

An interview with Bob Nickas, author and curator, on 'Looking Back'

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Bob Nickas has worked as a critic and curator in New York since 1984, during which time he has organised more than 80 exhibitions and gained a reputation for an individual style that transgresses the accepted. Nickas served on the teams responsible for Aperto at the Venice Biennale in 1993 and the 2003 Biennale de Lyon. From 2003-06 he was Curatorial Advisor at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York. As well as numerous articles and papers he is the author of several books, including *Painting Abstraction*, the first major definitive survey of the new wave of innovation in abstract painting.

He spoke to Phaidon.com about his latest curatorial project, *Looking Back: The Fifth White Columns Annual*, at White Columns gallery in New York (until 29 January), who in the art world he's keeping an eye on, and whether this show really will be his last in New York.

Q: Each December since 2006, New York's White Columns gallery has invited a different curator to make an exhibition based on their personal experience of art in the city over the previous twelve months. You're the curator of the fifth White Columns Annual. How does your exhibition differ from previous installments?

This edition has the largest number of artists of any show to date. There are 42 artists, as well as anonymous Tantric artists from Rajasthan, and more than 60 works in all. Although White Columns is a good sized gallery, it's not enormous, so while the scope of the show may seem as ambitious to some, it involved quite a bit of pre-planning on my part — choosing specific works and knowing the sequence in which works would be hung from room-to-room.

Q: How did you distill all the art you saw in one year down to the final selection?

I kept a kind of diary throughout the year, making a list of shows I wanted to see and studios to visit. Subsequently I collected images of whatever I was curious about, and that was an ongoing process over twelve months. As the year went on, some things really stayed with me, had lodged in my mind, and for various reasons. I loved them, and either knew why — or not. You sometimes wonder why you can't get something, or someone, out of your mind. In this respect the artworks you encounter can be like the people you meet. And I've always said that you can be in art what you can no longer be in life: promiscuous. In art, you can choose from everything, and with this show I did.

Q: Were there instances in which you were unable to include an artwork?

I very much wanted to include photographs by Helmar Lerski, who was active in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, but the prints can only be shown in certain conditions, with climate control and under specific lighting, neither of which White Columns has. There is a series of portraits that's fantastic. You never see the person, only their hands. One that I had planned to show at White Columns is a chemist in his lab, and his hands are as sculptural as the long glass tube that he's holding. Even though this is the 2010 Annual, there are works from the 1950s, 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s. Being able to go even further back in time with Helmar Lerski would have been really wonderful.

Q: If a visitor only has a limited time to see the show, which works would you suggest as the highlights and why?

There's a lot to take in, but the show is very manageable, with lots of intimate moments. You don't have the same sense of being overwhelmed as you do in the average biennial. And you don't have to deal with the claustrophobia of crowds and tourists that you find in most museums. It's a very visitor friendly atmosphere at White Columns.

Q: Have the demands on the curator changed since you first started out? How has your approach evolved over time?

I've never liked the term, for one thing. I recently saw an ad for an estate that's on the market, an enormous house on many acres, with horse barns and equestrian facilities, and woods and fields, with a mind-blowing price tag. At the bottom of the ad was the motto of the real estate company: "We curate fine properties." So the term has been trivialised, and at a time when there's a level of professionalism associated with being a curator; one that I'm not comfortable with. I prefer to say that a show has been organised. It sounds more like work, which it is. It also has associations with collectivity and a standing up to a dominant force — as in labour-organised against management. The curator is in many ways a cultural manager, so you have to fight against yourself in this respect. You always want to be on the side of the artist, and not lose sight of that.

Q: Was curating something you always wanted to do?

I fell into it, really. When I first came to New York in 1984 I worked at a gallery, and did not in any way care for the experience. Organising shows came out of that, and gained its own momentum as something I wanted to keep doing. For me it has a parallel with collecting art. The way that some people are almost addicted; that collecting is a compulsion — just as making art is a compulsion for most of the best artists. There's definitely a parallel once you become immersed in shows. It's as if each one is a perfect collection, a coming together of everything you want at a particular moment in time.

Q: What advice would you give anyone thinking about working as a curator?

Do not attend a curatorial programme at a college or university. It's not possible to teach someone to be an artist, and neither is it possible to teach someone to be a curator. Also, your instructors will probably not be working curators themselves. They'll be academics. The best thing to do is simply get out there and organise shows. For one thing, you'll probably be working alongside your peers, offering options for them to show, options outside of the usually closed gallery world, and you'll learn as you go along. And your view, hopefully, will be less in line with an established order. You'll meet artists, you'll have fun, you'll learn how to work with a modest budget and improvise, and the shows will get better as you move from one to the next.

Q: Painting Abstraction was published in 2009. Why is abstract painting worthy of so much attention at the current moment?

Abstract painting is always worthy of attention. In fact, a book like that can be put together or revised every few years. Painting has always been the most privileged site of art-making, at least in the last hundred years. There are rumblings from time to time about its death or its disappearance, but trust me, paintings are always being made. Critics and collectors and curators may go crazy for installation one season, or for performance or film the next, or for whatever is on the market and dominates the art magazines and biennials, and so on. But every form that art can take is continually being explored by artists. As to the death of painting, someone once said that it would be ludicrous to speak of the death of video, or the death of sculpture, or the death of drawing. Think about that the next time you hear about painting's demise.

Q: Since writing the book have you discovered any new painters we should keep an eye out for?

Within just a few months of the book appearing in stores, I was already beating myself up about a number of younger artists whose work I had begun to follow and who could easily have been included in Painting Abstraction. The first to come to mind are Jacob Kassay and Joe Montgomery, both of whom I've included in a number of shows since the book was published. And recently I've been involved with the work of two sculptors who are worth watching: Justin Matherly and Virginia Overton.

Q: Having worked as a curator since the early 1980s, you recently suggested this show will be the last you curate in New York. Is this true? What prompted your decision?

Having realised many shows in New York over the past 27 years, I would like to live here and work elsewhere from now on. My life here will be a little more anonymous, which I think of as a good thing, and everything else that I've always done — writing, engaging with artists, discovering new artists — all that will go on. When I first started out I was making it up as I went along, and I'd like to think that this is still the case.

Bob Nickas, thank you