a cross. Or a man killing a lamb. So we all 'own' this shit.



John Russell, *Elf Flux*, 2013, HD video on monitor and stand, 11 min on loop

**A more general question about the present/future..... What are you working on now? What sorts of things (artists, writers or otherwise) are you interested in lately? Where do you see things going? Are you optimistic?**

Hey dude optimistic? Yes I'm optimisitic. What I'm mainly working on the moment is some animated fonts. One is an animated font which is top secret and then this one - which is a semi-animated squirrel font. SQUIRREL PINK.



This email was conducted over email, late 2014 into 2015.