

Medium
Date
Web address

Web
October 31st, 2010
<https://www.vice.com/en/article/agreement-is-not-what-we-look-for-607-v17n11/>

Publication
Author
Artist

Vice
Andy Cooper
Cerith Wyn Evans



Magazine Pulse Life Tech Munchies Music Waypoint Members

Agreement Is Not What We Look For

By Andy Capper

October 31, 2010, 8:00pm

INTERVIEW BY ANDY CAPPER, PHOTO BY ALEX STURROCK

Artwork courtesy of White Cube

Strangers to the art world may have come across the work of Cerith Wyn Evans in his collaborations with the director Derek Jarman. Together the two made videos for the Smiths, the Fall and the Pet Shop Boys in the 1980s. He has also worked with artists such as Throbbing Gristle, Russell Haswell and Florian Hecker.

To art world people, Cerith was kind of a cool, older brother type to all the lunatic millionaires that came out of the Young British Artist movement of the mid-90s. His work is made from light, sound, fireworks, explosions and photographs, with an emphasis on the words “spectacular” and “beautiful”.

Born in 1958 in Llanelli, Wales, in a family of nine children, his father was an architect who constructed local buildings.

I first met Cerith on one of the worst nights of my life. I was “celebrating” my stag do in an illegal drinking den in east London with a few friends and lots of awful strangers. A tawdry ordeal in which I was stripped naked and tied to a chair took place.

Russell Haswell had brought Cerith along for a laugh, and were it not for their generous company and adeptness with profound philosophical conversation, I probably would have hanged myself that night.

With that in mind, here's Cerith!

Medium
Date
Web address

Web
October 31st, 2010
<https://www.vice.com/en/article/agreement-is-not-what-we-look-for-607-v17n11/>

Publication
Author
Artist

Vice
Andy Cooper
Cerith Wyn Evans

Vice: Hello Cerith. Where are you at the moment?

Cerith Wyn Evans: I'm at my studio. It's directly opposite the road I live on so I can put on pyjamas and come here whenever I want. It's across the road into Bloomsbury, opposite the British Museum.

How long have you been there for?

I've been here for seven years on the third floor and four years on the fourth. Once a year the building is marked and celebrated by devotees from the Hare Krishna movement. It was the first Hare Krishna temple in Europe and I believe that in 1968 the Beatles and Rolling Stones signed the lease together because they wanted to support the movement. It only lasted for about a year because the Krishnas soon became so successful that it outlived these premises. It's nice to think that I'm inhabiting this place with all those strange ghosts.

In Saint Martins in the late 70s you used to get a lot of guys bouncing down the street in orange robes, but there's a lot less robes now. I've still got all of the books they used to give out—I never read them but the pictures are quite nice.

Now, on the ground floor, there is a Jewish South American dentist who was once hit by lightning while playing golf last year on some golf course in Hampstead!.

Good. I hate golf. What are you working on at the moment?

The next piece of work will be with some robotics engineers in Japan, building an animatronic crystal flute. It's going to be super, super amazing. We're going to get these hands to play a flute made from one piece of onyx crystal. I really would chop my arms off and chop my legs off to pay for this because I really, really want to do it. We're trying to get it to be powered by the moon, because you can get these very large field sensors now that can harness moon power. Solar power is very, very predictable, and very, very strong and you can have batteries that can store that, but the moon is very, very weak, so it's a challenge. I want it to be a lunar-powered flute but I have to find the people to pay for it

Medium
Date
Web address

Web
October 31st, 2010
<https://www.vice.com/en/article/agreement-is-not-what-we-look-for-607-v17n11/>

Publication
Author
Artist

Vice
Andy Cooper
Cerith Wyn Evans

How much do you need?

Not that much really. Automatic flutes have been made since the 18th century, so they're easy to do. You need a pump and a power source. It's simple. I would like the power source to be an 18th century-looking item with weird clunky engineering. Depending on how much money you have—somewhere between £1,000 and £20,000—you can go from the lowest quality to the very highest quality. Then it's a question of the bogus romantic intelligence that will lead people in. I do like the idea of something being moon-powered; Minerva, the cult, the left side—nothing direct about it.

It's a beautiful idea.

Join the club, Andy! Talk to your bank manager.

I'll check my balance and get back to you. So you started out making short films, right? How did that happen?

I was at Saint Martins College, studying Sculpture A course.

Did you have a thirst for knowledge?

Well, the course focused on people who did performance and photography, and what was thought of at the time as conceptual. In effect, it defined itself against sculpture proper, which was Sculpture B course. There was a polarity between A and B, and in the A course you had these artists like Richard Long, Gilbert and George and Hamish Fulton, and they were people walking the boundaries between performance, art and heavy metal sculpture.

The B course was famous at Saint Martins for people like Henry Moore, and for people who were concerned with techniques for much more formal construction. It didn't have that documentary necessity which I thought "real life" was about at the time, which was probably more happening on the streets outside on Charing Cross Road than it was inside on the art course. Film really grew out of this idea of documenting things that weren't going to last. It came from the idea of things that were more like situations or events, not about things that were going to be rusting in a field for the next 100 years but rather things that were going to be over before you got new batteries in your camera.

Medium
Date
Web address

Web
October 31st, 2010
<https://www.vice.com/en/article/agreement-is-not-what-we-look-for-607-v17n11/>

Publication
Author
Artist

Vice
Andy Cooper
Cerith Wyn Evans

What equipment do you use?

I was never really interested in technical things, or learning the specifics of a camera. You make do with what you can get away with without getting bogged down in the technical aspects. I grew up as a photographer and I was taught all I needed to develop photographs from the age of about four, because we had a dark room at home. So when it came to my own recording, we used very basic video equipment owned by Saint Martins. It was these cumbersome 1.5-inch reel-to-reel videotapes and they were called ENG, which stood for Electronic News Gatherers.

I remember walking down Oxford Street, walking into the Count Club, near the 100 Club, in the middle of the afternoon. The club was open 24 hours a day and so we filmed footage of people getting pissed in the middle of the day.

We filmed it, sent the film to Kodak and it came back a few days later. You couldn't easily make a copy of the films we had back then so if you scratched it or fucked it up, that was that. It was fragile. These days it all seems even more fragile—when you think how people have a mental fucking breakdown just if their back-up drive fails. Back then, the attitude was “so what?” You just got a piece of Sellotape and pieced together a new film. That's just what happened. Things were a lot less precious in a sense.

Do you think people are spoilt now with all the technology?

I think it's just different. People weren't more or less spoilt at any one time really. I remember when I was teaching architectural students from Romania a long time ago and a guy named Ivan, who was very gifted and approachable, said, “I like London because in Romania I had to walk two hours to get to the art shop to buy pencils and in London everything is so handy.” It's a bit like that.

So I don't look back on my time at Saint Martins as being any better or worse than now. It's just different. I think with the passage of time people notice there are changes which technology affects. Change is about the advent of something and I think it is quite interesting when certain analogue technology makes a comeback. It's interesting how shares are rocketing in Polaroid, for instance. People are looking at ways of image production which aren't as super-saturated and maybe ideologically over-determined as much as digital technology.

Medium
Date
Web address

Web
October 31st, 2010
<https://www.vice.com/en/article/agreement-is-not-what-we-look-for-607-v17n11/>

Publication
Author
Artist

Vice
Andy Cooper
Cerith Wyn Evans

But who would have thought 20 or 30 years ago that the pencil would make a dreadful comeback... or charcoal? I was one who predicted the death of life drawing and you know what? I think it will outlive me!

What's your favourite medium then?

I don't know, I don't think you can really say that. Walking in the fresh air is my favourite medium, I think.

What about music and film as a medium?

Well, the musicians that I've worked with employed me, because it was my job. Sometimes Derek Jarman would give me the opportunity to work on a pop video. And when that happened the small band around Derek would be able to pay the rent for a couple of months. We did all sorts of things including the Smiths and the Pet Shop Boys. As things go on you develop relationships and keep in touch with people, so I owe Derek rather a lot. A lot came from that time; a lot of things were formed at that time. A lot of things developed. I actually met Genesis P-Orridge through Derek.

How was that?

Whenever someone asks me, "Where do you first meet someone?" I sort of go blank —unless something really drastic happened. On the other hand, there are times where I remember very clearly where I met them but I don't know them any more. I don't know what that says about me.

I've had relationships that have started suddenly, like a clap of thunder, but by and large, the ones that have really lasted haven't been like that.

I've known Genesis for a long, long time, and then Sleazy Christopherson. I worked with them when they were in a different outfit, when they were Psychic TV. And then there's been things with the Fall, Michael Clark, Russell Haswell and Florian Hecker.

What do you like about collaboration?

It's nice to have some company sometimes, really. Some people can't do it, and some people can only do it, but I just treat working with other people as a luxury because you can measure something else in the work, and not just be a narcissistic psychotic baby in the middle of it all. You can share that with another one.

Medium
Date
Web address

Web
October 31st, 2010
<https://www.vice.com/en/article/agreement-is-not-what-we-look-for-607-v17n11/>

Publication
Author
Artist

Vice
Andy Cooper
Cerith Wyn Evans

Why do you keep going back to working with musicians?

Well, not all musicians, by any means. I don't like musos, for instance. What I like is not only the way music is made, but also the way it is used. In the same way, people who are good at drawing aren't necessarily the best artists.

In that art-music scene there are people who are so important like John Cage and Iannis Xenakis. They were the difficult composers who went against what was thought to be the mainstream representational structures of the acceptable thing. And now that's all been going for the past 30 years and been commodified and put into museums, and at the same time it's a kernel of experimentation and radicalism which has been shied away from. Either because people think it's too naive for the time we're living in, culturally, or that it holds some kind of potential for threat or uncertainty. And therefore it holds political values.

You once said, "I hate the idea of being accessible."

Yeah. I think people should make a fucking effort, really. For example, [the Fall's] Mark Smith can be accused of being obtuse and all those things, but his heart is so in the right place. I remember Mark once going "We are making it easy for you" to an audience. And of course with that kind of approach to your art you really have to be on top of things.

How so?

It's a murky territory, because you have to be careful not to come across as some fucking old fogey. But at the same time, whenever I hear the word "layman" I hear some Nazi being rather patronising, you know. It feels like Talk Radio or Vanessa Feltz. God help us.

I would really rather go out of my way to be perverse about things rather than do this grovelling populism that I find really rather irritating. I do quite a lot to escape from populism's confines because populism's confines are happening to you every fucking day, like it or not.

Recently I was commissioned for a piece of work for these architects in Venice which I tried to make really absolutely as mystifying as possible. I thought, "Right. This is a perfect opportunity to do something really, really fucked up and twisted."

Medium
Date
Web address

Web
October 31st, 2010
<https://www.vice.com/en/article/agreement-is-not-what-we-look-for-607-v17n11/>

Publication
Author
Artist

Vice
Andy Cooper
Cerith Wyn Evans

I wanted to do something to offset the over-determined functionalism of what is perceived as being architecture, which is usually about having a roof over your head and warmth. Now on one level that's all architecture is about, but we mustn't reduce things to this denominator which is lower than the common because that actually insults the diverse thing which the common can be. Because as you know, the common is not common at all.

So they told me to describe what I was doing and said, "You do appreciate you have to make things as plain speaking as possible because a lot of people have to understand it. So please: 100 words of 400 characters, including gaps."

So I made a list of words, knowing they had to be translated into Italian and I thought: "Right! I'm going to start on the basis that we are going to teach at least seven precocious Italian children the meaning of prevaricate and it won't go to waste."

Because what are we going to do? People don't read that stuff anyway. It's just blurb for catalogues. When people say, "Why can't they put things more simply?" I say, "Why can't they put things more complicatedly? Why do I have to understand this?" And that's where I come from. I know it comes across as being a camp rant, but to some extent I really do think that.

It feels as if, with every passing second, the information being given out in the world is becoming more and more simplified and trite.

Francis Bacon used to say, "In art, as in friendship, agreement is not what we look for."

It's that sort of response that I think is worth maintaining, or looking out for. Innocence is the key. Love is the law.

It's a "what if?" scenario that can provide people with so much power, and to that extent I align myself with a libertarian tradition. Punk certainly had that. A lot of people of my generation had the feeling of "we're going to have to make do with that". I don't. For example, I don't like the fact I have less hair now. But I can't do anything with my hair now so I have to think of other things to do!

Medium
Date
Web address

Web
October 31st, 2010
<https://www.vice.com/en/article/agreement-is-not-what-we-look-for-607-v17n11/>

Publication
Author
Artist

Vice
Andy Cooper
Cerith Wyn Evans

I remember the first time we met, you told me you always got it cut at Vidal Sassoon.

Well, that's not true! But there's an answer to why I said that. There used to be a very good person at Vidal Sassoon and his name was Jean-Baptiste. But he liked to be known as JB, but for some reason I couldn't stop calling him BJ, like blowjob. It'd gotten into my brain in that "don't mention the war" way.

So he was a hairdresser who was heterosexual, but super camp in the way that only hairdressers can be. And he would go out of his way to say how well he was getting on with his girlfriend, and I was like, "Why are you telling me this?!"

He would tell them that French women didn't like getting their hair *cut*, they wanted their hair *set*. And it was only the likes of Vidal Sassoon who were interested in structure. So I was having these metaphysical arguments with the hairdresser, so I used to like seeing him. But he left to do a tour of Japan and he would go to stadiums where thousands of fans would show up and he would do these things to be relayed on LED screens across the arena, showing them how to do a classic bob. I went there [Vidal Sassoon] on a recommendation, and it was a weird time. They felt their look had been perfected in the 80s so they paid no attention to the 90s, and kept the weird kind of remodelling of a 30s art deco. So everything in the salon was chrome and black which also made a big statement in interior design in the 70s. They really maintained this look that was quite old-fashioned. It was so much more interesting than a barber shop. There were women everywhere, talking and reading magazines. It was like being in a documentary. There were the amazing capes they put over you and it had an amazing hierarchy and, of course, I'm talking about this more than anything else because I'm completely obsessed by it, but the reason why I would go there is that I felt like when I went there I could go to a social situation, be part of it, but read it and somehow have it reflected outside at the same time.

At this point in the interview the brand new digital dictaphone that was purchased the day before the interview inexplicably stopped recording. While the machine was broken, Cerith talked about social identity and how that was reflected in art and said some wonderfully profound things that ended with a quote from an episode of The Simpsons.

Medium
Date
Web address

Web
October 31st, 2010
<https://www.vice.com/en/article/agreement-is-not-what-we-look-for-607-v17n11/>

Publication
Author
Artist

Vice
Andy Cooper
Cerith Wyn Evans

Horried by the technological breakdown, we called him back and told him what had happened and asked for more of his time. This is what happened.

So yeah, the machine broke and we lost about 20 minutes. Can you say that stuff about social identity and *The Simpsons* again?

Well, I won't. I don't see why we can't keep it real and play out the irony of the fact that sometimes these things happen, because of what I was saying before about our old film equipment.

Like how when something got scratched, you just forgot about it, Sellotaped over it and started again, and the beauty of it was that the mistake added to the outcome.

Yes, exactly

OK, let's do that. But can we start at the *Simpsons* line, which was the last thing you said before it broke, please?

[sighs] Homer sees a contemporary abstract public sculpture in a shopping mall and says, "Well, what is that?" At which point our hero Marge says, "Oh Homer, it's a contemporary public sculpture." He says, "What does it do?" And she giggles for a while in her glorious Marge way and says, "Well, whatever it does it's doing it now."

Ha ha.

So it has that philosophical resolve at the end, which is really quite profound. Marge's position is essentially Zen, which is what makes it so comfortable and at the same time extraordinarily pernicious given the cultural imperatives of American society, because it seems like even Zen has been appropriated now. It is the antithesis of *Glee*, which I fucking loathe by the way. *Glee* must be the antithesis of *Vice* magazine. It really, really must be. *Glee* is so... fucking hell, I really think somebody has really got us by the nuts and I really can't stand it!

Everyone is so in their place in that show, aren't they? It's just suffocating. I think it's about time we caught those scuzzy little bastards and sorted it out! We should really be heading towards the ancient world when it comes to them!

Medium
Date
Web address

Web
October 31st, 2010
<https://www.vice.com/en/article/agreement-is-not-what-we-look-for-607-v17n11/>

Publication
Author
Artist

Vice
Andy Cooper
Cerith Wyn Evans

There are things more urgent, more valuable, than somehow being treated like some homogenised piece of shit. It's the mildest, blankest form of diarrhoea in the world. It's vile. *G/ee* must die. It's even called *G/ee*! William Blake must be turning in his grave.