

The background of the entire cover is a red and white checkerboard pattern. A white horizontal band is positioned at the top, containing the text.

guyton \ walker



MAMbo

Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna

BF: Sì, è un doppio maschio alfa, che ha molto più a che fare con New York e con la ricezione del loro lavoro piuttosto che con loro come persone. Riguarda più il luogo da cui partono e ovviamente determina chi sono e con che cosa il loro lavoro abbia a che fare. Contrariamente, Fischli & Weiss sono i ragazzini concettuali che vengono dalle montagne. La fiducia in se stessi – specialmente nel quadro della produzione culturale contemporanea svizzera – non è ovviamente paragonabile a quanto succede in moltissime città e paesi. Gilbert e George costituiscono il classico esempio britannico di snobismo, anche se non-normativo, mentre la collaborazione tra Mike Kelley e Paul McCarthy indica trasgressioni percepite come prodotti tipicamente americani. Così, New York sarebbe l'icona dei media fiduciosi in se stessi, dell'arte commerciale, del capitale culturale... il che pone Fischli & Weiss al sicuro, almeno da possibili minacce...

JB: Sì. Significa che non c'è mai la percezione di una sorta di distanza concettuale di Guyton\Walker dal mercato, o una messa in discussione di quest'ultimo nel modo in cui essa viene svolta, secondo l'interpretazione generale, nel lavoro di Fischli & Weiss. Questa qualità sembra inseparabile dal loro lavoro. Penso che questo elemento ci sia, naturalmente, ma anche che l'atteggiarsi di questi ragazzini di montagna sia altrettanto spiccatamente maschile. La costruzione molto particolare all'interno del mondo dell'arte della virilità come prodezza concettuale con una natura sensibile, o qualcosa del genere.

BF: Sì.

JB: Certo non visibilmente macho...

BF: Esatto, guarda più al folklore e a un'arte domestica dell'immaginario e della narrazione, e anche alle cose che possiamo fare quasi con le nostre mani. A confronto, tutto sembra così freddo, astratto, e manipolatorio in Guyton\Walker, volendo fare un paragone sbrigativo, semplicistico...

Batteria di nuovo scarica. Fine registrazione II.

A Conversation in Two Parts

Johanna Burton, Bettina Funcke

Bettina Funcke: Forty years ago, Robert Smithson said, "Actually, our older museums are all full of fragments, bits and pieces of European art. They were ripped out of total artistic structures, given a whole new classification and then categorized." You know what: this is not what I meant to read... but he said that, too... Okay, here's the passage I was looking for: "But it seems that now there's a tendency to try to liven things up in the museum, and that the whole idea of the museum seems to be tending more toward a kind of specialized entertainment. It's taking on more and more the aspects of a discotheque and less and less the aspects of art. So, I think that the best thing you can say about museums is that they really are nullifying in regard to action, and I think that this is one of their major virtues."

Johanna Burton: Do you want to say where this citation comes from?

BF: It's from a conversation between Robert Smithson and Allan Kaprow, which took place in 1967 and was reprinted in Jack Flam's edited version of Smithson's collected writings.

JB: The beginning of this discussion highlights what can be read initially as a kind of stark opposition between Kaprow and Smithson, one which centers around an idea that Kaprow has about liveness versus Smithson's privileging of, in this conversation at least, deadness, right? Though, it seems like Kaprow in the end comes over to the other side a little, recognizing that both he and Smithson are talking about the same thing: how to activate a space that risks losing relevance.

BF: Yes, he moves closer to Smithson's idea of emptying the museum as a gesture, or recognizes this as one possibility for artists to respond to the museum: to make an installation that empties rather than fills the space.

JB: In a way Smithson suggests a deadening or numbing of the institution as a counterintuitive way of producing meaning, or at least discursive potential, right? But then, for Kaprow, there was a continued imperative toward some kind of revivification.

BF: Yeah, I think Smithson even calls his attitude something like “necrophilia”, suggesting that the museum is really your inner tomb, and you’re not supposed to dance there.

JB: That’s funny, because in the re-reading and continual refetishization of Smithson, people take such terms to constitute a critique by Smithson. But, isn’t he arguing it as a point of pride, in a way, that he wants to embrace this kind of increasingly deadened entropic space, somehow?

BF: Yes. And then, strangely, Kaprow suggests to Smithson, instead of going to a museum and trying to enter this cultural archive with that attitude, if it’s not best to find those spaces in suburban areas or around highways or malls.

JB: So, alright, 1967 is exactly forty years ago. And there’s a kind of romance around going back to this kind of question, I think now. But there’s also a kind of weariness in today’s art world, that maybe there wasn’t when Kaprow and Smithson had this conversation. There was still a kind of possibility for thinking about what the contemporary museum was *going* to do. And how was it going to be able to house new kinds of speculative situations? But now we have actual malls for museums, like MoMA. Hasn’t that become this multi-tiered entertainment block, that I think they were concerned was going to happen?

BF: It’s interesting, then, that MoMA is probably one of the few institutions that is already around in 1967, specifically as a museum for contemporary art. Even though we call it “modern”, it meant “contemporary” in its founding moment. I wonder what other institutions they are referring to in ‘67, when they speak about a museum for contemporary art. The idea of the museum of contemporary art arises in the nineteen-teens with Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century Gallery and Alfred Stieglitz’s Gallery 291. I can’t think of anything comparable until the 1970s, when the next wave of museum-like spaces (i.e. non-profit spaces for contemporary art) takes place in New York with The New Museum and Dia Art Foundation, which – interestingly – then act as historical containers but also produce and generate works.

JB: It’s true...

BF: Because today it almost seems like, whatever is not a commercial gallery space is usually called a museum or a non-profit space. There is the Kunsthalle, of course, but that’s a European model. So, whenever you show something that’s not sold by the owner of the building, of the show...

JB: Then it’s a museum.

BF: It tends to be called a “museum,” which is a re-definition from it previously having been more like a mausoleum.

JB: Right, because a mausoleum, one would anticipate, is a final resting place, not a beginning. So, one then expects, in this definition that you’re laying out, that the mausoleum/museum is a site for collecting objects *after* their initial circulation within the field of discursive or commercial reception. But I think that that’s obviously not a true – or at least simply true – definition anymore. It’s a different kind of value accrual that we’re talking about.

BF: Yeah, it’s this huge activation of culture in the last decades that has clearly had to enter the museum, too.

JB: I was just at the Richard Prince show, which, as you know, I’ve been spending a fair amount of time at. And at the very top of the ramp, I was thinking about how there are very few museums that function as awkwardly and obstinately as, say, the Guggenheim. Because it hasn’t been updated, smoothed out, rendered newly contemporary in so long that it’s starting to feel quaint. So when we go there, we’re still able to in some way get a feeling for what an old contemporary art museum looked like or how it aspired to providing a different spatial model. But at the top, the very top gallery, where they always put the sort of climactic installations – and for Prince, it’s the *Nurse Paintings*, and the *De Koonings* – I happened by chance on something unexpected. I took someone to the museum to see the show, but they had de-installed that entire room and all of the paintings were wrapped in clear plastic. Suddenly, that part of the museum really operated – for a day or two only and out of public sight, but nonetheless – as an unintentional mausoleum. Draped, semi-visible, and huddled in the middle of the space, the paintings suddenly placed in question their own status after having entered the museum space. My understanding is that there was some nervousness – voiced by one of the lenders no doubt – about the safety of the very expensive paintings, their proximity to viewers. So while a couple of the works (two owned by Larry Gagosian in particular) were behind glass, the rest – those not framed in such a way – were thought vulnerable. So the room was de-installed, edgings were constructed around the circumference walls, and the whole was re-opened. It wasn’t a major event or anything, but it was so visually arresting and also so evocative on a number of levels.

There’s a way in which I think the transparency of the outside world – here it’s specifically the relationship with commerce, but there are other links too – exert real pressure and even frame artworks and exhibitions that are ostensibly removed from such constraints in the institutional context. Here, it’s quite pragmatic, straightforward. Even though the show is open, the museum de-installed, and then covered everything with plastic and re-installed, along the lines of addressing whatever it was that the problem was and however indebted they felt to the various

individuals without whose work the show wouldn't be fully constituted for the artist or curator.

BF: It's a particularly intriguing story, because I was surprised and disappointed when I walked through the show to find out that all the photographic works are not loaned from collectors, who might have bought those pieces early on, but instead they're "exhibition copies". And if I understand right, in certain cases they're even enlarged.

JB: Some of them feel enlarged, yeah. But the explanation given by the show's curator Nancy Spector – this question has come up a fair amount around the show – is that there were always three edition sizes and that we're seeing the "large" versions here, since the bigger size was most appropriate to the scale of the museum. I was struck by the size of the photographs and the fact that they were nearly all printed for the show, too. There is a lot to say about this: remaking work for historical shows. But what was really striking to me, also, was that the new prints *feel* different too, and I think it was you who pointed out why that may be. Prince's new old work is printed digitally, and it gives the photographs a slight but distinctly different patina from the way those images looked when they were printed chemically.

BF: It gives his early work a really strange twist, because it doesn't feel like the early work anymore, which for me has more to do with what we can't help but perceive as a change in size (most of us have only seen the "small"-size prints, and most of those in books anyway) than the re-printing. But, together, it's a killer. It's a commissioning of the early work of an artist by a museum that is doing a retrospective. It's a strange move for a museum to my mind. But then, there are of course a few areas they couldn't do an exhibition copy: all the paintings for instance, like the *Nurse Paintings*. And, tellingly, they actually run into trouble there, to the degree of the dependency of the collectors in a museum like the Guggenheim. In this small area where this could have happened, it actually did happen. They had to temporarily take down the show.

JB: Yeah. I think that this point is important on a number of counts: using the Prince show as a case study around the museum right now is really interesting. Because, of course, there's a lot of discussion happening between the two of us, say, but also between artists about what it means that the photographs are all exhibition copies, whereas the paintings of course can't be exhibition copies because there's still the idea of painting as an original object. And then, the photographs are presented at the size that is closest to painting-scale, so that suddenly the artist's history makes a kind of teleological, aesthetic sense (suddenly, he was always aspiring to being a master painter!) that it wouldn't have made if you actually allowed the photographs to be too small for the walls that they were hanging on, and to be smaller and smaller as you went down the spiral.

And it's interesting that lots of us are having these discussions, but nowhere have these questions been put forward in print. During the question and answer session for a fantastic talk on Prince that Richard Meyer gave at the Guggenheim, the exhibition-copy question came up at length, and some provocative ideas got raised. But I haven't seen anyone taking on in print what it means to present part of an artist's history via remakes, pairing "original" work with newly-made work smoothly so that it fits the format of the museum and the idea of a retrospective. Of course, Prince's is hardly the first show to incorporate exhibition prints, but given the nature of his work, the percentage of newly-printed photographs, and the scope of the show, it really becomes a quite pertinent element.

BF: Yeah, because it's more about the size of the museum than about the early work itself. The size question doesn't relate the same way to the later work, which so often expands, because capacities, financially and otherwise, are different later on in an artist's career.

JB: Yeah, so, suddenly there's this very different way in which the consumption of Prince's narrative – his career – works. And it goes down really easily. Although, it should be said that there's a lot of dissatisfaction by artists and critics we know around the hanging, precisely *because* it's so clean, so traditional in a way, so clearly intended to fit the idea of the long career first resistant to but now ready for acknowledgment to the canon.

BF: Especially in the rotunda, it seems like it is not just me... I've also heard from other people that the side galleries are the galleries where one can really enjoy seeing Prince's work, and one can get a feeling for his work as brought together in one place. But this could also be the case because these rooms are more traditional museum spaces. They are more or less rectangular galleries. The ceilings aren't too high. The walls relate to each other, and with the rotunda, you have just one huge sliding container.

JB: It's ironic then – or maybe, on the other hand, it makes perfect sense – that it was the top side gallery that had to be de-installed. And without going back into it, I should say that I was told that the re-hanging was motivated by *one* lender who was worried about their work; whether this is true or not, my impression is that the retention of a loan required what might have been unnecessary precaution. (One person suggested to me that actually one of the paintings had been sold, and so they had switched one out, although I don't know if this is the case. I would be curious to know.) But, it's powerful in any case to think that the entire remobilization of that gallery was prompted by some request by the lender. I hear more and more stories about the difficulty in making shows due to the enormous worth of the pieces – insurance issues, lenders' criteria, etc., do make it harder and harder when it comes to assembling shows.

Where, as you say, the photographs then suddenly occupy this really weird status of not belonging to anybody (or belonging to people but not being as restricted by such ownership), but being commissioned by the museum. And one wonders about their afterlife, then.

BF: Yeah, what does the exhibition copy mean economically? Will they have to be destroyed or what happens to them?

JB: In this case, they will be destroyed; I'm not sure if this is the case in all shows, but definitely for the Prince show they will be destroyed after the complete tour – this was made very clear when I and others asked about it. Isabelle Graw actually mentioned earlier – we talked recently about this show – that suddenly the gang photographs start to look as though they have a genealogy including, say, the Bechers or something. She felt that in their presentation and size here they felt very differently aligned or formalized in this way than they had previously.

So, this is a slightly different direction, but framed in the museum, apart from the context that informed them, suddenly, all of these works start to lose their historical contours; they become free for new associations, readings, and connections – I think your idea of the kind of sliding exhibition space, that's literally kind of in the round, also does this in the telling of artist's histories. It's really interesting that you had us start with somebody like Smithson, who just a few years ago had this really problematic historical exhibition...

BF: Mm-hmm, at the Whitney...

JB: Around which a lot of these questions came up, about re-staging, and what does it mean then to think about the afterlife of something? And then to think about Smithson alongside Prince, whom you would never think about together maybe normally... And that we naturally move into this second tier, this question of another male artist uneasily seated by shifting reception and presentation. Maybe it has to do with exactly what we began reading, which is the question of keeping things alive, or allowing them to be dead enough? Maybe Prince's show was too dead? – certainly Smithson's show wasn't dead enough, which is why it failed in some way, right?

BF: Yeah.

JB: And maybe Prince's show, there's something else to say about it. I don't know if it's not dead enough, but something has happened.

BF: Well, in this case, the artist is still alive. So, he's at least a co-author of this retrospective of his own work...

JB: But he's co-authoring something that he seems to then kind of disavow, also, in the same moment. Which is to say, he obviously wants to take control of how he is presented but then refuses to comment on the operations of doing so.

BF: Yeah. I might be wrong, but I have a feeling that he engaged with the Guggenheim as a major capitalist global player among the museums right now, and so he had to decide: Will I play this space by exploiting this particular potential, this global, powerful, glamorous spectacle, entertainment-related, tourism-related aspect of this museum? Or, will I play its power of canonizing and historicizing American art, New York art in particular? And I think he chose the latter, the canon... To me, it looked like he positioned himself as a painter, as a colorist. He almost looks like Rothko, like Abstract Expressionism at certain points. So, it's really very much the high art potential of the Guggenheim he is engaging with, and I was hoping – or just speculating – that he might already be working on the next bigger show or move, where he would go toward the other end of the spectrum of his own work as an artist, where he would undermine a lot of what he is doing in the Guggenheim right now.

JB: This is always such an impossible set of questions. I pose them to myself all the time. And I think it's probably not such a helpful line of thinking in the end, but it's one that you and I have talked about a lot – and maybe to actually discuss it here, as awkward as it is in a sense is productive anyhow: What would have made us happy or engaged or interested in that museum? Put another way, what would have seemed undermining enough without actually performing “being undermining”? What at the end would have been a successful show? Isn't the problem that the show is too successful at being a kind of “adequate” historicizing, canonizing procedure? But he's doing it in such a transparent way that one could take it in the same way one takes all his work, which is that there are quotes around this gesture. So, it's the most conservatively-installed show. It all points to painting in the end. There's a teleology that unwinds into, as you say this eventuality of formalist attention to color. Exactly what shouldn't be done, but then of course should be done, which is the painterly, and the gesture, and the heroic. And in the basement of the Guggenheim, in their impossible-to-get-to education center is Prince's early work. If you find yourself able to find it, a wall text tells you this, that it will all point to his painterliness, which will only come out thirty years later. In a way, this overt attention to steering the narrative has total clarity, but somehow feels disappointing for a number of reasons. So, what would have satisfied our desire for this show, this artist, as it is put forward today, in this context? Would anything? This is always the question, right? And I think putting our own expectations on the spot is necessary, since it's gotten harder to articulate just what good “critical” work or exhibitions are or do.

BF: Well, I would love for the show to come down after its first or second month,

and then to mount the other show you could do at the Guggenheim, which could show a lot of the other side of his work, such as his publications and writing and source material – it doesn't always have to be ephemeral... but to show all the other aspects of his work, and to me, his writing and his publications are crucial. And they don't have to fill the whole space. I enjoy retrospectives that can or are supposed to show the range and the contradictions of an artist's work, and how these maybe re-appear over time, or how they are dealt with specifically at some point in an artist's life. And then it catapults the work into something else. That's the nice thing about a retrospective, for me, to see what happens over time. And I think that's not visible at all in this exhibition. It doesn't really even look historical to me, strangely.

JB: Well, I like what you're saying, in that in a way there is a structural argument to what we're getting at, because what always worries me is that we make arguments like: This isn't critical enough, or it doesn't question its own imperatives... but there is a structural, even practical, argument that we're making, which is that one might actually open oneself up to the fissures in one's own practice, or to the points of inquiry, where somebody might pressure something, and it will be contradictory in impulse.

And, of course, that can itself be aestheticized or stylized, but in this case, maybe to have it manifest multiple hangings, say, or allow for things that don't aid this kind of morphological trajectory through photographs that are less incongruous or jolting to viewers at painterly-size in a big space... That that might be interesting. Maybe you could talk a little bit about how this strategy, though, itself has become used. I mean, all of these strategies, as much as they're potentially open, they're all potentially problematic. I was thinking, as you were talking, about the re-hanging done recently by somebody like Josh Smith, who re-hung his show at Luhring Augustine two weeks after it opened, so halfway through its run. And, of course, lots of people were happy with the idea of that re-hanging and thought it did exactly what we're talking about here, which is to crack open the usual regulated gallery show, to kind of question what the value of the first hanging was. And then others said it was exactly the opposite. It was a knowing, cynical way to get out twice as much of the work and to couch it in insecurity or something.

BF: But it was different in that it was Josh Smith's first show in a big Chelsea gallery, and it seems to me – and he spoke about that himself – that he really wanted to exploit the gallery and make the gallery work and to simply hand over certain elements of his work as an artist, not just as a painter, but as an artist, as potential, and to see what the gallery could generate from that.

The second hanging was also merely another way for him to see more of his work in this beautiful space. Also, he's in his very early 30s. So you can't really quite look back yet far enough for it to become interesting. And it's the very commercial realm of art: the New York gallery, not the museum.

And so, to do a re-hanging in a museum for me would be different and interesting, because we're dealing with a historical and comparative container rather than a commercial and transient, speculative one. And maybe it's already a contradiction in itself, to make a retrospective of a living artist, because once you've looked back, looked back institutionally that is, how can you keep working after that? I don't know, it's tricky because a museum retrospective embalms you like a mummy. It's mummifying.

So, looking back within a museum also produces a sense of being kept for afterlife, like a mummy. And clearly that's challenging for a producing artist. I wonder when the first retrospective of a living artist was first mounted... There's some sensibility about the gesture of the museum to work with living artists in that way that feels very – modern isn't even the right term. It feels contemporary, or current. It already embodies the contradiction of a museum being alive and dead at the same time.

JB: Well, and then this question about what purpose the retrospective serves becomes very complicated. I mean, Frank Stella's 1970 retrospective at MoMA happened when he was only 33 years old. I'm not sure if anyone has broken that record. It seems too obvious to say, but I don't think many women artists were, or are, having retrospectives in their 30s, and certainly not at MoMA whose first retrospective with a woman artist was Louise Bourgeois in 1982.

So, just what a retrospective is meant to *do* seems tied to the structural question of what a museum does. The question of the re-hanging of Prince's prints in this sense is interesting. It's a different kind of re-hanging than the one you are suggesting, to be sure. And I wonder if the kind of reshuffling you describe is even something that's possible or that could even be pragmatically pulled off in a museum the size of the Guggenheim – I think what's become really difficult with museum shows is that they disallow any kind of movement such as this one that you're talking about. It would be curious to know what kind of discussions happened around the hanging? Because obviously, Prince was very much a part of it.

And from my understanding, too, he had scheduled this retrospective in other museums and then played these museums against each other, until he got the biggest museum. I was told some years ago that it was supposed to first open in Chicago, and was initially conceived there.

BF: Is it traveling, at all?

JB: To the Walker and the Serpentine; it's a relatively small tour. I heard he pulled it from MCA, Chicago and Whitechapel when he was offered the Guggenheim, which is already this kind of funny bartering for the highest bidder.

BF: That makes a lot of sense for Prince. I mean, this difficultness that his work has, and the material he always chooses to work with. And what Brian Wallis was talking about in his lecture about Prince, the insider who's an outsider... I don't

know if he can still get away with being an "outsider" while being an "insider," but in any case, he's known to be difficult.

JB: Right, which makes him more attractive to some.

BF: And his work. It's maybe more interesting for the work. I think it really comes down to people – even a large institution like the Guggenheim could think about a specific exhibition in the form of a re-hanging, since almost everything seems possible. And the Guggenheim museum seems to be visited largely by tourists so that you don't primarily need the New York audience to come every three months to look at the next show up.

If instead of three, a show would be up five months, it could logistically allow for a re-hanging. Why wouldn't that be possible? On the other hand, the space is huge, so if you don't decide for one major gesture throughout the entire space, different hangings could have taken place already at once by structuring the enormous exhibition space differently.

JB: I'm really intrigued by the distinction that you make between the gallery and the museum. The overtly market-driven gallery in Chelsea actually has somewhat more – "freedom" is a hard word to use – but it has, as you argue it, the capacity to allow for an artist to re-hang. Obviously, it's a smaller space. But – I think you used the word "labor" or "work" – that there was a way in which Josh was interested in making the gallery do the work on a kind of visible level that a gallery does for an artist, or that underwrites that kind of labor.

And I was more pessimistic about this particular change, not necessarily because of some skepticism about him therefore being able to sell twice as many paintings – everyone knows that if an artist is doing well, a collector is brought into the back room. It doesn't matter whether the painting hangs on the wall or not. If there's a desire for them, they're sold. It's not so much about that, but it did make me wonder about the kind of tension that is set up already in his paintings between the concept of the gesture of painting and the objects themselves. And my real question was that I thought that the objects in a way were let-downs, and that they felt more hurried, or they felt – not even aesthetically – displeasing, but actually more aligned easily with historical paintings. They looked like riffs on past modernist paintings, in a way that his earlier works hadn't to me.

So, they actually felt more derivative, even though they were faster, in a sense. And for me, part of the question was whether that kind of nod to derivation was something that just happened as a result of thinking less about the paintings, and more about the gesture, the re-hanging? Of course, I'm still talking about it, so obviously it was interesting and more complicated in my mind than I'm making it here. But, the privileging of the question of the re-hanging over the question of painting itself became something that was unsettling to me. Maybe that's interesting. I don't know. Because – and maybe we should talk about Wade Guyton

and Kelley Walker in this way – what position do the objects have when we begin marking a distinction between an artwork and the (literal) positions it might occupy in a space?

BF: Yeah. Well, maybe let's backtrack to Josh Smith once more. Because as a transition to Guyton\Walker, I think Josh – he clearly is a painter who focuses on questions around painting, but he is also very specific about installing his work. He basically makes installations, organizes space. The way he involves chairs, or the floor, it's really an activation of an entire room. I think the paintings, which in the end are the individual objects that are torn out of their context of their first showing and become a painting over a sofa – or whatever – they really have a chameleon-capacity built into them. During the opening dinner, which took place in the show, in the gallery in Chelsea, we were surrounded by the just-painted paintings. They had just been hung on the wall and actually still smelled like paint. And to me they looked like restaurant-art that night. They were not just riffing on the history of painting, and they didn't only look like early twentieth-century painting, but they were also leaning on restaurant art as a possible form to relate to as a painter today. I don't know if that's just my idea or if Josh ever thought about this himself. But then a few days later when I went back and looked at it again, suddenly they looked very much like a painting show in Chelsea. And, not purified, but definitely freed of the particular kind of decorative feel of restaurant art. Then they maybe had taken on the particular decorative feel of painting in Chelsea galleries. All the while being difficult and not very beautiful *per se*. What matters is that the paintings can expand and transform according to their context.

And Guyton\Walker have used painting as an expandable format, too. But also as a particular form or production: maybe one can say that they used it to discipline themselves through working-structures, painting became a tool to kind of streamline their collaborative work. I think they started with a series of silk-screened paintings, right?

JB: What does it mean for you that they have "streamlined" their labor? Do you mean, by streamline, to pick one thing and then do it exclusively or do you mean that painting represents some kind of economy of means on its own?

BF: Well, I was thinking of two things when I said that. Two artists come together, and they are used to working in their own ways, and they might not even be able to articulate entirely how they work when they work. So you have to find ways to agree on how to be productive and how to work together. But there is also the continued excitement for Warhol and his continuing relevance, and the idea of working in groups and getting everyone excited enough so they work for you, with you. And especially the silk screens Guyton\Walker made together seem very much like – I'm forgetting the term – what is it, if everyone does the same thing? An assembly line. It's not so much streamlining, but assembly-line work.

JB: But in the assembly-line work that Guyton\Walker produce, it's kind of a sick assembly line, right? Because they had to figure out the processes as they went, as I understand it. In a sense, they didn't know...

BF: What do you mean, a "sick" assembly line?

JB: Well, that at that point when they came together, they were still each forming and defining the terms of their own individual practices (I suppose artists spend their whole lives doing some version of this), but had in a sense a kind of trust in each other that through the collaboration it would both pressure their own individual practices, but also maybe answer some things about what they were doing together and on their own.

It's interesting to me to think about the idea of a sick assembly line a little, because in a sense, it's too simple to make it seem like they had a strategic plan and then implemented it. They knew the direction they wanted to go, certainly, but in the end, they got together a bunch of friends, all young artists themselves, who they paid and fed lunch to, which is more than some kind of anonymous factory worker, or whatever. And then...

Battery dies. End of recording I.

JB: Okay, we were talking about the "sick" assembly line. And I guess all I'm saying about it being sick is that it isn't actually so well-oiled, but that it's all about – do you remember when they first had to figure out how to clean the screens? They couldn't figure it out at first, they had to experiment their way into a solution; they didn't know how anything worked, and they weren't really using anything "properly" anyway. And so, by that I mean it's an assembly line that isn't so efficient, but that kind of worked through its own stutters, its own mistakes.

And to say this, of course, is to risk all kinds of romantic notions, but I think it had more to do with a pragmatic way of producing something together, so that they would have a space outside of their individual practices, to even have a thinking process that they didn't have to totally rely on individually. So, as much as people maybe sometimes ascribe a kind of arrogance to such instances of coupling, it was early enough in their career that they did this, that it was, if anything, more of a defensive move. And I don't mean that they were scared, but that it was a way of working through a set of problems that they shared, but that they each approached maybe somehow differently.

BF: Yeah, and enabling themselves to be pushed into a place they individually couldn't have gone into... I remember Wade told me, that the first project they did together as Guyton\Walker was for a show at Midway, an exhibition place in Minnesota.

Wade was originally invited to do a show there, and he felt like he didn't want to

quite do it on his own at that point. He was about thirty years old, and he was still developing his entire set of tools, and he has always been thinking carefully and slowly. Maybe he wasn't ready to fill large spaces on his own at this point. So this is how it began. He asked Kelley, should we do this together? And so, it's also – it's not just a way out, but I think it's also a way to recognize limitations on the one hand, and on the other hand, to be able to engage with people whom you respect enough and have enough fun with, that you would want to try something like this and to see where you'd get if you work together.

JB: Well, it's an interesting thing, because I think these days people assume a collaboration as a kind of double assurance. You and I work this way together too, where in some way, it comes out of trusting the other person more than you trust yourself, because you understand that it's almost like analysis or something, right? That if you say it, then you'll hear it back from the other person, and it will somehow take on meaning that you wouldn't be able to see or hear otherwise. And I think this isn't talked about enough in today's practices, because so few people are really interested in – people would rather just assume that it's a doubling of the interest, where in a sense, of course, it is that, too, but it's also a kind of faith...

BF: Yeah, a faith that also comes out of a doubt about oneself. So, it's kind of a doubling of an uncertainty, combined with faith.

JB: This is partially why we're doing a dialogue instead of each writing something for this catalog: I know when we talk that I'm going to learn something that is partially coming out of my own understanding. And it's also frustrating, right? These conversations. Because they're staged, in a way. How many of these conversations have we had when we're riding the subway, that we say, oh my God, if we had that on paper – and whether or not it's true, how interesting they actually are, they feel generative for my own practice.

And we don't have anything visual to show, because we're writers, and our labor is so... differently vetted. But I think with Guyton\Walker, I've never really heard people talk about what you just said, which is, they both came together at a mutual moment of not uncertainty, but beginnings. And there was always a strengthening of, at once, the speculative nature, but also the actual material promise of the practices when they were brought together. When was the last time they did a project together?

BF: Well, I think that they took a little bit of a break this year, because there's a lot coming up in the next months, I think with both Carol Greene, LAXArt, and in Bologna. I don't know the last – obviously one answer is the "Uncertain States of America" show, which kept going endlessly and kept them busy reinstalling to the highest degrees of absurdity.

But, what you were just talking about before was interesting to me, that maybe there is also the need – it's almost a need – to collaborate. It's not just a leaning or an idea, or a wish. It's a need, which is maybe linked to where museums have gone, or the art world has gone. That there are so many spaces, and there's so much interest in artists once they start to be recognized for doing something that's potentially interesting, or material that might last both in the art spaces, as well as maybe in the print media around it on a more gossipy level on which the conversation has to keep going, too...

That kind of pressure and demand is posed on artists. These are often young artists, also. I guess it's just too much for one person. That's maybe also one way to protect oneself, by creating another personality, which is a shared personality or shared authorship. And then suddenly, it allows for space that you can't quite keep just by yourself.

JB: Mm-hmm. But it's important, this word "personality," because I hadn't thought about this before, but unlike a lot of the collaborative units that are quite visible right now (and I would say that Continuous Project is different from this, too – but not in the same way as Guyton\Walker), Guyton\Walker seems more to nullify personality, rather than to create an additional one. Guyton\Walker isn't a fictional person. Instead, it's almost a way of bringing two names together to magnify them, but also to cancel them out.

Which is interesting, because I feel like – to take your model of being kind of a defense mechanism (which, I think, I also agree with) and imagine it as a kind of mode of production, it also receives a fair share of aggression. Because not only as a collaborative team, Guyton\Walker, but also Kelley on his own and Wade on his own are constantly being critiqued for what are seen as practices that are perceived as being made for the museum in some way, or made for the gallery, or made for consumption.

It's interesting to me how aggressive some people are about this work, without, in the cases I'm thinking of, talking about its formal qualities, instead talking about some perceived operative or functionalist model.

BF: Well, it probably has to do with the somewhat young male successful artist in New York, and it's combining all the worst fears, and then times two in this case.

JB: Right. But maybe it would be interesting then to think about why in a model like Fischli & Weiss, you have two men coming together in a very different manner, but never accused of this kind of redoubling of the male affect. It's interesting with Guyton\Walker, because there's the subtext of the kind of partnership, or gay affect – even though they're not a couple – that complicates how one reads the pairing of two young men. Where Fischli & Weiss sometimes reasserts masculinity even while (or perhaps because) undermining assumptions of masculinity. For me, Guyton\Walker seems to do something else.

BF: Yeah, it's double alpha male, which has a lot more to do with New York and their reception than with them as people. It is more about from where they're working, and obviously that shapes who they are and what their work engages with. In contrast, Fischli & Weiss are the little conceptual guys from the mountains. The self-confidence – especially the one in the contemporary cultural production of Switzerland – is incomparable obviously to many cities and countries. Or think about Gilbert and George as the British stiff-upper-lip model, however non-normative, whereas the collaboration between Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy points to transgressions perceived as a typically American product. And so, New York would be the icon of self-confident media, commercial art, cultural capital... Which puts Fischli & Weiss into a much safer place, at least in relation to being threatening...

JB: Right. It's telling that there's never the perception of some kind of conceptual distance of Guyton\Walker from the market, or a questioning of it in the same way that Fischli & Weiss have always been understood to be working. This attribute seems to be part and parcel of their work, and I think it is there, of course, but that there is the posturing of, as you put it, the little guys from the mountains, which is also interestingly very male, a very particular art world construction of masculinity as conceptual prowess that feels sensitive or something.

BF: Oh, yeah.

JB: It's certainly not visibly macho...

BF: Yeah, it looks more at folklore and at a domestic area of imagery and narration, and the things we can almost make with our hands, too. And, in comparison, everything looks so cold, and abstract, and manipulative in Guyton\Walker, if you want to compare them in this very fast and simplifying way...

Battery dies again. End of recording II.