

# CONVERSING WITH A CONSTRUCTED WORLD

ANTHONY GARDNER, HUW HALLAM  
AND A CONSTRUCTED WORLD

Geoff Lowe and Jacqueline Riva formed A Constructed World in Melbourne in 1993 after working separately in different media. This initial intersection of distinct practices continues to pervade A Constructed World's work and philosophy, which are grounded in fluid models of collaboration and inclusivity across media and between people. A Constructed World encompasses painting, drawing, video and installation, as well as less conventional mediums: workshops with school students, visitors to art galleries and other audiences; discussion forums about art practice, criticism and curatorship; and experimental forms of research and publication.

The first of these publications, *Artfan*, ran from 1993 to 2002 and presented reviews of contemporary art that were written by people from various backgrounds—usually a critic, an artist, and two other people who may not have had any training in art history or practice. As A Constructed World claimed in *Artfan*'s first issue, a number of goals underpinned the magazine, its meeting of diverse voices and its format of “not editing or changing the contributor's language”. One goal was “to explore relationships between high levels of specialisation and amateur language”; another was “to describe not just the work but how it is looked at” by different people with different cultural knowledges.<sup>1</sup> Most importantly of all, A Constructed World sought to encourage new audiences to talk about contemporary art and culture, a model opposed to earlier, and somewhat paternalistic, agenda of bringing contemporary art to (or imposing it upon) new audiences.

A Constructed World's models of inclusion and collaboration have continued in more recent publications, such as the photocopy-based *errors deceits mistakes* (2006–) and the *SPEECH* web magazine.<sup>2</sup> These models have found particular resonance in Europe, where A Constructed World has been based in recent years (first in Turin, now in Paris) and where artists such as Thomas Hirschhorn or Dan and Lia Perjovschi have recently garnered acclaim for similarly inclusive practices of art making and knowledge transfer. And like Hirschhorn and the Perjovschis, A Constructed World have shown their work in many of the world's leading exhibitions and venues—the 1995 *Gwangju*, 1998 *São Paulo* and 2003 *Tirana Biennales*, as well as *Art all'Arte* in San Gimignano, Italy in 2000. They were the first artists-in-residence at London's Serpentine Gallery in 2002 and have held residencies in New York and Paris. This text is a follow-up of sorts to Rosemary Forde's essay on independent models of contemporary art criticism, including *Artfan* and *SPEECH*, which was published in the previous issue of *Broadsheet*.<sup>3</sup> It also serves as a preview or counterpart to *Increase Your Uncertainty*, an exhibition at Melbourne's Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, which will provide the first survey of A Constructed World's recent work.

This text is not, however, an interview. Instead, it documents a conversation that took place in Melbourne in April 2007, with questions and discussion directed between participants rather than following the unidirectional interrogation typically associated with interviews. In doing this, we hope to adhere to A Constructed World's belief, more relevant today than ever, that “the response to art is its greatest capital and what people say freely, conversationally, and without fear is the only communication we can bank on”.<sup>4</sup>

ANTHONY GARDNER, HUW HALLAM: *Let's begin by asking whether you could tell us more about the importance of collaboration in your practice. What are you trying to achieve with and through collaboration (whether that be between the two of you or with other people)?*

GEOFF LOWE: We came from different backgrounds. The original model of being an artist that I grew up with was that you would have an exhibition every two years; you would stay in your studio and paint with valour, and at the end of two years you would present your work almost as a trauma toward an audience. It would be a trauma of criticism and/or an exaltation. That wasn't an interesting way of making culture, especially as it took so long to get what was usually an inadequate response. So for various reasons in the 1980s, I decided to work with groups of people—to listen to what the audience said and to get over a sort of cultural loneliness, to try to get more in contact with people, to make art practice less judgmental and more pleasant basically. It came from a dissatisfaction with all of that, of feeling alienated and lonely, of not liking studio work and wanting to have more of a role in the formation of audience responses.

JACQUELINE RIVA: I didn't have the same kind of art school training. I did film, video and photography. When you make a film or video, you work with a group—you have a director and a sound person and so on. I had been used to working with people, even though there were aspects of working in those sorts of groups that I didn't always like. So I moved more towards making photographs. I quite liked working on my own. But after doing that for a number of years, sometimes I was very uncertain about what I was making. I'd work for hours in the darkroom and then come out and look at the work and think of asking somebody, ‘Is this working?’ And maybe in the same way, that process became very isolated.

A CONSTRUCTED WORLD: And then we started working together. Partly it was a necessity, because when we started to show internationally, we were helping each other with our work. It was a more effective way of working—we could pool the resources and help each other, and we decided that if we were doing that, we might as well be making the projects together. First of all we did the magazine called *Artfan*. There was so little criticism or information available about art. People would talk in private about artworks,

but often find it very difficult to provide a response in person. So with *Artfan* we sought a range of views, to show first of all that non-art people did think about art and often had quite libidinous points of view. But it was also to show that various viewpoints could sit side-by-side without needing resolution. It was a very different kind of dynamic. This was especially true when we ran workshops, where you have a number of people and you're working together. One person can have a really good idea and it can redirect what you're doing. We also started making videos together. Geoffrey was very keen to do that. He had spent fifteen years as a painter and knew a lot about its history from modernism and before. He'd never tried to use video, but he was very keen to use something he didn't know how to use. Jacqui had been schooled in video and had made photographs that were part of our practice. And then the last thing we started doing was painting together. Or rather, Jacqui was doing quite a lot of the painting—the *Fresh History Paintings*—and Geoffrey was doing more of the video work.<sup>5</sup>

AG, HH: *Was there a purpose to that shift from video into painting or painting into video, or was it more about the process of learning through experimentation?*

ACW: We were talking a lot about not-knowing. We got wrapped up in this idea of not-knowing, such as in our videos where people were playing music, who didn't know how to play music, or people wrote in the magazine, who didn't know about contemporary art. We were interested in that process as research and it's still there now in what we're doing—what is that threshold in knowing, where does it appear, where does it enforce itself, where is it easier to cross, what do you know when you don't know? Doing something without knowing is a fecund thing. It's a way of creating a platform to work with other people, within contexts of art. That sense of framing, of context, was important because without it, this idea of not-knowing could dissipate and get lost. And that's what we tried to do—framing this uncertainty, this unconscious-conscious, an in-knowledge and out-of-knowledge that we had been trained in with art and which we had strategies of dealing with. And it also happened by working with each other—Geoffrey used video unknowingly and Jacqui contextualised that practice. And the same with the painting, especially as most people are very anxious about painting, asking ‘what should I do?’ and ‘what does it mean?’ It's as though people are defiling the history of a medium by practising it without knowledge. But with *Artfan*, when invited people said they didn't know anything about art, it became clear that they did know. It's also true of the workshops, like the workshop with school students in New York in 2001. We provided the context—and there needs to be a context to understand, or to think about, art in particular ways. What we realised as a consequence was that everybody knows about culture—about images, about sophisticated films, about contemporary music—even if they think they don't. So when people say they don't know, they're talking about something else that we haven't even begun to unveil—though we've been working on it for thirteen years.



We've also tried to think about these experiences as ways of being together, a state that seems to be diminishing today. People have become more alienated from each other and knowing anything authentically seems to have passed. So some of the things we do are like offerings, to see whether any of the participants can come up with something different from what they do everyday. We're trying to find contexts or platforms to reveal the potential that people have for doing things, whether they know what they are doing or not. It may not be good to idealise other people, but at the same time there is so much mistrust between people.

AG, HH: *Does that mean that your work fits in with utopian or socially reparative gestures of collaboration, as were fairly common in Europe after the mid-1990s, or are you trying to do something else?*

ACW: We've never used the word 'utopia'. We've never seen what we do as utopian. I think that some ideas of utopia are quite useful to move in a particular direction. But what we've tried to do is something that's more dynamic. We don't say "this is what we're going to do and we're the artists". It's a much more open process that involves the people who come into a group that we've helped to set up. The important thing is the knowledges of those people. Everyone comes from a different background, everyone has their own experiences and these experiences inform what the group decides to do together. But in a group situation like that, more than in a utopian situation with utopian aims, there is generally a lot of conflict and mistrust. If you say to people that they can say or do what they want, it's quite an anxious thing. A lot of people like to be told what to do, to be told whether they have done something in the right way, or what it is that they're expected to do.

A lot of conflict can arise from those desires, especially if they are not met. But that conflict can become a very dynamic and lively process. It allows everybody to speak and to be part of the decision-making—not just as a group, but as individuals in a group. We've enjoyed the kind of conflict that often arises while you're going through the process of doing something together. For that reason, the workshops and forums are not outcome driven. We'd be happy if we went through a good twenty hour experience, where a lot happened about even negotiating where to start from. It's about activating desire or beginning to negotiate so that you can hear everyone negotiating. It's a system where you see a lot more traces of what other people thought. It's misleading then to think that you have to make an absolute product for a work to exist. And that again comes down to a lack of control and accepting that you really don't know what you're doing, rather than about believing in some transcendent, removed or remote sense of art, as with utopia.

We've also come to accept a lack of control in our own work. We're not a seamless collaboration, like Gilbert and George or Farrell and Parkin. The way we work is different—it has conflict and other people come into A Constructed World. It's not about who did what; it has a lot of evident seams. Which makes our work stupid and shoddy in a sense, because it's unresolved. This lack of resolution can have amusing effects too, such as when we show it to someone and they think that it's so unresolved that there's nothing there. We wonder whether we've done it wrong, maybe there is nothing there. But for some reason, something accrues then. When we did the *Fresh History Paintings*, there were so many people who said they were not paintings! And we were nonplussed, wondering what those people meant. Before we did the paintings, we had been looking at a lot of wall paintings and frescoes in Italy, because

they were part of Geoffrey's specialisation. The *Fresh History Paintings* are heavily influenced by those frescoes—and they're painted like frescoes, in a very fast way in flat acrylic paint. So for me it was bizarre that people would say that they weren't painting. And then a critic we respect a lot in France said that our videos weren't videos either! Which is true, in a sense, because we weren't aiming to be 'video artists'—we weren't working in that kind of discipline. We're evidently not editors either, because we make magazines that we don't edit. So our publications aren't really publications—they don't fulfil what publications should be like in the way they are constructed, distributed and so on.

The question of who the audience is also becomes a confused dynamic, because we are often the first audience for our projects. When we work with a group of people who contribute something with us, as with the writing projects, in a sense we are the first audience for that project. We see what other people are doing. And sometimes if you make a project with a group of people and if you don't get a very big audience—and for a lot of contemporary art you don't—then the group itself can become a kind of audience. This could be seen as a crisis, but when we work together we are always aware that there is at least one other person who will see the work we do. At least someone else is coming in contact with the work. So ultimately, our practice may not be a utopia, but a more open and inclusive system.

AG, HH: *It almost sounds like you have collaborated as a curatorial team—working to bring various artists and people together, creating forums, publishing writing as part of your broader art practice, as well as making installations, video and so on. Maybe this more open and inclusive system in art is actually curatorship?*

ACW: 'Curatorship', like 'editor', is a term we've resisted because we don't reject and accept. Both curatorial and editing work is about quality, what is in and what's not. For us, if people wanted to do something, we would do it with them. There was almost no rejection taking place. It was the same with *Artfan*. We would correct people's bad English, but not say that something could not be said, or it couldn't be included because we didn't like the ideas. And the same with shows. If people wanted to put work in, we would ask whether they were sure. Even if we didn't like what was being done, our experiment was to see what would happen if we didn't police everything. And in fact, not much at all! It's a fearful threshold for everyone to be out of control—especially in the curatorial world, and not just here in Australia. We did have parameters though. Art still provides certain contexts, it's not just formless. We would propose things in particular ways. With errors deceits mistakes, we invite people to be involved. And then we accept what they send us. If someone sends us something, we don't send it back and say that it wasn't very good, could you do something else. We try to work outside the frame of the predigested, even if that disturbs both of us in different ways. And that is our project—going through that process of having your boundary fiddled with and engaging dynamically with what you might otherwise be irritated by. And evaporating boundaries, so that the policing breaks down and something productive—not just a product but something productive—can come out of it. Questioning and threatening the boundaries of the artwork becomes the artwork. I think that it's this productive aspect that makes groups like DAMP or CLUBS in Australia so fascinating. With CLUBS, for example, people come together to make a sophisticated collaborative

structure that is unusual and ungraspable. You don't really know what the structure is, some of it is collaborative but other parts aren't. It's the same with DAMP's projects too. They were thought to be acolytes of ours and criticised for supposedly doing what we were telling them to do, which wasn't the case at all. What are your thoughts about the way people work collaboratively in Australia, especially because collaboration can be problematic in terms of the market and what still seem to be its demands for the artist's signature?

AG, HH: *There are a couple of concerns from what I've seen. The first may have to do with art seemingly not having a strong foundation at the moment in Australia, which means that the ability or availability of dissolving the boundaries of art practice—and that could be through collaborations between people, or seeing a video as not a video—is perhaps too ungraspable at a time when art is trying to rebuild its social purpose or position. The idea that art can be a career, or even something of interest, still seems relatively weak beyond the artworld. So that may explain why we still need to rely on extant conventions or media or signatures or Archibald prizes. But I wonder whether that breaking of rules and conventions is still conventional—through the codes and conventional myths of the avant-garde artist breaking rules and breaking down barriers.*

ACW: I'm almost embarrassed that you should say that, as though we're breaking things down. It may be true, it may be why people get mad with us, particularly in relation to funding or people in museums who are trying to construct cultural significance. It's almost like what we're doing is going against the good work that they're doing. Whereas I would say that iconoclasm has already happened and your project is more reconstructive. But when we talk about funding, I think that's a really important factor. Funding bodies still need to categorise to an extent—this is video, that is writing, you stop being 'emerging' after five years of practice because the funding bodies tell you so. And those categories remain important because there aren't as many avenues for funding beyond existing bodies—although that's changing, with the emergence of new and younger collectors. And patrons! We're starting to see patrons emerge in Australia, and people who don't necessarily want an object for their money and are willing to sponsor something like the studios at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, in Melbourne. This is a really important moment for contemporary art, even though it's been developing for some time. It means that people are valuing culture and the artist in that culture. I wonder whether that has really existed to the same extent before. Patrons are valuing what is not yet known, which is what we're doing too, so we're working on the same page with the people who are consuming culture. Patrons are seeing that not-knowing as a good platform, which is what we are trying to offer. We are not saying that we've got something that's resolved, but through these various platforms we have set up different potentials that could generate a lot of things as time goes on and if certain people get involved.

AG, HH: *How does that relate to your embrace of conflict, though?*

ACW: Conflict can still be generative and set up those platforms. That's why we've been trading in embarrassment, discomfort and anxious shared space as well. Our videos have been very boring, so that you would notice that you were viewing it rather than watching the television for four hours and it feels like a minute. To bring your attention to the act of watching and the shared space of attention that is normally covered up. And that kind of awareness has become connected to anxiety or violence; that once the entertainment stops you reach for the sedatives. Art instead has the potential to function as a space between entertainment and living that can point to wider options. But that sense of violence seems to be quite normal, at least in art. To get a conversation started with a group of people, even about a very known artwork, the tensions between people rise to the surface and either there will be differing views or that something we don't know will come upon us. In a way, this is also true of criticism—that the critic has to be violent to get a point across. Critics operate in a carefully concealed and orchestrated web that sometimes needs a sword for some degree of judgment to come through. There's not a lot of art criticism that is free. If you look the Melbourne newspaper *The Age*, for example, writers are sent out to review certain shows for certain reasons, and texts are often heavily edited. Sometimes, if a commercial gallery pays to be in a magazine, then there can be an expectation that the magazine will give a favourable review of the show. A case of you pay, they write. Very few people who write can then be seen as free—and it's not just in Australia. Where's the outlet that allows writers to be free? And does it have to be violent, like your piece on *NEW05*?

AG, HH: *I'd say that there are three things to consider in relation to violence in criticism. Because a lot of the Australian publications don't go into, say, the northern hemisphere, the Australian artworld is fairly contained. It is still maintained within certain parameters, and perhaps by certain people. So if you burn a couple of bridges, you may have lost important points of connection with people in this contained artworld. But the second factor is that potentially all forms of writing are violent toward an artwork—they are often different media with different purposes and different discourses that don't always work well with each other. The third factor involves the writer. When I wrote the *NEW05* essay, I was a young critic seeking a voice in a fairly saturated market. Maybe it's not simply the case that writers aren't 'free', but that it's very hard to get into and even to remain heard in art criticism. So how do you find a position, maintain or even create a position? And one approach—right or wrong—is to enact a form of violence, that years down the track you can evaluate whether it's justified or not. But also thinking about 'the audience' that you focus on in your work—it can be hard to divorce the ideas that are racing in your head from the audience for whom you presume you're writing. That can also be a form of violence, in the sense of panoptical self-censorship, because you are writing for an audience that may not actually exist except as a myth in your expectations. So even if you write something cosy, that may still be violent toward a different viewpoint that you may actually have about an exhibition, or even violent toward admitting that you don't know. Even an apparent lack of violence in criticism—or art—is still violent.*

*Finally, as we bring this conversation to a close, I was wondering whether you could also tell us about your plans for your upcoming exhibition at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. What will you be exhibiting, what are your aims for the exhibition, how might it encompass some of the ideas raised in your fourteen-year collaboration and also some of the ideas we might have touched on in this discussion?*

ACW: The exhibition is an attempt to reanimate works from the last five years. We tend not to make the same work again, so we reanimate them, rework them, restart them. It's an opportunity to rework themes, such as the theme of the slave—there is a video work we made of the parting of the waters, a poster and a painting, and a video that examines the etymological basis of the word 'ciao' and its roots in the Italian word for 'slave'. It's also an opportunity to think about how works from the last few years have related to each other. We can now show these works together and see how they respond to each other in the same space. So the exhibition is not a retrospective. The works come together through the fragmentation of the past few years of our work. A lot of it is video that hasn't been shown in Australia before, rather than the material we've made in workshops. We're also doing a program of forums or what we call 'conversations' about different issues. We're doing one on political art in Australia, another on collectivity, another on the idea of the audience. It's an attempt to revisit issues that have been talked about a lot at different times and to see whether, for example, the audience for contemporary art now is different from perhaps a decade ago. What have we lost and gained by attempting to broaden the audience for contemporary art? Is there a negative aspect to enlarging the audience? Or is it all positive? What about anger, as there was in the 'indie' scene? Or whether we lose anything from current beliefs in inclusivity. There will also be various events and performances, an open video call where anyone can come and present their video work at ACCA, as well as an open call for publications. There will then be a conversation about publications in Australia. Those events are equally important as the works that will be in the show. We don't see those events and conversations as outside the making of an artwork.

So playing on those slippages we've talked about between documentation and activation, between fragmentation and the unary, between process and product? And considering what wouldn't otherwise be seen: hearing speakers from, or seeing what is made in contexts that wouldn't normally be considered within the rigid parameters of 'art'. To see what happens when different contexts meet.

*INCREASE YOUR UNCERTAINTY  
A CONSTRUCTED WORLD  
AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART  
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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Geoff Lowe and Jacqueline Riva, 'Editorial', *Artfan* 1, 1993: 2

<sup>2</sup> Accessible at <http://speech2012.blogspot.com>

<sup>3</sup> Rosemary Forde, 'Crisis What Crisis? Independent Publishing on Contemporary Art in Melbourne', *Broadsheet* Vol 36 No 1, 2007: 56–57

<sup>4</sup> Lowe and Riva, 1: 2

<sup>5</sup> *The Fresh History Paintings* were made between 2000 and 2002