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SOL LEWITT RYAN GANDER KATLEEN VERMEIR HUANG YONG PING GUY VAN BOSSCHE



Ryan Gander, *Comic Cosmology*, 2005, courtesy of the artist and STORE, London and Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam

BACK TO THE FUTURE

RYAN GANDER

interviewed by HANS ULRICH OBRIST

Ryan Gander (b.1976, Chester, UK) lives and works in London and Amsterdam.

Developing his visionary work on the brink of art and architecture, he investigates the world of the mind and the relationship between human beings through our experience of the different senses. The conceptual and fragmented world of Ryan Gander materializes through a mimetic process, in which he fuses ideas, narrative and fantasy as tools for historical documentation and ingenious re-creation.

Solo exhibitions have been dedicated to Ryan Gander in the most prestigious international institutions, the most recent being: *Short cut through the trees* at the MUMOK in Wien and *The Last Work* at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. In 2006, the artist exhibited at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna di Bologna *Nine Projects for the Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau*.

Ryan Gander is the recipient of the Dena Foundation Art Award 2006; the following interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist has been published in the book *Intellectual Colours* by Ryan Gander, co-edited by SilvanaEditoriale and Dena Foundation for Contemporary Art in the occasion of the price ceremony that took place at the Centre International d'Accueil et d'Echanges des Récollets, in Paris on April 16th 2007.

One of the things I would like to ask you about is the concept of parallel universe. David Deutsch, eminent Oxford quantum physics expert, in his beautiful book, *The Fabric of Reality*, wrote about the idea of parallel realities in quantum physics. And also about the different snapshots of these parallel realities. So, I'm very interested in your current preoccupations regarding parallel reality, and we'll see how much this ties into Deutsch's quantum mechanics. Can you tell me a little about the new game you invented?

It uses a traditional pack of playing cards, but instead of having a pattern on the reverse side, there is another set of faces printed on the reverse. They're assorted, so as soon as they are taken out of the wrapper they will never be in the original order again. I have been working with some communication students from the Royal College of Art and together we've designed five new games. There are original and traditional games modified to be played with the new cards, sometimes even two games can be played at once using both the front and reverse sides. There's a version of *Patience*, which you play alone in the mirror, and when you play a game around a table with a group of people, you have the game that is facing out and the game that is facing in. It's like *Back to the Future*. Two games at once. Remember the images I showed in Antwerp of Michael J. Fox's hand up to his face, and his hand was slowly fading away and coming back again, because his future is being pre-determined?

Yes. In the same lecture, in Antwerp, you referred to Cerith Wyn Evans: is he one of your heroes?

I have a lot of respect for his work but I don't think there is anything heroic about it.

People who are oxygen... who keeps you going? Who are your other influences?

I think of oxygen as a daily encounter, as ways of noticing things that other people wouldn't necessarily notice: that's the sort of energy I'm after. It's the tiny phenomenon that happens around us all of the time. That's like fuel, not necessarily people, though.

You also mentioned Richard Wentworth.

The reason why I like Richard is because he sees things in the everyday, he sees things that are around us, things that not everybody picks up on. He detects and then highlights them. I think that's quite a specialism. Paul Elliman is the same. I was reading a story called *The Country of the Blind* by H. G. Wells last night and I realised that imagination has a lot to do with parallel worlds. I have a lot of respect for science fiction writers because it's such a creative act. Using your imagination to re-realise or write another world.

The children's book is half fiction and half based on historical facts. It's about Ernő Goldfinger, the Hungarian architect who built Trellick Tower and the Balfron Tower, seen through the eyes of a little boy called Tom. Tom lives in the shadow of Trellick Tower and he meets Ernő Goldfinger as the tower is being built and together they explore the magical world of the model or ideal of Trellick Tower but not the reality.

And that leads us, obviously, to science fiction and the whole question of your relationship to literature.

I have written a book for children and I'm currently working on a new book of one hundred essays on the phenomena of the everyday. It is split into two halves similar to the playing cards, insofar as it's verso-verso, so it's two books in one. When you turn the book upside down there's another beginning to it, there are two front pages. There are fifty essays that are optimistic and fifty essays that are pessimistic. The first optimistic essay is called *Why French People Look out of Windows*, which is a great observation, because there is a stereotype maintaining that French people are always gazing out of their windows. The first pessimistic essay is called *Christmas According to my Friend Stuart Bailey*.

John Brockman asked the scientific community for the beginning of 2007, for a reason to be an optimist today, to be ever an optimist in this kind of world. Are you an optimist or a pessimist?

I'm both. It's as double sided as the cards. I read an article about a band from Sheffield in a newspaper called *The New Musical Express*, which is a British music journal. It said that Northerners model themselves on the things they dislike, rather than the things they like, and that sounds pessimistic, but actually it's a healthy way of living. If you model yourself on the things that you like, then you aspire to something and you are in danger of becoming that thing you aspire to, which is also why it's probably not good to have heroes. However, if you model the way that you live on the things that you hate, you are ensuring that you are not being those things you dislike, whilst there's still

potential in the possibility of becoming a multitude of many different things. That's the impetus. Although it sounds pessimistic, it's actually a very optimistic way to live.

It's very different from the United States of America.

It's very different from America. I have been thinking about the idea of bitterness. I think when teaching art, you become very conscious that many of the students will never make art after they leave the college, they will mostly end up doing jobs like selling double-glazing or cars or working in a carpet shop. Then you really start to understand bitterness.

Traditionally, everyone thinks of bitterness as a really negative thing, but actually it's not negative at all. Bitterness governs the way that you work. I wanted to make a handbook of A4 photocopies, a collection of writers who've made texts about the idea of bitterness or failure.

So that's an unrealised project of yours?

Maybe it's one of those projects that should remain unrealised. Will Bradley has one that's called *The Fable of Deconstruction* which is a beautiful text about artists who buy an old hospital in the south of France and start their own art commune. It's a great text and it's linked to bitterness and failure.

Can you tell me more about the children's book?

The children's book is half fiction and half based on historical facts. It's about Ernő Goldfinger, the Hungarian architect who built Trellick Tower and the Balfour Tower, seen through the eyes of a little boy



Ryan Gander, *Is this guilt in you too – (The study of a car in a field)*, 2005, courtesy of the artist and STORE, London and Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam

called Tom. Tom lives in the shadow of Trellick Tower and he meets Ernő Goldfinger as the tower is being built and together they explore the magical world of the model or ideal of Trellick Tower but not the reality. It talks about the success of paper architecture in relation to the failure of concrete architecture. Trellick Tower was the last social housing over ten stories high to be built in Britain.

You are a winner of the Dena Foundation Art Award, and the catalogue revisits your project for Bologna.

Bologna was strange because it was the first time that I'd made a real public work. I have always avoided making work that is connected with notions of "the public" or a "non-art" audience. The idea of the public art makes you think of terrible sculptures on roundabouts. But this project was sited in a pavilion that was originally built for the Paris World Fair of 1925 and subsequently given as a gift from the city of Paris to the city of Bologna, and it was built outside the GAM Museum. I did a site visit about a year before the exhibition and I found the pavilion in a terrible mess. So I spent some of the project's resources on restoring the pavilion to the way it should be, and then made nine contributions to that context.

And the time capsule that cannot be opened for fifty years?

That was one of the nine works that were interventions that I made to the building.

Can you briefly summarise the content?

I like the idea that there will be a work of mine after I die, so I picked fifty years. Fifty years was also the amount of time it took for the city of Bologna to build the pavilion after it had been given by the city of Paris. So it was echoing that sort of mistrust through a time span. Andrea Viliani, who is the curator at the GAM, and I started the time capsule. We had to find four solicitors to legally establish it. It took about three weeks to sort it all out, so now under the central bank in Bologna there is a safety deposit box, and in the safety deposit box there are the instructions for an artwork to be made in fifty years' time from now. I will be eighty years old. If I live that long.

You could still be alive then.

But I might not. It's that ambiguity of whether or not I'll see it, which is interesting. The idea of predicting when you'll die is quite interesting. The artist Bedwyr Williams and I are writing each other's fictional obituaries at the moment, set in the future. So I'm producing a text which is typeset in the *Times* newspaper for the year 2052. Then they're displayed side by side in a box frame, it's the verso thing as well as one reality. The process of writing these obituaries requires you to decide on a frame of time for death, which is kind of a weird sensation. If you think of Bedwyr writing my obituary and me writing his, they can't both exist, one of them must be false which links back to the time capsule. It's a continuum.

And that's also something that is interesting in relation to this conversation, because I've invited you together with Rem Koolhaas, to be part of the



Ryan Gander, *Travelogue Lecture (with missing content)*, 2001, courtesy of the artist and STORE, London and Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam



Ryan Gander, Bauhaus Revisited, 2003, courtesy of the artist and STORE, London and Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam

I think a studio is a toolbox! Now I am stealing your phrases! It's funny that traditionally inside studios there were physical toolboxes, but now the studio for me is a sort of conceptual toolbox. Materials in every sense of the word are there in the studio.



interview marathon. Out of that experience, the ping led to a pong and you decided to interview us about the process of an interview, with a ghostwriter, and made that into a work of art. In the meantime I'm back doing an interview with you, so it's ping-pong again. Having recorded this interview once already for the first time, in ten years of recording there has been a problem with the tape so we had to re-do the interview. So it's in any case an unbelievably special process and an unpredictable outcome, and I'm very curious to know what will be next. But it would be very interesting to hear from you a little bit about this process and the interview work.

I made a critique – not that I'm critical of the things about the interview marathon that left me wanting to ask you questions. I make a lot of work and although I had never thought about overproduction before, it occurred to me that one could in actuality be over-productive. That was one thing that I was interested in discussing. After shooting and going through the editing process I saw the interview as a spectator rather than reading it as the maker. I produced another video with subtitles that was about the process of making the work. So there was a subtext or meta-narrative in it that was, basically, a transcription of all the thoughts that I had while I was constructing it. Do you think it moved from being an interview to something else?

The piece, you mean? Yeah, definitely, because it's, you know, to some extent no longer a reduction of the conversation, you sort of started constructing your piece. So it has to do with construction I suppose, because it seems constructed in many layers.

You never see anyone speaking.

Everything seems in-between.

An interview is a document that shouldn't be edited to change meaning. So I took some artistic license but I was altering reality. I was really conscious of that in the process. I was controlling truth. The notion of not seeing you speak takes the words out of you and makes the words mine. I am appropriating and controlling your words. I became your editor, an editor's editor!

How do you use other people's work? You use a lot of found material. Is it appropriation or filtration or...?

I don't see the difference between Jonathan Monk's work, the color red, or *Star Wars* the movie, or a piece of cardboard. I think you can take what you want, if anyone took my work I'd be quite happy. I recently made a work with a Jonathan Monk work I bought and then changed and then sold again. It's a work that is called *To Tears*, it's a photograph of Jonathan Monk when he's about thirteen years old I think. It's a passport photograph, he has two earrings in his eyes that pin the photograph to the wall – there are these two dangling jewels, which look like tears. So I bought that work and I took the earrings out of the photograph and



Ryan Gander, *Rietveld Reconstruction – Alex, aged six*, 2006, courtesy of the artist and STORE, London and Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam, photo Polly Braden

then sent the earrings to my mother, in Wales, to have a passport photograph taken of herself wearing the earrings. Then that passport photograph becomes a work, which is like appropriating someone's legacy. It is a temporary undoing, it's using art as a material, but it's also using a material that has a very good history.

And what role does the studio play in all of this? I think a studio is a toolbox! Now I am stealing your phrases! It's funny that traditionally inside studios there were physical toolboxes, but now the studio for me is a sort of conceptual toolbox. Materials in every sense of the word are there in the studio.

So it's not only a virtual place, is it a real place?

In a very real sense, it is a very real place. It feels boringly popular for artists to talk about having a nomadic practice or being physically independent because 'ideas happen in their head', it's all a bit 1990s' sounding.

So you have decided to take a sabbatical? However, it's a break, it's not a stop, on the contrary it

sort of re-nurtures this idea of research and breathing and, I'm thinking: could you maybe talk a little bit more about this, because I have heard rumours that your sabbatical has already entered in a cycle of production because you've produced works of art from the idea of the sabbatical. The last time an artist told me she was to have a sabbatical was when Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster went to Brazil, and she wanted to go on a world tour. She got stuck in Brazil, bought a house there, and you know, at the end of the day, it's a very unpredictable thing what happens once you liberate time, and maybe that's also interesting. So, can you talk a little bit about this?

Maybe I won't make any work, although the idea is to produce a sort of stock of work or at least have a few works in front of me. You just don't know what is going to happen.

I shot a film yesterday, which is the walk from my studio to my home. This is how the sabbatical becomes part of production. The work will eventually be two films. The first film is an open bracket and the second a close bracket. The camera lens points upwards, so you only see the sky and the buildings and the trees

that come into the shot. There was another camera crew with a steadicam operator, behind that camera crew, following that camera crew up the road. It's called *The Last Work*. The key to all this is that the film is based on a parallel reality and a déjà-vu, insofar as I'll make the film, the same, again in the summer, but it will be the walk from my home to my studio. The Stedelijk Museum has very kindly agreed to let me make two shows instead of one, with a one-year interval. So there's a *The Last Work*, which is in March 2007, the beginning of my research year, and then in March 2008, there will be the work that will be called the *The Last Work Too* which is an optimistic revision of the first work. The walk home is a pessimistic view on production, and the walk back to the studio, in the summer, is an optimistic view. I like the idea that it hasn't been announced that I will be coming back to work in a year, if you see the first – *The Last Work*, and you return a year later, you'll have a feeling that you've seen it before. The works are almost like twins, like the two clocks that are five minutes out of sync with each other.

So you are back to Kierkegaard's repetition. And also interesting, in relation to the studio, is the question of objects, because your practice has not necessarily been a practice which has produced a lot of objects, however there are things describable maybe as quasi-objects, because they are also broken objects...

Or remnants, or leftovers, or by-products.

And could you talk a little bit about these quasi-objects, these remnants, these leftovers, the broken neon we saw in Miami for example?

A lot of the ideas I have come from those by-products. They are literally leftovers, or evidence that an idea occurred. A really good example of this is *The Meteorite* by Cornelia Parker, where she sends a meteorite that fell in a garden back to NASA, asking them to put it back in space on a shuttle. We don't know if it exists. There is no documentation, there's no letter to NASA and there are no photographs. The work is about legend, and storytelling, and creating fables. The works that I feel most strongly about are those that exist ephemerally or in storytelling.

Gustav Metzger, who probably was THE artist, or at least was amongst those who most consequently resisted objects, with his autodestructive art and so on – Gustav, has been very concerned by drawing. And he's been asking how it is that people don't draw anymore. What is the role of drawing in your practice?

There's no drawing in my practice at all, not conceptually or ephemerally or in anyway. Although, thinking back: my dad did some drawings for me once though, I commissioned them as a work.

Two last questions. We've spoken about architecture but internally... for example Richard Hamilton



Ryan Gander, *Milestone / Stumbling Block*, 2006, courtesy of the artist and STORE, London and Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam, photo Polly Braden

exhibitions that produce a new display feature are really memorised, and if an exhibition doesn't manage to produce a new display feature very often it is forgotten. For example, your show at Whitechapel really produced a new display feature – could you talk a little bit about this show and about display feature in general and if you would agree with Hamilton?

I'd say with a lot of work, the display feature is eighty percent of the work. *Cinema Verso* is another alternative reality – or a parallel reality, where it positions a spectator behind the screen looking into the cinema. It is becoming implicitly involved in being part of the film that they are watching. The film is about two people, one blind and one deaf, and they are learning their way around New York City. The spectator is placed in a position where he can either watch or hear the film, because there's a directional speaker, so you can only hear the sound in one place and you can only see the film when you're in a different place. So, the spectator is positioned as a character within the narrative of the film.



Ryan Gander, *Travelogue Lecture (with missing content)*, 2001, courtesy of the artist and STORE, London and Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam

This is an answer, specifically, about that piece; but, in general, it's something that mattered a lot, that idea of the display invention.

It has got something to do with things not being accessible, being on the periphery, looking in, and not looking into a set or a stage, something that is manipulated or fabricated, artificial, pseudo. It has not to do with looking into something that is pre-arranged; it's feeling like you're an outsider, feeling like things are just far enough removed that you can't be involved in it.

That's a conclusion. I just have one very last question that can be inserted elsewhere in the interview. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote this very lovely text that is an Advice to a Young Poet. I was wondering what would be your advice to a young artist.

There are too many artists in London who are networking, arse-licking, name-dropping outlines of themselves. There's just too many. Nowadays, art schools teach "professional practice".

I think that this component should be banned and colleges that promote it should be burnt down to the ground. I believe this is the end of it all, all the good stuff. I don't think artists should have business cards. I

don't trust artists with websites, especially those sites whose address is the artist's name. I just don't understand these things. If there is that much time for self-promotion, then the question is begging to be asked, whether that time would be better spent in the studio. Art students are being fed the wrong idea about "professional practice". Nothing comes from being professional, or a stereotype of what is taught as being professional. So I think my advice would be to continue with the Amateur. Let the work do the talking, you know?

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